

Nobel Prize in Literature 1985



Claude Simon

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1985 was awarded to Claude Simon *"who in his novel combines the poet's and the painter's creativeness with a deepened awareness of time in the depiction of the human condition"*.

Claude Simon began to be noticed in earnest at the end of the 1950s in connection with the great interest in the so-called "new novel" in France. The term had been introduced by the critic Roland Barthes and was effectively launched a few years later by Alain Robbe-Grillet. The idea behind the term was to collect a group of French prose writers with little else in common except that they were against the more conventional fiction and broke its rules that a novel should have a continuous and realistic story and move along in a lucid and coherent way in time. The new storytellers in France linked up with other traditions, with patterns from poetry and the visual arts and with forerunners such as Faulkner and Proust. Their prose works had the appearance of linguistic montages or collages. They took place in the dimensions of memory and the apparently arbitrary or free association. Fragments from different times were closely joined on the basis of their content or emotional correspondences or aesthetic effects, but not on the basis of how they

might have followed each other in the ordinary course of time. Influences from the visual arts were strongly in evidence. In a picture everything is contemporaneous. The flow of things that follow each other is brought about by the beholder's attention and co-creative feeling moving over what actually exists as a single coherent now. This abstract description can fairly well cover what seemed to unite the advocates of "le nouveau roman". In its general form it still applies to Claude Simon and his prose. However, the writers who used to be included under this term were very unlike each other, with very different aims and commitments in their linguistic work. And they did oppose being lumped together in a group as happened.

Claude Simon had begun with several partly autobiographical novels from the middle of the 1940s up to the middle of the 1950s. These works, nowadays little read, nevertheless heralded his later production, among other things in the feeling for the tragic and absurd in the human condition. The narrative method was however almost traditional, but influenced by Faulkner. The change in Simon's author-character came with the novels *Le Vent*, 1957, and *L'Herbe*, 1958. He himself counts the latter as the turning point in his writing. Both stories take place in the South of France, where Simon himself has his roots and lives as a viticulturist. The principal character in *Le Vent* is akin to the one in Dostoevsky's "The Idiot" - a mysteriously complex man, at once confused and discerning, exposed to the fascination and inquisitive provocations and cruelties of his fellow men. He returns to the small town in the South of France to take over a bequest, a farm - and is caught up in absurd conflicts of various kinds, financial, erotic, and those involving prestige and the struggle for power. And over it all howls the hot mistral, the wind that fills the people with its everlasting, parching, dusty indefatigability - an inhuman element in which the people live as if, despite their activities and meddling, they are imprisoned in conditions which are more lasting and more powerful than themselves. In both these novels the author weaves a close and evocative web of words, of events and environments, of memories, thoughts, associations, with glidings and joins of elements according to a logic different from what the realistic continuity in time and space prescribes. Here we perceive

how Claude Simon's linguistic art and peculiarity take shape, such as we shall recognize his prose in later works. The language begins to live its own life. Each word and description leads on to the next. Elucidations, amplifications, developments of thoughts and memories and pictures, nuances, corrections with the insertion of alternatives and possibilities, etc. cause the text to grow as if the language were an independently living organism which buds, puts out tendrils and sows seeds of its own accord and as if the author were a tool or a medium for its own creative force.

So too has Claude Simon himself described his way of working, especially after his experiences when writing the book *Histoire*, 1967 nothing short of a rapturous awareness of the sensual life and charm in giving oneself up to linguistic work and its surprises and seductions. The book is one of the peaks in Simon's writing, perhaps the work in which his linguistic peculiarity is most clearly evident.

It was preceded by two other novels, in which we can find some of the basic themes that constantly recur in Claude Simon's novels, also in *Histoire - La Route des Flandres*, 1960, and *Le Palace*, 1962. The first of these two novels made Simon's name internationally. It is a broad and complex description with strongly autobiographical touches and with memories and traditions from Simon's family. The story is thought to take place during the night that "the hero", Georges, spends with his mistress, Corinne - and this alone is a radical break with all realist narrative methods. The profusely flowing narration, its fragmentations and piling up of parallel actions and its discontinuous joining of scenes and of stories within stories burst the framework for every realistic narrative art in the traditional sense. The novel takes the shape of a penetrating description of the French collapse in 1940, when Simon himself took part as a cavalryman - ending up in due course as a prisoner-of-war. Simon's experiences during this war, like during the Spanish Civil War in which he took part in 1936, have been of immense importance to him, constantly recurring in his writings. Cruelty and absurdity are the dominating things - unforeseeable. What is apparently well-planned ends in confusion and dissolution, in which each one lives through his hardships and has to save himself as best he can. Simon's

experiences from the Spanish Civil War were similar, depicted in *Le Palace* and his latest and most important novel, *Les Georgiques*, 1981. For all the sympathies which he and others might have for those faithful to the government who fought against the fascists, it soon turned out that these government champions for their part, could by no means follow any regular and intelligently planned strategies and operations. On the contrary, the fighters were split into factions and mutual strife, giving way to meaningless and absurd foolhardiness, obstructions and hazardous enterprises. In *Les Georgiques* George Orwell appears, thinly disguised. Simon's picture of the Spanish Civil War and of the intellectual idealists who like Orwell, and his English sympathizers, wanted to find an ideologically clear reason in the fight against oppression, shapes itself into a version, at once grotesque and tragic, compassionate and ironic, of war's reality and of man's inability to guide his fate and correct his conditions. *La Route des Flandres* and *Les Georgiques* are richly decorated compositions which, with sensuous perspicacity and linguistic invocation, conjure up an extremely complicated pattern of personal memories and family traditions, of experiences during modern war and of equivalents from bygone ages, to be exact the Napoleonic era. In other contexts Simon goes still farther back - to Caesar's fight against Pompey in 43 B.C. (in the novel *La Bataille de Pharsale*, 1969). The parallels are the same the cruelty, the violence and the absurdity are common to all, likewise the painful compassion and feeling that the author expresses in paradoxical contrast to the fascination that these phenomena obviously have for him. A similar feeling is characteristic of Simon's descriptions of erotic relationships, more rightly the sexual. In these contexts too there is a fascination or a fixation with violence and violation. The sexual contacts appear as conquests, the taking in possession, mountings which resemble what stallions and mares do, or outrages resembling what occurs in battle. A tragic feeling of life emerges also here - a picture of human loneliness and of how people are exposed to destructive passions and selfish impulses, disguised as vain striving for fellowship and intimacy .

Against these grim descriptions are contrasting elements of another kind - of tenderness and loyalty, of devotion to work and duty, to heritage and traditions and

solidarity with dead and living kinsmen. In particular there appears as a contrast of a consoling or edifying kind the devotion to such as grows and sprouts independent of man's lust for power and overweening enterprise. There is a growth which lives by its own power, despite what men can do. The best people in Simon's novels are those who subordinate themselves to this growth and serve it. We meet some old women, loyal to farm and family and traditions. We even meet in the brutal and at last disillusioned warrior a loyal love for his dead young wife. We meet a serving and a patient endurance which, without any self-important airs, is reflected within these people, which lives with them even if otherwise in their ostentatious deeds and ways they seem filled with egoism and brutality.

First and foremost we meet this growth, this vitality and this creativeness and this viability in language and memory, in the shaping, the renewal and the development of what is and was and what rises again inspired and alive through the pictures in words and story for which we seem to be more instruments than masters. Claude Simon's narrative art may appear as a representation of something that lives within us whether we will or not, whether we understand it or not, whether we believe it or not - something hopeful, in spite of all cruelty and absurdity which for that matter seem to characterize our condition and which is so perceptively, penetratingly and abundantly reproduced in his novels.

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