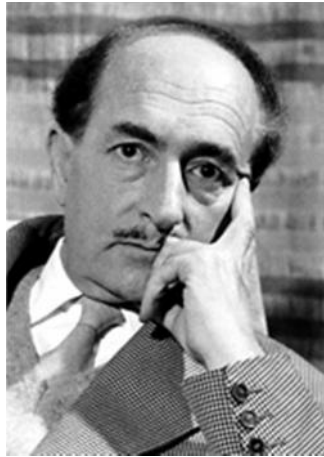


Nobel Prize in Literature 1959



Salvatore Quasimodo

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1959 was awarded to Salvatore Quasimodo *"for his lyrical poetry, which with classical fire expresses the tragic experience of life in our own times"*.

Salvatore Quasimodo, the Italian poet who has been awarded this year's Nobel Prize in Literature, is a Sicilian by birth. He was born near Syracuse, to be more exact, in the little town of Modica some distance from the coast. It is not difficult to imagine that a region so rich in memories of the past must have been of the utmost importance for his future calling. The relics of the ancient Greek temples on the island, the theatres near the Ionian Sea, Arethusa's fountain, so famed in legend, the gigantic ruins at Girgenti and Slinunte - what a playground for a child's imagination! Here in days gone by the heroes of Greek poetry were guests at the court of King Hieron, here the voices of Pindar and Aeschylus linger like an echo through the ages.

Even if, as far as material matters are concerned, Quasimodo was reared in comparative poverty, the milieu in which he spent his youth was nevertheless something to be grateful for. Admittedly, many restless years of travel were to pass before he became

conscious of his talent and began to find his way in the classical heritage that was his. In due course, however, his studies were to show their influence in his great contribution as a translator of the literature of classical antiquity which now forms the homogeneous background of his own work as one of the foremost poets in the Italian language. There can hardly be any doubt that his strict classical education acted as a stimulus, not to servile imitation, but to energetic self-discipline in the use of language and the achievement of artistic style. Although regarded as one of the principal innovators in modern poetry, Quasimodo is, nevertheless, bound to the classical tradition and occupies this place with all the natural confidence of a true heir.

Quasimodo made his debut as early as 1930 but it was not until the forties and fifties that he established his position as one of Italy's most outstanding poets, and by this time his reputation had become international. He belongs to the same generation as Silone, Moravia, and Vittorini, that is, the generation of left-wing authors who were able to prove their worth only after the fall of Fascism. Quasimodo is like these writers in that for him, too, the fate of present-day Italy is a reality in which he is deeply involved. His literary production is not very large. In actual fact it consists of five books of poetry, which reveal his development to complete individuality and originality. I quote the characteristic titles of the volumes: *Ed è subito sera* (And Suddenly It's Evening), published in 1942, *Giorno dopo giorno* (Day after Day), in 1946, *La vita non è sogno* (Life Is Not a Dream), in 1949, *Il falso e vero verde* (The False and the True Green), in 1956, and finally, *La terra impareggiabile* (The Incomparable Earth), in 1958. Together they form one homogeneous work in which not a single line is unimportant.

Quasimodo has sung of the Sicily of his childhood and his youth with a love that, since he went to live in the north of Italy, has gained an ever-increasing depth and perspective - the windswept island scenery with its Greek temple columns, its desolate grandeur, its poverty-stricken villages, its dusty roads winding through olive groves, its strident music of pounding surf and shepherds' horns. Nonetheless, he cannot be called a provincial poet. The area from which he draws his themes gradually increases, while at the

same time his human pathos breaks through the strict poetic form which first fettered him. Above all, the bitter experiences of the war provided the impulse for this change and made him an interpreter of the moral life of his fellow countrymen in their daily experience of nameless tragedies and constant confrontation with death. In this later period he has created a number of poems that are so monumental that one would like to believe that they will be accepted as a lasting contribution to the world's great poetry. Naturally, Quasimodo is far from being the only Italian poet to be deeply affected in this way by the martyrdom of his country and its people, but the Sicilian poet's dark and passionate earnestness rings with a special and individual note when he ends one of his lyrics with the cry:

However much everything else is distorted
The dead can never be sold.
Italy is my country, o stranger,
It is of its people I sing, and of the sound
Of secret lamentation that comes from its sea,
I sing of its mothers' chaste grief, of all its life.

Quasimodo is of the bold opinion that poetry does not exist for its own sake, but has an irrefutable mission in the world, through its creative power, to recreate man himself. To him, the road to freedom is the same as the conquest of isolation, and his own progress points in the same direction. In this way his work has become a living voice and his poetry an artistic expression of the consciousness of the Italian people, as far as this is possible for poetry with an otherwise so concise and individual structure. In his poems, Biblical turns of phrase are to be found side by side with allusions to classical mythology, that mythology which is an ever-present source of inspiration for a Sicilian. Christian compassion is the basic quality of his poetry, which, in moments of greatest inspiration, attains universality.

Dear Sir - The following statement pronounced by the Swedish Academy is the reason for which you have been awarded the Nobel Prize: "for his lyric poetry, which, with classical fire, expresses the tragic experience of life in our own times".



Your poetry has come to us as an authentic and vivid message of that Italy which has had faithful friends and admirers in our nation for centuries. With our most cordial congratulations I ask you to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature from His Majesty, the King.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1959/press.html