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***THE SWEDISH ACADEMY AND THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE* BY BO SVENSÉN. TRANS. KIM LOUGHRAN. STOCKHOLM: THE SWEDISH ACADEMY, 2000, PP. 85. ISBN 91-1-300878-1**

Despite the annual excitement about the Nobel Prize in Literature, the Swedish Academy has remained safely in the shade of more or less deserving Laureates. At least so it seems from the non-Swedish perspective. In the last decade of the twentieth century, however, two attempts were made to present the decision-making institution to the English-speaking readers. In 1991 Kjell Espmark published in Boston, Massachusetts his book *The Nobel Prize in Literature. A Study of the Criteria Behind the Choices*. To round off the century of the Nobel Prize, Bo Svensén offered his succinct account in 2000. It may be an advantage as well as a disadvantage that both authors are connected with the Swedish Academy; the former as an Academician, the latter as private secretary to the Academy's permanent secretary. The obvious advantage of such a situation is that both have the insider knowledge necessary to write competently. Their close links may, however, provoke the charge that both books are merely official statements on behalf of the powerful institution. Permanent Secretary Horace Engdahl's foreword to Svensén's book dispels all doubts in this respect; he admits that the text was written *at the Swedish Academy's behest* and in order to satisfy *a need for a modern and initiated presentation of the Swedish Academy to a global readership*.

Even though the title links the Academy with the prestigious prize, out of the book's six chapters only one is devoted exclusively to the Nobel Prize. The drift of Svensén's argument is, apparently, that the Swedish Academy was and is so much more than the dispenser of Nobel Prizes. The perspective of the book (especially in Chapters 1 and 2) is that of a historian who recounts past events and shows how the Swedish Academy came to be what it is now, but the author is also something of a tour guide who seeks to satisfy the needs of his audience: anticipate their questions and avoid boring them with too many details.

Chapter 1, “The Origins of the Academy”, outlines the intentions of King Gustav III, who founded the Swedish Academy in 1786. Entirely French in his upbringing and education, the King modeled the new institution on the French Academy (founded as early as 1635). In a royal letter, the King decreed that the Academy should consist of 18 members, of whom he appointed 13. The remaining five were to be elected by the appointed members. The main tasks of the Academy were to produce a Swedish dictionary and grammar, organize competitions in oratory and poetry, as well as nurture the nation’s heritage (by striking a commemorative coin and writing a memoir on *a great Swede of Former Times*). *Talent and Taste* was the motto the King gave to the Academy, which Svensén reads as an attempt to balance the Dionysian and the Apollonian (2).

In Chapter 2, “The Academy through Two Centuries”, Svensén traces the evolution of the institution in terms of its social set-up and performance. The titles of subchapters indicate that it was a small group of outstanding personages active in different eras who shaped the Swedish Academy. Svensén by no means avoids evaluative statements; for example, he praises Gustav III (6), and criticizes Carl David af Wirsén (20). Nor does he entirely skim over the charges of conservatism brought against the Academy at different times (10, 15, 19). One of the recurrent themes in this chapter is the changing proportion of the three categories of the Academy’s members: literary writers, *learned men*, and *gentlemen* (6, 14, 18, 21, 23, 26). It was only in 1914 that the Academy elected its first female member: Selma Lagerlöf (21). The female quotient nowadays comprises almost a quarter of the whole membership (26). Another theme that gives the book its suspense is the Academy’s search for permanent residence, which ended in success as late as 1921 (7, 17, 21).

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 focus on the Academy’s tasks. Chapter 3, “Linguistic Work”, gives a brief account of the numerous and mostly failed attempts to produce a grammar and a dictionary of the Swedish language. Although Svensén focuses on a specific institution, he also gives valuable insights into the history of lexicography as an independent scholarly field. Lacking in professionalism, the first participants in the Academy’s projects faced some of the crucial questions: Is normative or descriptive approach preferable? How should foreign words be dealt with? It was Bernhard von Beskow (toward the end of the nineteenth century) who first saw the need for professionalism in linguistic projects (31). The work on the Swedish dictionary is still in progress, and likely to be completed by 2017 (38).

The Academy’s Competitions and Prizes are discussed in Chapter 4. The Great Prize began as an annual competition in two categories: poetry and oratory (44). At first, the subject of entries was dictated, then only their form. Later even these restrictions were relaxed. Thus, it was also possible to compete with translations (46). Svensén admits that *[w]ith a few shining exceptions, the*

quality of competition entries was generally low (47). As a result, *there was ultimately little in the competitions to tempt the real talent, leaving the field open to the mediocre. Thus, the activity had largely defeated its own purpose* (48). It was as late as 1914 that a special committee was appointed to look at this problem. Its conclusion was that the competitions should continue but in another form; namely, without the division into two categories and two prizes each. The definite end to the competition came in 1940. Since then the Great Prize has been awarded irregularly two to four times per decade in recognition of especially prominent contributions (48). The subchapter on “Other Prizes” is very brief, and yet the figures quoted there are impressive: by the end of the 1990s, the Academy was awarding about 40 different prizes. The yearly number of prize winners reaches about 60. The total annual prize sum is approximately \$300,000 (51).

Chapter 5 tells the story of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Alfred Nobel’s will, dated 27 November 1895, and stipulating among others that *the Academy in Stockholm* should award the literature prize to *the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction* was an enormous challenge (52). Carl David af Wirsén was eager to accept it, but there were also opponents within the Academy, who feared *all the unpleasantness, all the pressures, intrigues, disapproval and calumny* which doubtless would accompany the mission of reviewing and judging the world’s yearly production in literature (quoted in Svensén’s book, 52). Af Wirsén found convincing arguments, and when put to a vote, his proposal won a majority. Thus, the Swedish Academy accepted Alfred Nobel’s commission. In 1899 the statutes of the Nobel Foundation were complete and the government ratified them in 1900. Svensén provides information about the statutes and regulations, organization of work, and the Nobel Library of the Swedish Academy. The relatively long and interesting subchapter on the changing policies in awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature is based on Kjell Espmark’s book, as Svensén admits in a footnote (61).

In the final chapter, “The Academy at Work and in Celebration”, the attempt is made to show the human face of the powerful institution. The author explains how the Academy is structured, where and when it meets, and how new members are elected. The chapter ends on a high note, with the pomp and circumstance that accompany the Annual Grand Ceremony. It seems, however, that throughout the book Svensén seeks to emphasize the egalitarian principle within the Academy, and the challenge, rather than prestige, of the Academy’s mission. The list of the 17 secretaries of the Academy so far and of the Nobel Laureates from 1901 to 1999 help to trace the changing concepts of talent and taste. The bibliography (including websites on the Internet) and the index are likewise helpful. The illustrations in the book are mostly photographs of people, places, and documents.

It is a place, however, that gains prominence on the cover of the book. Looking at the Stock Exchange Building in Stockholm's Old Town, whose top story has been the Academy's residence since 1921, one may ponder on the puzzling symbolism of the scene on which a literary function has been grafted. The building emanates classicist composure and majestic self-confidence, which also inform Svensén's book. In an apparently impeccable translation, the author's and the translator's sense of duty peer through the light conversational style. The author represents an institution, and so does the translator. With the strict secrecy regulation binding the Academy members and all researchers (56), the readers worldwide are likely to rely in the future (as heretofore) on elegant little books like this one.