the subsequent spurning of Maoist values, the deep influence of pro-Western internationalism on Chinese political, economic, social, and cultural life, and the resurgence of intellectual culture during the 1980s. The fifth and concluding chapter will draw out the significance of Gao Xingjian's Nobel Prize, examining Gao's prize-winning works and reactions to his prize all over the world, particularly in Mainland China.

from: Julia Lovell, The Politics of Cultural Capital, 2006

CHAPTER TWO

The Nobel Prize for Literature

Philosophy and Practice

> The whole of my remaining realizable estate shall be dealt with in the following way: the capital shall constitute a fund, the interest on which shall be annually distributed in the form of prizes to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit to mankind. The said interest shall be divided into five equal parts, which shall be apportioned as follows: . . . one part to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency; and one part to the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations. . . . It is my express wish that in awarding the prizes no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates, but that the most worthy shall receive the prize, whether he be a Scandinavian or not.
>
> ALFRED NOBEL*

First awarded in 1901 in accordance with Alfred Nobel's testament, the Nobel Prizes have since come to embody the complex of contradictions that inhere in the modern idea of global culture. Founded to honor benevolent contributions to mankind, the prizes were established and financed by profits from the dynamite industry. Alfred Nobel was proclaimed in his own lifetime a "merchant of death" whose research into explosives had fueled the escalating arms race between nations towards the end of the nineteenth century, while his peace prize aimed to promote "fraternity between nations."[1] A 1947 biographer notes the irony that Nobel, a workaholic inventor throughout his life, died leaving his will hidden under plans for explosives. "In his desk, buried under designs for new tools of war, lay the peace testament."[2] The stipulated "idealism" of the literary prize jars with both its historical background and its practice. On the one hand, Alfred Nobel's will champions a realm of literary idealism far above the worldly temptations of the international artistic field; on the other, the prize drags literature and

writers down into an arena promising material rewards, in which unspoken personal prejudices, financial temptations, thoughts of worldly gain, and international rivalries jostle.

The concept of "global culture," embraced with enthusiasm throughout the twentieth century, has been consistently undercut by boundaries between nation-states and Western powers' dominance in global institutions. The United Nations, for example, is founded on modern ideals of a world community, raised above nationalisms to assert universal interests. Its history, however, has been punctured with failures to acknowledge Western sources of self-interest deriving from colonialism and Cold War power conflicts.[3] Much of the early interest in the Nobel Prize can be attributed to the growing spirit of national competition: the prize was viewed as a thinking man's Olympic Games (which were restarted in 1896, just five years earlier). Today, announcement of the prize winner's nationality is still a matter of general interest. None of this seems to shake widespread belief that the Nobel Prize and like institutions are a fundamentally sound idea; however unrealized, universalism remains a key underpinning of the modern identity. In *Sources of the Self,* Charles Taylor sets the parameters of modern (Western) moral behavior around the belief that "it would be utterly wrong and unfounded to draw the boundaries any narrower than around the whole human race."[4] And among the Nobel Prizes, literature, far more than science, has played a crucial role in promoting, if not necessarily realizing, the prizes' modern universalistic ideal.

I am not suggesting that the laudable aims of the Nobel Literature Prize should be dismissed due to the impracticability of fully carrying them out. It would be unreasonable to hope that selections are devoid of individual subjectivity. The Nobel Prize, particularly in the last three decades, at very least does service reviving interest in literature for at least one day a year and brings neglected authors and those ignored outside their homeland to an international audience. My purpose here is to analyze the constituent elements of the Nobel Prize philosophy, what it represents as a modern, global institution of aesthetic evaluation, and the bad fit between its self-presentation and the reality of its practice. Having examined the psychological, philosophical and historical principles behind such an institution, especially with respect to national literatures outside the global mainstream, we can more easily comprehend the temptations and frustrations it has presented to modern Chinese writers and readers.

It is important not to overestimate the stability of ideas about literature in the West, since the uses of literature in practically every culture remain a point of constant contention. In China, the Nobel Prize and modern Western ideas about literature have frequently been misread as espousing a pure artistic professionalism, in contrast with the sociopolitical uses to which literature has been put in twentieth-century China. The course of Nobel literary history is far more complex than this: Romantic, humanist and Enlightenment conceptions of art have interacted to create a literary realm that espouses autonomy and literary professionalism while reserving the right to intervene in society where it chooses. The Nobel Prize represents an uneasy mix of ideas about literature, and its history is studded with controversies that reveal the different directions Western literature has taken in the twentieth century: classicism, humanism, experimentalism, and so on. In comparison with China (and, indeed, most colonial and semicolonial nations), however, the West in the modern era has possessed a far greater degree of social, political, and cultural self-confidence, and in that respect has experienced a smoother general continuity in literary and cultural concepts. This environment ensures that an institution such as the Nobel Prize can survive for a century, absorbing a variety of changes and criticisms while remaining in place. The task below is to understand what these ideas about literature involve and how they have manifested themselves in Nobel practice.

Philosophy and Origins of the Nobel Prize

The Nobel Prize has become "an anointed ritual whose claims are accepted as part of the order of things."[5] During its existence, the expansion of the mass media in conjunction with the growing gulf between modern science and literature and the general public have helped it attain global repute. The Nobel Prize has served as a bridge between the mystique of modern letters and the mass marketplace; prize winners are a sober part of our modern celebrity culture.[6] The six prizes — physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, peace, and economics — cover a broad sweep of modern intellectual life, in combination augmenting the prestige of each other. The literature prize has been adjudicated since 1900 by the Swedish Academy (a committee of five is appointed to administer the selection procedure), whose eighteen members over the century have changed only slowly. Once elected, Academy members — who are generally a mix of scholars and writers, all Swedish — remain in place for life, although resignations have been known. As the only literary prize of global humanistic scope, the Nobel Literature Prize occupies a unique position in modern world letters.

Nobel Prizes are accompanied by a prudent amount of fuss and ritual. Members of the Nobel Committee keep their deliberations secret for fifty years and maintain quaintly genteel habits such as addressing each other as Mr., Miss, and Mrs., in meetings. The prize ceremony is relatively brief, but the presence

of the Swedish king and queen furnishes the Nobel awards with an important touch of class. The Nobel ceremony avoids the media scrum of speculation that surrounds the British Man Booker or Whitbread prizes, since the winners are announced two months before. The occasion thus is a more sedate affair, marked by the dignity of a victory parade rather than the cheap thrills of a suspense-filled finish spun out by delaying speeches. The whole ceremony and banquet are the image of ordered restraint: precisely 1,288 guests are invited, all eating with and off special Nobel cutlery and porcelain. The banquet is the climax of the annual Nobel week, centered around the anniversary of Nobel's death on 10 December. Nobel prestige feeds off its resulting press coverage: winning a Nobel guarantees increased book sales, as new editions roll off the press, onto which "winner of the XXXX Nobel Prize" stickers are promptly slapped.

Naturally, Nobel authority stems also from the amount of money involved: the prizes are among the most lucrative in the world, offering in 2000 £615,000 to each winner. The Nobel Foundation is an industry in itself, generating an administrative expenditure of six million dollars in 1994.[7] It has produced various appropriate legitimizing devices, including a museum, journals, and patronage of hundreds of top intellects (the Nobel laureates), to whom and to whose ideas it lays a somewhat proprietorial claim. The Nobel Museum asserts a mission of unique scope; it is: "special . . . its 'acquisitions' are just those ideas that have served human beings and given them understanding and spiritual, yes, spiritual satisfaction. . . . A Nobel Museum recognises and praises the best in human beings."[8] The Nobel newsletter gives the distinct impression that winners of the Nobel Prize are absorbed into the Nobel fold at the expense of their individual, independent intellectual identities: mention of the latest post-Nobel work of laureates is subsumed under the telling heading, "Recent Literature on the Nobel Prize."

The nomination procedure for the literature prize is designed to avoid commercial pressures. While nominations for literary prizes such as the Man Booker in Britain come from the publishers themselves (and therefore appear more commercial), Nobel nominations give the prize the stamp of the expert's choice. Four kinds of people are qualified to nominate: members of the Swedish Academy and of other national academies, institutions and societies similar in membership and aims; university professors of literary history or languages; previous winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature; and presidents of authors' organizations representative of the literary activities of their countries (such as PEN).[9] Apart from membership of the Swedish Academy, none of these categories is nationally specific. Certain individuals, of course, are inevitably in a better position to nominate than others, and writers, their

lobbyists, and their opponents have often waged campaigns — sometimes behind the scenes, sometimes very publicly — over the awards. Pablo Neruda "was fully obsessed with the Nobel Prize. . . . He once said he would outlive Ekelöf (the committee member opposed to his laureateship) and win the prize. And he did."[10] The Nobel's cautious selection procedure has also imbued the prize with a sense of gravitas: a writer may hover several years on the short list before being considered a safe choice by the Academy. Such prudence has sometimes resulted in awards made so late they either seem out-of-date (the 1999 award to Günther Grass, for example) or become unrealizable due to the untimely death of the would-be beneficiary (Paul Valéry in 1945, Shen Congwen in 1988).[11]

It is perhaps this particular aura of authority that accounts for the paucity of thorough historical analyses of the prize.[12] For years, studies of the Nobel phenomenon have either focused on the character of Alfred Nobel or simply described what has happened over the last century, with little analysis of the institution or the prize winners. (Nobel was certainly a curious personality — a brilliant, cosmopolitan inventor and poetry-writing millionaire whose misanthropy and unhappy private life coexisted with hope for the betterment of humanity.) However, both these approaches have added to the Nobel's time-honored mystique, dehistoricizing the actual practice of awarding the prizes and failing to subject their fundamental raison d'être to rigorous analysis. Kjell Espmark, a member of the Swedish Academy, has produced a study of the changing criteria behind the prizes; his work goes to the opposite extreme, emphasizing the precise historical circumstances that governed the selections of each era.[13] Useful as it is, to some extent it still impedes our understanding of the broader, unifying rationale behind the prizes, in addition to airbrushing literary and cultural prejudices: everything becomes eminently comprehensible, even reasonable, once it is explained away in its historical context. Such an approach is problematic because it glosses over failures and shortcomings in the history of the prize as historical contingency rather than as part of the prize's fundamental conceptualization, a contradictory mix of Enlightenment and Romantic convictions. In the adjudication of the prizes, these convictions have been put through the additional wringers of personal bias and historical circumstance. The only commonality in the mixture of philosophies behind the Nobel Prizes is their distinctly modern character.

The Nobel Prizes represent first of all an Enlightenment belief in the existence of a universal, rational, secular realm capable of judging and ordering contemporary human achievements, "a self-admiring mirror of our democratized, scientized, secularized modern culture."[14] Alfred Nobel was himself one of the most renowned scientists of his day, a compulsive innovator who

researched and experimented tirelessly in the pursuit of scientific progress. The Nobel ethos attests to belief in an autonomous, rational self, a figure that gains control through disengagement—the correlative of objectification and mechanization—and in the commensurable achievements of such individuals.

Cutting into the Nobel Prize's Enlightenment philosophy is another set of modern ideas about literature and society that come under the umbrella of Romanticism. Nobel's vision of a universal, idealistic literature of benefit to mankind manifests a Romantic confidence in literature's capacity to exert a powerful transformative influence on humanity. Meanwhile, his call for a prize in which "no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates" denotes faith in a literature that transcends the everyday realm of human society and a Romantic belief in the supremacy and genius of the autonomous creator. Nobel was himself a great admirer and imitator of the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, "whose philosophy of life he absorbed both as regards its Utopian idealism and its religiously colored spirit of revolt."[15] From the age of eighteen, Nobel composed poems and plays full of overwrought Romantic emotions; his 1895 play *Nemesis* was written on the same theme as Shelley's Renaissance tragedy, *Beatrice Cenci.* The Enlightenment and Shelley exercised a deep intellectual influence on Nobel, leaving him with a hatred of religious dogmatism and the priesthood, and an enduring Romantic idealism.

Nobel's schema and its subsequent realization manifest all the contradictions inherent in its Enlightenment and Romantic tendencies. Nobel invoked a literary realm that was both secular and in possession of miraculously transformative powers. His vision reflects the parallel processes of secularization and divinization that shaped attitudes towards literature throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1860s, Matthew Arnold proposed "the renovation of imaginative letters as a secular but nonetheless saving scripture" with a desperate, hopeful urgency, forming "the current which runs steadily, expansively, sometimes turbulently from Carlyle in the 1820s to Hardy in the 1920s. The modern world needed a new testament, and literature was the only mode in which it could be made available."[16]

This vision of literature as a form of unbounded, quasi-sacred creativity existing beyond mundane norms of morality and culture was reinforced by institutional changes in the nineteenth-century literary field. It was in nineteenth-century France that the literary field started to emerge as an independent entity, as writers, reacting against bourgeois philistinism, proclaimed their social autonomy and allegiance to the ideal of "art for art's sake." The artist was neither "the man who works" nor "the man who does nothing" (the aristocrat).

"The artist is the exception," commented Balzac. "He does not follow the rules. He imposes them."[17] "Art for art's sake" asserted a moral neutralism and a new social personality for artists, reinforced by rebellious, Bohemian modes of living and driven by writers' search for distinction and originality.

What makes the positions of French nineteenth-century writers such as Flaubert and Zola particularly relevant to the philosophical origins of the Nobel Prize is their juxtaposition of an "art for art's sake" pure aesthetic with the "art for life's sake" literary form of realism. Just as Nobel appealed for a free-floating, nonnationally specific idealism combined with a literature of benefit to mankind, these writers elided belief in the autonomous aesthetic with social engagement. Flaubert's assertion of autonomy served as precursor to the disengaged engagement of Zola, one of whose principal achievements lay in putting the new institutional autonomy and integrity of the literary field to the service of sociopolitical activism.

> Zola needed to produce a new figure, that of the intellectual, by inventing for the artist a mission of prophetic subversion, inseparably intellectual and political, which had to be able to make everything his adversaries described as the effect of a vulgar or depraved taste appear as an aesthetic, ethical and political stance, and one likely to find militant defenders. Carrying to term the evolution of the literary field towards autonomy, he tries to extend into politics the very values of independence being asserted in the literary field. . . . The intellectual is constituted as such by intervening in the political field *in the name of autonomy* and of the specific values of a field of cultural production which has attained a high degree of independence with respect to various powers . . . the intellectual asserts himself against the specific laws of politics . . . as defender of universal principles that are in fact the result of the universalization of the specific principles of his own universe.[18]

The relevance of these historical developments to the Nobel Prize lies in their juxtaposition of a neutral, autonomous aestheticism with an engagement in the social realm; in other words, a literary stance that lays claim to independence while maintaining the right to intervene in society. Zola's establishment of a literature that claimed to intervene in life for art's sake mirrors the neutral stance of "literary integrity" adopted by Nobel judges over the years. It is this modern combination of artistic neutralism and engagement that has so confounded Chinese intellectuals who have yearned for Nobel glory. Chen Sihe, a professor of modern Chinese literature, has remarked:

> A lot of people have criticized Chinese literature for being impure, for containing too much intellectual reflection. But having read many of the Nobel winners,

> I thought that most of them did not write pure literature. They made a contribution to the whole of Western culture or society . . . For example in Sartre or Sienkiewicz, there is a lot of political thought. It seems that in the Nobel Prize, Western and Eastern criteria were not too far apart.[19]

Chen has picked up on a key contradiction within Western attitudes toward Chinese literature: reception of modern Chinese literature in the Anglophone West is frequently caught between unspoken and inconsistent beliefs about the sociopolitical role of literature, some of which coincide perfectly well with those traditionally held in China.[20]

The tension between calls for "transcendental literary quality" and literary social intervention is not one faced by Chinese writers alone; it has also been subject to reevaluation in every epoch of Western literary history. But the difference is, defining the correct negotiation of this tension in the modern era has always lain in the hands of Western (i.e., Swedish) writers and critics, and it is against their definitions that Chinese and other non-Western ideas about literature have been measured and, until recent decades, found wanting (or, more often, found to be one to two hundred years behind the West). In the modern era, and in the last two centuries above all, a certain level of historical and cultural amnesia has occurred in the West, in which the sociopolitical nation-building background to literary thought and the autonomous aesthetic has been largely erased. Indeed, when Gustavus III of Sweden founded the Swedish Academy of Arts and Sciences (later to adjudicate the Nobel Prize) in 1784, his inauguration speech revealed a view of literature not merely as "the amusement of a refined and select few, but as a matter of grave political importance, as the surest means of enlightening and ennobling society, of stimulating and sustaining public spirit." Gustavus viewed the Swedish Academy as the proper realm of statesmen, and the first eighteen members included four senators, two bishops, and a state secretary. He proclaimed that to "protect everything which may redound to the welfare of the realm is always my highest object; to contribute to the honor of the Swedish name my dearest desire. . . . With judges such as these, the Swedish language may look forward to a new and glorious era; nor is the duty of protecting her unworthy of those who have already dedicated all their time to the service of the State."[21]

The political and didactic roots of Western literary theory run deep. Plato's belief that the function of poetry was to instruct citizens in moral virtue led to his call to cast subversive poets out of the Republic. Theological thinking dominated medieval theories of literature and authorship, while idealized ethical conventions of form and subject matter held sway over classicism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was not until the eighteenth century,

and the advent of Romanticism in particular, that individual aesthetic judgment and the power of emotion came to be prized as universal autonomous goods. Absorbing the theistic secularism of the Enlightenment, the Romantics turned emotions and creative aesthetics into a new self-sufficient religion that led to the nineteenth-century advocacy of "art for art's sake." But Romanticism took over many of theistic religion's aspirations to the ideal: while in earlier theistic understandings, art had been primarily the medium for the expression of human ideals, it now became both means and end. Romanticism was, moreover, closely tied to broader sociopolitical developments, in particular to the rise of nationalism (an idealizing religion itself). Romantics everywhere sought to cultivate their national peoples, as in Herder's theorization of the universal uniqueness of national character and culture. The nation-state, and its relationship with individual consciousness, thus became the crucial organizational unit within Romantic schemas of modern aesthetic universalism: writers gave expression to a universal autonomous aesthetic through articulation of their national culture. Literature came to represent an "effective means of socializing people into the symbolic and economic values of the bourgeoisie that beg[an] to represent national values."[22] The implementation of aesthetic universalism, however, has been constantly hampered by inequalities within the global system of nation-states.

In the West, views of literature as an independent institution engaging only autonomously in the sociopolitical world have thus been far from dominant. They are little more than two centuries old and shot through with contradictions. The state of mind that permits literature's sociopolitical, didactic roots to be forgotten is in part a result of the "stance of disengaged reason" towards the world that Charles Taylor sees as inherent in Enlightenment modernity.[23] One of the hallmarks of this stance is its capacity to foreclose past options and to ignore superseded philosophical antecedents. The modern epistemic supremacy of the West (inventor of reason) ensured the victory of this amnesiac view of literature both in modern cultural production and in institutions such as the Nobel Prize. Chinese literature, coming from a different historical-cultural background and coming to modern nationalism later than Western countries, has thus been dubbed by the West unfashionably and improperly sociopolitical. Yet even the leveling amnesia of reason has not been able to completely erase the sociopolitical tendencies of literature in the Western tradition, and this has resulted in inconsistencies of attitude that have clearly emerged in post-Romantic literature and in the century of Nobel practice.

The link between nationalism and the universal autonomous aesthetic was reinforced by the relationship that Goethe envisioned between national and world literatures; this relationship constitutes another important contradic-

tion within Nobel's legacy. The parallel between Goethe's 1827 schema for a world literature and Nobel's vision for a literature prize in which "no consideration whatever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates . . . the most worthy shall receive the prize, whether he be a Scandinavian or not" is an obvious one to draw. Nobel shared with Goethe a modernizing, progressive conviction that world literature could advance human civilization through encouraging mutual understanding, appreciation, and tolerance. For Goethe, as for Nobel, world literature "serves as a link . . . between the nations themselves, for the exchange of ideal values."[24] "The point," wrote Goethe, "is not that nations should think alike, but that they should become aware of each other, and that even where there is no mutual affection, there should be tolerance." For Goethe there was no doubt that the possibility of universality existed; indeed, it was a moral and aesthetic duty of writers. "It is obvious that for a considerable time the efforts of the best writers and authors of aesthetic worth in all nations have been directed to what is common to all mankind."[25] Weimar would serve as the headquarters of world literature for writers from France, England, America, Italy, Scandinavia, Russia, and Poland.

However, Goethe's vision was compromised by the uneasy relationship between national and world literatures and by the unequal global system of transnational exchange. Just as the nation-state formed the basis of membership to the global model envisaged by the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, the essential constituent parts of Goethe's world literature were national literatures: "the only way towards a general world literature [is] for all nations to learn their relationships each to the other."[26] World literature, as a scholarly discipline, would establish intellectual relations between nations, either by systematic comparison or by historical exposition. Goethe thus smoothly conflated the relations between national and world literatures, envisaging a realm of free exchange — a literary United Nations — in which different national characteristics would not only be mutually accepted and acclaimed, but were indeed a prerequisite to entry. "The sure way to achieve universal tolerance is to leave untouched what is peculiar to each man or group, remembering that all that is best in the world is the property of all mankind."[27] Efforts made to ensure that the Nobel Literature Prize (to a far greater extent than the science prizes) revolves fairly among all nations point to the prize's close links to Goethe's vision of a literary United Nations. (The list of Nobel Science and Economics Prize winners in no way replicates the anxiety to circulate among nations reflected by the statistics for the literature prize. In the Nobel's first one hundred years, for example, 66 physics prizes, 47 chemistry prizes, and 90 medicine prizes went to U.S. scientists; the total of prizes won during this time by scientists working in countries outside the developed West can be counted on

the fingers of two hands.[28]) Goethe's literary convictions were fundamental to, and built upon the Romantic philosophy of literature and language: Coleridge, for example, viewed literature as both national and universal, both expressive and formative of civilization, as both representing the national whole and requiring geniuses who would stand above and elevate the lowly plebiscite.[29] The writer, thus, is both the *Volksstimme* (the voice of the people and outward expression of the inner essence of a nation or people) and the artist who towers above the *Volk*. In a similar way, Nobel's literature prize envisioned both an artistic realm that floated free of mankind and would have a salutary effect on mankind. And while he left instructions that national boundaries should be ignored, the literary prize, in practice, has proved to be firmly tied to literary nationalisms.

The cultural centrism shaped by global inequalities inherent in Goethe's vision emerges in revealing conflations such as, "European, that is to say, world literature."[30] Although his *West-Eastern Divan* appeared to remedy such bias, Goethe was more intent on drawing on Eastern "riches" (for example, thirteenth-century Persian poetry) as a "kind of devout longing to be transformed through self-sacrifice, to be purified and born again out of the East, to rise anew as a European. . . . But once the East had fulfilled its mission in extending Goethe's scope, he could return within his European confines. He had become West-Eastern."[31] Goethe envisioned two kinds of roles within world literature: a European community of contemporaries joining together to exchange the particular and the universal, while traffic to the East was unidirectional. "Goethe's conception . . . is permeated by classic Orientalist tropes, in which (an essentialized) difference is projected onto a passive East for the narcissistic benefit of the Western spectator."[32] Goethe saw world literature as, "an intellectual barter, a traffic in ideas between peoples, a literary market to which the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange."[33] In this barter, it is the translator who acts as mediator, even prophet. But if Goethe could happily describe world literature as a free market where nations offer their merchandise, it was a market in which the position of non-European, non-Western cultures was dwarfed by the languages and literatures of the giants of imperialism.

Despite Goethe's earlier universalism, furthermore, it was still "the destiny of the German to become the representative of all the citizens of the world."[34] Goethe's project was underpinned by his sense of the historic destiny of German culture, as he considered the German language and culture as the privileged medium of world literature. Combined with his Germancentrism, Goethe's use of economic tropes poses a wider range of problems for his utopian vision. Who sets the value on works and types of exchange?

What relationship should writers have with market demands? Where is the market and is there trade exploitation? As Andrew Jones pertinently asks: "Do developing nations supply raw materials to the advanced literary economies of the 'First World'?"[35] For Goethe translation was not a neutral channel of exchange, bringing benefits to both target language and original language; it was conceived as the appropriation of treasures of foreign art and scholarship on Germany's behalf, safekeeping them at the heart of Europe.

Goethe's discussion of translation and world literature reveals a constant tension between universalistic ideals and reverence for national historical mission (in his case, that of Germany). He asserted, on the one hand, his lack of patriotism for anything but the native land of his poetic powers and poetic work, the Good, the Noble, the Beautiful, and claimed that German culture and literature were distinguished, for example, from French by seeking to direct influence inward, as opposed to outward in the French case. On the other hand, his constant lamentations, invoking militaristic metaphors, of the lack of uniformity and unity in German literature were aggressive by implication: "Just as . . . the military strength of a nation grows out of its inner unity, so aesthetic strength is the gradual outcome of a similar unanimity."[36] Goethe intended German literature to become the new fountainhead of European or world literature through its youth and vigor, in contrast to tired French classicism, thus outlining a course of romantic individualism and universal unity in which German literature and language took a leading role.[37]

The Nobel Prize has throughout its history been similarly positioned between its universalistic brief and its location in Sweden. Underneath the apparent initial reluctance of the Swedish Academy to take on its Nobel duties at the turn of the century lay a barely concealed delight at the global prestige and authority that had fallen into its lap. While the Academy's director Carl David af Wirsén spoke in lofty terms of the idealistic benefit the prize money would bring to writers, he also clearly recognized it as Sweden's opportunity to arbitrate world letters. Wirsén composed this little verse for the first Nobel banquet in 1901:

> Unwished the task, unsought for, bearing now
> So weightily on Swedish backs; it seems
> We tremble taking obligation's vow,
> Henceforth a world will deem how Sweden deems.[38]

The Nobel Prize has been a global advertisement for Sweden ever since its inception; today, the image of the prize is tied closely to the issue of Sweden's international face. "What do we have in Sweden?" mused a cultural editor of a Swedish newspaper in the late 1990s. "We have Volvo, smorgasbord, Björn

Borg, and the prize. How can the prize not matter? It is the fashion to laugh and say we are above it. But we are not. When the academy seems foolish, we feel foolish, too. And when the prize sinks, so do we."[39] Achieving a reputation in Sweden, through translations and other promotional activities, has often been key to Nobel success. In the race between Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser for the 1930 prize, Lewis is seen to have gained a critical advantage through his deliberate cultivation of the Swedish public.[40] Gao Xingjian in 2000 doubtless benefited from the patronage of his translator Göran Malmqvist (the Nobel Committee's one sinologist). Malmqvist's Swedish translation of *Lingshan* (Soul mountain), one of the key works mentioned in the prize announcement, was published even before the Chinese original.

The history of the Nobel Prize poses the essential questions of *Weltliteratur*: the clash between world literature as a democratic, universalistic idea and its less-than-perfect application. Goethe's highly attractive ideal notwithstanding, no one, least of all Goethe himself, has proved qualified to carry out this ambitious brief, whose center of gravity has remained located in European, or Western, literature, and in Western ideas of how the individual relates to the nation-state.

The final Nobel contradiction lies in its entrapment of artistic idealism in distinctly materialistic rewards. How are we to reconcile the idea of a free-wheeling, autonomous literary field, with the institutionalization and bureaucratization that literary prizes, and the Nobel Institute above all, threaten? The Nobel drags literary idealism into the mire of bourgeois capitalist lucre, the entity against which the nineteenth-century idea of artistic autonomy defined itself—Nobel was, after all, one of the greatest capitalists of his day.

Pierre Bourdieu provides one answer to this conundrum, charting the process by which literary individualism itself becomes institutionalized. In a literary field where the values of indignation, revolt, contempt, and autonomy are celebrated, "all those who mean to assert themselves as fully fledged members of the world of art . . . will feel the need to manifest their independence with respect to external powers, political or economic. Then, and only then, will indifference with respect to power and honors—even the most apparently specific, such as the Académie, or even the Nobel Prize . . . be immediately understood, and even respected, and therefore rewarded."[41] It is the fate of even the most tirelessly avant-garde movement to be institutionalized and out-radicalized by new pretenders: T. S. Eliot brought iconoclastic modernism into the literary establishment within a decade. Bourdieu's sociological study of the literary field makes this point forcefully, highlighting the individualized stance taking that transforms itself into governing practice. This once more invokes tensions inherent in the conceptualization of the Nobel

Prize between visions of an autonomous literature and the social environment in which it exists. The literary field, priding itself on its independence, is as susceptible to cultural and political preconceptions as any social sphere and quickly develops its own set of legitimizing institutions. In the Nobel's century-long history, only Jean-Paul Sartre has refused the prize (in 1964).

During the twentieth century, literary prizes became a crucial tool for legitimizing and raising up works of serious literature. France's Prix Goncourt is an apposite example, offering a mere fifty francs to the winning book but guaranteeing a huge boost to sales. Thus, the means of legitimizing and exalting the chosen work does not contravene the ethos of success in the literary field, where economic tropes are reversed (the less you have to do with financial capital, the more cultural capital you amass). With the Prix Goncourt, a writer can have both. Once a book has received the stamp of seriousness through receiving an accepted and nonlucrative literary prize, sales boom. Literary prizes now permit more writers than ever before to combine cultural and economic capital. Currently in Britain there are probably more literary novelists able to make a living from writing than at any other time in the past century, despite the dominance of popular culture. The Man Booker and other literary prizes have had a large part to play, bringing a cash windfall (the Man Booker Prize was worth £52,250 in 2004), media attention, and a potentially spectacular spike in sales. The Nobel Prize has won its cultural capital perhaps *because* of its monetary value and the difficulty of winning it. It is desirable "as the only distinction by which one can rise above nearly all others."[42] While modern literature is regarded as an independent profession, therefore, it is constantly in the process of becoming variously institutionalized and commercialized.

ALL THESE CONTRADICTORY ideas formed the philosophical and theoretical background to Alfred Nobel's bequest and have continued to influence the practice of awarding the Nobel. Naturalized into a modern identity built around ideas of universalism, freedom, and a rational-romantic assertion of independence in the artistic realm, these concepts unite in the ostensibly neutral nexus of authority that is the Nobel Prize, obscuring the inconsistencies and mutual contradictions between their rational and Romantic, universal and national, independent and bureaucratic components.

In the West, despite the misgivings and criticisms voiced about individual awards, we are fairly happy to accept an institution such as the Nobel Prize at its own valuation, namely that the Nobel Committee is doing its best to keep interest in serious literature alive in a complex and fragmenting global

culture. However, in the struggle to create a truly diverse and accountable literary community, the Nobel Prize as an institution of world literature must be questioned and held to account on some of the following issues: What is the relationship between literature of a "world" level and the society in which it is written? Should this literature float independently above society, or be socially engaged? Should it attempt to be universal or particular? Independent and professional, or humanistic? Just as they apply to the Nobel Prize, these same questions have troubled Chinese literature for the past century. Furthermore, what should world literature do as an institution? Who can judge the worthiness of candidates? Who is neutral enough? Can it be an institution? What is the relationship between the institution and those who are incorporated into it? Who legitimizes whom?

The Nobel Prize in Practice

Despite the international repute of the Nobel, criticisms have been voiced. Since its inception, the Nobel Prize for Literature has been periodically lambasted for its choices, omissions, political bias, failure to represent non-Western literatures, or simply on grounds of logic. How can any committee of individuals aspire to judge the "most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency" that has conferred the "greatest benefit to mankind"? The Nobel, perhaps more than any other literary prize, suffers from the imprecision of its criteria. In Britain, the Man Booker Prize is more straightforwardly awarded to the "best" novel of the year written in English, including the Commonwealth but excluding the United States. In France, the aim of the Prix Goncourt (limited to works in French) is to "encourage literature, assure the material well-being of a number of literary figures and strengthen the bonds of fraternity between them."[43] The Nobel, meanwhile, has striven for a century to identify an "idealistic tendency" that has contributed to mankind in general. Should the Nobel Prize then seek out purely professional, technically sophisticated (modernist/postmodernist) writing that denotes some kind of perfection of literary form or advancement on forms of the past? What about socially engaged didactic writing that seeks to achieve a salutary effect on humanity — or popular literature accessible to as much of humanity as possible? Should it pursue difficult, obscure writing, cut loose from coordinates of the real, that can apply to the human condition in its entirety?

"Indeed," Kjell Espmark admits in his study, "the history of the literature prize is in some ways a series of attempts to interpret an imprecisely worded will."[44] A former secretary of the Swedish Academy, Anders Österling advocated only the very broadest of interpretations to Nobel's idealism, claim-

ing that Nobel referred to works of a positive and humanistic tendency. Sture Allén, another former secretary of the Academy, has preferred to attribute to Alfred Nobel the taking of an "independent stand."[45] It is this assertion of broad independence that runs through the Nobel Prize's history, incorporating at the same time the contradictions of its philosophical heritage and historical practice. Regardless of its inconsistencies, the Nobel has laid claim to a neutral, universal realm by dint of its being the only literary prize with a global remit.

Espmark draws a line between two main phases of Nobel practice, falling roughly at the division between the pre- and post-World War II eras. Referring to the latter, he comments: "The Nobel Prize in Literature has gradually become a *literary* prize." It is also this phase that can boast of the most worthy recipients: "What [the Academy] cannot afford is giving Nobel's laurel to a minor talent. Its practice during the last full half-century has . . . largely escaped criticism on that point."[46] Over the last fifty years, therefore, the Nobel Prize has aspired increasingly to being an upholder of pure literary values. This assertion of aesthetic neutrality, however, threatens to obscure the prize's continuing legacy of humanism and social engagement. The Academy has veered between two roles: arbiter of abstract literary achievement, and diplomat in international goodwill and literary politics. Below, I will identify some of the unifying features of Nobel practice, its "neutral aesthetic" that asserts an artistic, humanistic neutrality and independence while passing over inconsistencies and bias.

The History of the Literature Prize: A Synopsis

Espmark identifies the ethos promoted by Wirsén, the Academy's director in the first decade of the prize and a literary conservative, as a classically inspired "lofty and sound idealism." Hostile towards Romantic and modernist strains in literature, Wirsén favored authors such as Sienkiewicz (1905 laureate), whose works were described as having a Goethean "coolness of plasticity." The qualities of purity and objectivity, as incarnated in Goethe, stood in contrast to the tendentiousness of contemporary authors who wrote about "problems," for example Zola, Tolstoy, or Ibsen. Wirsén's "ideal" nevertheless proved to be highly selective about what represented neutrality. Tolstoy was deemed "one-sided," largely due to his denunciation of religion and state. Hardy was rejected on similar grounds, for his characters who "seem to lack all religious and ethical firmness." The committee disqualified James's *A Portrait of a Lady* on the grounds that it was incomprehensible that Isabelle Archer should choose Osmond over the "excellent Lord Warburton."[47]

Wirsén's reign over the Nobel Committee is now viewed as an unfortunate

episode in the prize's history, atoned for by an improved later performance. There is an important point of psychological continuity, however, from the prize's first decade through the rest of its history: the assertion of neutralism, a claim to a moral idealism that holds itself above the petty tendentious moralizing of a Tolstoy — even though the prize has been seen as political since its inception. In the furor surrounding the Academy's failure to award the first prize to Tolstoy, the journal *Academy* commented: "Ah, but in all things we must reckon . . . with political interests. . . . Sweden could not afford to offend the Czar, and Tolstoy is not a figure of delight to the Imperial gaze."[48] Twentieth-century Sweden has cultivated an aura of restrained neutrality, which has helped to imbue the prizes with universal authority. Sweden in 1900 was a country of five million people, one tenth the population of Germany, Britain, France, or Austria, and its days as an important military and political power had ended a century earlier. In culture and science, "Sweden exhibited all the symptoms of a small country with large, intimidating neighbors."[49] It is perhaps this quality of being marginal that has engendered more confidence in the Nobel than would be the case for a prize based in France or the United States, nations far more caught up in the middle of European and global transactions.

The following decade (1910–1920) of prizes was initially marked by a broadening of the prize's geographic range, with the 1913 award to the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. Prize distribution was subsequently characterized by what has been called "literary neutralism," a declaration of total political impartiality in view of the international tensions that exploded in the First World War. The Swedish Academy desired to take a role in promoting international peace, "to exercise a restraining and counterbalancing influence on the excesses" that nationalism in contemporary literature could so easily generate.[50] In the 1913 award, these two goals — widening geographical distribution and rising above political partisanship — proved handily compatible, since Tagore's prize incorporated a non-Western winner (albeit one from a British colony) into the Nobel fold, giving the prize a more universal scope and avoided favoring a writer from one of the Great Powers. Academy member Verner von Heidenstam wrote: "For the first time, and perhaps also for the last time in the foreseeable future, we would have the chance to discover a great name before it has already spent years haunting the newspaper columns." In a private letter, however, Heidenstam's arguments appear more tactical: "What you say about the Indian does not sound so bad. It is necessary in some way to break the routine."[51] The selection of Tagore doubtless strengthened the Nobel Prize's claims to internationalism, but the half-heartedness of the gesture shows through. In official statements, Tagore received the prize "because of his profoundly sensi-

tive, fresh and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English works, a part of the literature of the West." It has been further alleged that Tagore's prize was political, with Swedish Crown Prince William prodding the Academy to embarrass the British by awarding the prize to their colonial subject.[52]

Neutralism of varying kinds was pursued throughout the 1920s and 1930s, decades that presented two challenges to the Nobel Committee: the growing stature of modernist writers such as Joyce, Woolf, and Eliot, and the question of taking a stance on politicized (socialist) writers, most notably Maxim Gorky. Kjell Espmark, ever at pains to highlight the historical circumstances behind committee choices, points out that the committee of the 1920s sought the "great style," with Goethe's classicism and "universal appeal" in mind. This translated into the selection of compromise candidates, the omission of Joyce, Woolf, Conrad, and Proust, and the rejection of Eliot until 1948, over two decades after his brand of poetic modernism was first institutionalized in the Western canon. The Nobel Committee took a careful path of moderation that established the prize as a safe, middle-of-the-road organization, reluctant to recognize pioneers from the 1920s until after the Second World War. In Pearl Buck (1938) and Galsworthy (1932), accessibility was prized above all, while difficult modernists were excluded. Other novelist-laureates of these eras now considered second-rate include Pontopiddan and Deledda. The preponderance of novelists emphasized the function of the prize as a neutral, diplomatic instrument.

This stance was extended into the handling of political issues. In pre–Cold War decades, the committee sought a neutrality defined by the non-Communist West. Gorky was rejected for fear of the Nobel name being besmirched with communism, and the first prize to a Russian author went to Ivan Bunin in 1933, an émigré and opponent of the Soviet Union. The award was made despite the committee's reservations that Bunin's writing did not "continue the great tradition of Russian narrative art."[53] Given the misgivings over the artistic merits of Bunin's works, his prize was most certainly politically determined. Scholars of Russian believe that Bunin had for some years been lobbying for a Nobel, playing on anti-Soviet feeling.[54]

The prize took a more literary bent following World War II. Once modernism had been accepted into the literary establishment, it was beckoned into the Nobel roll of honor, with awards to Eliot in 1948, Faulkner in 1949, and Beckett in 1969. Obscure writing was now acclaimed for achieving an idealistic universalism unrestricted by the social reference points of realism. Since this period, the committees have sought refuge in objective technical criteria. "The Prize is

in the end not given to an attitude toward life," Espmark has commented, "to a set of cultural roots, or to the substance of a commitment; the Prize has been awarded so as to honor the unique artistic power by which this human experience has been shaped into literature."[55] In some ways, the search for literary pioneers marked a return to the ethos of the Wirsén era, during which the realist fiction of Tolstoy or Zola was regarded with distaste. Artur Lundkvist (one of the foremost spokesmen for the pioneer-seeking school of thought) attacked the choice of John Steinbeck in 1962 as "one of [the Academy's] greatest mistakes," presumably because his works such as *The Grapes of Wrath* are anchored in local social concerns. Lundkvist reasoned that "if attention had been focused on the renewal of narrative fiction, then Steinbeck would at once have been out of the picture in favor of authors like Durrell, Beckett, or Claude Simon."[56] Difficult poets such as Saint-John Perse (1960 laureate), meanwhile, were praised for their "highly individual creations" which at the same time "wished to be an expression of the human . . . and of the eternally creative human spirit." The poet's "isolation and distance" were "a vital condition for ambitious poetry in our age," making Perse "a poet with a universal message to his contemporaries."[57] If previously a literature of "universal interest" had been sought in internationally best-selling authors, postwar committees sought politically opaque universalism in esoteric creations.

After the pioneers of modernism had been recognized, "a pragmatic attitude" took over, focusing on acknowledging authors ("unknown masters") who would be positively helped by the money and kudos that a Nobel Prize brought. Lars Gyllensten remarked in 1984: "It is a matter of finding people who are good and who deserve the prize . . . and for whom the prize can be of benefit to themselves and their work."[58] Gyllensten asserted in 1969 that the "prize must not be a medal for services rendered . . . but rather a kind of investment in—and as such, of course, entailing a degree of risk—the advancement of an oeuvre that still *can* be advanced. And this must be relevant both for the recipient of the prize and . . . for readers and other authors at the frontiers of literature."[59] In the 1930s academician Fredrik Böök criticized the award to Galsworthy, hoping rather to award "a significant and highly individual author who stands somewhat apart from banal world fame and press-inspired popularity."[60] Österling expressed a similar viewpoint in the postwar years. "It would be a justified reaction to this commercialization if in the future the Nobel Prize awards were to favor writers who do not enjoy the benefit of such a market and who, for the sake of it, do not compromise their literary standards."[61] Hesse, winner in 1946, was viewed as a "worthy subject, as one of the last surviving writers of the genuine, romantic, non-commercial

type."[62] Committee member Sigfrid Siwertz in 1960 thought that the academy "ought to step outside the dominant cultures and give the prize to someone off the literary beaten track."[63]

Thus, another kind of aesthetic autonomy emerged in prize-giving policy, where considerations of an author's existing fame were set aside, and writers who were less commercial (therefore more independently artistic), who stood "outside the noise of the marketplace,"[64] or who came from "marginal" cultures were targeted instead. Following a pattern set by prizes to Jiménez and Quasimodo in the 1950s, the 1978–1981 prizes (Singer, Elytis, Milosz, and Canetti) can be viewed in the light of this policy. Prizes to Symborska (1996) and Saramago (1998) again brought world attention to two relatively neglected authors. The 1980s saw the prize go to African authors (Soyinka, 1985; Mahfouz, 1988) for the first time. In the first half of the 1990s alone, prizes were given to writers from Mexico (Paz, 1990), Jamaica (Walcott, 1992), and Japan (Oe, 1994). Although this policy has been clearly beneficial to individual authors, it also brought praise for the Nobel Committee, whose mission had became the virtuous promotion of "struggling artists." The championing of lesser-known writers continued to augment the committee's cultural capital from the postwar era throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The Nobel sought to be linked with the names of independent-minded writers who did not write for money. Not only could the Nobel judges assert political neutrality, they were deaf also to the din of commercialism.

> In their concern to situate themselves on a plane above ordinary alternatives . . . they impose an extraordinary discipline on themselves, one which is deliberately assumed against the facile options that their adversaries on all sides permit themselves.[65]

This "extraordinary discipline," observed by Bourdieu in his study of the stance of autonomy within the nineteenth-century French literary field, emerges also in the range of criteria set out by the Nobel judges over the years. The Nobel ethos has moved through aristocratic classicism, neutralism, accessibility, experimentalism, and marginalism, in the interests of asserting an extraordinary discipline of neutrality as arbiters of world letters. Whereas largely before the Second World War, the Nobel Committee sought to legitimize itself through inclusiveness and accessibility, the postwar period witnessed the beginning of a new, more "literary" phase in which the committee asserted allegiance to another kind of artistic universalism: art made universal by its obscurity and by its unpredictable eclecticism. Bourdieu has described the stance of the

Double Rupture that avant-garde members of an independently constituted literary field assert in order to assure a commanding position: I detest X, but I detest just as much the opposite of X.[66] The double rupture declared by Nobel practice has thus emerged as: we detest those who write for money, but we detest just as much those who write for politics. The final section will be devoted to discussing in detail the role of the committee's political stance, a question that has proved singularly problematic in their efforts to preserve aesthetic neutrality. I will focus on two areas where political considerations have come into clear play: in the selection of Cold War and non-Western winners.

Politics and the Nobel Prize: Cold War Case Studies

Nobel committees have not been disingenuous about the politicization of their prize. Bishop Gottfrid Billing wrote to Wirsén in 1902: "It is true that the awarding of the prize must not become a question of national politics. But it is equally incontrovertible and unavoidable that it has and will have a political aspect."[67] As a prize destined for benefactors of humanity and adjudicated by subjective humans, the politicization of the Nobel has been an inevitability. With this in mind, the Academy has striven to assert a stance of "political integrity" and to assume a position of moral probity concerning that politicization. This standpoint, however, has constantly been qualified by personality and circumstance, and despite assertions of literary professionalism (in particular since the late 1940s), extra-literary criteria have continually come to the fore. The Nobel Committee's definition of "political" has had its own blind spots. Wirsén vetoed a shared prize between Ibsen and Bjørgsen in 1902 on antipolitical principle: "I believe . . . that we are doing not only the wisest thing but also the most just in never using this prize as a political tool or bargaining piece . . . the procedure offends against the impartiality of a literary tribunal."[68] Added to which, of course, Wirsén objected to Ibsen's "negative and enigmatic features" and his use of symbolism, which clashed with Wirsén's own beliefs in the need for ethical correctness in literature. Gorky in 1928 was rejected for fear that a prize "would in the world at large be taken as a mark of approval of Gorky's writings in their entirety and thus provide a dubious advertisement for them."[69] With Gorky, the committee took up its favored stance of neutrality, before five years later blithely making an award to Bunin (importantly symbolic as the first Russian Nobel Prize), situated at the opposite end of the political spectrum.[70]

It was during the Cold War that such political inconsistencies became obvious. The Nobel Committee trod a careful path through the quagmire of Cold War politics, honoring four writers aligned in opposition to the Soviet