

Nobel Prize in Literature 1951



Pär Fabian Lagerkvist

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1951 was awarded to Pär Lagerkvist *"for the artistic vigour and true independence of mind with which he endeavours in his poetry to find answers to the eternal questions confronting mankind"*.

In a youthful manifesto of 1913 entitled *Ordkonst och bildkonst* [Verbal Art and Pictorial Art], Pär Lagerkvist, whose name was then unknown, had the audacity to find fault with the decadence of the literature of his time which, according to him, did not answer the requirements of art. His essay contains declarations which in their far too categorical form border on truism, but which in the light of his later work take on another, more profound meaning. Thus the young writer declared, «The writer's mission is to explain his time from an artist's point of view and to express the thought and feeling of this time for us and generations to come.» Today we can affirm that Lagerkvist himself, as far as one can follow him in his ascent toward maturity and greatness, amply accomplished this goal.

Today we call attention to this Swedish writer, not to present him in a general fashion - which would indeed seem superfluous - but to render to his work and to his person the homage due to them. Our attention is drawn above all to the impassioned,

unflinching sincerity, the ardent, unwearying patience, that have been the living forces behind his work. By these purely spiritual qualities, Pär Lagerkvist should answer fairly well, at least as a type of creative mind, to what Nobel said in the Sibylline terms of his will: «in an idealistic sense». Undeniably he belongs to that group of writers who, boldly and directly, have dedicated themselves to the vital questions of humanity, and who have tirelessly returned to the fundamental problems of our existence, with all that is overwhelming and sorrowful. The era in which he lived, whose materials determined his vocation, was menaced by rising clouds and by the eruptions of catastrophes. It is on this sombre and chaotic scene that he began to fight; it is in this country without sun that he discovered the flame of his inspiration.

Lagerkvist, with a precocious instinct of the imagination, apprehended the approaching disaster so far in advance that he was the prophet of anguish in Nordic literature; but he is also one of the most vigilant guardians of the spirit's sacred fire which threatens to be extinguished in the storm. A number of those listening to me surely recall the short story in Lagerkvist's *Onda Sagor* (1924) [Evil Tales], in which one sees the child of ten, on a luminous spring day, walking with his father along the railroad track; they hear together the songs of the birds in the forest, and then, on their way back, in the dusk, they are suddenly surprised by the unknown noise which cleaves the air. «I had an obscure foreboding of what that meant; it was the anguish which was going to come, all the unknown, which Father did not know, and from which he could not protect me. Here is what this world will be, what this life will be for me, not like Father's life in which everything was reassuring and well established. It was not a real world, not a real life. It was only something ablaze which rushed into the depths of obscurity, obscurity without end.» This childhood memory now appears to us as a symbol of the theme that dominates Pär Lagerkvist's work; at the same time, one might say that it proves to us that his subsequent works are authentic and logically necessary.

It is impossible, with the short time at our disposal today, to examine all these works in turn. The important thing is that, while Pär Lagerkvist makes use of different

genres, dramatic or lyric, epic or satiric, his way of grasping reality remains fundamentally the same. It does not matter in his case if the results are not always on a level with the intentions, for each work plays the role of a stone in an edifice he intends to build; each is a part of his mission, a mission that always bears on the same subject: the misery and grandeur of what is human, the slavery to which earthly life condemns us, and the heroic struggle of the spirit for its liberation. This is the theme in all the works we choose to recall at this time: *Gäst hos verkligheten* (1925) [*Guest of Reality*]; *Hjärtats sånger* (1926) [*Songs from the Heart*]; *Han som fick leva om sitt liv* (1928) [*He Who Lived His Life Over Again*]; *Dvärgen* (1944) [*The Dwarf*]; *Barabbas* (1950). It is needless to cite others to give an idea of the scope of Lagerkvist's inspirations and the power of his genius.

One of the foreign experts who, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Nobel Foundation, criticized the historic series of Nobel Prize laureates, gave as criteria two conditions which seemed equally indispensable to him: on the one hand the artistic value of the finished work, on the other its international reputation. Insofar as this last condition is concerned, it can immediately be objected that those who write in a language that is not widespread will find themselves at a great disadvantage. In any case, it is extremely rare that a Nordic writer could make a reputation with the international public, and, therefore, a fair judgment on this kind of candidate is an especially delicate matter. However, Nobel's will explicitly prescribes that the Prizes should be awarded without any consideration of nationality, so that they should be awarded to the worthiest, be he Scandinavian or not.» That should also signify that if a writer seems worthy of the Nobel Prize, the fact that he is Swedish, for example, should not in the end hinder him from obtaining it. As for Pär Lagerkvist, we must consider another factor, which pleases us very much: his last work has attracted much sympathy and esteem outside our frontiers. This was further proved by the insistent recommendations with which Lagerkvist's candidacy has been sustained by a majority of foreign advisers. He does not owe his Prize to the Academy circle itself. That the moving interpretations of the inner conflicts of *Barabbas* have found such repercussions even in foreign languages clearly shows the profoundly inspired character of this work,

which is all the more remarkable as the style of it is original and in a sense untranslatable. Indeed, in this language at once harsh and sensitive, Lagerkvist's compatriots often hear the echo of Småland folklore reechoing under the starry vault of Biblical legend. This reminds us once more that regional individuality can sometimes be transformed into something universal and accessible to all.

On each page of Pär Lagerkvist's work are words and ideas which, in their profound and fearful tenderness, carry at the very heart of their purity a message of terror. Their origin is in a simple, rustic life, laborious and frugal of words. But these words, these thoughts, handled by a master, have been placed at the service of other designs and have been given a greater purpose, that of raising to the level of art an interpretation of the time, the world, and man's eternal condition. That is why in the statement of the reasons for awarding the Nobel Prize to Pär Lagerkvist, it seems legitimate to us to affirm that this national literary production has risen to the European level.

Dr. Lagerkvist - We who have followed you from close by know how repugnant it is to you to be placed in the limelight. But since that seems inevitable at this moment, I beg you only to believe in the sincerity of our congratulations at the moment when you receive this award which, according to us, you have deserved more than any other at the present time. I have been obliged to sing your praises in front of you. But if the occasion were less solemn, I would be tempted to tell you quite simply, in the old Swedish manner: may it bring you happiness. And now, it remains for me to ask you to receive from the hands of our King the Nobel Prize in Literature for 1951.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1951/press.html