

First Prize, Second Hand, Third Rate

The Award Goes to . . .

by James O. Tate

With difficulty, in a diminished capacity, or perhaps with an alienated attitude because I was watching good old Benny Hill reruns on the BBC America channel at the time, I have become somehow dimly aware that prizes have been awarded to someone for something—but *not to the late Benny Hill*. Yes, the Powers, always clueless, have been running around strewing honors left and left, with their usual lack of touch and their customary excess of agenda. Now, what was it I obscurely gleaned through all the impudent suggestions of those Hill-induced saxophone riffs? What glimpsed I through the dark backward and abysm of time?

Well, I'll tell you one thing: The mind-numbing predictability of the Nobel Prize in Literature this year could only remind me that I'd rather have a free bottle in front of me than the prefrontal lobotomy represented by Elfriede Jelinek of Austria, author of *Bambiland*, *Lust*, *The Piano Teacher*, and *Women as Lovers*, and professor as well of exhausted bromides, feminist clichés, victimological asides, and highly questionable political judgments. The repellent interview published in the *New York Times* of November 21 was designed, I take it, either to substitute for a reading of her works or else, as in my case, to cancel any interest whatsoever in Elfriede Jelinek. Karl Kraus (1874-1936) not only has (not to mention *had*) a much more trenchant wit but is, even after all these decades, much more pertinent, and brilliantly represents the Austrian sensibility. Then again, Karl Kraus never received any Nobel prize, though he could have been a candidate for two of them—Literature for sure, and Peace as well. Karl Kraus was a true outsider, a prophet not without honor even in his own country, and not a well-heeled insider pretending to be an angst-ridden alien.

But then that brings up the embarrassing subject of the Nobel Peace Prize as well as the spotty history of the Literature Prize and the whole explosives-derived, Scandinavian-administered context of the Prizes themselves. If memory serves, Theodore Roosevelt was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906, and I think he deserved it. A visit to the house at Oyster Bay, where Teddy stood in the hall between the Russians and the Japanese in the rooms on either side, imprints that on the mind. But Woodrow Wilson won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1919, and he did not deserve it, because his actions and words sparked endless conflict with no end in sight. George C. Marshall (1953) and Jimmy Carter (2002) seemed to be deserving winners of the award, which is rather more than I can say for Willy Brandt (1971), Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho (1973), Sean MacBride (1974), Elie Wiesel (1986), Rigoberta Menchu (1992), or Yasser Arafat (1994).

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So then the Literature Prize would be less political and contentious, right? Wrong. The first 20 years of the award are impressive, and I think I spotted only one Fascist, though he was not at that time yet one (Knut Hamson, 1920), and perhaps I remarked only one literary genius for whom the award would today be impossible (Rudyard Kipling, 1907). In the ensuing decade, we should note that, though W.B. Yeats deserved his award (1923) as utterly as any writer ever did, today, such an honor would not be supported even in Ireland. Two years later, George Bernard Shaw won the award, which only goes to show that quantity is sometimes confused with quality, and that support for Mussolini at that time, as for Stalin later on, is hardly disqualifying. The award to Henri Bergson in 1927 confused one kind of discourse with another, as would subsequent ones to Bertrand Russell (1950) and Winston Churchill (1953). The recognition of Sigrid Undset and Thomas Mann in 1928 and 1929, respectively, was given for every good reason, but the award to Sinclair Lewis (1930), like those to John Galsworthy (1932) and Pearl Buck (1938), was not. The award to Luigi Pirandello (1934) could not have been more deserved, but the great man subsequently gave his gold medal to be melted down for support of the Fascist cause. And there have been some questions since those days, about Jean-Paul Sartre (1964), Mikhail Sholokov (1965, and make that two Stalinists in a row), and the utterly untalented Stalinist Pablo Neruda (1971). The leftist agenda still finds expression, and there are such anomalies as Dario Fo (1997) among such superior writers as Seamus Heaney (1995) and V.S. Naipaul (2001). All in all, the Nobel Prize in Literature has been such a mixed bag that the imperious sway of the honor is, at best, a mixed blessing.

Turning away with a shudder from such global sweep and presumption, perhaps we could address something a bit more focused and relatively simple: I mean the subject of cultural recognition in our own country. Do you suppose that, with developed institutions, this nation might be able to recognize superior achievement and reward it? If your answer is Yes, then maybe you haven't been paying attention. There are various organizations that support awards for achievements in the arts, of course, and different modes and levels of honors and honoraria, but no sooner do we identify one of these than we encounter problems with track records, or establishment logrolling, or ideologically imposed quota systems, or just plain lack of judgment.

As Henry Youngman would say, take the National Book Award for fiction, please. This year, the five finalists were all females living in New York City who had published precious little bookies they called novels—or were they hybrid short-story amalgamations? But, lest I stoke any outrage, I hasten to mention the stuff that didn't make the cut: no John Updike's

latest sex memoirs, no Philip Roth's latest pogrom fantasy, no Gore Vidal, no Norman Mailer—every cloud has a silver lining. It seems that the judges of the award applied “writerly” criteria to the finalists, rating style or technique over force, substance, and story. If so, they expressed the dilemmas inherent in their position, as well as inherent in the position of art in a late-capitalist mass society. As it happened, Lily Tuck won the award for *The News From Paraguay*, an historical novel about material that has been treated before. The publishing industry was not satisfied, nor were those who wanted to see some history made. I think Tuck's award will become part of her résumé when she begins to profess creative writing, if she has not already done so.

But what about the Pulitzer Prizes? A comparison finds that the National Book Awards have mostly been “better”—more reflective of lasting merit—than the Pulitzers have been. Looking back on the list of winners for novel (until 1948) and fiction since then, we find much that we would have otherwise. For example and famously, Margaret Mitchell and *Gone With the Wind* won over William Faulkner and *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1937. It was the classic case of overwhelming popular success trumping experimentation and high seriousness. Mitchell's book is better than it is thought to be today, but Faulkner's masterpiece lives on a summit of inspiration and execution with *Moby-Dick*. Faulkner was compensated by two Pulitzers he did not deserve, for *A Fable* (1955) and *The Reivers* (1962). Otherwise, we can say of the Pulitzers that the only memorable award in the 40's was to Robert Penn Warren for *All the King's Men* (1948), but that at the beginning, the names of Booth Tarkington (*The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1919; *Alice Adams*, 1922) and Edith Wharton (*The Age of Innocence*, 1921) and Willa Cather (*One of Ours*, 1923) must make us wonder which were better, the writers, or the judges, or both. Did Fitzgerald win a Pulitzer? No, but Hemingway did, like Faulkner, after, not when, he deserved it (*The Old Man and the Sea*, 1953). Katherine Anne Porter deserved the award in 1966 for her *Collected Stories*, and that may be the best fiction to win a Pulitzer in the last 40 years, unless it is John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, posthumously awarded in 1981.

There isn't much point, though, in worrying about awards, because people read what they want, and reputations have a way of taking care of themselves. No, the underlying crux is in the idea of an award in itself, and in the discrediting of that idea. I once heard of an ordinary woman in an ordinary town who once marched into the gift shop and purchased a silver bowl. She promptly had it engraved with her own name as “The XXX XXXX Bowl” and presented it annually to a person of choice in her community. How I applaud her Napoleonic audacity, for an award means little more! I think P.G. Wodehouse would have understood the point.

But it was not this certain woman who discredited the concept of awards—she only demonstrated the truth that had already been established. After all, well over 2,000 years ago, in a society without Al Gore or the internet, there was a competition for the best slate of tragedies with some satyr plays thrown in, and the winners of this competition had names such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. There was then no conflict between excellence and community, between art and the public. And only 200 years ago, Jefferson still insisted that excellence and democracy were not incompatible. Nor do I argue that they are. I do say, however, that a false culture, a cul-

ture based on falsehood, cannot successfully adjudicate artistic competitions. The example here is not the Booker Prize but the Oscars and perhaps the Golden Globes, the Emmys, and the Grammy Awards. As the buffed and preening humanoids present themselves for our thrilled examination, the best commentary is that of Joan Rivers, and even she only when being a complete bitch. We may have noticed that the best pictures do not win, and the best actors, rarely. But the quota systems of the diversity machine are operative, as indeed they are in the literary prizes. And the rot has long since penetrated the White House, *pace* Jefferson, in which the presentation of the Presidential Medals of Freedom has degenerated into a TV show with a feel-good agenda, and every little group gets an award. Everybody gets an award, except Benny Hill.

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Even such a cursory examination is revealing of a cultural void, a gap, and even more and even better, a failure, an undeniable shortcoming that may paradoxically be a bracing lesson. Ever since the days of the Puritans, our country has had problems with art, its nature and its status, and not even the most formidable of writers and thinkers, such as Poe, Emerson, Melville, and Dickinson, could resolve the clashes in the 19th century, though vulgarians such as Whitman and Twain did. The explosion of the media and the markets in the 20th century, as well as the exacerbation of aesthetic conflicts represented by the academy, on the one hand, and High Modernism, on the other, have put us in a bizarre position. America presumes to world dominance militarily, but her real and corrupting strength is through Hollywood and related mass phenomena. In other words, we may like to talk about Edith Wharton, but Lara Croft, Tomb Raider, has more quantifiable clout and more visible chest; or, to put it another way, sex and bad music is a winner, and you don't even have to think. There was a time when Theodore Roosevelt in effect patronized Edwin Arlington Robinson because he read his poems, but today, poetry has been made rather problematical by slams and hip hop, in which “shotgun blast” rhymes with “white cop ass.” In such an aesthetically challenged environment, the awarding of prizes for literary achievement becomes as absurd as it is impossible. The market and the money will overwhelm, if they have not already done so, the fusty sense of social control represented by establishmentarian awards, which themselves must be understood as emblems of the co-optation of leftist radicalism. <C>

Measuring Our Culture of Death

A Sobering Look at the Family in America

by Christopher J. Check

One side is celebrating, the other rending their garments, but both sides are wondering if the outcome of the November presidential election might signal a springtime for traditional moral values in America. Rappers P. Diddy and Eminem doubtless turned more voters away from Kerry than they attracted, and, in all states where voters were asked to define marriage, the majority agreed on a union of one man and one woman. Nonetheless, a Middle American reaction to the prospect of legal approval of sodomy, while encouraging, is hardly much of a barometer by which to measure the nation's cultural and social health. A better sense of just how "traditional" American values are can be gleaned from the latest Census Bureau data on the family. It might be time to sober up.

The family is the origin of civilized society, and every family begins with a marriage. How is marriage faring? Consider divorce rates over the last half-century. In 1950, there were 2.6 divorces per 1,000 population. The figure peaked in 1981 with 5.3 per 1,000 and has declined somewhat to 4.0 per 1,000 population in 2001. Is this good news? Not if we consider the data alongside the marriage rate. In 1950, there were 11.1 marriages per 1,000 population, in 1981, 10.6; and in 2001, only 8.4. Thus, the rate of divorce was 23 percent of that of marriage in 1950; it increased to 50 percent in 1981; and it hovers now around 48 percent, even as the overall marriage rate continues to fall.

Data from the past decade does not indicate any kind of turnaround. From 1990 to 2002, the percentage of the adult population (18 and over) that is married has dropped from 61.9 to 58.9 percent. Correspondingly, the percentage of the same population that has never married has risen from 22.2 to 24.4 percent, and the percentage that is divorced has risen from 8.3 to 10.0 percent. The retreat from marriage that began in 1960, when nearly 72 percent of the adult population was married, continues.

Births are another good gauge of a society's health. Here, there is bad news and bad news masquerading as good news. First, illegitimacy continues to rise, as it has done for the last half-century. Indeed, the percentage of illegitimate births has increased nearly nine times from 1950 to 2001: from 4 percent to 34 percent of all births. Again, nothing in the past decade indicates a turnaround, and the current percentages of illegitimate births by race are alarming: In 2001, 68 percent of black, 59 percent of Puerto Rican, 40 percent of Mexican, 50 percent of Hawaiian, 60 percent of American Indian, and 28 percent of white births were illegitimate. Second, something that looks like good news, so far as births are concerned, is a recent rise in the total fertility rate (TFR). This figure measures whether

a population is replacing itself by predicting the number of births that a woman will have during her childbearing years. In 1972, the TFR dropped below replacement level, reached its nadir in 1976 (1.7) and languished below replacement level until 2000, when it reached 2.1.

Alongside Europe, our commitment to childbearing may look vigorous (in Italy, deaths now outnumber births), but there are other factors to bear in mind. First of all, when only two thirds of births are within wedlock, *marital* fertility is below replacement level. Because an illegitimate child is significantly more likely to bear or sire an illegitimate child than is a child born to an intact marriage, marriage is not "replacing itself." What's more, it is doubtful, in the face of a continued rise in the average age of the population, that the TFR will long remain above replacement level. The median age of the population today is 36. It is projected to be 38 by 2050. While it is true that more children are born today than even during the Baby Boom, children diminish each year as a percentage of the total population. The Census Bureau does predict the TFR holding at 2.1 into 2010, but this rate will be buoyed by nonwhite fertility. By the same year, the TFR for Americans of European descent is projected to drop below replacement level.

Elsewhere on the childbearing front, families with three or more children are rare and getting rarer. They were 12 percent of all families in 1980 and 10 percent of all families in 2002. Making matters worse, nearly a quarter of all families with three or more children are single-parent families. Again, finding signs of a turnaround is difficult. The percentage of families with two or more children under the age of six is alarming: only six percent. What percentage of families have four or more children under the age of 18? Three percent. In the 1980's, we passed a milestone in the nation's demographic history. Today, more than half of our families (52 percent) have no children under the age of 18. Put another way, when we use the word *family*, we may think of a father and a mother and their minor children, but that composition describes the minority of "families" in America today.

The nation's weak commitment to childbearing can be measured by the nearly universal use of contraception. Among the roughly 30 million currently married women between the ages of 15 and 44, 41 percent resort to surgical sterility (tubal ligation is much more common than vasectomy), 19 percent use some kind of hormonal contraceptive (the Pill, implants, injectables); while another 17 percent resort to some kind of device (a condom, diaphragm, or IUD.) Nonusers plus couples practicing Natural Family Planning total less than ten percent of married couples. Contraceptive use among unmarried women is less common, but not for the reasons we might hope; more than 70 percent of unmarried women have had

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