
The Swedish Academy and the Nobel Prize in Literature: History and Procedure

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Aigi considers himself a disciple of the Russian avant-garde poets, especially Mandelstam. But although he accepts and respects the avant-garde, Aigi has argued against the destructive attitude which was so characteristic of futurism, for example, and of other forms of modern art. He is convinced that a poet should adopt a "fatherly" attitude toward tradition and not act as its "son." At the same time Aigi is one of the few contemporary poets whose verse is pervaded by a strong Mandelstamian longing for world literature. He has compiled an anthology of twentieth-century French poetry (in the Chuvash language), for example, and some of his own poems take the form of epistles addressed to French poets (Michaux, Char, Bonnefoy).

If I mention that Aigi's poetry has been published in

the West in Russian as well as in other languages, that he has also been translated and published in Eastern Europe (Polish, Czech, numerous translations in Yugoslavia) and that there is a growing interest for all these poets abroad, then we could draw the conclusion that there is a two-way communication going on between Russian underground literature and contemporary literature written elsewhere. This is occurring not only through the mediation of poets not living in their homeland today—Brodsky, Natalia Gorbanevskaya, Dimitry Bobishev, Konstantin Kuzminsky, Eduard Limonov, to name a few—but also thanks to the uncompromising work of those who continue writing in the literary underground of their own country.

Ohio State University

The Swedish Academy and the Nobel Prize in Literature: History and Procedure

By WILLIAM RIGGAN In presenting separate essays on the ten literary members among "The Eighteen" of the Swedish Academy, the Spring 1981 issue of *WLT* (55:2, pp. 197–256) was an attempt to introduce "The Swedish Writers Behind the Nobel Prize" as the ten prominent, engaging and highly individualistic authors that they are, in contrast to the occasional public image of them abroad as a monolithic group of aged men given to "musing the obscure"¹ in their annual Nobel selections. The criticism which these yearly choices call forth—whether of a literary, a journalistic or an ideological nature—often betrays a comparable misapprehension of the way in which the Academy approaches the task and reaches its decisions. Critics outraged at the failure to honor Tolstoy with the first Nobel Prize in 1901, for example, neglected to note that the great Russian novelist had not been formally nominated by any outside individual or group and thus could not even be considered by the Academy under the statutes it had formulated for selecting the prizewinner (*NMP*, 91);² and charges of political opportunism in the 1980 choice of Polish poet and novelist Czesław Miłosz during a well-publicized labor crisis in Gdańsk evidently were prompted by a confusion of the *announcement* of the prize with the lengthy *deliberations* which had begun months if not years earlier and had, for all practical purposes, been concluded before the strikes became a daily page-one item. As a complement to the Spring issue's essays on

ten of the Academicians, then, the following descriptive history may serve to clarify, at least in some measure, the Swedish Academy's work in choosing the recipients of the world's most well-known and remunerative literary award.

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In an 1893 will Alfred Nobel included no specific bequest in regard to literature, making only general reference to rewards "for the most important and original discoveries or the most striking advances in the wide sphere of knowledge or on the path of human progress" and therefore evidently wishing to aid the exact sciences first and foremost (*NMP*, 85). The final will of November 1895, however, stipulated that one of five annual awards for "those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind" was to be given to "the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an ideal tendency"³ and that this prize be distributed by "the Academy in Stockholm." Nobel's wish to promote the cause of letters, writes Academy member Anders Österling,

. . . was inspired, first and last, by his own interest in literature, which had been developed in his earliest youth and was later stimulated by his continued language studies. He not only read but mastered five languages, including Russian; his poems in English, written in his late teens and still preserved, show an astonishing mastery of poetic diction and an unmistakably poetic instinct.

Throughout his life, Alfred Nobel gave serious attention to literature and, as far as his absorbing and hectic existence permitted it, kept in touch with the literary developments of his time. In regard to his tastes, it is also known that he preferred works of an ideal tendency and consequently strongly disapproved of the contemporary naturalism represented, for example, by Zola. . . . As a reader of literature, he looked for the living core; the ideas expressed interested him more than the forms.

Consequently, it was not by chance that he expressly stipulated that "an ideal tendency" was an essential qualification of literary works to be judged for the prize, even though the expression was vague and has caused endless arguments. What he really meant by this term was probably works of a humanitarian and constructive character, which, like scientific discoveries, could be regarded as of benefit to mankind. (*NMP*, 85–86)

The Svenska Akademien itself was founded in 1786, under the reign of King Gustavus III. Although based on the model of the Académie Française, the Swedish Academy is composed of only eighteen members instead of the former's forty—reputedly because Gustavus preferred the resonant sound of *En av De Aderton* (One of The Eighteen) to that of all other possible numbers, particularly the pinched nasal tones of *En av De Fyrtio* (One of The Forty). The Academy's principal duties were originally the promotion and preservation of Swedish language, literature, history and culture; since 1893 it has also published and periodically updated the *Svenska Akademien ordbok* (Dictionary of the Swedish Academy). The organization awards numerous grants and scholarships to individuals, to journals and to groups, with the total annual amount allocated for such awards, philological work, magazine publication and research roughly corresponding to that of three Nobel Prizes. Funds for these programs "are derived chiefly from an old newspaper monopoly and from donations which the Academy administers," writes current Permanent Secretary of the Academy Lars Gyllensten (*NPL*, 5).⁴ The Swedish Academy also participates with the Music Academy and the Art Academy in the publication of *Artes*, a bimonthly journal devoted to literature and the arts. The journal is not an official organ of the three organizations, but the articles and features published there do represent their various areas of interest. Swedish Academy member Östen Sjöstrand is the Editor, and the Editorial Board includes his fellow authors Lars Gyllensten and Artur Lundkvist as well as essayist and art critic Ulf Linde.

Members of the Academy, who are elected by the group itself for life and occupy specific "chairs" within the organization, are drawn "from Swedish cultural life and the humanities"; approximately half are themselves writers, the others being elected on the basis of their "literary leanings and expert knowledge of the Academy's various spheres of responsibility," Gyllensten continues. The organization "is not subordinate to any state or other authority. The governing body consists of a Director (chairman) and a Chancellor (vice chairman), who are elected for six months at a time,

and of a Secretary, who usually remains until the age of 70—all of them members of the Academy. The Academy meets weekly and conducts its business in its own premises on the upper floor of the Stock Exchange (from the 18th century) in the old part of Stockholm" (*NPL*, 5).

Within a month of Nobel's death on 10 December 1896 the Swedish Academy was informed of the task entrusted to it by the magnate's will. There was evidently considerable hesitation and even reluctance among the members to assume this new responsibility, which some felt would so increase the Academy's workload as to force that body to neglect its traditional duties. That a majority of the Academicians did in fact ultimately vote in favor of acceptance was doubtless due to the persuasive force of the group's Permanent Secretary, Carl David af Wirsén, who argued:

If the Swedish Academy refuses to assume this responsibility, the whole donation will be forfeited as far as literary awards are concerned, and by that very act the leading men of letters throughout Europe will be deprived of the opportunity to enjoy the financial rewards and the exceptional recognition for their long and brilliant literary careers which Nobel had in mind. A storm will blow up, a storm of indignation. The Academy's responsibility is great; if it definitely rejects the task, it will suffer sharp reproaches; in these reproaches may join future generations of our eighteen members who are to succeed us and who may find it strange that for reasons of personal convenience the members of today deliberately declined an influential role in the world of letters. The task is said to be foreign to the true purposes of the Academy. The work will, no doubt, be both new and arduous, but it can hardly be called foreign since it is of a literary character. A body that is to judge the literature of its own country cannot afford to be ignorant of the very best produced abroad; the projected prizes are to be given to the best living writers anywhere, and, consequently, as a rule, to the very men whose work ought to be familiar to the Academy members anyway. (*NMP*, 91)

To administer the huge fortune made available from the Nobel estate for the five prizes and to coordinate the work involved in the judging and presentation of the awards—though exercising no influence whatsoever on the prize deliberations and decisions themselves—the *Nobel Foundation* was established in early 1897. The Foundation is headed by an Executive Director and is managed by a Board of Directors whose members are elected by the several prize-awarding institutions,⁵ to which they are responsible; the Executive Director is chosen by the Board, but the Chairman and Deputy Chairman of the Board are appointed directly by the Swedish government (*NPL*, 2). As of this writing (March 1981) the Chairman is Sune Bergström, a physician and professor at the Caroline Medico-Surgical Institute in Stockholm, and

Ed. Note: We would like to thank the Swedish Academy's Permanent Secretary Lars Gyllensten for taking the time to read over this essay and check its accuracy prior to publication. His comments and corrections were most helpful in clarifying several points left unclear in the available published materials on the Prize procedures.

the Executive Director is Stig Ramel, a Doctor of Law; the other Board members are bank director Tore Browaldh (Deputy Chairman), professor Carl Gustaf Bernhard (Permanent Secretary of the Royal Academy of Sciences), bank director Lars-Erik Thunholm, and medical professor and novelist Lars Gyllensten (as noted above, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy).⁶ "In the course of the years," Gyllensten writes,

. . . the Foundation has received a number of donations and grants from other quarters and has engaged in various scientific and cultural projects in line with the principal aims of the Nobel Prizes but in addition to the actual prize work. The international conferences known as the Nobel Symposia are one example. The Nobel Foundation acts as arranger and host at the ceremonies and festivities in connection with the presentation of the prizes, which takes place on 10 December, the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death. The Foundation has nothing to do with the actual prize decisions, the choice of candidates, the practical work of assessment etc. All this is entirely in the hands of the prize-awarding bodies. . . . The ambition in administering the donation has been, and is, to maintain as far as possible the real value of the fortune and of the revenue (and thereby also of the prizes), and to place sufficient financial means at the disposal of the prize-awarding institutions for their increasingly widespread and expensive work of investigation. In 1901 . . . a prize was worth 150,800 kronor. In 1978 each prize amounted to 725,000 kronor [over \$180,000]. (*NPL*, 2–3)

Upon the establishment of the Nobel Foundation, the prize-awarding institutions began drawing up formal statutes and regulations detailing the procedures by which they would carry out the work of assessment and selection in their respective areas. The Swedish Academy's final proposals (submitted in the spring of 1900) placed particular stress on the need for strict and specific rules regarding the right to nominate candidates for the prize. Österling explains:

In the case of the Swedish Academy the problem was all the more complicated as there were no other institutions of the same type anywhere in the world, except the French and Spanish academies. It would obviously have been unfair to limit the nominating rights to these two bodies, and it would have been equally inappropriate to grant such rights to any institution as a body, since the Academy's freedom of action might thereby be hampered by overwhelming external pressure. It was therefore proposed that the right to nominate candidates should be granted to the individual members of such institutions and not to the institutions themselves. The Academy felt, it was further stated, that by distributing the nomination rights so widely, it had tried to make sure that proposals could be made by duly qualified persons in all parts of the world and that no domestic or foreign literary organization of any importance should have cause to complain that the rights and privileges of its members had been slighted. The proposed text for the special statute was formulated as follows: "The right to nominate candidates for the Prize in Literature is granted to members of the Swedish Academy; and of the French and Spanish Academies which are similar to it in character and objectives; to members of the

humanistic sections of other academies, as well as to members of the humanistic institutions and societies as enjoy the same rank as academies, and to university professors of aesthetics, literature, and history." (*NMP*, 91–92)

The statute was altered in 1949 to broaden the range of groups regarded as competent to make nominations. The field now includes, according to Gyllensten, "members of the Swedish Academy and of other academies, institutions and societies similar to it in membership and aims; professors of languages or in the history of literature at universities and university colleges;⁷ Nobel laureates in literature; and presidents of authors' organizations which are representative of the literary activities of their respective countries" (*NPL*, 7). Detailing the actual nomination procedure, Gyllensten continues:

In order for anyone to be considered for a Nobel Prize, he or she must be proposed as a candidate for the prize by someone qualified to make such a proposal. . . . Nominations must be sent in writing to the Swedish Academy or its Nobel Committee before the end of January of the year in which the award is made. The reason for a nomination should be stated, but detailed analysis is not necessary. A person who has once been proposed for a Nobel Prize is not automatically regarded as a candidate in following years but can be proposed again. Also, the Nobel Committee or the Academy can, if it sees fit, reconsider a previously proposed name, if this is not among the nominations from outside. Applications to receive a prize are disregarded.

In order to stimulate nomination, the Nobel Committee during the autumn sends out reminders or invitations to nearly 600 persons within the groups having the right to nominate candidates. The Committee endeavours to distribute such invitations all over the literary world and to vary the recipients each year. This procedure does not mean that others who are entitled to submit proposals do not have the right to do so—this right holds good even if no special invitation has been received.

The Academy receives between three and four hundred nominations each year before 1 February. Many of the proposers nominate the same candidates, so that the number of suggested prizewinners is much smaller than the number of proposers—of recent years, the number of nominees has usually amounted to 100–150. Of these, only a few are new names which have not been proposed before—about a dozen. It does not occur that a candidate of any literary importance is proposed who is unknown to the Academy or the Nobel Committee. The names of the more important ones are sent in year after year. It is very unusual for anyone who has been proposed for the first time to receive the prize. As regards appraisal of the most qualified candidates, there is a clear consensus of opinion between many of the proposers from different parts of the world. (*NPL*, 7–8)

In setting up a mechanism whereby it might handle the nominations most efficiently, the Swedish Academy established, prior to the very first prize, a *Nobel Committee*, which consists of five regular members plus one or more co-opted members appointed by the Academy. (The Committee presently includes Johannes Edfelt, Karl Ragnar Gierow, Lars Gyllen-

sten, Artur Lundkvist and Anders Österling, with Östen Sjöstrand as a co-opted member.) Committee members are elected for three-year terms, receiving a yearly honorarium of approximately \$1,200 (otherwise the Academicians receive no salary or stipend for their Academy work), and may be reelected without restriction; in fact, Österling has served on the panel continuously since 1921! The Nobel Committee, Gyllensten writes,

. . . is responsible for the adjudication work necessary in dealing with the questions concerning the Nobel Prize in Literature. . . . This work goes on all the time, the whole year round. It is the Committee which gathers in the nominations from outside, supplementing the list if necessary, and which sees to it that the merits of the nominees are scrutinized sufficiently to give the [Academy] a solid basis for its opinion. . . . The Committee is aided in its work by a secretary (the head librarian of the Nobel Library) and a literary scholar engaged as professor at the Academy. [Presently these posts are held by Anders Ryberg and Knut Ahnlund respectively.] . . . The Nobel Committee's adjudication work is of course decisive for the Academy's choice, but this work is done in continual contact with the Academy as a whole and during discussions which can be carried on all the year round in connection with the Academy's regular meetings each week. (NPL, 6, 4)

Assisting the Academy and the Nobel Committee in their work is the Academy's *Nobel Institute*, which consists of the *Nobel Library*, housed in the Academy's premises in the Royal Stock Exchange. The Library maintains a large collection of Swedish fiction, poetry, drama, essays and criticism for use in the Academy's regular activities, and also procures some 1,500–2,000 books annually in modern literature from throughout the world, in accordance with each year's list of Nobel Prize candidates. The total collection numbers approximately 150,000 volumes, making the Nobel Institute "the largest library in the Nordic countries as regards modern literature," adds Gyllensten. Moreover, "it is available to the public and is part of an interurban library service together with other public libraries. It is financed, however, entirely by private means from the Nobel Foundation and the Academy, without state or municipal grants. In addition to the head librarian and his assistants, the previously mentioned literary scholar works at the Academy's Nobel Institute" (NPL, 6–7).

All candidates proposed prior to 1 February by eligible individuals or organizations are placed on the year's list of nominations by the Nobel Committee, which may not exclude anyone so proposed. "This list," explains Gyllensten, "is put before the Academy as a whole during the first days of February. The Academy can then add new names, if necessary supplementing with those which for some reason, perhaps mere chance, have not been included. Nowadays the Academy, as well as the Nobel Committee, is more active in making such nominations than it was in the early days of the prize, when the members thought they should be very restrictive with their own propos-

als" (NPL, 8). All nominees on the supplemented list are appraised by the Academy, but "for one reason or another, many are unthinkable as Nobel laureates—perhaps because their production must be regarded as scholarship without the stipulated literary qualities, perhaps because their work, even if it does belong to literature, is far from having the necessary weight or quality, perhaps because they have obviously been proposed on grounds other than factual or literary ones (in some cases political, provincial, ideological and other motives appear as the decisive ones for the nomination in question)" (NPL, 9). The remaining names are then turned over to the Committee for thorough scrutiny. Gyllensten outlines the procedure at this stage of evaluation as follows:

[The candidates'] works are procured in the original or in translation, if they are not already in the library. In cases where there is a paucity of translations and where candidates write in a language unfamiliar to the Academy's members or the experts, sample translations can be commissioned. With the aid of reference books, magazines, critical or scholarly reviews of literature etc. the Nobel Committee and its assistants familiarize themselves further with the nominees and their position in the literary world. Experts within or outside the Academy, at home and abroad, are commissioned to submit reports. Sometimes such assignments are given to individual writers, sometimes they are extended to include specific language areas or countries and certain literary schools or genres etc. Several investigations are made concerning most of the candidates of any importance and extensive information is collected about them. At the same time, the members of the Committee themselves read as much as they can of the candidates' works in the original or in translation and recommend books for the other members of the Academy to read. (NPL, 9)

Several factors pertaining to Alfred Nobel's will must be considered by the Committee and subsequently by the Academy as a whole in weighing each year's candidates: the nature of "literature," the "work" to be recognized, the "recentness" of that work, its benefit to "mankind" and the "ideal tendency" which it reflects. In 1900 the original Committee decided that "under the term 'literature' shall be comprised, not only belles lettres, but also other writings which, by virtue of their form and method of presentation, possess literary value" (NMP, 93); hence the subsequent selection of such laureates as Henri Bergson (1927), Bertrand Russell (1950) and Sir Winston Churchill (1953), although the Academy has adhered to a more purely belletristic line since Churchill's award. The will's stipulation that the prizewinners must have rendered their noteworthy service "during the preceding year," Österling writes, "is interpreted to mean that 'the awards shall be made for the most recent achievements in the fields of culture referred to in the will, and for older works only if their significance has not become apparent until recently.' The purpose of the new phrasing was, obviously, to clarify in a legally proper way the testamentary requirement which, in most instances, it would have been impossible to inter-

pret in any other way" (*NMP*, 93). Gyllensten reasons:

Literary works in particular often do not acquire their full importance until they are seen as a life's work or parts of a whole, as distinct from more ephemeral lucky shots in the literary market. This is also the background to the fact that many literary laureates receive their prize when they are well up in years and the greatness and creative context of their work is clearly apparent or when their significance to the age in which they live begins to be discerned. The insistence on topicality and on the benefit to mankind implies, however, the condition that what is to be rewarded shall still be a vigorous and fruitful literary creativeness on which the prize and its prestige can be expected to have a stimulating effect. This point of view has explicit support in what is known of Alfred Nobel's intentions with his donation. (*NPL*, 12–13)

The statutory regulation that the prizes be given for *a work* or *a writing* posed no dilemma for the prize-awarding institutions in the sciences and medicine, "but for the Swedish Academy it has been much more difficult to observe," Österling says. "Usually the literary awards have been given for an author's entire production, without specifying any particular work. At times it has been done, however, 'with special reference' to a particular book, as in the case of . . . Ham- sun's *Growth of the Soil*, . . . Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*, and Martin du Gard's *Les Thibault*" (*NMP*, 93). The condition that the prizes benefit "mankind" has been taken at least since World War II as an enjoinder to look beyond the somewhat limited geographic and cultural views of Nobel's day, to adopt a more "universalist" outlook, to take into account what is being offered by civilizations other than those of Scandinavia or Europe or North America, and to honor their outstanding achievements too (*NPL*, 13). Lastly, the will's directive that the prize in literature honor the person who has produced the most outstanding work "of an ideal tendency" has caused much perplexity over the years. Gyllensten explains:

Just what Alfred Nobel intended is not clear. With the knowledge we have of his person and life, and of what he has expressed about his general outlook and aims, the words "of an ideal tendency" have been taken to mean a striving for the good of mankind, for humaneness, common sense, progress and happiness. The fundamental idea has been interpreted as applying to literary achievements with constructive aims. All the same, there have sometimes been violent differences of opinion as to what was intended by "ideal tendency" in the strict sense. When considering the candidates nowadays, this expression is not taken too literally. It is realized that on the whole the serious literature that is worthy of a prize furthers knowledge of man and his condition and endeavors to enrich and improve his life. (*NPL*, 15)

In December 1900 Esaias Tegnér, in his capacity as Director of the Academy, delivered an address which became something of a program declaration regarding the organization's approach to its new duty. He emphasized that the task was one which the Academy did not assume lightly, one which it in fact could not

shirk, since the donor's millions had been given not to the Academy itself but to all mankind as represented by its foremost writers. His fervent hope was that a prize of such magnitude would in any event "have the effect of making a good piece of work known in much wider circles than would otherwise have been the case—and that it would be an excellent piece of work, if not in every instance the best available for a prize, he felt could be taken for granted" (*NMP*, 94). He foresaw the difficulties involved, but pointed up as well the Academy's uniquely favorable position for accepting such a task as that assigned by Alfred Nobel's will.

"The Swedish Academy," [Tegnér] proceeded, "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. Nay, it anticipates with certainty that such criticism will often be merited. But it consoles itself with the assurance that 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. In a different sense, this is also true of us. And in the fact that we are a small nation we have, in a way, a safeguard against partiality which the big nations lack: we shall less often be able to appear as contenders for the prize ourselves." (*NMP*, 94–95)

Once its studies and preliminary discussions are completed—usually by early summer—the Nobel Committee submits to the full Academy a ranked listing of the candidates it deems most deserving of full consideration in the current year, together with information on the nominees' principal works, suitable secondary-source materials and available reports by Committee members and/or outside specialists. The Academy is in no way bound by the Committee's recommendations and may alter or add to the list as it wishes. Upon receiving the Committee's list, the Academy begins its deliberations, which occupy the major portion of the time at the group's weekly meetings until a decision is reached, usually by mid-October (*NPL*, 9–10). All nominations, investigations, deliberations and pollings are secret, and only the final choice is officially made public, at a time fixed by the awarding institution (*NPL*, 4). "In order for the voting within the Academy to be valid," Gyllensten notes, "it is required that at least twelve members shall take part and that a candidate shall receive more than half of the votes. The choice is made by secret ballot in writing. As a rule, all members of the Academy take part in the voting; if one or two cannot be present they send in their ballot papers. Usually the result is apparent after lengthy discussions and scrutiny, so that a large majority, or all, can agree on the prizewinner. No reservations concerning the majority's decision may be expressed, still less made public" (*NPL*, 10).⁸ The awards, moreover, cannot be appealed against. In addition, the following regulations apply:

All prizes may be shared jointly by more than one person (a maximum of three). . . . The literary prize, however, is shared very seldom, as literary achievements rarely show the kind of affinity which often justifies a division of the scientific prizes. . . . A prize can be withheld and awarded the following year. Prizes may only be given to persons, except the peace prize which may also be given to an institution or a society. A deceased person cannot be put on the list of candidates for a prize, but if someone dies after having been chosen a prizewinner and before the prize has been presented, the prize can nevertheless be given. This is the exception, however. Any criteria other than actual merit may not be observed when the decisions are made—in other words, no regard shall be paid to race, sex, nationality etc. (NPL, 4)

Once the final vote has been taken, the Academy notifies the new laureate (usually by telegram or phone), announces the decision publicly and issues a brief citation which is later printed on the Nobel diploma presented to the prizewinner by the Swedish King at the official award ceremonies on 10 December. Responsibility is then passed to the Nobel Foundation for issuing invitations to the recipient and his or her family and for arranging the round of festivities held in conjunction with the presentation ceremonies. The Academy does host a luncheon in honor of the laureate, however, and also sponsors the *Nobel Lecture* that most recipients consent to give, generally on 8 December or at another time shortly before or after the award presentations: "It is a rule for [the Nobel Lecture] to be given by the prizewinners in the other spheres, but not always in the case of the literature prize. If the lecture is not held, the prizewinner writes an essay or an article which the Nobel Foundation issues in its publication *Les Prix Nobel*" (NPL, 10).

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Kipling, Yeats, Shaw, Thomas Mann, Pirandello, O'Neill, Eliot, Faulkner, Pasternak, Seferis, Beckett—like them or not, as you will, they are writers whose fame has endured and who are still read and admired the world over. Many of these were at the time by no means obvious choices for the Nobel Prize in Literature: Faulkner was lionized in France and Sweden and was prominent in the States in 1949 (though success at home had been long and slow in coming, and many of his books were in fact out of print) but enjoyed only a modest reputation in most other countries; and Seferis was only slightly more well known outside Greece in 1963 than was his compatriot Odysseus Elytis in 1979. The Prize focused the reading world's attention on their work, however, and that work has proved itself worthy of the scrutiny. The same is true to varying degrees in the cases of Lagerlöf, Tagore, Hamsun, Undset, Hesse, Lagerkvist, Asturias and Kawabata, and probably will prove so with 1978 laureate I. B. Singer. Meanwhile the fame of, say, Heyse, Sillanpää and Frédéric Mistral has shrunk from international to merely national or regional dimen-

sions in literary history. "At the same time," concludes Österling,

. . . it could be objected that a number of equally significant names are conspicuous by their absence; . . . and it is not to be denied that the history of the Nobel Prize in Literature is also a history of inexpiable sins of omission. But even so, it may perhaps be said that the mistakes have been comparatively few, that no truly unworthy candidate has been crowned, and that, if allowances are made for legitimate criticism, the results have reasonably matched the requirements and difficulties of an almost paradoxical assignment.

Just as there are older prizewinners in whom a younger generation can take only a slight interest, so there are recent winners who, to the older people, would have seemed unthinkable. The coming of new generations, with inevitable changes in literary tastes, must obviously be reflected in the history of the Nobel Prize, and all the more clearly as time goes on. But under any circumstances it would be presumptuous to expect the Nobel Prizes to exercise any kind of guiding influence on the direction of literary progress. This has so far followed its own course, independently of the prizes, and will continue to do so in the future. (NMP, 133)

To point up the unique difficulties in choosing each year's recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature is not to offer any apology for past choices but rather to state what should be readily apparent upon serious reflection. The criteria for assessment here "are necessarily more varied and often, too, more contradictory than in the case of medicine and other natural sciences," writes Gyllensten, himself both a teaching physician and a novelist; and those criteria are also more readily discernible—and therefore disputable—by the layman than are those for the exact sciences.

A literary work has its roots in the traditions and the cultural setting of the age and country in which its author lives. The work reflects this background and acquires its full richness only through this interplay and only in those readers who are, or can put themselves, in sympathy with it. Literary works are more or less bound to the literary environment in which they are created, and the farther away from it one is, the harder it is to do them justice.

The task of awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature involves the obligation of trying to find methods for keeping oneself *au fait* with what is happening in literature all over the world and for appraising it, either on one's own or with the aid of specialists. Finally, the prize awarders must try to familiarize themselves with the works of most value, directly or via translations, and to make a careful assessment of their quality with all the viewpoints conceivably necessary for a reasonable evaluation. It is obvious that no hard and fast criteria for such an appraisal can ever be laid down. One must accept a kind of pragmatical procedure and look to the fundamental idea in Alfred Nobel's will as a whole: it was a matter of encouraging science and literature and of disseminating them in an international perspective for the benefit of mankind, but not of handing out empty status rewards. (NPL, 11)

A given year's laureate may well turn out to be, in time, another Sully-Prudhomme, who received the

very first award in 1901 yet today is all but forgotten even by his French countrymen. But he or she may also be another Pasternak, a Hamsun, a Seferis. Whatever posterity may reveal about a particular prizewinner, the Academicians take their year-round labors seriously, as I hope this outline of their history and procedures will indicate. The annual shots fired by much of the fourth estate at the Academy's choices thus are often as ill-considered as they are unoriginal, a perhaps natural ("the general public naturally does not like to be surprised by names it has never heard of before," *NMP*, 134) though regrettable reaction totally alien to the spirit of the Prize selections. Current fame is not a major criterion. Quality is. The Nobel Prize in Literature is not intended merely to echo and confirm popularity. It may also attempt to point out talent not yet recognized by most of the world's readers and critics. It may educate the many as it celebrates the one.

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¹ In its issue of 3 November 1975 *Time* wrote (p. 95): "In one of his great poems, Wallace Stevens speaks of 'musing the obscure.' That phrase seems to be the unspoken motto of the Swedish Academy. Last week it again passed over such notables as Vladimir Nabokov, Graham Greene and Saul Bellow to award the Nobel Prize in Literature to Eugenio Montale, 79, an Italian poet virtually unknown to the public outside his native land." The view is surprising, to say the least, in light of the same magazine's comments nine years earlier (3 June 1966), when "transatlantic ignorance [was] relieved" by the appearance of Montale's *Selected Poems* in English: "a European writer of enduring importance, indisputably the most profound Italian poet of the 20th century. . . . Like Eliot, he has written very little . . . but that little he has written with iridescent precision." Evidently "times" change.

² Anders Österling, "The Literary Prize," in *Nobel: The Man and His Prizes*, Norman, Ok., University of Oklahoma Press, 1951; second and third revised and enlarged editions were published in New York by Elsevier in 1962 and 1972 respectively. Parenthetically abbreviated as *NMP*.

³ The word used in Nobel's will is *idealisk* (ideal) and not *idealisk* (idealistic), although the latter form is often used in translations of the will such as that which appears in *Nobel: The Man and His Prizes*. As Österling indicates, the term is best understood as expressing a preference for works possessing some positive, constructive purpose, although widely varying interpretations have been offered. Astronomer and mathematician M. G. Mittag-Leffler, for example, a good friend of Nobel, wrote that "he was an anarchist; by *idealisk* he meant anything that comprehends a polemic or critical attitude toward religion, royalty, marriage, or social organization in general" (see Richard Vowles, "Twelve Northern Authors," *BA* 41:1 [1967], p. 22). In any event, writes Lars Gyllensten, "*idealisk* is about as bewildering in Swedish as *ideal* is in English" (letter of 1 April 1981). For consistency, I have changed all references here to read *ideal* and not *idealistic*.

⁴ Lars Gyllensten, *The Nobel Prize in Literature*, Alan Blair, tr., Stockholm, Swedish Academy, 1978. Parenthetically abbreviated as *NPL*.

⁵ In addition to the Swedish Academy, the prize-awarding institutions are the Royal Academy of Sciences (physics and chemistry awards), the Nobel Assembly of the Caroline Medico-Surgical Institute (physiology and medicine) and the Norwegian Nobel Committee (peace). The prize in economics was added in 1969 and is actually sponsored by the Bank of Sweden "in memory of Alfred Nobel"; it is awarded by a special Prize Committee of economists from the Royal Academy of Sciences.

⁶ *Nobel Foundation Directory: 1979-1980*, Stockholm, Nobel Foundation, 1979.

⁷ The *Nobel Foundation Directory* (p. 11) qualifies this category as "professors of languages or in history of literature at universities and university colleges selected by the Swedish Academy" (my stress).

⁸ However, in the three editions of *NMP* Österling does give brief summaries of the Academy members' thinking and a hint of the course which the deliberations followed in many of the Nobel selections through 1970.

The 1980 Nobel Lecture

By CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ My presence here, on this
tribune, should be an
argument for all those who
praise life's God-given, marvelously complex unpredictable-
ability. In my school years I used to read volumes
of a series then published in Warsaw—"The Library of
the Nobel Laureates." I remember the shape of the
letters and the color of the paper. I imagined then that
Nobel laureates were writers, namely persons who
write thick works in prose, and even when I learned
that there were also poets among them, for a long time
I could not get rid of that notion. And certainly when,
in 1930, I published my first poems in our university
review, "Alma Mater Vilnensis," I did not aspire to the
title of a writer. Also much later, by choosing solitude

and giving myself to a strange occupation—that is, to
writing poems in Polish while living in France or
America—I tried to maintain a certain ideal image of a
poet, who, if he wants fame, wants to be famous only in
the village or the town of his birth.

One of the Nobel laureates whom I read in child-
hood influenced to a large extent, I believe, my notions
of poetry. That was Selma Lagerlöf. Her *Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, a book I loved, places
the hero in a double role. He is the one who flies above
the earth and looks at it *from above* but at the same
time sees it in every detail. This double vision may be a
metaphor of the poet's vocation. I found a similar
metaphor in a Latin ode of a seventeenth-century
poet, Maciej Sarbiewski, who was once known all over