The Nobel Prize: History and Canonicity

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Through the decades the Nobel Prize in literature has been criticized negatively as being at best a popularity contest and at worst a political event run by second-rate provincials who know too little about literature beyond their own borders and who, in addition, are almost exclusively white and male. Yet when one of our own—a U.S. author—wins, such as Toni Morrison did in 1993, many of us may grumble, but most are willing to gather to congratulate the winner and, more often than not, agree that the candidate, though of course chosen from a field of equally excellent candidates in this country and others, is reasonably deserving.

Are the Nobels in literature fair—that is, are winners chosen justly to represent the best of world literature? Part of the answer to this question lies in determining what is the literary canon. In fact, one can argue that the history of the Nobels in literature is to some extent a history of how the literary canon has been—and will be—determined. In recent years in the awarding of the prize, it is quite clear that there has developed a greater effort not only to include nonwhite and female authors, but also to redefine the meaning of good—canonical—literature in accordance with the literatures of nonwhite and female authors whose writings differ from the traditional canon. This paper examines these issues first by looking at a description of the literary prize, then at the history of the political and aesthetic judgements made in awarding the prize, and finally at contemporary fairness and canonicity.

Description of the Prize

A description of the literary prize may be helpful. Alfred Nobel, inventor of dynamite, died in 1896 and left most of his estate, about nine million dollars—an immense fortune at that time—to establish the Nobel prizes. He wrote the final draft of his bequest at the Swedish Club in Paris on a torn piece of paper in front of four witnesses because of his distrust of lawyers. In an earlier draft, he had not mentioned the literary prize. However, moved perhaps especially by the Utopian philosophy and literary style of Shelley and by his lifelong love of writing (Osterling 75-6), Nobel's final bequest included a prize for literature among several prizes.

Nobel stipulated that the interest from the investment of his fortune should be "annually distributed in the form of prizes to those who, during

the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind," with the literary prize going to "the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an ideal tendency" in the previous year. Nobel also stipulated for all fields that "no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates, so that the most worthy shall receive the prize, whether he be a Scandinavian or not" (Schuck 647).

Nobel chose "the Academy in Stockholm"—the Swedish Academy—to decide on the winners in literature (647). The Academy was created in 1786 by King Gustav III from the French model. There are eighteen members appointed for life; the average age at appointment is about fifty (Almhult 11). Among the eighteen, "several are usually authors and the others learned men or high officers of state with literary interests" (12). The foremost aim of the Academy, according to the King's initial charter, is "to develop the purity, strength and nobility of the Swedish tongue" (9). Besides the awarding of the Nobel, the Academy offers prizes to citizens of Sweden and sponsors other literary activities.

Each year the Nobel Committee of the Academy, five to six men and women of letters, help decide who shall be nominated for the prize in literature. The Committee members are chosen from the Academy (the Nobel Foundation specifies that Committee members need not be Academy members, but they have, with one exception, always been so); the five or six stay on the Committee as long as they wish, sometimes for decades. They devote a large amount of their time throughout the year to reading world literature in several languages (usually at least three or four languages are represented on the committee, sometimes more), either borrowing from the 200,000-volume Nobel Library the Academy keeps, or ordering more books for the library in order to read nominees' works. In addition, experts are consulted and translations made into Swedish of the works of authors whose writings do not exist in a language well known to the members of the Committee or the Academy. Nominations, some 300-400 per year for about 100-150 authors, are received before February for works published in previous years. Authors may be nominated by professors of literature or philology at universities or university colleges, presidents of literary societies, members of the Swedish Academy and other academies like it, and other laureates in literature. No self-nominations are allowed, and an author must be alive at the time of nomination (though not necessarily at the time of final selection) to be chosen.

The Committee presents a list of the nominees to the Academy in February and, by March, the Committee narrows the list to some fifteen to twenty names. According to Artur Lundkvist, a member of the Committee in 1981, "Most names on this reduced list have been there before,

sometimes for as long as 40 years" (Kostelanetz 4). This list of finalists and examples of their work are presented to the Academy in April. Then the Academy spends the summer and early fall reading, gathering reports, and discussing the merits of the finalists.

Usually by late October the Academy makes its final choice. There must be at least 12 members present, the prizewinner must win by majority vote, and balloting is secret. However, as Lars Gyllensten, long a member of the Nobel Committee, pointed out, "Usually the result is apparent after lengthy discussion . . . so that a large majority, or all, can agree on the prizewinner." In addition, "no reservations concerning the majority's decision may be expressed, still less made public" (Kostelanetz 4).

Once a choice is made, the prizewinner is informed by telegram, the winner is announced to the media, and the King of Sweden presents the award on December 10, the day on which Alfred Nobel died, "at a brilliant festival in Stockholm" (Almhult 25). The award consists of a gold medal, an illuminated diploma, and a check for a large sum of money, now well over a million dollars. Most authors accept. Jean-Paul Sartre did not, George Bernard Shaw almost didn't, and Boris Pasternak was forced to decline.

Some of our greatest authors have won the Nobel Prize in Literature, people such as Hemingway, Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, and O'Neill and Europeans Yeats, Mann, and Hesse. More recent winners perhaps also destined for similar fame include Beckett, Neruda, and Marquez.

However, both those who defend and those who criticize the Nobel Prize in Literature are quick to point out the great literary figures who did not win. Rado Pribic, in his introduction to *Nobel Laureates*, asked, for example, why the following writers were passed over:

> Was Paul Claudel too religious (Roman Catholic)? Were Maxim Gorki and Bertolt Brecht too ideological (Communist)? Were Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf too experimental? Did Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekhov not receive the prize because they were primarily known as playwrights? (xiii-iv).

Others who have not won include such lights in the West as Auden, Borges, Greene, Hardy, Llosa, Nabokov, Lowell, Porter, Pound, Proust, Rilke, Sandberg, Strindberg, Tolstoy, Valery, Warren, Woolf, Zola, and in addition a number of deserving non-Euro-American writers in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa who have yet to receive proper recognition for their places in world literature.

There also are complaints about those who did become winners and should not have, as exemplified in a "The Talk of the Town" column in

The New Yorker:

> Everybody complains about how many writers of the second rank have won the prize—about how Pearl Buck and Steinbeck won it . . . [and] those writers who . . . no longer seem to have any rank at all. Rudolf Christoph Eucken, Karl Adolph Gjellerup, and Henrik Pontoppidan; Carl Friedrich Georg Spitteler, Carl Gustaf Verner von Heidenstam, and Jacinto Benavente; Frans Eemil Sillanpaa, and Johannes Vilhelm Jensen. Who were they, and what did they write? (31)

Some of the complaints about those who were not nominated may be justified; however, many other authors never reached their important world ranking—or did not have their most important works published—until shortly before or after their death. In addition, the academy has depended often on professors at universities and the presidents of writing organizations of each country to nominate authors, and many times nominations simply have not been easy to get. In addition, as in most institutions, personal politics sometimes have been involved. Alberto Manguel wrote of this recently in the magazine *Saturday Night:*

> Octavio Paz, it seems, did not receive the award [before 1990] because one of the Swedish academicians was himself the author of a book on the artist Marcel Duchamp, and resented the success of Paz's work on the same subject. The enmity between another member and Graham Greene has become legendary, as has the vow of yet a third academician that Borges, before his death in 1986, would never receive the prize. (53).

As noted, the prize currently is worth over one million dollars to each recipient when unshared (the literary prize almost never is shared). In addition to the cash prize, there are virtually guaranteed increases in sales, translations into other languages, and lecture fees. The steadily increasing monetary value of the prize in recent years has encouraged some critics to suggest that the Nobel has become more a contest for who deserves the money rather than for who deserves the honor of the prize (Manguel 53)

History—Poetics and Politics

A brief history of the awards in literature also is helpful in examining issues of fairness and canonicity. Choosing prizewinners always has been based to a certain extent on a mixture of politics and poetics—on popular representation and aesthetic choice. Some of the politics in particular can be examined through how three of the stipulations in Alfred Nobel's bequest have been followed.

One stipulation which obviously has been followed quite poorly specifies that the award must be given for the single most outstanding work from the previous year. Nobel himself was wary of the value of prizes. "'I owe my Swedish Order of the North Star to my cook, whose skill won the approval of an eminent stomach,' he once said, 'And my French Order was conferred upon me as the result of a close personal acquaintance with a minister'" (Manguel 51). Indeed, as Christopher Hitchens wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement,* "all prizes contain some original or inherent foolishness or anomaly, and then go on from there" (1066).

What were Nobel's intentions as far as giving "his" prize to someone on a basis more deserving than that of gastronomic or personal indulgence? Pribic suggested in *Nobel Laureates in Literature* that Nobel wished to reward the pioneering spirit:

> Why Alfred Nobel donated most of his estate to the Nobel Foundation is not completely clear. The theory that he wanted to clear his conscience after he saw the devastating power of his invention is not very convincing. . . . He was hoping that his inventions would be used to benefit mankind . . . rather than for military purposes. It is clear, however, that Alfred Nobel greatly respected the pioneering spirit . . . [and that his] prizes were intended to support the innovative spirit and the young struggling scholars and artists with new ideas. Of course, the history of the awards, especially in literature, shows that older, more established thinkers were generally given preference over the younger ones, contrary to Nobel's original intent. (xi)

Throughout the history of the awards, in fact, most laureates have been chosen primarily for a body of works, not for any one work or for promise as a writer. As Richard Kostelanetz pointed out in the *New York Times Book Review,* "More winners than not have failed to do major work *after* receiving the Prize. . . . Indeed, the award is often redundant, . . . a distraction, albeit a classy one" (32). Anders Osterling, long a Nobel Committee chairman, in his 1962 essay "The Literary Prize" set the average age of the award at 61, an age which he judged "rather high" (86). As Hemingway reportedly said of the prize, "You finally scramble ashore and the bastards hit you over the head with a lifebelt" (Hitchens 1066). So obvious a trend is this that "Talk of the Town" in *The New Yorker* gave the following tongue-in-cheek advice in 1991 for how an author might plan his or her writing career in order to win the prize: "Write epic; write cosmic; above all, write long [and] be upbeat" (31-2).

In recent years, with the addition of Kjell Espmark as chair of the Nobel Committee, a change in this pattern developed. Espmark proposed one solution in his detailed and liberal-minded 1986 history of the prizes,

> A basic weakness may be located in the international nominating system, which in many quarters tends to . . . hold back proposals that would favor strong, developing, younger talents. Consequently, the Nobel Committee should intensify its own investigations of the growth points of literature in various parts of the world. (168)

A second stipulation in Nobel's bequest that has caused concern provides that writers of other nationalities have a chance at the prize, even "whether he be a Scandinavian or not." On the whole, the Academy took this stipulation seriously from the start. It is true that a number of Scandinavians have continued to appear on the awards platform, especially Swedes, so that some thirteen Scandinavians, many of them now forgotten, have received the prize. However, this was almost to be expected: five won during World War I and II when the Academy wished to show political neutrality, some won when the Academy could find no great non-Scandinavian candidate in a given year or were deadlocked on two choices, and several Swedish laureates were themselves members of the Academy. Probably the thirteen have been no better or worse than other choices.

The greater problem for the Academy in recent decades has not been too many Scandinavians but rather too many Europeans. In the first 5 1/2 decades of the awards, almost no one outside Europe and the U.S. won. Pribic commented on this in *Nobel Laureates*:

> One has to recognize that an unusually high number of recipients have been from Scandinavian countries and that the selections also definitely favored European and U.S. writers. Even the Indian laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1913), the only recipient before 1945 who was not European or American [U.S.], was awarded the prize for his popularity in Europe rather than for his contributions to Indian literature. (xiii-iv)

For years the Academy dealt with this misrepresentation partly, perhaps, by awarding the prize to writers who wrote literature *about* other cultures, and partly by trying to define the meaning of "great literature" in a Eurocentric manner. Thus, for example, besides choosing Tagore in 1913, they also selected Kipling (1907), who wrote of India; Buck (1938), who wrote of China; and Hemingway (1954), who wrote of a poor Latin American fisherman. At the same time, however, many of the members of the Academy were almost painfully aware of the problem. The author of the 1922 committee report recommending Yeats wrote as follows:

> We must always be careful to judge literary works that are to us

> more or less strange, not according to our own standards, but against their proper background and according to what we may infer that they mean to the people of the country where they were produced and whose local traditions and national culture make it easier for them to appraise both the content and the form of such works. (Osterling 88)

A statement like this makes two trends obvious: first, the Academy was itself struggling against nationalism and cultural elitism within its own white, Eurocentric sphere; second, from nearly the start the Academy has relied heavily upon nominations from other countries, from which to make its selections. This paper examines these two trends more in the final section below, "Is There Fair Representation?"

A third stipulation of Nobel's which has given continuing cause for concern is his phrase requiring that prizewinning work must be "of an idealistic tendency." The early struggles of the Academy with this stipulation help explain many of the Academy's poorer choices, especially in its first two decades, and these early struggles also help highlight more recent criticisms of racism and sexism leveled at the Academy.

After Nobel's death, Danish literary critic Georg Brandes asked a close friend of Alfred Nobel what "idealistic" had meant to Nobel. Brandes reportedly received this answer: Nobel "was an Anarchist: by idealistic he meant that which adopts a polemical or critical attitude to Religion, Royalty, Marriage, Social Order generally" (Espmark 4). Kjell Espmark, current chair of the Nobel Committee of the academy, suggested in his book *The Nobel Prize in Literature* that there may be something to this, even if it should be regarded with reserve: Nobel was, after all, a Utopian idealist, a radical anticleric, and an unmarried man (5).

However, the Academy nearly turned this interpretation upside down in the first decade of the Nobel Prizes, and the Academy has been redefining "idealistic tendency" ever since that time. The first chair of the Nobel Committee, Carl David af Wirsen, interpreted Nobel's stipulation to mean that the winner's works "ought to be of 'a lofty and sound idealism,' characterized 'by a true nobility not simply of presentation but of conception and of philosophy of life'" (Espmark 9). As such literary greats as Ibsen and Strindberg began their breakthroughs, Wirsen led the Swedish Academy to present a conservative front against new writing. This Wirsenian viewpoint represented a continuation of the great literary canon which had been inherited over the centuries from previous European writers: "Of primary importance was an idealistic view of the nature of reality, particularly the Christian conception. . . . A critical or negative attitude in a candidate toward Christianity was a disqualification," as were a lack of plots which showed "striving toward higher things and moral responsibility" (12-13). Thus the "moderation, balance, and

harmony . . . of ancient Greece," Goethe, and Lord Tennyson were the ideals for literature espoused in the beginning of the Nobel awards (15), and so the great tradition of literature was one which began in Greece, proceeded through medieval times in Europe, and had never been anything but European, graceful, moving, Christian, white, and predominantly male.

The first great author to be rejected—Tolstoy—probably was not chosen because of this conservative viewpoint of what great literature should be. Tolstoy was not even nominated in the first year, and 42 Swedish authors, artists, and critics signed a famous address to Tolstoy objecting to this. Tolstoy's response was that he did not want to be nominated or elected because he would not know what to do with the money or the fame. However, he was nominated the next year, and he was found wanting by the Wirsenian aesthetics because of his "animosity toward culture," "ghastly naturalistic descriptions," and "criticism of the state and the Bible" (16). For similar reasons, in the first decade of the awards Zola (who was considered a "standard-bearer of the crudest kind of naturalism" [Osterling 91]), Ibsen, Swinburne, Hardy and James were rejected, and Strindberg (reflecting the conservativism of the nominators) was never even nominated. Rudyard Kipling remains one of the few good choices of early Academy members.

Modern poetry (and for that matter, almost all poetry) also had a difficult time at first. According to Espmark, "In promoting the 'universal' aim of the Nobel Prize, the Academy excluded de facto the whole of modern poetry with its restricted appeal" (58). The first modern poet, Karlfeldt, did not break through until 1931, and he was, in fact, a Swede, a member of the Swedish Academy, and dead by the time the award was given.

The Nobel Committee and Academy early had several changes of membership which led to increasingly better selections. Rabindranath Tagore (1913, India) still is regarded as a strong choice, as is Romain Rolland (1916, France). Starting with 1920 the list of laureates shows a number of strong choices: Hamsun, France, Yeats, Shaw, and Mann in the 1920s; Lewis, Pirandello, and O'Neill in the 1930s, and Hesse, Gide, Eliot, and Faulkner in the 1940s. In the second fifty years of the awards, equally well known and well considered authors have been chosen.

The phrase "idealistic tendency" also led the Academy not to offer awards to authors of countries in conflict during World War I and II, in order to not only remain neutral politically but to also actively oppose extreme forces of nationalism (30). In more recent decades this policy of countermanding extreme nationalism and of keeping a literary neutrality has led to several controversial choices such as the Russian laureates and Gabriel García Márquez, a close friend of Castro. It is arguable, in fact,

that one of the intents of Alfred Nobel in creating the Nobel Prizes was to counteract totalitarianism, and that literary prizes to dissidents or even revolutionaries well may be in keeping with the spirit of the awards.

However, in the early decades of the prizes, even as Nobel's "idealistic tendency" became interpreted more liberally, still the ideas of a "great style" and of "universal interest" (to Euro-American audiences) were important to the Academy in making its choices. Thus Valéry was for years considered too inaccessible, Drieser too dreary, and Hesse, for many years, too ethically anarchist (55, 61, 70).

However, other omissions hardly can be blamed on the Academy. Valéry was to have won in 1945, but he died (74). Joyce and Conrad were never proposed, for their stature was not recognized sufficiently before their deaths, though Espmark believes that Joyce would have been chosen in the "late 1940s," had he lived that long (152). Kafka died before some of his greatest works were even published, and Proust, Rilke, and Lorca died before or soon after some of their best works appeared (152). Lawrence was recognized in the late 1920s and died in 1930. In fact, according to a questionnaire distributed to 350 international experts in literature, about two-thirds of the prizes given over the years were appropriate and only one-third were deemed inappropriate in any way (Espmark 145). The Nobel Prize for Literature has, over the decades, become increasingly more respected as an indication of the value of authors' works. The greater question that has been asked increasingly in recent years is whether the Nobel unfairly excludes certain classes of people. In other words, is the awarding of the Nobel racist and sexist?

Is There Fair Representation?

A description of the prize and a history of the awarding of it having been offered, it is now possible to turn more directly to the issues of fairness and canonicity. From its beginning, the awarders of the prize—the literary committee in Stockholm—have been accused of cultural elitism. For this reason, as shown previously, the members of the Academy and its Nobel Committee have been careful to reach out in their reading and research to other cultural heritages. However, as the Western canon of literature gradually has been redefined, especially in the latter half of this century, so too have the particular forms of the charges of elitism.

At one time there was a considerable body of opinion that deserving Latin American writers had been ignored. The choice of Gabriela Mistral (Chile) in 1945 did not stop such criticism. However, starting in 1967 with Miguel Asturias, the academy selected four Latin Americans in 24 years: Asturias (Guatemala, 1967), Pablo Neruda (Chile, 1971), Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Columbia, 1982), and Octavio Paz (Mexico, 1990) (and West Indian/Caribbean author Derek Walcott in 1992).

However, the bigger problem was not confined to the exclusion of Latin American writers. Non-Euro-Americans were being almost completely ignored. In 1913 the Academy showed a (for then) rare and liberal understanding of literature by giving the prize to Rabindranath Tagore of India; however, as explained before, he was awarded primarily for his works which had been translated into English.

After 1913, the Academy got down to the usual business of most of European letters: ignoring non-Euro-American cultures. In 1966 the Academy broke slightly with this tradition and gave the prize to Shmuel Yosef Agnon of Israel, a Hasidic Jew; but this was no more than a briefly blazed trail still close to the circled wagons of traditional European literature. Not until 1968 did the Academy begin moving further afield: in that year Kawabata of Japan won, then in 1986 the award went to Soyinka of Nigeria, in 1990 to Mahfouz of Egypt, in 1992 to West Indian Walcott, and in 1994 to Oe of Japan.

One can argue that Gordimer and Agnon of Israel both are indirectly part of a European heritage, as are all of the North and South American winners. If this is so, then in ninety years of the awards there have been only four winners from a non-European literary tradition, and only two in the last 24 years. Part of the problem is in the perception of what constitutes good literature. As discussed above, the Eurocentric tradition and its supposed superiority have long swayed the Nobel awards—and indeed many assumptions that still exist today in Europe and America about the nature and value of the Western canon. This conservative point of view of great literature was supported in public as recently as 1977 by a member of the Academy, Artur Lundkvist, in *Svenska Dagbladet:*

> The academy is often reproached for thus neglecting the literatures of Asia and Africa and other "remote" parts. But I doubt if there is so far very much to find there. It is a question of literatures that . . . have not achieved that level of development . . . that can make them truly significant. (Espmark 141)

Such comments and such an attitude sound small-minded at best and at worst uneducated and colonialist. The problem such an attitude creates was well exemplified five years ago when an international symposium was held in Lagos, soon after Soyinka's prize in 1986, to celebrate, as the *Times Literary Supplement* put it, "Europe's recognition of that strand of African literature which is written in European languages." The article added that "many participants criticized the Eurocentrism of the Nobel theme," and William Conton, a Sierra Leone novelist, thought of the conference as "a recognition of an African writer, who writes according to the concept of literary excellence of a group of Europeans." The African tradition of literary excellence was nearly completely ignored.

"Significantly," wrote the *Times*, "not one *griot* or towncrier from the oral tradition had been invited; not one representative of African literatures in African languages participated" (Unk 616).

Another example of the Eurocentric point of view exists in the way Chinese literature is considered. John Kwan-Terry described this in his 1989 article "Chinese Literature and the Nobel Prize":

> The problem is that modern Chinese literature goes against almost all the tenets of modernism. It is not a literature that celebrates esthetic or technical excellence or the impassioned but detached contemplation of life; nor is it a literature that believes in the realm of the political and economic power play. It "makes nothing happen" (to use the famous statement that Auden makes in his elegy on Yeats), its power resides rather in analogical sublimations, in a kind of colonizing symbolization extended by the creative imagination . . . , a literature that . . . cannot be read detached from the political and social turmoil of its time. (385)

As Kell Espmark, present chair of the Nobel Committee, put it so concisely in 1986, "How is Western tradition superior to a tradition that includes on the one hand Tang poetry and *The Dream of the Red Pavilion,* and on the other, Firdausi, Rumi, and Hafiz" (141)? And one must not forget that within the European and American countries that are accustomed to winning the Nobel are nonwhites who come from different cultures and traditions. Why have no indigenous representatives of North or South American Indians won? Why have no American or European Orientals won? And most especially, why—until Wolcott and Morrison—have no American or European blacks won?

Even worse in the history of the awards is the implicit sexism which exists in the fact that only nine women have been awarded the prize. Again it is argued in defense of the academy that women have been full-time writers no more so than they have been full-time captains of industry or leaders in science. However, significant numbers of women have been writers, some of them quite brilliant, for many decades now.

Feminist critics earlier in the century may have been somewhat mollified by the fact that from 1926 through 1945, four of fifteen winners were women. Yet since World War Two until recently when Nadine Gordimer was chosen, during a 45-year period only one woman, a German Swede (Nelly Sachs) was selected. So bad is this record that it begs the question of culture and "great literature" from a gender perspective: are female Euro-American authors even less able to produce literature for the great Western canon than are non-Euro-American peoples?

Mimi Reisel Gladstein of the University of Texas at Austin argued in a 1975 paper, "Some Fictional Stereotypes of Women in 20th Century

American Fiction," that there has been implicit sexism even in the awards to men: "The last three American writers to win the Nobel Prize [Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck] represent American male novelists who have been unable either to come to terms with the 'Otherness' of the female or to draw convincing portraits of women." The same could be argued of many other male laureates over the years. In addition, when women do win, they are taken less seriously. Lagerlof, Deledda, Undset, and Sachs are nearly forgotten, and Pearl Buck, though still popular, is considered by many critics one of the worst choices the Academy ever made (Espmark 150; Kostelanetz 32; Osterling 115).

The problem is not one merely of ignoring women per se, but rather perhaps (once again) of defining what is great literature. The work of the nine women who have won suggests tendencies toward fewer fictional devices: Mistral, Sachs, and Szymborska are known primarily for their poetry, Buck and Undset for historical writing, and Lagerlof for travel writing. Morrison has been criticized for her plotting even while garnering praise for the poetic intensity of her fiction.

In addition, many of the women laureates were or are especially committed to some great people-related cause: Morrison with racism against African Americans, Sachs with concentration camps, Gordimer with South African rebellion, Mistral with teaching and diplomacy, Buck with Asian orphans and retarded children, and Undset with religion. The most recent female laureate, Szymborska, is considered a poet of the common people. Typical of praise for women laureates are words like those used by Anders Osterling to describe the writings of Buck: "authenticity, wealth of detail and rare insight" (Osterling 115).

These traits and others, when taken together, begin to have a ring to them which recalls John Kwan-Terry's description above of Chinese literature: "not a literature that celebrates technical excellence" but rather a literature of "analogical sublimations," a "colonizing symbolization" which "makes nothing happen" and which "cannot be read detached from the . . . turmoil of its time" (xx). The problem with the nominations and selections of laureates may be the same one that Carl Jung ascribed to himself and his followers, according to feminist critic Annis Pratt in *Beyond Intellectual Sexism:* "Jung himself, toward the end of his life, admitted that one of the chief problems he and his followers had was a tendency to locate women 'just where man's shadow falls. So that he is only too liable to confuse her with his own shadow'" (248). The Western canon, white and masculine, emphasizes plot, lofty idealism, and a traditional "great style"; often only in its own shadow does it see nonwhite and female literature with values and styles that are different. Yet these different values and styles are not part of the shadow of Western literature but rather a different expression of life. These different expressions

have their own just as valid literary, historical, and esthetic traditions.

Much of the ignoring of noncanonical culture by the Academy is perhaps not so much bad faith as it is a sin of omission. Gradually, however, the Academy is taking steps to correct this. An even greater sin of omission may lie in the amorphous body of nominators throughout the world. Though Academy members can and do nominate, most nominations are received from universities, previous winners, and presidents of literary societies. The Academy has had difficulty getting nominations from countries poorly represented on the winners' list. Espmark remarks that "nominations of Asian authors are not particularly numerous," "in several countries those with the right to propose have neglected to make use of the right," and there is a "defeatism that so often prevents interesting candidates outside the West from even reaching the stage of being proposed" (138). Kawabata, the 1968 laureate from Japan, was in fact nominated and chosen mostly on the basis of non-Japanese evaluations (139).

The lack of women winners possibly also may be more the fault of nominators than of the Swedish Academy. One should note that of the nine women who won the literary prize, three resided in Scandinavia. This would suggest that Academy members—the natural nominators for most of the Scandinavian-language candidates—have been more willing to read, appreciate, and nominate female authors than have professors of literature and philology and presidents of literary societies in other countries.

A second mitigating circumstance is that, however bad the Eurocentrism has been in the past, the Nobel Committee seems to be trying to correct it. The process of correction may have started, in fact, decades ago with the introduction of increasing numbers of Latin American candidates, and this same policy of expansion of the canon gradually may be bearing fruit for nonwhite countries, women, and nonwhite candidates in Euro-American countries.

Roger Ross, the publisher in Brazil of a collection of books about Nobel literature winners, had a conversation in the 1960s or 1970s ("some years ago" before 1983) with Anders Ryberg, secretary of the Nobel committee at that time, on the subject of Latin American and non-Euro-American candidates:

> Mr. Rybert said the academy was aware of the criticism that it had slighted South Americans when awarding the Nobel Prize. Writers who expressed themselves in French, German, English, Russian, or the Scandinavian languages, he explained, had had an edge in the past because these languages were the ones most easily read by the members of the academy. This was no longer true, however, as the Selection Committee regularly commissioned critics to bring the works of authors who wrote in less accessible

> languages to the academy's attention. . . . I remain convinced that the foundation and the academy had, and certainly must still have, an intense interest in Latin American literature—and most likely in Asian and African literature as well. (2)

A 1981 interview with Osten Sjostrand, poet, critic, and another member of the Nobel Committee, suggests that the Academy has continued to improve its receptivity to non-Euro-American cultures:

> We try to pay attention to minority cultures—ethnic groups and minor languages. . . . It is not a process of selecting the world's best writers. We choose writers who we feel are important to literature in languages other than their own. This is the most profound editorial policy of the Nobel committee. (Kostelanetz 32)

Current Committee chair Espmark wrote in 1986 that author Nils-Ake Nilsson discerned the pattern in a 1980 article in *Expressen:* "The academy has followed the line that has been discernible for several years now: the selectors have looked for authors who are less well-known, who are not already the objects of heavy promotion and advertising. . . . Without a doubt they have come upon a treasure" (Espmark 95). Espmark also adds that Committee member Lars Gyllensten said in an interview in Titel in 1984 that "attention to non-European writers is gradually increasing in the academy; attempts are being made 'to achieve a global distribution'" (Espmark 132).

It would seem, then, that in our contemporary era, the Nobel Committee and the Academy are attempting to expand and extend the arena from which the awards are chosen. There is a conscious attempt to look for lesser-known but highly deserving authors whose literature is important to the literature of the world or can become so if given exposure.

Conclusion

Readers may wish to conclude, as does Pribic, that the future will be somewhat better, if not perfect, in the awarding of the prizes:

> Judging by selections in recent years, the future laureates in literature should show more international and cultural diversity. They will represent more literatures outside European traditions. However, controversies will continue, and one will often hear the question: How politically motivated is the presentation of the awards? The convention that the prize be given to older, established writers for their total contribution to literature, although against Alfred Nobel's original will, will also be continued. (xv)

Certainly the awarding of the prize to Morrison in 1993 and Oe in 1994

continues these trends, and an argument can be made that the inclusion of Heaney in 1995 and Szymborska in 1996 represents a nod to less noticed eddies in the pool of European literature.

According to Richard Kostelanetz, "What can be said about the Nobel is that it is a good prize, if not the best. From the beginning it has been a universal prize rather than a purely regional or national one. . . . The record of Nobel selections is credible, even if arguable" (32). According to Hitchens, while the "lofty aims of the Nobel may have been forgotten," the prize's true aims may be more like those of the Booker Prize: "To reward merit, raise the stature of the author in the eyes of the public, and to increase the sale of the books" (1066). According to long-time Nobel Committee member Anders Osterling, "Though in its origin Nobel's prize foundation was the creation of a bourgeois capitalist age, it can . . . continue to promote the cause of international tolerance and good will, and to the achievement of this ideal, literature too can make a real contribution" (130).

Perhaps the best response of all from the Academy to its critics was voiced at the beginning of the great Nobel prize project in 1900 by Director Esaias Tegner:

> The Swedish Academy certainly does not cherish the illusion that even once it may be able to award a prize in such a way as to escape criticism. . . . In the whole world there is no other institution which would not meet the same fate. . . . If there are drawbacks to being a small nation situated on the outskirts of the civilized world, there are also certain advantages. And when it is a question of a responsibility like this, a few of them become clearly evident. A person living on the border of a province is better able to decide which peaks inside it are the highest than an observer standing amidst the mountains themselves. (Osterling 84)

It is worth noting once more, too, that the quality of the Academy's choices is partly dependent upon the quality of the nominations that it receives. This is true not only of nominations from other countries but also, especially for us, of nominations of female and nonwhite authors from our own country. As amended in 1949, the statutes specify that professors of literature and of philology at universities and university colleges may make nominations. (The address for information about how to do this is the Nobel Committee of the Swedish Academy, Kallargrand 4, S-111 29 Stockholm, Sweden.)

The academy and the body of nominators are improving the cultural and gender distribution of the prize, and by doing so are both reflecting and helping to develop a newer literary canon that is less culturally

biased and more inclusive of nonwhite and feminist literary values. Many countries and cultures remain underrepresented, in spite of having long and respected literary traditions. However, the prize does seem to be an increasingly international award representative of a greater variety of people and of an improved canon.

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