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THE BBC REITH LECTURES – SILENCE GRIPS THE TOWN

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LECTURE 3 - ANTWERP

SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to the third of this year's Reith Lectures with the author Hilary Mantel. Today, we're in the Flemish port of Antwerp in Belgium, at the Vleeshuis, the flesh house, the Butcher's Guild Hall. Today it's home to a museum dedicated to music, but when it was built at the beginning of the 16th century and full of prosperous beef butchers, it was the highest secular building in Antwerp and helped put the city on the map as an economic powerhouse of Tudor times.

No surprise then, that Hilary Mantel, best known for her novels of Henry VIII's Court, was keen to deliver one of her Reith Lectures here in Antwerp where she spend time researching Thomas Cromwell, who would have visited this very building. Hilary's been warning of the dangers of ignoring the complexity of history. She's talked about the role of history in our lives and she's explained how the art of fiction can shed light on its interpretation. Today, she tells a story of how obsession with the past can lead to tragedy. Her lecture is called 'Silence Grips The Town'.

Please welcome the BBC Reith Lecturer 2017, Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

HILARY MANTEL: Around the new year of 1928, a young Polish writer moved into a small room in the city of Danzig. It was a sort of outhouse attached to a school where her husband had been a teacher. He was dead now, and she was alone, and unable to afford the three rooms where they had lived together. All she owned was a typewriter and the contents of her head. The space into which she moved was meant only for temporary use, in the summertime. It measured 7 feet by 15 and it was furnished with a stove, a stool, a bed and a table. In this room, the young woman settled down to talk with the dead. In this third lecture, I want to tell you her strange story: how, as her commitment to the past turned to obsession, history chewed her up and spat her out.

Her name was Stanisława Przybyszewska, I apologize for my somewhat Anglicized pronunciation. Her contemporaries called her Stasia. Not that she spoke to anyone much, by this stage in her life. For seven years after she moved into the room, till her death at the age of 34, she devoted herself obsessively to writing plays and novels about the French Revolution. She had little encouragement, little food, often no money, and a precarious supply of morphine, on which she was dependent. What she did have, to keep her warm through the Polish winters, was a burning conviction of her own genius.

Stasia was born in 1900. She was an illegitimate child, and her father was the writer Stanisław Przybyszewski: he was an associate of writers and artists like Strindberg and Munch, and he was famous in his day. He was best known as a playwright, and parodic in his self-importance: 'We artists know no laws.' By his own account, he was a Satanist. He had several illegitimate children by different women, and he neither nurtured them nor paid for it to be done; he entered and left their lives when it amused him. Stasia's mother, Aniela Pajak, was a young artist, gentle and talented. Przybyszewski was married when they had an affair and there was no question of his leaving his wife. As a young single woman with a child, Aniela found Poland inhospitable. Mother and daughter became emigrés, living precariously in Vienna, then Paris: till Aniela died suddenly of pneumonia, leaving her daughter alone at the age of eleven.

Stasia was an intense, ferociously intelligent child, at home in several languages, but at home nowhere else. First, she lived in Zurich with friends of her mother's. Then she went back to Vienna to live with an aunt. In the middle of the Great War her aunt's family moved back to Poland, to Cracow.

Stasia enrolled as a trainee teacher. She had only seen her father twice, in her early childhood. Finally, he gave in to pressure from her guardians to acknowledge paternity, and when she was 18, he came back into her life. Her mother had always spoken well of him, never blamed him for abandoning her. So Stasia idolized him, saw him as a savior, a twin soul, she didn't doubt his brilliance; though by this time his career was off the boil and he was working for the Post-Office – which you would have thought offered limited opportunities for a Satanist.

But he got his fun elsewhere. He arranged meetings with Stasia at hotels. His wife of the moment was suspicious enough to set a private detective on him. He may have seduced his daughter. He almost certainly introduced her to morphine. He had used it to wean himself off alcohol, which was killing him. He was an addict, and soon, so was Stasia. She enrolled at a Polish university, but after the first term she had a breakdown.

However, she was able to support herself by teaching, and in 1923 she married a young artist called Jan Panieński. With him she made her final move, to the city of Danzig, where she would spend the rest of her life.

The marriage seems to have been a strained companionship between shy introverts, who for a short time became dependent on each other, and who had both, separately, become dependent on drugs. Two years on, Jan went to Paris on an art scholarship, and died of an overdose. Stasia's letters contain no reaction to his death. Later she wrote, 'I was born for mental life, and had to dispense with the sexual phase of my life very quickly in order to be free.' Yet it's not so simple as that – alongside her passion for Revolution runs a perplexed sexual awareness, an unruly force, half-understood, and channeled from her life into her work.

A turning point came when she read Georg Büchner's play, *Danton's Death*, which deals with the last days of the Revolutionary hero, the bold, vital, deeply compromised George-Jacques Danton. This set the course of her future. She read the play 11 times, and then she began to write. She had found her subject. It was not Danton, but his rival Robespierre, the quiet and outwardly unremarkable man who was the most controversial as well as the most unlikely of the Revolution's leaders. For what remained of Stasia's life, her days and nights were an almost unvaried round, enslaved to the typewriter while she attempted to capture on the page the swirl of excitement and horror inside her head. She had a small inheritance from her husband, and it kept her going for a year or so. Then she moved to the room that I have described. A neighbour sometimes brought her food. For a while she went out for cigarettes and newspapers, and occasionally to see a film. And then she gave up going out except to get her drugs.

Stasia was determined to rival her father as a playwright. By now, she had seen his feet of clay – or his cloven hooves. His famous talent had burnt out. His politics moved steadily to the right, and he was received back into the Catholic church. Stasia was able to see that he was a mediocrity and a con-man, yet her whole life was shaped in reaction to him. She still hoped his name and contacts would help her, so when she had finished her a second play about the Revolution, she sent it to him. The plot centres on a sickly girl who attempts to have her father guillotined. Perhaps her own father read too much into it. But anyway, he offered no help.

She sent out her work to publishers. Rejection made her physically ill. In spring 1928, she began work on a new play. She had begun to see Robespierre as a hero and one who needed her advocacy: a single, lonely, burning flame of integrity in the chaos of five years of revolution.

In order to preserve her solitude – to be alone with him - she locked herself into a life of astonishing deprivation.

December 1928

'It's difficult for me to write, my fingers are weak and numb from the cold. I can't hit the keys hard enough, and frequently miss them altogether....two years ago I was able to have a fire in the coal-burning stove almost every day ... last year I could afford a fire only once a week. This year any fire at all is totally out of the question.' She seldom saw daylight. Often the cold was so intense that she could not think.

11 Feb 1929:

‘Yesterday it was minus 20 centigrade, today it is minus 25. From 9 pm deathly silence grips the town. From top to bottom the windows are overgrown with a thick white fur; it’s better than curtains, but it gives the interior of my room the exact feeling of the most private dwelling, the grave.’

Why do this? Because, she wrote, ‘I can be a writer or nothing at all.’ There’s a tension in every artist between the outer and the inner lives. You want to be at your desk or in your studio, mining your resources, but you also want to be out there in the world, listening and looking to replenish your talent. There’s no safe point, no stasis. It produces anxiety, even a kind of shame. Stasia found it easiest to lock the world out. Her only concern was that nothing and no one disturb her work.

After a year she had finished four major drafts of her play *The Danton Affair*. She was afraid to part from it. But she sent it out. Stasia had hardly ever seen a play, and even if she had known how to write one, she wouldn’t sacrifice an exact retelling for the sake of the drama; so the script threatened to become as long as life itself.

Yet even though it was the size of three or four normal plays, there was interest among the professional readers employed by the theatre companies. Not surprisingly, because her work is astonishing. It reads more like a vast transcript of the Revolution, verbatim, than like something invented. For three years, there were tortuous negotiations. The National Theatre in Warsaw tried to beat out a version, and gave up. But in 1931 the play was staged - cut down from an estimated fourteen hours playing time, but still five hours long. Stasia didn’t go. She was disgusted with the cuts and it closed after five performances.

There was one other production, in 1933. It lasted twenty-four days - and this time she had reason for disgust, because the text had been manipulated to make it topical – it had become an anti-revolutionary play, a vehicle for the right wing. What she feared had happened: her work had gone out into the world and been misused and contaminated.

So, she decided, she would depend on herself. She turned to the novel, because there you have sole control. And she believed she had everything she needed inside her room.

The historian Edward Gibbon said solitude was the school for genius. Maybe. You will never be an artist if you can’t endure your own company or define your own purposes and stick with them. But many artists set up a state of internal exile, or – to put it more positively - a safe space inside: a place where you do your work, no matter what else is happening. Virginia Woolf said a woman writer needs a room of her own. She didn’t stipulate, ‘a cell of her own.’ Paradoxically, Stasia wasn’t someone who rejected the world – she craved it. She sought connection – but on her own terms.

She wrote letters to famous writers – but mostly, she never sent them. Among her papers were the outlines of numerous prose works – novels, stories – and often the figure of Robespierre, disguised or occulted, appears in them, even if the setting is contemporary. Stasia always believed that if she chose she could walk out of her room, take up normal life, earn a living. But external realities - the lively and cosmopolitan city of Danzig, the world of the theatre and publishing – were fading. In the grip of her morphine addiction, and incubating tuberculosis, she became fixated on a bleak inner

landscape. She was 'living,' she said, 'with people who died so long ago that there is not even a single vibration left in the air after them...'

She had no money for books or newspapers, hardly enough for pencils or carbon paper. She describes how she painted her scraps of food with disinfectant to preserve them. She was slowly starving, but it seemed that the frailer her body became, the more her thoughts raced, the more schemes she promulgated. She felt, she said, 'death cornering me.' But she would rally, and go back to her desk.

Her last letters were written to the novelist Thomas Mann. 'Every object in my room is laden with pain. And nowhere any love. I'm not pure enough. I've used myself up.'

And then the letters stopped. Presumably she was too weak to type or hold a pen. She died alone in her room on 15th August, 1934.

Meeting her through the papers she left behind, you can be repelled by her untrammelled conviction of her own genius, by her rectitude. You can be bitterly amused - except that you know where it is leading. Was she a failure? She said not. In March 1929, she wrote:

'It has just dawned on me today that my life without entertainment, without friends, without sex, without the possibility of spending money on luxury items, is much much richer than the lives led by 99 per cent of the people...the joys, thrills and revelations that I experience in a single month are beyond the reach of most in the course of an entire lifetime.'

And yet, she admitted, the writer needs a reader. Her work did have an afterlife of sorts. Her three Revolution plays were staged in Poland in the late 1960s, early 1970s, and then Andrej Wadja put on a version of the play about Danton in Warsaw in 1975. In 1983, Wadja released his famous film, *Danton*, the French-Polish production with Gerard Depardieu in the title role. He used Stasia's work as the basis for the script. This was the era of Solidarity, the populist social movement that preceded the downfall of the Communist state, and the film became a parable about current politics. Stasia loved the cinema, but I think she might have hated this reduction of her purpose. She had a story to tell but it was not the one the film was telling, and the Robespierre it presented was not her man.

But her name on the end of the credits brought her some attention. In 1986 there was a fine biographical study in English. The same year, Pam Gems reworked her scripts for the Royal Shakespeare Company. And then just last year, a book of her short stories came out in Poland. So her name has survived. She is a truly European writer. Her work challenged clichés and entrenched pieties about the Revolution, so she is a good servant to history. She is also an awful warning. If anyone thinks writing is therapy - I beg them to look at this life.

What went wrong? Stasia worked and worked to get the truth, but she didn't find a way of serving the truth through narrative. She was crippled by perfectionism. She lost the distance that enabled her to judge her work, and she didn't have that pragmatic streak that says that compromise is not always dishonor. Detail matters. But there are other

things that matter more: pace, grip, shape. An unperformable play or a half-finished novel is no use except as a stepping stone to a genuine communication.

But: if you pinpoint any moment in an artist's career, you will see the unfinished. Who is ready for completion? Who is ready for death? It takes us all by surprise - the pen poised, the potential unrealized, explanations wanting, an evaporation of effort into white space. With each line, each sentence, you succeed and fail, succeed and fail. And perhaps as a subject the Revolution sets us up for frustration - it eludes our analysis, simply because it isn't over yet.

Stasia was a hero worshipper. I think her exaltation of the individual was based on a romantic fallacy. But in fiction we end up writing about individuals, however hard we resist them. Novels and plays aren't primarily vehicles for ideas, though they are feeble if they leave the ideas out. I cannot say Stasia chose the wrong subject or the wrong focus. The great historian Michelet wrote, 'Robespierre strangles and stifles.' Yet when Michelet finished his great work on the Revolution, it was Robespierre he missed. 'My pale companion,' he called him, '...the man of great will, hard-working like me, poor like me.'

From the early days of the Revolution, when he was an obscure young deputy, Robespierre was drawn and painted. He seemed to attract the artist's eye and compel attention - so he exists in multiple versions. And through the sequence of his portraits, you see what revolution costs.

In five years, he ages twenty. In 1789 you see a dreamy, soft-featured young man who might be a poet. By 1794, the flesh falls away from a clenched jaw, the head becomes a skull. In revolution everything speeds up, every process is accelerated. This is true of politics and it is true of individuals. Authority gives way to liberty, but as soon as liberty is threatened it gives way to repression. Ideals are crushed by the weight and speed of events. The box is opened, the hopes fly out, the box is slammed shut and someone's head is caught in it.

And this is precisely why a writer is drawn - to where all the human stories, and all the stories about power, are distilled. The makers of the Revolution knew they were actors. In Paris they could, in fact, leave their assemblies and revolutionary clubs, book a seat and see themselves on stage. They were caught up in a self-conscious spectacle, and they were aware of all the layers of meaning of the term 'representation.' What does it mean, to stand in for someone else? To embody the collective will? What happens when you step on to the stage of history? When your clothes become costumes, and your face a mask?

Sometimes our books write us. Stasia's version of Robespierre was a creation of her own need: she found her way to the loneliest of the Revolutionaries, and she clung to him. Her text itself is a riot of complication. She went to the Revolution, and forgot to take the reader. But if she goes wrong, she does it, like the Revolutionaries, on an epic scale.

A jealous rival of Robespierre's said, 'What a man this is, with his crowd of women about him!' In 1794, at his death, he was 36 - he was unmarried, supposedly engaged to the daughter of the carpenter with whom he lodged. The men of the Revolution were in general very young, so the widows, sisters, fiancées they left behind

lived far into the 19th century, their lives spent in prolonged mourning for a time, place, events and men who must have seemed like hallucinations.

Stasia connects us to these women. She embodied the past until her body ceased to be. Towards the end of her life she had begun to date her letters by the Revolutionary calendar. She had left us - chosen another time frame, which began again at the Year One. From her letters, there is an uncanny sense that she had passed *through* history. If historical fiction had a patron saint, it should be this woman, who slipped off mortality like one of those virgin martyrs who – allegedly – were devoured by wild beasts in the Roman arena.

Susan Sontag said: ‘Somewhere along the line one has to choose between the Life and the Project.’ Stasia chose the Project. It killed her. Multiple causes of death were recorded, but actually she died of Robespierre. You don’t want to work like that, be like that. You hope your art will save you, not destroy you. But it’s a sad fact that bad art and good art feel remarkably the same, while they’re in process. As you work, you have to exercise self-scrutiny and fine discrimination, but in the end, the verdict is out of your hands.

Stasia couldn’t see the difference between the truth and the whole truth: for her, to omit was to falsify, and because she was anxious never to mis-state, she over-determined her direction and her method. This is where her art failed. Artists are often asked to state their intention. They sometimes try. But really, this question is the wrong way round. Intention evolves as a result of capacity. You don’t know what you’re doing, till you try to do it. As capacity increases, so does ambition. But when it comes getting the words on the page, you can only work breath by breath, line by line. And the line-by-line is what I will talk about in my fourth lecture.

[APPLAUSE]

SUE LAWLEY: Hilary, thank you very much indeed. Let's find out now what our audience here in Antwerp thought of what you had to say. So can I have any, some hands with some questions? Yes..

Q: Hi, I'm Kathy. I'm a writer and a literary critic. I was wondering, we've all heard that Stasia, that she couldn't find a balance between the two, but have you ever felt like her and how do you find the balance between inner life and outer life?

HILARY MANTEL: I think that one of the things that strikes me about her is the certain element of self-hatred. It was as if her body was a necessary encumbrance to her and she would wish to be pure spirit or pure intellect. And so she trashed her body. She deprived it and she punished it. And as many people will know, I have myself had a great deal of ill health. For a lot of my life, my body has not been a source of gratification. It's been a kind of burden, and looking after it has been a kind of second job. And what you have to do certainly as this historical novelist, you have to lend your body to other people who happen to be dead. It doesn't mean that you have to describe them to the reader in minute detail, but you have to be conscious of what kind of energy they embody. And therefore, you have to put yourself at their disposal for the time that you're writing about them. I moved swiftly from one body to another.

SUE LAWLEY: Gentleman over here. Here we are...

Q: My name is Douwe Draaisma and I'm a psychologist of memory. Listening to this grim tale about Stasia and her fixation, perhaps, on Robespierre, and your own statement that one of the joys of writing historical fiction is having to navigate between imagination on the one hand and constraints on the other hand. I was wondering, if you pick such a complicated figure, does that provide you with more or less constraints?

HILARY MANTEL: I think what drew me to Stasia was not only a common interest in the revolution as you say, but also my record of failure, if you like. I spent the whole of my twenties writing a huge novel about the French Revolution and when I had finished, no one wanted it. I couldn't even get people to read it.

SUE LAWLEY: So you truly identify with Stasia in that sense?

HILARY MANTEL: I do. And what I wonder is how did I survive that process? And I'm trying to work out, you see, where I managed to put out a hand and grapple for survival, I find the strength to say very well, I can put this subject aside.. I can do something else. Whereas Stasia, being perhaps less malleable, perhaps less pragmatic, she didn't and I do really take this story as an awful warning about art consuming someone.

SUE LAWLEY: So you mentioned Susan Sontag talking about 'you choose the life or the project'. She obviously, as you said, chose the project. Where would you put yourself on the scale?

HILARY MANTEL: I think perhaps the idea is not to force yourself to a stark choice, but if I have to, yes, I choose the project.

SUE LAWLEY: So you might spend all day in the 1530's and at the end of the day wake up and realise you're in the 21st century. Is that how it is?

HILARY MANTEL: Whole months in the 1530's.

SUE LAWLEY: Yes. Another question from the floor? Gentleman there, yes...

Q: I am Johan Bijttebier, proud citizen of Antwerp, and proud reader of your books. Could I be blunt, ask you an actual question about the future and about England? What you think about the whole situation in the past, the present and the future, in England.

SUE LAWLEY: (laughter) Great question. How long have you got? How long have you got, Hilary? So are you asking about Brexit?

Johan Bijttebier: I'm asking about Brexit, yes.

HILARY MANTEL: There has been a gigantic failure on the part of the voting public in Britain to know their history, to examine the evidence that was put before them, and a giant failure of imagination. I think the whole thing is shameful, regrettable and I think--

[APPLAUSE]

----time will prove how destructive it may be. All nations have a fantasy of a golden age, but I would say ours was to come. I'm not so sure, now.

Q: My name is **Marysa Demoor**. **I'm a full Professor in English Literature at the University of Ghent**. I was wondering to what extent this concept of post-truth - that we start doubting what the truth really is - that we're all living with now, and that seems to inform our ideas and our lives, to what extent has that informed your talk today and your own work, in fact, your own fiction?

HILARY MANTEL: I think that in this world where false information flies about the planet at the speed of light, then the skills of the historian are more necessary than ever because the historian teaches us to ask who is telling me this, can I trust them, why are they telling me, why do they want me to believe this? If you interrogate your sources of news, your sources of information in that way, mobilize your intelligence.. you won't come to much harm, but I think the concept of fake news, of unreliable news, to me, is just not new at all.

SUE LAWLEY: A final question over there.

Q: My name is **Lode Desmet**. **I'm a film maker**. You seem attached to research, to the facts and at the same time, I heard you say Stasia couldn't make the distinction between the truth and the whole truth, which also seems to indicate that you're willing to make a compromise with the truth. It's a slippery place that you find yourself in there, it seems.

HILARY MANTEL: I don't think so. I think it's a matter of the artist's selection because all effective narrative depends on selection. And if you try to tell your reader everything, it means there's a level at which you have not done the work. I think the kind of compromises that Stasia refused, I think her mania for cataloguing the facts actually got in the way of her creativity, but I don't see selection as a grubby or compromised art. I see it as an essential part of making sense of a narrative for the reader.

SUE LAWLEY: Do you want to come back on that?

Lode Desmet: Having worked and still working in television, I know how facts and footage is often ... it's always selection and it's – why do you feel you have the authority to make the right selection?

HILARY MANTEL: If someone did not seize that authority there would be no history. There would be no knowledge. There would only be information. However, we mustn't be timid about this. I myself have had a very good experience with television drama, but you see, look what happened to Stasia as soon as she had her work put on in the theatre. So it is, as you suggest, a delicate art.

SUE LAWLEY: That's it. Thank you very much. We're out of time. Thank you to our hosts here at the Butcher's Guild Hall in Antwerp, thank you very much to our audience. If you'd like to find out more about the series, you can find transcripts, audio and much more in the Reith Archives on the BBC Reith website. Next time, we're going to be in Hilary's home territory. We'll be in Exeter to hear how she sets about the

practical task of writing her books. The title of her lecture is a question: "Can these bones live?" We shall find out. For now, our thanks again to our Reith Lecturer 2017, Dame Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

END.