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A Nobel Sensibility

Horace Engdahl

Because of the attention that the literature prize attracts across the world and because of its prestige, the Nobel laureates have inevitably come to be seen as forming a kind of modern canon. This has provoked the critical reproach that many of the 20th century's greatest writers are missing from the list, and that it includes too few women and not enough non-Europeans.

I believe that the Academy members who comprised that first Nobel Committee in 1901 would have been terrified had they realized what they were about to set in motion. Certainly in those first few years no one thought of the prize as a means to define a canon. (Nor was the concept of a canon applied to contemporary literature—that is a late development.) Alfred Nobel's will intends to reward a literary work published in the previous year—a single book, not a body of writing. Nobel clearly wanted the literature prize to act in the

present, rather than crown masters for all time. As it turned out, the Swedish Academy gave the prize a distinctly monumental character. In doing so, it could appeal to the wording of the Nobel Foundation's statutes, the final document that directs the activity of the Nobel Prize committees. According to the statutes, older works may be awarded, "if their significance has not become apparent until recently." This concession was used to motivate the practice of considering a lifetime's creativity rather than an individual work. The phrase "during the preceding year" was interpreted in a broader sense, as a demand for the continued viability of a work.

Today, the annual crowning of a Nobel laureate for literature—an individual often removed from the regions of the world which are the focus of international interest, writing in a language outside the broad sweep of western literature—suggests

that the concept of a single body of works that drives and defines global creativity is an anachronism. If we want to consider the possibility of a truly Global Canon, it might be best to look at the intellectual tradition from which Alfred Nobel inherited his idea of literature.

When Nobel was in the process of drawing up his famous will, his friend Bertha von Suttner, the peace activist and writer, gave him the first issue of *Magazine International*, a journal first published in 1894 by an international artists' union. His copy of the magazine is preserved in the Nobel Library of the Swedish Academy. On the cover is the famous passage from Goethe's conversations with his longtime personal secretary Johann Eckermann, where the term "*Weltliteratur*" appears for the first time: *Nationalliteratur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Weltliteratur ist an der Zeit, und jeder muss jetzt dazu wirken, diese Epoche zu beschleunigen.* ("National literature has no great meaning today; the time has come for world literature, and each and every one of us should work to hasten the day.")

In his will, Nobel declared that it was his "express wish that in awarding the prizes no consideration whatsoever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates." The prize is intended as an award for individual achievements and is not given to writers as representatives of nations or languages nor of any social, ethnic or gender group. There is nothing in the will about striving for a "just" distribution of the prize, whatever that could be. What was vital for Nobel was that the prize-winning author should have contributed to humanity's improvement ("conferred the greatest benefit to mankind"), not that the prize should flatter any collective self-esteem.

The deficiency of a strictly nation-based concept of literature is evident from a glance at the list of prize-winners from 1901 to the present day. For several of the

winners, exile, whether internal or external, has been the inescapable condition of their work. The reading public and literary opinion-makers in their home countries have generally preferred other writers to those selected by the Academy. In authoritarian or strongly traditional societies, laureates have often been perceived as outsiders or dissidents. The issue of a writer's authenticity tends to be questioned as some sort of ideological crime, as two recent examples suggest.

Exotic Guises?

In 2000, the Chinese government proclaimed that Gao Xingjian was not a genuinely Chinese writer and congratulated France on the prize. Conservative nationalists in Turkey expressed similar sentiments in the case of Orhan Pamuk in 2006; they branded his work as being too strongly influenced by western values. Oddly enough, the same demand for a writer to be loyal to his origins is voiced by post-colonial western intellectuals. Critics with these convictions have argued that, in giving the prize to writers such as V.S. Naipaul, Gao Xingjian and Orhan Pamuk, the Academy was actually rewarding European literature (or today's iteration of the longstanding western Canon) in an exotic guise, thereby joining forces with cultural imperialism.

But writing has always, in some sense, required deserting one's own kind. Great authors are often nomads, difficult to classify ethnically or linguistically. It is striking how many prize-winners have had problematic nationalities. Samuel Beckett was an Irishman who wrote in French. Elias Canetti was a British subject of Jewish origin from Bulgaria whose literary language was German. The Brodsky who won the prize no longer called himself Iosif but Joseph and was bilingual as a poet (Russian and English). Nelly Sachs



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belongs to German literature but not to Germany, nor to Sweden, where she spent most of her life. Isaac Bashevis Singer was anchored in Yiddish and in English, and his imaginative recreation of the vanished Jewish culture of Eastern Europe presupposed the distance of a foreign shore and a modern, secular society.

Despite the half century it took for the Academy's Nobel Committee fully to accept literary modernism, the Nobel Prize in Literature has from the very first been an expression of modernity. The preconditions for the award of the prize are the freedom of thought and the cosmopolitanism that was upheld by the Enlightenment. In the field of scientific research, a kind of international republic of learned people developed as early as the 17th century, with Latin as its mother tongue. Bacon and Descartes were among this republic's legislators. Perhaps Goethe, in minting

the term *Weltliteratur* in 1827, believed the time had come to establish a similar cross-border community for literature. Earlier, in her essays and novels, Mme de Staël had attempted to interpret the great European cultural nations. Prejudices were destroyed and literary news was suddenly transported at great speed. This was the internationalism lauded by Georg Brandes in the first part of his "Main Currents of the Nineteenth Century," "The Emigré Literature," with Mme de Staël cast as the heroine. If we study the relevant part of Eckermann's "Gespräche mit Goethe," it transpires that Goethe's "world literature" did not signify a huge compendium of all literature written by all peoples but rather the possibility of dialogue between different cultures through their great writers. In "West-östlicher Divan," Goethe had set an example by playing with a double identity as a German and a Persian poet.

The intellectual underpinning for the views expressed by Mme de Staël and Goethe was created around 1800, by the circle of German geniuses that centered on the brother poets and essayists Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel. For the first time, the idea was expounded that western literature comprised a spiritual whole with an autonomous, historical development. In his lectures, Friedrich Schlegel described literature as an enormous organism in which every part interacts with every other. In this magnificent historical-philosophical construct he found room for the poets of antiquity, the Middle Ages and of the new age, and for both the Roman and the German peoples. (There was as yet little coming from the Slavic regions.) Thus he delineated what we regard as our Western Canon, stretching from Homer to Goethe and onward.

A few decades later, German scholars tackled the immense chore of charting the literary development of all civilized peoples beyond the western sphere. The first “history of world literature” appears to be Karl Rosenkranz’s “Handbuch einer allgemeinen Geschichte der Poesie,” published in three volumes in Halle, Germany in 1832–33. Thus, the idea of a Global Canon has antecedents that go back at least two centuries. When the Nobel Prize was instituted in 1901, one might have expected a more cosmopolitan distribution of the awards, but as it turned out, the Europeans came to dominate during the first decades, a brilliant exception being the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, in 1913. Western dominance has never quite faded from the list of literary laureates, although the exceptions have become more frequent since the 1980s. Indeed, in the current discussion of world literature, the idea of a center and a periphery plays a prominent role. The Nobel Prize is often criticized as an expression of literary values characteristic of the nucleus of the western cultural sphere.

Center vs. Periphery

Franco Moretti’s theory of diffusion presents an influential description of the literary inequality between center and periphery. Moretti maintains that the life of literature consists of waves of influences flowing from the center, disturbing local development. The result is a great degree of uniformity, as regions are progressively pulled into a common market of books and values. According to Moretti, the phenomenon was first observed in the wave of Petrarchism that washed across Europe during the Renaissance. In the 18th century, the poetry of all European countries was largely adapted to French models. But at the same time, the pattern from the center was applied in different ways on the periphery, depending on local traditions. The result is often a hybrid—the center combining with material and narrative voice from the periphery. The barbarism of the fringes is revealed in their inability to achieve the aloof aestheticism that characterizes the center’s attitude. Moretti’s argument, drastically paraphrased, is that literature is a special form of malevolence invented by the French that the rest of the world tries to learn with no definitive success.

But from the viewpoint of the Nobel process, the literary system in fact appears far from unified and centralized. Every nation seems to have its own idea of world literature. There is no neutral ground or transnational vision shared by all. On the contrary, it can be seen everywhere that national canons pierce the international, not only in the sense that national writers are granted a special place but also in the different choices of foreign classics.

In Sweden, for example, more authors from the Nordic countries become a part of their own canon than enter the perception of readers in England or Italy. Such a phenomenon also encompasses older clas-

sics. Chekhov is a more canonical author in the West than in Russia (in the sense of being looked upon as a model author), while the opposite is true for Pushkin. For an observer from a small country this effect is especially obvious, while critics from the great nations are often convinced that the canon of their own country is the universal one.

As a member of the Nobel Committee, one cannot hope to take a purely theoretical view of the subject. "World literature" shifts from a descriptive term to something of a performative phrase. Rather than designating the bulk of literature existing world-wide, it signifies a context into which we hope to bring the winning body of work.

In what way, then, does the literary Nobel Prize herald the dawn of a future Global Canon, a different kind of canon? First, simply by being an event—attracting world-wide attention for its choices, thus giving support to the idea that a great book, regardless of its language and background, belongs to the readers of all the world. Second, by looking at authors as individuals and not as representatives. This not only means being open to good candidates from every corner of the earth. It also means turning a deaf ear to the demands that the Academy should let itself be guided by good intentions rather than good judgment. It means playing down the whole issue of origin.

An International Reading List

A Global Canon of literature can hardly take the form of a commonly accepted international reading list, resembling the curricula once designed to underpin the pride and identity of nation states. The hope of the periphery of working itself

onto such a list is futile. Nothing would be gained. The legitimacy of a balanced canon would immediately be questioned, if it were the result of political pressure or benevolent compromise. Literary recognition cannot be commanded or negotiated. Even with the support of the most favored source of cultural authority,

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a work can fail miserably.

Will there be a Global Canon? If so, it will have to base itself on other needs, and must assume other functions, than classical canons. It will not be a hierarchy of works that serve to define a common ideal of excellence, but rather a literary space—a field of presentation larger than any particular tradition or aesthetic creed. Such a field exists and has existed for a long time, despite the obvious ethnocentricity of literary teaching, and despite the dominance of European models in much of the writing from the last hundred years.

World literature in the future will not, as some people seem to imagine, be equivalent to books written in English by authors of different nations. The working language of international business, diplomacy, science, and entertainment holds no similar privilege in the literary field. In the realm of literature, there is no universal language other than translation. A new canon with a global perspective will not be the outcome of a rejection of native tongues. On the contrary, it will destroy the illusion of a monolingual future. ●