The Nobel Prize in Literature – a New Century

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Svenska Akademien

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ISBN 978-91-8020-766-9
Published by Svenska Akademien Stockholm 2021

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BACKGROUND

In the course of the first two decades of the 21st century the character of The Nobel Prize in Literature has been partly modified. The concept of "witness literature" becomes important but the field on the whole has been extended and new values have appeared.

The first century of the prize had already seen several, sometimes spectacular, changes. Alfred Nobel's wish that the Literature Prize should go to the most remarkable work "in an ideal direction" initially received a strongly conservative interpretation, which in time gave way to interpretations of quite a different spirit. In fact, each new generation in The Swedish Academy interpreted the will according to their own values. Carl David af Wirsén and his Academy read Nobel's formula as a demand not only for loyalty to altar, throne and family but also for "a lofty and sound idealism". The prize was seen not simply as a *literary* reward. The chosen work should be characterized by "a true nobility not only in its manner of presentation but in terms of its overall view of life's values". A conservative idealism adapted from Sweden's official philosopher C. J. Boström, joined company here with classically orientated esthetics inherited from the epoch of Goethe and Hegel.

With such criteria one could dismiss Tolstoy, Ibsen and Zola and welcome Bjørnson, Kipling and Heyse. Such evaluations had previously affected the Wirsén Academy's opposition to the critics and authors of the modern breakthrough in Scandinavia, initially Brandes, Ibsen and Strindberg. Nobel's will gave Wirsén – who has been called the Don Quixote of romantic idealism – the chance to pursue a provincial campaign on the international literary stage. Such an application of the will was far from Nobel's own values. With his traits of rebel and free-thinker and his admiration for Tolstoy he would have reacted strongly against the early Nobel policy of the Academy.

The 1920s entailed a decisive break with the narrow interpretation of "ideal" launched by Wirsén, with the strategic use of the mission to promote his campaign. The key phrase was now "wide-hearted humanity", a term which made it natural to give the prize to Anatole France, who had previously been rejected. A new generation, represented by Permanent Secretary Erik Axel Karlfeldt and Nobel Committee Chairman Per Hallström, cleared out the demands for a theistic faith and a view of life and society in line with Boström's thinking. But a classically orientated approach to literature was maintained, signposted with the recurring formula "the great style". This left Goethe on his pedestal but it widened the ideal to encompass "classical realism" in the nineteenth century, with a high point in the once rejected Tolstoy. The Academy was thus tacitly aligned with the classical leanings of 1920s movements, both in Sweden and throughout Europe. With such a yardstick, however, the Academicians were not in tune with vigorous new ambitions in contemporary literature. In 1929, they could hail Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* – a masterpiece close to the "classical realism" of Tolstoy – but, in hurtful silence, bypassed *Der Zauberberg*. In a couple of instances on the other hand, this indecisive Academy could make good the short-comings of Wirsén's. There was recognition of "the great style" in W. B. Yeats, previously rejected on the grounds of his symbolist "obscurity". In G. B. Shaw, once discarded because he was "too brutal", it was now possible to distinguish in his fundamental attitudes "a basically idealistic and human outlook". Here we can see the effect of a new, more generous interpretation of the "ideal" concept.

The Academy of the 1930s tried out a new policy based on Nobel's demand that the prize should be awarded to those who have bestowed "the greatest benefit to humankind". The Academy could be said to regard "humankind" as the imaginary readers of the literary works in question. Hence the more exclusive literary forms, above all poetry, were excluded. It was a matter of reaching out to the "ordinary reader". With a view to work that is generally accessible, the Academy could honour much-admired prose-writers, from

the best-seller Sinclair Lewis in 1930 to Pearl Buck in 1938. The only really significant writers rewarded in this decade were the two dramatists Luigi Pirandello and Eugene O'Neill. At the same time the more conservative members of the inner circle spent the whole decade blocking Hermann Hesse, who had been nominated by Thomas Mann as early as 1931 and advocated by Anders Österling.

To a younger wing within the Academy, it was now clear that the literary Nobel Institute was in a grave crisis. A pause in Nobel Prize activities during the Second World War gave those sympathetic to Österling›s criteria time to consolidate themselves. The new policy they devised meant a radical break with the previous somewhat populist phase. The Academy would now invest in literary pioneers. This interpretation of the will ran parallel to moves in the scientific committees to give priority to new discoveries and new research methods.

The new principle found expression in the prize to Hesse in 1946, followed by the prizes to André Gide, T. S. Eliot and William Faulkner, all bold innovators. The motivation for Eliot's prize clearly refers to his "outstanding, pioneer contribution to present-day poetry". In his speech Österling placed, beside Eliot's "magnificent experiment in poetry", *The Waste Land,* "another pioneer work, which had a still more sensational effect on modern literature, the much discussed *Ulysses* from the hand of an Irishman, James Joyce". With these words Österling included in the 1948 Nobel celebration a gesture towards the previous era's greatest and now irreparable neglect.

At the same time, a wider interpretation was given to the keyword "ideal". It is telling that the new list begins with Hesse, whose "ethical anarchy" was in the 1930s seen to be at odds with the aim of Nobel's will. In the following year it was a matter of guiding Gide past moral obstacles; to certain Academy members his homosexuality was a problem.

Two decades later another innovator, Samuel Beckett, provided a more challenging test for the new generous reading of Nobel's terms. His dark view of the world was for many incompatible with

a prize "in an ideal direction". Karl-Ragnar Gierow hit upon the solution: it is in the depths that "pessimistic thought and poetry can work their miracles". In Beckett's feeling for "true human value" Gierow could distinguish "the source of inner cleansing, the life-force *nevertheless*" in the author's bleak vision.

The significance of "pioneer" as a criterion diminished as the international avantgarde epoch became part of history, but the criterion came to be applied to innovators from specific language areas. If from a western point of view Naguib Mahfouz seems like a custodian of the inheritance from Flaubert and Thomas Mann he is thus, in the Arab world, the creator of its contemporary fiction. Gao Xingjian likewise opened "new paths for the Chinese novel and drama".

1978 sees the breakthrough of a new policy which in practice could allow for neglected innovators. Lars Gyllensten had already in 1971 formulated criteria for a "pragmatic attitude" in the weighing up of candidates. This aimed at the possible benefit of the prize for insufficiently recognized work either by supporting "an original and innovatory *author*", "a neglected but fertile *literary genre*" or "an insufficiently recognized linguistic or cultural sphere". By drawing attention to important but disregarded authors it was hoped to give to a world readership masterpieces which otherwise would be unnoticed, and so give an important authorship the readers it deserved.

This "pragmatic" policy materialized in 1978 with the prize to the completely unknown Isaac Bashevis Singer, who soon became one of the world's most widely read authors. There followed prizes to the internationally overlooked Odysseus Elytis, Elias Canetti and Jaroslav Seifert. The criterion had a special significance for poetry. In no earlier period had poets been singled out as they were between 1990 and 1996 when four of the seven prizes went to Octavio Paz, Derek Walcott, Seamus Heaney and Wisława Szymborska, all previously unknown to the international public.

THE PRIZE TO GRASS – A SUMMING-UP

The prizewinner in the last year of the century, Günter Grass, drew attention to several of the questions that inspired discussion in the course of the preceding decades. From one point of view it was he who, more strikingly than anyone else, summed up the century that was now nearing its end. If the Academy had thought of giving emphasis to this aspect in 1999, Grass himself forestalled it with the publication in that year of *Mein Jahrhundert.* But the Academy's discussion in itself summed up a good deal of the century's argumentation.

In 1972 Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass were weighed against each other in relation to the same criterion: they had both worked to renew German literature. But Böll's contribution, as Gierow emphasized in his award speech, "is not an experiment with form"; it is "a rebirth out of annihilation, a resurrection, a culture which, ravaged by icy nights" sends up new shoots "to the joy and benefit of us all". It was, concluded Gierow, what Nobel "wished his prize to reward".

This means that the foremost representative of a *moral* renaissance on the ruins of The Third Reich – with an explicit appeal to Nobel's intentions – was preferred to the country's leading representative of what was much too narrowly defined as "experiment with form". The choice removed Grass from prize deliberations for many years, and made room for debate about a downward curve in his artistry. It remained for the renewed Academy of the 1990s to resume his candidature from other starting-points.

A passage in the will that influenced twentieth century discussions of the prize refers to the idea of limiting it to works "during the preceding year", a condition which, in the statutes, was modified to "the most recent achievements"; older works were to be considered "only if their significance has not become apparent until

recently". The early major achievement *Die Blechtrommel* thus risked being removed from view. But the qualification "not become apparent until recently" is very relevant here. The intervening years had clarified Grass' role as a source of energy in literature. In 1972 he was an innovator without successors. In later years, he had been hailed as leading the way by authors like Salman Rushdie, Nadine Gordimer, Gabriel García Márquez, António Lobo Antunes and Kenzaburo Oe. The author of *Die Blechtrummel* had at last found his place not only as an innovator in German literature but also as a significant pioneer internationally.

A younger generation within the Academy had also been exposed to a significantly more comprehensive authorship. The citation recalls a new side to Grass, the fabulous historian, with special attention to history's forgotten face. Without ignoring works like *Der Butt*, with its beginning in history's dawn, the Academy has quite naturally focused on what Permanent Secretary Horace Engdahl in his award speech calls "this great questioner of our century's history"; giving this questioner the century's last prize was "an easy decision". The choice that waited so long found its perfect moment at the end of the period which Grass sums up in an incomparable manner.

But there are other considerations in the choice of Grass at the conclusion of the century. The prizes to Hesse, Gide, Eliot and Faulkner introduced half a century characterized by criteria in step with contemporary literature and by a wider reading of the conditions for awards. The 1999 prize hints at how far the Academy had succeeded in making the literature prize a *literary* prize. The 1972 reference to moral values at the cost of experimental art would be hard to envisage in the Academy at the turn of the century. It can also be noted that the political implications that made Grass' then most recent novel, *Ein weites Feld,* controversial in his own country were expressly ignored. In his award speech Engdahl emphasizes that the motivation for the 1999 prize contains no reservation of the kind that affected Thomas Mann (and *Der Zauberberg*).

WITNESS LITERATURE

A new policy is signalled by the Nobel Symposium "Witness Literature", arranged (December 4–5, 2001) by The Swedish Academy to mark the centenary of the prize. The speakers invited included three notable past winners, Nadine Gordimer, Kenzaburo Oe and Gao Xingjian, and two future winners, Herta Müller and Imre Kertész. A further three delegates, Timothy Garton Ash, Nuruddin Farah and Li Rui were also prominent international figures

The initiator of the symposium, Horace Engdahl, pointed out that the concept of witness literature was relatively new and had not so far been clearly defined either by critics or scholars. Only a quarter of a century before, Elie Wiesel had proposed the genre as the literary innovation of our period: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony." Wiesel exaggerates what's new in the phenomenon, according to Engdahl, but he touches on the most fundamental change in literature after modernism's breakthrough. What put witness in the centre was our horror at the systematic obliteration of memory in totalitarian societies.

The example that most naturally presented itself is a work from the same time as Wiesel's statement, i.e. Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago.* The author himself called it a literary work. Unlike historical works it is based on witnesses from the Russian camp system and on the author's capacity as a former prisoner to give credible content to the words of the victims. Another difference is that the narrative reaches no conclusion: to the witnesses and their interpreter it never stops. Solzhenitsyn's prose eliminates the time between the crime and our reading about it.

The opening session of the seminar not only clarifies its subject, with concrete examples, but also gives us to understand that the

new focus has already resulted in one of the Nobel history's most commented upon choices – that of Solzhenitsyn. But that is only the beginning. The three guest prizewinners exemplify in different ways the role of giving witness in this context.

It was no surprise that Nadine Gordimer, who had so often borne witness to South African racial oppression, showed herself to be extraordinarily well-placed to come to grips with the substance of the symposium. With reference to the way people actually experience September 11th, she saw witness literature's task not in the immediate picture, in the description of the chain of events, but "in depths of revealed meaning": "It is in the tensions of sensibility, the intense awareness, the antennae of receptivity to the lives among which writers experience their own as a source of their art." Insight into what happened comes from what seems to deny reality – the reshaping of events, motives, feelings, reactions from the immediate to the "enduring significance that is meaning".

For content with such deep levels there is obviously no given form or style. The linguistic means that are appropriate in one context are insufficient in another. A witness statement demands the tried or untried combination of means which is the unique expression for *the event beyond the event,* for its past as well as for its future.

With his experience of the effects of the atom bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kenzaburo Oe could supplement the foregoing by stressing the need for a witness statement, to use the term from Russian formalism, to go through a "defamiliarization", the repeated "washing" of the written word which at last allows the unimaginable to be recognized as what really happened. In this process the witness must not simply allow the voices of others to echo in his or her own voice but must also include everything the working-through process has added. It is a process which can achieve a description of the indescribable and at the same time remold the author into the new intellectual required by the approaching future.

With his personal experience of harsh political reality, the third

Nobel Prizewinner, Gao Xingjian, stressed that we must break free of all forms of ideology if literature is to be able to bear witness to humanity and our existential predicament.

This does not mean that such a literature avoids politics as subject matter; but it does mean repudiating it as its purpose. As for various taboos, political, social or religious, witness literature speaks up for the uncompromising independence and spiritual freedom which an author passionately seeks. What authors can contribute is their uncommonly keen sensibility: "Everything suddenly becomes lucid, and the writer can almost physically experience even that which he has never experienced." But this heightened perceptibility also marks out the author's task: "What more can a writer do but leave a testimony of his times?"

Two future prizewinners also contributed to the definition of the new genre. In a presentation full of concrete memories, not least from her childhood, Herta Müller made a point of the fact that she did not see herself as a witness when she was writing. She even asked herself if literature *can* bear witness. When life is no longer comprehensible, words fail. All dictatorships misuse language and the prescribed medium is as inimical as every other offence. She had herself experienced how oppression nudges closer and closer. Since she refused to cooperate as an informer, she became acquainted with everything her friends told of interrogations, house-searches and death threats. That was why she knew how fear can widen one's field of view and what friendship means when there is no certainty about living from the one day to the next. It is not least this widened perspective, together with distrust of the offered language, that makes up Herta Müller›s version of witness literature.

Imre Kertész is the writer who along with Primo Levi could have given the most qualified registration of the problems of concentration camp reporting. Unfortunately, his contribution to the seminar did not fulfil such expectations. What his lecture "The Freedom of Self-Definition" primarily relates is the discrimination entailed by "collective labelling", the system created by the Nazis. His role as witness is presented in general terms as that of the Jewish

author: "I am a chronicler of an anachronistic condition, that of the assimilated Jew, the bearer and recorder of this condition, and a harbinger of its inevitable demise."

A dialogue of great interest occurred between two other delegates. Horace Engdahl, first, had referred to the conflict between witness and literature. An antiliterary tradition began with Plato, the search for the colourless word, the word of the truth-telling witness. Rhetoric has no place in the language of witness, likewise ideological struggle. The witness does not try to persuade anyone. One cannot partake in a debate and bear witness at the same time.

Peter Englund widens this point of view by recounting the historian's love-hate of the genre. The risk is that the author wins over the witness of the same name. With reference both to women's memoirs of the Soviet era and to first-hand accounts from World War One, Englund specifically illuminates the process of condensing, polishing, reformulating and excising that occurs between the event and the final text, the latter being the process that turns the happening into literature. The dilemma is that instead of uniting the best of both sides we may finish up with a combination of the worst of both, a result working neither as a historical source nor as a literary creation.

Timothy Garton Ash presents a contrary view. He allows what all historians, journalists and lawyers know: that witnesses are highly unreliable. He points out how even the immediate response to an event, like a note in a diary, involves a degree of invention. Memories are rewritten, partly to make the happenings comprehensible, partly to make them more comfortable. But on the other hand, good history or reporting has never been written without "a large imaginative sympathy" with the people we write about.

We create them as characters, subject to interpretation of their personalities. Imagination is necessary but demands moral considerations – such as awareness of the consequences of a possibly inaccurate revelation – and the testing of "facticity" and "veracity". The latter may be apparent, as in Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia,* in "tone, style, voice".

Someone who *could* have taken part in the symposium is V. S. Naipaul, who was given the prize that very month. He is not only the author of novels like *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *A Bend in the River* but also an innovator in the genre of reportage. In *Beyond Belief* he expressly applies the novelist's depiction of people and their surroundings to a documentary presentation of a problematic culture developing round a number of representative, sharply delineated human fates. As he himself formulates the enterprise in his introduction: he has made the traveller step back in favour of those who live in the country and returned to what he was in the beginning, "a manager of narrative".

The 2001 Nobel Symposium has been said to bring in a new phase in the history of the literature prize. On closer inspection it is clear that the renowned symposium in fact gathers criteria which had been on the way for more than a quarter of a century and manifested themselves in four prizes, to come fully into view in a fifth. In practice the symposium created a base for the *formulation* of a direction which had already come to expression over several years. At the same time, the meeting summarized the views and criteria which can be distinguished behind the decision to give weight to "witness literature".

The Nobel Committee that from 2001 onwards introduced also this new perspective saw some changes in membership. Kjell Espmark (chairman), Östen Sjöstrand and Lars Forssell had been there since 1988, while Horace Engdahl and Per Wästberg were new.

Only a year after the symposium, its criteria receive their first explicit result in the prize to Imre Kertész. With a different focus than Naipaul's, he has incorporated, in his horrifying depiction of concentration camp reality, the observer's witness in a narrative text. In both cases the prize citation touches on the role of the observer in relation to the larger picture. With Naipaul, it is a matter of "incorruptible scrutiny" in works that compel us to see, with him, "the presence of suppressed histories". The same stance of observer is touched on when Kertész is said to uphold "the fragile experience of the individual against the barbaric arbitrariness

of history". The words "scrutiny" and "experience" in relation to the historical run of events link the works to the grand theme of witness literature.

Several prizewinners can subsequently be placed in this perspective. Most notably Herta Müller and Svetlana Alexievich. But the winner in 2012, Mo Yan, also belongs in this circle. His citation tells us how he "with hallucinatory realism merges folk-tales, history and the contemporary". The last words here remind us that in his novels he recreates the recent past of his country, an epic documentation that seeks to reinstate collective memory wiped out by the regime.

In fact, many prizewinners who at first glance do not seem to fall within the genre in question can be found among those who bear witness. Tomas Tranströmer, for instance, formulates his mission in the poem "The Outpost": "to be where I am. / Even in that ridiculous, deadly serious / role – I am the place / where creation is working itself out." The poet is on guard duty, obliged "to wait", and he is "anxious, stubborn, confused". What he is required to observe is suggested in another poem, "December Evening 1972": he is "perhaps employed / by a Great Memory to live right now". Tranströmer's words indicate what he sees as the poet's fundamental task, to contribute to the collective memory with his own observations. Or, as Kenzaburo Oe formulated it in his symposium talk, all the authors whose images the writer carries in his head have borne witness to humanity in the twentieth century.

The winner in 2008, Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, declared himself in an interview that everything he had written could be regarded as witness literature. The motivation for his prize could be said to support him; the latter part of it calls him an "explorer of a humanity beyond and below the reigning civilization".

Two prizewinners, however, have noticeably sharp contours within the genre, Herta Müller and Svetlana Alexievich. In the case of the former the motivation glides discreetly past the witness role. She is given the prize as one "who, with the concentration of poetry and the frankness of prose, depicts the landscape of the

dispossessed". What she has made visible, with great artistry, are the conditions of exile, conditions she herself shared with a series of recent authors. But implicit in the formulation are the forces which drove her away from her homeland, the supervision, the interrogations, harassments and death threats which Securitate made itself guilty of. What her poetic prose, subtle and effective in equal degrees, bears witness to is one of the twentieth century's toughest experiences, life beneath the baleful stars of dictatorship.

The experiences that Svetlana Alexievich testifies to are of another sort. She develops the genre not least by turning herself into a medium for the experiences of *others.* Her enterprise is concisely summarized by the motivation for her prize: "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time". If the latter part alludes to the monumental gathering of witnesses that she secured, the former refers to the manner in which these voices are made to sound like a chorus.

"Suffering and courage" – the author says she does not want to write "a history of war but a history of feelings". This is the case whether it is a matter of the role played by women in "the great patriotic war" or of the fate of the "zinc boys" in Afghanistan. But also in the chilling accounts from the Chernobyl catastrophe the emphasis is on the experience rather than on the event which gave rise to it. Svetlana Alexievich does not want to create literature, she insists; for her it is "in the living human voice, in the living recreation of the past that the original joy conceals itself and life's tragedy is exposed". Her ambition aims at nothing less than "an encyclopedia of the feelings and inner life" of her time. But she stresses that what she gives us is not simply a collection of unworked first-hand accounts. She »refines« her material. Years can pass between the interviews and the summing up which allows a small part of the material to "crystalize". It is in this process that the wide perspective surrounding the individual accounts develops. That she shies away from the idea of thus producing literature does not prevent her series of choral works amounting to significant poetry.

In fact, she has created a new literary genre which makes it possible to give expression to late twentieth century Russian catastrophes. Through her sensitive choices, her revisions, her overall planning, her technique of repetition and her feeling for rhythm she has composed a kind of requiem where these tragic events can be captured. The motivation for her prize has tried to assimilate these separate aspects of the gathering of voices and the shaping of literary form.

The attention given to witness literature does not of course mean that this type of literature is to be given preference. It is a question of a widening of the area that is surveyed. Nor does the genre as such amount to any kind of basis for evaluation. What is decisive is the artistic power and precision with which the bearing of witness is shaped.

The new policy which has been sketched exemplifies a consistent ambition ever since the later twentieth century: to widen the area under scrutiny and try to give justice to more and more aspects of international literature. Nobel's will prescribes a world-wide focus and in the long term it was not enough to be content with the isolated attempts in this direction represented by the prizes to Rabindranath Tagore and Yasunari Kawabata; the choice of American and Latin-American candidates still stayed within the European language family. In the early 1980s one could still see, in a world context, headlines like "The European Prize". It was criticism which the Academy itself accepted as justified.

In a 1984 interview, Permanent Secretary Lars Gyllensten set out the ambition to achieve "a global spread". Several prizewinners, from the Nigerian Wole Soyinka in 1986 and the Egyptian Naguib Mahfouz in 1988 to the Japanese Kenzaburo Oe in 1994, illustrate this new direction. It has been revealed that the old master Shen Congwen was close to a prize when he died in 1988. If a first Chinese prize had really gone to an author who was well-anchored in his homeland, the later history of the Nobel Prize would have been rather different.

Nadine Gordimer and Derek Walcott certainly belong to the English language sphere but have widened the Nobel map to include South Africa and The West Indies. And the prize to Patrick White had already indicated a choice to broaden the geographical extent. According to the motivation, his prize had rewarded "an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature".

This wider ambition has made heavy demands on the competence required for making choices. On the whole, linguistic skills in the Academy have been high. In recent times it has included

Chinese and Russian. But above all the area of scrutiny has been extended with the help of outside experts. In the course of recent decades, the Nobel Committee has commissioned opinions on literature that was beyond the horizon in earlier eras, opinions which in part could place the works in question in their literary and cultural frame, in part give a sense of the creation's resonance and associative properties. In the absence of translations into English, French, and German or into one of the Scandinavian languages, special translations can be ordered. The reshaping of the adjudicating process, which can be traced from 2018 onwards, entails the cooperation of international experts from the wide language areas beyond the competence of the Nobel Committee.

It is important that the choice of language or land should not go before the choice of author; such a practice would have meant politicizing the prize. Instead, we have seen an effort to widen the overall survey in the usual decision-making process such that a Chinese novelist can be weighed at one point, and an Arabic poet at another, against candidates from closer linguistic regions – all according to *literary* considerations.

It is symptomatic that the first literature prize of the new century went to a Chinese author, Gao Xingjian – who was in the next year followed by V. S. Naipaul, native to West Indian Trinidad. The former was rewarded »for an oeuvre of universal validity, bitter insights and linguistic ingenuity, which has opened new paths for the Chinese novel and drama". The formulation shows how yet again a choice was made to give attention to a pathfinder, as in the case of Mahfouz an innovator on a national level. As for novels, the masterpiece *Soul Mountain* is singled out, and for drama, it is the series of plays where Gao Xingjian happily makes good of lessons from Brecht and Kafka at the same time as, according to the press release, he chooses to "open the flow of sources from popular drama". The prizes to the South African J. M. Coetze, the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa and the Canadian Alice Munro can be said to continue the geographical widening within the European language area as we saw when Patrick White, Nadine Gordimer and Derek

Walcott were chosen. A real break-out from this area came only with Orhan Pamuk and Mo Yan. The 2006 prize to the former, the first to a Turkish author, also stresses his international perspective. The motivation for Pamuk's prize describes him as one "who in the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures". With the prize to Mo Yan in 2012 the new century's Nobel policy directed attention for the second time to the vitality of Chinese literature, this time in the work of an author who managed to recreate an uncomfortable recent history – and at the same time preserve his place within the Chinese cultural circle, unlike the exiled author Gao Xingjian. But like Pamuk he is representative of the meeting of cultures; it is from the impulses from, on the one side, catalyzers like Faulkner and García Márquez, on the other, Chinese folk tales, that he succeeded in creating an art of fiction which, "with hallucinatory realism", gives the world shocking pictures of his country's recent past.

The later part of the twentieth century, however, sees yet another extension of the widening perspective, again one which kept its relevance into the new century. This concerns the place of women in the context of the Nobel Prize. With its ambition to give pioneers their due recognition and its will to draw attention to the neglected masters, the Swedish Academy had in the postwar period succeeded in overcoming several of the obstacles which the earlier Academy had not managed to deal with. But as the 1990s began, the question rose as to whether the Academy's criteria had discriminated against women authors. These have been invisible to the Nobel Committee which chose to identify the innovators in literature. The criterion has as a rule aimed at linguistic and structural innovation and only exceptionally on the type of "moral" renewal of the sort understood from Böll. It meant shutting oneself off from the innovation which lies in a new female perspective, with a sensitive language for a neglected reality. We can argue that a series of recent significant women writers remain among those who successfully carried forward a great narrative tradition rather

than investing in a new paradigm – and thus were not registered by the Academy's measuring capacity. At the same time they have often appealed to a large readership and have been rewarded with admiration and fame – and have thereby made themselves less interesting also with regard to the other principal criterion; they have not found themselves among the great but neglected authors whom the Academy could have elevated from the shadows and presented to a potential public.

What the Academy had to consider in 1991 was if Nadine Gordimer had not been unjustly treated and had not in fact belonged among the "masters", from Francois Mauriac to William Golding, who glided past the criteria and were now praised, in spite of their fame, for their supreme vision and artistic "intensity". The Academy was facing an authorship which, though it showed some signs of "renewal", basically has its home in a good old story-telling tradition. Nadine Gordimer has herself placed her authorship in the area of "critical realism" (with reference to George Lukács) where we encounter a series of great story-telling works from Balzac and Tolstoy to Thomas Mann and Solzhenitsyn, novels in which a historical epoch is condensed in a handful of clear-cut figures. At the same time as she thus demoted herself as a "pioneer" she has with her striking political analysis and her living depictions of character reached a wide and enthusiastic readership worldwide – and so in principle made herself less desirable relative to the "pragmatic" criterion. The Academy has, however, taken a stance by recognizing "her magnificent epic writing" and laid stress, with support from Nobel's words, on the way Nadine Gordimer through her writing has "been of very great benefit to humanity".

The prize to Wisława Szymborska in 1996 is in line with those given to exclusive poetic masters from Elytis to Miłosz. On the other hand, Toni Morrison hardly belonged to the neglected great figures, nor to the pronounced renewers of fiction. The description of her art, "characterized by visionary power and poetic import", puts her in the category where novelists like Golding and, most recently, Nadine Gordimer were placed, masters who did not appeal

to the special criteria but were quite simply convincing because of their creative power. What the declaration of 1971 called "an insufficiently acknowledged linguistic or cultural area" should not be passed over. Toni Morrison, in the words of the motivation, "gives life to an essential aspect of American reality", that is, the black population of the U.S.A., which had previously been beyond the ken of the Academy. But to a decisive degree the new and stronger presence of women, three in the 1990s compared to but one during the preceding half century, appears as a result of the insight into the limitations which remained in the new more positive means of selecting winners.

Against that background the new century's work with the Prize in Literature could remedy a weak female representation in quite a different manner than the preceding century's. The proportion during the first two decades, seven winners out of twenty, is much better than during any earlier period. The series began with Elfriede Jelinek in 2004. She cannot, however, be placed in the same category as Nadine Gordimer. She has on the contrary been regarded as a notable innovator in, above all, drama, where her apparently untheatrical text-masses proved to be rewarding scores for directors. In Horace Engdahl's words in the Award Speech: astonished directors find she has delivered into their hands "material to revolutionize theatre". He sees this overthrow of tradition also in her novels which "cheerfully break the laws of classic narrative art".

Doris Lessing belongs to the old brigade whose members had already frequented the prize deliberations for several decades but she had been, like Nadine Gordimer, sidelined by current criteria. The motivation of 2007 seems to atone for the neglect of the innovation which is implicit in a new female perspective on existence: Lessing is described as "that epicist of the female experience, who with skepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilization to scrutiny". This means that from a female experience of the world she has become a "moral" power akin to the 1972 winner, Heinrich Böll.

Herta Müller and Svetlana Alexievich can, as we have seen, be

classified among the representatives of a strong art of witness. In Olga Tokarczuk we observe the same striving for facticity, with the difference that the testimonies she uncovers in the huge chronicle of the Jewish sect-leader Jakob Frank, belong to the eighteenth century. The prize motivation salutes nonetheless "a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life". All prizewinners cannot be sorted under specific criteria. What is decisive is that the Academy members feel in the grasp of impressive literary art. This is the case with Tokarczuk but is also true in a high degree of Alice Munro and Louise Glück. Of the former, the motivation in 2013 speaks laconically of the "master of the contemporary short-story", while of the latter we hear of the winner's "unmistakable poetic voice" and "austere beauty". That this voice also "makes individual existence universal" can seem like a cliché along with all the previous formulations about "universal human conditions". But I would rather see a more specific content in the words, a gesture towards the movement – as of a film-camera dizzily tracking – where the observation of everyday human activity unexpectedly widens into far-reaching vision.

But the choice of Louise Glück has also another significance, which appears in Thomas Steinfeld's reaction. He found himself surprised at having missed an important author. "Respect for the Academy: it has emphasized its knowledge and its sovereignty." The Prize in Literature has in other words fulfilled the function which the "pragmatic" policy promised: it has shone light on a significant author which the world would not otherwise have taken notice of in anything like the same degree.

The ambition to extend the area of scrutiny recurs also in another context. The 1971 declaration in favour of the "pragmatic" direction included "a neglected but fruitful *literary* genre". This aspect became relevant with the choice of Dario Fo in 1997. The motivation is discreet on that point. The prize goes to an author "who emulates the jesters of the Middle Ages in scourging authority and uphold-

ing the dignity of the downtrodden". The first phrase highlights farce, a genre *ignored* in the Nobel context and one which Fo took up and *renewed*, thus giving an answer to the two main criteria of the preceding half century. I presented this motivation in the face of critical questions about Dario Fo during a panel debate at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in November 2000; several members of The Swedish Academy then took part in a conversation about the Nobel Prize and "world literature".

Now the choice of Dario Fo is one of the most criticized in recent times. On the one hand it was thought that he was not good enough, on another that it was unclear how much of the work was done by him and how much by his wife, Franca Rame. Italians were happy to hear that Sweden, if no other country, had seen that Italy had its Molière.

Behind the Academy's decision there is in fact a Swedish Fo tradition that can be followed back to the late 1950s. The first powerful manifestation was the Pistol theatre production of *We Don't Pay! We Don't Pay!* in 1977. Two years later Kim Anderzon was a great success in *A Woman* and Björn Granath launched an unstoppable production of *Mistero buffo,* a central piece in Fo's production. Several of the plays were published in Swedish, among others *We Don't Pay! We Don't Pay!. Mistero buffo* was already in print in 1969, and we can mention *Juan Padan Discovers America* and a series of shorter farces.

This engagement, including interest in the genre, had found a foothold in the Academy and was extended, on account of the candidature, to Fo's full production. In the press release *Mistero buffo* is proposed as "the central work" but among the highpoints, reference is also made to *Morte accidentale di un anarchico* and *Non si paga! Non si paga!.* Attention is also drawn to the special character of the genre: "Fo's strength is in the creation of texts that simultaneously amuse, engage and provide perspectives. As in commedia dell'arte, they are always open to creative additions and dislocations, continually encouraging the actors to improvise, which means that the audience is activated in a remarkable way." It is in this genre, close

to commedia dell'arte, that the Academy discovered "an oeuvre of impressive artistic vitality and range".

The widening towards witness literature can be seen in the light of the general extension of the horizon. But could it not be said that the attention given to this more or less documentary genre means embracing the kind of work alluded to in The Nobel Foundation's statutes §2? There it is stated that literature comprises "not just literary works but also other texts which due to their form and manner of presentation possess literary value". Should this paragraph, which had certainly been tested but not resulted in any prize since 1953, Churchill's year, then have acquired new relevance for a genre between literature and historical documentation? The spirit behind the statute is actually what lies behind Timothy Garton Ash's interpretation of the purpose of the 2001 symposium, that it should correct the twentieth century's habit of giving priority to creative imagination. That the first century's prizes mainly, if not exclusively, went to novelists and poets was seen by him as "the background of our meeting". Who could reasonably claim, he says, that the works of Thucydides, Macaulay and Nietzsche, Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* or for that matter Naipaul's A*mong the Believers* don't amount to literature? "Wherever the boundary of literature lies, it is not there."

The examples show an interesting range. The presence of philosophy and history is in line with the Academy's practice from Mommsen and Bergson to Russell and Churchill while Orwell and Naipaul represented the new genre which to all intents is included in the statute even if not openly given a place in the area of scrutiny. The symposium widens the ambition, but quite within the frame of what is foreseen in The Nobel Foundation's basic statutes.

Another example of the extension of range, however, aroused greater attention, the 2016 choice of Bob Dylan, who was said to have "created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition". He had previously won, among other awards, The

Polar Music Prize for 2000, an undisputed mark of honour. The question now was if the songs as *text* were on the same level as the poems of, for example, T. S. Eliot, Nelly Sachs and Joseph Brodsky. The motivation avoids the question by granting Dylan the role of innovator within his country's great "song tradition". This means the introduction of a new genre within the area of scrutiny, a genre where the text cannot be separated from its musical performance. Permanent Secretary Sara Danius implies as much in her book on Dylan:

> There could well be a need for a new [...] genre definition that can do justice to his work. Bob Dylan writes poetry for the ear. His poetry moreover is part of a larger whole: the song, the disc, the concert, the radio, YouTube, Spotify. We are to listen to his texts, not read them, at least not initially.

She continues by setting Dylan's poetry in a perspective that reaches back to Greek poetry about six hundred BC, a poetry written to be *performed,* "preferably with music".

A problem that has followed the Prize in Literature through the years has been how Nordic writers were to be treated. They are, as has been pointed out many times, over-represented on the list of winners, partly as a result of the neutrality policy during World War One. Candidates from countries outside the conflict, principally the Nordic countries, were favoured throughout those years. This resulted in prizes to Verner von Heidenstam, Karl Gjellerup, Henrik Pontoppidan and, as an echo in 1920, Knut Hamsun.

The matter reached crisis-point in 1959 when the Nobel Committee's majority chose Karen Blixen but the Academy set her aside in favour of Salvatore Quasimodo, precisely because of the strong Nordic presence on the list of winners. The Committee chairman, Anders Österling, had especially argued for *Out of Africa* as "one of the most remarkable and richest creations in the literature of recent decades, unsurpassed both as an artistic vision of nature and as epic treatment of its ethnographic matter". The book provides too, "with its deep and compassionate interpretation of African temperament, an idealistic appeal which has gained a wider reach in today's world". Further, as a short story writer, Blixen had "created her own genre, at times a touch pastiche-like and artificial, but at its high points brilliant with ingenious imagination and witty perception of humanity". Still in the most recent collection, Österling found "such a jewel of the finest narrative art as Babette's Feast". He concluded by reminding his readers that Karen Blixen was 74 so if the prize were to reach her, that should happen "without delay".

It would seem that in this situation the Academy would accept the committee's recommendation. But there was one objector, Eyvind Johnson, who referred to the excessive representation of Scandinavian literature and proposed a candidate from Italian poetry, a neglected area. In view of the fact that Johnson himself

would receive the prize fifteen years later it deserves mention that the minutes contain not the least hint of calculation. Johnson in fact sided with the doubts about a new Scandinavian prize that had recurred in the debates in later years. His concern was for the international reputation of the prize.

As we know, the Academy supported Johnson's candidate, Quasimodo. With the wisdom of hindsight, we can say that the outcome was unfortunate. Few experts would today put Quasimodo above Ungaretti and Montale. But above all we may regret that Karen Blixen was thus set aside. It is ironic that precisely she should have to pay for earlier generosity towards Nordic authors. International opinion would certainly have found it easier to accept her than several other Scandinavians as prizewinners. The masterly creator of *Seven Gothic Tales* and *Out of Africa* was after all regarded as an English language author. Moreover, with its continuing anxiety about excessive Nordic representation, the Academy set the scene for another and perhaps worse disproportion, the deplorable lack of female prizewinners in the postwar period. Karen Blixen would not only have enhanced the list of winners. At the same time, she would have softened some of the criticism for gender one-sidedness.

The Blixen case illustrates a specific problem when Nordic authors come up for discussion. The "pragmatic" policy that allowed Singer to reach a worldwide public and roused international interest in relatively exclusive poets like Brodsky, Miłosz and Szymborska does not seem to work in relation to Nordic authors. Johannes V. Jensen and Halldór Kiljan Laxness have remained Nordic celebrities. As though the Academy was suspected of promoting local talents at the cost of its international mission. It seems to be a precondition that Nordic candidates are already regarded as global figures.

This was the case for Tomas Tranströmer. He was already being read in upwards of sixty languages and was energetically promoted by Brodsky, Walcott and Heaney. International criticism was summed up by Helen Vendler in *The New York Review of Books* as

early as 1998: "Tranströmer is frequently, and justly, mentioned as a poet deserving the [Nobel] prize."

The doubts which arose were domestic. To what extent the Academy's discussion of Tranströmer›s candidature included critical views is not something that can be dealt with here. What can be noted is the recurring, above-mentioned hesitation at the prospect of a "new Scandinavian prize", most likely with the criticized choice of Eyvind Johnson and Harry Martinson in fresh memory. Nor could the risk be disregarded that Tranströmer might face the same destructive criticism which affected Martinson in particular. Regardless of what arguments could have stood in the way, an academy is a gathering in continuous renewal, with an opinion which changes a little with each new member. In October 2011 at all events the ripe moment had arrived.

Tranströmer was rewarded "because, through his condensed, translucent images, he gives us fresh access to reality". The latter part of the motivation draws attention to the poet's epiphanies, these rooms that "contained every moment – a butterfly museum". The former part refers to one of the most remarked upon characteristics of Tranströmer's language – Brodsky confesses to having stolen more than one metaphor from him. That it does not stop with metaphors as such but that it is a matter of how the individual images are built into a strong overall vision, that was a task for the speaker at the Nobel ceremony to clarify.

As the new century began, the Nobel Committee saw changes in membership with Horace Engdahl and Per Wästberg joining and, later on, Katarina Frostenson and Kristina Lugn replacing Forssell and Sjöstrand.

At the time of my seventy-fifth birthday I declined re-election as chairman and was followed in that post by Wästberg. When Peter Englund was appointed as Permanent Secretary in 2009, he was co-opted to the committee and then in 2015 replaced there by Sara Danius when she had been elected as Permanent Secretary. At the time of my eighty-fifth birthday I chose to leave the committee but remained for a period as a co-opted member. At the beginning of 2018 Sara Stridsberg was elected to the committee to replace Katarina Frostenson.

The crisis that shook the Academy in the spring of 2018 not only radically altered work in connection with the Nobel Prize in Literature but had substantial significance for the composition of the Nobel Committee. In a press release of May 4th the Academy announced that no Nobel Prize would be given for that year. The 2018 winner would instead be declared together with the 2019 winner. This decision was arrived at "in view of the numerically diminished Academy and the reduced international confidence in the Academy". The Academy had in fact, since Sara Stridsberg had left, been reduced to ten working members and exposed, also on an international level, to harsh criticism. It was explained that the Academy "needs time to regain its full strength […] and recreate confidence in its work, before the next Literature Prizewinner is chosen".

The Nobel Foundation, which had of course played their part in these deliberations, supported the decision in a press release which also made it clear that they expected the Academy would now put "all its energies into the work of restoring its confidence as

a prize-giving institution [...] and subsequently to report on their concrete measures".

This requirement appears again in a letter addressed by the Nobel Foundation to the Swedish Academy on June 15th. On August 18th *Dagens Nyheter* is able to outline the main points of the letter. The Foundation considers that the Academy "must elect a new Nobel Committee which can function as long as the Academy as a whole has not been restored in a manner that reestablishes confidence". It is required of the new Nobel Committee that (1) it can work and make decisions on the Nobel Prize "in a totally independent manner" in relation to the Swedish Academy generally; (2) that members of the committee cannot be "directly compromised by the events of the recent half year"; (3) the independent committee should involve "both members with previous experience of Nobel work and co-opted experts from outside". Even if responsibility for setting up the new committee ought to lie with the Academy, the Foundation retains the right to evaluate how the process followed by the Academy should "meet the Foundation's demands for competence, legitimacy and credibility". Here we can take note of an unexpected interlude, an initiative to a new Nobel Committee already on July 1st. A meeting in Barlingbo on Gotland was called by the Nobel Foundation's head, Lars Heikensten, and the Academy's mediator Eric Runesson with two members, one from each side of the schism, from the Academy's side its director Per Wästberg, and from the "defectors'» side the writer of this account.

During discussions Runesson came up with a King Solomon solution that should both satisfy the Nobel Foundation and save the Academy's face. The Academy would delegate the literary prize to an independent committee composed of members from the two contesting parties plus some outside experts, this in order that in the course of two (maximum five) years the Academy could have time to reorganize itself and regain the lost trust. The committee should not contain anyone who was "compromised" in connection with the crisis in the Academy. During the summer Per Wästberg and I worked at this idea and in August presented a proposal for

a committee of ten members including three representatives from each party and four external members. The proposal was put to the Academy, but rejected.

On November 19th Permanent Secretary Anders Olsson announced that the Academy in consultation with the Nobel Foundation had decided to set up a new Nobel Committee with ten members for the 2019 and 2020 prizes: Per Wästberg (chairman), Horace Engdahl, Kristina Lugn, Anders Olsson and Jesper Svenbro, together with five external experts, Mikaela Blomqvist, Rebecka Kärde, Kristoffer Leandoer, Henrik Petersen and Gun-Britt Sundström. Compared to the summer's proposal the external participation here included some active critics – and this turned out to be a complication. Mikaela Blomqvist and Rebecka Kärde had in the spring been rewarded the Academy's critics' prize on the recommendation of an independent jury.

At the Academy's first meeting in January 2019, both Peter Englund and I returned to a working role there. We explained in public that during the autumn we had "cooperated in the rebuilding of the Swedish Academy and taken part in several important decisions" but had now "reached a point where further constructive efforts could be made only within the Academy".

A primary aim for the Academy in the new year was to try to recover the task of rewarding the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Nobel Foundation had, as the press informed its readers, spelt out a number of demands on that score. One of them, that Katarina Frostenson should leave the Academy, was met on January 18th. Another lies behind the Academy's press release in March that Horace Engdahl would leave the Nobel Committee "by his own choice" in order not to "risk the future of the literary prize by encumbering the cooperation between the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Foundation". A third demand can be read through Permanent Secretary Anders Olsson's announcement that it had been decided the committee should propose only *one* winner to the Academy. Delivering a final list of five for the Academy's decision, as had previously been the case, would in fact limit the external members'

influence on the final choice. The new procedure matches the practice in the other Nobel Committees. It is clear from an interview with Heikensten that the Nobel Foundation wished to see a time limit on membership. The Academy also decided that members of the Nobel Committee should have a three-year tenure, with the possibility of reappointment for a further three-year period.

In March 2019, The Nobel Foundation agreed to the Academy's electing for the 2018 and 2019 prizes. In the work which the Nobel Committee soon took up again, the five external members played a role, but from various directions there was criticism of the choice of those taking part. The four critics had indeed signed an oath of secrecy – but what was to stop them, after their two year period serving the Academy, using their knowledge of which candidates were close to winning, not only those on the final list but also the twenty or so waiting on the "half-long list"? That question has remained unanswered.

After deliberations with the whole Academy, the new committee presented *one* proposal for the 2018 prize, Olga Tokarczuk, and *one* for the 2019 prize, Peter Handke. The former name was unproblematic, the latter, as is well-known, was controversial. The Academy, which during the preceding discussions had had a chance to influence the result, had by this late stage no possibility of scrapping the committee's proposal. In the voting which followed there was also a strong majority in favour of the proposals. Peter Englund objected to the decision on Handke and marked his position by being absent from all of the ceremonies connected with the prize.

The external committee members' period ended with 2020. The experiences did not make a continuation attractive. The new committee which the Academy chose in the autumn of that year included five members, all from its own circle. Anders Olsson, who had functioned as chairman during the summer, was re-elected for the coming three years. Wästberg and Svenbro were reappointed while Ellen Mattson and Anne Swärd came in as new members. It was further decided to have ten external experts, without voting rights, for linguistic areas which the Academy could not cover.

»POLITICAL INTEGRITY«

Throughout the history of the literary prize, the decisions have been criticized from many quarters for having a political intent. With almost the same regularity such criticism has been rejected by an academy eager to emphasize the purely literary nature of the prize, with repeated claims of "political integrity" as its polestar. It belongs to the picture that in certain areas, especially in the old Eastern bloc, it has been hard to understand the Swedish Academy's independent position in relation to state and government.

There is of course a political aspect to every international literary prize. But it is necessary to distinguish between political *effect* and political *intention.* The former is inevitable and often unpredictable while the latter has been expressly banned by the Academy.

The distinction, as well as the Academy's autonomy, can be illustrated by the lead-up to Solzhenitsyn's prize. Memories were fresh of the tragic consequences for Boris Pasternak of the 1958 choice; he was subjected to a violent Soviet campaign and forced to turn down the award. With this in mind, the Permanent Secretary sounded out possible reactions to Solzhenitsyn's candidature. From the Swedish ambassador in Moscow, Gunnar Jarring, came a reassuring message that unfortunately turned out not to be prophetic. He did, however, advise the Academy to wait another year before making a decision. A prize now "would lead to difficulties for our relations with the Soviet Union". He received the reply: "Yes, that could well be so, but we are agreed that Solzhenitsyn is the most deserving candidate."

This exchange clarifies something of great importance: the Academy pays no regard to what could be desirable from the viewpoint of the Foreign Office. Its unconventional – and scarcely recommendable – enquiry was aimed only at the possible consequences the decision could have for the candidate personally. But

the difference of views is also a fine example of the way a possible political *effect* can be allowed for – not of course in the sense that the possible harm to relations with the Soviet Union should be intended but that one was aware of the risk and chose to leave it out of account.

Another question of principle during the second half of the twentieth century is the choice of Czesław Miłosz in 1980. Much of the international press saw the prize as motivated by the fact that Poland had become a centre of political interest. Miłosz was, however, on the "short list" of five finalists already in May, in other, words a couple of months before the strike in Gdansk. As Artur Lundkvist reveals, this dramatic event caused several members to hesitate but at the same time find it impossible to *reject* Miłosz because of what had happened in Poland. The words illuminate an unexpected dilemma: a non-choice in these circumstances would have meant taking a political stance. The Academy took the only decision that could preserve the integrity of the prize.

A third case concerning such principles and their consequences is Ezra Pound's candidature in the late 1950s. He appealed to the Academy's new criterion with his "pioneering significance" but was disqualified by his Fascist broadcasts in Italy during the war, his praise of Hitler and Mussolini but above all his applauding of the mass murder of East European Jews. This also discredited his work, especially the later *Cantos.* In Österling›s words: "The evil spirit raises its head everywhere." The conclusion is formulated by Dag Hammarskjöld in a letter in 1959: "Such a 'subhuman' reaction [...] ought to exclude the possibility of a prize that is after all intended to lay weight on the 'idealistic direction' of the recipient's efforts."

The Academy followed that line and thus marked out a lower limit: an author who gives expression to a basic contempt for human values is in conflict with Nobel's spirit and cannot be considered for a prize.

These standpoints also illuminate the new century's practice. The international climate has, naturally, not been so sensitive as during the Soviet empire. The cases likely to cause friction have also been

less frequent. In 2000 the choice of Gao Xingjian aroused fierce irritation from the Chinese leadership and in 2005 the prize to Harold Pinter was in some quarters described as politically motivated. The former, a dissident who lived in French exile, had taken a stance against the events on Tiananmen Square. Within the Academy, it was of course obvious that a prize in these circumstances could stir up dissatisfaction in Beijing but it was, as in 1970, a circumstance not considered decisive of the choice. The Chinese authorities on their side accused the Academy of "hidden political motives". The totalitarian state, to which an academy is an instrument for its power, saw once again a political motive behind the prize.

But the most politically sensitive cases, in terms of news coverage, were the 2012 prize to Mo Yan and the 2019 prize to Peter Handke. In the former instance, it was not the prizewinner's homeland that reacted. On the contrary, critical opinion, led by Herta Müller, claimed that Mo Yan was a party man who was rewarded at the cost of her own candidate, who was a dissident. It is true that Mo Yan was a deputy chairman (one of several) in the Chinese Writers' Union, meaning he was well-respected by the leadership, but he was far from the subservient author critics saw in him. Commentators had not managed to understand how Mo Yan acted under the difficult restraints imposed upon the country's authors. It was made clear to me, at meetings with colleagues in China in the month following the decision on the prize, just how skilfully Mo Yan had manoeuvred to facilitate his own critical oeuvre and that of his fellow writers. With his bold novels he had given back to his readers their censored recent history and he had at the same time pushed at the limits of what he and his colleagues could write. This had been possible because, in addition to his literary activity, he had acted shrewdly on the political level. His colleagues saw in him a bullish Chinese peasant not given to budging to pressures.

But these pros and cons could not have been relevant to the Academy when it made its decision. The blunt criticism directed at the Academy from above all Herta Müller came as a surprise.

Handke's candidature was more cumbersome. As is now well

known, he had been a candidate for many years. He had also had a significant presence in Swedish literature. (The subject had already in the 1980s been dealt with at a doctoral seminar at Stockholm University with the participation of, among others, Stig Larsson, Katarina Frostenson and Christer Eriksson.) Handke's significance on an international level had also been manifested during several decades. But it had also been possible to follow his disputable actions during and after the war in the former Yugoslavia and arguments for and against him had had plenty of time to develop long before the current discussion.

When Handke's candidature was resumed, in 2019, the Academy's earlier stance in the question of literature and politics was revitalized. The principles illustrated by the discussions around Solzhenitsyn, Miłosz and Pound all hover over this choice, one of the most interesting in Nobel history, with the added feature that five external members were drawn in who were not familiar with the Academy's prolonged engagement in the matter.

For the side who were for Handke it should have been given, as in the case of Solzhenitsyn, that the candidate's literary quality is paramount and that the well-known political complications could be left behind. In the eyes of many, as in Miłosz' candidature, a non-choice must also have appeared to be an unjustified political consideration. But the case of Pound had also, of course, been revived. For those who favoured Handke the compromising circumstances simply did not amount to the seriousness of those which justified rejection in 1959.

That there was a division in the decision-making body became obvious when Peter Englund rejected the decision. How deeply the disagreement ran was, however, not apparent from the outside. Three of the external members defended the choice in the press and Jesper Svenbro gave a poetic turn to his stance through a poem, "The Fruit-Thief", alluding to Handke's latest novel, *Die Obstdiebin* (*Svenska Dagbladet* 23.10.2019).

The crack in the facade widened only in December in connection with the desertion of two of the committee's external mem-

bers. The one, Kristoffer Leandoer, felt that he had realized too late that he and the others had been "pawns in an internal power-game". He had understood that it was "our task to restore the Nobel Prize by making it relevant in a world which does not accept gender differences of the order of 100 to 14, and does not accept that literature can be written and read only in the language of the colonial powers". He found it "not hard to come up with proposals for worthy prizewinners who lived up to one or both of those criteria". Not unlikely, Leandoer's ambition is here representative of the expectations entertained by the external members.

Those members had felt that, in Gun-Britt Sundström's words, they were facing "decisions already made". What most likely she refers to is the fact that after the choice of a winner there remain those still on the short list, which is wholly or partly carried over to the following year's discussion, and that a new candidate cannot be a winner for that year. For an unwritten law, the so-called lex Pearl Buck, stipulates, on the basis of a hasty choice, that a candidate must have been on the short list for one year before being eligible. The external members have quite naturally experienced how the selection process in their first year was locked. It was not before their second year that their ideas could have any influence.

With regard to Handke's candidature Gun-Britt Sundström has had an important reservation. She has refused to ignore his disputed political activities: the choice has been "interpreted as an argument for the view of literature as something that stands above 'politics'. Such an ideology is not mine.«

Leandoer claims that for his part there is no doubt that Handke deserves a Nobel Prize. Yet he considers that the decision was "whipped up, without sufficient anchoring". He even thinks that there was a wish for "a thoroughly controversial prize, one that would stir up a proper hullabaloo". This is a quite absurd assertion. Those who voted for Handke have undoubtedly felt they were acting in line with the Academy's declared political integrity and have not found in Handke the contempt for human values on a

level with Pound's outrageous pronouncements. It is finally this judgement, reasonably justified or not, that is at issue.

Has the behaviour of the committee been as blunt as Leandoer and Sundström think with their talk of "power-game"? The question will have to be left to future studies. What is interesting in terms of principles is that both committee and academy had followed the guidelines that had been established in the foregoing century – but had formed a judgement with regard to the test case of Pound which allows of serious discussion.

A political complication, troublesome for forthcoming Nobel work, is indicated by a statement from the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in the summer of 2020. At a writers' conference, where Mo Yan was in the audience, Xi Jinping complained that "certain Chinese authors are not writing for the party, only in order to win western prizes" (i.e. the Nobel Prize). This marks a dramatic change from 2017. In the autumn of that year I was in China and was told that hackers had managed to break into the Academy's data and had come across the most secret of all, that year's short list! The government had decided that a Chinese candidate should be allowed to accept the prize in spite of his uncomfortable activity, and this was because of the risk of a Japanese author being awarded. (It was Kazuo Ishiguro who despite his British citizenship and a production in English was seen as Japanese.) In the general sharpening of Chinese politics in recent years, cultural politics have also hardened. Xi Jinping's remark in the summer of 2020 raises the question if a choice of a Chinese prizewinner would risk placing the recipient in the same drastic situation as Pasternak in 1958 and Solzhenitsyn in 1970. As it should be clear, these conditions are not enough to *exclude* a prize but it is a reality that has to be weighed into a possible decision.

THE NOBEL PRIZE AND WORLD LITERATURE

Can the Nobel Prize in Literature create a canon, a catalogue of recent world literature? That was the theme of the panel discussion at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris in 2000, to which The Swedish Academy was invited. In other contexts, the question has been reformulated to an imperative. The prize has, quite frankly, been assigned the task of establishing a global Parnassus – and the Academy has been criticized when its choices were considered not to serve such a purpose. It has even been demanded that the prize should be awarded to long dead masters in order to fill in the troublesome gaps in the list of winners. Those who advance such claims are blind to certain insurmountable obstacles.

Alfred Nobel himself unmistakably attributed a universal dimension to his prize: "It is my express wish that in awarding the prizes no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates, but that the most worthy shall receive the prize, whether he be a Scandinavian or not." If questioned on the matter he would most likely have added that his utopia was a literature without borders in the same way as the natural sciences lack national borders.

But the Permanent Secretary during the first decade of the literary prize, Carl David af Wirsén, would not dream of a global award. For him it was a question of crowning those he called "the leading men of letters throughout Europe". The first prize to a candidate outside Europe, to Rabindranath Tagore in 1913, the year after Wirsén's death, was a half-hearted attempt to include Asian linguistic areas. Those involved were in fact content to read Tagore in his own English translation, even though at that time there was an orientalist in their circle, Esaias Tegnér Jr., who was well capable of reading the texts in Bengali.

In the 1920s, the Nobel Committee confirmed that the prize was

"intended for the richly variegated literature of the whole world" but even the United States had to wait until the 1930s before becoming part of the picture, and it was not until 1945 that Gabriela Mistral, "the spiritual queen of the entire Latin American world", was chosen. It was only in 1968 that the prize again went outside the European linguistic circle with the choice of Kawabata.

As has been shown, it is during the 1980s that a more decisive policy comes into view, with a stated ambition to "reach a global spread", as applied in the choices of Soyinka, Mahfouz and Oe as the century ran out. In the new millenium such an aim is obvious.

What are the difficulties that pile up in the face of each effort to make the list of prizewinners into a truly international Parnassus? An immediate obstacle is chronological. Among the "neglected" names, we find for example Proust, Kafka, Rilke, Musil, Cavafy, Mandelstam, García Lorca and Pessoa – a list which would have been shocking if it had not contained just as many anachronisms. The complainers have not realized that the main works of Kafka, Cavafy and Pessoa had been published posthumously. Mandelstam's true dimensions appear mainly in the unprinted poems which his wife saved from extinction and passed on long after he had perished in his Siberian banishment. When it comes to Proust, Rilke and Garcia Lorca, much too short a time had elapsed between their relevant works and their deaths for prizes to be possible. Proust had his breakthrough with the Goncourt Prize in 1919 for the second volume of his novel series but in less than three years he was dead. As for Musil, it was only with the collected works in the period 1952-57 that his significance became clear outside the small circle of connoisseurs and by then he had been long gone. To the not so few who died from an expected prize belong the French poet and essayist Paul Valéry and the Chinese prose master Shen Congwen. A premature death makes it in this way hard to establish a *Weltliteratur* with the help of Nobel.

It is also easy to forget the flood of worthy candidates confronting the Academy before a decision. The situation is well illustrated in a questionnaire carried out by the journal *Books Abroad*

with the aim of setting up a kind of account for the first half-century of the prize, an international questionnaire sent to 350 "experts in belles-lettres". This jury found that two thirds of the choices were fortunate but at the same time it compiled a list of 150 authors worth the honour. 150 outstanding candidates for 50 prizes – that gives us an idea of the extent of the problem.

I would like to add that three deserving candidates for each prize is an approximation that a member of the Nobel Committee could endorse. A few examples follow. W. H. Auden, who was regarded with much sympathy in 1964 but had to give way to Sartre, was put forward again in 1967. The competition was then between Asturias, Auden and Graham Greene. The prize went to Asturias and the choice of the pioneer in Latin American fiction can hardly be found wanting. Two years later, there were many who wanted Malraux; he had by then left his post as Minister for Culture and won new relevance with his *Antimémoires.* But in 1969 the choice was Beckett and in the following year Solzhenitsyn, both counting as »canonical« names. With such an *embarrass de richesse,* figures like Malraux, Auden and Greene could stay close to a prize for several years without reaching a sufficient majority.

A further frustration to each attempt to make the literature prize into the creator of the Parnassus of our age is the continuous alteration of perspective. For us, Joseph Conrad stands out as one of the most serious absences. But it was a position he did not have at the time of his death in 1924. None of those who had the right to nominate in the English-speaking area reacted in time. It is equally obvious today that Paul Celan belonged among the masters of twentieth century poetry. When he died in 1970 he was not one of those whom critics most eagerly wanted to see on the list of prizewinners. The fact is that in 1966 the Academy considered a forward-looking proposal to share the prize between Celan and the closely akin Nelly Sachs. Unfortunately, the committee could not »persuade itself that his work should motivate such a place«. We ought to remind ourselves that his later work, from *Atemwende* onwards, was not yet available. The member who actually set Celan

high and who had been strongly stimulated by him in his last collection, Hjalmar Gullberg, had been dead for five years.

These various arguments, some focussing on chronology, some on the abundance of candidates, some on the shifting perspective, make clear the difficulty in any attempt to create an up to date *Weltliteratur* with the help of the Nobel Prize. What the prize can in fact achieve is a substantial *contribution* to such a canon.

A BENCHMARK

With a background of four decades of involvement in the work of the Nobel Prize in Literature, I can perhaps ask myself what the ideal prize may be. Who is the exemplary prizewinner and what kind of preliminary debate may be said to be the most constructive?

For my part the answer is easy: William Faulkner and the work that preceded his prize. The answer has gained unexpected significance during the new century.

With the choice of T. S. Eliot in 1948, Academy members knew that here was a pioneer with a thoroughgoing influence on an international level. In the discussions on Faulkner there was as yet no signs of a similar significance. The development was anticipated by investing in a pioneer with a *potentially* great significance for literature. Faulkner in fact appeared "side by side with Joyce and perhaps even more so", as the "great experimentalist among twentieth century novelists", to quote from Gustaf Hellström's award speech.

As a fortunate investment this was unique. Faulkner gradually exercised an increasing international influence. That had already started in the French *nouveau roman* where authors such as Claude Simon fetched inspiration. Later, Faulkner's novels became a powerful stimulant in the Latin American flowering, with names such as Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa. In the U.S.A. Faulkner's novels assumed a new role. The literary historian Robert E. Spiller concluded that the 1949 prize led to a rereading that revealed quite a new Faulkner. Here, if nowhere else, the Nobel Prize seems to have had a notable effect in achieving just recognition of a great author, says Spiller. Among the American authors who have learnt much from Faulkner we must count another Nobel Prizewinner, Toni Morrison.

When in 2001, in an assessment of the first century with Nobel's

legacy, I drew attention to Faulkner's special position, it was at that point impossible to suspect his thoroughgoing influence on recent Chinese literature. In the new century it has become evident that he was probably the most important source of impulses. Mo Yan told us of a dialogue that stretches across the years: "Whenever my confidence weakens, I usually have a chat with Faulkner." Inspired by the American's Yoknapatawpha County, he has created his own north-eastern region in Gaomi County, a special province where ordinary people and their actions grow into near-mythical dimensions. He lets his Gaomixian, "no bigger than a postage stamp", become "a China in miniature" reflecting the country's recent history. It is not unlikely that he has also been stimulated by Faulkner's highly vivid character-drawing and his bold and varied story-telling methods.

It can in fact be asked if any other author in the twentieth century has had an influence as powerful as Faulkner's. Here the literary prize, in mid-century, anticipated its then incompletely formulated mission to raise into wider view a master not generally known. But Faulkner has not only conquered a new readership; he has also been able to inspire a series of younger colleagues. Perhaps no other prize has meant more than that of 1949.

What then about the procedure which led to such a splendid result?

In Sweden Faulkner had been noticed relatively early – not unexpectedly by Artur Lundkvist, who had already presented him in the 1932 November number of *BLM,* and later in a longer essay in *The Flight of Icarus.* When that book appeared, in 1939, he and his friend Erik Lindegren shared their fascination with Faulkner's novels. In his review in *Frihet* of *The Flight of Icarus,* Lindegren called Faulkner "the high voltage line in the most modern fiction" and blamed the "many critics with well-rewarded and well-oiled moral inhibition mechanisms" who "pushed forward with their doomsday placards".

We can say then that among Swedish authors acquainted with modern writing Faulkner was well established by 1950, when

Swedish PEN, through its chairman Prince Wilhelm, nominated him for the prize.

With its ambition to choose "pioneers", the Academy has been a sympathetic receiver of the proposal. Gustaf Hellström, well-versed in English literature, was asked for a report. It is a remarkable coincidence that someone who was counted as belonging to the 1910 bourgeois realists and who, with *Lacemaker Lekholm Has an Idea* (1927), created the great novel of Swedish social changes, should now launch the most influential modernist on the list of winners. His report sees Faulkner as "for the time being, one of the foremost figures not only in the American novel but in English fiction in general". He stresses in part Faulkner's "passionate imaginative powers and his intense psychological characterization", in part "his narrative technique, varying from novel to novel". "The same desire to experiment is shown in his mastery – unrivalled in the modern Anglo-Saxon novel – of the riches of the English language, riches derived from its different linguistic elements and the periodic changes in style, from the spirit of the Elizabethans down to the scanty vocabulary of the Negroes of the southern states." In the light of the Academy's recent aversion to all kinds of complication, Hellström's analysis of *Absalom, Absalom!*, "Faulkner's most difficult work", seems particularly impressive. His reading widens into a defence against the objections that the work was a failure: "We witness the release of a powerful, indeed overwhelming creative energy; it is only geniuses who can fail like this." Hellström sees the book as "one of the most original and most fascinating novels written in a long time".

With subtle intuition, he guides the Academy into this difficult terrain by drawing parallels to a familiar and loved narrative art. He compares Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County with Selma Lagerlöf's Värmland and places his Jefferson City beside Hjalmar Bergman's Wadköping. At the same time, he shows how Faulkner – like the two Swedish storytellers "both a romantic and a realist" – shares Lagerlöf's belief that no one escapes their punishment or is deprived of a just compassion. The American author is also said

to share something of Bergman's grotesque sense of humour. But his scene, according to Hellström, is darker and more bloody and its social background far from the stable legality of the Swedish authors. Wíth this skilfull guidance in Faulkner's world, Hellström succeeded in persuading the Academy to favour a prize for a difficult pioneer. The first member he won over for his candidate was the Nobel Committee's chairman, Anders Österling, who had had doubts about "the deeply depressive themes" which Faulkner prefers to deal with. That hardly reflected "the demand of a consolatory or in some way positive view of life which was in all likelihood intended in the guidelines of an idealistic direction". But, he adds, "his artistic integrity is so strong and original that one finally hesitates to apply such a measurement to his novels". Österling was therefore for his part ready to align himself with Hellström's "clearly considered" evaluation of Faulkner's "narrative genius". He thought too that Faulkner's "position in the literary world" was so well qualified that a prize would be enthusiastically welcomed in both America and Europe.

For 1950 the committee unanimously proposed Bertrand Russell. In the event of the Academy deciding to give also the reserved prize for 1949, Österling proposed Faulkner. The rest of the committee did not support this but fortunately a majority in the Academy did.

This was how the 1949 prize was given to a "difficult" pioneer whose eventual international breakthrough was as yet unknown. That the Academy could take on a so demanding candidate and invest in his renewing power gave prominence to the perhaps greatest inspirer in the century's art of fiction. In my eyes this is the most admirable investment in the history of the Prize in Literature. For the more recent Academy, entrusted with carrying that history forward, the 1949 choice stands out as a lasting challenge.