When something is wrong in the world of literature, who better to blame than the writers? Nobel Prize for Literature judge Horace Engdahl said this week, only days before the award was given to French writer Patrick Modiano, that American and European literature is today characterised by writing which does not transgress anything – but only pretends to.

The cause for this decline in urgency of values, he said in an interview with French paper La Croix, lies with writers being institutionalised and university-based.
Writers pretend to be transgressive

Engdahl went on to claim a large number of those writers deal with the “same shock subjects” and “pretend to be transgressive”. They “don’t transgress anything because the limits they have determined as being necessary to cross don’t exist”.

Engdahl’s statement led to continued speculation this week (and Ladbroke’s betting scores) that the prize might go to an African or Asian writer such as Kenyan Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, or Haruki Murakami, Japan. It is here, he said, that the character of liberty is to be found in the new literature being produced.

And the award goes to ...

The surprise came when the Laureate was awarded to a French author little known beyond French-speaking readers, Patrick Modiano. Modiano’s name had not come up in anyone’s speculations – at least until recent stories around betting odds – possibly because his lyrical, moody novels about the fate of Jews outside of the French Occupation resist ready translation and are little known in English-speaking countries.

Peter Englund, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, referred to:

the art of memory with which [Modiano] has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation.

Self, society, language and power

In view of the chair’s comments about past winners over the last decade, the selectors clearly wanted literature that was profoundly engaged with meta structures of the self, society, language and power. Elfriede Jelinek, the 2004 winner and Engdhald favourite, was cited for:

her musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that with extraordinary linguistic zeal reveal the absurdity of society’s clichés and their subjugating power.

Engdahl’s argument against writers enjoying creature comforts is a familiar one: give the writer a room of his or her own, time in which to write and an intellectual community to speak with, and she will not be sufficiently eviscerated to write truly well.

Writing programs at university are the worst offenders, according to this view. Engdahl proposes writers should instead work as taxi drivers and waiters, as in the old days: “Samuel Beckett and many others lived like this.”

Thankfully, few writers in the West – or elsewhere – could compete with Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o’s experience of writing a novel on toilet paper while interred as a political prisoner in Kenya; or with
2012 Nobel laureate Mo Yan, born to a poor family of farmers in north eastern China, who lived through the Cultural Revolution (yet defended censorship).

Surely, even in Engdahl’s eyes, driving taxis and waitressing pales by comparison.

**The ubiquity of the market**

Engdahl is, nevertheless, right to be concerned about:

> the future of literature because of this ubiquity of the market. It implies the presence of a ‘counter-market’: a protected, profound literature, which knows how to translate emotions and experiences.

Yes, there is a good deal of polished, strategic literature coming out of the West.

But he is wrong to identify the institution of the university as the cause. The cause of a literature which knows too well how to “translate emotions and experiences” is instead “the economy, stupid”.

Book publishing is dominated by transnationals with major financial interests in other products such as breakfast cereals and oil, working at rapidly evolving business models in an attempt to keep abreast or ahead of new technologies and modes of distribution.

**Amazon, again**

“It seems preposterous now, but Amazon began as a bookstore” wrote New Yorker columnist George Packer in February as he assessed the deleterious impact that Amazon has had on literature and publishing. Publishing had for a couple of decades been dominated by “the big six”: Simon and Schuster, HarperCollins, Random House, Macmillan, The Penguin Group, and Hachette.

Now, many argue, Amazon dominates.

And it’s only the big five now, following the Penguin Random House merger in 2013. There has even been speculation these five will in time merge to become one. Will further mergers continue to produce “homogenisation and dampen risk-taking”?

**The new trend – international literature**

Edward Nawotka, editor-in-chief of PublishingPerspectives.com, points to the dominance of marketisation and the trend towards what’s being described as “international literature”, exactly the literature which Engdahl dislikes:

> I suspect part of the reason we love those books so much is because they offer a simulacrum of world we live in – a place where the consolidation of commercial power has levelled the cultural landscape into a medium for frictionless transactions. When the language of
commerce (and sex) dominates everything, where is there room for the political or cultural?

Our literature is the symptom of globalised technological and economic change, and universities and writers will both be hard pressed to have impact.

The Conversation is a non-profit + your donation is tax deductible. Help knowledge-based, ethical journalism today.

Make a donation