

Another Irresolute Essay on Lit and Crit

by strannikov

Is it literature if it isn't read,
is it lit if it doesn't last?
Such questions could best be posed, I guess,
to those from remote and recent pasts.

How reliable is literary critical judgment? The question is too broad already, let's narrow the focus:

How reliable are the literary critical judgments of the successive members of the august Nobel Committees? Not so bad, cumulatively, you could say, in terms of their notable choices: not so good, necessarily, we could agree, in terms of their conspicuous and numerous misses.

I was amazed decades back at getting a Nobel Laureate recommended to me I'd never once heard of through my primary and secondary schooling, nor through my post-secondary education (I was young decades ago, keep in mind). To this day I have not read one line from any page penned by Nobel laureate Sigrid Undset, which is no reflection on her or the Nobel Committee members who nominated her—I've just been busy following other paths I could already discern for myself. (I'd already begun a decade as a confirmed Slavophile, half of that on Dostoevsky alone, most of the rest with Mikhail Bulgakov, and most of the rest of that with Nikolai Gogol and, latterly, Daniil Kharms.)

There are many fine books by many fine authors from all around the globe I shall never read, some for good reasons, some for poor reasons, most for no reason at all, and the rest in accord with Schopenhauer's dictum "a precondition for reading good books is not reading bad ones: for life is short". But a look at the cumulative list of Nobel laureates in literature reveals both startling omissions

(one legitimate excuse being that world wars resulted in no awards or nominations for brief spells) and a roster of laureates who have lapsed into obscurity, sometimes because of a native language and the absence of talented or motivated translators.

I could be clever here and mix things up, but I don't want to waste much time, so just look at the names below and judge whether you are familiar with their biographies or any of their works, have read any of their works, or can even identify what genres (poetry, fiction, drama) they excelled in. (I shan't bother with dates, either.)

These notables, whom I identify as almost complete unknowns, have each and all been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature:

Sully Prudhomme
Rudolf Christoph Eucken
Selma Lagerlöf (despite the efforts of travel writer Nils
Holgersson)
Verner von Heidenstam
Karl Adolph Gjellerup
Henrik Pontoppidan
Carl Spitteler
Jacinto Benavente
Sigrid Undset
Erik Axel Karlfeldt
Harry Martinson

All but the very last antedate both my birth and the time by which I began scribbling myself, more or less in earnest. Considering, though, that this handful alone comprises almost ten percent of those who have been awarded Nobel laureateships in literature, combined with the names of writers of merit known never to've won (and good handfuls likely never even nominated, for all kinds of reasons, premature death chief among them), I do in fact wonder about the critical perspicacity of the members of the Nobel literary committee as of academic lit crit perspicacity broadly (not with respect to my own work, granted, but not completely without

consideration, either: I have to confess here my critical skills are not to be trusted without skeptical regard).

In a prior attempt at literary criticism, I cited the case of poor Victorian novelist R. D. Blackmore, who died the year before the Nobel awards for literature commenced. Blackmore is cited in his Wikipedia entry as “one of the most famous English novelists of the second half of the nineteenth century”. Perhaps his appeal continues in the United Kingdom to this day, and perhaps his enduring fame owes to the great success of his most memorable work Lorna Doone. On the west side of the Atlantic, however (with the possible exception of Canada), Blackmore enjoys little fame and gains little attention. I suppose his works retain some interest and remain somewhat engaging: but I never hear his name spoken or commonly see it cited. In the US I take it that Blackmore is not nearly as familiar to readers as his later contemporary Thomas Hardy or his earlier contemporary Charles Dickens. I trust that Wikipedia is not trying to hoodwink us, that in fact in his day Blackmore was indeed “one of the most famous English novelists of the second half of the nineteenth century”: but as proof of my utter unfamiliarity with his biography and his works, he was not excerpted or even indexed in the third edition of the Norton Anthology of English Literature that I was obliged to slog through in my sophomore undergraduate year.

Were the critics and the public of Blackmore's day amiss? Probably not: likely, Blackmore's subjects and style enjoyed exactly the relevance that made him so celebrated. Perhaps because his work was so relevant to its age, its relevance no longer persists (though in this day and time, no one should be surprised if a sudden Blackmore revival overtakes us and displaces the fame of contemporary stalwarts like Don DeLillo or Sherman Alexie, Jonathan Franzen or David Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith or Jhumpa Lahiri, Margaret Atwood or Jennifer Egan).

Or: maybe the critics and the public of Blackmore's day were in no position whatever to judge and appreciate the enduring literary merit of R. D. Blackmore and his prose: perhaps critics and publics of the second half of the nineteenth century were no more apt in

their literary judgment-making than Nobel committee members of the twentieth century.

I am no fantastical writer myself, merely one who indulges perhaps too often in works of speculative fantasy: but in my flights and even when I risk being grounded, I have come to accept the “growing block universe” hypothesis of time. Contrasted with eternalism and presentism, I am persuaded, both the past and the present exist but not the future. As far as I can judge contemporary astrophysics to be saying, the future enjoys no baryonic existence at present (meaning, for those less schooled in contemporary astrophysics, future states from our present vantage point enjoy no physical existence whatsoever, they have no molecular or atomic constituents to them, in very real terms, e. g., in the very real terms of very real bricks dropped on very real naked toes). Because the future and actual future states do not exist at this moment, there is no way in the world to say exactly what works of mere literary execution or even actual literary merit will be read decades, centuries, or millennia hence, since we cannot reliably say that we shall enjoy any posterity whatsoever. Writing “for posterity” itself is a fool's errand, in every case, since no writer can reliably predict distant reading preferences.

Why do I read Juvenal and Lucian of Samosata to this day from time to time? Because their works still speak and they speak to me, not with the utter relevance of my bare contemporary Cousin Flannery, let's say, but certainly with far greater relevance than I expect R. D. Blackmore ever to hold. I prize Juvenal as one of the most articulate satirists whose works still exist in their native Latin and continue to enjoy translation from age to age, generation to generation, Indo-European tongue to other such tongues and beyond: the same goes for Lucian, author of very wry comic fiction, the very progenitor of science fiction, it can be argued.

I pick these two ancient authors, especially Lucian because he is an acknowledged exemplar of the Second Sophistic. We might fault such writers today for their mimicry of Attic stylists some few centuries prior and for their consequent “lack of originality”,

although Lucian is able to defend himself and Juvenal should not be expected to have to mount a defense since the works of his greatest Latin/Roman satiric predecessor, Lucilius, exist today only in fragments. The fact is: both Juvenal and Lucian were close students who modeled their output on the examples of those known to have excelled in their chosen genres decades and centuries earlier.

As much as we live in Juvenal's or Lucian's future, we do not live in "the future": we are confined to our day as Blackmore and his readers were to theirs, as Nobel committee members were and are to theirs. Enduring literary quality that guarantees a posterity of lively reception is quite difficult to pull off reliably: yet we agree that formal standards for identifying literary merit exist and are capable of being discerned, not merely of being ascribed. —but is this itself true?

No use in quizzing hoary Homer here, his
jaws and lips would speak of his ears
(blindness once was a poetic gift)
and whether what was writ could be heard.

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