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BY JEFFREY MEYERS

The Nobel, the longest-running literary prize, has the greatest *éclat.* It has a dignified royal ceremony in Stockholm on December 10 (the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death), grants the largest amount of money ($1.3 million last year), and generates the most publicity for the winner. But the Swedish Academy—often blind to real distinction and unduly influenced by geography and politics, race and gender—has frequently awarded it to mediocrities. Most of the greatest authors of the twentieth century have not won the prize. If we look at how decisions are made, we can see why the losers are often more impressive than the winners.

The strange careers of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, both desperately poor, illuminate the central paradox of the prize. In 1925, just before Lewis unleashed his six provocative works of the late 1920s, he jokingly asked Pound, who had forsaken France for Mussolini's Italy and the crackpot economic theories of Major Douglas, "Could you get me the Nobel Prize next year? Or do you want it for yourself?" Both inveterate outsiders were destined to remain virtually excluded from public recognition and honors, while their close friend Tom Eliot received both the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize in 1948. When Lewis heard of Eliot's award, he noted the irony of their lives and told Pound, who'd been charged with treason, declared insane, and confined to St. Elizabeth's hospital in Washington, "You might almost have contrived this climax to your respective careers: yours so Villonesque and Eliot's super-Tennyson."

The money for the prize was donated by Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, whose testament decreed that it should be given to the

author who produced "the most outstanding work of an idealist tendency." Nobel's equation of idealism and literary merit has bedeviled the choices from the start and frequently led to the selection of the monumental and the banal. The left-wing bias (except toward Graham Greene, who was personally disliked by an influential member of the committee) increased the number of dud choices and eliminated several great writers. Jorge Luis Borges, for example, who praised the Argentine junta and befriended General Pinochet, was immediately disqualified.

About thirty candidates are seriously considered by the eighteen members of the Swedish Academy, and the winner is chosen in mid-October. Members of the Swedish, French, and Spanish Academies; fellows of other humanistic institutions and societies; and "teachers of aesthetics, literature, and history at university colleges" may nominate candidates, but few American professors exercise this right.

Nobel wanted to give the winners complete financial independence so they could devote themselves entirely to their work, but almost all the writers were well off by the time they won the award. Only ten of them—Rudyard Kipling (the youngest), Maurice Maeterlinck, Romain Rolland, Sigrid Unset, Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O'Neill, Pearl Buck, Albert Camus, Joseph Brodsky, and Seamus Heaney—won the prize while they were still in their forties. The academy, which has become increasingly conservative about age, prefers to give the award to moribund writers like Erik Karlfeldt, John Galsworthy, Vicente Aleixandre, Jaroslav Seifert, and Harold Pinter. It's clearly advantageous to have a terminal illness.

The first Nobel Prize was awarded in 1901. The subsequent 103 winners (there were four double prizes and seven war years without an award) from thirty-eight countries can be roughly divided into four categories: I. 17 international reputations; II. 26 serious and important (see tables I and II); III. 44 third-rank and often middle brow; IV. 16 obscure, unreadable, and forgotten.

This division reveals that only 17 of the 103 winners (16.5 percent) are now recognized as great authors while 60 percent are no longer read. The most unfortunate awards went to the low-brow Pearl Buck (Ernest Hemingway, reporting from China, spoke of "the bad earth"), who beat out Margaret Mitchell; the dreary plagiarist Mikhail Sholokhov; and the performance artist Dario Fo, a bold but foolish choice. The Swedes have also made the right decision for the wrong reasons. Hemingway's worst book, *The Old Man and the Sea,* was

specifically cited; Thomas Mann's best novel, *The Magic Mountain,* was not.

When the Nobel Prize was first awarded, many of the greatest writers of the nineteenth century were still alive. Instead of choosing Tolstoy or Chekhov, Meredith or Swinburne, Hardy or Zola, Twain or James, or even the sacred monsters of the frozen north, Ibsen or Strindberg (none of whom ever won the prize), the academy immediately revealed its limitations by a controversial award to Sully Prudhomme. World opinion protested against the neglect of Tolstoy, and forty-two Swedish authors signed a tribute to his genius. The despotic disposition of Carl Wirsén, the first chairman of the Academy, who died in 1912, was largely responsible for the inexpiable sins of the early years. He accused Tolstoy of "narrow-minded hostility to all forms of civilization," declared that "Hardy's deep pessimism and inexorable fatalism were not to be reconciled to the spirit of the Nobel Prize," was violently opposed to Ibsen, who'd attacked the suffocating bourgeois values embodied in the academy, and hated Strindberg, who'd satirized him in *The New Kingdom* (1882).

During the next five years the prize (including a double award in 1904) went to the historian Theodor Mommsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, Frédéric Mistral, José Echegaray, Henryk Sinkiewicz, and Giosué Carducci. The early winners were all establishment figures. Prudhomme, Anatole France, Henri Bergson, Echegaray, Verner von Heidenstam, and Karlfeldt were members of the French, Spanish, and Swedish Academies (the Swedes have been exceptionally generous to their own countrymen). Mommsen, Carducci, and Rudolf Eucken had university chairs at Berlin, Bologna, and Jena. Kipling, in 1907, was the first distinguished writer to win the prize.

The national distribution is also strangely unbalanced. France and the United States lead with twelve and ten awards, followed by Germany with eight; Sweden, Italy, and Britain with six; Spain and the Soviet Union with five; Poland and Ireland with four; Norway and Denmark with three; Chile, Greece, Israel, Japan, and South Africa with two. It's clear that British authors have been seriously neglected, Poles and Scandinavians (with thirteen) grossly inflated. Austria (including Czech-born, German-language writers of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) had the greatest grievance. None of its major writers—Rainer Maria Rilke, Robert Musil, Franz Kafka, and Hermann Broch, as well as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Karl Kraus, Stefan Zweig, and Georg Trakl—has ever won the award, which finally, and

absurdly, went to Elfriede Jelinek in 2004.

In addition to the ten nineteenth-century masters and the four best Austrian writers, there are forty-five immensely distinguished authors who did *not* win the prize. Eighteen authors (Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, E. M. Forster, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, George Orwell, Evelyn Waugh, and W. H. Auden; Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Pound; Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, and André Malraux; Anna Akhmatova and Vladimir Nabokov) were just as good as the seventeen winners with the greatest reputations (Table I). And twenty-seven writers (H. G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, Robert Graves, Arthur Koestler, Olivia Manning, Iris Murdoch, and Ted Hughes; Scott Fitzgerald, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Robert Lowell; Giovanni Verga, Italo Svevo, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, and Primo Levi; Osip Mandelstam and Isaak Babel; Bertolt Brecht and Paul Celan; Federico García Lorca and Borges; Constantine Cavafy and Nikos Kazantzakis; Fernando Pessoa and Yukio Mishima) were as good as the twenty-six winners in Table II. Minor masters like Katherine Mansfield, J. R. Ackerley, Elizabeth Bishop, John Betjeman, J. F. Powers, and Philip Larkin have never been seriously considered. In short, forty-three major writers won the prize and eighty-six did not.

Though voting records are not kept and the choices of the academy are as secret as those of the Vatican (the literary world eagerly waits for the puff of smoke from the log-burning Jotul stove), it's possible to explain the selection process. Unlike the awards in science, which can be evaluated more objectively, the prize for literature is based on subjective and often biased judgments. Like any academy composed of timorous and traditional members, the Swedes—hostile to innovation and insensitive to genius—tend to select the old and safe, the bland and boring, the well-established and conservative writers.

The Swedes have made embarrassing apologias for their disastrous choices. Anders Österling, former chairman of the Nobel committee—conveniently forgetting the awards to Echegaray, Eucken, Paul Heyse, Carl Spitteler, Wladyslaw Reymont, and all the dismal Swedes—unconvincingly claimed that "mistakes have been comparatively few, and no truly unworthy candidate has been crowned." Kjell Espmark, who's been chairman since 1988, feebly maintained in *The Nobel Prize in Literature: A Study of the Criteria behind the Choices* (1986) that many of the greatest authors were not officially nominated, not translated into Western languages, not idealistic, not politically ac-

ceptable; that they died young or were too famous, declined early or developed too late, or were too negative, experimental, and difficult for middle-brow readers.

When I challenged Espmark at a literary festival in Toronto in October 2000, he added a few more excuses. He maintained that three Scandinavians had been selected during World War I "when there was no prize for belligerents"—though Romain Rolland had won it in 1915; that Sinclair Lewis, John Galsworthy, and Pearl Buck had won "during the era of popular social realism in the 1930s"—though far better authors had written in this mode; that Proust "published only the early volumes in his lifetime"—though the first three books were masterpieces and he'd won the prestigious Prix Goncourt in 1920; that Cavafy and Kafka's works "were mainly posthumous" —though their genius was clear from the start.

Like most literary prizes—in which a blackball immediately eliminates a controversial contender and a double prize indicates a compromise—the Nobel most frequently goes to the consensus candidate or to the choice of the most adamant judge. Swedish translators effectively lobby for their own authors. Writers in minor languages enhance their reputations and become candidates for the prize if sponsored by major writers. Previous winners (or influential Swedes) have been instrumental in obtaining the prize for their friends. Mann helped Hermann Hesse, Martin du Gard helped André Gide, Dag Hammarskjöld helped Saint-John Perse, Alexander Solzhenitsyn (with great moral as well as literary authority) helped Heinrich Böll, Saul Bellow had translated Isaac Singer, Brodsky helped Derek Walcott (who had a play on in Stockholm the year he won), Czeslaw Milosz helped Wislawa Szymborska.

Authors who write in or have been translated into English—today's universal language—have the best chance. Eleven of the seventeen best winners and nineteen of the twelve best losers wrote in English. Since the most original and idiosyncratic writers lose most in translation, novelists have won more frequently than poets. Though some authors wrote in several genres, the 103 winners can be divided into sixty novelists, twenty-six poets, twelve playwrights, three philosophers (Eucken, Bergson, and Bertrand Russell), and two historians (Mommsen and Winston Churchill).

The criminals and crazies, the rebels and extremists in ideas and behavior (Pound, Henry Miller, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Brecht, Malcolm Lowry, Jean Genet, Dylan Thomas, John Berryman, and Allen

Ginsberg), whose very presence might have disrupted the solemn ceremony, had absolutely no hope of winning. The academy consistently but unwisely chose the weaker candidate: Jacinto Benavente, but not Lorca; Galsworthy, not Conrad; Odysseus Elytis, not Cavafy; Böll, not Günter Grass (formerly in Himmler's Waffen SS); William Golding, not Iris Murdoch; Seifert, not Milan Kundera; Nadine Gordimer, not Doris Lessing (who'd ruined her chances by lapsing into science fiction); Toni Morrison, not Philip Roth; Kenziburo Oe (who wrote about his disabled child), not Mishima; Fo, not Arthur Miller; Pinter (an imitator of Samuel Beckett, but critic of American imperialism), not Tom Stoppard. The only perceptive choices were Gabriel García Márquez over Mario Vargas Llosa and Octavio Paz over Carlos Fuentes.

There have been a few commendable awards. Gide, whose defense of homosexuality in *Corydon* ((1911) had kept him out of the French Academy, won in 1947. The 1969 citation ignored Beckett's disturbing vision and garbage-canned characters, which were more pessimistic and fatalistic than Hardy's, and claimed (with typical flatulence) that in his works "the destiny of modern man acquires its elevation." The Swedes have also aroused the wrath of their powerful neighbor by giving the prize to Boris Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn, who had criticized and defied the Soviet Union.

Despite the Academy's disclaimer, politics often influenced the awards, and it was no accident that Perse, Seferis, and Pablo Neruda were diplomats. William Butler Yeats won the prize two years after Ireland became independent. The only Finn, Frans Eemil Silanpää, won in 1939, the year his country was invaded by Russia. Sweden—which remained neutral during World War II, sold iron ore to Germany, and allowed armed Nazi troops to pass through their country while invading Finland in 1941—worked off some of its guilt by giving the 1944 prize to a Dane, Johannes Jensen, whose country was occupied by the Germans. Then Hesse, a German author who compromised with the Nazis and whose dubious moral position was analogous to Sweden's, won the first postwar prize. Bellow won in America's bicentennial year.

Graham Greene was considered too friendly with left-wing dictators like Fidel Castro and Omar Torrijos. Malraux (who, Camus felt, should have won the prize in 1957) was considered too right-wing. His biographer Jean Lacouture explained that "the Nobel Prize for Literature was withheld from him because he was for so long a minister

in a [Gaullist] government regarded as semi-fascist by a few puritan professors of the Stockholm jury."

Auden said that time would pardon Kipling and Claudel, pardon them for writing well, but Auden himself was not pardoned. In 1964 he was supported by Hammarskjöld and had an excellent chance to win. But the Swedes disliked his introduction to Hammarskjöld's *Markings* (1964), which referred to the author's "exceptionally aggressive super-ego," and Auden was told that he would have to delete this phrase if he wished to remain in favor. But he printed his introduction without changing a word, remarking philosophically and without bitterness, "Well, there goes the Nobel Prize."

When an African was due for the award in 1986, tribal politics influenced the decision. It was given to Wole Soyinka, from the dominant Yoruba tribe of Nigeria, who'd been imprisoned for political reasons and sentenced to death, instead of to the better writer, Chinua Achebe, a minority Ibo who'd supported Biafran independence during the civil war.

Brodsky, an unusual choice in 1987, exemplified the extra-literary trend. The forty-seven-year-old Russian-Jewish poet was arrested in 1964 and exiled from the Soviet Union in 1972. He was sponsored by Auden and Lowell when he arrived in the West, and lived mainly in New York. He was not as well known as his compatriots and rivals, Andrei Voznesensky and Yevgeny Yevtushenko; and he had not equaled the achievements of his closest rivals, Octavio Paz and V. S. Naipaul, who later won the prize. Comparing Brodsky to the four previous Russian winners shows that he was completely unlike the party hack Sholokhov, but was an exile like Ivan Bunin, a critic of the regime like Boris Pasternak, and a political prisoner like Solzhenitsyn. Like several other winners during the previous decade—Aleixandre, Elytis, Seifert, Claude Simon, and Soyinka—he was earnest but uninspiring. In political terms, the award was a criticism of Russia, an honor for America, and a recognition of all writers in exile.

Though Greene and Malraux were politically unacceptable, the Swedes, overriding their customary caution, gave the prize to Luigi Pirandello, who was a Fascist; to Knut Hamsun, who later collaborated with the Nazis during World War II; and to the mindless defenders of Stalin—Halldór Laxness and Miguel Angel Asturias—as well as to the fanatical Communists—Sholokhov, Neruda, and Jelinek (she remained a member of the Communist Party until 1992). These writers seemed unaware of Stalin's monstrous crimes: the forcible collec-

tivization of the kulaks, the Soviet Purge trials, the Hitler-Stalin pact, the betrayal of the Warsaw rising, the millions of innocent prisoners in the Gulag Archipelago, the postwar occupation of eastern Europe, and the brutal invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

The Academy, instinctively afraid of making premature judgments, often awarded the prize to writers long after their best work had been completed. They gave it to William Faulkner and to Hemingway, who'd done their finest writing in the 1920s and 1930s, as they were composing or had just completed their most bogus and bathetic books: *A Fable* (1954) and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). Hemingway, superstitious about "the Swedish thing," felt it usually put an end to a writer's career. Eliot, who believed it was more an epitaph than an honor, exclaimed, "The Nobel is a ticket to one's funeral. No one has ever done anything after he got it." Camus, and many other writers, felt guilty about receiving the award during a period of sterility, and unworthy when subjected to the overwhelming publicity and flattery. Naipaul, who won it in 2001, has not published a major work since 1992, and is just as whinging and miserable now as he was before he won the prize. Pinter said that after the Nobel he would write no more plays.

The Academy's insistence on "idealism" has sometimes led it to select writers like Golding (a contentious choice), who strain for profundity and moral uplift. Faulkner also succumbed to this temptation in his pompous and self-parodic acceptance speech: "when the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, even then there will still be one more sound: that of [man's] puny inexhaustible voice, still talking."

By contrast, Hemingway's speech, which diagnosed the dangers of literary life even as he reaped its rewards, was a sad acknowledgment of solitude, uncertainty, and personal failure: "Writing, at its best, is a lonely life. Organizations for writers palliate the writer's loneliness but I doubt if they improve his writing. He grows in public stature as he sheds his loneliness and often his work deteriorates. For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day."

Only two homosexuals (Gide and Patrick White), four Asians, and ten women have won the prize. In November 1980 the influential Academy member Artur Lundkvist—speaking of the literature of Asia, Africa, and other "remote" parts of the world—asserted, "I

doubt if there is very much to find there." His statement was roundly condemned and the Swedes, suddenly politically correct, adopted a policy of affirmative action. During the next eight years they eagerly handed the prize to Soyinka, Naguib Mafouz, Walcott, and Morrison.

There's now a shameful fissure between the best living writers and those most likely to win. Just as Kipling was the only great writer to win between 1901 and 1922, so Seamus Heaney and Naipaul were the only great writers so rewarded between 1977 and 2006. Today the outstanding Americans are Norman Mailer (a wild card), William Styron, and Philip Roth. But the academy in its wisdom will probably give it to the slick but vacuous John Updike or the prolix and gimmicky Joyce Carol Oates.

Liberal political views, especially outspoken hostility to repressive governments and years spent in prison, have in the last twenty years become more important than literary merit. Ariel Dorfman (a Chilean exile in America), Milan Kundera (a Czech exile in Paris), Vaclev Havel (imprisoned for political offenses, but later the president of Czechoslovakia), and Salman Rushdie (an Indian living in England and sentenced to death by an Iranian ayatollah) are worthy but rather dull contenders.

Geographical origins are also of paramount importance. Like the college admission boards, who favor bright students from North Dakota or Wyoming, the Academy is strongly influenced by regional distribution and likes to spread the wealth among smaller countries. A mediocre writer from a remote nation is more likely to be chosen. Since 1998 the prize has gone for the first time to Portugal, China, Trinidad, Hungary, Austria, and Turkey. Naipaul, a fine writer but prickly personality, was scarcely idealistic, but he touched three bases. He was an Indian, which pleased the Asians, was born in Trinidad, which satisfied Caribbean interests, and lived in England, which made him an honorary European.

Orhan Pamuk of Turkey, who won the prize in 2006, touched all the right bases. His serious novels (one of which was made into a film) were widely translated and gained an international audience. He is Moslem and comes from an important country that had never won the prize. And, most significantly, he denounced the *fatwa* against Rushdie, dared to mention the Armenian massacres, and opposed government oppression with formidable courage.

Countries which have never been given the prize—including the Netherlands, Romania, Argentina, Pakistan, South Korea, and Indone-

sia—have a good chance of winning with a halfway decent candidate. From the literary, political, and geographical points of view, Adonis of Syria (who'd be a sop to the Arabs), Jorge Amado of Brazil, Margaret Atwood or Alice Munro (though Canadian writers are rarely thrown in jail), and Ismail Kadare of Albania (who recently won the Booker International Prize and is involved with Kosovo, a hot political issue) have a very good chance of winning in 2007.

Tables

I. Kipling, Yeats, Shaw, Mann, O'Neill, Gide, Eliot, Faulkner, Hemingway, Camus, Sartre, Beckett, Solzhenitsyn, Montale, Bellow, Heaney, and Naipaul.

II. F. Mistral, Carducci, Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, Hamsun, Bunin, Pirandello, Hesse, Russell, Lagerkvist, Mauriac, Churchill, Pasternak, Quasimodo, Saint-John Perse, Andric, Seferis, Neruda, Singer, Márquez, Brodsky, Paz, Grass, Coetzee, Pinter, and Pamuk.