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Prof. Antoine Compagnon: Winner of the Third Claude Lévi-Strauss Prize

Antoine Compagnon

EDITOR'S NOTE

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- 1 **While it is a great honour and an immense pleasure for me to receive today the Claude Lévi-Strauss Prize for the social sciences and humanities, I consider it first and foremost as a homage to the discipline that I represent.**
- 2 It is a discipline that one has trouble naming – literature, literary history, criticism, philology, that is, “love of letters”, or even the humanities, which is the broadest and most ambitious term and the one I prefer. It is also a discipline that may feel fragile in the new century and lost in the digital world. I am therefore particularly grateful to the jury for having chosen to award this year’s prize to a literary scholar, a philologist.
- 3 As I know and admire the work of all of the members of the jury – Raymond Boudon, who is unfortunately absent, Ezra Suleiman, who introduced me too generously, Jean-Luc Marion, my former colleague from the Sorbonne, Mireille Delmas-Marty, Roger Guesnerie, and Philippe Descola, who welcomed me to the Collège de France, and Helga Nowotny, with whom I was brought into contact through the European Research Council, which she presides –, I am all the more sensitive to the fact that they deemed me worthy of such a distinction.
- 4 Another cause for satisfaction is that I shall be succeeding, in this the third year of the Claude Lévi-Strauss Prize, two prize-winners whose work I have esteemed for a long time and with whom I am friends: Dan Sperber, whom I read as soon as his first book on symbolism came out in the early seventies, and Jean Tirole, who went to the same schools as I did, although these did not prepare us for later receiving a prize in the social sciences and humanities.
- 5 Finally, and above all, I am moved by the name that this prize bears. In my Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, I evoked my incursions into the seminars of Claude Lévi-Strauss when I was a student at the École polytechnique. As I said, I sat at the back of the room, silent and attentive. It was there that I listened to Roman Jakobson, in particular, and there that I also heard for the first time Julia Kristeva, who was later to supervise my first doctoral thesis.
- 6 Today I will also evoke another memory, one which discreetly links me to Claude Lévi-Strauss by the back door, so to speak. When I was writing a Master’s thesis in literature during my military service in 1973 in Verdun, I did not yet know how to type and I was looking around for a typist. A common friend recommended to me Claude Lévi-Strauss’ secretary. So this is how I first entered the Collège de France, skirting the walls of the wing where the Anthropology Laboratory then stood. At the time, about a decade before computers were around, the latest thing was the self-copying chemical paper called “carbonless” or “non-carbon copy paper”. Lévi-Strauss had some shipped over at great cost from the United States, and his assistant borrowed a few dozen of his sheets for my personal use. Imagine my pride at having my Master thesis typed on Lévi-Strauss’ paper! And imagine my confusion when, thirty-three years later, his office, that I would creep past in order to get to his secretary’s, fearing that he should open the door, became mine, in this corner pavilion built for Claude Bernard.
- 7 The first time I read Lévi-Strauss was when I read the passage on the invention of writing among the Nambikwara in *Tristes Tropiques*. These pages were as remarkable as those of Plato’s *Phaedrus* on speech and writing. They had been given to us in our preparatory classes as a summary exercise by my professor of literature, Alain Ferry, present here this evening, who then lent me the volume, which I devoured with passion.

- 8 As you can well imagine, receiving a prize bearing the name of Claude Lévi-Strauss gives me a feeling of profound humility, or even of imposture or fraud. Who am I to deserve it? Just after I heard the news, I left for Beirut, where I was giving a seminar, and there I had this dream: the members of the jury were explaining to me that, on second thoughts, they had changed their mind and were not giving me the prize. I did not protest, as I could understand their about-turn and found it justified. Then, when I awoke, I was unsure for a while of what was dream and what was reality.
- 9 I would like to reflect with you for a moment on the researcher's concern that was expressed there: the researcher is always on the lookout, he or she is afraid of being wrong, of committing an error, of not being up to the task, no matter how high the recognition he or she has enjoyed until then. I can say that nothing, neither the Sorbonne, nor the Collège de France, nor any prize such as the one that is being awarded to me today can – or should – resolve this feeling of essential vulnerability. It is possible that this state of mind has been increased by my unorthodox origins and by the solitary discipline that I have chosen. Physicists or sociologists are probably surer of themselves, because they work in a team and do not sign their articles alone, because they trust in bibliometrics, in impact factors and in their h-index. The lot of the literary scholar is to be increasingly uncertain of the quality and value of his or her work, because, more than others, he or she adds words to words and writing to writing.
- 10 That is why I remain surprised by the indulgence with which I met during my life as a researcher and professor, and I never cease to ask myself whether I was worthy of it then and still am today. It is said that the university is over-cautious. That is not my experience of it: it welcomed me, and I am immensely grateful to it.
- 11 However, please do not think that I am describing an idiosyncrasy here. If the literary scholar has more reason than others to be dissatisfied with himself or herself, the condition of the researcher, as I see it, is the same for all, which is to be in doubt, in perpetual doubt. There is no possibility of comfort for him, of self-contentment, or of “smugness” or “self-importance”,¹ as two fine English words would say. The researcher's demon – which is closer to Socrates' ironist and prohibiting demon than to the affirming demon that pushed Baudelaire to accomplish dazzling feats after long bouts of procrastination – relentlessly whispers in his ear “*Memento! Souviens-toi! Esto memor!*” Remember that at any moment you can be on the wrong track!” No prize can reassure him: like Groucho Marx, he mistrusts any institution that allows him in, any honour that is bestowed upon him, because it might give him the illusion that he knows, it might make him lose his ability to be amazed, to see everything with new eyes, like a child or a convalescent, as Baudelaire would say; whereas we, as researchers, must always start things anew from scratch, without ever having our rear protected and without any guarantee that we will succeed again.
- 12 To my doctoral students I have always preached the morals of “reasonable unhappiness” or “unhappy reason”: you will doubt yourselves; your foundation will remain precarious; you will accept permanent discontent, which is the researcher's lot; you will be your most severe judge, your most uncompromising critic. Yet do not doubt this: reasonable unhappiness is the path to a greater happiness. As Pascal wrote: “You would not be looking for me if you hadn't already found me” (919), taking up Saint Bernard's thought: “He can look for you who has already found you” (*De Deo eligendo*). The researcher is a hunter, a hunter of infinity: if his only pleasure lies in the catch, as Montaigne said, he is only a researcher in name, for the catch comes as a bonus; it

rewards, like a favour, the reasonably unhappy researcher. It is also said in the *Pensées*: “There are only three kinds of people: those who serve God and have found Him, those who are busy looking for Him, having not found Him, and those who live without looking for Him or having found Him. The first are reasonable and happy. The last are mad and unhappy. The middle ones are unhappy and reasonable” (160). And here we are in the middle: there is nothing more beautiful, nothing more human than the unhappy reason of the eternal researcher. No one has better described our condition than Pascal, who was at the same time a man of science and a man of letters, the model researcher.

- 13 As I have said, I am receiving this third Claude Lévi-Strauss Prize above all as a mark of esteem for my discipline: literature, philology or the humanities. That is why I will devote the amount to the promotion of research in modern and contemporary French literature.
- 14 You will perhaps object that, as a spokesperson for a discipline, I am neither typical nor exemplary: I have been incapable of keeping to one century and to one author – you yourself, Mr Minister, asked me about this the other day –, I have oscillated between the Renaissance and modernity, I have gone from Montaigne to Proust, making a few intermediary stops along the way, and I have at times played the historian, historian of the discipline, of the institutions and even of men and women. When I was a student, interdisciplinarity was often talked about but rarely practised. One of the reasons I left for the United States is that I longed to find myself in a university where all of the disciplines were present, not only the humanities and the social sciences, but also the natural sciences, medicine, law, etc. And one of the reasons I feel happy at the Collège de France – if you will allow me to use this word after having celebrated the “unhappy reason” of the researcher –, is that the disciplines interact there. In isolation they could become strongholds of certitude. One needs to get out of them, to take a look elsewhere, as I have always recommended my students to do, all the better to come back with fortified ideas, concepts and methods. If Claude Lévi-Strauss spoke to us so well of Montaigne, Diderot, Rousseau or Proust, it is because he was approaching them from a tangent, via a detour, from the outside. Far from wanting to encase literature in a discipline, the humanities want to open it up to the world.
- 15 And if I have accepted over the past years to sit on a – surely too great – number of councils and commissions dealing with education, science, technology, evaluation, and the teaching condition, working with representatives from all disciplines, it is primarily, as I suggested, because the institution has given me so much, because I feel obligated to it and that my duty is to give something back to it. However, I think I can represent it well, precisely because of the very anomie that has made me, who has received a scientific education, an all the more determined defender of the humanities, and who has worked for a long time outside of France, an all the more zealous servant of the French university and of French research.
- 16 As soon as I returned to this country, I began to advocate for radical reform of the universities, in order to improve the quality of research and to promote excellence in the humanities. It is thus with great satisfaction that I have followed – sometimes participating in their advent – the transformations of the French university landscape since the beginning of the new millennium. The French university has opened up to Europe and to the world, and that is a good thing. As you know, I did not approve of all the reforms, but the mobilization of the entire community leads me to think that the

impetus is irreversible and that the problems that we were able to point out can be fixed.

- 17 The fact remains that these adjustments have sometimes seemed less favourable to the flourishing of the humanities than to the development of the other disciplines. The humanities have seemed to be suffering from a lack of legitimacy, which would make them more vulnerable in a context where research financing is increasingly collective, where research evaluation is increasingly statistical, and where the management system of the autonomous universities is increasingly based on accounting.
- 18 These are not fears that I share, albeit with two caveats. I am in favour of evaluation in research, provided that it is carried out by one's peers, as I have been accustomed to submit to and to practise in the United States. I think that this kind of evaluation is more trustworthy than the quantification of quality, especially for the humanities – but not only. What could a researcher fear from his peers when he, by vocation his own critic, is his own most merciless peer? And although I have taken part in a few large collective projects in the past, and still do, I remain an ardent defender of individual research, of the old-fashioned solitary kind, which must be safeguarded at all costs, because within our disciplines it is this kind of research which produces fundamental, lasting work, dense with knowledge and thought, for which the French academic tradition remains virtually unequalled.
- 19 I have just used the terms “defend” and “safeguard” on purpose, in order to be able to correct them straightaway and strip them of the passive, routine, distrustful or timorous aspect that you may have ascribed to them. These words as I mean them are assertive, and this time, like Baudelaire's, my demon is a combative one, ready for action. I am not one of those literary pessimists who dread the sciences and pose as victims. Nothing, as I said, gives the researcher energy as doubt does, the “unhappy reason”. This is true for any researcher, but particularly so for the literary one. I bet on the humanities, on teaching and on research in the humanities a long time ago. It is a wager that I never regretted, because it is one that holds promise for the future.

This prize was created in 2009 to recognize and support excellence within the social sciences and humanities. The purpose of the Claude Lévi-Strauss Prize is to distinguish a researcher who is making a significant contribution through his or her work to the evolution of methods or approaches in the social sciences and humanities.

AUTHOR

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Modern and Contemporary French Literature: History, Criticism, Theory