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The Nobel Prize for Literature in Its Second Century

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to survey the decisions of the Swedish Academy in awarding Nobel Prizes in Literature in the twenty-first century in an effort to judge whether these decisions represent an improvement over the sometimes peculiar choices made in the first decade, and the first century, of the award. Various criticisms of the Literature Nobel are canvassed, most importantly the question of idealism, as demanded by Alfred Nobel's will; the omission of major authors and the inclusion of minor ones; the evident bias toward European authors over those from the rest of the globe and (particularly recently) toward writers in English; the article queries whether these objections have been answered by the Nobel procedures of the period 2001-2023. Finally, there is an account of the turmoil produced by a scandal that included accusations of sexual molestation, improper financial self-dealing, and even gambling on the basis of inside information provided by a member of the Swedish Academy, and tries to balance the damage undoubtedly caused to the prestige of the Nobel Prize in Literature with the built-in difficulties of getting such a prize right, as well as the claim from some observers that the Nobel no longer matters.

Keywords: Nobel Prize, idealism, Eurocentrism, scandal, Swedish Academy, #MeToo, gender

The 2001 Nobel Prize in Literature, won by V. S. Naipaul, inaugurated the second century of this, the most famous and arguably most important of all literary prizes. Looking back over a quarter of that second century

provides a good occasion to inquire about the health, the judiciousness, even (if such a thing can be assessed) the fairness or justice of the Literature Nobel. Its fame has purchased much controversy in the past hundred and twenty-three years. Some of that is probably inescapable either because of the subjectivity of such a choice in Literature (surely there are more objective criteria in Chemistry or Medicine) or because of structural peculiarities in the criteria established by Alfred Nobel. Others result from the vagaries of the Swedish Academy or the unpredictable nature of the laureates themselves. (That some laureates have later behaved strangely, consorted with Nazis or written in praise of Stalin, is not of course a fundamental flaw in the Nobel Prize.) Some of the reasons for dissatisfaction with the Prize are historic, then, and date from its nineteenth-century beginnings (Nobel died in 1896); others are new in the 21st century, and those may be the most destructive.

The Nobel Prize in Literature has always had its critics, who point to the obscurity and mediocrity of some of the winners, the Eurocentrism and even Swedo-centrism of its choices, and the omission of more deserving candidates. From the beginning, there was outrage over the exclusion of Leo Tolstoy, Henrik Ibsen, and August Strindberg, and, as the years have gone on, more and more artists of the first rank have been ignored. The classic example is James Joyce. There are, of course, some excuses, including the failure of some of these famous authors to have received a nomination (though the Academy itself can nominate); and, as Anne Crittenden points out,

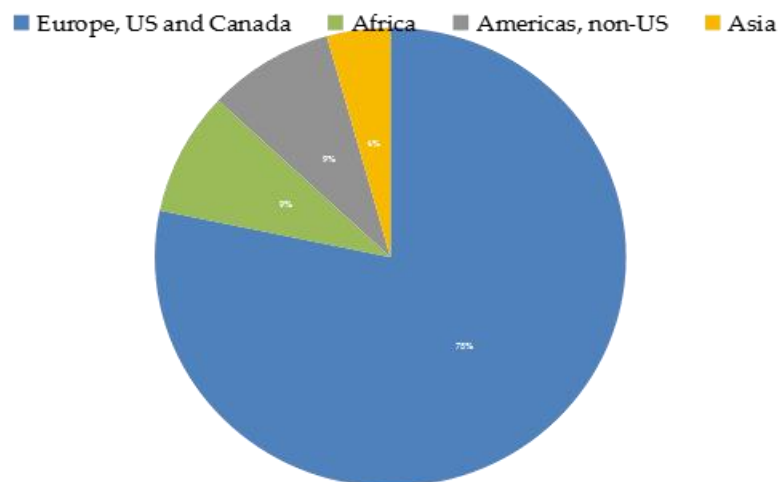
We can blame some of this on Alfred Nobel himself. Part of the problem in the early years was the selection committee's faithful adherence to Nobel's eligibility requirements, as laid out in his will. He decreed that the winners should exhibit 'lofty and sound idealism.' A winner should have produced 'the most outstanding body of work in an ideal direction.' That apparently ruled out Twain and Henry James . . .¹

Some of its sternest critics have included winners, such as George Bernard Shaw, the winner in 1925, who declared that "I can forgive Alfred Nobel for having invented dynamite, but only a fiend in human form could have invented the Nobel Prize" ("When a Nobel"). Having initially refused it, he changed his mind and accepted the award, but not

the money that accompanied it, saying he had enough money, and asking that it be used to translate the works of August Strindberg into English. Jean-Paul Sartre famously declined the award.

But the second century may have drawn more global and more dramatic critiques of the Literature Nobel, as evident from headlines like “Do We Still Need the Nobel Prize in Literature?,” “Why the Nobel Prize Is No Longer Noble,” “What Happened to the Nobel Prize in Literature,” “What’s Wrong with the Nobel Prize in Literature?,” and “The Nobel Prize in Literature Is Prestigious, Lucrative and Bonkers.” Christopher Hitchens, objecting particularly to the award to Harold Pinter in 2005, referred to “the almost complete degradation of the Nobel racket” (qtd. in Weales 603). Pinter used his Nobel Prize speech to denounce the United States for its foreign policy and specifically the war in Iraq, of which Hitchens was a defender.

First, review a few facts about the second century’s awards. In twenty-three years, there have been twenty-three winners. This is more unusual than it may appear. In the first ten years, there were eleven winners due to a shared award in 1904; in the next decade, there were ten winners, accomplished by skipping 1914 and doubling up in 1917; in the 1940s, there were only seven winners, the Prize not having been awarded for several years during the Second World War.

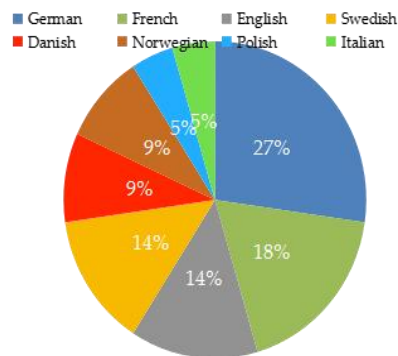


Countries of Origin, Nobel Prize winners in Literature, 2001-2023

The twenty-first century has seen a broader distribution in the countries from which winners come, including prizes for authors from Peru, China, Tanzania, South Africa, in what seems an effort by the academy to counteract what Alex Shepherd calls the “haughtiness . . . evident in the Nobel’s narrow geographic outlook, which slighted non-European writers.” In the twenty-first century, the winners have represented eighteen different countries, but, on closer examination, thirteen of those countries are either European or North American. Three laureates are from France, three from the UK (and V. S. Naipaul is almost another, despite his Trinidadian citizenship).

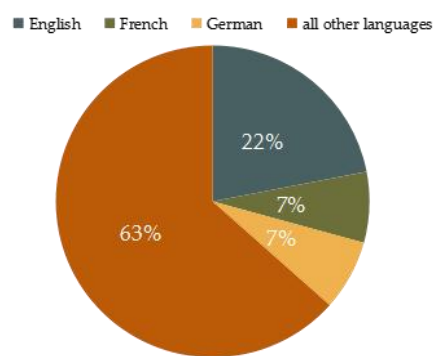
The greater global reach of Laureates somewhat obscures the narrower range of languages, that is, the domination of English. Beyond the winners from the US, Canada, and the UK, the authors from Tanzania, Trinidad, and South Africa write in English. Perhaps the increasing dominance of English as a world language provides some explanation – though perhaps not enough.ⁱⁱ

Languages, 1901-1923



The first twenty-three years

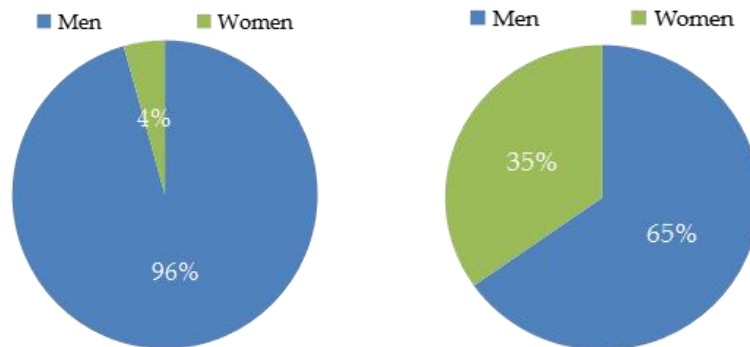
Languages 2001-2023



2001-2023

The historic imbalance of the genders – there have been 17 women among the 119 winners – has been somewhat ameliorated in the second century, with 8 female winners alongside 15 men.

Despite this correction, men have still outnumbered women in the second century.



Several of the objections that have in the past been lodged against the results of the Nobel process in the 21st century – inequity among the genders, bias toward the West, or toward English – have been made almost as long as there has been a Nobel Prize in Literature. They can be divided into those built into the competition by Nobel’s will and those arising from the way the Swedish Academy has operated, although these two categories interact, since Nobel’s will stipulated the involvement of the Academy.

The Will

Nobel’s final will – he had made others earlier, with great or lesser emphasis on peace and prizes – was, in the words of Burton Feldman, “a masterpiece of legal ambiguities, vagueness, and omissions” (40). The portion which established the five Nobel Prizes is no more than one long paragraph. Among the most significant, and in some cases, troublesome, provisions are these: the income from the investment of most of his fortune “shall be annually awarded in prizes to those persons who shall have contributed most materially to benefit mankind during the year immediately preceding” (Feldman 41), and “I declare it to be my express

desire that, in the awarding of prizes, no consideration whatsoever be paid to the nationality of the candidates, that is to say, that the most deserving be awarded the prize, whether of Scandinavian origin or not” (Feldman 41).

The second clause is noble and quite admirably disclaims any local bias, making all the world’s literature the proper field for the Nobel Prize. This is a noble intention. That eight Swedish authors have won the Prize, equal to the number from India, China, and the continent of Africa combined; that the only posthumously awarded Literature Nobel was given to a Swedeⁱⁱⁱ; that, in 1974, two Swedes (Harry Martinson and Eyvind Johnson) who, intriguingly, were themselves members of the Swedish Academy that chose the winners, shared the Prize: all these suggest that the Academy has never quite got to the point of choosing winners “whether of Scandinavian origin or not.” And, beyond the disproportionate recognition of Swedes and Scandinavians, there is an obvious bias in favor of Europeans and North Americans.

The first of these clauses has caused the most trouble, across the range of prizes. To begin with, it establishes a timeline that immediately proved unworkable. Nominations are made in February of one year; if awards had to be based on activity in the previous year, that is, conceivably as recently as three months earlier, this would prove a crippling limitation. Particularly in Literature, this criterion was immediately waived by the Nobel Committee, and, in fact, Literature Nobel Prizes have now come to be seen as lifetime achievement awards, rather than recognition for an accomplishment of the previous year. That this was so in the early years is appreciable from the advanced age of the early laureates: the first six years (including one shared award) saw prizewinners aged 62, 85, 71, 74, 72, 59, and 71, and two of those men died the very year after receiving the prize.^{iv} One consequence is that prizes often seem to be based on work that not only was not published the previous year, but is very far in the past.^v As early as 1925, Annie Russell Marble was commenting, “Not wholly without foundation is the comment that too many of the awards in literature have been ‘tombstones rather than stepping-stones’” (17). T. S. Eliot “called the prize ‘a nail in an author’s coffin.’ The critic Herbert Howarth put it as gravely: the Nobel

prize is like ‘a death mask on fulfilled grandeur’” (Feldman 57). More complex, since it is not so easily ignored, is the “benefit to mankind” clause. It is not difficult to understand the benefit to mankind accruing from, say, the discovery of insulin, or Marie Curie’s researches in radioactivity; it is harder to make this case for a work, or even a career’s work, of literature.

Two more difficult phrases in Nobel’s will affect only the Prize in Literature: “one share [i.e. prize] to the person who shall have produced in the field of Literature the most distinguished work of an idealistic tendency,” and “the prize for Literature [shall be awarded] by the Academy in Stockholm . . .” (Feldman 41). Even “have produced the most distinguished work” can be read in more than one way. Does it mean “one work of literature”? Sometimes, apparently, it does. The Academy stipulated that Ernest Hemingway’s 1954 prize was for his book *The Old Man and the Sea* (published in 1952) and seldom recognized by critics as his best work. Or does it mean a distinguished *oeuvre*? This is the customary interpretation.

There has never been consensus on what is meant by “an idealistic tendency,” though, in the early years of the Prize, the rather conservative judges seem to have construed this as meaning in favor of Christianity, patriotism, marriage, and governmental status quo. At other times, perhaps most signally in the 1930s, it seems to have been construed as “populist” anti-elitist, open to the appreciation of all people (the 1938 choice of Pearl Buck, otherwise inexplicable, is sometimes attributed to this motive); at times, it seems to have pointed to the status of Nobelists as dissidents (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Boris Pasternak, Nadine Gordimer). The term is still available to deploy against winners who seem too nihilist or too politically committed to an unpopular cause – most recently in the case of Peter Handke, winner in 2019, who was an enthusiastic supporter of Slobodan Milošević and the Serbian cause in the Balkan War.

And, finally, there is “the Academy in Stockholm.” This was recognized as referring to the Swedish Academy, a dignified body created by King Gustav III in 1786. Its historic purpose was “to develop the purity, strength and nobility of the Swedish tongue” (Jewell 98). Like academies in other countries, it has historically been conservative, dedicated to the

stability and protection of the Swedish language; it maintains a list of words recognized as Swedish and has been working on a dictionary of the language for more than a century (Brown). There were hesitations and reservations among the Academicians about accepting the responsibility. Some members wished to decline the assignment (for which no compensation was designated), fearing that it would detract from the Academy's real business and turn it into "a cosmopolitan tribunal of literature." Those in favor argued that refusal would harm "the great figures of continental literature," and the Academy would be criticized if it failed to "acquire an influential position in world literature." They also liked "the enormous power and prestige that the Nobel will bequeath to the Eighteen" (Espmark). (The Eighteen, always capitalized, is how the members of the academy refer to themselves.)

To sum up: dissatisfactions with the Nobel Prize in Literature have resulted from unhappiness with the Swedish Academy; with the omission of deserving recipients; with the Eurocentric bias in selection of laureates; and with the obscurity or fame of those chosen.

This last objection, when made retrospectively or historically, takes the form of asking, "who in the world was Sully Prudhomme (1901) or Frans Eemil Sillanpää (1939)?" That these names are unfamiliar today is no reliable guarantee that they were undeserving at the time, and no one can predict with any confidence how V. S. Naipaul (2001) or Annie Ernaux (2022) will be remembered in a century. Renee Winegarten's sensible reminder of "how far from simple it is to distinguish the great and possibly obscure genius of one's own day from the modish author of talent" (65) should temper the desire to damn the Academy for previous winners now become obscure. The whirligig of time brings in his revenges and the reputation of Rudyard Kipling, very high when he won in 1907, has declined precipitously since then, only to rebound. There may yet be a great and unexpected Sinclair Lewis or Bjornstjerne Bjornson revival.

Charges of obscurity leveled at contemporary winners are a different matter. A typical complaint by Tunku Varadarajan in the *Wall Street Journal* is entitled "The Nobel Prize in Obscure Literature." Varadarajan begins by noting that the Nobel Prize had just been awarded

to someone he had never read (Abdulrazak Gurnah). One might note that almost all the writers in the world belong in the class “a writer I’ve never read” to even the most voracious reader, and Varadarajan acknowledges the possibility that his admission makes him a philistine. But he goes on to accuse the Swedish judges of a “fetish for obscurity.” He also acknowledges the possible role of English-language bias in complaints about obscure choices; many of the 21st-century laureates do not write in English, and the tendency of readers in the UK and US to read only in English and of their publishers to produce very few translations calls into question the credentials of an American reader to pronounce on the obscurity of Elfriede Jelinek or Jon Fosse. (Fosse is something of a special case, since he writes in Nynorsk, a special version of Norwegian that not even all the five and a half million Norwegians can read. Gurnah, a Tanzanian, writes in English). Varadarajan does give equal dismayed attention to the English-writing American Nobel laureate Louise Glück, whom he calls “a very recondite American poet [who] was foisted on an unsuspecting world as the lit laureate. Even in her own country, yawns of consternation were heard.”

The objection to those who are thought to be obscure winners is the obverse to complaints about the oversight of more deserving authors, among whom the American Philip Roth, the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, the Canadian Margaret Atwood and Indian-born British novelist Salman Rushdie have been frequently mentioned 21st-century possibilities. Ngũgĩ writes in Kikuyu, a possibly crippling disadvantage, and it is noticeable that the others all write in English. It is undoubtedly true that, at any given time, there are more deserving authors than a single prize a year can properly honor, despite the best efforts of the jury.

But what about winners who are not *obscure enough*? Shepherd, writing in the *New Republic* in 2017, begins with what she calls a standard joke, that the Nobel Prize in Literature is an award for Estonian poets. (This is funny, of course, mostly to those convinced that it is for novelists who write in English.) Shepherd goes on to discern a trend in which “the Nobel Committee for Literature has decided to expand the scope of a prize that had gained a reputation for trawling the hidden corners of Europe for under-read gems.” She cites Bob Dylan’s popularity and Svetlana

Alexievich's nonfiction oeuvre, outside the usual range of belles-lettres as examples:

The Nobel is also casting off its elitist reputation. After the Italian comic writer Dario Fo won, members of the Committee told Fo's publisher that awarding the prize to frontrunners Salman Rushdie or Arthur Miller would have been 'too predictable, too popular.' Those days seem to be behind the Nobel, at least for now. (Pity Philip Roth, who retired before the Nobel Committee could come around to popular writers like Philip Roth.) (Shepherd)

Shepherd admires the new trend, which she calls "fun." Critics who do not are most upset over the 2016 award to Bob Dylan. Complaints that his songs are by definition *not poetry* or *not literature* seem picayune. Lyric poetry has often constituted song lyrics; presumably, Sappho's lines were sung, as were Homer's. The different argument, that Dylan's lyrics are *not good enough* for the Nobel, is the kind of subjective judgment to which every award is vulnerable. The main complaints were that the award denied "real authors" a chance. Some accused the Academy of laziness of "dumbing down," of abandoning standards; some linked the award to a culture in which Donald Trump could be elected president; some said that Dylan might be great, but he did not *need* the award, having received so much recognition already. His response, failing to respond in any way for some time, declining to go to Stockholm for the presentation, and delivering an address which some observers consider plagiarized, has done nothing to placate critics of the decision. The most vivid denunciation must have been that of Scottish novelist Irvine Welsh: "I'm a Dylan fan, but this is an ill-conceived nostalgia award wrenched from the rancid prostates of senile, gibbering hippies" (qtd. in Carbonara).

The twenty-first century *has* done something to remedy the shortage of Nobelists from outside of Europe and North America. The number of Chinese winners doubled, from one to two; the number of Africans increased by two, though the fact that of the five winners from that continent, two are white South Africans writing in English does little to increase representation of the African majority. Undoubtedly, the Swedish Academy is aware of the criticism of its decisions on this score. Presumably, attitudes have changed since one member of the Academy

commented on the rest of the world, specifically the Asian and African countries: “I doubt if there is very much to find there” (Feldman 110). He went on to say “The Nobel Prize is after all a Western institution and cannot reasonably be distributed on the basis of other than Western evaluations” (110-111). Richard Jewell records a similar diagnosis: “The Western canon, white and masculine, emphasizes plot, lofty idealism, and a traditional ‘great style’; often only in its own shadow does it see nonwhite and female literature with values and styles that are different. Yet these different values and styles are not part of the shadow of Western literature but rather a different expression” (108). Bernth Lindfors quotes a Nigerian critic who says that the Nobel Prize is “neither a world prize nor a reward for excellence; rather, it is a western European award for those who render specific kinds of service to Western power and Western global hegemony . . .” (Lindfors 222).

Many observers – though not the official spokespersons for the Academy – make the really unanswerable point that linguistic ability or inability plays a major role in all the decisions, particularly as regards the non-European cultures and languages. “Of course, it would be exceedingly difficult,” Lindfors acknowledges, “for any jury of eighteen, even with the help of an army of translators, to monitor literary production in all the languages of the world. Nonetheless, until the members of the Swedish Academy make an honest effort to do so, their judgments will continue to be open to charges of bias, chauvinism, parochialism, and outright racism” (222). An anonymous author writing in *The Economist* notes that – at least in principle –

the judges choose from all living writers, writing in every language in the world (of which there are 7,000). It is, acknowledges Mr Olsson, ‘an immense’ task. And, naturally, a nonsense one. The six members of the judging committee are not considering the oeuvre of every Irish author writing in Gaelic or every Papua New Guinean one writing in Hiri Motu.^{vi} (“The Nobel Prize in Literature Is Prestigious, Lucrative”)

Tim Parks offers a sympathetic commentary both on the workload – that is, the enormous amount of reading expected of the judges – and on the linguistic challenge of trying to

compare a poet from Indonesia, perhaps translated into English with a novelist from Cameroon, perhaps available only in French, and another who writes in Afrikaans but is published in German and Dutch and then a towering celebrity like Philip Roth, who they could of course read in English, but might equally feel tempted, if only out of a sense of exhaustion, to look at in Swedish. What a relief then from time to time to say, the hell with it and give it to a Swede, in this case an octogenarian acknowledged as his nation's finest living poet [Tomas Tranströmer, Nobel Prize 2011] and a man whose whole oeuvre . . . could fit into a single slim paperback. A winner, in short, whom the whole jury can read in the original pure Swedish in just a few hours.

Acknowledging the limitations imposed on the Academy by (1) Nobel's will; (2) the difficulty of reading in all known languages; (3) the time required for their task; and possibly (4) a narrow or provincial Scandinavian membership, the Academy has generally been credited with doing its job as well as it could. Burton Feldman, in his history of the Nobel Prize published in 2000, wrote that "The invisibility of the machinery heightens the majesty of the prizes. This machinery is so self-effacing that the decisions seem almost to issue not from mere Stockholm but from some timeless Realm of Objective Judgment" (15). Shocking developments in 2017-2018 have forever foreclosed the idea that the Nobel Prize in Literature issues from such a realm; in part, the crisis resulted from a new and undesired visibility of the machinery – specifically the human side of the august Swedish Academy. The result was language like Varadarajan's "this Nordic cabal" or Ron Charles's denunciation of the 2019 award as "just another tone-deaf stunt by a group of Swedish snobs who command a disproportionate and undeserved wedge of the world's attention." Alexandra Schwartz asked,

Why, after all, do we get so worked up about which writer a committee of Swedish intellectuals chooses to anoint in any given year? . . . Now we have been reminded that behind the mystical Nobel curtain is a small, fairly homogenous group of fallible Swedes who have taken it upon themselves to arbitrate all of world literature, and that reminder punctures the aura of supreme election that the prize has accrued.

In late 2017 began what Elisabeth Elgán et al. called "the biggest scandal of #MeToo": "the one which nearly permanently destroyed the

Swedish Academy, the body known by the general public for choosing the Nobel Prize for Literature every year” (228). The Swedish press reported accusations of serial sexual abuse against a French “photographer and cultural entrepreneur” (Brown) named Jean-Claude Arnault. He was a well-known figure in Stockholm cultural circles and had just been decorated by the king (Elgán et al. 228).^{vii} Arnault was not an author, nor a Swede, nor a member of the Swedish Academy, but his wife, poet Katarina Frostenson, was one of the Eighteen. Further revelations connected Arnault to the Academy in ways that went far beyond just being married to a member. In one awkward linkage, Arnault managed a sort of high-culture night club or artistic venue called Forum, in whose activities Frostenson was also highly visible, possibly the co-owner. The club turned out to have been the recipient of financial subsidy from the Swedish academy. In one instance, the Academy had guaranteed a loan to Forum. These arrangements were not known to all the Eighteen.

That Arnault was a “ladies’ man” was apparently well known in artistic Stockholm circles, but, as Andrew Brown reveals, “What made the matter a wider global scandal is that it seemed to reveal something rotten at the heart of the Swedish Academy: many of the [sexual] attacks” – eighteen different women accused Arnault of violating them, though the congruence with “the Eighteen” of the Academy was apparently a coincidence – “were said to have taken place in luxurious apartments owned by the academy.” It is unlikely that the public outside a small circle in Stockholm was even aware that the academy owned luxurious apartments, not just in Stockholm, but elsewhere, including Paris. Perhaps the most damaging charge was that Frostenson had been providing the names of the Nobel winners to her husband so that he could bet on them. As Brown reported, “there had been heavy and well-informed betting in advance of the prize in several of the early years of the century; Frostenson was accused of leaking the names of seven prizewinners to her husband ahead of the announcements.”

Frostenson and Arnault had their defenders. In the aftermath of the scandal, several members resigned; several others had resigned in the past for reasons including the Academy’s failure to make a statement in defense of Salman Rushdie.^{viii} The secretary of the Academy, Sara Danius,

resigned under pressure, including criticism from the defenders of Frostenson and Arnault. The resignations meant that the quorum of twelve members required by the bylaws to name new members did not exist, so there could be no replacements. This did not prevent the remaining members from deciding to go ahead and award a 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature. Schwartz reports that the academy decided to postpone the award; Brown, however, writes that “on 4 May . . . the Nobel Foundation, which pays out the money, stepped in and announced that there would no award this year. Its chairman has since said that there will be no prize money until the academy has cleared itself.”

In April, the Academy issued a statement acknowledging very serious damage to the Academy’s reputation and, therefore, a threat to the reputation of the Nobel Prize, acknowledging breaches of the conflict of interest rules, since Frostenson was a co-owner of the Forum club and voted for its subsidy without making that public, and of its secrecy rules (“Press Release”). As for the accusations of sexual offenses, the statement reads, “The investigation revealed that unacceptable behaviour by the director of the cultural venue Kulturplats Forum [i.e. Arnault] in the form of unwanted intimacy had indeed taken place, but the knowledge was not widely spread in the Academy. Neither was the Academy aware of anything that might be described as criminal sexual assault” (“Press Release”) – though it also admits that as far back as December 1996 a letter alleging sexual assault at Kulturplats Forum [the club operated by Arnault and Frostenson and subsidized by the Academy] was sent to the Academy but “shelved.”

A partial solution to the complications brought on by “resignations” included a decision by King Carl XVI Gustaf, on recommendations from the Academy, to amend the rules and allow members to resign, so that replacements could be elected (“Press Release”). The statement went on to admit, as it could hardly avoid admitting, that “the reputation of the Nobel Prize in Literature has suffered greatly from the publicity surrounding the Academy’s crisis” (“Press Release”). In the aftermath, Frostenson left the Eighteen; Arnault was sentenced to two years imprisonment for rape, increased on appeal to two and a half; and bemused observers commented on the odd outcome that charges of sexual

assault by a strangely enabled man resulted in the removal of the first female permanent secretary of the Academy. In 2019, the Academy announced two awards: the delayed 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature to Polish novelist Olga Tokarczuk and the 2019 Prize for Austrian Peter Handke, another decision that proved controversial.

But the damage from 2018 was done and is likely to be lasting. The Eighteen were always known to be human beings with failings. They cannot read literature in all known languages; like any reader, they prefer some authors to others; they interpret the demand for idealism in different ways; they may be hostile to some countries or cultures or national literatures.^{ix} But the discovery of the crimes of Arnault, who reportedly sometimes referred to himself as the nineteenth member of the Academy, the cosy self-dealing of Frostenson, the bitter partisan backbiting among the members, have shown the Academy in a new and unwelcome light.

Of course, there are those who discount the damage to the Academy's reputation, and that of the Nobel Prize, by suggesting that the reputation was never deserved. Winegarten, having summed up many of the usual complaints – the selection of undeserving winners and the omission of deserving winners, the embarrassing political views of some of the laureates – concludes that

fundamentally, the effect of the Nobel Prize on literature itself and on writers is minimal. It does not help to encourage or foster struggling talent. It does not influence the public to probe the nature and art of writing or to seek to acquire the qualities of literary discrimination and judgment. On the whole, those who "hit the jackpot," as V. S. Naipaul phrased it, are not necessarily better writers than those who fail to do so. But one does not look a gift horse in the mouth; the laureates are simply more fortunate in being able to enjoy additional prestige and financial reward. (75)

To conclude that the Nobel Prize for Literature cannot be damaged because it does not matter probably goes too far. Many observers will conclude, with Brown, that the "destruction of the academy's reputation is not just damaging to an old, odd, Swedish institution, but to the ideals it upheld, and to the dream of a global high culture that the Nobel prize represents."

Notes:

- ⁱ “Tolstoy’s exclusion caused forty-two Swedish writers, artists, and critics to protest. The Nobel committee evaluated Tolstoy’s work as containing ‘ghastly naturalistic descriptions’ and ‘negative asceticism’ and abhorrent, fatalist, and anarchist sympathies” (Feldman 69-70). In other words, it did not have a lofty idealism.
- ⁱⁱ Sam Carter comments on the Nobel statement that “attempts were being made ‘to achieve a global distribution.’” But whatever success it had in this respect was largely a result of recognizing writers working in English, including the laureates Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul, and J. M. Coetzee.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The only other posthumously awarded Nobel Prize, this one for Peace, went to Dag Hammarskjöld in 1961. And yes, he was Swedish, too.
- ^{iv} Oddly, average ages have increased in recent years, the average of winners over the past decade being 71, compared to 66 over the first decade and a number that would have been higher had the octogenarians Alice Munro (2013) and Doris Lessing (2017) been included.
- ^v The 1902 winner, Theodor Mommsen, was rewarded for his history of Rome, published in the 1850s.
- ^{vi} While in theory all literatures in all languages may and perhaps should be considered, Sture Allén, a member of the Academy, dampens such expectations: “As a matter of course, the Nobel statutes make it clear that Prize proposals written in a language that the Academy cannot interpret ‘without very great trouble or considerable expense’ need not be taken into account” (68).
- ^{vii} For a larger context, see Caitlin P. Carroll, “The #MeToo Movement, Sexual Violence, and the Law in Sweden.”
- ^{viii} It is technically untrue that any member resigned. Appointment to the Academy is for life, so they could not resign, but they simply ceased to function as members.
- ^{ix} The permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, Horace Engdahl, announced in 2008 that American literature was uncompetitive with that of Europe: “The U.S. is too isolated, too insular. They don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature. . . . That ignorance is restraining” (qtd. in Fisher). Engdahl was a fierce defender of Arnault and Frostenson, a critic of Danius, and the only important figure in the 2018 controversies who remains among the Eighteen.

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