

# **Nobel Lecture by Jon Fosse**

Nobel Laureate in Literature 2023



SVENSKA  
AKADEMIEN

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## **A Silent Language**

When I was at junior high school, it happened without warning. The teacher asked me to read aloud. And out of nowhere, I was overcome by a sudden fear that overpowered me. It was like I disappeared into the fear and it was all I was. I stood up and ran out of the class room.

I noticed the big eyes of the students as well as the teacher following me out of the class room.

Afterwards I tried to explain my strange behaviour by saying I had to go to the toilet. I could see on the faces of those listening that they didn't believe me. And they probably thought I'd gone mad, yes, was on my way to becoming crazy.

This fear of reading aloud followed me. As time went by, I found the courage to ask the teachers to be excused from reading out loud, as I was so afraid of it, some believed me and stopped asking me, some thought that in one way or another, I was pulling their leg.

I learnt something important about people from this experience.

I learnt many other things.

Yes, very likely something that enables me to stand here and read aloud to an audience today. And now almost without any fear.

What did I learn?

In a way it was as if the fear took my language from me, and that I had to take it back, so to speak. And if I were to do that, it couldn't be on other people's terms, but on my own.

I started to write my own texts, short poems, short stories.

And I discovered that doing so, gave me a sense of safety, gave me the opposite of fear.

In a way I found a place inside myself that was just mine, and from that place I could write what was just mine.

Now, about fifty years later, I still sit and write – and I still write from this secret place inside me, a place I quite honestly don't know much more about other than that it exists.

The Norwegian poet Olav H. Hauge has written a poem where he compares the act of writing to being a child, building leaf huts in the forest, crawling into them, lighting candles, sitting and feeling safe in dark autumn evenings.

I think this is a good image of how I, too, experience the act of writing. Now – as fifty years ago.

And I learnt more, I learnt that, at least for me, there is a big difference between the spoken and the written language, or between the spoken and the literary language.

The spoken language is often a monological communication of a message that something should be like this or like that, or it is a rhetorical communication of a message with persuasion or conviction.

The literary language is never like that – it doesn't inform, it is meaning rather than communication, it has its own existence.

And in that sense, good writing and all kinds of preaching, obviously contrast each other, whether the preaching is religious or political or whatever it might be.

Through the fear of reading aloud I entered the loneliness that is more or less the life of a writing person – and I've stayed there ever since.

I've written a great deal of both prose and drama.

And of course, what characterises drama is that it is written speech, where the dialogue, the conversation, or often the attempt to speak, and what there may be of monologue, is always an imagined universe, is a part of something that doesn't inform, but that has its own being, that exists.

And when it comes to prose, Mikhail Bakhtin is right in arguing that the mode of expression, the very act of telling, has two voices in it.

To simplify: the voice of the person who speaks, who writes, and the voice of the person who it is spoken about. These often slide into each other in such a way that it is impossible to tell whose voice it is.

It simply becomes a double written voice – and that is of course also part of the written universe, and the logic within it.

Each single work I have written has, so to speak, its own fictional universe, its own world. A world that is new for each play, for each novel.

But a good poem, because I have also written a great deal of poetry, is also its own universe – it relates mainly to itself. And then someone who reads it can enter the universe that is the poem – yes, it's more like a kind of communion than a communication.

As a matter of fact, this is probably true of everything I have written.

One thing is certain, I have never written to express myself, as they say, but rather to get away from myself.

That I ended up as a dramatist – yes, what can I say about that?

I wrote novels and poetry and had no desire to write for theatre, but in time I did it because – as part of a publicly funded initiative to write more new Norwegian drama – I was offered what was to me, a poor author, a good sum of money to write the opening scene of a play, and ended up writing a whole play, my first and still most performed play, *Someone Is Going to Come*.

The first time I wrote a play turned out to be the biggest surprise in my whole life as a writer. Because in both prose and poetry I had tried to write what usually – in usual spoken language – cannot be said in words. Yes, that's right. I tried to express the unsayable, which was given as the reason for awarding me the Nobel Prize.

The most important thing in life cannot be said, only written, to twist a famous saying by Jacques Derrida.

So I try to give words to the silent speech.

And when I was writing drama, I could use the silent speech, the silent people, in a whole other way than in prose and poetry. All I had to do was to write the word *pause*, and the silent speech was there. And in my drama the word pause is without a doubt the most important and the most used word – long pause, short pause, or just pause.

In these pauses there can be so much, or so little. That something cannot be said, that something doesn't want to be said, or is best being said by saying nothing at all.

Still, I'm fairly certain that what speaks most through the pauses is silence.

In my prose, perhaps all the repetitions have a similar function as the pauses do in my drama. Or perhaps this is how I think of it, that while there is a silent speech in the plays, there is a silent language behind the written language in the novels, and if I'm to write good literature, this silent speech must also be expressed, for instance in *Septology*, it is this silent language, to use a couple of simple, concrete examples, that says that the first Asle and the other Asle may well be the same person, and that the whole long novel, of around 1200 pages, is perhaps just a written expression of one extracted now.

But a silent address, or a silent language, speaks mostly from the totality of a work. Whether it is a novel or a play, or a theatre production, it is not the parts themselves that are important, it is the totality, which also must be in every single detail – or perhaps I may dare to talk about the spirit of the totality, a spirit that in a way speaks from both close and far away.

And what do you hear then, if you listen closely enough?

You hear the silence.

And as it has been said, it is only in the silence that you can hear God's voice.

Maybe.

Now to get back to earth, I want to mention something else that writing for the theatre gave me. Writing is a lonely profession, as I said, and loneliness is good – as long as the road back to the others remains open, to quote another poem by Olav H. Hauge.

And what gripped me the first time I saw something I had written performed on a stage, yes, that was exactly the opposite of loneliness, it was companionship, yes, to create art through sharing art – that gave me a great sense of happiness and security.

This insight has followed me since, and I believe has played a role in that I haven't simply persisted, with a peaceful soul, but I have also felt a kind of happiness even from bad productions of my own plays.

Theatre is really a large act of listening – a director must, or at least should, listen to the text, the way actors listen to it and to each other and to the director, and the way the audience listen to the whole performance.

And the act of writing is to me to listen: when I write I never prepare, I don't plan anything, I proceed by listening.

So if I should use a metaphor for the action of writing, it has to be that of listening.

Thus, it almost goes without saying, that writing is reminiscent of music. And at a certain time, in my teens, I went more or less directly from only being engaged with music, to writing. I actually completely stopped both playing music myself and listening to music, and started to write, and in my writing, I tried to create something of what I experienced when I played. That's what I did then – and what I still do.

Something else, perhaps a bit strange, is when I write, at a certain point I always get a feeling that the text has already been written, is out there somewhere, not inside me, and that I just need to write it down before the text disappears.

Now and then I can do it without making any changes, at other times I have to search for the text by rewriting it, cutting and editing, and carefully try to bring out the text that has already been written.

And I, who didn't want to write for theatre, ended up doing only that for about fifteen years. And the plays I wrote were even performed, yes, as time passed, there have been a lot of productions in many countries.

I still can't believe that.

Life is not really believable.

Just as I cannot believe that I'm now standing here trying to say some more or less sensible words about what it is to write, in connection with being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

And that I have been awarded the prize has, as far as I understand, to do with both my drama and my prose.

After having written almost only plays for many years, it suddenly felt as if enough was enough, yes more than enough, and I decided to stop writing drama.

But to write has become a habit and one I can't manage to live without – maybe like Marguerite Duras, you can call it an illness – so I decided to go back to where it all began, to write prose and other kinds of writing, the way I had done for more or less a decade before my debut as a dramatist.

That is what I have done for the last ten-fifteen years. When I started to seriously write prose again, I was uncertain whether I could still do it. I wrote *Trilogy* first – and when I was awarded the Nordic Council Literature Prize for that novel, I experienced it as a great confirmation that I did have something to offer as a prose-writer as well.

Then I wrote *Septology*.

And during the writing process of that novel, I experienced some of my happiest moments as a writer, for instance when one Asle finds the other Asle lying in the snow and thus saves his life. Or the ending, when the first Asle, the main character, sets out on his last journey, in a boat, an old fishing boat, with Åsleik, his best and only friend, to celebrate Christmas with Åsleik's sister.

I had no plan to write a long novel, but the novel more or less wrote itself, and it became a long novel, and I wrote many parts in such a smooth flow that everything was immediately right.

And I think that's when I'm closest to what you can call happiness.

The whole *Septology* has memories within it about much of the other works I have written, but seen in another light. That there is not a single full stop in the whole novel is not an invention. I just wrote the novel like that, in one flow, one movement that didn't demand a full stop.

I said in an interview once that to write is a kind of prayer. And I was embarrassed when I saw it in print. But later I read, to some consolation, that Franz Kafka had said the same. So maybe – after all?

My first books were quite poorly reviewed, but I decided not to listen to the critics, I should just trust myself, yes, stick to my writing. And if I hadn't done that, yes, then I would have stopped writing after my debut novel, *Raudt, svart* ("Red, Black") came out forty years ago.

Later I received mostly good reviews, and I even started to receive prizes – and then I thought that it was important to continue with the same logic, if I didn't listen to the bad reviews, I also wouldn't let success influence me, I would hold fast to my writing, hold on to, hang on to what I had created.

And I think that's what I've managed to do, and I really do believe that I'll keep doing that even after having received the Nobel Prize.

When it was announced that I had been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, I received a lot of emails and congratulations, and of course I was very pleased, most of the greetings were simple and cheerful, but some people wrote that they were screaming with joy, others that they were moved to tears. That truly touched me.

There are many suicides in my writing. More than I like to think about. I have been afraid that I, in this way, may have contributed to legitimising suicide. So what touched me more than anything were those who candidly wrote that my writing had quite simply saved their lives.

In a sense I have always known that writing can save lives, perhaps it has even saved my own life. And if my writing also can help to save the lives of others, nothing would make me happier.

Thank you, Swedish Academy for having awarded me the Nobel Prize in Literature.

And thank you to God.

Translated by May-Brit Akerholt





*The premises of the Swedish Academy are in the Exchange (Börshuset), in Stortorget in the Old Town in Stockholm. The building was erected between 1767 and 1778. The ground floor was intended for the Stockholm Stock Exchange and the upper floor for the burgesses of Stockholm. From the 1860s the Grand Hall served as the council chamber for the City aldermen.*

*It is in the Grand Hall that the Academy has always held its Annual Grand Ceremony, but finding premises for the daily work and the weekly meetings has at times caused problems. Not until 1914 was a solution found. A donation made it possible for the Academy to acquire the right to use the upper floor of the Exchange (including the Grand Hall) and its attic in perpetuity. It did not finally move in, however, until 1921, when Stockholm's new Town Hall had been completed.*