



BRILL

# The ‘Most Ideal’ Peter Handke?

## *Aesthetics and Ethics as Criteria for the Nobel Prize in Literature*

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Received 7 April 2023 | Accepted 24 November 2023 |

Published online 14 March 2024

### Abstract

The Nobel Prize in Literature to the Austrian writer Peter Handke in 2019 gave new attention to one of the basic, and historically highly disputed (cf. Espmark 2001, 2021), questions in relation to the practice of the world’s most important literary prize – on what grounds, aesthetic or otherwise, does the Swedish Academy award the prize? In the aftermath of the 2019 prize to Handke, there was an intense public debate about the aesthetic criteria in relation to ethical criteria, in particular in Swedish national newspapers. Several members of the Academy as well as members of the Nobel Prize committee, wrote articles and gave statements about their individual reasoning for awarding the prize to Handke. Using this debate about the prize awarded to Handke as a case study, I aim to discuss the methodological and theoretical implications connected to the question of which criteria guide the selection of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

### Keywords

literature nobel prize – Peter Handke – aesthetic value and moral flaws – imaginative resistance

## 1 Introduction

This article will start with a discussion of the Nobel Prize regulations, as manifested in the will by Alfred Nobel from 1895, and some of the interpretations of

the will put forward since then – in particular in respect to the Nobel Prize in Literature, with the well-known formulation that the Prize in Literature should be awarded to the author who had written the ‘most ideal’ literature (ch. 2). In the following, the discussions in the aftermath of the 2019 prize to Peter Handke will be used as a test case: which aesthetic and ethical criteria can be extrapolated from the unusually public debate by members of the Swedish Academy and its Nobel committee, following the 2019 prize to Handke?

## 2 Alfred Nobel's Will

The interpretation of Alfred Nobel's will, and in particular of its phrase “en del den som inom litteraturen har producerat det utmärktaste i idealisk riktning” (“one part to the person who, in the field of literature, produced the most outstanding work in an idealistic direction”),<sup>1</sup> has been the topic of intense debate; former permanent secretary Sture Allén has even gone so far to engage a forensic expert in his research of the manuscript, since Nobel added an amendment to his handwritten will: “The last two letters of the Swedish word *idealisk* – i.e., *sk* – have been superimposed on other characters” (Allén 1997). Sture Allén – a professor of Swedish linguistics – concludes his investigation with the verdict that the solution to what Nobel actually meant in his will

would thus appear to be that Nobel's phrase *in an ideal direction* means “in a direction towards an ideal”. The sphere of the ideal is in turn indicated by the fundamental criterion for all the Nobel Prizes, namely that they are to be awarded to those who “shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind”. This means, for instance, that writings, however brilliant, that advocate, say, genocide, do not comply with the will.

Let me use this as my starting point for the following discussions about what counts as the criteria for the Nobel Prize in Literature. To put it bluntly: If Handke's literary work actually advocates genocide, the prize of 2019 would have been awarded in contradiction to Nobel's will, as interpreted by its former permanent secretary Sture Allén. In addition, the wording by Allén actually

1 Most of the material used concerning Nobel's will is published online, on the Swedish and international pages of the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Foundation. Whenever possible, the official translations as used by the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Prize Foundation on their internet pages are used throughout the article. My own translations are always marked as such.

catches a well-known question dealt with within analytical philosophy and aesthetics in particular, the question about the relationship between ethical and aesthetic value. I will therefore try to clarify two aspects: the implicit and explicit criteria for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and secondly, a discussion of these criteria, juxtaposed with the relation between ethical and aesthetic criteria for the arts in general, and for literature in particular, as discussed within analytical philosophy and its branch of Aesthetics.

So – on what grounds, based on which explicit and implicit criteria, is the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded? My answer to this question will necessarily be purely academic, based solely upon openly available material and my deductions from it. At this point, some further clarifications are needed: I am and I was in no way involved with the Swedish Academy, and its Nobel Literature Prize committee, and I have never received a grant or scholarship from the Academy (which is an important financial contributor not only for writers, but also for of Swedish academics in the field of literature). As is widely known, the work of the Academy with the Nobel Prize in Literature is regulated with strict confidentiality and a fifty-year embargo on all documents related to the decision making process. This article is based upon a conference paper, given during the Covid-19 pandemic on Zoom, convened by Bielefeld University, Linköping University, Germany's National Literature Archive at Marbach, and the Swedish Academy. Two members of the Academy, both part of the Prize committee, were virtually attending my talk: Permanent secretary Mats Malm, and the chair of the Prize committee Anders Olsson. In the discussion following my presentation, permanent secretary Mats Malm commented on my talk, pointing out that the Academy never *argues* for its line of reasoning behind its choices, but that the Academy occasionally *clarifies* certain points. The clarification Malm offered was the same he had given earlier, in Swedish news outlets, and will be discussed in more detail in section three. In light of this, the following discussions and the results of my paper may thus be seen as an attempt to understand the clarifications given by various members of the Academy and its external committee members, since this is all that is available to independent researchers.

It must, however, also be pointed out that this puts independent researchers into a problematic epistemological position, in particular in comparison to the public clarifications from within the Academy, which are made from a very different – that is, privileged – epistemological position, since it is the Academy members who decide which parts of their actual knowledge about their internal reasoning are made public, and which are not. In some aspects, this results partially in what one could call a 'Swedish Academiology' – the science of interpreting of what is available publicly, without being able to know what actually

was discussed within the Academy committee. To be clear: There are good and sound reasons for the Academy to keep secret the reasonings behind their choices, together with the list of nominees as well as their nominators – not the least in order to protect everyone involved from unsolicited pressure. I have no quarrels with that. I merely want to point towards the problematic epistemological position of outside researchers, conducting research on the Academy and its prize, in a relatively small academic community such as the Swedish one.<sup>2</sup> I strongly believe, however, that research on the Nobel Prize in Literature is of great importance – for the field of (world) literature, for the people personally affected by the Academy's decisions, but also for the Academy itself. The crisis of the Swedish Academy in the aftermath of the revelations made by Swedish journalist Matilda Gustavsson (2019), and the lack of transparency that had fueled that crisis, point towards the importance of independent scrutiny from outside the Academy.

According to Allén, Nobel's will offers five criteria for the literature prize:

- 1) "to those who ... shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind". This is the basic criterion, introduced in the very first sentence of the relevant paragraph in the will. (2) "during the preceding year". For obvious reasons, this is interpreted in such a way that the writer shall be alive at the moment of nomination – no room for Shakespeare – and the oeuvre shall be of current interest. (3) "no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates". This was a far-sighted criterion although not in keeping with the national romanticism of the late 19th century. In the last decade or so it has been possible for it to apply extensively. (4) "to the person who shall have produced ... the most outstanding work". It goes without saying that this means literary excellence. (5) "in an ideal direction".

This means that the prize shall be awarded to a writer of any nationality who in more or less recent times has produced excellent literature in the ideal direction, for the greatest benefit for mankind; a rather impossible – and imprecisely

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2 For the sake of transparency, I want to point out that Mats Malm has been a researcher at a different department (General and Scandinavian Literature) during my time as PhD-student/part-time lecturer at the Department of German and Dutch at Göteborg University 2001–2008, with occasional professional exchanges during seminars and lunch meetings. He has also been the external evaluator for the readership appointed to me by Lund University in 2013. I strongly believe that our professional acquaintance has no bearing on my independence as a researcher in this case.

formulated – task for the “Academy in Stockholm” (another imprecision in Nobel’s will, since there were at the time and still are several Academies in Stockholm).

Fortunately, we have a long history of awarded prizes to look back at. If there is anything that can be said for certain about the history of the Noble Prize in Literature, it is that criticism of the Academy decisions seems to be a historical constant. But of course, the long list of awarded prizes demonstrates at least implicitly a manifestation of the criteria the decisions were based on. In addition to the prizes themselves, together with their nominations and the prize citations, there is yet another important source: Kjell Espmark’s seminal study *Det litterära Nobelpriset: principer och värderingar bakom besluten* (*Nobel Prize in literature: a study of the criteria behind the choices*) from 1986, translated and available in a number of languages, is a tremendous resource and gives great insight into the inner workings of the Academy and the prize committee. However, it is written by one of the most important recent protagonists of the Swedish Academy Literature Prize committee – and must therefore be considered to be exactly as such: a contribution from *within* the Academy, from the Academy’s own perspective. In addition, Espmark’s discussion of former decisions, with his abstractions of historically used underlying criteria, is still bound to the 50-year confidentiality rule – even though Espmark at times allows himself to make general remarks about the discussions that are of course informed by his intimate knowledge.

I stated above that there is – at least theoretically – the possibility to deduct an implicit set of criteria from the list of awards and their motivations. This begs the question, though, whether such an approach ever can be more than just a *re-construction*, superimposing thoughts and the usage of potential criteria *a posteriori* to a large number of decision makers. Therefore, Espmark’s book must also be considered as a *re-construction* of criteria from a retrospective position, even if he possesses first-person knowledge from nearly two decades of membership in the committee. Espmark has, according to the Swedish Academy website, been the chair of the Nobel Prize committee between 1987–2004, and “possesses an unsurpassed knowledge about the Nobel Prize in Literature and the reasonings behind it throughout the years”.

My assessments of Espmark’s contribution do not fundamentally change with the publication of his latest book from 2021, in which he continues his personal narrative about the changing criteria, this time both looking back at his earlier account of the criteria in the first book, and expanding this approach to the ‘new century’, which he labels as ‘Witness literature’. However, and this remains somewhat of a recurring knockout argument in the general discussions about aesthetic criteria, but also to some extent in Espmark’s writings:

The decisive criterion, when everything is said and done, seems to be that “the Academy is touched / deeply moved by [a] great literary art” (my translation, JAB, of the Swedish original: “Det avgörande är att Akademien gripits av en stor litterär konst”, Espmark 2021, p. 26; the official translation is this: “What is decisive is that the Academy members feel in the grasp of impressive literary art”, Espmark 2021, p. 26, in the English translation by Robin Fulton Macpherson). When discussing the prizes for Tokarczuk, Munro, and Glück, which Espmark struggles to incorporate into his narrative of the changing, predominant criterion, a rather diffuse aesthetic criterion of ‘impressive literary art’ is put forward as the most important of all. The wording in this particular passage, ‘gripits’ / ‘touched’ or ‘deeply moved’, is especially noteworthy: It is an emotional, non-rational criterion, albeit in line with the Academy motto, ‘snille och smak’ – ‘talent and taste’.

Espmark’s books are the most important source for researchers like myself, who try to deal with questions about the prize criteria without insight into the actual discussions and arguments put forward within the Academy Nobel committee. However, as a consequence of the scandal in 2018, and as a result of the new forms of the prize committee work, we have seen an unusual increase of public discussion by both internal and external members of the Nobel committee, in particular in connection to the 2019 prize to Peter Handke. In major Swedish newspapers such as *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, as well as in interviews with Swedish public service television SVT and other media, there was an unusual amount of public information available, provided by people within the Academy and its then newly formed external committee.<sup>3</sup>

### 3 Aesthetics and Ethics

Should the Nobel Prize be given to an author of questionable moral standing? First of all, to avoid misunderstanding, I certainly do not advocate a kind of personal moralistic criterion for the Nobel committee. Obviously, the prize has

3 For an overview over the Nobel Committee and the external Committee’s work in the aftermath to the *MeToo*-scandal that had thrown the Academy into a severe crisis, see Espmark’s latest book (2021), in particular the chapter entitled “The Nobel Committee”, in the English translation. The catalyst of the Academy crisis were articles by the Swedish journalist Matilda Gustavsson in the Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, which resulted in a highly convincing book, published 2019, entitled *Klubben. En undersökning* (*The club. An Investigation*, my translation, JAB).

been given to authors with questionable moral standpoints before, and it will most likely be given to authors in the future whose moral standpoints in certain respects might be questionable, both from a contemporary position, and even more so in a diachronic perspective. Values change. Therefore, I am not advocating a stance that argues for the Academy to act as thought-police. Yet, the question still remains: According to the will, as put by the former Academy secretary Sture Allén, an author advocating genocide (and without the necessary prerequisite of that opinion to be expressed in the aesthetic work of the author) is not eligible for the Nobel Prize in Literature. That means that *there is* a moral criterion attached to the prize, at least in the will. Ezra Pound was never awarded the prize, in particular because of his antisemitism and support for Hitler and Mussolini (among a number of additional reasons);<sup>4</sup> Hamsun, on the other hand, was – albeit prior to his open support for Nazi Germany. Harold Pinter was awarded the prize, despite his political activism supporting Slobodan Milošević, yet Handke had to face fierce criticism for the very same support, being called “the Bob Dylan of Genocide Apologists” by the author Aleksandar Hemon (2019) in an op-ed piece in *The New York Times*.

And to speak frankly – one cannot help but wonder: Why did the Academy decide to award the prize to Handke, in particular as one of the first prizes after the biggest crisis for the Academy in recent times? They certainly knew how controversial the choice would be – not only due to the protests in connection to the Ibsen Prize awarded to Handke some years earlier in Oslo (2014). For one, Handke himself obviously does see connections between prizes, awards, and politics – or how else could one explain Handke's own activism during the 1990, when he first returned the Büchner-Preis, the most prestigious German literary award, and paid back the 10 000 Deutsche Mark he had received in 1973 from the Academy in Darmstadt, or when he in 2006 refused to accept the Heinrich-Heine-Prize (which, by the way, with its 50 000 € is far more lucrative than the Büchner-Preis was in the 1970's)? In the first case, Handke returned the award in particular for political reasons, that is the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, and his refusal to accept the Heine-award was caused by political protests, put forward by local county politicians in Düsseldorf, which probably would have led to his never actually receiving the prize. However, for Handke himself, and for literary prizes in general, the connection between literary prizes and awards on the one hand, and politics on the other, is obvious. Literary prizes are of political

4 The current permanent secretary Mats Malm was explicitly referring to the case of Pound and Espmark's reasoning in his comment to my talk at the Marbach conference, and thereby acknowledging a moral threshold in the prize criteria.

importance, at least in their effect, even if possibly not in their intent.<sup>5</sup> But does that necessarily apply to the case at hand? One could argue, and this is a point that has been made at least implicitly on several occasions in the discussion of Handke's prize, that the Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded solely to the work, and not to the writer. Obviously, everybody immediately also sees the counter-argument: It was Handke himself and not his publisher who was handed the medal by the Swedish King, and the prize sum (I assume) was transferred to Peter Handke's bank account.

Still, one could argue that flawed personal moral beliefs are entirely irrelevant for the Nobel Prize. Let me call this position the *extreme autonomous aesthetic stance*: The concept of 'work' or 'oeuvre' (the German 'Werkbegriff') is here to be thought of as independent of the artist's 'private' or 'personal' beliefs, both morally, and also artistically and aesthetically: A collection of works of literature is purely judged by its independent and intrinsic aesthetic value, without any relation to its creator besides the mere fact of being responsible for its production. As one can see, this stance becomes difficult to apply to both the history of the Nobel Prize in Literature as well as to the decision to award the prize to Handke. If nothing else, the history of the Nobel Prize does show a clear relationship between aesthetic values in works of literature and their creators. Looking at the history of poetics, the relationship between morals and aesthetics has long been intertwined – at least from Plato onwards. The idea of the poet as truth-sayer, as genius, and as public intellectual can easily be traced throughout the history of the humanities.

Let us take a very brief (and admittedly superficial) look at this particular part of the history of aesthetics in relation to questions of morality. As Eva Dadlez (2017) points out, already David Hume suggested that unethical content could be regarded as an aesthetic flaw: "In 'Of the Standard of Taste' David Hume criticized works in which 'vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation' (ST 246)." Dadlez links this view to contemporary discussions about a problem that philosophers have named 'imaginative resistance': "in other words, works and performances can make us complicit in the attitudes they endorse. The endorsement of attitudes most are inclined to resist might be thought an aesthetic flaw as well as a moral one." If a work of art makes you imagine unmoral propositions, the process of appreciation might not only be flawed, but might actually stop altogether, due to a resistance to imagine those propositions.

5 This is the distinction made by Espmark (2021) in his latest book in the English translation.



This is precisely the point made by Carol Hay (2017) in her rather informal discussion in the same article in the *Daily Nous*, a well-known and serious philosophers' internet platform with 'news for and about the philosophy profession':

Is it ok to enjoy art that's made by sexist assholes? Does the art celebrate, elevate, or excuse sexist assholery? Then probably not. Otherwise, go nuts. I thought the poststructuralists had decided the author was dead; shouldn't we just evaluate the content of the work itself? On the other hand, it seems to me the mere fact an artist happens to be a certain type of person – *a female* – has been sufficient to discredit the quality of women's work for centuries. If it's good enough for us, I figure it's probably good enough for the assholes.

I do not think that this reasoning necessarily comes to a felicitous solution. Two wrongs do not make one right. Likewise, the marginalization of women in the history of western civilization does not justify to automatically dismissing a work of art solely based on the morally flawed behavior of its creator – be it a cis-man, cis-woman, or non-binary person.

Stephanie Patridge (2017) tries to nuance the problem: Miles Davis admittedly abused his female partners, but the record *Kind of blue* still is a masterpiece, probably entirely unaffected by the fact that Davis has admitted to substantial wrongdoings. The comedian Louis C.K., on the other hand, does make comedy that oftentimes imitates his personal life, and (rightfully, I believe) the appreciation of his work is tainted by our knowledge that he used to masturbate in front of female colleagues, particularly when he is doing a bit on the same topic on stage. Patridge seems to suggest some kind of scale – the more the moral flaws of the author are reflected in the work, the more the aesthetic value of the work seems to decline. But also, the gravity of the artist's moral flaw plays an important role: Even if Hitler's painting were any good, they still would be impossible to appreciate.

This suggests that several yardsticks seem to come into play, then – the gravity of the moral flaw by the artist, and the degree to which the works of art themselves can be related to the immorality of the artist. A pop musician cheating on his taxes is different from a racist writer publishing novels in a colonial setting. Miles Davis' *Kind of blue* still is a masterpiece. Let us call this the *moderate dependent aesthetic stance*.

Kathleen Stock (2017) has made a similar argument, also making use of imaginative resistance as her starting point:

If this is right, then what we are left with is an ability to distinguish, in a lot of cases, the content of the work from the content of the author's values. As long as those values aren't being intentionally promoted in the work as things to be believed by readers and viewers, then we can feel less compromised in liking the work.

In other words: If there is no evidence of intentional content in the work of art promoting ethically flawed positions, there is no problem in still laughing at and enjoying Woody Allen movies. Let us call this *the intentional dependent aesthetic stance*.

These discussions of different opinions within analytical philosophy come with several problems for those of us interested in the example of the Nobel Prize for Peter Handke, and in the Nobel Prize more generally. Not only philosophers, but for a rare change even common sense tells us that Sture Allén's point in his discussion of the will and the problematic wording of 'idealisk' still holds: If a *work* of literature advocates genocide, it is not worthy of the Nobel Prize. My understanding of the philosophical discussions is that this is a sound position. The requisite needed here is that immoral views also are part of the work, and not just a fact about the author in his public or private life in general. This is the essence of the *intentional dependent aesthetic stance*. There are several other variants and positions as well, such as the view that even the moral flaws of an author suffice as such, without any traces of these flaws in the actual work. Let us call this the *extreme dependent aesthetic stance*. But this arguably more extreme position strikes me as problematic, for several reasons. For one, it opens for the possibility of thought policing. Secondly, it implies a strong actual intentionalist stance on interpretation.

These distinctions can be applied to Mats Malm's and Amanda Sokolnicki's exchange in the biggest Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*. According to Sokolnicki, Malm's first clarification of the Handke choice in the main Swedish television news programme was in line what I have called the *extreme autonomous aesthetic stance* – the prize is awarded to the literary work only, and that is independent of whatever personal political views the author holds privately, or even publicly.<sup>6</sup> In a second clarification, together with Academy member Eric M. Runesson, a stance more in the line of the *intentional dependent aesthetic stance* is discernable:

<sup>6</sup> This was also expressed by the head of the Nobel prize committee at the time, Anders Olsson, in interviews directly after the prize announcement in public Swedish television.

Akademien har behandlat en författare som definitivt fällt provocerande, olämpliga och otydliga yttranden i politiska frågor, men har inte funnit något *i det han skrivit* (my emphasis, JAB) som innebär angrepp på det civila samhället eller respekten för alla människors lika värde.

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The Academy has treated an author who definitely has made provoking, inappropriate and imprecise remarks regarding political questions, but did not find any of that *in what he has written* (my emphasis, JAB) which would conclude an attack on the civil society or the respect for all humans equal worth.

Applied to the discussion about Handke, this means that we need to discuss whether or not there are passages of problematic nature in his literary oeuvre, which could be construed as examples of Handke's work advocating the case of Milosević and the genocide of Bosnian and Croatian men and boys in Srebrenica.

I will not attempt to do so, since I am not a Handke scholar, and since the burden of proof would probably exceed the limits of this article. There are several attempts by others, though – together with attempts to clarify those 'imprecise' remarks.<sup>7</sup> However, this remains a complicated issue in the case of Handke's oeuvre on a general level. Paratext plays a crucial role, and questions of 'what counts as a literary work' become decisive – together with complicated issues of interpretation. The objective of this paper, however, remains to shed light on the criteria behind the decision-making process by the Swedish Academy, and not the question which passages in Handke's vast production might bear intentional traces of morally questionable values.

Based on our discussion so far, if we adopt an *intentional dependent aesthetic stance*, the only feasible defense of the Nobel prize to Handke would then be to argue that there is no such textual evidence of intentionally advocating genocide to be found in Handke's work. In this *intentional dependent aesthetic stance*, it is not a feasible argument to entirely dismiss Handke as a prize-worthy author solely on the grounds of assertions made in interviews or in private, outside of the literary work. Such an *extreme dependent aesthetic stance* would open for a practice of thought policing, and is certainly not in line

7 A comprehensive overview, albeit 'work in progress', is the "clarification" by Handke's publishing house Suhrkamp, that was circulated in October 2019, and that aims to meet all allegations put forward against Handke's texts and interviews about former states of Yugoslavia and the aftermath of the Balkan wars.

with a democratic and libertarian view on literature which prevails currently in most democratic societies in the world, and in Sweden in particular. “Nur wahre Hände schreiben wahre Gedichte” (Only true hands write true poem) wrote Paul Celan (1992) in a letter to Hans Bender on May 18, 1960. Such an *extreme dependent aesthetic stance*, which makes the work’s moral value entirely dependent on the creator’s personal morals – to make a morally exemplary creator a necessary prerequisite for aesthetic value – is in my opinion just as ill-informed as the view that reading literature makes you a better person. I suppose that my professional academic readers will agree with me that being an apt reader of literature does not necessarily make you a better person. As someone once mentioned, board meetings of literature departments provide ample anecdotal evidence that this is not the case.

However, Henrik Petersen, external member of the then newly established Nobel Prize committee (not one of the 18 ordinary members of the Academy), seems to adopt a *moderate dependent aesthetic stance*, in an article in the Swedish daily newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, where he defends the prize decision:

Även om det också syns hur Handke reflexmässigt slår mot vad han uppfattar som en orubblig konsensus, så är ett flertal av dessa utspel helt och hållet oförsvarbara. Men någon krigshetsare är Peter Handke inte. Han är ingen Ezra Pound.

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Albeit one can see how Handke reflexively hits against anything he assesses as unbreakable consensus, a number of these gambits are entirely undefendable. But he is no warmonger. He is no Ezra Pound.

My translation, JAB

In addition, this very line of argumentation within the *moderate dependent stance* is continued by Petersen’s distinction between “great works” and Handke’s “essayistic work” (‘essäistik’, in the Swedish original), which according to Petersen was not at the heart of the deliberations. We cannot know whether this was the case for the entire prize committee. However, his reasoning suggests that there are some ethically flawed non-literary texts by the author, and his public opinions are undefendable, but since they do not surmise to warmongering, he is still Nobel Prize-worthy.

When Kjell Espmark was asked about the prize for Handke, by the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter*, he refused to comment directly. Instead, the former member of the prize committee for 17 years made a historical comparison:

Det får jag inte ha någon mening om. Däremot kan jag tala om hur jag rent principiellt ser på saken. Det primära kriteriet är litterär kvalitet. Men det sekundära är att man också måste ta hänsyn till att priset ska vara i idealisk anda. Det där testades framför allt under sent 1950-tal då Ezra Pound skulle ha fått priset. Han var föreslagen av Svenska PEN-klubben, men avvisades av Akademien efter ett brev från Dag Hammarskiöld. I brevet skrev Dag Hammarskiöld att den som har lovprisat utrotningen av sex miljoner judar, och hoppats på samma öde för de amerikanska judarna, inte kan tilldelas ett pris i Nobels anda. Där var det uppenbart att den politiska faktorn spelade in, svarar Kjell Espmark diplomatiskt.

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I am not allowed to have an opinion on that. But I can tell you how I look at this in principle. The primary criterion is literary quality. But the secondary one is that one also needs to consider that the prize shall be in the ideal spirit. This was tested in particular during the late 50's when Ezra Pound was about to get the prize. He was suggested by the Swedish PEN-club, but was refused by the Academy after a letter from Dag Hammarskiöld. In the letter, Dag Hammarskiöld wrote that someone who has praised the eradication of six million Jews, and hoped for the same faith for the American Jews, cannot be awarded a prize in the spirit of Nobel. It was obvious there that the political factor played a role, Kjell Espmark diplomatically replies.

My translation, JAB

As we can see, Espmark too agrees with a stance that sees literary prizes, including the finest literary prize worldwide, the Nobel, as politically dependent. The extreme positions – aesthetics and morals are mutually independent on one hand, and aesthetics and morals are always interdependent, even outside the aesthetic work itself, are both rigorous, and therefore perhaps preferable. They both give very clear cut-choices. As Hemon has put it, "Mr. Handke's politics irreversibly invalidated his aesthetics, his worship of Mr. Milosević invalidated his ethics." From Hemon's perspective, this is certainly true. But this *extreme dependent aesthetic stance* can also be problematic. It seems unreasonable to demand a full ethical vetting of every potential laureate.

If we take a look at the opposite *extreme autonomous aesthetic stance*, it is the author who receives the prize, and not the work or the publisher. Both the Academy and also common sense tell us that prizes within the arts are given to creators of art, and the very idea of a prize as such is counter-intuitive to the *extreme autonomous aesthetic stance*. What we are left with, then, is the

middle ground, or the two positions characterized as the *intentional dependent aesthetic stance*, and the *moderate dependent aesthetic stance*. Both have their merits, and from what I can tell based on the public commentary available to a researcher outside the group of 'de aderton' (the eighteen), the Nobel Prize committee of the Swedish Academy has adopted the *intentional dependent aesthetic stance*, even if there admittedly were some utterances that could be labelled as examples of the *extreme autonomous aesthetic stance* and of the *moderate dependent aesthetic stance*.

Besides intricate questions about authorship in relation to the status of the literary oeuvre, with tricky borderline cases and questions of degree, there is also another aspect of relevance, and that is the question of which form of achievement the prize is awarded for. If we remain in the domain of the Nobel Prizes, would we care if we were reached by the news that the Nobel Prize winner in chemistry in his private life worships Nazi regalia in his basement, and is an antisemite? We probably would. But all our disgrace would be targeted on the person, and not on the prize-worthy scientific discovery and breakthrough. The scientific achievement of that Nobel Prize winner would stand – but would the Nobel Foundation give the prize to a well-known antisemitic professor of chemistry? I assume not. However, the extreme autonomous stance seems far more applicable here. Intentional moral flaws in biological and medical discoveries are obviously unlikely – maybe with the exception of Robert Oppenheimer, who was nominated three times for the Physics Prize, but never won. An intentional dependent stance seems to work fine for those fields. The Peace Prize, on the other hand, is probably the only Nobel Prize where politics are decisive, and the history of Nobel laureates, such as Arafat, Peres and Rabin, or Mandela who shared with de Klerque, and even Obama, at his time the president holding the record for killings due to drone warfare, point towards the fact that certain moral flaws might be neglected, suggesting a moderate dependent stance.

But there might be substantial differences not only among the Prizes, but also within different forms of art. Miles Davies' music is arguably still beautiful, and that is true in some people's opinions also about Michael Jackson's music. If Hitler's paintings were of astonishing aesthetic quality, we might still be fascinated by their beauty until the phenomena of imaginative resistance puts an end to our appreciation, and Leni Riefenstahl's films have always had an aesthetic effect on me which I cannot deny. Literature, though, seems different. I am not sure whether this is caused by us having higher moral demands towards authors of literature, compared to musicians, painters, or actors. This might be a result of the romantic aesthetics of cult of genius, or it might be due to the fact that the art of writing is fundamentally different from other

forms of art. I will not attempt to answer this question, but it strikes me as intuitively correct that certain artforms are less prone to be colored by moral defects of their creators than others. Personally, I have no objections if someone does or does not find Woody Allen or Bill Cosby funny anymore, just as one still might aesthetically enjoy Roman Polanski movies or find them unbearable. Generally, the *moderate dependent aesthetic stance* strikes me as far more applicable for other artforms than literature. The *intentional dependent aesthetic stance*, as expressed by Malm and Runesson in their second clarification (2019), seems to me to be the best choice when it comes to works of literature. Even better, though, might have been a choice of a laureate whose ethical constitution was not an issue to begin with. The prizes of 2020, 2021, and 2022 were all prizes where the laureates' ethical stance gave no reason for discussions.

The core of the problem in relation to the decisions of the Swedish Academy, and their criteria in the process of decision-making, is that their decisions are not just private and personal matters, even though the primary selection criteria seems to be 'literary quality', which more or less seems to be a question whether the committee members do or don't "feel in the grasp of impressive literary art" (Espmark 2021, 26). But since the prize is given to the author, and not to 'the work itself', the Nobel committee and the Swedish Academy need to face the fact that their decisions in cases of ethically problematic laureates will cause the kind of backlash that the 2019 Nobel Prize decision has received. This is true both within a perspective along the lines of the *intentional dependent aesthetic stance* and the *moderate dependent aesthetic stance*. Therefore, Peter Handke hardly can be considered the 'most ideal' choice.

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