

On Stories and Story-Telling

(Ivo Andrić's speech when receiving the Nobel Prize)

In the performance of their exalted task, the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy has decided, this time, to distinguish a writer of, as it is often called, a small country with the Nobel prize, which, measured in international dimensions, is a very high honour. May I be allowed, accepting this award, to say a few words about that country, and to add a few more general considerations in connection with the narrative works that you have been pleased to reward.

My country is really "a small country among worlds" as one of our writers put it, a country that in rapid stages, at the price of great sacrifices and exceptional endeavours, has attempted to make up in all fields, including that of culture, for what an unusually stormy and difficult past has deprived it of. By your recognition, you have thrown a beam of light on the literature of this country, and thus drawn the attention of the world to its cultural endeavours, at the very time when our literature through a range of new names and original works has begun to make its way in the world, in a justified aspiration to make a fitting contribution to world literature. Your recognition of a writer from this country undoubtedly does much to encourage this. It constrains us to gratitude, then, and I am happy that I can, at this place and time, not only in my own name, but in the name of the literature I belong to, express this gratitude simply but sincerely.

The second part of my task is somewhat more complex and difficult, that is to say a few words in connection with the narrative works of the writer to whom you have done honour with

this prize.

But where a writer and his work is concerned, does it not seem just a little unjust that he who has created some work of art, should be expected, apart from having given his creation, a part of himself that is, to say something else about himself and this work? There are some of us who are more inclined to look upon the creators of works of art as if they were dumb, absent contemporaries, or the glorious departed, who think that the speech of the work of art is purer and clearer if it is not mingled with the living voice of its creator. This kind of thinking is neither new nor unusual. Montesquieu stated that "writers are not good judges of their own works". I once read with great admiration and understanding Goethe's rule: "It is the artist's to create, not to speak." As many years later I was to come with excitement upon the same thought, brilliantly expressed, in the works of a man we still mourn, Albert Camus.

For this reason I would like to place the emphasis of this short address where I think it properly should be, on a consideration of the story and story-telling in general. In a thousand different languages, in the most varied conditions of life, from age to age, from the ancient stories of the patriarchs in their huts round the fire, to the works of modern narrators that are coming out at this moment from the publishing companies in the great world centres, a story has been spun of the fate of mankind, told without end by people to people. The manner and forms of the narration change with time and conditions, but the need for stories and story-telling remains, the

story runs on, there is no end to story-telling. Sometimes it seems to us as if mankind from the first flash of consciousness, through the ages has constantly told itself, in a million variants, in time with the breath of its lungs and the rhythm of its pulse, the same single story. And this story seems to want, like the story-telling of the legendary Sheherazade, to beguile the executioner, to put off the inevitability of the tragic fate that awaits us, and prolong the illusion of life and continued existence. Or is, perhaps, the teller with his work there to help man to find himself, to cope? Perhaps it is his calling to talk in the name of all those who could not, or, cut down before their time by the executioner of life, did not manage to express themselves. Or does the narrator tell his tale to himself, as a child sings in the dark to beguile his fear? Or is it the aim of this story-telling to light up for us, at least a little, the dark ways onto which life often casts us, and tell us something more of this life, that we live but do not always see or understand, than we in our weakness *can* know and understand. Often only from the words of a good story-teller can be find out what we have done and what left undone, what should be done, and what not. Perhaps in these tales, both oral and written down, the first history of mankind is stored, and perhaps from them the meaning of this history can be guessed at if not known. Irrespective of whether they treat of the past or the present.

Talking of story-telling that deals with the past, it should be said that it is sometimes thought that to write of the past means to avoid the present, to turn

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one's back on life to some extent. I think that the writers of historical tales and novels would not agree with this, and that they would be rather more inclined to admit that they themselves do not really know how or when they are taken from what is called the present to what we call the past, crossing the thresholds of centuries with such ease, as if in a dream. And after all, do we not always meet the same phenomena and problems in the past as we do in the present? To be a man, born without knowing anything, without a will of one's own, cast into the ocean of existence. To have to swim. To exist. To bear an identity. To sustain the atmospheric pressure of everything around one, all the collisions, the unforeseeable and unforeseen actions of oneself and others, which are often not on the scale of our powers. And above all, one's own thoughts about all this have to be endured as well. In short, to be a man.

And so on the other side of the line that arbitrarily divides the past from the present the writer meets the same human fate that he has to note and understand as well as he can, to identify with it, warm it with his breath and his blood, until it becomes the living tissue of the story that he wishes to communicate to his readers, as beautifully, as simply, as convincingly as he can.

How can this be achieved, in what way, by what means? Some achieve it by the free and unrestricted ranging of the fancy, others by long and attentive study of historical data and social phenomena, others by plunging into the essence and point of bygone times, and others again with a capricious and joyful lightness, like the fertile French novelist who said: "What is history? A peg on which I hang my novel." In short, there are a hundred ways and means by which the writer can arrive at his work, and the only vital and crucial thing is the work itself.

The writer of historical novels could affix to his work, as inscription and the only explanation of everything for everyone once and for all, the ancient words: *Cogitavi dies antiquos et annos aeternos in mente habui* (I have thought of ancient days and borne in

mind the years of eternity).

And even without a note, the work will say the same thing.

But, at the end of it all, all these are questions of technique, methods, customs. It is all a more or less interesting play of the spirit occasioned by, or around, a work. It is not at all so important whether a narrator describes the past or the present, or whether he lunges boldly into the future; what is the most important thing here is the spirit with which his story is informed, that fundamental message that his story has for people. And of this, of course, there neither are nor can be rules or regulations. Everyone tells his tale according to his own inner needs, according to his own inherited or acquired leanings and understandings and the power of his expressive capabilities; everyone bears the moral re-

sponsibility for what he tells, and everyone should be allowed to tell his tale freely. But it is permissible, I think, at the end to wish that the story that today's story-teller tells the people of his time, irrespective of its form or topic, should not be poisoned with hatred or deafened with the thunder of lethal weaponry, but as far as possible set in motion by love and guided by the breadth and serenity of a free human spirit. For the tale-teller and his work have no purpose if they do not serve man and mankind in one way or the other. That is what is essential. And this is what I thought worth mentioning in my brief considerations on this occasion, which I shall, if you allow me, close as I began: with an expression of my most profound and sincere gratitude.

Translated by Graham McMaster



Andrić receives the Nobel Prize for literature, October 10, 1961, in Stockholm.