

THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE—A “POLITICAL” AWARD

Anders Olsson, member of the Swedish Academy, which awards the Prize: “It is not a political prize; it is a literary prize” (2019). That statement needs some refining and specifying. It is understandably somewhat defensive, just as the founding of the Prize by Alfred Nobel was based on bad conscience, as he admitted and as its language suggests.

Founded in 1901 to acknowledge “the most outstanding work *in an ideal direction*.” Nobel invented dynamite for essentially peaceful purposes but found his invention coopted for munitions. Dynamite itself reflects the energies of the Industrial Revolution. The very founding of the award was, then, inevitably political in several direct and indirect senses.

The selection process itself involves politicking. The nomination process is understandably restricted, and the deliberations of the Academy are meant to be secret for fifty years after the award. 1) But there is intense lobbying, jockeying, arm-twisting, gossip, and strategic leaking. 2) That degree of secrecy, here as with other institutions, is virtually an invitation for abuse and power games—not surprising, then, that it bred a climate where sexual abuse could long flourish until the scandals broke open in 2016 and 2017.

The award is political in the broad sense of inevitably mirroring cultural concerns and values. 1) In its first ten years, the prize went to writers who praised technical progress as human advancement and exhibited an “onward-and-upward” optimism—Sully Prudhomme (1901); Henryk Sienkiewicz (1905); Giosuè Carducci (1906); Romain Rolland (1915); no scope for pessimism, irony, social criticism. 2) This dynamic excluded many writers, all considered outstanding, who were nominated but not considered—Leo Tolstoy; Anton Chekhov; Mark Twain; Marcel Proust; Franz Kafka; Henry James; James Joyce; Virginia Woolf—because they lacked a culturally upbeat approach and/or were too experimental in technique.

The award is used politically to reward or rebuke governments and regimes. 1) “Good” governments—Thomas Mann (1929) and Heinrich Böll (1972) representing a free and democratic Germany; Winston Churchill (1953) rewarded more for his political status than his literary stature; Bob Dylan (2016) given the award less than a month before the election that would bring Donald Trump to office. 2) “Bad” governments—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1970) (Soviet Union); Pablo Neruda (1971) (Chile); Ömer Pamuk (2006) (Turkey). In these last three instances, it was easy to predict the winners once the long list was announced.

“Political” priorities reveal cultural value systems. 1) After World War II, the prize went to a series of highly traditional-minded and spiritual-humanistic-religious authors—Hermann Hesse (1946); T. S. Eliot (1948); William Faulkner (1949); François Mauriac (1952). 2) The emphasis but not the spiritual principle shifted thereafter to writers of existentialist intensity—Albert Camus (1957); Samuel Beckett (1969); Saul Bellow (1976); Isaac Bashevis Singer (1978). “Ideal direction” has been radically recast but not necessarily rethought.

And now the political outrage, furor, and widespread reaction, much of it explosive, to this year’s award to Peter Handke. Protests, especially by PEN and many writers, especially German-language ones, for upholding Serbian genocide during the Balkan Wars and for his fierce advocacy of Slobodan Milosevic and the massacres he led. “I’m standing at my garden gate and there are 50 journalists – and all of them just ask me questions like you do, and from not a single person who comes to me I hear they have read any of my works or know what I have written.” But largely condemned, and emphatically so, by writers who DO know his work—Aleksandr Hemon, Saša Stanišić, and many others. The quality of his other work is completely obliterated by the condemnations. (Is Handke pursuing a romantic idyll influenced by his Serbian mother?)

We are back to the beginning—what is “politics” in literature, what role does it play, and what account needs to be taken of it?