

Nobel Lecture by László Krasznahorkai

Nobel Laureate in Literature 2025



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Dear ladies and gentlemen!

On receiving the 2025 Nobel Prize in Literature, I originally wished to share my thoughts with you on the subject of hope, but as my stores of hope have *definitively* come to an end, I will now speak about angels.

I.

I walk around up and down and I'm thinking about angels, even now I'm walking around up and down, do not believe your eyes—it may seem to you that I am standing here and speaking into a microphone, but I'm not, in reality I'm walking around and around, from one corner to the other, and back again from where I started, and so on and so forth, around and around, and yes, I'm thinking about angels; angels, and immediately I can reveal that these are a new kind of angels, these are angels who have no wings, and so, for example, there is no need to muse about how, if the two wings are sticking out from these angels' backs, indeed, if these two enormous wings spread out so heavily even beyond these angels' cloaks, then what kind of work is their heavenly tailor even doing, what kind of unknown knowledge drifts into his workshop up there when he is dressing them; the two wings are outside, of course, they are outside the unembodied body, but then where do they place those wings outside of that unembodied physical, robe that winds around them so sweetly and that also covers their wings, or, conversely, if their wings do not stick out, then how does this heavenly cloak cover their bodies together with their wings, oh, poor Botticelli, poor Leonardo, poor Michelangelo, indeed poor Giotto and Fra Angelico! but it doesn't matter now, this question has evaporated along with the angels of old, the angels I'm talking about are the new ones, that much is clear as I begin to pace around in my room of which you can only now see that I am standing in front of a microphone as I announce, as the recipient of this year's Nobel Prize in Literature, that I wanted to talk about hope, but I won't talk about that now, so instead I will talk about angels, I will start from that point, and already there were hazy contours forming in my brain as I set to my task, assuming a meditative posture in my work space which is not too big, altogether four by four metres in a tower room from which the area of the staircase leading up and down to the ground storey needs to be subtracted, of course you should not be picturing some kind of romantic ivory tower, this tower room, built from

the cheapest Norway spruce planks and located in the right-hand corner of a single-storey wooden building, rises above everything else because my plot of land lies upon an incline, because the whole thing stands at the top of the hill, namely the entire plot of land is on a slope and it inclines, moreover, it inclines *deeply* towards a valley which means that as I wished to build a much-needed addition for the ground floor rooms, namely I wanted this as the books were manoeuvring to claim every space, then, after a certain period of time this task became impossible to postpone, and because of this incline, the room that was built as an addition was already rising like a tower above the lower storey, weighing down upon it, well, here I would merely like to speak about angels,

and not about hope,

and not about the old ones, namely the old angels, because the old ones, the winged ones—think of the most famous of them in the paintings of the Annunciation, produced in immeasurable quantities during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance—were bringing a message, a message that The One To Be Born would be born; these were the angels of old, these heavenly messengers continually arriving with this or some other message, and according to the findings of angelology, for the most part they convey this message to the addressee verbally, or, as seen in depictions originating from the ninth and tenth centuries, they read directly from an undulating strip of paper, a sentence-ribbon, in depictions in which the word is granted extraordinary significance; yet these angels, even while fulfilling other missions, still convey—more precisely, they conveyed—the message of The One Above to his elected, the word veiled in light or whispered into an ear, meaning that, regardless of these depictions, these angels cannot be truly distinguished from their message—more precisely, they could not be distinguished from their message—so much so that we should actually say that these angels of old were themselves messages, they themselves were the message that always arrived from The One Who Can Not Be Supplicated, he sent them, he sent the angels to us, we who struggle in the dust, we who wander, condemned to Unforeseeable Consequences /oh, those beautiful times!/ in a word, every angel of old was a message from someone else to someone else, a message of tidings with the character of a command or a report, but I do not intend to take up this matter here standing before you while pacing around and around

in my tower room which, as you already know, is constructed from planks of cheap Norway spruce and is nearly impossible to heat, and which is a tower merely because of the steep incline of the plot of land, well, I'm not going to talk about the old ones, even if the pictures that live within us—thanks to the geniuses of the Middle Ages and the early modern period, from Giotto to Giotto—even if these angels of old, with their fitting epithets of ravishing, sublime, and intimate, even if they can still touch our souls at any time, even now, even if they can touch our souls which are incapable of belief, for surely they were the only ones, who, throughout the centuries, because of their infrequent appearances, allowed us to deduce the existence of Heaven, and with that we could also deduce the direction that created within us the structure of the universe as a direction, because where there is direction there is distance, namely there is space, and where there is direction there will also exist a distance between two points, namely there is time, and there is, accordingly, for centuries now—oh! and for millennia!—the world that is believed to be created, where these meetings with them, with these angels of old, gave us a way to decisively sense the above and below as something genuine and real, and so if I wanted to talk to you about the angels of old I would be walking around in circles from one corner, then turning back to the same corner, but no, the angels of old are no more, there are only the new ones, and as for myself, I do not walk around in circles from one corner back to the same corner thinking about them as I stand here in the presence of your attention, because, as I have perhaps mentioned already,

our angels are these new ones,

and, having lost their wings, they no longer have at their disposal those cloaks sweetly winding around them, they walk among us in simple street clothes, we don't know how many there are, but according to some obscure suggestion their number remains unchanged, and, just like the angels of old in the old days, these new ones too uncannily show up somehow here and there, they show up in front of us in the same kinds of situations in our lives just like the old ones did, and as a matter of fact it's easy to recognize them if they want us to, if they're not hiding what they are carrying within themselves, it's easy because it's as if they were stepping into our existence with a different kind of tempo, a different rhythm, a different melody than the one we walk to,

we who are straining and wandering around in the dust down here, in addition we cannot even be so sure that these new angels are arriving from somewhere up there, because it does not even seem as if there would be an ‘up there’ anymore, as if that too—along with the angels of old—had given up its place to the eternal SOMEWHERE where now only the insane structures of the Elon Musks of this world organize space and time, and from this it may emerge that while you unchangeably see and hear only an old man in front of you, speaking in his own unknown language on the occasion of his receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature, an old man who of course is pacing unchangeably and precisely in that very same unheatable tower room, among the planks of Norway spruce, pacing around and around, namely it is myself, the one who now quickens his pace as if wishing to express that his thoughts concerning these new angels require a different kind of footstep and a different kind of velocity from the one who is thinking about them, and truly, now as I quicken my footsteps, I suddenly realize that not only do these new angels have no wings, but they also have no message, none whatsoever, they are merely here among us in their simple street clothes, unrecognizable if they so wish, but if they do wish to be recognized, then they choose one of us, step over, and then suddenly, in a single moment, the cataracts fall from our eyes, the plaque falls away from our hearts, namely an encounter ensues, we stand there in shock, oh my goodness, it’s an angel, they are standing here in front of us, only that... they don’t give us anything, there is no kind of sentence undulating around them, there is no light with which they could whisper into our ears, namely they do not speak a single word, as if they had grown mute, they just stand there and look at us, they are searching for our gaze, and in this search there is a plea for us to look into their eyes, so that

we ourselves

can transmit a message to them, only that unfortunately, we have no message to give, because we could only say in response to that entreating gaze what was said in response long ago, when there was still a question, but now there is neither question nor answer, so that well, what kind of encounter is this, what kind of heavenly and earthly scene is this, they just stand there before us, looking at us, and we too just stand there looking at them, and if they understand anything from this whole thing, we certainly do not understand

what is going on, the mute to the deaf, the deaf to the mute, how could there be any conversation from this, how could there be any understanding, not even to speak of the divine presence, when suddenly it will occur to every lonely, weary, sorrowful and sensitive person, as is happening right now—if I may number myself among you—it will occur to me, I who seemingly stand here before you speaking into the microphone, but who in reality is up there in the tower room, as you know, among the cheap Norway spruce planks and the disgraceful insulation, the realization occurs that these new angels in their infinite muteness are perhaps no longer even angels, but sacrifices, sacrifices in the original, sacred sense of the word, quickly I pull out my stethoscope, because I always carry it with me, and I have it now too, as I speak from that tower room, pacing around and around, and very gently I place the diaphragm and bell onto all of your chests, and immediately I hear the sound of fate, I hear your fates, and with this I step across into such a fate, I sense such a fate beating which immediately transforms this moment, but mainly the next moment that would have stood before me, because no, the moment which seemed likely to follow is not the moment that follows, a completely different moment follows, the moment of shock and collapse strikes down upon me, because my stethoscope detects the horrific story of these new angels that stand before me, the story that they are sacrifices, sacrifices: and not for us, but because of us, for every single one of us, because of every single one of us, angels without wings and angels without a message, and all the while knowing that there is war, war and only war, war in nature, war in society, and this war is being waged not only with weapons, not only with torture, not only with destruction: of course, this is one end of the scale, but this war proceeds at the opposite of the scale as well, because one single bad word is enough, one single bad word tossed towards one of these new angels, one unjust, thoughtless, undignified act is enough, one single wounding of body and soul, because when they were born they were not meant for this, they are defenceless in the face of this, defenceless against crushing, defenceless against vileness, in the face of cynical mercilessness against their harmlessness and chastity, just one deed is enough, but even one bad word is enough for them to be wounded for all eternity—which I can not remedy with even ten thousand words, because it is beyond all remedy.

II.

Ah, enough about angels!

Let us speak instead of the dignity of humans.

Human being—astonishing creature—who are you?

You invented the wheel, you invented fire, you realized that cooperation was your only means of survival, you invented necrophagy so that you could be lord of the world under your command, you acquired a shockingly large intellect, and your brain is so big, so furrowed and so complex that truly, by means of this brain, you acquired power, albeit somewhat limited, over this world that was also named by you, leading you to such recognitions of which it was later to turn out that they were not true, but they helped you to progress in the course of your evolution; your development, pressing forward by seeming leaps and bounds, reinforced your species upon Earth and caused it to grow, you gathered together in hordes, you built up societies, you created civilizations, you also became capable of the miracle of not dying out, although that possibility existed too, but once again you stood on your own two legs, then, as *homo habilis*, you made tools out of stone, and you knew how to use them too, then as *homo erectus*, you discovered fire, and then because of one tiny detail—in contrast to the chimpanzee, your larynx and soft palate do not touch—it became possible for you to bring language into being, parallel to the development of the brain's speech centre; you sat down with the Lord of the Heavens, if we can believe the silenced passages of the Old Testament, you sat down with Him, and you gave names to all the created things He showed you, then later on you invented writing, but by now you were already capable of philosophical trains of thought, first you connected the events, then you separated them from your religious beliefs; referring to your own experience, you invented time, you constructed vehicles, and boats, you wandered across the Unknown on the Earth, plundering everything that could be plundered, you realized what it meant to concentrate your strength and your power, you mapped out planets thought to be unapproachable, and by now you no longer regarded the Sun as a God and the stars as the determiners of fate, you invented, or rather you modified sexuality, the roles of men and women, and very late, although it's never too late, you discovered love for them, you invented feelings, empathy, the differing

hierarchies of the acquisition of knowledge, and finally you flew into space, forsaking the birds, then you flew up to the Moon, and you took your first steps there, you invented such weapons that could blow up the entire Earth many times over, and then you invented sciences in such a flexible manner thanks to which tomorrow takes precedence over and mortifies what can only be imagined today, and you created art from the cave drawings up until Leonardo's Last Supper, from the magical dark enchantment of rhythm up until Johann Sebastian Bach, finally, in accordance with historical progress, you, with complete and utter suddenness, began to believe in nothing at all anymore, and, thanks to the devices that you yourself invented, destroying imagination, you are left with only short-term memory now, and so you have abandoned the noble and common possession of knowledge and beauty and the moral good, and now you are ready to move out onto the flatlands, where your legs will sink down, don't move, are you going to Mars? instead: don't move, because this mud will swallow you up, it will pull you down into the swamp, but it was beautiful, your path through evolution was breathtaking, only, unfortunately: it cannot be repeated.

III.

Ah, enough about human dignity.

Let's talk about rebellion instead.

I tried to touch upon this in my book *The World Goes On*, but as I am dissatisfied with what I wrote, I will try again. At the beginning of the nineteen-nineties, on a humid, muggy afternoon, I was in Berlin, waiting at one of the U-Bahn stops on the lower level. The platforms, like everywhere in the U-Bahn system, were set up so that at the starting point of the correct direction of travel, just a few metres from where the train continued its journey through the tunnel, there was mounted a large mirror equipped with signal lights, partially to assist the conductor in seeing the entire length of the train and partially to indicate precisely where, exactly to a centimetre, the front part of the train had to stop, temporarily, while the passengers got off and on, after having arrived. The mirror was of course for the train driver, while the red light indicated that point perpendicular to the tracks where the train driver had to stop for passengers to board and disembark safely, at which moment these, namely the lights, embarkation and debarkation having been completed, turned to green and the U-Bahn could continue its journey through the tunnel—in my case, towards Ruhleben. Apart from a sign warning of the necessity of avoiding accidents and keeping the rules, a highly visible, thick yellow line had been painted onto the ground between the column bearing the signal lights and the tunnel entrance, this yellow line serving to indicate that even if the platform continued for a few more metres, as it did, the traveller must not step across this yellow line under any circumstance so that here—as in every station—there was a strictly forbidden zone in between this yellow line and the entrance of the tunnel where a person, namely a traveller, must not, under any circumstances set foot. I waited for the train to arrive from the direction of Kreuzberg, and suddenly I noticed that there was someone in this forbidden zone. It was a clochard, who—his back bent in pain, his face, in this pain, slightly turned towards us, like someone who counted on sympathy—was trying to urinate onto the walkway above the tracks. It could be seen that this urination was causing him a great deal of suffering, as he could only free himself of it drop by drop. By the time I had fully realized what was happening here, the people around me had also noticed what kind of an unusual incident was now disturbing the afternoon on our behalf. Suddenly and

generally, nearly palpably, the unanimous opinion was formed that this was a scandal, and this scandal must be brought to an end immediately, this clochard must leave, and the validity of the painted yellow line must be reestablished. There would have been no problem if the clochard had been able to finish the job, sidle back in among us, then climb the steps to the upper level, but this clochard did not finish, presumably because he could not finish, and what brought this event even closer to trouble was that on the opposite platform there suddenly appeared a policeman who, calling out from there, almost eye-to-eye with the clochard, decisively addressed the transgressor, telling him immediately to cease what he was doing. These U-Bahn stations—once again, for the sake of security—are constructed so that trains moving in opposite directions, arriving at a certain stop and then proceeding onwards, are separated from each other, namely the two sets of train tracks are situated in a trench approximately ten metres wide and nearly one metre deep, so that if a passenger were to rethink his journey, wishing to go from a platform servicing trains arriving in one direction to another platform where the trains are headed in another direction, then this passenger could only do so by walking to the staircase at the end of the platform, climbing the stairs to the upper level, strolling across the corridor above the tracks over to the other side, then coming down the stairs, and only in this way could he reach the platform of the train travelling in the direction that he suddenly desired, whereas of course he could never simply pick himself up, jump into the trench with its two sets of tracks, and traverse those ten metres by walking across the tracks, no, this, if it is possible to distinguish degrees of prohibition, was even more prohibited, as well as being, of course, life-threatening, and I express this obvious fact in such detail, because the aforementioned and visibly enraged policeman—preserving something of his dignity, but making use of his mandate and benevolence—certainly would have to use the same route, namely he would have to head towards the stairs leading to the upper walkway on the other platform, then, climbing these stairs, he would have to run over to this side and come down the stairs, finally arriving to where we were standing.

This was the precedent, obliging the policeman to follow it as well, because from the moment he noticed the clochard, he yelled out a few times in his own hollow, high voice, but to no avail as the clochard took no notice of him, his head still turned towards us, looking at us with a gaze unchangeably reflective of his torture, while the drops of urine

continued to fall onto the tracks; truly, an unparalleled insult to the regulations, to order, to the laws and to common sense, namely that this clochard took no notice of the policeman, and, to employ an expression that the policeman himself probably would have used: he acted as if he were deaf, causing this policeman particular pain.

Of course, the clochard had included the policeman in his calculations, that because of his painful advantage, the policeman would be faster than himself, and that he could in no way—either by his own will or the will of nature—bring this forbidden activity to an end in time, therefore, when he noticed that the policeman was hurrying, indeed breaking into a run on the other platform to reach the still distant upper level at the top of the stairs, dash across above the tracks, then run down here to our side, and grab this clochard by the ear, the clochard, groaning, with enormous difficulty, left off what he was doing, and began to escape in our direction so as to reach the closest staircase heading upwards as soon as possible, and then somehow disappear.

It was a horrific competition. Everyone standing on our platform fell completely silent as the clochard set off, because it was immediately apparent that this escape would lead to nothing, because the old clochard began to tremble all over his body; his legs and his brain that were directing his legs seemed no longer to be functioning properly, so that while he observed the policeman on the other side trying to reach the upper walkway—metre by metre!—the clochard, on our platform, could only advance centimetre by centimetre and only through horrific strain, arms flailing, while the policeman too, he too was looking at those ten metres that separated them. These ten metres signified a heavy torture to the policeman, an undeserved, punishing hindrance, whereas on our side, these same ten metres meant delay, a delay which in and of itself carried the meaningless, but manifest encouragement that the clochard still might escape the obvious indictment to follow. Looking at the matter from the viewpoint of the policeman, he himself represented the law, the Good sanctioned by all and therefore obligatory in the face of the transgressor, this repudiator of the rational judged by all—in other words, the Wicked. Yes, the policeman represented the mandatory Good, but in this given moment he was impotent, and within me, as, humiliated, I watched this inhuman competition between metres and centimetres, it happened that my attention suddenly became razor-sharp, and

this razor-sharp attention caused that moment to stop. The moment stopped exactly when they noticed each other: the good policeman perceived that the wicked clochard was urinating in the forbidden zone, and the wicked clochard saw that, to his own misfortune, the good policeman had seen what he was doing. There were altogether ten metres between them, the policeman had grabbed his truncheon, and before he could begin running, he came to a dead halt, oh, there was an infinite, but interrupted strength in this movement, his muscles were tensed, ready to jump, because for a moment, it had flashed through him: what if he simply jumped across those ten metres, while on the other side, yet within the protection of those ten metres, the clochard flailed and trembled in his doubled helplessness. Here my attention stopped, and here it has remained until today as I think of that picture, that moment when the enraged policeman, swinging his truncheon, begins running after the clochard, namely, that moment when the obligatory Good begins running towards the Wicked that emerges yet again in the disguise of a clochard, moreover, not simply towards the Wicked, but, because of the consciousness and intention of this act, towards Evil itself, and in this way, in this frozen tableau I continually see, and I see even today, the one hurrying on the far platform, his quick steps carrying him forward metre by metre, and, on our side, I see the guilty one, moaning, trembling, powerless, nearly paralyzed from pain, for who knows how many drops of urine remained in that body, advancing centimetre by centimetre—yes, I see that in this competition the Good

all because of ten metres

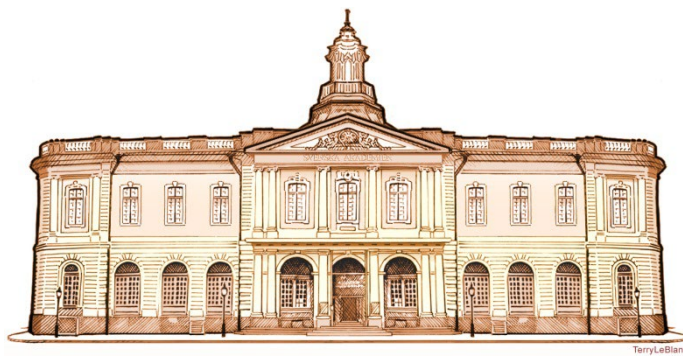
will never catch the Wicked, because those ten metres can never be bridged, and even though this policeman might grab this clochard as the train thunders into the station, in my eyes those ten metres are eternal and unconquerable, because my own attention only senses that the Good will never catch flailing Evil, because between Good and Evil there is no hope, none whatsoever.

My train took me towards Ruhleben, and I could not beat that trembling and that flailing out of my head, and suddenly, like a flash of lightning, the question flashed through my mind: this clochard and all the other pariahs, when will they finally rebel—and what will

this revolt look like. Perhaps it will be bloody, perhaps it will be merciless, perhaps terrible, as when one human being massacres another—then I wave the thought away, because I say that no, the rebellion that I’m thinking of will be different, because that rebellion will be in relation to the whole.

Ladies and gentlemen, every rebellion is in relation to the whole, and now as I stand before you, and those footsteps of mine in that tower room at home begin to slow down, once again that one-time Berlin trip on the U-Bahn towards Ruhleben flashes within me. One lit-up station glides by after the other, I do not get off anywhere, ever since then I have been riding that U-Bahn through the tunnel, because there is no stop where I could get off, I simply watch the stations gliding by, and I feel that I’ve thought about everything, and I have said everything about what I think about rebellion, about human dignity, about the angels, and yes, maybe about everything—even hope.

Translated by Otilie Mulzet



The premises of the Swedish Academy are located in the Stock Exchange Building on Stortorget in Stockholm's Old Town. The building was erected between 1767 and 1778 by the architect Erik Palmstedt. The ground floor was intended for the Stock Exchange, and the upper floor for the city's bourgeoisie. From the 1860s, the Exchange's Grand Hall served as the city council session hall.

While the Academy has always held its annual ceremony in the Grand Hall, it was not until 1921, when city council meetings were moved to the newly built Stockholm City Hall, that the Academy finally moved into the Stock Exchange Building. A donation made it possible for the Academy to sign an agreement giving them the right to use the upper floor of the Exchange in perpetuity.