Shadows and Ghosts:
The evolution of the PEN Charter

I'd like to thank PEN International, Jennifer Clement and Carles Torner in particular, for inviting me to talk on this extraordinary centenary occasion about this equally extraordinary document.

The vital statistics of what has since 1948 been called 'The PEN Charter' are reasonably clear. The current English-language iteration, which is what you are looking at now, comprises 219 words, 8 sentences, and 4 articles. On my reckoning—and here things become a little trickier—it contains only two descriptive statements: the opening assertion 'Literature knows no frontiers', and the no less beguiling claim implied in Article 2 that 'works of art are the patrimony of humanity at large'. To my mind, the further claim in Article 4 about freedom implying 'voluntary restraint' hovers between the descriptive and the normative, making it more difficult to place in these overly neat categories.

For the rest, the Charter is a patchwork of what grammarians call normative statements of obligation, ranging in mode from the exhortatory recommendation 'should' to the more categorical imperative 'must'. So we have, for instance, 'Members of PEN *should* at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations and people'; and 'Literature…*must* remain common currency.' Taken together, the modal modifiers, verbs, and verb phrases identify the Charter as a declaration of foundational commitments, principles, and ideals, designed, like the preamble to a constitution, to state clearly and succinctly what PEN is for and what it is against. In this even-handed spirit, the verb 'pledge' occurs three times, neatly balancing the three uses of 'oppose'. Again, like many other collective accords of this kind—think of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* also of 1948—the Charter is written in the simple present tense. 'All human beings *are* born free and equal in dignity and rights', the *Universal Declaration* begins, before adding: 'They *are* endowed with reason and conscience and *should* act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.'

Though the present tense idiom powerfully locates the Charter in an urgent and perpetual now, we should not let grammatical considerations obscure its complexities as a living document. For one thing, while the Charter clearly articulates the principles governing PEN's engagement in the present, it also charts a course into an uncertain future and constitutes an ethical pledge, which, as you can see at the foot of this version, all aspiring PEN centres are required formally to sign in order to become recognized affiliates, a practice PEN has followed since the 1930s. So, the Charter is both the binding expression of the solidarity PEN represents across over 140 centres today and a promissory note addressed to the new solidarities it hopes to build tomorrow. For another thing, while each of the four articles is a succinct statement of commitment here and now, each also tells a shadow story rooted in the momentous history of the past one hundred years. This is because, unlike the *Universal Declaration*, the text of the Charter has evolved over time, reflecting PEN's expanding and diversifying membership—and, it should be said, its own cherished culture of internal debate—as well as its openness to re-framing its thinking and priorities in line with a changing world.

As these shadow stories, some of which are also ghost stories, require a little scene setting, I need to begin by taking a journey back to the future, tracking the Charter's evolution in reverse. Our first stop must be 2016, the year before PEN formally ratified a few important changes to Article 3. At that point, PEN was still committed to promoting 'mutual respect' only 'between nations', not 'nations and people'; to dispelling not 'all hatreds' but only 'race, class, and national hatreds'; and to championing 'the ideal of humanity living in peace in one world', not 'peace and equality.' These changes reflected PEN's effort to update the language of the 1940s, and to address the Charter's silence about gender, a key issue Jennifer Clement raised when she became PEN International's first woman president in 2015. The 2017 *Women's Manifesto* is another product of this important intervention.

Our next stop, which takes us to 2002 and centres on Article 1, marks a break not with the 1940s but with PEN's founding moment in the 1920s and, as the internal debate at the time revealed, with a legacy of late 18th -century European thinking. With the changes ratified in 2003, PEN formally de-nationalized its idea of literature, dropping the parenthetical phrase 'national though it be in origin' from its opening statement, and changing 'among nations' to 'among people' in the second clause. It also reinforced its commitment to this new vision by shifting mode from the exhortatory 'should' to the imperative 'must'. Though PEN has a long history of assisting refugees and exiles, and of trying to make space for the literatures of stateless people—beginning with Yiddish writers in the 1920s—the 2003 amendments finally aligned its guiding principles more closely with its day-to-day practice, opening it up to a post-Euro-American and post-colonial world where, no matter what current circumstances suggest, the 'national', let alone the 'nationalist', can never be treated as self-evident given.

PEN in fact anticipated this development in the 1970s when it added a new concluding clause to the first sentence of Article 4, the statement on free expression. Between 1948 and 1976, the Charter pledged PEN members ‘to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong.’ Then, in 1977, the guardedly expansive subclause ‘as well as throughout the world wherever this is possible’ was inserted. This circumspect, ten-word addition reflects the growing tensions of the Cold War—the global expansiveness came from the initial American proposal, the caution from a Belgian amendment.

We have now reached our penultimate stopping point: the auspicious year of 1948, auspicious not just because this was the year the document came formally to be known as ‘The PEN Charter’—an idea the Yiddish writer Leo Koenig proposed in 1942—but because 1948 saw the addition of the complex, 113-word, fourth article, which sets out PEN’s carefully balanced commitment to free expression, as well as the insertion of the peace and hatred clauses in Article 3. Again, the initial proposals came from American PEN, though, as we shall see, the third sentence in Article 4 includes wording first formulated over a decade earlier. The central feature of the new free expression article however—the anti-absolutist balancing—dates from an American resolution first tabled and vigorously debated in 1946. This coupled free expression to ‘voluntary restraint’, while also adding the further commitment ‘to oppose such evils of a free press as mendacious publication, deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for political and personal ends.’ It is hard not to feel this intricate balancing speaks even more powerfully to today’s climate-ravaged digital world than it did in the war-ravaged print era of the 1940s.

Our final stopping point is 1927, the year PEN agreed a short, 73-word ‘Statement of Aims’ as it was first called. This comprised the first three articles of the Charter, minus the peace and hatred clause of Article 3. These foundational principles defined PEN’s aspirations in the interwar years, articulating its self-understanding as ‘An International Association of Writers’—to use the wording of the official letterhead of the period—that is, a body established in the shadow of the First World War, like the League of Nations, to guard against the worst excesses of nationalism but not to initiate a new post-national, or for that matter, post-colonial world order, again like the League of Nations.

As an evolving, multi-authored, and collectively authorized document, the Charter is rightly identified with PEN the organization, but, as I said earlier, this is in part a ghost story. One of the privileges of opening up an archive, especially one belonging to a pioneering and influential organization caught in the crosscurrents of world history, is that you get to look behind the tapestry, to see the individual threads that make up the picture, even the agonies of workmanship that went into its creation. It did not take much archival digging for me to start hearing some individualized voices.

First to break through are the urbanely passionate tones of the English novelist, John Galsworthy, PEN's founding President and first major benefactor—in one of his last acts, he bequeathed his £9000 Nobel Prize to PEN in 1932. Building on the social vision of the founder, the English writer Catherine Dawson Scott, Galsworthy used the 1927 'Statement of Aims' to articulate his hopes for the kind of internationalism PEN could represent. As he saw it, writers had a duty not only to protect 'the patrimony of humanity at large' from 'national or political passion,' but to model non-political forms of co-operation, injecting what he called a 'new idealism' into international relations. It is difficult not to hear his voice blending with Scott's in an early draft of the 'Statement of Aims':

> The P.E.N. Club stands for hospitality and friendliness among writers of all countries; for the unity, integrity and welfare of letters; and concerns itself with measures which contribute to these ends. It stands apart from politics.

The last point about politics was the theme-tune of Galsworthy's decade-long presidency.

The next voice to emerge, different but no less English, speaks through the third sentence of Article 4: '[PEN] believes that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organised political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations and institutions imperative.' Though part of the new article added in 1948, the wording (minus the late insertion of 'governments') came from a resolution the English novelist Ernest Raymond tabled at the Edinburgh congress in 1934. Raymond was just the scribe, however. The principal author of these words was PEN's second president, the utopian English futurist and science-fiction visionary, H.G. Wells. Less anxious about the messy business of politics than Galsworthy, Wells made free expression and the 'free criticism of administrations and institutions' key priorities for PEN, encouraging it to take a categorical stand against the Nazification of German PEN in 1933 and to adopt a more engaged and explicitly progressivist idea of its role. Hence those unmistakably Wellsian words about 'the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organised political and economic order.'

These are some of the ghostly, individualized voices, the threads behind the tapestry, the archives reveal. What they also uncover, however, are some of the even more spectral voices that played as influential a part in the Charter's evolution but that survive only in the records, not in the text itself. These include the many counter-voices and iconic figures who are sometimes more easily forgotten either because they were on the other side of the arguments that gave the Charter the shape it has or because they were at the centre of the horrors to which it was a collectively drafted response. I'd like to end by focusing on just one of these doubly ghosted voices: the German-Jewish *avant garde* poet-playwright and revolutionary social democrat, Ernst Toller.

During the 1926 Berlin congress, Toller was among a group of younger German writers who attacked the PEN project in the press. For the '1925 Group', as they were called, which included Bertolt Brecht, Joseph Roth, and Robert Musil, PEN was simply a dining club for the old guard. 'They have so deliberately excluded anything youthful,' wrote the 28-year-old Brecht, 'that this congress, so far as the German group is concerned at least, is absolutely and hopelessly superfluous, even harmful.' During a meeting with Galsworthy, Toller went further, challenging his stance on politics, which, Toller insisted, is inescapable because it 'is everywhere and influences everything.' Speaking not just as a political activist, but as a traumatized veteran of the First World War, who became a committed pacifist, and as a former political prisoner, who had recently served a five-year sentence for treason, Toller was firmly on the other side of the literature and politics argument of the 1920s. Rattled by these encounters, Galsworthy returned to London determined to spell out PEN's counter-position and to defend the 'new idealism' he believed it had a responsibility to uphold.

Yet, if Toller and the 1925 Group haunt the first three articles of the Charter, Toller alone stands behind what eventually became the fourth. 'The defence of liberty of expression and that defence alone, defines a task big enough for all your efforts as a society,' H.G. Wells said during his opening address at the Edinburgh congress in 1934. 'If and when National Socialism or Fascism invades the liberties of thought and literature', he added, 'the P.E.N. must fight National Socialism or Fascism.' Once again, like Galsworthy, Wells was not just defending a principle. He was responding to counter-voices, on this occasion from the right rather than the left. At the previous congress, held in Dubrovnik in May 1933, German PEN had refused to answer questions about its own Nazification and membership purges, or about the broader assaults on free expression in Hitler's Germany, including the recent book burnings in Berlin. In response, Wells insisted on giving Toller the floor as a newly exiled German-Jew whose books had been among those burned, alongside many others by the 1925 Group. At that point, the German delegates left the room and, later that year, they were expelled from PEN itself. As Hermon Ould, PEN's long-serving international secretary, later put it: ‘after 1933 the International PEN and a Totalitarian form of government were shown to be incompatible.’

Since the events of 1933, and Toller’s Dubrovnik testimony in particular, live on in the penumbra of the Charter’s free expression article, it seems appropriate to give him the last word. Bear in mind that he took his own life in New York in May 1939, aged 45, almost exactly six years after saying these words, so he did not live to see the genocide that was yet to come. He spoke in German without notes. I am quoting a version of the English translation he prepared later.

> Yesterday [he said as he took the floor on that day in early May 1933] the German delegates passed a resolution which contained the following words: “It is the duty of the artist to keep the spirit in its freedom so that mankind shall not be prey to ignorance, to malice, and to fear. Literature knows no frontiers and should remain common currency in spite of political or international upheavals.”
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> I was surprised indeed that the gentlemen from the German PEN Club supported this resolution and I wanted to ask them: Is their support compatible with reality?
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> Millions of people in Germany are not allowed to speak freely and to write freely. Speaking here, I speak also for those millions who have no voice today. These gentlemen evoke the spirit of great German writers. How are the spiritual claims of Goethe, Schiller, Kleist, Herder, Wieland, Lessing compatible with the persecution of free peoples, with the persecution of Jews?
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> Madness governs our times, barbarity rules the people. The air around us is getting thinner and thinner.

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