

Bittere Nobelpreise

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In nearly every language, taste sensations are used not just as literal descriptors, but also in a figurative sense. And none, I think, is as strong as "bitter." The initial taste of anything bitter is never forgotten. The memory of bitterness is just as strong, its capacity for evoking suffering undiminished by time.

How could the word be possibly applied to the Nobel Prizes? These unique distinctions in several (arbitrarily selected) fields of human creativity quickly acquired a mystique out of proportion to their monetary value. The Nobel Prizes recognized the best in human beings, who through their achievements became the focus for aspirations of both young people and of humanity. There is a time for everything under the sun; this is the time to praise.

Of course, the Nobel Prizes are sweet. Or are they? Let's skip over the deserved or misplaced pride of nations and institutions in the prizes. The awards assuredly bring unalloyed joy to the mothers and fathers of the winners. And to their communities, broadly defined. The consequences are less simple to the laureates themselves (I speak for myself), being a *mélange* of joy, of material and spiritual opportunity – including that of making a fool of oneself – of self-questioning, and of obligation. For the children of the recipients, they are perhaps something to overcome. And, given human nature, the Nobel Prizes engender an oh so large sum of painful disappointment in those not recognized, among those who do not have the psychological strength to come to peace with the workings of chance in the selection process.

The calculus of joy and disappointment aside, the vast majority of Nobel Prizes were, are a celebration of the good in people. But some are bitter. Bitter now, as we think about them, as they were bitter when they were awarded. In most of these cases a totalitarian government (or a political force perceived in the mind of a man) imposed its misguided will on

a human being. An act of joy for the individual, a sublime moment for the community of knowledge, was thus embittered.

Forever? Not necessarily. The circumstances shape a confrontation between a man and an ideology. Thus creating the stuff of a play, a dramatic moment, a moment in which human beings face moral choices. We should be spared such tragic moments. And yet they allow us to take the measure of a human being. In currency ultimately more important than that of the Nobel awards.

Roald Hoffmann