

Nobel Lecture by Patrick Modiano

Nobel Laureate in Literature 2014



**SVENSKA
AKADEMIEN**

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I would simply like to tell you how happy I am to be here with you and how touched I am by the honour you have done me in awarding me the Nobel Prize in Literature.

This is the first time I have had to make a speech in front of such a large audience, and I am feeling somewhat apprehensive about it. It is easy to imagine that this sort of thing comes naturally and easily to a writer. But a writer – well, a novelist at least – often has an uneasy relationship with speech. Calling to mind the way school lessons distinguish between the written and the oral, a novelist has more talent for written than oral assignments. He is accustomed to keeping quiet, and if he wants to imbibe an atmosphere, he must blend in with the crowd. He listens to conversations without appearing to, and if he steps in it is always in order to ask some discreet questions so as to improve his understanding of the women and men around him. His speech is hesitant because he is used to crossing out his words. It is true that after several redrafts, his style may be crystal clear. But when he takes the floor, he no longer has any means at his disposal to correct his stumbling speech.

I also belong to a generation in which children were seen and not heard except on certain rare occasions and only after asking permission. But no one ever listened and people would often talk across them. That explains the difficulty that some of us have when speaking – sometimes hesitant, sometimes too fast as if we expect to be interrupted at any moment. This is perhaps why the desire to write came over me, like so many others, at the end of childhood. You hope that the adults will read what you write. That way, they will have to listen to you without interrupting and they will jolly well know what it is you have on your chest.

The announcement of this award seemed unreal to me and I was eager to know why you chose me. On that day I do not think I had ever been more acutely aware of how blind a novelist is when it comes to his own books, and how much more the readers know about what he has written than he does. A novelist can never be his own reader, except when he is ridding his manuscript of syntax errors, repetitions or the occasional superfluous paragraph. He only has a partial and confused impression of his books, like a painter creating a fresco on the ceiling, lying flat on a scaffold and working on the details, too close up, with no vision of the work as a whole.

Writing is a strange and solitary activity. There are dispiriting times when you start working on the first few pages of a novel. Every day, you have the feeling you are on the wrong track. This creates a strong urge to go back and follow a different path. It is important not to give in to this urge, but to keep going. It is a little like driving a car at night, in winter, on ice, with zero visibility. You have no choice, you cannot go into reverse, you must keep going forward while telling yourself that all will be well when the road becomes more stable and the fog lifts.

When you are about to finish a book, you feel as if it is starting to break away and is already breathing the air of freedom, like schoolchildren in class the day before the summer break. They are distracted and boisterous and no longer pay attention to their teacher. I would go so far as to say that as you write the last paragraphs, the book displays a certain hostility in its haste to free itself from you. And it leaves you, barely giving you time to write out the last word. It is over – the book no longer needs you and has already forgotten you. From now on, it will discover itself through the readers. When this happens you have a feeling of great emptiness and a sense of having been abandoned. There is a kind of disappointment, too, because of this bond between

you and the book which was severed too quickly. The dissatisfaction and the feeling of something unfinished drives you to write the next book in order to restore balance, something which never happens. As the years pass, the books follow one after the other and readers talk about a 'body of work'. But for you, there is a feeling that it was all just a headlong rush forward.

So yes, the reader knows more about a book than the author himself. Something happens between a novel and its reader which is similar to the process of developing photographs, the way they did it before the digital age. The photograph, as it was printed in the darkroom, became visible bit by bit. As you read your way through a novel, the same chemical process takes place. But for such harmony to exist between the author and his reader, it is important never to overextend the reader – in the sense that we talk about singers overextending their voice – but to coax him imperceptibly, leaving enough space for the book to permeate him little by little, by means of an art resembling acupuncture, in which the needle merely has to be inserted in exactly the right spot to release the flow in the nervous system.

I believe the world of music has an equivalent to this intimate and complementary relationship between the novelist and his

reader. I have always thought that writing was close to music, only much less pure, and I have always envied musicians who to my mind practised an art which is higher than the novel. Poets, too, who are closer to musicians than novelists. I began writing poems as a child, and that is surely why a remark I read somewhere struck such a chord with me: 'prose writers are made from bad poets'. For a novelist, in terms of music, it is often a matter of coaxing all the people, the landscapes, the streets he has been able to observe into a musical score which contains the same melodic fragments from one book to another, but which will seem to him to be imperfect. The novelist will then regret not having been a pure musician and not having composed Chopin's *Nocturnes*.

A novelist's lack of awareness of and critical distance to his own body of work is due to a phenomenon that I have noticed in myself and many others: as soon as it is written, every new book erases the last one, leaving me with the impression that I have forgotten it. I thought I was writing books one after the other in a disjointed way, in successive bouts of oblivion, but often the same faces, the same names, the same places, the same phrases keep coming back in book after book, like patterns on a tapestry

woven while half asleep. While half asleep or while daydreaming. A novelist is often a sleepwalker, so steeped is he in what he must write, and it is natural to worry when he crosses the road in case he is run over. Do not forget, though, the extreme precision of sleepwalkers who walk over roofs without ever falling off.

The phrase that stood out for me in the declaration following the announcement of this Nobel Prize was an allusion to World War II: 'he uncovered the life-world of the occupation'. Like everyone else born in 1945, I was a child of the war and more precisely, because I was born in Paris, a child who owed his birth to the Paris of the occupation. Those who lived in that Paris wanted to forget it very quickly or at least only remember the day-to-day details, the ones which presented the illusion that everyday life was after all not so very different from the life they led in normal times. It was all a bad dream, with vague remorse for having been in some sense survivors. Later on, when their children asked them questions about that period and that Paris, their answers were evasive. Or else they remained silent as if they wanted to rub out those dark years from their memory and

keep something hidden from us. But faced with the silence of our parents we worked it all out as if we had lived it ourselves.

That Paris of the occupation was a strange place. On the surface, life went on 'as before' – the theatres, cinemas, music halls and restaurants were open for business. There were songs playing on the radio. Theatre and cinema attendances were in fact much higher than before the war, as if these places were shelters where people gathered and huddled next to each other for reassurance. But there are bizarre details indicating that Paris was not at all the same as before. The lack of cars made it a silent city – a silence that revealed the rustling of trees, the clip-clopping of horses' hooves, the noise of the crowd's footsteps and the hum of voices. In the silence of the streets and of the black-out imposed at around five o'clock in winter, during which the slightest light from windows was forbidden, this city seemed to be absent from itself – the city 'without eyes' as the Nazi occupiers used to say. Adults and children could disappear without trace from one moment to the next, and even among friends, nothing was ever really spelled out and conversations were never frank because of the feeling of menace in the air.

In this Paris from a bad dream, where anyone could be denounced or picked up in a round-up at a Métro station exit, chance meetings took place between people whose paths would never have crossed during peace time, fragile love affairs were born in the gloom of the curfew, with no certainty of meeting again in the days that followed. Later, as a consequence of these often short-lived and sometimes shabby encounters, children were born. That is why for me, the Paris of the occupation was always a kind of primordial darkness. Without it I would never have been born. That Paris never stopped haunting me, and my books are sometimes bathed in its veiled light.

And here is proof that a writer is indelibly marked with the date of his birth and by his time, even if he was not directly involved in political action, even if he gives the impression of being a recluse shut away in what people call his 'ivory tower'. If he writes poems, they reflect the time he is living in and could never have been written in a different era.

This is especially true in a poem by Yeats, the great Irish writer, which I have always found deeply moving: *The Wild Swans at Coole*. In a park, Yeats is watching some swans glide on the water:

The nineteenth Autumn has come upon me

Since I first made my count;

I saw, before I had well finished,

All suddenly mount

And scatter wheeling in great broken rings

Upon their clamorous wings.

But now they drift on the still water

Mysterious, beautiful;

Among what rushes will they build,

By what lake's edge or pool

Delight men's eyes, when I awake some day

To find they have flown away?

Swans often appear in 19th century poetry – in Baudelaire or Mallarmé. But this poem by Yeats could not have been written in the 19th century. It has a particular rhythm and a melancholy which places it in the 20th century and even in the year in which it was written.

A writer of the 20th century may also, on occasion, feel imprisoned by his time, and reading the great 19th century novelists – Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky – may bring

on a certain nostalgia. In those days, time passed more slowly than today, and this slowness suited the work of the novelist because it allowed him to marshal his energy and his attention. Time has speeded up since then and moves forward in fits and starts – explaining the difference between the towering literary edifices of the past, with their cathedral-like architectures, and the disjointed and fragmented works of today. From this point of view, my own generation is a transitional one, and I would be curious to know how the next generations, born with the Internet, mobile phones, emails and tweets, will express through literature this world in which everyone is permanently 'connected' and where 'social networks' are eating into that part of intimacy and secrecy that was still our own domain until quite recently – the secrecy that gave depth to individuals and could become a major theme in a novel. But I will remain optimistic about the future of literature and I am convinced that the writers of the future will safeguard the succession just as every generation has done since Homer...

And besides, a writer always manages to express something timeless in his work even if he, like any other artist, is so tightly bound to his age that he cannot escape it and the only air he

breathes is the air of the zeitgeist. In productions of Racine or Shakespeare, it hardly matters whether the characters are dressed in period costume or the director wants to put them in jeans and a leather jacket. These are insignificant details. While reading Tolstoy, Anna Karenina feels so close to us after a century and a half that we forget she is wearing dresses from 1870. And there are some writers, like Edgar Allen Poe, Melville or Stendhal, who are better understood two centuries after their death than they were by their own contemporaries.

Ultimately, how far away exactly does a novelist remain? At the margins of life in order to describe it, because if you are immersed in it – in the action – the image you have of it is mixed up. But this slight distance does not limit the author's capacity to identify with his characters and the people who inspire him in real life. Flaubert said 'Madame Bovary is me'. And Tolstoy instantly identified with the woman he saw throwing herself under a train one night in a station in Russia. This gift of identification went so far that Tolstoy blended with the sky and the landscape that he was describing and that absorbed him entirely, down to the slightest batting of Anna Karenina's eyelash. This altered state is the opposite of narcissism as it

implies a simultaneous combination of self-oblivion with supreme concentration so as not to miss the smallest detail. A certain solitude is implied, too. This does not mean turning inwards, but it does allow you to achieve a degree of attention and hyper-lucidity when observing the outside world, which can then be transposed into a novel.

I have always thought that poets and novelists are able to impart mystery to individuals who are seemingly overwhelmed by day-to-day life, and to things which are ostensibly banal – and the reason they can do this that they have observed them time and again with sustained attention, almost hypnotically. Under their gaze, everyday life ends up being enshrouded in mystery and taking on a kind of glow-in-the-dark quality which it did not have at first sight but which was hidden deep down. It is the role of the poet and the novelist, and also the painter, to reveal the mystery and the glow-in-the-dark quality which exist in the depths of every individual. My distant relative, the painter Amedeo Modigliani, comes to mind. In his most stirring paintings, the models he chose were anonymous people, children and street girls, maids, small farmers, young apprentices. He painted them with an intense brush stroke reminiscent of the

great Tuscan tradition – Botticelli and the Sienese painters of the Quattrocento. He also gave them – or rather revealed – all the grace and nobility that was inside them, beneath their humble appearance. The work of a novelist must travel in the same direction. His imagination, far from distorting reality, must get to the bottom of it, revealing this reality to itself, using the power of infrared and ultraviolet to detect what is hidden behind appearances. I could almost believe that the novelist, at his best, is a kind of clairvoyant or even visionary. He is also a seismograph, standing by to pick up barely perceptible movements.

I always think twice before reading the biography of a writer I admire. Biographers sometimes latch onto small details, unreliable eyewitness accounts, character traits that appear puzzling or disappointing – all of which is like the crackling sound that messes with radio transmissions, making the music and the voices impossible to hear. It is only by actually reading his books that we gain intimacy with a writer. This is when he is at his best and he is speaking to us in a low voice without any of the static.

Yet when reading a writer's biography, you do occasionally discover a noteworthy childhood event which planted the seed of his future body of work and about which he did not always have a clear conscience, this noteworthy event coming back in various guises to haunt his books. This brings to mind Alfred Hitchcock, not a writer but someone whose films nevertheless have the strength and cohesion of a novel. When his son was five years old, Hitchcock's father told him to take a letter to a police officer friend of his. The child delivered the letter and the police officer locked him up in the screened-off section of the police station that is used as a cell holding all sorts of offenders overnight. The terrified child was in there for an hour before the police officer released him, explaining 'now you know what happens if you behave badly in life.' This police officer, with his really rather strange ideas about childrearing, must have been behind the atmosphere of suspense and anxiety that is found in all the films of Alfred Hitchcock.

I will not trouble you with my own personal story, but I do think that certain episodes from my childhood planted the seed that would become my books later on. I was usually away from my parents, staying with friends about whom I knew nothing, in

a succession of places and houses. At the time, nothing surprises a child and even bizarre situations seem perfectly natural. It was much later on that my childhood struck me as enigmatic and I tried to find out more about the various people my parents left me with and those places that kept on changing. But I was unable to identify most of the people nor to locate all the places and all the houses of the past with any topographical accuracy. This drive to resolve enigmas without really succeeding and to try to unravel a mystery gave me the desire to write, as if writing and the imagination could help me finally tie up all those loose ends.

Since we are talking about 'mysteries', the association of ideas brings to mind the title of a 19th century French novel: *Les mystères de Paris*. The city – as it happens Paris, the city of my birth – is linked to my very first childhood impressions, and these impressions were so strong that I have been constantly exploring the 'mysteries of Paris' ever since. When I was about nine or ten, it came about that I was out walking alone, and even though I was scared of getting lost, I went further and further into neighbourhoods I was unfamiliar with on the right bank of the Seine. That was in daylight, which reassured me. At the start of adolescence I worked hard to overcome my fear and venture out

at night even further afield by Métro. That is how you get to know about the city, and I was following the example of most of the novelists I admired and for which, since the 19th century, the city – call it Paris, London, Saint Petersburg or Stockholm – was the backdrop and one of the main themes of their books.

In his short story 'The Man of the Crowd', Edgar Allen Poe was among the first to evoke the waves of humanity he observes outside a café window, walking the pavements in endless succession. He picks out an old man with an unusual appearance and follows him overnight into different parts of London in order to find out more about him. But the unknown person is a 'man of the crowd' and it is pointless following him because he will always remain anonymous and it will never be possible to find out anything about him. He does not have an individual existence, he is simply part of the mass of passers-by walking in serried ranks or jostling and losing themselves in the streets.

I am also reminded of something that happened to the poet Thomas De Quincey when he was young and that marked him for life. In London, in the crowd on Oxford Street, he made friends with a girl, one of those chance encounters that happen in a city. He spent a few days in her company then he had to leave

London for a few days. They agreed that after a week, she would wait at the same time every evening on the corner of Great Titchfield Street. But they never saw each other again. 'If she lived, doubtless we must have been some time in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London; perhaps even within a few feet of each other – a barrier no wider than a London street often amounting in the end to a separation for eternity.'

With the passing of the years, each neighbourhood, each street in a city evokes a memory, a meeting, a regret, a moment of happiness for those who were born there and have lived there. Often the same street is tied up with successive memories, to the extent that the topography of a city becomes your whole life, called to mind in successive layers as if you could decipher the writings superimposed on a palimpsest. And also the lives of the thousands upon thousands of other, unknown, people passing by on the street or in the Métro passageways at rush hour.

That is why in my youth, to help me write, I tried to find the old Parisian telephone directories, especially the ones that listed names by street with building numbers. I had the feeling as I turned the pages that I was looking at an X ray of the city – a

submerged city like Atlantis – and breathing in the scent of time. Because of the years that had passed, the only traces left by these thousands upon thousands of unknown individuals were their names, addresses and telephone numbers. Sometimes a name disappears from one year to the next. There was something dizzying about browsing through these old phone books and thinking that from now on, calls to those numbers would be unanswered. I would later be struck by the stanzas of a poem by Osip Mandelstam:

I returned to my city familiar to tears,
To my vessels and tonsils of childhood years,

Petersburg, [...]

While you're keeping my telephone numbers alive.

Petersburg, I still have the addresses at hand
That I'll use to recover the voice of the dead.

So it seems to me that the desire to write my first books came to me while I was looking at those old Parisian phone books. All I had to do was underline in pencil the name, address and telephone number of some unknown person and imagine what his

or her life was like, among the hundreds and hundreds of thousands of names.

You can lose yourself or disappear in a big city. You can even change your identity and live a new life. You can indulge in a very long investigation to find a trace of malice, starting only with one or two addresses in an isolated neighbourhood. I have always been fascinated by the short note that sometimes appears on search records: *Last known address*. Themes of disappearance, identity and the passing of time are closely bound up with the topography of cities. That is why since the 19th century, cities have been the territory of novelists, and some of the greatest of them are linked to a single city: Balzac and Paris, Dickens and London, Dostoyevsky and Saint Petersburg, Tokyo and Nagai Kafū, Stockholm and Hjalmar Söderberg.

I am of the generation which was influenced by these novelists, and which wanted in turn to explore what Baudelaire called the 'sinuous folds of the old capital cities'. Of course, fifty years ago – in other words when adolescents of my age were experiencing powerful sensations by discovering their city – cities were changing. Some of them, in America and what people call the third world, became 'megacities' reaching disturbing

dimensions. The inhabitants are divided up into often neglected neighbourhoods, living in a climate of social warfare. Slums are increasing in number and becoming ever more sprawling. Until the 20th century, novelists maintained a more or less 'romantic' vision of the city, not so different from Dickens' or Baudelaire's. That is why I would like to know how the novelists of the future will evoke these gigantic urban concentrations in works of fiction.

Concerning my books, you were kind enough to allude to 'the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies'. But this compliment is about more than just me. It is about a peculiar kind of memory, which attempts to collect bits and pieces from the past and the few traces left on earth of the anonymous and the unknown. And this, too, is bound up with my year of birth: 1945. Being born in 1945, after the cities had been destroyed and entire populations had disappeared, must have made me, like others of my age, more sensitive to the themes of memory and oblivion.

Unfortunately I do not think that the remembrance of things past can be done any longer with Marcel Proust's power and candidness. The society he was describing was still stable, a 19th

century society. Proust's memory causes the past to reappear in all its detail, like a tableau vivant. Today, I get the sense that memory is much less sure of itself, engaged as it is in a constant struggle against amnesia and oblivion. This layer, this mass of oblivion that obscures everything, means we can only pick up fragments of the past, disconnected traces, fleeting and almost ungraspable human destinies.

Yet it has to be the vocation of the novelist, when faced with this large blank page of oblivion, to make a few faded words visible again, like lost icebergs adrift on the surface of the ocean.

Translation: James Hardiker, Semantix



The premises of the Swedish Academy are in the Exchange (Börshuset), in Stortorget in the Old Town in Stockholm. The building was erected between 1767 and 1778. The ground floor was intended for the Stockholm Stock Exchange and the upper floor for the burgesses of Stockholm. From the 1860s the Grand Hall served as the council chamber for the City aldermen.

It is in the Grand Hall that the Academy has always held its Annual Grand Ceremony, but finding premises for the daily work and the weekly meetings has at times caused problems. Not until 1914 was a solution found. A donation made it possible for the Academy to acquire the right to use the upper floor of the Exchange (including the Grand Hall) and its attic in perpetuity. It did not finally move in, however, until 1921, when Stockholm's new Town Hall had been completed.