



In the Forest of Paradoxes

**Jean-Marie Gustave
Le Clézio**

The Nobel Lecture

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Telephone Interview

Telephone interview with Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio immediately following the announcement of the 2008 Nobel Prize in Literature, 9 October 2008. The interviewer is Adam Smith, Editor-in-Chief of Nobelprize.org.

[Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio] Yes, Le Clézio speaking.

[Adam Smith] Oh hello, my name is Adam Smith and I'm calling from the Nobel Foundation web site in Stockholm.

[J-MGLC] Yes.

[AS] And, would you mind if we spoke just for five minutes on the telephone?

[J-MGLC] No, not at all. I am ready for that.

[AS] Thank you so much. You're an inhabitant of many countries but we catch you in France now, is that correct?

[J-MGLC] Yes, yes. I am in France presently. Normally I am going to Canada in a few days, but I'm still in France now.

[AS] And given that you were brought up in many countries and you've lived around the world, is there anywhere that you consider to be home?

[J-MGLC] Yes, in fact, I would say that Mauritius, which is the place of my ancestors, is really the place I consider my small homeland. So, this would be Mauritius definitely.

[AS] And, you were brought up bilingual, but you always write in French. Is there a particular reason?

[J-MGLC] Well, yes. In fact, when I was a child I grew up speaking French, I mean, in a French public school. So my first contact with literature was in French, and that's the reason why I write in French.

[AS] And, you started writing as a young child, and are very prolific. You've written over 30 books alone. Does writing come very easily? Do you enjoy putting pen to paper?

[J-MGLC] Yes, definitely. This is one of my greatest pleasures in life is to sit at a table, wherever it is. I don't have any office, I can write everywhere. So, I put a piece of paper on the table and then I travel. Literally, writing for me is like travelling. It's getting out of myself and living another life; maybe a better life.

[AS] That's nice. People often say that reading is like travelling, but writing, also, that's nice.

[J-MGLC] Yes, both go together for me. I enjoy very much being in a foreign country, in a new country, new place. And I enjoy also beginning a new book. It's like being someone else.

[AS] You write about other places, other cultures, other possibilities a great deal, and in particular you've written a book about the Amerindians. What is particularly appealing about their culture?

[J-MGLC] Well, it's probably because it's a culture so different from the European culture, and on the other hand it didn't have the chance of expressing itself. It's a culture which has been in some ways broken by the modern world, and especially by the conquests from Europe. So I feel there is a strong message here for the Europeans ... I am European essentially. So, I feel there is

a strong message here for the Europeans to encounter this culture which is so different from the European culture. They have a lot to learn from this culture; the Amerindian cultures.

[AS] You also write about the colonial experience a lot. Do you feel it's important for modern European culture to examine its past in this way?

[J-MGLC] Yes, because I feel, it's my feeling that the, Europe, and I would say also the American society are – it owes a lot to the people that submitted during the colonial times. I mean the wealth of Europe comes from sugar, cotton, from the colonies. And from this wealth they began the industrial world. So they really owe a lot to the colonized people. And they have to pay their debts to them.

[AS] The wide range of your writing is unclassifiable, but is there some unifying purpose in why you write?

[J-MGLC] Mainly would be to be true to myself, to express myself in the most accurate way. I feel that the writer is just a kind of witness of what is happening. A writer is not a prophet, is not a philosopher, he's just someone who is witness to what is around him. And so writing is a way to ... it's the best way to testify, to be a witness.

[AS] And for those who are unfamiliar with your work, would you suggest any particular starting points?

[J-MGLC] Uh, no. I would not dare to do that. I mean reading is a free practice. You have to, you have to be led by not haphazard, but to be led by your own feelings. I think the readers are free to begin by the books where they want to. They don't have to be led in their, in their reading.

[AS] That's a very appealing answer, thank you. Ah, last question. The Prize will bring some further notoriety. Is there a particular message you think you might use that notoriety to spread?

[J-MGLC] Well, let me think about that! It's a ... in a way it's a very intimidating situation, because I'm not familiar ... it's not my habit to give messages, and to express thoughts. I would say, rather, I would prefer to be read, and to, that my writings might inspire some people. I, anyway, there is of course the speech I have to deliver to the Nobel Academy, so maybe I will find some, some messages to express at that time.

[AS] So we will wait for December.

[J-MGLC] Yes.

[AS] Okay. Well, we will look forward to seeing you in Stockholm in due course, but thank you very much indeed.

[J-MGLC] Thank you very much indeed.

[AS] And congratulations.

[J-MGLC] Bye bye.

[AS] Bye bye.

Presentation Speech

Horace Engdahl

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Ladies and Gentlemen, of what use are characters to a literary work? Roland Barthes maintained that the most antiquated of all literary conventions was the proper name – the Peter, Paul, and Anna who never existed but whom we are expected to take seriously and feel concerned about when we read novels. His view was in accordance with *le nouveau roman*, the new French novel, which at the time, forty years ago, was doing away with psychologically shaped characters, turning them into angles of vision, camera lenses.

In such a climate, Jean-Marie Le Clézio set out on his literary path. He writes in his second book, *La fièvre* (1965; *Fever*, 1966): “Poems, short stories and novels are antiquities that no longer fool anyone or just about. [...] All that is left is the writing, writing that gropes its way along with words that searches and describes, meticulously and in depth that clings on to and ruthlessly works over reality.” The young Le Clézio was not alone in wanting to shake off the genres. But while his colleagues stressed doubt in the apprehensibility of reality, he chose to believe in the alliance of language with matter and the body.

His first novel, *Le procès-verbal* (*The Interrogation*), which made him a celebrity at the age of twenty-three, mixes confessions, parodies, diary fragments, found texts, newspaper items, word play, and dialogues from a mental hospital. In its feverish prose speaks a generation that has lost its faith in hierarchies. Everything that language captures seems equally valuable and equally instable. Le Clézio’s early books are a verbal “big bang” with figures that appear and disappear, sudden bursts of light, vast silences, glowing matter, a universe in the making that continually dissolves its forms.

He could have stayed with prose poetry and crisis writing, heir

of Lautréamont and Michaux and Stig Dagerman, if it had not been for his travels. A several year long stay in Central America brought him into contact with Indian culture, and this changed the conditions of his literary production. He discovered the denied knowledge that did not suit modernity and that progress had put in the shadows. He discovered that he was actually an Indian, but a poor one. In time, he would find a connection between this experience and his own family's history, his ancestors' migration to Mauritius, the struggle and the freedom at the ocean's edge. That cleared the way for masterpieces such as *Révolutions* and *L'Africain*.

This year's Laureate in Literature belongs to the tradition of the critique of civilisation, which on French ground can be traced back to Chateaubriand, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Diderot, and yes, Montaigne. In the nineteenth hundreds, it was represented with furious enthusiasm by Artaud, who Le Clézio follows in his relations with the old Mexican gods.

His books give a place of honour to eccentrics who have preserved the ties with their origin: gypsies, fishermen, ox drivers, nomads. He prefers groups in constant motion, those who live in our societies without belonging to them, and saves them from banality. Few authors have so convincingly described how reluctantly languages and cultures die. This is one of our time's unexpected experiences, which inspires hope and anguish in equal measure. The imprint of history does not fade. We do not become more like one another. The universally human is, for Le Clézio, the opposite of the international service type without a past encouraged in the Western capitals.

In the novel *Désert* (1980), which marked a new turn in his writing, the outsider position is represented by a Bedouin girl, who has left North Africa to look for work in France. She is an image of humanity before the Fall that came with the use of money. Unlearned, she reads the language of things with unerring certainty. An inborn remote gaze that defies time and place puts

her in contact with her people's great past. Europe is seen in this novel through the eyes of the unwanted immigrants and appears as a realm of death.

The open form of this book has become typical for its author, a form that juxtaposes separate places, times, and discourses without mediation. In his hands, the novel merges with the travel story, the analytical essay, the prose of recollection, and witness literature. This alloy is strong enough to carry a consciousness that is open to global reality and does not merely pretend to be so in order to dominate it. Le Clézio gives us a French that has stepped down from the pedestal of purism and that is permeated by the consciousness of other languages.

And the proper names, the characters? In a very personal essay on cinema published just this year, Le Clézio describes how Jean Vigo expanded the language of film by shifting the focus from individuals to that which they see and experience. In the same way, fictive figures seem to find mercy in Le Clézio's writing when they appear, not so that we can immerse ourselves in their petty plots, but rather so that we can see with their eyes.

Le Clézio's imagination sustains itself in the unexplored regions where fear and ecstasy arise, inseparable from one another. It may seem surprising to call him a hopeful author, given the significant strain of colonial devastation, bourgeois oppressiveness, and social injustice in his themes. Still, he deserves such a designation. The earth's lustre, the sun, the sea, and the vast expanses, the irrepressible feeling of freedom that comes with a new departure – these are the forces that outweigh the sorrow about the path that our civilisation has taken.

Most honoured Laureate, dear Jean-Marie Le Clézio! Your work is a story of migration; you are yourself a nomad of the world. You have in writing found a gateway to adventure, not as escapism, but as a hunger for the unknown. You have, after a long era in which the highest forms of expression seemed reserved for dystopian experience, restored to literature its power

to celebrate the world. I would like to express the warm congratulations of the Swedish Academy as I now ask you to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature from the hand of His Majesty the King.

J.M.G. Le Clézio – Nobel Lecture

In the forest of paradoxes

Why do we write? I imagine that each of us has his or her own response to this simple question. One has predispositions, a milieu, circumstances. Shortcomings, too. If we are writing, it means that we are not acting. That we find ourselves in difficulty when we are faced with reality, and so we have chosen another way to react, another way to communicate, a certain distance, a time for reflection.

If I examine the circumstances which inspired me to write—and this is not mere self-indulgence, but a desire for accuracy—I see clearly that the starting point of it all for me was war. Not war in the sense of a specific time of major upheaval, where historical events are experienced, such as the French campaign on the battlefield at Valmy, as recounted by Goethe on the German side and my ancestor François on the side of the *armée révolutionnaire*. That must have been a moment full of exaltation and pathos. No, for me war is what civilians experience, very young children first and foremost. Not once has war ever seemed to me to be an historical moment. We were hungry, we were frightened, we were cold, and that is all. I remember seeing the troops of Field Marshal Rommel pass by under my window as they headed towards the Alps, seeking a passage to the north of Italy and Austria. I do not have a particularly vivid memory of that event. I do recall, however, that during the years which followed the war we were deprived of everything, in particular books and writing materials. For want of paper and ink, I made my first drawings and wrote my first texts on the back of the ration books, using a carpenter's blue and red pencil. This left me with a certain preference for rough paper and ordinary pencils. For want of any children's books, I read my grandmother's dictionaries. They were like a marvellous gateway, through which

I embarked on a discovery of the world, to wander and daydream as I looked at the illustrated plates, and the maps, and the lists of unfamiliar words. The first book I wrote, at the age of six or seven, was entitled, moreover, *Le Globe à mariner*. Immediately afterwards came a biography of an imaginary king named Daniel III—could he have been Swedish?—and a tale told by a seagull. It was a time of reclusion. Children were scarcely allowed outdoors to play, because in the fields and gardens near my grandmother's there were land mines. I recall that one day as I was out walking by the sea I came across an enclosure surrounded by barbed wire: on the fence was a sign in French and in German that threatened intruders with a forbidding message, and a skull to make things perfectly clear.

It is easy, in such a context, to understand the urge to escape—hence, to dream, and put those dreams in writing. My maternal grandmother, moreover, was an extraordinary storyteller, and she set aside the long afternoons for the telling of stories. They were always very imaginative, and were set in a forest—perhaps it was in Africa, or in Mauritius, the forest of Macchabée—where the main character was a monkey who had a great talent for mischief, and who always wriggled his way out of the most perilous situations. Later, I would travel to Africa and spend time there, and discover the real forest, one where there were almost no animals. But a District Officer in the village of Obudu, near the border with Cameroon, showed me how to listen for the drumming of the gorillas on a nearby hill, pounding their chests. And from that journey, and the time I spent there (in Nigeria, where my father was a bush doctor), it was not subject matter for future novels that I brought back, but a sort of second personality, a daydreamer who was fascinated with reality at the same time, and this personality has stayed with me all my life—and has constituted a contradictory dimension, a strangeness in myself that at times has been a source of suffering. Given the slowness of life, it has taken me the better part of my existence to

understand the significance of this contradiction.

Books entered my life at a later period. When my father's inheritance was divided, at the time of his expulsion from the family home in Moka, in Mauritius, he managed to put together several libraries consisting of the books that remained. It was then that I understood a truth not immediately apparent to children, that books are a treasure more precious than any real property or bank account. It was in those volumes—most of them ancient, bound tomes—that I discovered the great works of world literature: *Don Quijote*, illustrated by Tony Johannot; *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes*; the *Ingoldsby Legends*; *Gulliver's Travels*; Victor Hugo's great, inspired novels *Quatre-vingt-treize*, *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*, and *L'Homme qui rit*. Balzac's *Les Contes drôlatiques*, as well. But the books which had the greatest impact on me were the anthologies of travellers' tales, most of them devoted to India, Africa, and the Mascarene islands, or the great histories of exploration by Dumont d'Urville or the Abbé Rochon, as well as Bougainville, Cook, and of course *The Travels of Marco Polo*. In the mediocre life of a little provincial town dozing in the sun, after those years of freedom in Africa, those books gave me a taste for adventure, gave me a sense of the vastness of the real world, a means to explore it through instinct and the senses rather than through knowledge. In a way, too, those books gave me, from very early on, an awareness of the contradictory nature of a child's existence: a child will cling to a sanctuary, a place to forget violence and competitiveness, and also take pleasure in looking through the windowpane to watch the outside world go by.

Shortly before I received the—to me, astonishing—news that the Swedish Academy was awarding me this distinction, I was re-reading a little book by Stig Dagerman that I am particularly fond of: a collection of political essays entitled *Essäer och texter*. It was no mere chance that I was re-reading this bitter, abrasive book. I was preparing a trip to Sweden to receive the prize which the

Association of the Friends of Stig Dagerman had awarded to me the previous summer, to visit the places where the writer had lived as a child. I have always been particularly receptive to Dagerman's writing, to the way in which he combines a child-like tenderness with naïveté and sarcasm. And to his idealism. To the clear-sightedness with which he judges his troubled, post-war era—that of his mature years, and of my childhood. One sentence in particular caught my attention, and seemed to be addressed to me at that very moment, for I had just published a novel entitled *Ritournelle de la faim*. That sentence, or that passage rather, is as follows: “How is it possible on the one hand, for example, to behave as if nothing on earth were more important than literature, and on the other fail to see that wherever one looks, people are struggling against hunger and will necessarily consider that the most important thing is what they earn at the end of the month? Because this is where he (the writer) is confronted with a new paradox: while all he wanted was to write for those who are hungry, he now discovers that it is only those who have plenty to eat who have the leisure to take notice of his existence.” (*The Writer and Consciousness*)

This “forest of paradoxes”, as Stig Dagerman calls it, is, precisely, the realm of writing, the place from which the artist must not attempt to escape: on the contrary, he or she must “camp out” there in order to examine every detail, explore every path, name every tree. It is not always a pleasant stay. He thought he had found shelter, she was confiding in her page as if it were a close, indulgent friend; but now these writers are confronted with reality, not merely as observers, but as actors. They must choose sides, establish their distance. Cicero, Rabelais, Condorcet, Rousseau, Madame de Staël, or, far more recently, Solzhenitsyn or Hwang Sok-yong, Abdelatif Laâbi, or Milan Kundera: all were obliged to follow the path of exile. For someone like myself who has always—except during that brief war-time period—enjoyed freedom of movement, the idea that one might be forbidden to

live in the place one has chosen is as inadmissible as being deprived of one's freedom.

But the privilege of freedom of movement results in the paradox. Look, for a moment, at the tree with its prickly thorns that is at the very heart of the forest where the writer lives: this man, this woman, busily writing, inventing their dreams—do they not belong to a very fortunate and exclusive *happy few*? Let us pause and imagine an extreme, terrifying situation—like the one in which the vast majority of people on our planet find themselves. A situation which, long ago, at the time of Aristotle, or Tolstoy, was shared by those who had no status—serfs, servants, villeins in Europe in the Middle Ages, or those peoples who during the Enlightenment were plundered from the coast of Africa, sold in Gorée, or El Mina, or Zanzibar. And even today, as I am speaking to you, there are all those who do not have freedom of speech, who are on the other side of language. I am overcome by Dagerman's pessimistic thoughts, rather than by Gramsci's militancy, or Sartre's disillusioned wager. The idea that literature is the luxury of a dominant class, feeding on ideas and images that remain foreign to the vast majority: that is the source of the malaise that each of us is feeling—as I address those who read, who write. Of course one would like to spread the word to all those who have been excluded, to invite them magnanimously to the banquet of culture. Why is this so difficult? Peoples without writing, as the anthropologists like to call them, have succeeded in inventing a form of total communication, through song and myth. Why has this become impossible for our industrialized societies, in the present day? Must we reinvent culture? Must we return to an immediate, direct form of communication? It is tempting to believe that the cinema fulfils just such a role in our time, or popular music with its rhythms and rhymes, its echoes of the dance. Or jazz and, in other climes, calypso, maloya, sega.

The paradox is not a recent one. François Rabelais, the greatest writer in the French language, waged war long ago against the

pedantry of the scholars at the Sorbonne by taunting them to their face with words plucked from the common tongue. Was he speaking for those who were hungry? Excess, intoxication, feasting. He put into words the extraordinary appetite of those who dined off the emaciation of peasants and workers, just long enough for a masquerade, a world turned upside down. The paradox of revolution, like the epic cavalcade of the sad-faced knight, lives within the writer's consciousness. If there is one virtue which the writer's pen must always have, it is that it must never be used to praise the powerful, even with the faintest of scribblings. And yet just because an artist observes this virtuous behaviour does not mean that he may feel purged of all suspicion. His rebellion, denial, and imprecations definitely remain to one side of the barrier, the side of the language of power. A few words, a few phrases may have escaped. But the rest? A long palimpsest, an elegant and distant time of procrastination. And there is humour, sometimes, which is not the politeness of despair, but the despairing of those who know too well their imperfections; humour is the shore where the tumultuous current of injustice has abandoned them.

Why write, then? For some time now, writers have no longer been so presumptuous as to believe that they can change the world, that they will, through their stories and novels, give birth to a better example for how life should be. Simply, they would like to bear witness. See that other tree in the forest of paradoxes. The writer would like to bear witness, when in fact, most of the time, he is nothing more than a simple voyeur.

And yet there are artists who do become witnesses: Dante in the *La Divina Commedia*, Shakespeare in *The Tempest*—and Aimé Césaire in his magnificent adaptation of that play, entitled *Une Tempête*, in which Caliban, sitting astride a barrel of gunpowder, threatens to blow himself up and take his despised masters with him. There are also those witnesses who are unimpeachable, such as Euclides da Cunha in *Os Sertões*, or Primo Levi. We see the

absurdity of the world in *Der Prozess* (or in the films of Charlie Chaplin); its imperfection in Colette's *La Naissance du jour*, its phantasmagoria in the Irish ballad Joyce created in *Finnegans Wake*. Its beauty shines, brilliantly, irresistibly, in Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* or in Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. Its wickedness in William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, or in Lao She's *First Snow*. Its childhood fragility in Dagerman's *Ormen (The Snake)*.

The best writer as witness is the one who is a witness in spite of himself, unwillingly. The paradox is that he does not bear witness to something he has seen, or even to what he has invented. Bitterness, even despair may arise because he cannot be present at the indictment. Tolstoy may show us the suffering that Napoleon's army inflicted upon Russia, and yet nothing is changed in the course of history. Claire de Duras wrote *Ourika*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but it was the enslaved peoples themselves who changed their own destiny, who rebelled and fought against injustice by creating the Maroon resistance in Brazil, in French Guiana, and in the West Indies, and the first black republic in Haiti.

To act: that is what the writer would like to be able to do, above all. To act, rather than to bear witness. To write, imagine, and dream in such a way that his words and inventions and dreams will have an impact upon reality, will change people's minds and hearts, will prepare the way for a better world. And yet, at that very moment, a voice is whispering to him that it will not be possible, that words are words that are taken away on the winds of society, and dreams are mere illusions. What right has he to wish he were better? Is it really up to the writer to try to find solutions? Is he not in the position of the gamekeeper in the play *Knock ou Le Triomphe de la médecine*, who would like to prevent an earthquake? How can the writer act, when all he knows is how to remember?

Solitude will be his lot in life. It always has been. As a child, he

was a fragile, anxious, excessively receptive boy, or the girl described by Colette, who cannot help but watch as her parents tear each other apart, her big black eyes enlarged with a sort of painful attentiveness. Solitude is affectionate to writers, and it is in the company of solitude that they find the essence of happiness. It is a contradictory happiness, a mixture of pain and delight, an illusory triumph, a muted, omnipresent torment, not unlike a haunting little tune. The writer, better than anyone, knows how to cultivate the vital, poisonous plant, the one that grows only in the soil of his own powerlessness. The writer wanted to speak for everyone, and for every era: there he is, there she is, each alone in a room, facing the too-white mirror of the blank page, beneath the lampshade distilling its secret light. Or sitting at the too-bright screen of the computer, listening to the sound of one's fingers clicking over the keys. This, then, is the writer's forest. And each writer knows every path in that forest all too well. If, now and again, something escapes, like a bird flushed by a dog at dawn, then the writer looks on, amazed—this happened merely by chance, in spite of oneself.

It is not my wish, however, to revel in negativity. Literature—and this is what I have been driving at—is not some archaic relic that ought, logically, to be replaced by the audiovisual arts, the cinema in particular. Literature is a complex, difficult path, but I hold it to be even more vital today than in the time of Byron or Victor Hugo.

There are two reasons why literature is necessary: First of all, because literature is made up of language. The primary sense of the word: letters, that which is written. In French, the word *roman* refers to those texts in prose which for the first time after the Middle Ages used the new language spoken by the people, a Romance language. And the word for short story, *nouvelle*, also derives from this notion of novelty. At roughly the same time, in France, the word *rimeur* (from *rime*, or rhyme) fell out of use for designating poetry and poets—the new words

come from the Greek verb *poiein*, to create. The writer, the poet, the novelist, are all creators. This does not mean that they invent language, it means that they use language to create beauty, ideas, images. This is why we cannot do without them. Language is the most extraordinary invention in the history of humanity, the one which came before everything, and which makes it possible to share everything. Without language there would be no science, no technology, no law, no art, no love. But without another person with whom to interact, the invention becomes virtual. It may atrophy, diminish, disappear. Writers, to a certain degree, are the guardians of language. When they write their novels, their poetry, their plays, they keep language alive. They are not merely using words—on the contrary, they are at the service of language. They celebrate it, hone it, transform it, because language lives through them and because of them, and it accompanies all the social and economic transformations of their era.

When, in the last century, racist theories were expressed, there was talk of fundamental differences between cultures. In a sort of absurd hierarchy, a correlation was drawn between the economic success of the colonial powers and their purported cultural superiority. Such theories, like a feverish, unhealthy urge, tend to resurface here and there, now and again, to justify neo-colonialism or imperialism. There are, we are told, certain nations that lag behind, who have not acquired their rights and privileges where language is concerned, because they are economically backward or technologically outdated. But have those who prone their cultural superiority realized that all peoples, the world over, whatever their degree of development, use language? And that each of these languages has, identically, a set of logical, complex, structured, analytical features that enable it to express the world, that enable it to speak of science, or invent myths?

Now that I have defended the existence of that ambiguous and somewhat passé creature we call a writer, I would like to turn to the second reason for the necessity of literature, for this has more

to do with the fine profession of publishing.

There is a great deal of talk about globalization these days. People forget that in fact the phenomenon began in Europe during the Renaissance, with the beginnings of the colonial era. Globalization is not a bad thing in and of itself. Communication has accelerated progress in medicine and in science. Perhaps the generalization of information will help to forestall conflicts. Who knows, if the Internet had existed at the time, perhaps Hitler's criminal plot would not have succeeded—ridicule might have prevented it from ever seeing the light of day.

We live in the era of the Internet and virtual communication. This is a good thing, but what would these astonishing inventions be worth, were it not for the teachings of written language and books? To provide nearly everyone on the planet with a liquid crystal display is utopian. Are we not, therefore, in the process of creating a new elite, of drawing a new line to divide the world between those who have access to communication and knowledge, and those who are left out? Great nations, great civilizations have vanished because they failed to realize that this could happen. To be sure, there are great cultures, considered to be in a minority, who have been able to resist until this day, thanks to the oral transmission of knowledge and myths. It is indispensable, and beneficial, to acknowledge the contribution of these cultures. But whether we like it or not, even if we have not yet attained the age of reality, we are no longer living in the age of myths. It is not possible to provide a foundation for equality and the respect of others unless each child receives the benefits of writing.

And now, in this era following decolonization, literature has become a way for the men and women in our time to express their identity, to claim their right to speak, and to be heard in all their diversity. Without their voices, their call, we would live in a world of silence.

Culture on a global scale concerns us all. But it is above all the

responsibility of readers—of publishers, in other words. True, it is unjust that an Indian from the far north of Canada, if he wishes to be heard, must write in the language of the conquerors—in French, or in English. True, it is an illusion to expect that the Creole language of Mauritius or the West Indies might be heard as easily around the world as the five or six languages that reign today as absolute monarchs over the media. But if, through translation, their voices can be heard, then something new is happening, a cause for optimism. Culture, as I have said, belongs to us all, to all humankind. But in order for this to be true, everyone must be given equal access to culture. The book, however old-fashioned it may be, is the ideal tool. It is practical, easy to handle, economical. It does not require any particular technological prowess, and keeps well in any climate. Its only flaw—and this is where I would like to address publishers in particular—is that in a great number of countries it is still very difficult to gain access to books. In Mauritius the price of a novel or a collection of poetry is equivalent to a sizeable portion of the family budget. In Africa, Southeast Asia, Mexico, or the South Sea Islands, books remain an inaccessible luxury. And yet remedies to this situation do exist. Joint publication with the developing countries, the establishment of funds for lending libraries and bookmobiles, and, overall, greater attention to requests from and works in so-called minority languages—which are often clearly in the majority—would enable literature to continue to be this wonderful tool for self-knowledge, for the discovery of others, and for listening to the concert of humankind, in all the rich variety of its themes and modulations.

I think I would like to say a few more words about the forest. It is no doubt for this reason that Stig Dagerman's little sentence is still echoing in my memory, and for this reason that I want to read it and re-read it, to fill myself with it. There is a note of despair in his words, and something triumphant at the same time, because it is in bitterness that we can find the grain of truth that

each of us seeks. As a child, I dreamt of that forest. It frightened me and fascinated me at the same time—I suppose that Tom Thumb and Hansel must have felt that way, when they were deep in the forest, surrounded by all its dangers and its wonders. The forest is a world without landmarks. You can get lost in the thickness of trees and the impenetrable darkness. The same could be said of the desert, or the open ocean, where every dune, every hill gives way to yet another identical hill, every wave to yet another perfectly identical wave. I remember the first time I experienced just what literature could be—in Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*, to be exact, where one of the characters, lost in the snow, felt the cold gaining on him just as the circle of wolves was closing round him. He looked at his hand, which was already numb, and tried to move each finger one after the other. There was something magical in this discovery for me, as a child. It was called self-awareness.

To the forest I owe one of the greatest literary emotions of my adult life. This was about thirty years ago, in a region of Central America known as El Tapón del Darién, the Darién Gap, because that is where, in those days (and I believe the situation has not changed in the meantime), there was an interruption in the Pan-American Highway that was meant to join the two Americas from Alaska to the tip of Tierra del Fuego. In this region of the isthmus of Panama the rainforest is extremely dense, and the only means of travelling there is to go upriver by pirogue. In the forest there lives an indigenous population, divided into two groups, the Emberá and the Wounaans, both belonging to the Ge-Pano-Carib linguistic family. I had landed there by chance, and was so fascinated by this people that I stayed there several times for fairly lengthy periods, over roughly three years. During the entire time I did nothing other than wander aimlessly from one house to the next—for at the time the population refused to live in villages—and learn to live according to a rhythm that was completely different from anything I had known up to that point.

Like all true forests, this forest was particularly hostile. I had to draw up a list of all the potential dangers, and of all the corresponding means of survival. I have to say that on the whole the Emberá were very patient with me. They were amused by my awkwardness, and I think that to a certain degree, I was able to repay them in entertainment what they shared with me in wisdom. I did not write a great deal. The rain forest is not really an ideal setting. Your paper gets soaked with the humidity, the heat dries out all your ball point pens. Nothing that has to work off electricity lasts for very long. I had arrived there with the conviction that writing was a privilege, and that I would always be able to resort to it in order to resolve all my existential problems. A protection, in a way; a sort of virtual window that I could roll up as I needed to shelter from the storm.

Once I had assimilated the system of primitive communism practised by the Amerindians, as well as their profound disgust for authority and their tendency towards natural anarchy, I came to see that art, as a form of individual expression, did not have any role to play in the forest. Besides, these people had nothing that resembled what we call art in our consumer society. Instead of hanging paintings on a wall, the men and women painted their bodies, and in general were loath to create anything lasting. And then I gained access to their myths. When we talk of myths, in our world of written books, it seems as if we are referring to something that is very far away, either in time, or in space. I too believed in that distance. And now suddenly the myths were there for me to hear, regularly, almost every night. Near the wood fire that people built in their houses on a hearth of three stones, amidst the dance of mosquitoes and moths, the voice of the storytellers—men and women alike—would set in motion stories, legends, tales, as if they were speaking of a daily reality. The storyteller sang in a shrill voice, striking his breast; his face would mime the expressions and passions and fears of the characters. It might have been something from a novel, not a myth. But one

night, a young woman came. Her name was Elvira. She was known throughout the entire forest of the Emberá for her storytelling skills. She was an adventuress, and lived without a man, without children—people said that she was a bit of a drunkard, a bit of a whore, but I don't believe it for a minute—and she would go from house to house to sing, in exchange for a meal or a bottle of alcohol or sometimes a few coins. Although I had no access to her tales other than through translation—the Emberá language has a literary variant that is far more complex than the everyday form—I quickly realized that she was a great artist, in the best sense of the term. The timbre of her voice, the rhythm of her hands tapping against her chest, against her heavy necklaces of silver coins, and above all the air of possession which illuminated her face and her gaze, a sort of measured, rhythmic trance, exerted a power over all those who were present. To the simple framework of her myths—the invention of tobacco, the first primeval twins, stories about gods and humans from the dawn of time—she added her own story, her life of wandering, her loves, the betrayals and suffering, the intense joy of carnal love, the sting of jealousy, her fear of growing old, of dying. She was poetry in action, ancient theatre, and the most contemporary of novels all at the same time. She was all those things with fire, with violence, she invented, in the blackness of the forest, amidst the surrounding chorus of insects and toads and the whirlwind of bats, a sensation which cannot be called anything other than beauty. As if in her song she carried the true power of nature, and this was surely the greatest paradox: that this isolated place, this forest, as far away as could be imagined from the sophistication of literature, was the place where art had found its strongest, most authentic expression.

Then I left that region, and I never saw Elvira again, or any of the storytellers of the forest of Darién. But I was left with far more than nostalgia—with the certainty that literature could exist, even when it was worn away by convention and compromise,

even if writers were incapable of changing the world. Something great and powerful, which surpassed them, which on occasion could enliven and transfigure them, and restore the sense of harmony with nature. Something new and very ancient at the same time, impalpable as the wind, ethereal as the clouds, infinite as the sea. It is this something which vibrates in the poetry of Jalal ad-Din Rumi, for example, or in the visionary architecture of Emanuel Swedenborg. The shiver one feels on reading the most beautiful texts of humankind, such as the speech that Chief Stealth gave in the mid-19th century to the President of the United States upon conceding his land: “We may be brothers after all...”

Something simple, and true, which exists in language alone. A charm, sometimes a ruse, a grating dance, or long spells of silence. The language of mockery, of interjections, of curses, and then, immediately afterwards, the language of paradise.

It is to her, to Elvira, that I address this tribute—and to her that I dedicate the Prize which the Swedish Academy is awarding me. To her and to all those writers with whom—or sometimes against whom—I have lived. To the Africans: Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ahmadou Kourouma, Mongo Beti, to Alan Paton’s *Cry the Beloved Country*, to Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka*. To the great Mauritian author Malcolm de Chazal, who wrote, among other things, *Judas*. To the Hindi-language Mauritian novelist Abhimanyu Unnuth, for *Lal passina (Sweating Blood)* to the Urdu novelist Qurratulain Hyder for her epic novel *Ag ka Darya (River of Fire)*. To the defiant Danyèl Waro of La Réunion, for his maloya songs; to the Kanak poetess Déwé Gorodey, who defied the colonial powers all the way to prison; to the rebellious Abdourahman Waberi. To Juan Rulfo and *Pedro Paramo*, and his short stories *El llano en llamas*, and the simple and tragic photographs he took of rural Mexico. To John Reed for *Insurgent Mexico*; to Jean Meyer who was the spokesman for Aurelio Acevedo and the Cristeros insurgents of central Mexico. To Luis González, author of *Pueblo en vilo*. To John Nichols, who wrote

about the bitter land of *The Milagro Beanfield War*; to Henry Roth, my neighbour on New York Street in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for *Call it Sleep*. To Jean-Paul Sartre, for the tears contained in his play *Morts sans sépulture*. To Wilfred Owen, the poet who died on the banks of the Marne in 1914. To J.D. Salinger, because he succeeded in putting us in the shoes of a young fourteen-year-old boy named Holden Caulfield. To the writers of the first nations in America – Sherman Alexie the Sioux, Scott Momaday the Navajo for *The Names*. To Rita Mestokosho, an Innu poet from Mingan, Quebec, who lends her voice to trees and animals. To José Maria Arguedas, Octavio Paz, Miguel Angel Asturias. To the poets of the oases of Oualata and Chinguetti. For their great imagination, to Alphonse Allais and Raymond Queneau. To Georges Perec for *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour?* To the West Indian authors Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, to René Depestre from Haiti, to André Schwartz-Bart for *Le Dernier des justes*. To the Mexican poet Homero Aridjis who allows us to imagine the life of a leatherback turtle, and who evokes the rivers flowing orange with Monarch butterflies along the streets of his village, Contepec. To Vénus Koury Ghata who speaks of Lebanon as of a tragic, invincible lover. To Khalil Gibran. To Rimbaud. To Emile Nelligan. To Réjean Ducharme, for life.

To the unknown child I met one day, on the banks of the river Tuira, in the forest of Darién. At night, sitting on the floor in a shop, lit by the flame of a kerosene lamp, he is reading a book and writing, hunched forward, not paying the slightest attention to anything around him, oblivious of the discomfort or noise or promiscuity of the harsh, violent life there just next to him. That child sitting cross-legged on the floor of that shop, in the heart of the forest, reading all alone in the lamplight, is not there by chance. He resembles like a brother that other child I spoke about at the beginning of these pages, who was trying to write with a carpenter's pencil on the back of ration books, in the dark years

immediately after the war. The child reminds us of the two great urgent tasks of human history, tasks we are far, alas, from having fulfilled. The eradication of hunger, and the elimination of illiteracy.

For all his pessimism, Stig Dagerman's phrase about the fundamental paradox of the writer, unsatisfied because he cannot communicate with those who are hungry—whether for nourishment or for knowledge—touches on the greatest truth. Literacy and the struggle against hunger are connected, closely interdependent. One cannot succeed without the other. Both of them require, indeed urge, us to act. So that in this third millennium, which has only just begun, no child on our shared planet, regardless of gender or language or religion, shall be abandoned to hunger or ignorance, or turned away from the feast. This child carries within him the future of our human race. In the words of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, a very long time ago, the kingdom belongs to a child.

J.M.G. Le Clézio, Brittany, 4 November 2008

Translated by Alison Anderson

Biography

Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio was born on April 13, 1940, in Nice, but both parents had strong family connections with the former French colony, Mauritius (conquered by the British in 1810). At the age of eight, Le Clézio and his family moved to Nigeria, where the father had been stationed as a doctor during the Second World War. During the month-long voyage to Nigeria, he began his literary career with two books, *Un long voyage* and *Oradi noir*, which even contained a list of “forthcoming books.” He grew up with two languages, French and English. In 1950 the family returned to Nice. After completing his secondary education, he studied English at Bristol University in 1958-59 and completed his undergraduate degree in Nice (Institut d’Études Littéraires) in 1963. He took a master’s degree at the University of Aix-en-Provence in 1964 and wrote a doctoral thesis on Mexico’s early history at the University of Perpignan in 1983. He has taught at universities in Bangkok, Mexico City, Boston, Austin and Albuquerque among other places.

Le Clézio received much attention with his first novel, *Le procès-verbal* (1963; *The Interrogation*, 1964). As a young writer in the aftermath of existentialism and the *nouveau roman*, he was a conjurer who tried to lift words above the degenerate state of everyday speech and to restore to them the power to invoke an essential reality. His debut novel was the first in a series of descriptions of crisis, which includes the short story collection *La fièvre* (1965; *Fever*, 1966) and *Le déluge* (1966; *The Flood*, 1967), in which he points out the trouble and fear reigning in the major Western cities.

Even early on Le Clézio stood out as an ecologically engaged author, an orientation that is accentuated with the novels *Terra amata* (1967; *Terra Amata*, 1969), *Le livre des fuites* (1969; *The Book of Flights*, 1971), *La guerre* (1970; *War*, 1973) and *Les*

géants (1973; *The Giants*, 1975). His definitive breakthrough as a novelist came with *Désert* (1980), for which he received a prize from the French Academy. This work contains magnificent images of a lost culture in the North African desert, contrasted with a depiction of Europe seen through the eyes of unwanted immigrants. The main character, the Algerian guest worker Lalla, is a utopian antithesis to the ugliness and brutality of European society.

During the same period, Le Clézio published the meditative essay collections *L'extase matérielle* (1967), *Mydriase* (1973) and *Haï* (1971), the last of which shows influences from Indian culture. Long stays in Mexico and Central America in the period 1970 to 1974 were of decisive significance for his work, and he left the big cities in search of a new spiritual reality in the contact with the Indians. He met the Moroccan Jemia, who became his wife in 1975, the same year *Voyage de l'autre côté* was published, a book in which he gives an account of what he learned in Central America. Le Clézio began the translation of the major works of the Indian tradition, such as *Les prophéties du Chilam Balam. Le rêve mexicain ou la pensée interrompue* (1998) testifies to his fascination with Mexico's magnificent past. Since the 90s Le Clézio and his wife share their time between Albuquerque in New Mexico, the island of Mauritius and Nice.

Le chercheur d'or (1985; *The Prospector*, 1993) treats material from the islands of the Indian Ocean in the spirit of the adventure story. In later years the author's attraction to the dream of earthly paradise is apparent in books such as *Ourania* (2005) and *Raga: approche du continent invisible* (2006). The latter is devoted to documenting a way of life on the islands of the Indian Ocean that is disappearing with the advance of globalization. The former is set in a remote valley in Mexico, where the main character, the author's alter ego, finds a colony of seekers who have regained the harmony of the golden age and laid aside civilization's ruined customs, including its languages.

The emphasis in Le Clézio's work has increasingly moved in the direction of an exploration of the world of childhood and of his own family history. This development began with *Onitsha* (1991; *Onitsha*, 1997), continued more explicitly with *La quarantaine* (1995) and has culminated in *Révolutions* (2003) and *L'Africain* (2004). *Révolutions* sums up the most important themes of his work: memory, exile, the reorientations of youth, cultural conflict. Episodes from various times and places are juxtaposed: the main character's student years during the 1950s and 60s in Nice, London and Mexico; the experiences of an ancestor from Brittany as a soldier in the army of the revolution in 1792-94 and his emigration to Mauritius to escape the repression of revolutionary society; and the story of a female slave from the beginning of the 1800s. Embedded among the childhood memories is the story of the main character's visit to his grandfather's sister, the last mediator of family tradition from the lost estate on Mauritius, who passes on the memories that he as author will carry into the future.

L'Africain, the story of the author's father, is at once a reconstruction, a vindication, and the recollection of a boy who lived in the shadow of a stranger he was obliged to love. He remembers through the landscape: Africa tells him who he was when, at the age of eight, he experienced the family's reunion after the separation during the war years.

Among Le Clézio's most recent works are *Ballaciner* (2007), a deeply personal essay about the history of the art of film and the importance of film in the author's life, from the hand-turned projectors of his childhood, the cult of *cinéaste* trends in his teens, to his adult forays into the art of film as developed in unfamiliar parts of the world. A new work, *Ritournelle de la faim*, has just been published.

Le Clézio has also written several books for children and youth, for example *Lullaby* (1980), *Celui qui n'avait jamais vu la mer suivi de La montagne du dieu vivant* (1982) and

Balaabilou (1985).

Literary Prizes: Prix Théophraste Renaudot (1963), Prix Larbaud (1972), Grand Prix Paul Morand de l'Académie française (1980), Grand Prix Jean Giono (1997), Prix Prince de Monaco (1998), Stig Dagermanpriset (2008)

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