

When *World Literature Today* speaks from the University of Oklahoma, a distinguished international audience listens—even the august group that awards the Nobel Prizes.

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# The Nobel Connection

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"And who will be *next* year's winner of the Nobel Prize?" one of the hosts inquired. "Well, I hope it will be Czeslaw Milosz," the guest replied. "He's certainly one of the finest poets and essayists writing today in any language."

Polite chit-chat. The annual guessing game of *literati* everywhere. "Who will it be this year?" "What famous or obscure writer will the Swedish Academy single out for the world's most prestigious and remunerative literary honor?" The above exchange was different, however. The gracious host was Arthur Lundkvist, a Swedish poet and novelist who is one of the five members of the Swedish Academy's Nobel Committee; the occasion was a special, invitation-only reception in Stockholm for the 1979 Nobel laureate in literature, Greek poet Odysseus Elytis, on the eve of the awards ceremony; and the prescient guest was Dr. Ivar Ivask, professor of modern languages at the University of Oklahoma and director of the school's international literary quarterly *World Literature Today*. Ten months later, almost to the day, the Academy announced the winner of the 1980 Nobel Prize in Literature — Polish poet, essayist, and novelist Czeslaw Milosz!

Not bad, you say, when an OU professor tells one of the Nobel king-makers who will be the next king of the literary hill, so to speak. This is not to claim, however, that OU is in

any way usurping the preeminence of the Nobel Foundation and the Swedish Academy in recognizing the most outstanding contemporary writers in the world. Dr. Ivask himself would be the first to deny such boldness. Yet the fact that his opinion was solicited — plus the fact that he and his wife Astrid were invited to the 1979 ceremonies — clearly indicates both the high esteem in which *WLT* is held by the Academy, and also the very tangible connections between OU's 54-year-old journal and Nobel Committee selections over the years.

The Norman-Stockholm connection is not exactly new. Let's go away back. Like most publications and individuals with an interest in current cultural activity, *Books Abroad* (as *WLT* was known during the years 1927-76), almost from its inception, paid close and frequent attention to

*The symbolic silver eagle's feather  
presented to each Neustadt laureate.*

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the annual Nobel choices. Individual winners were lauded or lamented but always at least noticed, and founding editor Roy Temple House opened his journal's pages in the 1930s to proposals for writers and literatures not yet favored by the Academy's immortalizing touch.

(Whether these proposals were ever formally submitted to the Academy, we don't know. But it is a little-realized fact that until quite recently, in theory if not in practice, any professor of literature and languages was automatically eligible to make official nominations to the Nobel Committee each year. So the articles in *BA* were not necessarily mere exhortations into the Oklahoma wind.)

In 1939 House even sponsored in *BA* a "Super-Nobel" election in which regular collaborators and other specialists were to choose the writer

who, in their collective opinion, had offered the most significant contribution to world letters in the first third of the 20th century, whether or not he or she had been named a recipient of the Nobel Prize. Such non-laureates as Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and Theodore Dreiser finished near the top of the balloting; but ultimately the election confirmed the Academy's frequent astuteness by naming 1929 Nobel winner Thomas Mann as laureate of the "Super-Nobel" award — a distinction which Mann graciously acknowledged in a brief note to editor House, published in the Summer 1940 issue of *BA*.

In 1951 the journal again scrutinized the history of the Academy's Nobel selections and proposed a number of writers deemed worthy of the prize's recognition but hitherto overlooked by the commit-

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*Courtesy: the Nobel Foundation*  
*At left, the 1979 Nobel Prize winners receive the homage of the crowd, including Dr. and Mrs. Ivask in the far balcony. Above, Odysseus Elytis is presented the Nobel Prize for Literature by Sweden's King Carl Gustaf.*

tee. (Again, we unfortunately don't know whether these proposals were actually and officially submitted to the Academy.) Prominent critics from Europe and the United States were solicited for comments on the topic "What's Wrong with the Nobel Prize?" The result, while containing a few disparaging remarks about the Academy's general procedure and specific perceived omissions (Conrad, Ibsen, D. H. Lawrence, Strindberg, Tolstoy, Valéry), was far more notable for its thoughtful, concerned debate and knowledgeable, reasoned argument (as well as frequent praise and sympathy for the electors) — precisely the kind of interest Alfred Nobel himself would have rejoiced in.

In 1951 as well, the Nobel Foundation, which oversees the awarding of all five Nobel Prizes each year, chose the University of Oklahoma Press to

issue the first English-language edition of its own authoritative volume, *Nobel: The Man & His Prizes*.

As Savoie Lottinville, then director of the Press, wrote at the time to Dr. House: "It may be a happy reflection upon literary toleration in this country and at the University of Oklahoma that the publishing house which prints and distributes . . . *Books Abroad*, which has for several issues carried critical pieces on the Nobel Prizes, should also be the publisher of the official report of the Nobel trustees at the end of fifty years of the great system of prizes established by that lonely and genuinely gifted man, Alfred Nobel."

The section on the literary prize, by Nobel Committee member Anders Österling, outlines the history of the Academy's choices through 1948, offering numerous insights into the selection process and simultaneously clarifying some of the many questions and objections previously raised in *BA* and elsewhere.

In 1967 *Books Abroad* hosted an even larger, full-scale symposium on the Nobel Prize, this time a series of proposals, analyses and debates growing out of study sessions at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association. This truly comprehensive and far-ranging collection of essays not only surveys the Academy's past choices in the various major-language areas, but goes on to assess the merits of, for example, Arabic, African, Brazilian, Chinese, Hebrew, Indonesian, Japanese, and Persian writers as potential candidates and to examine such "outsider" laureates as Rabindranath Tagore of India (1913) and George Seferis of Greece (1963).

The summation by symposium moderator Herbert Howarth of the University of Pennsylvania perhaps overemphasizes the negative criticism at the expense of the panelists' many words of praise or justification: "The Swedish Academy has done well, but could have done better; the list of prize-men is blemished by errors of commission and omission: includes non-literary figures who should have been non-starters; includes mediocrities; omits some writers of the highest rank; and where it names the best men, names them too late."

Still, the whole is both an excellent contribution to *BA*'s continued and long-standing interest in the prizes, and a fine posthumous tribute to the *BA* editor who had organized the symposium, Robert Vlach (d. 1966), professor of modern languages at OU and himself the contributor of the essay on Slavic award recipients.

(By the way, in connection with the above quote from Howarth, many people, some younger literary specialists among them, seem to be unaware that the 1953 Nobel Prize in Literature — in *literature*, mind you — went to Winston Churchill, that the 1951 prize went to British philosopher Bertrand Russell, the 1927 prize to French philosopher Henri Bergson, the 1902 prize to German historian Theodor Mommsen! And the winner of the very first award, French poet Sully

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Prudhomme (1901), is now scarcely read at all even in France, much less anywhere else. These are just a few of the tidbits one discovers in reviewing the *BA*/Nobel history.)

The year 1967 brought Ivar Ivask to the University of Oklahoma as Vlach's successor at *Books Abroad* and in the department of modern languages. Under Ivask, the journal not only continued its yearly scrutiny of the Nobel selections, but also soon moved to establish an alternative award, sponsored by the University and intended as something of a complement to the Nobel. Though the Academy's choices for 1967-69 were laudable and stimulative in their respective ways (Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias in 1967, Japanese novelist Yasunari Kawabata in 1968, Irish-French playwright and novelist Samuel Beckett in 1969), several previous selections in the 1960s were clearly

undistinguished, to say the least, and even smacked of political balancing (Soviet novelist Mikhail Sholokhov in 1965) and tepid compromise (Hebrew novelist S. Y. Agnon and German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs, joint recipients in 1966).

Ivask's intent was to set up an award and a selection procedure which would be as free as possible of such "extraliterary" considerations. The candidates would be proposed and debated by a *constantly changing international group of their peers*, themselves writers and men and women of letters who would be equally worthy of such an award. The Academy's permanent membership has its definite advantages in tradition, continuity, resources, shared heritage and interests, single-mindedness of purpose, and the smooth coordination brought by decades of practice. However, Ivask felt that the constant infusion of new jurors and candidates from as many countries as possible would give the new Oklahoma prize a continually renewed source of energy, interest, and vitality.

Each jury would, in a sense, start with a clean slate and select a laureate from among *its own* field of candidates, not just from an inherited, perpetual list of names which scarcely changed from year to year. Publicizing the candidates' names also was thought in itself to generate debate and stimulate curiosity about the individual writers nominated rather than merely engender idle speculation through shrouding the proceedings in secrecy.

Those hopes and aspirations have been realized well beyond what might have been reasonably expected. After provisional University support had helped inaugurate the biennial prize in 1970, a \$200,000 endowment in perpetuity by the family of Mrs. Walter Neustadt, Sr., of Ardmore in 1971 assured the continuance of the award, which now bears the title "Neustadt International Prize for Literature." Six such awards have been made, beginning with Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti in 1970 and most recently honoring the Czech émigré novelist Josef Skvorecký in 1980. In that one decade of existence, no fewer than *six* writers associated in one way or another with the Oklahoma prize

have also received the Nobel Prize in Literature! On the very first jury, in 1970, was the outstanding German novelist Heinrich Böll, honored by the Academy in 1972. Three of the candidates for that first Oklahoma prize (then called simply the *Books Abroad* International Prize for Literature) — the Soviet Union's Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, and the Italian poet Eugenio Montale — were accorded the Academy's prize in 1970, 1971, and 1975 respectively.

A member of the 1972 Neustadt jury, Greek poet and essayist Odysseus Elytis, was the choice for the 1979 Nobel award. And finally, the 1978 recipient of the Neustadt Prize, the Polish émigré writer Czeslaw Milosz, gained the Academy's nod in 1980. (Milosz had, moreover, been nominated for the 1972 and 1976 Neustadt awards as well.)

In addition to the above connections between the long-established Nobel Prize and the newly instituted Neustadt Prize, the special issues of *Books Abroad* (Autumn 1975) and *World Literature Today* (Summer 1978) on Elytis and Milosz respectively were specifically cited by the Academy as having been of prime importance in the candidacy and ultimate selection of each writer. Those two issues still constitute (as of this writing) the only significant sources of critical information and assessment, in English or any other major language, for the work of these two Nobel laureates.

In acknowledgment of this fact in the case of Elytis, Ivask and his wife were honored with an invitation to the 1979 award ceremonies in Stockholm and to many of the public receptions associated with the prize, as well as to several private dinners and meetings with Academy members and Swedish dignitaries. (It was after Elytis Nobel lecture that the Academician Lundkvist popped his question to Ivask, as recounted at the beginning of this article.)

"This certainly proves that all three categories associated with the Neustadt Prize need to be watched closely," Ivask said in a recent interview. "Watch the Neustadt laureates, watch the Neustadt candidates, and watch the Neustadt jurors; they are



*Of those present at the 1978 presentation of the Neustadt International Prize to Czeslaw Milosz, center, only Dr. Ivar Ivask, left, might have ventured the prediction that the Polish émigré writer might be the eventual Nobel Prize laureate as well. OU President-Emeritus Paul F. Sharp is at right.*

all among the world's elite writers. We have always contended that the OU literary prize is selected by a jury of peers who themselves are equally eligible, equally qualified."

The procedure of the Neustadt Prize begins with the selection of a jury, a time-consuming matter in which Ivask consults with *WLT's* editorial board, other specialists and colleagues, and the University administration to arrive at a list of prominent writers from 10 or 11 different countries who are deemed both competent as critics and able and willing to serve as jurors. Once 11 writers have accepted the formal invitation (it's not really as quick and easy as this sketch may make it sound, but I'll spare you any tales of the many personal, political, and postal problems which have arisen at this stage over the years), each juror except Ivask — who chairs each session and is the panel's only permanent member — presents *one* candidate for the Neustadt award.

The names of all the jurors and candidates are then announced publicly at least six months prior to the actual jury meeting, which is held on the Norman campus in February of each even-numbered year.

"Our lists are always open," Ivask says. "We announce the jurors and candidates ahead of time to avoid people's setting up fancy lists that are unreal. The Nobel selection, however, is all secret. For example, I was in Vienna in early October, and at the end of a lecture one evening I mentioned that Milosz was a strong candidate for this year's Nobel Prize," he recalls. "Milosz wasn't among the contenders listed in all the papers, and people thought that I, coming from Oklahoma and talking about some exiled Polish poet, was a bit crazy." Two days later Milosz was named the winner, and the news media were immediately clamoring at Ivask's door for interviews, for photographs of Milosz taken during

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his acceptance of the OU prize, and for copies of the special Milosz issue of *WLT*. "I think it was good exposure for *World Literature Today*, for the Neustadt Prize, and for the University of Oklahoma," Ivask adds.

The Academy members often are secretly amused at the rampant speculation which goes on each year in the world press, both before and after the announcement of the recipient is made. The media invariably seems disturbed that, for example, neither Graham Greene, Jorge Luis Borges, nor Günter Grass has been named, and so they harumph about the Swedes' "inexplicable predilection for obscure old poets who write in strange languages and are unknown outside a small circle of poetry lovers in their own country," or some such nonsense.

It is undoubtedly true that fewer people will have heard of or read Milosz, Elytis, French poet Saint-John Perse (1960), or Yugoslav novelist Ivo Andrić (1961), than will know Saul Bellow (1976), Boris Pasternak (1958), Albert Camus (1957), or Hermann Hesse (1946). However, the Academicians, like

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Ivask and the editors and editorial board of *WLT*, are specialists who follow *the entire world* of literary activity. They know of many more fine writers worthy of the international attention and acclaim brought by the Nobel Prize than the mere handful of luminaries annually trotted out by the press as "leading contenders." The Academy's choices are, therefore, more often *educative* than celebratory, like the work of *WLT* and the Neustadt juries, drawing attention to *literary excellence pure and simple*, whether it has heretofore gone totally unnoticed or



*OU President William Banowsky, right, poses at the 1980 Neustadt Prize banquet with Mrs. Walter Neustadt, Sr., whose family endowed the award.*

has long been proclaimed around the world.

When their work is viewed in that spirit, the Nobel Committee and the Neustadt juries have chosen wisely far more often than not. The fact that their totally different, independent selection processes occasionally lead to identical outcomes only confirms the integrity of each prize and enhances rather than diminishes the stature of the honored laureates. *New York Times* books editor James Atlas voiced a similar sentiment in the lead paragraph of his fine story on the 1980 Nobel winner: "The announcement of the Nobel Prize for Literature has often caused bewilderment: The Swedish Academy is given to electing writers who, however deserving, are virtually unknown outside their own countries. But the émigré Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, while hardly familiar, has long possessed an international reputation among readers of poetry — a reputation enhanced by the publication last year of *Bells in Winter*, which the poet and critic Richard Howard declared the work of 'a great European master.' And in the citation of the Neustadt Prize, awarded in 1978, Joseph Brodsky pronounced Mr. Milosz 'one of the greatest poets of our time, perhaps

the greatest.' The Nobel Prize, then, confirms rather than establishes Czeslaw Milosz's reputation."

Perhaps the distance between Norman and Stockholm is not so great after all. What began in the late 1920s and '30s as the sometimes critical interest of a small OU journal in the annual Nobel rites has led — over a half-century of symposia, books, essays, juries, and awards — to a realization of enormous mutual respect derived from shared interest in and understanding of the world's finest contemporary literature. In a fitting culmination of this long-standing connection, *WLT* will devote the entire article section of its Spring 1981 issue to the Swedish Academy, introducing to readers the 10 literary members of that august body of 18 and thereby, hopefully, humanizing the Academy and its work by studying the writers behind the Nobel Prize.

The Academy members admittedly are delighted and honored at the prospect, and their permanent secretary, Lars Gyllensten has placed at the disposal of Ivask and the *WLT* editors extensive biobibliographical materials on all the writers to be treated. (Surprisingly, such an in-depth presentation has never been made outside Sweden!) In a note to Dr. Ivask in June 1980, following several exchanges on the subject of the proposed special Academy issue, Gyllensten offered this tribute: "If I have not said or written it before, I will take the opportunity to state my opinion that *WLT* is one of the best-edited and most informative literary publications I know."

So—when next October rolls around, watch for the announcement of the 1981 Nobel Prize in Literature. Ivask won't guarantee that the winner again will be one of "OU's writers," but the chances are excellent that *WLT* will have covered the recipient in some fashion over the past few decades. And no, Ivask is not yet making predictions about future Nobel laureates — or Neustadt laureates, for that matter. But the Norman-Stockholm connection should nonetheless continue to enliven many a festive-hour conversation in *both* of these out-of-the-way literary capitals — and wherever *WLT* is read. ■