

Nobel Lecture by Annie Ernaux

Nobel Laureate in Literature 2022



SVENSKA
AKADEMIEN

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Where to begin? I have asked myself this question dozens of times, gazing at a blank page. As if I needed to find the one, the only sentence that would give me entry into the writing of the book and remove all doubts in one fell swoop – a sort of key. Today, as I confront a situation which, the initial stupor having passed – ‘is it really me this is happening to?’ – my imagination represents in a way that instils a growing terror, I am overwhelmed by the same necessity. Finding the sentence that will give me the freedom and the firmness to speak without trembling in this place to which you have invited me this evening.

To find that sentence, I don’t have to look very far. It instantly appears. In all its clarity and violence. Lapidary. Irrefutable. Written in my diary sixty years ago. ‘I will write to avenge my people, *j’écirai pour venger ma race*’. It echoed Rimbaud’s cry: ‘I am of an inferior race for all eternity.’ I was twenty-two, studying literature in a provincial faculty with the daughters and sons of the local bourgeoisie, for the most part. I proudly and naively believed that writing books, becoming a writer, as the last in a line of landless labourers, factory workers and shopkeepers, people despised for their manners, their accent, their lack of education, would be enough to redress the social injustice linked to social class at birth. That an individual victory could erase centuries of domination and poverty, an illusion that school had already fostered in me by dint of my academic success. How could my personal achievement have redeemed any of the humiliations and offences suffered? That’s not a question I ever asked myself. I had a few excuses.

From the time I could read, books were my companions, and reading was my natural occupation outside of school. This appetite was nurtured by a mother who, between customers, in her shop, read a great many novels, and preferred me reading rather than sewing and knitting. The high cost of books, the suspicion with which they were regarded at my religious school, made

them even more desirable. *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Jane Eyre*, the tales of Grimm and Andersen, *David Copperfield*, *Gone with the Wind*, and later *Les Misérables*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Nausea*, *The Stranger*: chance, more than the school's prescriptions, determined what I read.

By choosing literary studies I elected to remain inside literature, which had become the thing of greatest value, even a way of life that led me to project myself into the novels of Flaubert or Virginia Woolf and literally live them out. Literature was a sort of continent which I unconsciously set in opposition to my social environment. And I conceived of writing as nothing less than the possibility of transfiguring reality.

It was not the rejection of my first novel by two or three publishers – a novel whose sole merit was its attempt to find a new form – which subdued my desire and my pride. It was life situations in which the weight of difference between a woman's existence and that of a man was keenly felt in a society where roles were defined by gender, where contraception was prohibited and termination of pregnancy a crime. Married with two children, a teaching position and full responsibility for household affairs, each day I moved further and further away from writing and my promise to avenge my people. I could not read the parable 'Before the Law' from Kafka's *The Trial* without seeing the shape of my own destiny: to die without ever having entered the gate made just for me, the book that only I could write.

But that is without taking account of private and historical circumstance. The death of a father who passed away three days after I arrived home on holiday, a job teaching students from working-class backgrounds similar to my own, protest movements everywhere in the world: all these factors brought me back, through byroads that were unforeseen and proximate to the world of my origins, to my 'people', and gave my desire to write a quality of secret and absolute urgency. No more of the illusory 'writing about nothing' of my twenties; now it was a matter of delving into the unspeakable in repressed memory, and bringing light to bear on how my people lived. Of writing to understand the reasons, inside and outside of myself, which had caused me to be distanced from my origins.

In writing, no choice is self-evident. But those who, as immigrants, no longer speak their parents' language, and those who, as class defectors, no longer have quite the same language, think and express themselves with other words, face additional hurdles. A dilemma. They indeed feel the difficulty, even the impossibility of writing in the acquired, dominant language, which they have mastered and admire in works of literature, anything that relates to their world of origin, that first world made up of sensations and words describing daily life, work, one's place in society. On the one hand is the language in which they learned to name things, with its brutality and silences, for example that of the intimate exchange between a mother and a son in the very beautiful text by Albert Camus, 'Between Yes and No'. On the other hand are the models of admired, internalized works which made that first world open out and to which they feel indebted for their elevation; which they sometimes even considered their true homeland. Mine included Flaubert, Proust, Virginia Woolf. None of them, when I went back to writing, were of any help to me. I had to break with 'writing well' and beautiful sentences – the very kind I taught my students to write – to root out, display and understand the rift running through me. What came to me spontaneously was the clamour of a language which conveyed anger and derision, even crudeness; a language of excess, insurgent, often used by the humiliated and offended as their only response to the memory of others' contempt, of shame and shame at feeling shame.

Very quickly too, it seemed self-evident – to the point that I could not imagine any other way to start – to anchor the story of the rift in my social being in the situation that had been mine as a student, a revolting situation to which the French state still condemned women, the need to seek out clandestine terminations at the hands of backstreet abortionists. And I wanted to describe everything that had happened to my girl's body; the discovery of pleasure, periods. And so, without being aware of it at the time, that first book, published in 1974, mapped out the realm in which I would situate my writing, a realm both social and feminist. Avenging my people and avenging my sex would, from that time on, be one and the same thing.

How can one reflect on life without also reflecting on writing? Without wondering whether writing reinforces or disrupts the accepted, interiorized representations of beings and things? With its violence and derision, did insurgent writing not reflect the attitude of the dominated? When the reader was culturally privileged, he maintained the same imposing and condescending outlook on a character in a book as he would in real life. Therefore, originally, it was to elude this kind of gaze which, when directed at my father whose story I was going to tell, would have been unbearable and, I felt, a betrayal, that, starting with my fourth book, I adopted a neutral, objective kind of writing, 'flat' in the sense that it contained neither metaphors nor signs of emotion. The violence was no longer displayed; it came from the facts themselves and not the writing. Finding the words that contain both reality and the sensation provided by reality would become, and remain to this day, my ongoing concern in writing, no matter what the subject.

It was necessary for me to continue to say 'I'. In literary use, the first person – the one through which we exist, in most languages, from the moment we know how to speak until death – is often considered narcissistic when referring to the author rather than an 'I' presented as fictitious. It is worth remembering that the 'I', hitherto the privilege of nobles recounting feats of arms in memoirs, was in France a democratic conquest of the eighteenth century, the affirmation of the equality of individuals and the right to be the subject of their story, as claimed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in this first preamble to the *Confessions*: 'And let no one object that, being a man of the people, I have nothing to say that deserves the attention of readers. [...] In whatever obscurity I may have lived, if I thought more and better than the Kings, the story of my soul is more interesting than that of theirs.'

It was not this plebeian pride that motivated me (although, having said that...), but the desire to use the 'I' – a form both masculine and feminine – as an exploratory tool that captures sensations: those which memory has buried, those which the world around us keeps on giving, everywhere and all the time. The prerequisite of sensation has for me become both the guide and guarantee of the authenticity of my research. But to what end? Not to tell the story of my

life nor free myself of its secrets but to decipher a lived situation, an event, a romantic relationship, and thereby reveal something that only writing can bring into being and perhaps pass on to the consciousness and memories of others. Who could say that love, pain and mourning, shame, are not universal? Victor Hugo wrote: ‘Not one of us has the honour of living a life that is only his own.’ But as all things are lived inexorably in the individual mode – ‘it is to me this is happening’ – they can only be read in the same way if the ‘I’ of the book becomes transparent, in a sense, and the ‘I’ of the reader comes to occupy it. If this ‘I’, to put it another way, becomes transpersonal.

This is how I conceived my commitment to writing, which does not consist of writing ‘for’ a category of readers, but in writing ‘from’ my experience as a woman and an immigrant of the interior; and from my longer and longer memory of the years I have lived, and from the present, an endless provider of the images and words of others. This commitment through which I pledge myself in writing is supported by the belief, which has become a certainty, that a book can contribute to change in private life, help to shatter the loneliness of experiences endured and repressed, and enable beings to reimagine themselves. When the unspeakable is brought to light, it is political.

We see it today in the revolt of women who have found the words to disrupt male power and who have risen up, as in Iran, against its most archaic form. Writing in a democratic country, however, I continue to wonder about the place women occupy in the literary field. They have not yet gained legitimacy as producers of written works. There are men in the world, including the Western intellectual spheres, for whom books written by women simply do not exist; they never cite them. The recognition of my work by the Swedish Academy is a sign of hope for all female writers.

In the bringing to light of the social unspeakable, of those internalized power relations linked to class and/or race, and gender too, felt only by the people who directly experience their impact, the possibility of individual but also collective emancipation emerges. To decipher the real world by stripping it of the visions and values that language, all language, carries within it is to upend its established order, upset its hierarchies.

But I do not confuse the political action of literary writing, subject to its reception by the reader, with the positions I feel compelled to take with respect to events, conflicts and ideas. I grew up as part of the post-war generation, following World War II, when writers and intellectuals positioned themselves in relation to French politics and became involved in social struggles as a matter of course. Today, it is impossible to say whether things would have turned out differently had they not spoken out and committed themselves. In today's world, where the multiplicity of information sources and the speed at which images flash past condition a form of indifference, to focus on one's art is a temptation. But, meanwhile, in Europe, an ideology of withdrawal and closure is on the rise, still concealed by the violence of an imperialist war waged by the dictator at the head of Russia, and steadily gaining ground in hitherto democratic countries. Founded on the exclusion of foreigners and immigrants, the abandonment of the economically weak, the surveillance of women's bodies, this ideology requires a duty of extreme vigilance, for me and all those for whom the value of a human being is always and everywhere the same.

By granting me the highest literary distinction that can be, a bright light is being shone on work that consists of writing and personal research carried out in solitude and doubt. This light does not dazzle me. I do not regard as an individual victory the Nobel prize that has been awarded me. It is neither from pride nor modesty that I see it, in some sense, as a collective victory. I share the pride of it with those who, in one way or another, hope for greater freedom, equality and dignity for all humans, regardless of their sex or gender, the colour of their skin, and their culture; and with those who think of future generations, of safeguarding an Earth where a profit-hungry few make life increasingly unliveable for all populations.

If I look back on the promise made at twenty to avenge my people, I cannot say whether I have carried it out. It was from this promise, and from my forebears, hardworking men and women inured to tasks that caused them to die early, that I received enough strength and anger to have the desire and ambition to give them a place in literature, amid this ensemble of voices

which, from very early on, accompanied me, giving me access to other worlds and other ways of being, including that of rebelling against and wanting to change it, in order to inscribe my voice as a woman and a social defector in what still presents itself as a space of emancipation, literature.

Translated by Alison L. Strayer

Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell ; Une saison en enfer & The Drunken Boat ; Le bateau ivre*. Translated from the French by Louise Varèse ; preface by Patti Smith. New York : New Directions, 2011

Quotations from the following works are translated by Alison L. Strayer:

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes I. Les confessions ; Autres textes autobiographiques*. Édition publiée sous la direction de Bernard Gagnebin et Marcel Raymond. Paris : Gallimard, 1959

Victor Hugo, *Œuvres complètes. Poésie V, Les Contemplations* (Préface des *Contemplations*). Paris : Hetzel-Quantin, 1882



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.