

Nobel Prize in Literature 1960



Saint-John Perse

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1960 was awarded to Saint-John Perse *"for the soaring flight and the evocative imagery of his poetry which in a visionary fashion reflects the conditions of our time"*.

The Nobel Prize laureate in literature for this year bears a name of unusual sound, which he chose at first to protect himself from the curious. Saint-John Perse is the poet's name that was to be made internationally famous by a private man who in civil life is called Alexis Léger and, as such, was to acquire great prestige in another domain of public life. Thus his life is divided into two periods, one of which has ended whereas the other is continuing: Alexis Léger, the diplomat, has been transformed into Saint-John Perse, the poet.

Considered as a literary personage, he presents a biography remarkable in many respects. Born in 1887 in Guadeloupe, he belonged to a French family that came to settle there as early as the seventeenth century. He spent his childhood in this tropical Eden of the Antilles, all rustling with palms, but at the age of eleven he left for France with his family. He was educated at Pau and at Bordeaux, decided to take a degree in law, and in

1914 entered upon a diplomatic career. Sent first to Peking, he next found himself entrusted with increasingly important assignments. As Secretary General for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for several years, with the rank of Councillor of State, he assumed major responsibilities during the political events that were the prelude to the Second World War.

After the defeat of France in 1940 he was abruptly suspended and went into exile, was considered a dangerous adversary by the Vichy regime, and was even deprived of his French citizenship. He found refuge in Washington, where he occupied a position as literary adviser to the Library of Congress. The French state was soon to reinstate him in his full rights, but the exile firmly refused to reenter diplomacy. In recent years, however, he has repeatedly returned to France for private reasons.

Here is a career which opens vast vistas and which presupposes in the one who succeeds in it a breadth of perspective acquired under many conditions, combined with a spiritual tone of uncommon dynamic quality. This international versatility, the hallmark of the great traveller, constitutes moreover one of the themes often repeated in the poet's work. He owed his first success to the cycle of poems entitled *Pour fêter une enfance* (To Celebrate a Childhood), 1910, whose dazzling imagery evokes in the golden dawn of childhood memories the exotic paradise of Guadeloupe, its fabulous plants and animals. From China he brought back an epic poem, *Anabase* (Anabasis), 1924, which relates, in a form suggestive and hard as enamel, a mysterious warlike expedition into the Asian deserts. The same, uncompromisingly dense form, in which verse and prose are united in a solemn flow blending Biblical verse with the rhythm of the Alexandrine, is found again in the collections of poems which followed: *Exil* (Exile), 1942, and *Vents* (Winds), 1946, both written in America. They constitute an imposing statement of the uninterrupted cycle of degeneration and rejuvenation, while *Amers* (Seamarks), 1957, celebrates the sea, the eternal dispenser of power, the first cradle of civilizations.

These works are, it is true, of marked singularity, complicated in form and thought, but the master who created them is anything but exclusive, if one means by that that he immures himself in a satisfied autonomy and is interested only in himself. Quite the

contrary; his dominating quality is the wish to express the human, seized in all its multiplicity, all its continuity; the wish to describe man, forever the creator, struggling from century to century against the equally perpetual insubordination of the elements. He identifies himself with all the races who have lived on our stormy planet. "Our race is old", he said in a poem, "our face is nameless. And time knows much about all the men that we may have been... the ocean of things besets us. Death is at the porthole, but our route is not there".

In this exaltation of man's creative power, Saint-John Perse may sometimes recall the hymns of the German poet, Hölderlin, who also was a magician of speech, filled with the grandeur of the poetic vocation. It is very easy to treat this sublime faith in the power of poetry as a paradox in order to belittle it, especially when it seems to assert itself with a force inversely proportional to the need of arousing an immediate response to the thirst for human communion. On the other hand, Saint-John Perse is an eloquent example of the isolation and estrangement which in our era are a vital condition for poetic creation when its aim is high.

One can only admire the integrity of his poetic attitude, the lofty insistence with which he perseveres in the only mode of expression that allows him to realize his intentions, an exclusive but always pertinent form. The inexhaustible luxuriance of the picturesque style of his rhapsodies is intellectually demanding and may weary the reader of whom the poet demands such efforts of concentration. He takes his metaphors from all disciplines, from all eras, from all mythologies, from all regions; his cycles of poems call to mind those great sea shells from which a cosmic music seems to emanate. This expansive imagination is his strength. Exile, separation - evocations whose voiceless murmur gives his poetry its general tonality; and through the double theme of man's strength and helplessness a heroic appeal can be perceived, an appeal which is perhaps expressed more distinctly than before in the poet's latest work, *Chronique* (Chronicle), 1960, filled with a breath of grandeur, in which the poet recapitulates everything, at the end of the day, while making veiled allusions to the present state of the world. And he even makes a prophetic

appeal to Europe to have it consider this fateful moment, this turning point in the course of history. The poem ends with these words: "Great age, here we are. Take measure of the heart of man".

It is, then, correct to say that Saint-John Perse, behind an apparent abstruseness and symbols frequently difficult to grasp, brings a universal message to his contemporaries. One has every reason to add that in his own way he perpetuates a majestic tradition in French poetic art, especially the rhetorical tradition inherited from the classics. In short, this honour awarded to him only confirms the position he has acquired in letters as one of the great leaders in poetry.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1960/press.html