



**UNIVERSITÀ
DI PARMA**

Awarding of the title of Honorary Doctor in

**“Classical and Modern Philology
and Literature”**

to

Patti Smith

Rector’s speech

Loris Borghi

Parma, Auditorium Paganini

3 May 2017

Civil, Military and Religious Authorities,

Academic Authorities,

Distinguished Colleagues,

Students,

Ladies and Gentlemen

While taking the opportunity to express my sincere thanks to you all for attending this splendid Auditorium which, for this special occasion, has been transformed into the Great Hall of the University of Parma, I wish to extend a warm welcome to all the people who have honoured us with their presence at this Ceremony, during which the Honorary Degree in “Classical and Modern Philology and Literature” will be awarded to Patricia Lee Smith, known professionally as Patti Smith – a prominent figure on the international cultural scene from the 1970s to this day.

The ceremony which I am about to open represents a truly special

festive occasion for our students, for the University as a whole and for the entire City of Parma, where the artist Patti Smith has kindly consented to stay for a few days, with a view to becoming an integral part of our cultural, institutional and daily life.

This ceremony will be the starting-point for her stay in Parma, as evidence of how our University has actively promoted the invitation and offering of hospitality to Patti Smith here in Parma; our aim was to honour all the citizens of Parma with her presence, in the context of the close inter-relationship with the city and the surrounding territory, in which the University has made major investments in recent years.

It is not stating the obvious that the person who will be awarded an Honorary Degree here today needs no introduction. This is certainly the case, but it is important to mention, in my opening speech and also in the speeches that follow, that this honorary graduand embodies values, ideas, aspirations and ambitions that are closely mirrored in those that inspire and motivate our University, in its essential role as a community of people linked by diverse, but shared, cultures.

The particular importance of the Honorary Degree to be celebrated today lies in the fact that it reflects the firm intention of our University to take an active part in the union of theory and practice which, while taking carefully into account all the current challenges in the scientific and technical sectors, remains firmly rooted in concepts and values of *humanitas* of which the fields of literature, creative arts and social studies are not only the custodians but also the promoters.

Thus it is hardly surprising that the Committee of the Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Cultural Industries should have made the unanimous and wholehearted decision to confer the Honorary Degree in “Classical and Modern Philology and Literature” on Patti Smith, whose artistic commitment has always distinguished itself for the search and experimentation of new expressive forms of language having the power also to channel spiritual and social elements of particular significance.

Born in Chicago in 1946, the poetess, writer, musician, singer and photographer Patti Smith made her appearance on the music scene in the 1970s in a period of intense cultural ferment, which was to generate innovative trends such as Punk and New Wave. In her commitment to the

cultural and artistic, experimental and innovative currents on the New York City scene in that particular period, her partnership with the famous photographer Robert Mapplethorpe was a particularly significant one.

Patti Smith soon distinguished herself for her dynamism and interpretative communication, as well as for the intensity of her lyrics, endowed with a powerfully visionary poetic quality. During her 40 years of professional activity, her musical output has evolved through a range of different styles, addressing, with a clear-sighted and lyrical approach, the tragedies and sufferings of society at large, as well as delving into anxieties and apprehensions on an individual basis. In 2005 Patti Smith was named a Commander of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Ministry of Culture, also by virtue of her appreciation and re-elaboration of the poet Arthur Rimbaud's works. In May 2010 she was awarded an honorary doctorate in fine arts by the prestigious New York Pratt Institute. In February 2013, Bryn Mawr College in Philadelphia honoured her with the Katharine Hepburn Medal, dedicated to women whose lives have contributed to changing the world. Finally, in May 2016 she received an honorary doctorate from the Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

However, Patti Smith has also always maintained close links with Italy, with the Italian music scene, and with its cultural traditions. We need only think of her passion, ever since her childhood, for Italian opera, for Verdi and Puccini in particular, which inspired her, while still in her adolescence, to nurture dreams of becoming an opera singer, to the extent that her music teacher assigned her the task of preparing and interpreting what she refers to as Manrico's "lullaby" in the *Trovatore*. We cannot fail to mention her lifelong passion for the figure and works of Pasolini and the influence he exerted on her: her poem "italy (the round)", included in the collection *Babel* dated 1978, is subtitled "for Pasolini" and, in the closure, she commemorates his death. As regards the visual arts, however, I would like to mention not only the importance for Patti Smith of the illustrious works of the major Italian artists, but also that of the lesser known works, which form an integral part of the local Italian artistic heritage, and with which she has become acquainted during her various visits to Italy – for example, the "little angel" in the town of San Severino in the Marche region. She was so enthralled with this work of art that she chose to display it on the cover of her book

Auguries of Innocence, published in Italy in 2006 with the title *Presagi di innocenza*.

In recent times, in 2014, Patti Smith paid a visit to Parma, on which occasion she took part in a musical event held in the grounds of the Pilotta, which left its mark on the cultural memory of the city of Parma, thanks to the warm appreciation of the public, to whom the artist responded equally affectionately. This was perhaps the occasion that sowed the seeds for the liaison between the city of Parma and Patti Smith which, over the years, has paved the way for today's celebration and for all other future events.

Today, Parma celebrates Patti Smith as a writer and reader, in particular as a world-renowned writer and expert in the field of world literatures; an active protagonist of contemporary World Literature, that is to say, of a canon that transcends the confines of national traditions and languages in order to address all individuals, without distinctions or exceptions. Although she has repeatedly been paid tribute as the "queen", "poetess" and "priestess" of rock or punk music, she will be celebrated here today as a poet *tout court*, as a novelist and reader with a

critical eye, as a person who has a way of instilling in others a taste for reading and as an author of a rich series of volumes, from her debut in 1972 with her poetry collection *Seventh Heaven*, to *Auguries of Innocence* in 2005, up to her most recent publications *Just Kids* in 2010 and *M Train* in 2015.

Her more specifically literary works would be too numerous to be listed exhaustively: suffice it to say that in each of these, Patti Smith displays the same sensitivity, energy, passion and ability to transfigure reality and experience in order to reveal their essence; the same essence that lies at the heart of her music or her artistic projects, as, for instance, here in Parma, the concert entitled “Grateful” and the photo exhibition “Higher Learning”.

The artist herself underlined the close interconnection among the multifaceted expressions of her creativity in the message addressed to the University and the city of Parma, following her acceptance of the honorary degree.

I quote her words:

“When I was young, I dreamed of attending a high-status University.

It is indeed a privilege to receive an honorary degree from the University of Parma, one of the oldest and most prestigious Universities in Europe.

I have always been a believer in the importance of education and to have obtained an award from this eminent institution of higher education is both an embarrassment and an incentive.

The significance of the exhibition is to pay homage to another type of education. The University of life, of travel, of books, artists, poets and teachers. The images are visual representations of the pilgrimage and of gratitude, and an expression of constant admiration and respect for our cultural voices, for their grandiose works and for the unpretentiousness of their instruments. A paintbrush, a typewriter and the beds in which they dreamed. The places of their eternal peace”.

These are words that will remain permanently engraved in the annals of our University.

To return to today’s ceremony, I wish to point out that the conferral of an honorary degree is a far from simple formal procedure. On the contrary, it is a highly official occasion, with the highest level of responsibility from the scientific, social and ethical point of view, during

which the entire academic staff welcomes, as a fully-fledged member of the Community, an illustrious figure who has distinguished him/herself in the field of research, culture, intellectual professions, work and social commitment.

This award is a concrete act, the honorary degree having full legal value. It is equivalent to the *Laurea Magistrale* and its conferral, subsequent to the resolutions of the University Authorities, is rendered effective by the approval on the part of the Minister of Education, University and Research which, in Patti Smith's case, was obtained on 30th September 2016.

Following my introduction, today's ceremony will include a speech by Professor Massimo Magnani, coordinator for the Degree in "Classical and Modern Philology and Literature", who will illustrate the reasons for the conferral.

This will be followed by a reading of the *Laudatio* by Professor Diego Saglia, Professor of English Literature and Head of the Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Cultural Industries, who approved the proposal of the honorary degree. By way of exception, the *Laudatio* will

be delivered in English, as a gesture of warm welcome towards our graduand.

After these two speeches, after presenting the academic cap, gown and scroll, I shall proceed to award Patti Smith with the Honorary Degree in “Classical and Modern Philology and Literature”.

To conclude, the new graduate will deliver her *Lectio Doctoralis*.

Finally, I would like to emphasise how the presence here today of such a numerous and demonstrative audience, consisting not only of the University staff and students, but also of a large number of citizens of Parma who have always been admirers of Patti Smith, is the most vivid demonstration not only of the interest that her figure has the power to inspire, but also of her ability to involve and deeply move her public, to fascinate them and, at the same time, make them reflect.

Dear Patti, if I may be allowed to address you in this familiar way, the University of Parma and the City of Parma as a whole would like to thank you for having enthusiastically accepted this award, which is an honour also for us, and which will be a constant reminder to us to bear in mind the principles and ideas, but also the expressions of passion and

enthusiasm, which will be our guidelines along the path of the growth, development and consolidation of our millennial University.

In your vibrant book of memoirs *Just Kids*, you admit to having succeeded in outliving a difficult period of adolescence, during which you felt like a “skinny loser” and therefore “the subject of much ridicule”, and approximately express the following ideas: “I immersed myself in books and rock 'n' roll, and my love for books, my love for music, my dedication and enthusiasm were like weapons to overcome obstacles and seize and wield power”. The very power, immortalised in your song “People Have the Power”, that belongs to every one of us: the power to dream, to rule and to wrestle the world from fools.

Dear Patti, we are all extremely grateful to you for having agreed to accept the title of Doctor in Classical and Modern Philology and Literature at the University of Parma.

Thank you! With heart and mind.

THE RECTOR

Loris Borghi

Parma, 3rd May 2017