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Approaching the ›prize of prizes‹: Literature in the Nobel Era

- Literature in the Nobel Era: Comparative, Theoretical, and Archival Approaches to the Nobel Prize in Literature, International Symposium, German Literature Archive, DLA Marbach, 25.–27. August 2021, Online via Zoom.

The symposium *Literature in the Nobel Era. Comparative, theoretical, and archival approaches to the Nobel Prize in Literature* took place at the *German Literature Archive* (DLA) in Marbach and online from August 25th through 27th 2021. It was organised both transdisciplinary as well as transnational by literary scholars **Jørgen Sneis** and **Carlos Spoerhase** (Bielefeld) and sociologist **Jacob Habinek** (Linköping) in cooperation with **Sandra Richter** (DLA) as well as **Mats Malm** (Swedish Academy) and aimed to establish a dialogue between different approaches in contemporary research on the Nobel Prize in Literature.

The introduction by **Carlos Spoerhase** and **Jørgen Sneis** began with a reference to Tim Park's critical questioning of the Nobel Prize and Pascal Casanova's mapped world literary space. The question of comparability, they argued, is the heuristically valuable starting point for understanding literary prizes and their presuppositional history. They went on to recall Alfred Nobel's last will and his wish that nationality should not be the dominant criterion for deciding who receives an award. Only the ›worthiest person‹ should be nominated. Despite this rejection of nationality as a criterion, the Nobel Prize shows a reciprocal dynamic between nationalism and internationalism. Spoerhase and Sneis also drew attention to the practice of compiling tables on the winners of the Prize. This quantitative practice represents an effort to link literary success to nationality. At the same time, this method of quantification opens up a distanced horizon of comparison. The constellation could, they suggested, be described with Francesca Orsini's analytical term ›thin knowledge‹. In need of clarification, they argued, are the canonisation, reading practice, translation practice, attention economy, globalisation tendencies and politics associated with the Nobel Prize. According to Spoerhase and Sneis, this task can only be accomplished by an interdisciplinary research community.

In literary prize culture, the fabrication of excellence and prestige is a collective effort by heterogeneous stakeholders, demanding a broad approach for a full understanding of the complex transactions and interplays that produce the specific notion of ›value‹ inherent to literary prizes. The Nobel Prize as the most prominent literary prize, awarded annually (with a few exceptions) by the Swedish Academy since 1901, is certainly no exception. The convenors, including the Swedish Academy and the DLA, took this into account not only by inviting scholars from a wide range of disciplines but also by including the voices of some of these stakeholders, such as a Nobel laureate, a publisher, archivists and academy members. Fittingly, the opening statements by two of the co-convenors addressed this institutional entanglement both in words and *qua persona*. Mats Malm, permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, characterised the symposium's subject matter, the Nobel Prize, as a »celebration of literature and a constant stimulant to discussion«, while Sandra Richter, head of the DLA, commented on the Swedish Academy's co-convenorship of the symposium as »an act of self-reflection with external assistance«. According to Richter, the archive-based research results – which also played a role during the

conference – clearly showed how productive the connection between practice and theory is. Significantly, the conference brought to light the very attention implicitly given to the Nobel Prize in Literature. The current task is to examine the various Nobel effects. Richter emphasised that informative sources are archived in the DLA Marbach. Fact is: there is still a lot to discover. As Richter and Malm are both representatives of literary institutions as well as literary scholars, their remarks appeared programmatic for what is at stake when institutional frameworks of literature both undergo and contribute to scholarly analysis. It seems that this »external assistance« can be understood in both directions: scholarly research activity could use some outer input from practitioners to reflect on their methods and practices, and the practitioners should have something to gain from scholarship in order to design tools for – an updated – self-reflection.

In the first keynote lecture **Gisèle Sapiro** (Paris) emphasised at the outset that Pierre Bourdieu's repertoire of methods is particularly suitable for examining literary prizes such as the Nobel Prize and for understanding them. In this way, the symbolic economy as well as the processes of the genesis of world literature can be recognised. Like Spoerhase and Sneis, she referred to the practice of scaling in this context. It needs to be clarified which stakeholders have the necessary agency, which unofficial criteria exist and where the limit of price autonomy is to be located. For the French publishing landscape, the establishment of a new canon could be observed. This is bound to the publishing houses that have a monopoly position and a high symbolic capital. Overall, Sapiro explained, French, English and German publishing houses dominate the international literary prize landscape. The chance of international recognition and translation rises and falls with the respective publishing house. Ultimately, the publisher's affiliation determines the chances of winning the prize. Deviation tendencies in the awarding of prizes are mostly motivated by political events. While the Nobel Prize has already started to take diversity into account, it also reinforces modes of domination. Sapiro emphasised that it is not the task of the Nobel Prize to change these asymmetrical power constellations. Yet, this does not exempt it from the need to promote diversity in the long term.

In his talk, **Fabien Accominotti** (Madison) analysed mechanisms that generate a dominant status in the field of literature. It is striking, Accominotti stated, that women rarely win literary prizes. At the same time, the Nobel Prize narrows the view of the literary field. From an award perspective, there is only the chosen one and the rest. Furthermore, there is no explicit definition of greatness, and hierarchy is based on the rules of performance. **Vaughn Schmutz** (Charlotte) also explored the relationship between winners and losers. A significant balance of power in favour of the Western countries can be outlined. This is, as Schmutz claimed, serially perpetuated by the Swedish Academy. With the help of current text-mining methods, a typology of winners could be determined. Media coverage provides a rich source for this project: it also shows how the work and particularly the author as prize-winner are evaluated. According to **Jacob Habinek** (Linköping), the Nobel Prize procedure could be considered as the archetype of the literature prize, and it already reinforced an existing academic power. Habinek gave a structured insight into his current research project in which he is evaluating the digitised archive holdings of the Swedish Academy. The initial results confirm the finding that a predominant Western position of power is clearly evident. However, the Nordic countries used to have the position of an outsider. Sweden – this may hardly come as a surprise – was later overrepresented. It can also be stated: the most nominated countries have also received the most awards. In contrast: the most nominated authors did not receive the most awards.

During the first evening's artist talk between Nobel laureate **Herta Müller** and **Jan Bürger** (Marbach), Müller's perspective on the relevance of the prize was added to those of academic observers and of the awarding institution. Even though Müller ascribed the prize an aura that you have to relate to, if you are suited for it or not, she also emphatically deflated the impact that it had on her own life. In relation to the smaller prizes that she had received early in her career, the Nobel Prize was almost negligible. These first prizes assured her physical protection, as the ruling regime could not harm a writer who had received that sort of attention abroad. While almost unchallenged in structural prize hierarchies, the Nobel apparently can be rendered – on a personal level – close to insignificance.

In a sense, the first panel of day two found a way to scholarly integrate the first day's initial impulses given by the ›external‹ figures of the archivist, the academy member, and the author. **Alexander Bareis** (Lund) placed emphasis on the »unique position inside the Academy«, from which Kjell Espmark had written extensively on the criteria for the Nobel Prize. He also raised the question from what other sources »from the outside« one could generate knowledge of these criteria. How can we tell to what extent moral judgements influence the prize decisions? By analysing public statements from members of the Academy on the heated debate surrounding the prize awarded to Peter Handke in 2018, Bareis presented a spectrum of different modes of artistic autonomy that were implicit in these utterances. This ranged from a rigid distinction between the author's political positions and the aesthetic value of their work all the way to a strong link, where an author's work is directly contaminated by his/her positioning. **Rebecca Braun** (Lancaster) caught up on the Herta Müller reading from the previous evening, where an older newspaper article on an earlier presentation by Müller was read, much to the amusement of both audience and performers. The detailed depiction of Müller's gestures and the invoked seriousness of her appearance in that article stood in stark contrast to the joyful laughter it provoked on stage. Braun addressed this relation between how we perceive the consecrated author and how the article construed an image of what a Nobel laureate »should look like«. The Nobel Prize therefore requires raising questions on different modes of authorship – from celebratory to utopian – that go along with the attention politics of award winners. The example of Nobel laureates shows that authorship too is co-created by a variety of stakeholders, thus a constant change is inherent to the »image of how to be a human who writes«. The archive as one instance of this co-creation was discussed in **Tim Sommer's** (Edinburgh) paper. Based on the observation that authors meanwhile tend to prepare the archival future of their papers and documents while still alive, Sommer addressed questions of value around these transactions in relation to the authors' prize careers with special attention to Nobel laureates. As Sommer showed that some laureates' collections are sold to archives for amounts even exceeding the Nobel Prize money, he delivered a striking example of the complex structure of the interplay between symbolic and economic capital in the literary field – here approaching the art trade. These transactions show, he argued, how prestigious prizes such as the Nobel raise the stakes of consecration on both sides of the transaction, thereby pointing towards questions on causality and contiguity in the circulation of both symbolic and economic value between author, prizes and archives.

The second panel of day two paid special attention to inter-prize relations. **Nils Hansson** and **Daniela Link** (Düsseldorf) asked what role medicine, itself a field in which the Nobel Prize is awarded, plays in the nominations of »physician authors« for the literary prize in order to perform excellence and prestige. They outlined a case study on Georg Bonne, hardly known today, and his »cross-boundary campaign« for the Nobel Prize. The

nominations, arguably written by a ghostwriter, emphasised Bonne's image as a »doctor of the poor« in order to meet the presumably humanitarian and idealistic standards which the nominators expected from the prize committee. **Stevie Marsden's** (Leicester) paper focused on inter-prize relations not through the scope of differentiation *qua* discipline, but rather with an interest in the hierarchical order between prizes, vaguely resembling the hierarchy scale between high and low culture. The »single winner axiom« which characterises the logic of most cultural prizes, according to Marsden, seems to apply equivalently to the very field of cultural prizes itself: academic attention is drawn to the few prizes with the most impact and thereby generates a blindside towards prize culture at large. An attempt to fill this gap was provided by **John Raimo** (New York), who concluded the panel with insights on two »anti-Nobels«, the Prix international du éditeurs and the Prix Formentor. His historical reconstruction of the emergence of these prizes in the 1960s showed how the European publishing industry attempted to use these prizes to secure publishing rights and to undermine the impact of the Nobel Prize.

Another panel addressed the time span *before* being awarded the prize and was opened by a detailed case study by **Stefanie Leuenberger** (Zürich). Leuenberger presented archival findings on Carl Spitteler's authorship, such as documented cooperations and correspondences, which led up to the Nobel Prize of 1919. A more wide angled approach to pre-Nobel careers was presented by **Urs Büttner** (Düsseldorf), who traced back the circulation of translations of awarded works through data sets collected between 1944 and 1970. The results show that the peak of most of the laureates' translations occurred long before the actual Prize was awarded and that two patterns can be distinguished: »hype authors« with a steep translation curve and »lifetime achievement authors« with a relatively flat curve. **Jana Rüegg's** (Uppsala) analysis of the Swedish publishing landscape confirmed the finding that translations reach the highest publication numbers before and not after the Nobel Prize, even though the awarded work is often »reintroduced to the market« after the Prize. Her results also showed that dramatic and poetic works by Nobel laureates are far less published than novels.

James English (Philadelphia), author of arguably the most cited book of the symposium (*The Economy of Prestige*, 2005), opened his keynote lecture with a rejection of »the bad habit to strictly distinguish economic and symbolic capital« and an emphatic plea for the conceptual »impurity of prestige«. Challenging his own signature thesis that scandals do not form a threat to, but rather constitute, the very life blood of prize culture, he presented a surprising revision of his earlier prognosis that the recent #metoo scandals linked to the Swedish Academy would not undermine but possibly even inflate the significance of the Nobel. Instead, English now proposed that the inability of the Swedish Academy to gain from the momentum and rearrange its anachronistic structure may have created an opening for a new player to enter the stage in order to meet the demands posed to a global literary prize: a player equipped with even more economic power, necessary to create a »wow effect« like the one the Nobel had in 1901, and with a more contemporary take on recent debates on identity politics and diversification of laureates, necessary to claim the moral high ground that the Nobel's philanthropic roots had once installed. This player, his speculative suggestion goes, could be MacKenzie Scott. The way the circulation of cultural prestige is structured, English argued, the demand for a »prize of prizes« will remain intact, yet the monopoly the Nobel had on this position for a long time may be lost.

Day three started out with **Michael Ka-chi Cheuk's** (Hong Kong) proposal to use the term »censorship« in a broad sense, including not only forceful and direct interventions

but also the soft powers which restrict an author's voice as a result of the implicit demand for a Nobel laureate to »represent certain values«. Cheuk exemplified the matter in a case study on the Olympic gathering in Atlanta 1996, where Nobel laureates were united and publicly presented in a series of panel discussions during the Olympic Games. As the idealised roots of both the Nobel Prize and the modern Olympic Games were and remain discursively intertwined with the internationalist peace movement at the end of the 19th century, Cheuk argued that a staging of this kind yields implications on how the laureates are »structurally censored« in their function *as* laureates. This kind of instrumentalisation of laureates as representatives of a larger community was also addressed in **Takashi Inoue's** (Kyoto) paper on the construction of myths around Japanese Nobel laureates and nominees. A deeper understanding of the Prize's role in attempts to claim literary recognition for the purpose of shaping nationalistic narratives in the era of the Cold War would be central to challenge these myths and to contribute to new approximations to world literature, Inoue argued.

Hülya Yildiz (Ankara) elaborated on the diverging paths towards the Nobel Prize for Orhan Pamuk, who eventually won it, and Yasar Kemal, who remained a favoured candidate. Her analysis paid special attention to »authorial position« and »translatability« as the distinctive factors responsible for Pamuk's success. His positioning within prestigious institutions in America along with the Western themes of his novels gave him, according to Yildiz, an advantage against the »perceived provinciality« of Kemal's work. **Pablo Faúndez Morán's** (Valparaíso) paper discussed the political appropriation of Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral in Chile in regard to different iconographies of the author that can be traced back through different political disputes in the country. Morán also presented a portrait of Mistral on the official banknotes. As a material manifestation of the theoretically and ideologically charged relationship between symbolic and economic power this example provided the symposium with another entrance to the multitude of value discourses surrounding the Nobel Prize. **Coletta Kandemiri** (Windhoek) gave insights on the reception and canonisation of what she called »the big four« of African literature, consisting of Wole Soyinka, Nagib Mahfouz, Nadine Gordimer and J.W. Coetzee, all of whom have been awarded the Nobel Prize. Despite criticism for writing in English instead of in a native language, which especially Soyinka was confronted with, his works and those of the other Nobel laureates have been largely distributed transnationally in African countries, with schools and other educational institutions being major instances of their reception. This circulation within African countries contributed to a construction of the four authors as intracontinental representatives of literature *from* and maybe even more *about* ›Africa‹.

Kerstin Bohne (Oldenburg) brought up a surprising fact: so far, no Dutch author has received the Nobel Prize. What have all Dutch authors done wrong, Bohne asked? To answer this question, she works with the holdings of the Nobel Archive. For the Netherlands, she said, a reception beyond its borders is a great challenge. It is by no means sufficient that the texts are translated. Rather, what is crucial is the quality of the translation. At the same time, a text that is difficult to understand is difficult to judge. The quality and quantity of translations determine the chances of winning the Nobel Prize. Overall, the importance of symbolic capital is particularly evident in ›small language families‹. In a collective talk, **Sandra Richter, Astghik Antonyan, Dilan Çakir** et al. (Marbach/Stuttgart) determined whether the awarding of the Nobel Prize had an effect on translation projects. It can be validated that most translations follow after the Nobel Prize has been won. This is crucial because translations are instrumental in determining which works can be remembered. Again, some languages dominate the translation field. For the

book market, the Nobel Prize functions as a globally readable brand. **Kathrin Yacavone** (Cologne) traced the visual side of the Nobel Prize. It quickly becomes apparent that photographs are a central medium of authorship and that portraits have a high symbolic value. In comparison, it becomes clear that the photographs of Nobel Prize winners in literature show a high degree of staging as well as a pronounced similarity. Diversity is not captured photographically. Instead, a prominent principle of representation is successfully established. Indirectly, this promotes the corporate identity of the Swedish Academy. According to Yacavone, a reciprocal relationship of representation and idealisation is created, which ultimately serves to legitimise itself.

In his closing lecture, **Pieter Vermeulen** (Leuven) focused on value creation and book design. Forms of book presentation prove to be a risk because a decision has to be made that is appropriate to the subject matter. This reveals how a book should appear to the reading public: sexy or serious. Moreover, besides the literary value, a whole bundle of values needs to be served: commercial, aesthetic, symbolic. These different values must be continuously produced and legitimised, the ultimate goal being prestige. ›World value‹ can only be understood, Vermeulen concluded, when situational practices and specific differences are examined.

The event concluded with a panel discussion between **Michael Krüger** and **Anders Olsson**, moderated by Jan Bürger. Krüger drew attention to the downside of the Prize, which he said was a hurdle for many authors: it is a burden to wait forever for the Nobel Prize and possibly never receive it. Olsson then emphasised that the Nobel Prize for Literature does not stand for a competitive model. It is primarily an instrument that can help broaden perspectives on literature and current issues. In addition, Krüger offered a different perspective to the well-known criticism that decision-making criteria are not made transparent. According to Krüger, it is the lack of transparency that makes the awarding of prizes so attractive. It is precisely this criterion that provokes discussions that benefit literature as a whole. This may be the reason for the sustainability of the award.

Discussions around the Nobel Prize as a stabiliser of historically universalised western perspectives on value and literature were prominent during the symposium. Several comments to the papers addressed the need to make truly global perspectives strong in order to imagine how reflections on prize culture and evaluation processes could contribute to a more diverse perception of literature in the future. The inertia of the prize and the persistence of its widely presumed global relevance was a controversial aspect throughout the discussions. Also, in view of the numerous sources, there were lively discussions about which (digital) methods of analysis are suitable and useful to address these questions. In their concluding outlook Spoerhase and Sneis summarised that further transdisciplinary research on literary prizes could deepen our understanding of how evaluation practices influence literature. The look at the *Literature in the Nobel Era* explained phenomena such as the translation boom and licence negotiations, but many aspects remain unexplored. Hence the symposium can be understood as a plea for further international, transdisciplinary (and also archive-based) research on literary prizes. The conveners expressed the aim to keep up the dialogue through further conferences and publication projects, this initial symposium however is deservedly already part of the history of the Nobel Prize in Literature, as the lectures have already been archived in the DLA Marbach.

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