Received: 22 May 2022 | Revised: 2 November 2022 | Accepted: 24 November 2022

DOI: 10.1111/oli.12377

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

ORBIS Litterarum WILEY

The Nobel Roll of Honor

Comparing literatures and compiling lists of Nobel laureates in the early twentieth century

Jørgen Sneis | **Carlos Spoerhase**

Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Munich, Germany

Correspondence
Jørgen Sneis, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Munich, Germany.
Email: j.sneis@lmu.de

Abstract

This paper analyzes what may be called Olympic Internationalism as a framework for comparing literatures in the early twentieth century. Specifically, it analyzes the practice of tabulating information about the Nobel Prize—in the Swedish Academy, the international press, and repositories of general knowledge such as encyclopedias—and argues that the international circulation of such "thin knowledge" (Orsini) formed the very basis for that framework of comparison. This, it is further argued, played a crucial role in shaping the international perception of what world literature is and in making the Nobel Prize in Literature what it is: a globally acknowledged "world prize."

KEYWORDS
comparison, internationalism, Nobel Prize in Literature, Olympic Games, tables

1 | INTRODUCTION

"The Nobel and the Nobel winners provide a focus of conversation that brings the world together, in much the same way that international sports tournaments bring the world together, or the Olympic Games" (Parks, 2016, 166). Indeed, once a year, when the next Nobel laureate is announced, all eyes are on Stockholm. And the conversation is usually centered on the prize-winners, much like it is centered on the medalists when we follow the Olympic Games. We may want to take part in the conversation, but perhaps not actually recall who won the Nobel Prize in Literature last year, or the year before, or in any given year. If we want to find out, we are likely simply to

Year	Picture	Laureate	Country	Language(s)	Citation	Genre(s)
1901		Sully Prudhomme (1839–1907)	France	French	"in special recognition of his poetic composition, which gives evidence of lofty idealism, artistic perfection and a rare combination of the qualities of both heart and intellect"[17]	poetry, essay
1902		Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903)	Germany	German	"the greatest living master of the art of historical writing, with special reference to his monumental work *A History of Rome*"[18]	history, law
1903		Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910)	Norway	Norwegian	"as a tribute to his noble, magnificent and versatile poetry, which has always been distinguished by both the freshness of its inspiration and the rare purity of its spirit"[19]	poetry, novel, drama

FIGURE 1 List of Nobel laureates in Literature. *Source:* Wikipedia (n.d.) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

google it and to be redirected to Wikipedia, where one can find a list of all the laureates. The first three lines of that list look like this (Figure 1). The list offers a few basic facts and figures, arranged in such a way that they can be appreciated easily. In addition to the year of the award and the names of the laureates, we also learn when they lived, which country they come from, which language they wrote in, and which genres they worked in. The list even includes photographs, putting faces to names that we may have barely heard of. And the citation informs us about what the awarding body, the Swedish Academy, valued in their works, with which we may be entirely unfamiliar. Is there anything remarkable about such a list? This paper argues that there is, and even more so when the practice of tabulating information about the Nobel Prize is viewed as something that has evolved historically. The visual economy of lists, charts, and tables doesn't allow for a lot of nuance: they are all about simplicity and matter-of-factness. But it is precisely this simplicity and matter-of-factness, we argue, that makes them powerful expressions of what a prize like the Nobel—or, by extension, literature itself—is ultimately considered to be.

In what follows, we will analyze what may be called Olympic Internationalism as a framework for comparing literatures in the early twentieth century. Specifically, we will analyze the practice of tabulating information about the Nobel Prize—in the Swedish Academy, the international press, and repositories of general knowledge such as encyclopedias—and argue that the international circulation of such "thin knowledge" (Orsini, 2019) formed the very basis for that framework of comparison. This, it is further argued, played a crucial role in shaping the international perception of what world literature is and in making the Nobel Prize a staple of literary culture. Our aim, in other words, is to return to the beginnings of the Nobel Prize and detail how the compilation of lists and tables—by playing into the reciprocally constitutive relation between the prize and the imaginaries about the international that it shaped and by which it was shaped—lay at the very heart of its workings and what it was publicly taken to represent. This also draws attention to the sheer contingency of the way the Nobel Prize developed in its first decade (more or less), that is, to the fact that it might have functioned very differently if ideas about comparability and actual practices of comparing had been constellated differently.

2 | KEEPING RECORDS IN THE SWEDISH ACADEMY

In 1895, Alfred Nobel famously signed his last will and testament, stipulating that much of his fortune should be used to fund a series of prizes: in physics, chemistry, and medicine (the so-called "science prizes"), as well as in literature and for the promotion of peace. He concluded that section of his will with the following note: "It is my express wish that when awarding the prizes, no consideration be given to nationality, but that the prize be awarded to the worthiest person, whether or not they are Scandinavian" (Nobel, 1895). Accordingly, from the outset, members of the Swedish Academy referred to the Nobel Prize in Literature as a "world prize" ("världspris," Svensén, 2001, 1: 65, 89, 120, 152, 156, 170, 181, 224, 241, 310, 312; Schück, 1999, pt. V: 10, 107, 139, 166, 172, 176).[1] Or, as one academy member wrote in a letter to its Permanent Secretary: the prize was supposed to possess a "universal character" ("karaktär af universalitet," Schück, 1999, pt. V: 91).

This claim to universality, however, papered over a more complex interplay between the national and the international which can be traced in the papers of the Swedish Academy's Nobel Prize Committee. One kind of document emerged from a basic problem in the selection process: organizing information about the nominated authors as well as the persons nominating them. For the first few years, the Nobel Prize Committee tabulated the number of nominees and nominators, divided according to nationality (see also Svensén, 2001, 1: 20, 43, 62, 83). These tables were apparently considered to be of some importance, since they were distributed to all 18 members of the academy. On the vertical axis we find a list of nations. The horizontal axis, in turn, marks the seriality of the prize, listing individual years up to 1905 (Figure 2 below).

The table gives a hint at the rationale behind the selection of laureates in the day-to-day work of the Nobel Prize Committee. As early as 1902, when the Nobel was awarded for the second time, a "negative heuristic"[2] emerged that can be observed again and again in the following years: the avoidance of repetition. Once the award had been given to Sully Prudhomme in 1901, it could not again be awarded to a Frenchman the following year. After all, doing so would undermine any claims to universality (Schück, 1999, pt. V: 91). Within

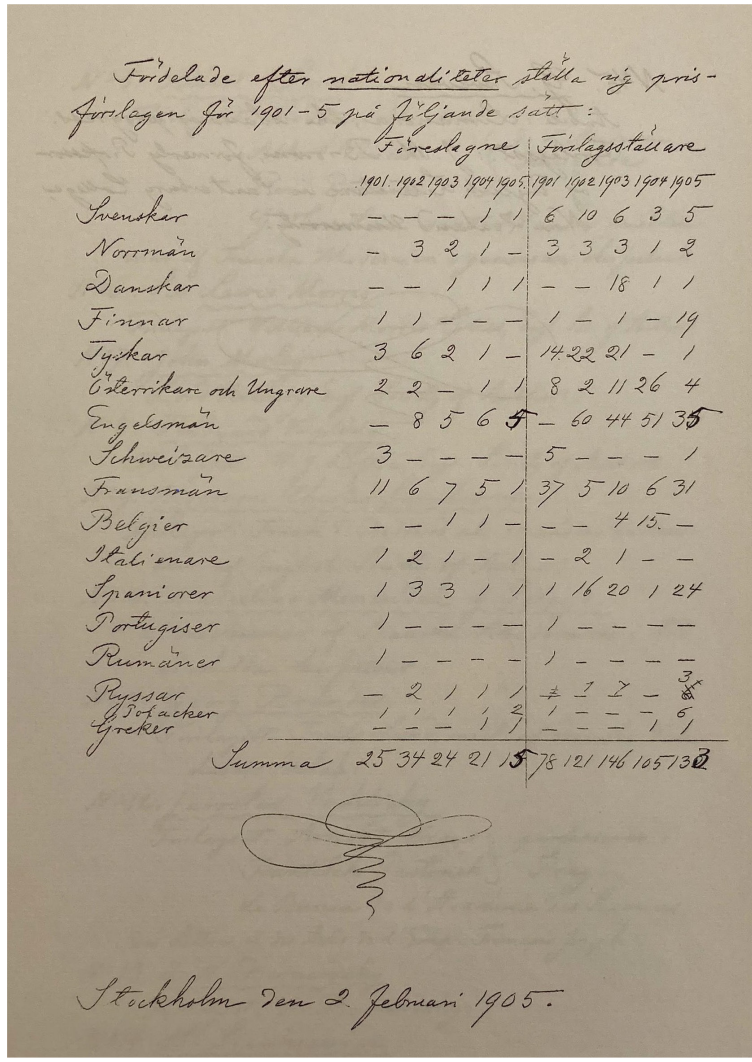

FIGURE 2 List kept in the Swedish Academy's Nobel Prize archive, Stockholm. The number of nominators and authors nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature up to 1905, divided by nationality. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

the Swedish Academy, the members spoke of a "successive circulation in different countries" ("Nobelprisets successiva cirkulering i olika land," pt. V: 117; see also Espmark, [1986] 1991, 135). This circulation of the award was quickly recognized in the press, not only in Sweden, where journalists, at least to some degree, had a tap on what was going on behind the scenes (Källstrand, 2012, 200), but also internationally. And the academy, in turn, paid attention to media coverage and the image of the prize in different countries (Schück, 1999, pt. V: 123). The monitoring of the press was even pursued systematically by the Nobel Foundation, by hiring external help to collect and file newspaper clippings on all five prizes. Today, these clippings are kept in the Nobel Foundation's archive. Those covering the first decade alone fill some 28 volumes, Swedish and Norwegian press coverage not included (Källstrand, 2012, 43). This observation of the press is an important aspect of the history of the Nobel Prize in Literature, especially, that still needs to be analyzed in more detail.[3] It allowed the Swedish Academy, which had fewer clearly defined criteria for prize-deservingness to go by than the institutions awarding the science prizes, to factor in public expectations. In the early years of the prize, this seems to also have been motivated by the assumption that any display of poor judgment would reflect unfavorably not merely on the academy itself but also on Sweden as a whole (Källstrand, 2018). This brings us back to the table displayed above. Mindful of the international image of the award, the academy's Nobel Prize Committee kept records not only of the number of nominated authors by country, but also of the number of nominators, as an indication of interest taken in the prize in different nations.

The table appears to have served two distinct but substantially overlapping functions in the Nobel Prize Committee's work: it not only *recorded* the national distribution of nominated authors and nominators, but also *informed* the "negative heuristic" that determined future awards, as the Literature Prize could not be awarded to the same nation consecutively. This principle of selection seems to be based on the assumption that there exists a certain number of national literatures of relatively equal value, whose achievements would eventually warrant acknowledgment. It is true that for years only writers from a handful of nations were seriously considered by the committee (Schück, 1999, pt. V: 130). Nonetheless, these national literatures were in principle judged to be equal, at least in terms of the distribution of awards. The tables kept by the Swedish Academy were thus grounded in a series of presuppositions that in guiding decision-making went beyond the stipulations of Alfred Nobel's will (see also pt. V: 130). In comparing and evaluating literature, consideration most certainly was given to nationality.

3 | OLYMPIC INTERNATIONALISM (I)—NATIONAL ACHIEVEMENTS BY INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

The interplay between internationalization and nationalization characteristic for the formative phase of the Nobel Prize may be called, to adopt a term coined by Geert J. Somsen, Olympic Internationalism. Somsen uses this term in a somewhat different context. He turns to the history of sport—specifically, the Olympic Games—as a point of reference in discussing conceptions of internationality in the history of science. In the nineteenth century, he explains, "*patriotic* values began to be associated with the pursuit of knowledge," with scientific accomplishments "increasingly presented in terms of national prestige" (Somsen, 2008, 364). This did not mean that "the supranational qualities of science" were no longer stressed, but rather: "What used to be the cosmopolitan Republic of Letters now became 'the international scientific community', with a shift in meaning from a brotherhood of individuals to an association of nations" (p. 365). Somsen charts how, by the turn of the twentieth century, scientific nationalism transformed into an Olympic internationalism as the international scientific community was increasingly institutionalized through international organizations, conferences, and unions (and eventually also, we may add, through the Nobel science prizes). What is important about this process of institutionalization is that internationalization and nationalization in fact "went hand in

hand": "National achievements, after all, can only be measured by *international* standards, so some form of international organization was required for them to be recognized at all"—meaning that "internationalism was not a counterforce to nationalism, but effectively channelled and facilitated it" (p. 366). Here lies the analogy to the modern Olympic Games (cf. p. 366), founded in 1896, which were intended to bring nations together while at the same time offering a showcase for their rivalry.[4]

It is not self-evident how this is applicable to literature. For one thing, no standards or objective criteria for artistic accomplishment or aesthetic value, directly comparable to the criteria for athletic or scientific achievement, have ever existed.[5] Moreover, works of literature are generally thought of as firmly grounded in the language and cultural context in which they are written, which makes it harder still to conceive of any *international* standards or criteria. This is where the Nobel Prize in Literature comes in, enjoying the status of the first truly international literary award (English, [2005] 2008, 258). The rise of the Nobel Prize in Literature, we would argue, had a function quite similar to the institutionalization of "world sports" (most notably through the Olympic Games) and the institutionalization of the international scientific community (through international organizations, conferences, unions, etc.)—making it, at the turn of the century, a prime vehicle and catalyst for the internationalization of literature that *at the same time* stabilized certain notions of the national. How, then, did the Nobel Prize become an institution of "world literature"?[6] A key role in the process of institutionalization was played by the international press coverage of the Nobel.

4 | PRODUCING COMPETITION—THE NOBEL PRIZE IN THE INTERNATIONAL MASS MEDIA

The Nobel was a large-scale media event from the very beginning. Even before any prize had been awarded, the amount of money involved, combined with the irony of a peace prize being funded by the inventor of dynamite, had stirred great curiosity in the international press. After the first award ceremony in 1901, the Nobel Prizes were reported on by some 500 newspapers, not counting the Scandinavian press, with the largest portion of the publicity centered on the Literature Prize and the Peace Prize (Crawford, 1984, 189–190). In the following years, the prizes continued to attract interest. But once the Nobel had been around long enough to be thought of as something with a history, something new can be observed. Decennial anniversaries are generally an opportunity to look back and take stock, and the Nobel Prize is no exception. On December 10, 1910, when the Nobel Prizes were awarded for the tenth time, the Swedish newspaper *Dagens nyheter* added to a list of every laureate a tally of the most successful nations (we owe this observation to Källstrand, 2018, 408). In the years prior to World War I, this interest in nationality frequently expressed itself through the compilation of tables.

A few months later, for instance, in 1911, the German newspaper *Vossische Zeitung* published an article titled "The cultural achievements of nations, measured in Nobel Prizes" ("Die Kulturleistungen der Völker, gemessen an den Nobelpreisen," Schultze, 1911). Looking back at ten years' worth of awards, the article featured the following table, with an overview of the number of recipients in each prize category divided by nationality (Figure 3, see p. 152). The Nobel Prize, the author of this article argued, is an adequate instrument for measuring the cultural achievement of nations, not only because it is international in scope, but also because it is awarded annually: after 10 years, with a total of 50 awards, any contingencies that may have been effective in individual awards would be largely evened out. The author reflects in great detail on the characteristics of the Nobel Prizes in each of the five prize categories. In the table, however, they are lumped together, and in the end, the article seems to have been largely motivated by national rivalry and an effort to bolster national pride. The very first observation following the table, from which the names of the laureates are omitted altogether, is that Germany is ahead of France.

	Physik-Preis	Chemie-Preis	Medizin-Preis	Literatur-Preis	Friedens-Preis	Preise insgesamt
Deutschland	3 (2½)	6 (6)	4 (3½)	3 (3)	— —	16 (15)
Frankreich	4 (2)	1 (1)	2 (1½)	2 (1½)	3 (1½)	12 (7½)
England	2 (2)	2 (2)	1 (1)	1 (1)	1 (1)	7 (7)
Holland	3 (2)	— —	— —	— —	— —	3 (2)
Italien	1 (½)	— —	1 (½)	1 (1)	1 (½)	4 (2½)
Schweiz	— —	— —	1 (1)	— —	3 (1½)	4 (2½)
Schweden	— —	1 (1)	— —	1 (1)	1 (½)	3 (2½)
Dänemark	— —	— —	1 (1)	— —	1 (½)	2 (1½)
Spanien	— —	— —	1 (½)	1 (½)	— —	2 (1)
Ver. Staaten	1 (1)	— —	— —	— —	1 (1)	2 (2)
Österreich	— —	— —	— —	— —	1 (1)	1 (1)
Belgien	— —	— —	— —	— —	1 (½)	1 (½)
Norwegen	— —	— —	— —	1 (1)	— —	1 (1)
Rußland	— —	— —	1 (1)	— —	— —	1 (1)
Polen	— —	— —	— —	1 (1)	— —	1 (1)
	14 (10)	10 (10)	12 (10)	11 (10)	13 (8)	60 (48)
Ferner 2 Gesellschaften	— —	— —	— —	— —	2	2 (2)
	14 (10)	10 (10)	12 (10)	11 (10)	13 (10)	62 (50)

FIGURE 3 The number of Nobel laureates by nationality. *Source:* Schultze (1911)

			Population.
1. Switzerland,	1	prize to	610,000
2. Netherlands,	1	" "	980,000
3. Denmark,	1	" "	1,290,000
4. Sweden,	1	" "	1,370,000
5. Norway	1	" "	2,300,000
6. Belgium,	1	" "	2,360,000
7. France	1	" "	2,600,000
8. Germany,	1	" "	3,800,000
9. Great Britain,	1	" "	6,400,000
10. Italy,	1	" "	8,100,000
11. Spain,	1	" "	9,750,000
12. Austria,	1	" "	24,700,000
13. United States	1	" "	25,900,000
14. Russia,	1	" "	80,000,000
15. India,	1	" "	316,000,000

FIGURE 4 The number of Nobel laureates by nationality, relative to the population of each country. *Source:* "The Nobel Roll of Honor," *The Independent* (1913, December 18)

In the United States, the Nobel Prize was discussed in similar terms. As early as in 1904, when the prize had been awarded only four times, a piece in *The Spokesman-Review* began imagining a Nobel Roll of Honor, at first projecting it into a distant future:

> The list of Nobel prize winners is an international roll of honor and when the 500 or more names upon it are scanned a century hence, there will be found the names of those who have done the most for the welfare of mankind and the advancement of civilization during the 20th century.
>
> ("The Alfred Noble Prizes," 1904)

This idea, however, would gain traction long before a century had passed. After the 1913 prize ceremony, the New York weekly magazine *The Independent* published an article with that precise title, "The Nobel Roll of Honor." This article also featured a table (Figure 4 above). In this case, the table records the number of Nobel Prizes relative to the population of each country. The numbers from 1 to 15 in the left column highlight the order of success in obtaining prizes. Much like the table in the *Vossische Zeitung*, this ranking of nations is explicitly based on the

assumption that the Nobel Prize serves as "an appraisement of contemporary achievement": "the list of the Nobel prizemen affords an opportunity of comparing the relative value of the contributions made by different countries to modern culture" ("The Nobel Roll of Honor," 1913). When the idea of a Nobel Roll of Honor was introduced in 1904, one was quick to note that "no award has yet been made to an American" ("The Alfred Noble Prizes," 1904). And in 1912, another article in *The Spokesman-Review* lamented that the United States was still "on the back seat":

> The Nobel roll of honor affords a unique opportunity to see which nations are doing the most for civilization [...]. Germany has been so honored 16 times and stands at the head in all five departments except peace. France stands second, with 10 Nobel prizemen, followed by England, with seven, and Holland with five. Then come Russia, Italy, Switzerland and Sweden, with four each; and Denmark, Spain, Belgium, Austria and the United States, with two each; and Norway with one. It is humiliating to American pride to be put in the lowest rank with countries as small as Denmark or as backward as Spain; the justice of the awards we do not question. The trouble goes farther back than that. We have not achieved, and we have not deserved.
>
> ("The United States on the back seat," 1912)

In contrast, the article in *The Independent* took the argument in a somewhat different direction. While purporting to leave it "entirely to the reader's judgment" whether it is "safe to draw any conclusions from these figures as to the national distribution of genius," it goes far in suggesting what characterizes German culture:

> It is [...] interesting and probably significant that Germany stands at the top of the list in four of the five [prize categories] and does not appear at all in the fifth. Seventeen Nobel medals in all have been awarded to Germans, five in chemistry, four each in physics, medicine and literature, none for peace.
>
> ("The Nobel Roll of Honor," 1913)[7]

This is symptomatic of a larger trend: the conclusions drawn from the national distribution of prizes may have differed, but they all presupposed a considerable collective belief in the Nobel Prize as an institution. And any such deliberations, in turn, further contributed to the institutionalization of the prize as the international standard for measuring the "cultural achievements of peoples."

Nobel Prize tables such as the ones presented here, which focus not on the individual laureates but on nations and national cultures as the relevant entities for comparison, meet all the criteria of a ranking (Ringel & Werron, 2021, 309): They compare and evaluate the performances of homogeneous entities (nations/national cultures), are quantitative in nature, and visualized in the form of a hierarchical table. They are supposed to be updated and published repeatedly and therefore suggest an ongoing competition between the entities compared. The table, in other words, is not just a way of storing information, but a powerful means of communication and of conveying a message (Brankovic et al., 2018, 280; Wainer, 1992). The Nobel tables do indeed purport to present the updated score of a cultural competition.

Another article, published in 1914 in the French newspaper *Journal des débats*, offered a slightly different metric, but again a similar line of reasoning (Figure 5, see p. 154). To buttress the chart's claim to be a valid comparative evaluation of national achievement, the article refers to the Nobel Prize as an "impartial" institution presiding over a "peaceful tournament" (Varigny, 1914). The names of the prize-winners are not mentioned in the chart: the table is clearly about a cumulative comparison of nations in all scientific and intellectual fields (the Peace Prize is not included due to its lack of "intellectual" significance), although the author of the article rather wants to limit himself to lauding France's past achievements. But the French article is particularly interesting for another reason. It was written in response to yet another article, this time in the British journal *Science Progress in the Twentieth Century*, which pointed out, plain and simple, that "It will be of interest to examine how the literary and scientific Nobel

P. S. — Voici la répartition des prix Nobel que nous avons annoncée d'autr part :

Pays	Population en millions	Prix décernés: Physique	Chimie	Médecine	Littérature	Total	Nombre de prix par 100 millions de population
Suède	5.6	1	1	1	1	4	71.9
Hollande	5.9	3	0	0	0	3	50.5
Norvège	2.4	0	0	0	1	1	41.8
Danemark	2.7	0	0	1	0	1	36.4
France	39.6	4	4	3	2	13	32.8
Allemagne	64.9	4	6	4	4	18	27.7
Suisse	3.7	0	0	1	0	1	26.7
Belgique	7.4	0	0	0	1	1	13.5
Angleterre	45.4	2	2	1	1	6	13.3
Espagne	19.6	0	0	1	1	2	10.2
Italie	34.7	1	0	1	1	3	8.6
Pologne russe	12.5	0	0	0	1	1	8.0
Etats-Unis	92.0	1	0	0	0	1	1.1
Russie	120.6	0	0	1	0	1	0.8

FIGURE 5 The number of Nobel laureates by nationality, relative to the population of each country. *Source:* Varigny, *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires* (1914, January 15)

Country.	Population in millions.	Prizes awarded for: Physics.	Chemistry.	Medicine.	Literature.	Total.	Rate per 100 millions of population.
1. Sweden	5·6	1	1	1	1	4	71·9
2. Holland	5·9	3	0	0	0	3	50·5
3. Norway	2·4	0	0	0	1	1	41·8
4. Denmark	2·7	0	0	1	0	1	36·4
5. France	39·6	4	4	3	2	13	32·8
6. Germany	64·9	4	6	4	4	18	27·7
7. Switzerland	3·7	0	0	1	0	1	26·7
8. Belgium	7·4	0	0	0	1	1	13·5
9. Britain	45·4	2	2	1	1	6	13·3
10. Spain	19·6	0	0	1	1	2	10·2
11. Italy	34·7	1	0	1	1	3	8·6
12. Poland (Russian)	12·5	0	0	0	1	1	8·0
13. United States	92·0	1	0	0	0	1	1·1
14. Russia	120·6	0	0	1	0	1	0·8

FIGURE 6 The number of Nobel laureates divided by nationality, relative to the population of each country. *Source:* "The international distribution of the Nobel Prizes during twelve years," *Science Progress in the Twentieth Century, 8* (1913)

Prizes have been distributed among the nations since the inauguration of the prizes in 1901" ("The international distribution of the Nobel Prizes during twelve years," 1913, 382; Figure 6, see above). The *Journal des débats* article adopted this table, but its journey did not end there. These very statistics went on to cross the Atlantic when the French article, in turn, was reported on in *The Republic*, based in Springfield, Massachusetts, and again in the *Boston Evening Transcript*. This sort of transnational circulation is important. Not only did the press take an interest in the national distribution of the Nobel Prizes, and not only did the Swedish Academy monitor the press, but

papers from different countries also monitored each other and gradually established an international audience for the cultural competition of nations.[8]

It is also worth noting that these articles explicitly referred to the Olympic Games. As early as in 1897, shortly after the publication of Alfred Nobel's will, the Swedish daily *Svenska Dagbladet* predicted that the Nobel Prizes would institute a kind of cultural Olympic Games, and that the "golden laurels of the prize-winner" would "radiate through the civilized world" (we owe this observation as well as the English translation to Källstrand, 2018, 406). This prediction was indeed spot on. The author of the *Science Progress* article, published in 1913, concluded:

> Neither Britain nor the United States can be congratulated on the result. The table probably gives a good rough measure of intellectual development in the respective nations, and one which would be likely to be confirmed in other lines such as mathematics, zoology, and botany, art, music, and even invention during the present century. The failure of Britain and the United States is probably due to their attitude towards intellectual effort, to their preoccupation with politics and game-playing, and possibly to the unreality of their education. It is probably due, however, still more to the poor payment made for scientific work in comparison with other lines of effort or of no-effort. How little interest is taken in this country in the higher intellectual work may be gauged from the very small references to the Nobel Prizes which appear in the British press, compared with the endless talk about such matters as the so-called Olympic Games.
>
> ("The international distribution of the Nobel Prizes during twelve years," 1913, 384)

This is telling for three reasons. First, the national distribution of the Nobel Prizes clearly serves as an opportunity to reflect on "intellectual development" and the scientific status quo in Britain and the United States. Second, in suggesting that the "failure of Britain and the United States is probably due to their attitude towards intellectual effort, to their preoccupation with politics and game-playing," an analogy between science and sports in terms of competition is implied, and also that each nation has limited resources and may not excel in every domain. And third, the amount of attention given to the Nobel in the press is also considered indicative of a lack of interest in "higher intellectual work."

In response to the *Journal des débats* piece, the article in the *Boston Evening Transcript* picked up on the idea of the Nobel Prize as a tournament between nations, but made the sporting analogy more explicit:

> To date the United States has done considerably better at Olympic games than at Nobel prizes. But England, Germany and France, all of whom we have bested at the one, and all of whom have bested us at the other, are bending their energies, as if national honor were at stake, toward making better showings at the next Olympic games to be held in Berlin in 1916. We can scarcely better our chances by importing a Nobel prize trainer from Germany, for example, in return for Germany's recent exportation from us of an athletic trainer.
>
> ("Genius in nations," 1914)

The author of this article is right: the United States did do very well in the Olympic Games. Compare the tables displayed above to the one presented in the official report of the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm (Figure 7, see p. 156). Indeed, the medal count in the Olympic Games, still common today, and the Nobel Prize tables of the early twentieth century both follow the same logic: both add up the individual performances achieved in completely different disciplines by country and then use a table to compare the numbers—because they are considered indicative of the cultural performance of nations. And the press coverage on the Nobel did mirror the press coverage on the Olympics: during the 1908 Olympics, for instance, newspapers chronicled the medal race with updated medal tables each day (McIntire, 2009, 280). Decades later, something similar was observed in a British newspaper, speaking (perhaps more aptly) of the "Nobel Prize 'league table'." The awarding of the Nobel Prize is imagined as the never-ending season of

OFFICIAL CALCULATION OF POINTS.

(1:st prize = 3 points; 2:nd prize = 2 points; 3:rd prize = 1 point.

Nation	Number of points	Number of 1:st prizes	Number of 2:nd prizes	Number of 3:rd prizes	Total number of prize	Number of times placed fourth*	Number of times placed fifth*	Total of placings
Sweden	136	24	24	16	64	22	15	101
U. S. A.	124	23	18	19	60	14	15	89
Great Britain	76	10	15	16	41	9	6	56
Finland	52	9	8	9	26	5	5	36
Germany	47	5	13	6	24	9	7	40
France	32	7	4	3	14	3	1	18
Denmark	19	1	6	4	11	1	2	14
Norway	17	4	1	3	8	2	2	12
South Africa	16	4	2	—	6	2	—	8
Hungary	16	3	2	3	8	3	1	12
Canada	14	3	2	1	6	3	3	12
Italy	13	3	1	2	6	1	4	11
Australasia	13	2	2	3	7	1	—	8
Belgium	11	2	1	3	6	1	—	7
Russia	6	—	2	2	4	1	2	7
Austria	6	—	2	2	4	1	1	6
Greece	4	1	—	1	2	2	2	6
Holland	3	—	—	3	3	—	—	3
Bohemia	—	—	—	—	—	3	—	3
Luxemburg	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	2
		101	103	96	300	84	67	451

* In such competitions where it was possible to place 4 or 5 men or a team.

FIGURE 7 From the official report of the Olympic Games of Stockholm, 1912: list of most successful nations. *Source:* Bergwall (1913)

a cultural tournament in which nations can improve their position every year or fall behind their competitors. Even if it remains controversial how exactly the position in the table should be calculated (whether it should, for example, consider the total population of each country): "Statisticians have extended their activities to the Nobel Prize list and revealed some interesting facts. Switzerland heads the 'league table' for prizewinners per million inhabitants" ("The Nobel Prize 'league table'," 1964). Maybe the idea of a Nobel Prize trainer has some merit after all. To this day, observing the national distribution of the Nobel can be a way of looking into the future. In China, for instance, the "quest for Nobel Prizes," much like that for "Olympic gold" (Yu, 2014, 59), is a matter of national politics.

5 | OLYMPIC INTERNATIONALISM (II)—"CULTURE" AS A UNIVERSAL CONCEPT

Olympic Internationalism, we may conclude, is not merely an analytical concept applied by historians to describe the interplay between internationalism and nationalism around 1900. It also corresponds to how historical agents thought of the Nobel Prize. Moreover, a fresh look at the widespread practice of compiling tables helps us substantiate what has been pointed out from time to time in commentary on the prize, but usually without providing any real evidence: that, in the early years, much international interest was centered on national competition.[9] But one question still remains to be tackled: where does this leave the Literature Prize?

It is helpful to recall an argument presented by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann in his essay "Culture as a historical concept" ("Kultur als historischer Begriff"). Luhmann notes that the concept of culture, as it established itself in the eighteenth century, entails a "doubling" of observation: everything can be observed in two different ways. For instance, literature can be seen simply as literature and at the same time as an expression of culture. Once the idea of culture was *universalized*, Luhmann continues, it appeared as "a world project that includes both history and regional ('national') differences as material for comparison" ("ein Weltprojekt, das sowohl Geschichte als auch regionale

('nationale') Unterschiede als Vergleichsmaterial einbezieht," Luhmann, 1995, 41). This is surely the case in the tables presented above, in which the common denominator in comparing nations is the idea of cultural achievement and the relative value of contributions to modern culture. In this context, cultures are indeed considered to be fundamentally different. But this does not stand in the way of comparability, as long as they are all cultures. In other words, it is the very concept of culture that allows for meaningful comparison between them, for instance in terms of progressiveness.

This leads us to a second point, namely, how culture came to mediate the relationship between the nation and the international around 1900. It is worth mentioning that in discussing the cultural achievements of peoples, the relative value of the contributions made by different countries to modern culture, and which nations are doing the most for civilization while others are backward, the articles referred to above are very much talking about the same thing. During the second half of the nineteenth century, as pointed out by Akira Iriye (1997, 4–5), "culture tended primarily to connote scientific research, artistic creation, musical performance, and similar 'high' pursuits"; then, by the turn of the century, "this 'high culture' approach had come to be coupled with, if not eclipsed by, an idea of civilization, which incorporated a whole nation," and this idea of civilization was in turn "equated with order, progress, and modernization." This may or may not have been what Alfred Nobel had in mind when he stipulated in his will that the prizes should be given "to those who [...] have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind" (Nobel, 1895). What is more important here is how a number of ideas converge: culture, the nation, civilization, progress, modernization. The Nobel Prize, awarded each year, became a way of keeping score in an *ongoing* cultural competition between nations, in which they could fall behind or catch up.

With respect to the Nobel Prize in Literature, the crux of the matter is that a *universalistic* concept of culture, even only implicitly and unconsciously applied, opened up to the evaluation of literature in terms of nationality, insofar as the nation was largely conceived of in terms of a shared tradition and culture (see also Bosworth, 2007). And insofar as literature, alongside scientific research and efforts for peace, was considered an expression of culture, it became plausible that authors should be regarded as representatives for their national cultures—with the implication that an international literary prize such as the Nobel was not awarded simply to individuals, but also taken to honor the cultural, linguistic, geographical, or even political features of their respective countries.[10]

This helps understand the rationale behind the "successive circulation" of the Literature Prize, mentioned above, or why the Swedish Academy favored Scandinavian authors during World War I as a way of remaining impartial in the public eye (Espmark, 1991, 27–38). It also helps understand why international recognition was not necessarily the decisive criterion for prize-worthiness, as long as the authors were taken to aptly represent their own culture. In 1910, for instance, when the award was given to Paul Heyse—certainly not one of the most internationally recognized writers at the time—the Nobel Prize Committee was clearly impressed by the amount of support the author received at home and argued that precisely this made him worthy of a "world prize" (Svensén, 2001, 1: 221–224).[11] And finally, it helps understand how the institutionalization of the Nobel Prize in Literature, at an international level, was facilitated in the early years by the spread of ideas and values that had relatively little to do with the aesthetic value of the works of literature themselves. With regard to the science prizes, a convincing case has been made that the Nobel was able to assume its unique status and to be recognized as a symbol of scientific excellence so quickly because it was useful in the co-production of other values, ideas, and beliefs, such as national prestige, scientific progress, the idea of science as an engine of cultural progress in general, and the belief in the individual as an actor in society (Källstrand, 2018, 405–406). This is, mutatis mutandis, also the case for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and it is important to see how all five prizes under the Nobel "brand" (Urde & Greyser, 2015) reflected off each other.[12]

6 | GENERAL KNOWLEDGE, "THIN" KNOWLEDGE, THIN INTERNATIONALISM

When the Nobel Prize was new, the press was the main source of information for the international public. But newspapers are ephemeral and hardly ever kept in bookshelves for later reference. Let us therefore briefly take a

look at how the Nobel Prize was presented in repositories of general knowledge, such as encyclopedias, intended for a broad reading public. Such repositories generally offer a good indication of what has settled as basic knowledge, or, put differently, what is considered helpful information for a non-specialist audience at a given point in time. In the early twentieth century, it quickly became customary to include information about the Nobel Prizes, often as a part of the entry on Alfred Nobel.[13] At first, there was usually no mention of individual laureates. This is the case, for instance, in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1910–1911) and the fourteenth edition of the *Brockhaus*, a standard German encyclopedia (*Neue revidierte Jubiläumsausgabe*, 1901–1908). As soon as Nobel laureates were listed in such entries, some kind of additional information beyond their mere names was usually provided.

Consider the fifteenth edition of the *Brockhaus* (1928–1935), which included separate entries on the Nobel Prize and the Nobel Foundation, and a comprehensive listing of laureates, filling an entire page (*Der große Brockhaus*, 1932, 447; Figure 8, see p. 159). The nationality of the laureates, which accompanies their name in parentheses, is presented as essential information. With the international press coverage of the Nobel Prizes and the constant use of the Nobel as a measure of cultural achievement in mind, this may not come as a surprise. In this table, the representative function of laureates is reduced to its simplest form: their name and their country. In the fourteenth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1929–1973; the twelfth and thirteenth editions were mere supplements to the eleventh),[14] we find no such table, but the entry on the Nobel Prize does include a list of prize-winners. This is what we learn about the Nobel laureates in Literature: "British—R. Kipling (1907), Rabindranath Tagore (Indian, 1913), W. B. Yeats (Irish, 1923), G. Bernard Shaw (1925); American—none" (Encyclopædia Britannica, 1929, 477). At first glance, this may seem somewhat arbitrary, but the list actually follows the same principle as the *Brockhaus* table, only with a focus on the British Empire and the United States, in accordance with the general scope of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

In more frequently updated reference works, such as the annual *World Almanac and Encyclopedia*, tables became a common feature earlier. This is actually far less trivial than it may sound. In fact, the frequency with which such tables were updated and made available has a direct bearing on their function: in order to function as rankings (cf. Ringel & Werron, 2021), they have to be updated and published repeatedly. The table displayed below is from the 1917 edition of the *World Almanac* (Figure 9, see p. 160). But consider also, in comparison, the entry in *Who's Who* from 1909, also displayed below. As a biographical dictionary, also published annually, it is only natural that the information about the Nobel Prize itself is kept brief and focus is placed on listing the laureates. For the science prizes, there is a clear preference for naming cities rather than countries in specifying where the laureates come from (but without specifying further whether this is where the laureates were born, or where they lived for most of their lives, or where they conducted their most important research). Cities also seem to be an option for the Literature Prize, at least as long as they are well-known hot-spots of literary life, such as Paris and Berlin. Otherwise, the nationality of the laureates is given—with one exception: in the case of Rudyard Kipling, the editors of *Who's Who* seem to have felt confident that the mere name would suffice, with a British audience in mind (see Figure 10, see p. 160). Is this a different kind of table? Yes and no. There are obviously no unified criteria for presenting information about the laureates, but the table does seem to be committed to the idea that the laureates are best described in terms of where they come from, and the idea of national representation was probably already present in the readers' consciousness.

Indeed, it is worth reflecting on what is and what is not included in such short entries. This takes us back to Wikipedia, where the list presented at the beginning of this article is followed by another three. In one of them, the total number of laureates is divided by country, much like in the early days of the Nobel Prize. France heads the table with 15 prizes, followed by the United States in second and the United Kingdom in third place. What should we make of this? Does it mean that we still live in an age of Olympic Internationalism? Probably not. National competition is not what it used to be, at least not in literature (cf. Sapiro, 2020). But nationality does still seem to be one of the core categories applied to make sense of a prize that encompasses every literary genre, as well as "other writings which,

Nobelpreisträger 1901—31.

Jahr	Physik	Chemie	Medizin	Literatur	Friedenspreis
1901	W. C. Röntgen (Deutsches Reich)	J. H. van't Hoff (Deutsches Reich)	E. von Behring (Deutsches Reich)	R. F. A. Sully-Prudhomme (Frankreich)	H. Dunant (Schweiz), F. Passy (Frankreich)
1902	H. A. Lorentz, P. Zeeman (Niederlande)	E. Fischer (Deutsches Reich)	R. Ross (England)	Th. Mommsen (Deutsches Reich)	E. Ducommun, A. Gobat (Schweiz)
1903	H. Becquerel, P. und Marie Curie (Frankreich)	S. Arrhenius (Schweden)	N. R. Finsen (Dänemark)	B. Björnson (Norwegen)	W. R. Cremer (England)
1904	Lord J. W. S. Rayleigh (England)	W. Ramsay (England)	J. P. Pawlow (Rußland)	F. Mistral (Frankreich), J. Echegaray (Spanien)	Institut für internationales Recht in Gent
1905	Ph. Lenard (Deutsches Reich)	A. von Baeyer (Deutsches Reich)	R. Koch (Deutsches Reich)	H. Sienkiewicz (Polen)	Berta v. Suttner (Österreich)
1906	J. J. Thomson (England)	H. Moissan (Frankreich)	C. Golgi (Italien) S. Ramon y Cajal (Spanien)	G. Carducci (Italien)	Th. Roosevelt (Ver.St.v.A.)
1907	A. A. Michelson (Ver.St.v.A.)	E. Buchner (Deutsches Reich)	Ch. L. A. Laveran (Frankreich)	R. Kipling (England)	T. Moneta (Italien) L. Renault (Frankreich)
1908	G. Lippmann (Frankreich)	E. Rutherford (England)	P. Ehrlich (Deutsches Reich) E. Metschnikow (Rußld., Frankr.)	R. Eucken (Deutsches Reich)	K. P. Arnoldson (Schweden) F. Bajer (Dänemark)
1909	F. Braun (Deutsches Reich) G. Marconi (Italien)	W. Ostwald (Deutsches Reich)	Th. Kocher (Schweiz)	Selma Lagerlöf (Schweden)	A. Beernaert (Belgien) P. d'Estournelles de Constant (Frankreich)
1910	J. D. van der Waals (Niederlande)	O. Wallach (Deutsches Reich)	A. Kossel (Deutsches Reich)	P. Heyse (Deutsches Reich)	Internationales Friedensbureau in Bern
1911	W. Wien (Deutsches Reich)	Marie Curie (Frankreich)	A. Gullstrand (Schweden)	M. Maeterlinck (Belgien)	T. M. C. Asser (Niederlande) A. H. Fried (Österreich)
1912	G. Dalén (Schweden)	V. Grignard, P. Sabatier (Frankreich)	A. Carrel (Ver.St.v.A.)	G. Hauptmann (Deutsches Reich)	E. Root (Ver.St.v.A.)
1913	H. Kamerlingh Onnes (Niederlande)	A. Werner (Schweiz)	Ch. Richet (Frankreich)	Rabindranath Tagore (Indien)	H. La Fontaine (Belgien)
1914	M. von Laue (Deutsches Reich)	Th. W. Richards (Ver.St.v.A.)	R. Bárány (Österreich, Schweden)	—	—
1915	W. H. Bragg, W. L. Bragg (England)	R. Willstätter (Deutsches Reich)	—	R. Rolland (Frankreich)	—
1916	—	—	—	V. von Heidenstam (Schweden)	—
1917	Ch. G. Barkla (England)	—	—	K. Gjellerup, H. Pontoppidan (Dänemark)	Internationales Komitee vom Roten Kreuz in Genf
1918	M. Planck (Deutsches Reich)	F. Haber (Deutsches Reich)	—	—	—
1919	J. Stark (Deutsches Reich)	—	J. Bordet (Belgien)	C. Spitteler (Schweiz)	W. Wilson (Ver.St.v.A.)
1920	Ch. E. Guillaume (Frankreich)	W. Nernst (Deutsches Reich)	A. Krogh (Dänemark)	K. Hamsun (Norwegen)	L. Bourgeois (Frankreich)
1921	A. Einstein (Deutsches Reich)	F. Soddy (England)	—	A. France (Frankreich)	H. Branting (Schweden), Chr. L. Lange (Norwegen)
1922	N. Bohr (Dänemark)	F. W. Aston (England)	A. Hill (England) O. Meyerhof (Deutsches Reich)	J. Benavente (Spanien)	F. Nansen (Norwegen)
1923	R. A. Millikan (Ver.St.v.A.)	F. Pregl (Österreich)	F. G. Banting und J. R. Macleod (Kanada)	W. B. Yeats (Irland, England)	—
1924	M. Siegbahn (Schweden)	—	W. Einthoven (Niederlande)	W. Reymont (Polen)	—
1925	J. Franck, G. Hertz (Deutsches Reich)	R. Zsigmondy (Deutsches Reich)	—	G. B. Shaw (Irland, England)	[land) J. A. Chamberlain (Eng- C. G. Dawes (Ver.St.v.A.)
1926	J. Perrin (Frankreich)	Th. Svedberg (Schweden)	J. Fibiger (Dänemark)	Grazia Deledda (Italien)	A. Briand (Frankreich) G. Stresemann (Deutsches Reich)
1927	A. H. Compton (Ver.St.v.A.) Ch. Th. R. Wilson (England)	H. Wieland (Deutsches Reich)	J. Wagner-Jauregg (Österreich)	H. Bergson (Frankreich)	F. E. Buisson (Frankreich) L. Quidde (Deutsches Reich)
1928	O. W. Richardson (England)	A. Windaus (Deutsches Reich)	Ch. Nicolle (Frankreich)	Sigrid Undset (Norwegen)	—
1929	Louis Prinz von Broglie (Frankreich)	H. v. Euler-Chelpin (Schweden) A. Harden (England)	Ch. Eijkman (Niederlande) F. G. Hopkins (England)	Th. Mann (Deutsches Reich)	F. B. Kellogg (Ver.St.v.A.)
1930	Ch. V. Raman (Indien)	H. Fischer (Deutsches Reich)	K. Landsteiner (Österreich, Ver.St.v.A.)	S. Lewis (Ver.St.v.A.)	N. Söderblom (Schweden)
1931	—	F. Bergius, K. Bosch (Deutsches Reich)	O. Warburg (Deutsches Reich)	E. A. Karlfeldt (Schweden)	Jane Addams, N. M. Butler (Ver.St.v.A.)

FIGURE 8 List of Nobel laureates, including nationality. *Source:* Der große Brockhaus (1932)

YEAR.	Physics.	Chemistry.	Medicine.	Literature.	Peace.
1901...	W. C. Röntgen (G.)	J. H. van't Hoff (D.)	E. A. von Behring (G.)	R. F. A. Sully-Prudhomme (F.)	J. H. Dunant (Swl.) Fr. Passy (F.)
1902...	H. A. Lorentz (D.) P. Zeeman (D.)	E. Fischer (G.)	Sir Ronald Ross (E.)	Th. Mommsen (G.)	E. Ducommun (Swl.) A. Gobat (Swl.)
1903...	H. A. Becquerel (F.) P. and Marie Curie (F.)	S. A. Arrhenius (Swe.)	N. R. Finsen (Dane.)	B. Bjornson (N.)	Sir W. R. Cremer (E.)
1904...	Lord Rayleigh (E.)	Sir Wm. Ramsay (E.)	I. P. Pawlow (R.)	F. Mistral (F.) J. Echegaray (Sp.)	Institute of International Law.
1905...	Ph. Lenard (G.)	A. von Baeyer (G.)	R. Koch (G.)	H. Sienkiewicz (P.)	Baroness von Suttner (Aus.)
1906...	J. J. Thomson (E.)	H. Moissan (F.)	C. Golgi (I.) S. Ramon y Cajal (Sp.)	G. Carducci (I.)	Th. Roosevelt (A.)
1907...	A. A. Michelson (G.)	E. Buchner (G.)	C. L. A. Laveran (F.)	R. Kipling (E.)	E. T. Moneta (I.) L. Renault (F.)
1908...	G. Lippmann (G.)	E. Rutherford (E.)	P. Ehrlich (G.) E. Metchnikoff (R.)	R. Eucken (G.)	K. P. Arnoldson (Swe.) F. Bajer (Dane.)
1909...	G. Marconi (I.) F. Braun (G.)	W. Ostwald (G.)	Th. Kocher (G.)	Selma Lagerlöf (Swe.)	A. M. F. Beernaert (B.) Baron de Constant (F.)
1910...	J. D. van der Waals (D.)	O. Wallach (G.)	A. Kossel (G.)	P. v. Heyse (G.)	Int'l Peace Bureau (Swi.)
1911...	W. Wien (G.)	Marie Curie (F.)	A. Gullstrand (Swe.)	M. Maeterlinck (B.)	T. M. C. Asser (D.) A. H. Fried (Aus.).
1912...	Gustaf Dalén (Swe.)	V. Grignard (F.) P. Sabatier (F.)	A. Carrel (A.)	G. Hauptmann (G.)	Elihu Root (A.)
1913...	H. K. Onnes (D.)	A. Werner (Swl.)	C. Richet (F.)	R. Tagore (Beng.)	H. LaFontaine (B.)
1914...	M. von Laue (G.)	T. W. Richards (A.)	R. Bárány (Aus.)	Not awarded.	Not awarded.
1915...	W. H. Bragg (E.) W. L. Bragg (E.)	R. Willstätter (G.)	Not awarded.	Romain Rolland (F.)	Not awarded.
1916...	Not awarded.	Not awarded.	Not awarded.	Verner Heidenstam (Swe.)	Not awarded.

A., American; Aus., Austrian; B., Belgian; Beng., Bengalese; D., Dutch; E., English; F., French; G., German; I., Italian; N., Norwegian; P., Polish; R., Russian; Sp., Spanish; Swe., Swedish; Swl., Swiss.

FIGURE 9 List of Nobel laureates, including nationality. *Source:* The World Almanac and Encyclopedia (1917)

PRIZES AWARDED

Physics.

1901. Prof. W. C. Roentgen, München.
1902. Prof. H. A. Lorentz, Leyden, and Prof. P. Zeeman, Amsterdam.
1903. Prof. H. A. Becquerel, and Prof. P. Curie (*d.* 1906), and Mrs. M. Curie, Paris.
1904. Lord Rayleigh, London.
1905. Prof. Ph. Lenard, Kiel.
1906. Prof. J. J. Thomson, Cambridge.
1907. Prof. A. Michelson, Chicago.

Chemistry.

1901. Prof. J. H. van't Hoff, Berlin.
1902. Prof. E. Fischer, Berlin.
1903. Prof. S. Arrhenius, Stockholm.
1904. Sir W. Ramsay, London.
1905. Prof. A. von Baeyer, München.
1906. Prof. H. Moissan, Paris.
1907. Prof. E. Buchner, Berlin.

Medicine.

1901. Prof. E. von Behring, Prussia.
1902. Prof. R. Ross, Liverpool.
1903. Prof. N. Finsen (*d.* 1904), Copenhagen.
1904. Prof. I. Pavlov, St. Petersburg.
1905. Prof. R. Koch, Berlin.
1906. Prof. C. Golgi, Pavia, and Prof. S. Ramon y Cajal, Madrid.
1907. Prof. C. Laveran, Paris.

Literature.

1901. Sully Prudhomme (*d.* 1907), Paris.
1902. Prof. Th. Mommsen (*d.* 1903), Berlin.
1903. Bjoernstierne Bjoernson, Norway.
1904. F. Mistral, France, and J. Echegaray, Spain.
1905. H. Sienkiewicz, Poland.
1906. G. Carducci (*d.* 1907), Italy.
1907. Rudyard Kipling.

Peace.

1901. H. Dunant, Switzerland, and H. Passy, Paris.
1902. E. Ducommun (*d.* 1906), and A. Gobat, Switzerland.
1903. Sir W. R. Cremer, M.P. (*d.* 1908), London.
1904. Institute of International Law, Belgium.
1905. Baroness B. von Suttner, Austria.
1906. Président Th. Roosevelt, New York.
1907. E. T. Moneta, Italy, and Prof. L. Renault, Paris.

FIGURE 10 List of Nobel laureates. *Source:* Who's Who Year-Book (1909)

by virtue of their form and style, possess literary value" ("Statutes of the Nobel Foundation," n.d.),[15] from every corner of the world. If you know very little about any Nobel laureates, their nationality may very well coincide with the "nature" of their work, as in one table from the *Modern Language Journal* (Figure 11, see below). Even though the Wikipedia entry specifically devoted to the Nobel Prize in Literature seems richer than any other discussed in this paper, it still seems to testify to a considerable faith in numbers and adhere to a basic logic of recognition, in which the authors are largely seen as representatives of a culture conceived of in terms of nationality. This is not self-evident, and it is not carved in stone what authors are considered representatives of, or who gets to decide what they represent (Owen, 2014, 251). Interestingly, this logic of recognition seems to apply even in the work of the Swedish Academy, which still seems very self-conscious about cultural origin and avoiding repetition in the selection of laureates. If we take a closer look at the list of laureates, a "negative heuristic"—that is, a circulation of the prize between nations or regions—seems to be the rule to this day. A survey and contextualization of Nobel Prize charts (lists, tables, diagrams, etc.), a phenomenon hitherto entirely neglected in the study of the award,[16] can indeed help us understand how world literature, recognition, and literary value was negotiated in the twentieth century.[17]

Lists and tables may seem somewhat far from the literature itself, but that is precisely the point here. They allow their readers to view literature from a distance, and offer them a few apparently simple but in fact consequential means of comparison. Such lists and tables illustrate the importance of what the literary historian Francesca Orsini (2019, 59, 63) refers to as "thin knowledge." Orsini, a specialist in South Asian literatures, observed how not

A LIST OF NOBEL PRIZE WINNERS*

Date	Name	Nature of Work
1901....	René François Armand Sully-Prudhomme	French poet
1902....	Theodor Mommsen	German historian
1903....	Björnstjerne Björnson	Norwegian novelist and playwright
1904....	Frédéric Mistral	French poet
1904....	José Echegaray	Spanish dramatist
1905....	Henryk Sienkiewicz	Polish novelist, author of *Quo vadis?*
1906....	Giosuè Carducci	Italian poet
1907....	Rudyard Kipling	British short-story writer and poet
1908....	Rudolf Eucken	German philosopher
1909....	Selma Lagerlöf	Swedish novelist
1910....	Paul Heyse	German novelist and dramatist
1911....	Maurice Maeterlinck	Belgian dramatist
1912....	Gerhart Hauptmann	German dramatist
1913....	Rabindranath Tagore	British poet and dramatist
1914....	No award	.....
1915....	Romain Rolland	French novelist
1916....	Verner von Heidenstam	Swedish poet
1917....	Henrik Pontoppidan	Danish novelists
1917....	Karl Gjellerup	
1918....	No award	.....
1919....	Carl Spitteler	Swiss poet
1920....	Knut Hamsun	Norwegian novelist
1921....	Anatole France	French novelist
1922....	Jacinto Benavente	Spanish dramatist
1923....	William Butler Yeats	British poet
1924....	Ladislaw Reymont	Polish novelist, author of *The Peasants*
1925....	George Bernard Shaw	British dramatist
1926....	Grazia Deledda	Italian novelist
1927....	Henri Bergson	French philosopher
1928....	Sigrid Unset	Norwegian novelist
1929....	Thomas Mann	German novelist
1930....	Sinclair Lewis	American novelist
1931....	Erik Axel Karlfeldt	Swedish poet
1932....	John Galsworthy	British novelist
1933....	Ivan Bunin	Russian novelist
1934....	Luigi Pirandello	Italian dramatist

FIGURE 11 List of Nobel laureates in Literature. *Source:* "List of Nobel Prize winners," *Modern Language Journal*, *20* (1935)

only substantial, "thick," knowledge, but also "superficial familiarity"—that is, "thin" knowledge—can shape perceptions of literature. As far as the Nobel Prize is concerned, the knowledge involved seems to be as thin as can be, sometimes including only name and nationality, intended for readers largely unfamiliar with the actual works of literature. Nevertheless, this thin knowledge has its advantages: it travels quickly (remember the transatlantic journey of the *Journal des débats* piece), is easy to understand, and reaches a broad public. It is well adapted to the international attention economy, thus effectively shaping perceptions of world literature (Orsini, 2015, 350).[18] In fact, our analyses suggest that the international circulation of such thin knowledge compiled in (seemingly) simple tables played a crucial role in making the Nobel Prize in Literature what it is: a globally acknowledged "world prize."[19]

Tim Parks, who provided the quote at the very beginning of this article, is perhaps one of the Nobel's most outspoken critics. In 2018, he published a polemic in the *New York Times*, essentially questioning the very basis for its existence:

> Literature is not tennis or football, where international competition makes sense. It is intimately tied to the language and culture from which it emerges. Literary style distinguishes itself by its distance from the other styles that surround it, implying a community of readers with a shared knowledge of other literary works, of standard language usage and cultural context. What sense does it make for a group from one culture—be it Swedish, American, Nigerian or Japanese—to seek to compare a Bolivian poet with a Korean novelist, an American singer–songwriter with a Russian playwright, and so on? Why would we even want them to do that?
>
> (Parks, 2018)

If we look at it from a historical perspective, we can actually turn this intervention on its head. Literature *was* a lot like a sports tournament,[20] and this is important in understanding what the Nobel has become. The notion of literary works as something unique and intimately tied to their cultural origin did not, in the early years of the Nobel Prize, stand in the way of comparability. Rather, it was precisely what made comparison attractive in the first place. The unparalleled appeal of this model of comparison was based on the assumption that cultural origin means nationality—something that even Parks still seems to hold to when he speaks of the "Bolivian poet," the "Korean novelist," the "American singer–songwriter," and the "Russian playwright." This is still very much part of the paradigm we can observe in the table published in the *Modern Language Journal*, presented above. But Parks, who urges us to "grow up and concentrate on the books themselves, without this razzmatazz of winners and losers" (Parks, 2018), is right about one thing, perhaps unwittingly. Olympic Internationalism was not about comparing individual authors and their unique works, but what they were taken to represent: nations and national cultures. As a pretty much universally adopted framework for comparison in the early twentieth century, Olympic Internationalism did not have to rely on any profound knowledge acquired from critically engaging with "the books themselves." Quite the opposite: Olympic Internationalism was based on the international spread of "thin" knowledge, not least through lists and tables in the mass media.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

ORCID

Jørgen Sneis https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4019-9662
Carlos Spoerhase https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0615-6789

ENDNOTES

[1] Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are our own.

[2] We borrow this term from Imre Lakatos (1978, 48) without applying it in a strict sense.

[3] Gustav Källstrand (2012) has analyzed the reception of the Nobel in the Swedish press between 1897 and 1911 in great detail. But as far as we can tell, international press coverage has not yet systematically been accounted for. On the Swedish Academy's observation also of academic literary criticism, see Espmark (1991, 163).

[4] In his book *The Economy of Prestige*, a seminal work on the cultural prize, James F. English considers "The arts as international sport" (English, 2008, 249–263). See also Braun (2014). We will return to this analogy below.

[5] For an analysis of globalization processes in the fields of science and sports in the late nineteenth century, including the development of shared criteria by which achievement could be measured, see Heintz and Werron (2011).

[6] We are not thinking primarily of organizational institutions as engines of internationalization or globalization (see, for instance, Iriye, 2002). The term is applied in a wider sense here (cf. Berger & Luckmann, [1966] 1991, 72): "Institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution." In her erudite study on the concept of the national author, Anne-Marie Thiesse (2019, 235) also briefly touches on the Nobel Prize and the relationship between the national and the international: "The principle affirmed in the 19th century, which grants universal scope to a work if and only if it is authentically national, allows for the establishment of international literary institutions. According to its founder, Alfred Nobel, the first universal literary prize should reward a work inspired by 'a powerful ideal in the service of humanity.' Its awarding is indeed a matter of competition between nations" ("Le principe affirmé au XIXe siècle, qui accorde portée universelle à une œuvre si et seulement si elle est authentiquement nationale, permet de poser des institutions littéraires internationales. Le premier prix littéraire universel doit selon son fondateur Alfred Nobel récompenser une œuvre inspirée par 'un puissant idéal au service de l'humanité'. Son attribution, en fait, relève de la compétition entre nations.")

[7] This is a recurring observation in the American press coverage. In 1931, for instance, the *New York Times* published an article entitled "Germans lead the Nobel Prize winners." The lead reads as follows: "Americans now stand fourth in the list, following the French and British." And in the article itself it is pointed out that "The Germans lead in all branches of the award except peace, in which the Americans head the list."

[8] For a lucid analysis of how nation states compete for "soft" goods such as "attention, legitimacy, and the achievement of prestige," see Werron, who also points to "the influence of external observers of the state system—universalized third parties such as international organizations, social scientists, and journalists—and to different forms of competition created by such processes and third parties" (Werron, 2012, 338).

[9] See, for instance, Feldman: "The Nobel's internationalism allowed it to include achievements anywhere in the world, to reap the harvest of all nations. Inevitably, this appeal to international harmony—like the Olympics—has roused fierce national rivalries" (Feldman, 2000, 12; see also p. 4). For a somewhat more detailed account, see Crawford (2009).

[10] A similar observation is made with respect to Japan, in particular, by Iwamoto (1988, 218).

[11] This is reflected more generally by Thiesse (2019, 19): "Nations [...] compete not only in military or economic terms but also in cultural terms. The award of the Nobel Prize in Literature to a writer is interpreted as a consecration of his country on the international scene" ("Les nations [...] rivalisent en termes non seulement militaires ou économiques mais aussi culturels. L'attribution du prix Nobel de littérature à un écrivain est interprétée comme consécration de son pays sur la scène internationale").

[12] Over time, of course, the Literature Prize was able to establish itself as its own brand, perhaps even more effectively than its siblings, at least among the general public. An article in the *New York Times* from 1924 offers an explanation for this. "ANATOLE FRANCE at his death was something more than the greatest son of his own country or, beyond that, the finest flower of the Latin genius. He was the towering literary figure in Europe since the departure of IBSEN and TOLSTOY. [...] who may now be regarded as the greatest of Europeans when we strike a fair balance between merit and fame? [...] There is a simple test. Glance down the list of Nobel prize winners in their five parallel columns of Physics, Chemistry, Medicine, Literature and Peace, and it is from just one column that the choice will instinctively be made—Literature. The scribbler, the story-teller, the dreamer, has it all over his serious competitors; though the reason may be that he filches from every one of the four other columns for his own glory and profit. He is the popularizer" ("Anatole France's successors," 1924).

[13] It would be interesting to compare the (inter)national status of the encyclopedia, that is, the imaginaries informing the rise and use of the encyclopedia as an (inter)national project, to the imaginaries informing the Nobel Prize. That, however, would be a different paper.

[14] For an overview of the different editions, see https://www.britannica.com/topic/Encyclopaedia-Britannica-English-language-reference-work.

[15] "Statutes of the Nobel Foundation" (n.d., § 2): "The term 'literature' shall comprise not only belles-lettres but also other writings which, by virtue of their form and style, possess literary value."

[16] It is only natural that this is not taken into account in specialized inquiries. For research on the history of the Nobel Prize in Literature more general in scope, see Österling ([1950] 1951); Espmark ([1986] 1991, 2001, 2021); Feldman (2000); Wires (2007).

[17] This also has wider implications for the study of cultural history, insofar as "The modern ascendancy of cultural prizes may conveniently be said to have started in 1901 with the Nobel Prize for Literature, perhaps the oldest prize that strikes us as fully contemporary […]" (English, 2008, 28).

[18] "[I]f the idea of a world literary system works it's in terms of world *recognition*: the Nobel prize, the Man Booker prize, and so on. But thanks to another slippage of momentous consequence, what circulates in the so-called global market of letters becomes what world literature *is*" (Orsini, 2015, 350).

[19] This is the consensus in all scholarship on the prize. See, for instance, Casanova (2005, 74–75): "One objective indicator of the existence of [a] world literary space is the (almost) unanimous belief in the universality of the Nobel Prize for literature. The significance attributed to this award, the peculiar diplomacy involved, the national expectations engendered, the colossal renown it bestows; even (above all?) the annual criticism of the Swedish jury for its alleged lack of objectivity, its supposed political prejudices, its aesthetic errors—all conspire to make this annual canonization a global engagement for the protagonists of literary space. The Nobel Prize is today one of the few truly international literary consecrations, a unique laboratory for the designation and definition of what is universal in literature. The echoes it creates each year, the expectations aroused, the beliefs stirred all reaffirm the existence of a literary world stretching across virtually the entire planet, with its own mode of celebration, both autonomous—not subject, or at least not directly, to political, linguistic, national, nationalist or commercial criteria—and global. In this sense, the Nobel Prize is a prime, objective indicator of the existence of a world literary space."

[20] And even part of a sports tournament. As Miles Osgood (2021, 761) reminds us, "From 1912 to 1948, artists could win Olympic medals."

REFERENCES

Alfred Noble [*sic*] Prizes, The. (1904, December 25). *The Spokesman-Review*.

Anatole France's successors. (1924, October 20). *New York Times*.

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. ([1966] 1991). *The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Penguin Books.

Bergwall, E. (1913). *The official report of the Olympic Games of Stockholm 1912*, issued by the Swedish Olympic Committee. Wahlström & Widstrand.

Bosworth, R. J. B. (2007). Nationalism. In G. Martel (Ed.), *A companion to international history 1900–2001* (pp. 26–38). Blackwell.

Brankovic, J., Ringel, L., & Werron, T. (2018). How rankings produce competition: The case of global university rankings. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, *47*, 270–288.

Braun, R. (2014). Embodying achievement: Thomas Bernhard, Elfriede Jelinek, and authorship as a competitive sport. *Austrian Studies*, *22*, 121–138.

Casanova, P. (2005). Literature as a world. *New Left Review*, *31*, 71–90.

Crawford, E. (1984). *The beginnings of the Nobel Institution. The Science Prizes, 1901–1915*. Cambridge University Press.

Crawford, E. (2009). Nobelpreis und Olympische Spiele: Gleichzeitige Begründung 1896 und spätere Entwicklungen. *Paragrana Beiheft*, *4*, 72–78.

Encyclopædia Britannica. Fourteenth edition. A new survey of universal knowledge: Volume 16. (1929) The Encyclopædia Britannica Company, Ltd/Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.

English, J. F. ([2005] 2008). *The economy of prestige. Prizes, awards, and the circulation of cultural value*. Harvard University Press.

Espmark, K. ([1986] 1991). *The Nobel Prize in Literature. A study of the criteria behind the choices*. Hall.

Espmark, K. (2001). *Litteraturpriset. Hundra år med Nobels uppdrag*. Norstedts.

Espmark, K. (2021). *Nobelpriset i litteratur—ett nytt sekel*. Svenska Akademien.

Feldman, B. (2000). *The Nobel Prize. A history of genius, controversy, and prestige*. Arcade.

Genius in nations. How it shows up in the award of the Nobel Prizes. (1914, February 11). *Boston Evening Transcript*.

Germans lead the Nobel Prize winners. (1931, January 4). *New York Times*.

Große Brockhaus, [*Der*]. *Handbuch des Wissens in zwanzig Bänden: Band 13*. (1932). F. A. Brockhaus.

Heintz, B., & Werron, T. (2011). Wie ist Globalisierung möglich? Zur Entstehung globaler Vergleichshorizonte am Beispiel von Wissenschaft und Sport. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, *63*, 359–394.

International distribution of the Nobel Prizes during twelve years, The. (1913). *Science Progress in the Twentieth Century*, 8, 382–384.
Iriye, A. (1997). *Cultural internationalism and world order*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
Iriye, A. (2002). *Global community. The role of international organizations in the making of the contemporary world*. University of California Press.
Iwamoto, Y. (1988). The Nobel Prize in Literature, 1967–1987: A Japanese view. *World Literature Today*, *62*(2), 217–221.
Källstrand, G. (2012). *Medaljens framsida. Nobelpriset i pressen 1897–1911*. Carlssons.
Källstrand, G. (2018). The image of the Nobel Prize. *Public Understanding of Science*, *27*, 405–416.
Lakatos, I. (1978). *The methodology of scientific research programmes. Philosophical papers* (Vol. 1). (J. Worrall & G. Currie, Eds.). Cambridge University Press.
List of Nobel Prize winners. (1935). *Modern Language Journal*, *20*, 180.
Luhmann, N. (1995). Kultur als historischer Begriff. In N. Luhmann (Ed.), *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik. Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft* (Vol. 4, pp. 31–54). Suhrkamp.
McIntire, M. (2009). National status, the 1908 Olympic Games and the English press. *Media History*, *15*, 271–286.
Nobel, A. (1895, November 27). Last will and testament. Retrieved from https://www.nobelprize.org/alfred-nobel/full-text-of-alfred-nobels-will-2/
Nobel Prize "league table," The. (1964, April 10). *Coventry Evening Telegraph*.
Nobel Roll of Honor, The. (1913, December 18). *The Independent*.
Orsini, F. (2015). The multilingual local in world literature. *Comparative Literature*, *67*, 345–374.
Orsini, F. (2019). World literature, Indian views, 1920s–1940s. *Journal of World Literature*, *4*, 56–81.
Osgood, M. (2021). Going for the bronze: Modernism vs. the Old Guard at the Olympic art competitions. *Modernism/modernity*, *28*, 761–789.
Österling, A. ([1950] 1951). The Literary Prize. In Nobel Foundation (Ed.), *Nobel. The man and his prizes* (pp. 85–134). Printed in Sweden for the University of Oklahoma Press.
Owen, S. ([2004] 2014). Stepping forward and back. Issues and possibilities for "world" poetry. In D. Damrosch (Ed.), *World literature in theory* (pp. 249–263). Wiley-Blackwell.
Parks, T. (2016). Globalization, literary activism and the death of critical discourse. In A. Chaudhuri (Ed.), *Literary activism. A symposium* (pp. 159–180). Boiler House Press/UEA Publishing Project.
Parks, T. (2018, May 4). The Nobel Prize for Literature is a scandal all by itself. *New York Times*.
Ringel, L., & Werron, T. (2021). Serielle Vergleiche: Zum Unterschied, den Wiederholung macht. Anhand der Geschichte von Kunst- und Hochschulrankings. *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, *73*, 301–331.
Sapiro, G. (2020). The transnational literary field between (inter)-nationalism and cosmopolitanism. *Journal of World Literature*, *5*, 481–504.
Schück, H. (1999). *Anteckningar till Svenska Akademiens historia 1883–1912* [ca. 1939], (B. Svensén, Ed.). Nordstedts.
Schultze, E. (1911, August 20). Die Kulturleistungen der Völker, gemessen an den Nobelpreisen. *Vossische Zeitung* (Sonntagsbeilage no. 34).
Somsen, G. J. (2008). A history of universalism: Conceptions of the internationality of science from the Enlightenment to the Cold War. *Minerva*, *46*, 361–379.
Statutes of the Nobel Foundation. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.nobelprize.org/about/statutes-of-the-nobel-foundation
Svensén, B. (2001). *Nobelpriset i litteratur. Nomineringar och utlåtanden 1901–1950* (Vol. 2). Nordstedts.
Thiesse, A.-M. (2019). *La fabrique de l'écrivain national. Entre littérature et politique*. Gallimard.
United States on the back seat, The. (1912, January 27). *The Spokesman-Review*.
Urde, M., & Greyser, S. A. (2015). The Nobel Prize: The identity of a corporate heritage brand. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *24*, 318–332.
Varigny, H. de (1914, January 15). Revue des sciences. *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*.
Wainer, H. (1992). Understanding graphs and tables. *ETS Research Report Series*, 4–20.
Werron, T. (2012). Worum konkurrieren Nationalstaaten? Zu Begriff und Geschichte der Konkurrenz um "weiche" globale Güter. *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, *41*, 338–355.
Who's Who Year-Book. (1909). Black.
Wikipedia. (n.d.). List of Nobel laureates in literature. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Nobel_laureates_in_Literature
Wires, R. (2007). *The politics of the Nobel Prize in Literature. How the laureates were selected, 1901–2007*. The Edwin Mellen Press.
World Almanac and Encyclopedia, The. (1917). The Press Publishing Co.
Yu, J. (2014). The politics behind China's quest for Nobel Prizes. *Issues in Science and Technology*, *30*(3), 58–66.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Jørgen Sneis (j.sneis@lmu.de) is a lecturer in literary studies at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. He is a principal investigator of a research project on *The Nobel Prize in Literature as a Global Standard of Comparison*, located at the Collaborative Research Center *Practices of Comparing* (SFB 1288). His research focuses on awards and prize culture, book history, literary theory, Scandinavian and German literature, and World Literature. He is the author of *Phänomenologie und Textinterpretation. Studien zur Theoriegeschichte und Methodik der Literaturwissenschaft* (de Gruyter, 2018).

Carlos Spoerhase (carlos.spoerhase@lmu.de) is a full professor of German Literature at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. He is a principal investigator of a research project on *The Nobel Prize in Literature as a Global Standard of Comparison*, located at the Collaborative Research Center *Practices of Comparing* (SFB 1288). He was a Class of 1932 Visiting Fellow at the Council of the Humanities of Princeton University in 2021/2022. His co-authored book *Geistesarbeit: Eine Praxeologie der Geisteswissenschaften* was published with Suhrkamp in 2022.

How to cite this article: Sneis, J., & Spoerhase, C. (2023). The Nobel Roll of Honor. *Orbis Litterarum*, *78*, 147–166. https://doi.org/10.1111/oli.12377