

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour to receive the Jerusalem Prize. The list of previous recipients reads like a catalogue of writers whom I admire, who have inspired me and whom I have learned from - and in a few cases have also stolen from. It was when I read V. S. Naipaul's novel *The Enigma of Arrival* that I understood for the first time that that which is closest to us and seemingly insignificant can be of the greatest literary value, and that not understanding and not knowing is closely connected to the act of seeing. It wasn't until I read Ian McEwan's novel *A Child in Time*, with its theme of regression into childhood, that I was able to write my first novel. It was when I read Susan Sontag that I understood that distance is also a mental state, and that when a photograph makes something in the world present, it simultaneously makes something else absent. It was when I read Don DeLillo's novel *The Names* that I understood that the world continues to produce meaning only as long we continue to talk. And it was when I read Jorge Luis Borges' fantastic short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" that I understood that reality and the conveying of reality are by and large the same thing, and that therefore the world we live in and are familiar with might just as well have been entirely different.

I am not saying this simply because as a novelist I want to justify my job and therefore, in a formal acceptance speech such as this, feel the need to exalt the value of literature; I am saying it because I believe it is true. And we don't have to look very far to confirm this claim, in fact we don't have to go anywhere at all, for we are in Jerusalem, a city that houses perhaps the most transformative and defining texts known to us.

I grew up in Norway, a country which geographically, climatically and culturally is a world apart from the Middle East. During my schooling in the 1970s, however, stories from this region were of central importance – in the classroom, for example, we had three maps: one of Norway, one of the world, and one of biblical Israel. We were as intimately familiar with Mount Sinai, Canaan, Jericho, the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea as we were with the names of the landscape that surrounded us. And the tales from the Bible were as important as the stories that belonged to our own history. We were taught about Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, about Joseph and his brothers and about Moses and Aaron as a matter of course, they were a part of our notional world and were woven into the culture, as object lessons in being human and expressions of the link between the human realm and the divine.

However, we were the last generation for whom this was a given; Norwegian society is much more secular now than it was a mere thirty years ago. When I began to write books in my late twenties, what concerned me most was identity, the relationship between the one and the many, and this reflected my interest in the radical changes that I could observe around me and feel in my flesh, the great collective change which we ourselves were also an expression of, perhaps without even being aware of it: masculine identity was changing, national identity was changing, and religious identity was changing. My grandparents believed in God, and their faith shaped their world. That world was disappearing, and I wanted to write about it. I did so by turning its disappearance into something concrete, through one simple question: what happened to the angels? For those divine, awe-inspiring creatures once dwelled here on Earth, so alive and physically present that there is even a description of them sharing a meal with Abraham on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah, and

the paintings of the Renaissance and the Baroque abound with them, in all shapes and varieties, from plump little cherubs to mighty warriors clad in armour. I read everything I could get hold of about them, and I wrote a long essay about the fall of the angels; about how, from the timeless sphere of divinity, they approached closer and closer to biological life and were eventually trapped in it, as if flung into an evolutionary centrifuge that bound them to time and place as inexorably as we ourselves are bound to it.

That was the idea, I wanted to speculate about why and how the relation between the divine and the earthbound changed. But how could I put the theory into practice, in other words, how was I to write the novel? I had to tell a story, and I came to the Bible stories with the unassailable and indispensable naivety of a novelist. But after a mere couple of pages, nothing further would come. In order to write I had to feel free, and so much of the reality of biblical times was unknown to me. I knew almost nothing about living conditions or the landscape, I knew little or nothing about sand or desert, about camels or palm trees, about kaftans and sandals, about what people talked about, what they did, what the biblical world was really like to the people who lived in it.

So what I did was to transpose that whole biblical reality, the entire world of Abraham, Isaac and Joseph, to Western Norway, into a landscape of fjords and mountains, verdant hillsides, glades of birch and smallholdings with cows and sheep. This world, the world of my grandparents, is where I set the story of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the great Flood and Noah's ark. I was toying with concepts of distance and closeness, but it wasn't just an idle game, for in a certain sense it was also true: going back in time, for generation after generation the stories of the Bible had been an integrated part of life in that part of Norway. When these stories were allowed to play out in the landscape

of my forebears, what happened was that the stories were diminished, they became local, they became something that happened right around here, in the woods just beyond the neighbour's meadow. The characters too were diminished, their lives became more trivial, they now had petty concerns not unlike our own.

A few years later, a new translation of the Old Testament was underway in Norway. I was asked to participate as a Norwegian language consultant. It is one of the most fascinating endeavours I have ever taken part in, working so closely with the ancient original texts that have shaped the world and our understanding of it for so many centuries. What I realised was that the small and local was present in the original texts too, and that the level of abstraction they had come to possess in the culture was not reflected in the texts themselves: there everything was physical, concrete, narrated through action and dialogue. The problem with the old translation was that it explained too much, it was too abstract; our mandate was to bring the text of the new Bible closer to the original. The strange thing was that doing so seemed also to bring it closer to ourselves and our own time, precisely because the physical and concrete aspects of biblical reality emerged, that is to say, that in the world which doesn't change.

The knowledge set down in these texts isn't abstract either, it can be applied directly and concretely: When my native country experienced a massacre six years ago and one man killed sixty-nine young people on an island, many felt an acute need to understand and explain what had happened. I wrote about those events, and to do so I turned to the Old Testament, more specifically to the story of Cain and Abel. To me, that is a story about forces which exist within humanity and about how those forces, which can be

devastating, must be subjugated. The killer in Norway was surrounded by an empty space where no correction could occur. I saw an expression of a similar space in the story of Cain and Abel. The face and the gaze are what drives the narrative forward. The Lord looks approvingly upon Abel. Cain's face falls. Yahweh warns him: if he doesn't lift up his face, sin will crouch at the door. He disobeys, he kills his brother, and from then on he will be hidden from the face of Yahweh.

It burned in Cain, and his face fell.

There lies the centre of the story, its core - not greatness, not sacrifice, not God or the divine, but smallness, an emotion that suddenly fills a human being entirely and is woven into his fabric. It has never been expressed better. It burned in Cain, and his face fell.

To say that the story of Cain and Abel is a story about not being seen is to reduce it, to draw the mythological into the individual psychologising of our own time, it is to see ourselves in what is foreign to us, and thereby transforming the foreign into ourselves. But all ages have done this, and this is why these texts, which are fundamentally about the founding of a culture, are still commonly known, for they are unfathomable, which also means that they always contain something more than their interpretations. They are embodied, that is to say, they tell the story of certain people who acted in certain ways, and they are so simple that even a child can understand them. The significance created by these actions is not simple, however, but complex enough that several thousand years later we are still able to come up with new interpretations of them. Cain isn't seen, that is the starting point of the story. If he isn't seen, then he is nobody, and if he is nobody, then he is dead, and if he is dead, then he no longer has anything to lose. The downcast face is directly

linked to evil, for God says, “If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up?” In other words, See and be seen. Or else, if your face is not lifted up, “sin is crouching at the door, and its desire is for you, but you must master it.” To turn oneself away, which means not only not seeing, but also not being seen, is dangerous, for within that space, which is the space of the uncorrected, sin gathers.

And his face fell.

Lift up.

Reading is seeing, but it is also to be seen. We must fill the ancient texts with our own selves if we are to understand them, but we must also allow ourselves to be filled by them if we are to understand ourselves.

(Translated from the Norwegian by Ingvild Burkey.)