The Case of Sillanpää: Translation, the Nobel Prize, and a Neighbor in Distress

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Abstract: This article explores the intricate relation between translation and the Nobel Prize in Literature through the lens of a special case: the 1939 award to Finnish novelist Frans Eemil Sillanpää. The discussions in the Nobel committee, and the decision of the Swedish Academy to select Sillanpää for the prize, were deeply affected by the long and complicated political and cultural history of neighbors Sweden and Finland, as well as the Soviet bombings of several Finnish cities in the autumn of 1939. This article argues, however, that the translations of Sillanpää's novels into Swedish were just as important, and what mattered was not only that they were translated but also how and by whom they had been made accessible for Swedish-speaking readers. The 1939 Nobel Prize to Frans Eemil Sillanpää is a case of two neighboring nations with a common colonial past, two close and overlapping cultural and political positions, and two very dissimilar languages.

Keywords: literary translation, the Nobel Prize in Literature, Frans Eemil Sillanpää, Finnish literature, Finno-Swedish literature, World War II, proletarian realism

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Literary translation and the Nobel Prize are intimately connected. A recent anthology stresses the tangible yet complex and multilayered interdependence of the prestigious award and translation processes (Tenngart and Ågerup). First, the Swedish Academy's choices prompt translations. The extent to which newly appointed laureates enjoy a translational boost—a so-called "Nobel effect"—varies greatly between authors, genres, and languages, but the overall impact is significant (Gunder; Rüegg; Tenngart, *Nobel Prize*). Secondly, many of the prize decisions rely on translations. Without renditions into Swedish or other languages within the reach of the Nobel committee members, the prize would be a very narrow affair.

When Alfred Nobel's will was revealed on New Year's Eve 1896, it was not evident that the

Swedish Academy would accept responsibility for the annual choice of laureates, and the linguistic scope of potential winners was indeed one of the strongest arguments against taking on the task. The members of the Academy were appointed to serve Swedish culture and the Swedish language, not international literature, and except for its leader at the time, permanent secretary Carl David af Wirsén, they had no credentials in evaluating foreign works. At a decisive Academy meeting in spring 1897, one of the members—historian Carl Gustaf Malmström—pointed out the obvious problem with Nobel's assignment: "hardly any existing institution in the world ha[s] the required expertise to execute it" (Schück 511; my trans.). But Wirsén managed to convince his colleagues. With a neat and thorough administration of proposals and extensive help from external experts, the erudite Swedes were finally confident that they would be able to compare and evaluate the candidates.

Wirsén's Academy was very aware of its dependence on translations. In the early history of the prize, several nominated authors were unceremoniously put aside due to the committee members' lack of linguistic access. Other candidates had an upper hand in the discussions because they were widely translated and accessible for European readers. The early committees were very keen on establishing the prize as an important factor on the international literary scene, which could only be done through reflecting the cosmopolitan European literary taste (Tenngart, *Nobel Prize* 78–81). Bad translations, on the other hand, worked against a candidate. In 1904, Provençal poet Frédéric Mistral was almost ruled out because Wirsén found the recent Swedish translation of his epic poem *Mirèio* lacking. When the Academy still decided to let Mistral share the award with Spanish playwright José Echegaray, they opened up for critique from Swedish readers without access to the Provençal original (82).

But access to the proposed Nobel candidates is not solely a matter of language. It has also to do with cultural references and complex conditions of intercultural understanding. Deciding between William Butler Yeats and Jacinto Benavente for the 1922 prize, committee chair and permanent secretary Per Hallström pointed out a Swedish bias when comparing an Irish poet with a Spanish playwright: "It is easier for the Irishman, with his background in the very intense English poetic culture, to capture our emotions and enchant the lyrical sense that we Swedes have in common with Germanic people in general, than for the Spaniard, who represents quite a different kind of poetry" (Svensén, *Nobelpriset i litteratur 1921–1950* 30; my trans.).

The committee chair urged his fellow Academy members to bear this bias in mind when discussing his suggestion to award Benavente. Eighteen years later, Hallström returned to the argument when proposing an award to Gabriela Mistral. The Chilean poet was admired, he wrote in his summary of the 1945 candidates, all over her own "southern continent," but her poetry is a challenge for Scandinavians, because it stems from a "different emotional life than ours" (311; my trans.). The problem of access is, then, partly a language issue and partly a cultural one. Often, these go together. In discussing Chinese author Lu Xun, Egyptian novelist Taha Hussein, Iranian short story writer Mohammed Al Djamalzadeh, and Ukrainian poet Pavlo Tychyna—to mention just a few examples from the 125-year history of the Nobel Prize—the committee was forced to reject the candidates due to their own lack of both linguistic skills and cultural knowledge (Tenngart, "Nobel Obligations" 178–186). Sometimes, however, language access and cultural distance are separate issues. This was the case when the Swedish Academy decided on the first (and to this day only) Finnish Nobel Prize in Literature—the 1939 award to novelist Frans Eemil Sillanpää.

Finland and the Nobel

Neighboring countries Sweden and Finland have a complex common history. In the Middle Ages, Swedes colonized Finland in a series of crusades eastwards, and between the 13th and the early 19th centuries Finland was a part of the Swedish kingdom. In 1809, the territory was lost to Russia, and Finland became an autonomous grand duchy in the Russian Empire. The Russian revolutions in 1917 resulted in Finnish independence from Russian rule and a civil war between the right-wing Whites and the socialist Reds.

The newly independent Finland of the 1920s was a politically polarized nation, but also linguistically divided. The old colonial language, Swedish, was still spoken by a powerful minority, while the majority spoke Finnish. Adding to the challenge was the fact that these two languages are completely different. While Swedish is a Germanic language very close to Norwegian and Danish, Finnish is a Finnic language belonging to the Uralic family. In 1922, Swedish and Finnish were declared as equal national languages, and with two official languages Finland also had two literatures. Finnish literature had been solidified in the 19th century with the national epic *Kalevala* (final form 1849) and Aleksis Kivi's important novel *Seven Brothers* (1870), while Swedish literature written by Finns, so called Finno-Swedish literature, thrived with contemporary, modernist poets like Edith Södergran, Elmer Diktonius, and Gunnar Björling.

The short cultural distance between Stockholm and Finland urged the Swedish Academy to award the literary tradition of their neighbors. After one French (poet Sully Prudhomme in 1901) and one German (historian Theodor Mommsen in 1902) prize, the Swedish Academy selected Norwegian author Bjørnstierne Bjørnson as the third literary Nobel laureate. The strong ties to their western neighbors were later confirmed with the prizes to Knut Hamsun in 1920 and Sigrid Undset in 1928. Sweden's southern neighbors, the Danes, were honored with a shared prize to novelists Karl Gjellerup and Henrik Pontoppidan in 1917. But when the 1930s was coming to an end, no Finnish author had been selected. This was not due to lack of formal suggestions. Thirteen Finnish authors had been nominated in 53 different proposals for 28 of the 39 prize discussions between 1901 and 1939. The Academy's dismissal of all these did not look good, especially since three awards had been given to writers from the prize-giving institution's own country: Selma Lagerlöf (1909), Verner von Heidenstam (1916), and Erik Axel Karlfeldt (1931). Was Finnish literature really this distinctly less significant than the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish traditions? No, nobody could argue that. But the Finnish case was much trickier.

Language-wise, Finnish literature was both too close and too distant to the Academy in Stockholm. A Nobel Prize to a Swedish-speaking Finnish author would not only be a problematic gesture from a former colonizer, but would also be seen as yet another internal Swedish award. Such a decision would risk the Nobel's status as a world literary prize. Literature written in Finnish, on the other hand, was inaccessible to the judges. Nobody in the Swedish Academy read the language.

In the autumn of 1939, the Swedish inclination to award Finland became urgent. After Great Britain and France had declared war on Germany in early September, Josef Stalin, who has been Adolf Hitler's ally since the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, started to build military bases in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. A couple of weeks later, he ordered Finland to give up three different strategic territories to the Soviet Union. In addition, the Russians planned to place a marine base in the south-western point of Finland. The Finnish government refused to meet Stalin's demands, referring to their seven-year-old bilateral deal and to Finland's status as a sovereign state since 1917. The risk of an armed conflict between the small, recently independent country and its gigantic, former master was imminent, and the political leaderships of all Western democracies—

not least Sweden—were strongly supporting David and condemning Goliath. Tension was building. The military threat from Moscow was about to be transformed into actual attacks. Finland needed every encouragement available.

A Perfect Kind of Access

The most nominated Finnish author was Johani Aho. He was born as Johan Brofeldt in a Finno-Swedish family in Helsinki but wrote in Finnish under his Finnified name. Between 1902 and 1920, Aho was suggested as a Nobel laureate 12 times. The Nobel committee was not uninterested, but they raised three different arguments against him.

In 1914, Aho was turned down because of the tense political situation. Awarding a Finnish-speaking author and not also a Finno-Swedish writer would send the wrong political signals after the outbreak of the Great War, the committee members reasoned, anxious to help the Swedish government maintain a neutral position (Svensén, *Nobelpriset i litteratur 1901–1920* 319). Two years later, the committee dismissed Aho because they lacked skills in Finnish and thus could not compare him with his peers. Since they could not possibly know if he was the best living author writing in Finnish or not, they could not risk giving him the prize (358). In 1917, the committee returned to the issue of signals, but this time on a cultural rather than a political note. It would not be right, the Nobel committee argued, to award a Finnish-language author before awarding a Finno-Swedish one (378). Between the lines, this argument was based on a sense of obligation towards a sister-culture across the Baltic Sea, but it was also rooted in a lingering imperialist idea that Finno-Swedish culture was fundamentally more advanced than Finnish culture.

After Johani Aho's death in 1921, Finno-Swedish poet Bertel Gripenberg became the most recurrent name among the Finnish Nobel candidates, with 11 proposals between 1917 and 1937. The main argument against Gripenberg was that his poetry lacked the force, substance, and importance required for the Nobel, but there were ideological issues too. In 1918, the civil war in Finland made it too politically sensitive to award a Finno-Swedish aristocrat with deeply conservative values. Gripenberg was an anti-communist and explicitly on the Whites' side in the internal conflict. In the 1920s, Gripenberg's ideology was still an issue, but—somewhat surprisingly—in complex and conflicting ways. In the 1923 prize discussions, the committee was concerned with a lack of human warmth in his poetry (Svensén, *Nobelpriset i litteratur 1921–1950* 40), but when Gripenberg's name returned on the candidate list six years later, the poet's "strong patriotism and bellicose manliness" worked in his favor (134; my trans.). It did not help all the way, however. Gripenberg was deemed less worthy of the Nobel Prize than a couple of his fellow Finno-Swedish poets, despite being frequently suggested throughout the 1930s.

By that time, however, another top candidate had appeared in the nominations lists. Finnish-speaking novelist and short story writer Frans Eemil Sillanpää was proposed every year from 1930 to 1939. First time around, the committee agreed that it was too early for him, but in the following prize procedures they kept discussing his stories with great interest. In 1937, three of the committee members proposed a shared prize between Sillanpää and Finno-Swedish poet Jarl Hemmer, while the others wanted to award French novelist Roger Martin du Gard. The committee could not reach a common suggestion and left the decision to the Swedish Academy as a whole,

and a majority in the bigger assembly voted for du Gard. In the two following prize discussions, the committee remained in disagreement, and in September 1939, they presented three alternative laureates to the Academy: Dutch philosopher or historian Johan Huizinga, Belgian-Flemish novelist Stijn Streuvels, and Swiss author Hermann Hesse (302).

Then world events intruded. On November 8, 1939, the leading Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* published a lengthy interview with Sillanpää from an evacuated Finnish capital, anxiously awaiting Soviet bombs (Alving [Bang]). Two days later, the 18 members of the Swedish Academy ignored the committee's three alternatives and decided on Sillanpää.

By then, the novelist's work was extensively available in Swedish translations. Between 1920 and 1939, 13 Swedish titles were published, and language access had been a crucial and recurrent issue in the committee discussions. In 1931, Sillanpää was dismissed because no new title was available in Swedish that could strengthen his merits since the previous year (Svensén, *Nobelpriset i litteratur 1921–1950* 163). Next year, a new novel had been translated (178), and in 1933 there was a new collection of short stories in Swedish (196). These books worked in Sillanpää's favor and strengthened his position among the nominated authors. In 1935 and 1937 the committee turned him down because there were no new translations to consider (225, 288). It is clear that Sillanpää's candidature stood and fell with his continually reconfirmed actuality on the Swedish literary market.

What was beneficial for Sillanpää, however, was not only that but also how he was available in Swedish. Half of the translations were published by Swedish-speaking publishers in Helsinki, and half were published by Sweden's largest publishing house, Bonniers. Sillanpää's stories had thus been successful among Swedish speakers in Finland as well as in the prize-giving institution's own country. More importantly, the 13 titles were translated by five different translators, all of whom enjoyed a central position in Finno-Swedish culture.

Sillanpää's most acclaimed novel, *Hurskaskurjuus* (published in English as *Meek Heritage*) from 1919, was rendered into Swedish by Hagar Olsson, who was an influential novelist as well as a very influential literary critic. In the mid-1920s, her essay *Ny generation* (*New Generation*) established a modernist aesthetics in Swedish-speaking Finland and thus helped to make the Finno-Swedish literary scene much more aligned with contemporary European literature than the national Swedish scene in Stockholm. Another early Sillanpää translator was Hjalmar Dahl—novelist, journalist at the leading Finno-Swedish newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* and editor-in-chief of the weekly magazine *Helsingfors-Journalen*. Sillanpää's most diligent translator, Ragnar Ekelund, was not only a renowned poet but also a prominent painter who had studied in Paris and brought his fascination for modern French art—especially Paul Cézanne—to Finland. The translator of Sillanpää's latest novels, *Miehen tie* (1932, appr. *One Man's Faith*) and *Ihmiset suviyössä* (1934, published in English as *People in the Summer Night*), Henning Söderhjelm, was a literary critic and author of several adventure and detective novels.

And Sillanpää's fifth Swedish translator was Gripenberg, himself nominated for the Nobel Prize 11 times. His first Sillanpää translation was a Swedish rendition of a short-story collection, published in 1924. Two years later, Gripenberg made Sillanpää's debut novel, *Elämä ja aurinko* (appr. *Life and the Sun*) available in Swedish. Before the autumn of 1939, then, Sillanpää had been strongly consecrated in Sweden via very prestigious Finno-Swedes.

Every Nobel Prize in Literature casts sunrays of confirmation over the laureate's Swedish translators, who are secondarily honored with royal glitter—especially if they have given access to an *œuvre* beyond the language skills of the Swedish Academy. Almost always there is also a third

party being acknowledged: what the laureate represents. Such a triple honor was very tangible in 1939. Sillanpää's answer to Permanent Secretary Hallström's gratulatory telegram says a lot about the novelist's humble understanding of why he was selected: "Deeply moved, I thank you on behalf of my country and myself for the honour and happily accept the prize" ("Nobelpriset till Sillanpää"). On his first press conference after the announcement, he added: "This prize has to do with my country as much as with me" (Strömberg 298). And yes, taken together, Sillanpää himself, his original Finnish novels and short stories plus the five translators' 13 Swedish versions made an inclusive, multilayered representation of Finland as a whole.

The laureate's extensive availability in Swedish transcended the cultural and linguistic borders between Swedish and Finnish Finland, making the award a strong confirmation of Finland as an independent and unified nation—and, not less importantly, as a country with intimate cultural ties to the Nobel judges' own belongings. It was a gesture from a former colonizing power to strengthen its neighbor's struggle against a present military threat.

Translation, Integration, and Prize Decisions

The members of the Swedish Academy and its Nobel committee work from central positions in the Swedish cultural landscape. Their evaluations of the prize candidates are deeply entrenched in domestic contemporary values and aesthetics and thus strongly affected by the nominated authors' presence in the Swedish literary landscape, a presence that is—in its own turn—an integral part of the domestic culture. Translated works are, Gisèle Sapiro writes, "often appropriated in the transfer process to serve the interests and purposes of the importers in their own fields, whether ideological or intellectual" (89). They are imminently shaped by "the new intellectual formations into which they migrate," as Isabel Hofmeyr poignantly puts it (2–3).

In some cases, the prize decisions' connection to domestic patterns are very clear. In the latter half of the 1960s, the Swedish Academy's ambition to widen the cultural scope of the Nobel Prize with awards to Israeli author Samuel Agnon (1966), Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias (1967), and Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata (1968) was partly an effect of a distinct international interest in contemporary Swedish literature. Two decades earlier, the Academy's decision to award T. S. Eliot (1948) directly aligned with the dramatic breakthrough of modernist poetry in the 1940s Swedish public sphere. And in the 1930s, the awards to John Galsworthy (1932) and Roger Martin du Gard (1937) were perfect fits for the bourgeois realist novel that thrived in the Swedish 1920s and 1930s. The Thomas Mann prize in 1929 also belongs to this category, since it was his upper middle-class family novel *Buddenbrooks* and not his more challenging, contemporary works *The Magic Mountain* and *Death in Venice* that motivated the award.

When American novelist Pearl Buck won the prize in 1938, a competing strand in Swedish 1930s prose was indirectly acknowledged: working-class fiction. Between 1933 and 1936, a whole generation of self-taught, socially and economically underprivileged writers enjoyed a collective breakthrough in Sweden. With semi-autobiographical, regionally rooted accounts of rural working conditions, Harry Martinson, Eyvind Johnson, Ivar-Lo Johansson, Moa Martinson, Jan Fridegård, and Vilhelm Moberg suddenly reached beyond political party channels and labor unions and attracted majority culture readers, a literary development that went hand in hand with the Swedish Social-Democratic Party winning the general election in 1932.

Buck's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Good Earth* (1931) is set in the Chinese countryside and tells the story of poor farmer Wang Lung, who struggles with strict, local hierarchies, and failed harvests before eventually succeeding with the help of luck, cunning, and hard work. Wang Lung is not, however, the novel's sole protagonist. His wife, O-lan, is just as much in focus. As a little girl, she was sold by her starving parents as a slave to the region's most powerful family, Hwang. When marrying Wang Lung, she exchanged one kind of confinement with another: no longer a slave, but still both sexually, socially, and economically belonging to another person. While Wang Lung's story resonates with the male protagonists in Swedish working-class fiction from the 1930s, Buck's depiction of O-lan's life echoes Moa Martinson's feminist version of proletarian realism in *Women and Appletrees* (1933) and *My Mother Gets Married* (1936).

A year after Buck's award, this connection between the Swedish Academy and the domestic boom of working-class fiction was strengthened. Sillanpää's novels are distinctly set in the Finnish countryside, and they almost always focus on the socially and economically underprivileged. Often, his protagonists have endured a social degradation, mirroring his own life story. The author was born in a very poor family in southern Finland but managed—through luck and generous benefactors—to climb the social ladder and study science at the University of Helsinki. He did not succeed in the city, however, and returned to his rural region (Enckell). "Like few other writers," a contemporary Swedish critic wrote, Sillanpää "is a representative of what is called 'the people'" (Selander).

Sillanpää's first novel from 1916, *Life and the Sun*, created quite a stir despite being published in the middle of the Great War. It tells the story of several people in a rural region in southern Finland, for example farmhand Paavo and yarn spinner Lyyli. His real breakthrough was, however, the 1919 novel *Meek Heritage*, in which the odd and not very liked protagonist Juha tries to make ends meet. As the son of a farm owner and his housemaid, Juha never fits in and never really manages to create a stable life for himself and his family. In the civil war, he is enrolled by the Reds, innocently accused of murder, and executed. On the execution spot, he is struck by an acute fatigue and lies down on the pile of dead bodies instead of waiting for the neck shot. He is told to rise: "Uncomfortably, Juha squirms up to a standing position, and while holding up his miserable underpants, he sinks away into the mighty general circumstances of death, without any 'last thought'" (Sillanpää, *Hurskas kurjuus* 183; my trans.). Juha dies as he has lived: without dignity and deeper meaning.

In Sillanpää's most successful novel from the 1930s, *Nuorena nukkunut* (1931, published in English as *The Maid Silja*), the protagonist has a similar background. Silja is born as the third child of a farm owner and his wife—former maid Hilma—but when she is still a toddler her father struggles financially and is forced to sell the farm. After the death of her mother and her siblings, she grows up with her socially degraded father under very tight circumstances, and after his death she works as a maid on small farms and in private households in different Finnish regions until she dies of tuberculosis at the age of 22. The narrator concludes that Silja's life has been small, but also that there is a blessing in this total lack of grandeur: "Everything about Silja, the girl who now has silently passed away in the sauna at Kierikka farm, is for the most part wonderfully insignificant" (*Nuorena* 7; my trans.).

In retrospect, Sillanpää comes forth as a Finnish precursor of the domestic Swedish proletarian boom. Swedish proletarian realism had older roots, but the 1930s generation managed to attract an extensive readership beyond the working-classes through two new qualities: their use of narrative elements borrowed from bourgeois realism, and their inspiration from modernist prose. Just like their contemporary bourgeois counterparts, Martinson's, Johnson's, Lo-Johansson's, Martinson's,

Fridegård's, and Moberg's novels followed an individualistic narrative structure in their strong focus on single protagonists and their ways out of scarce and narrow circumstances. And in contrast to their formally educated contemporaries, several of them used experimental stylistic devices. This way, these self-taught authors could both humor the worldview of the majority culture and add something modern to the literary scene. Sillanpää's novels are earlier examples of this combination and were probably a direct inspiration to several of the Swedish autodidacts.

Most of Sillanpää's novels focus on single individuals. *Meek Heritage* narrates Juha's whole life span from crib to grave; *The Maid Silja* starts with an account of the protagonist's death and then takes us back to her parents, her birth, and goes through the main events of her short life; and *One Man's Faith* tells the tragic story of the farmer Paavo, who loses his wife to childbirth and ends up drinking. These narratives depict social structures and existential predicaments, but they are all focused on individual circumstances: it is Juha's, Silja's, and Paavo's particular lives that matter rather than societal conditions, social positions and identities. Sillanpää manages, one critic wrote about *The Maid Silja*, "to look beyond the outer circumstances and see that which is important: Silja's own personality" (Selander). And exactly this was one of the obvious strengths of the 1930s Swedish boom: these stories showed working-class men and women as individual persons with personal aims and ambitions, and not as anonymous representatives of a group. Rural laborers, timber workers, farmhands, and maids were humanized.

In Sillanpää's novels this humanizing process is achieved with the help of an elaborate and original literary style. His stories of humble human lives are full of poetic descriptions and lyrical observations of the protagonists' psychological, social, and existential predicaments, and of their natural surroundings. This way, their lives and conditions are lifted to a new level of interest, infused with meaning and significance. When the old and almost broken Juha in *Meek Heritage*, for example, walks home one summer night after a tough work shift on his master's fields, he suddenly experiences a kind of bliss. And so does, it seems, the narrator: "Happy is the summer night of Finland. When the everyday shape of nature has softened the man for decades, has pushed and dragged him along the winding road of prosperity and adversity, it sometimes—one summer night—frees the ageing man from all his daily toils and blows, and lets his mind flow out into the humid serenity of its dreamy landscape" (Sillanpää, *Hurskas kurjuus* 111; my trans.).

The poetic quality of Sillanpää's prose is also what the Nobel committee first identified as a prize-worthy dimension in his works, as summarized in one of the reports to the Academy: since his first nomination the committee members have expressed their "unambiguous recognition of his depiction of nature and his mastery of style" (Svensén, *Nobelpriset i litteratur 1921–1950* 26). Here, the lyrical skills of the translators come in handy. Sillanpää's books are poetic Finnish novels made into lyrical Swedish prose by prominent Finno-Swedish poets and authors.

Several of the Swedish proletarian novelists of the 1930s follow Sillanpää's example and depict social and economic hardships through the literary lens of innovative, poetic, and personal stylistic idioms—among them future Nobel laureates Harry Martinson and Eyvind Johnson.

Darkness Closes in

The Swedish press did not have access to the Nobel committee's suggestions to award either Huizinga, Streuvels, and Hesse, but the Academy's decision to turn them down for the benefit of

Sillanpää was met with joy and jubilation. According to one report, the news resulted in a "spontaneous applause" from critics in all the Nordic countries. Everyone seemed to agree that selection was "a recognition of Sillanpää as well as of Finland," and that this acknowledgement honored "both himself and the prize-givers" (Fors Bergström). The award's consequences for the laureate's home country were obvious, as a report in *Dagens Nyheter* said: "Tonight, Finland has added yet a hefty stone to the wall of unity: in Finland as a whole, among Finno-Swedes as well as among Finns, the message of Sillanpää's Nobel Prize has aroused the greatest of joy" ("Nobelpriset till Sillanpää").

The political gesture was not lost on international commentators. In the *New York Times*, the selection of Sillanpää was big news ("Nobel Prize Given to Finnish Writer"; "Topics of the Times"), and in the London *Times* the choice led to a fervent response. The day after the announcement, the English paper published one article on Sillanpää's works and one on the reactions in Finland ("Nobel Literature Prize"; "A Great Patriot and Liberal"). The *Times*'s correspondent in Helsinki saw the prize as an important political gesture from Sweden in support of their neighbors: "The whole of Finland rejoices at the selection of Mr. Sillanpää for the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature. The award is doubly valued, because it comes at a time of serious political crisis." His British colleague in Stockholm observed a general "gratification" from the Swedish public to the Academy "at a time when Finland is nearer to Swedish hearts than she has been for a long time."

Two weeks after the prize announcement, Soviet troops attacked Karelia in south-eastern Finland. Later that morning, Stalin's air raids bombed Helsinki, and during the first weeks of December several other Finnish cities were hit by the Soviet air force. From Sweden, many young men arrived as voluntary soldiers to support the neighbors under the famous banner "Finland's case is ours!" The Sillanpää prize helped to establish and uphold international sympathies with Finland. In a report from the bombed cities, the *Times* stressed Sillanpää's position as an important figure of resistance, making clear that the novelist was not any random intellectual, but indeed the latest Nobel laureate in Literature ("Two Raids on Helsinki" 1939).

World War II made it impossible for the Nobel Foundation to arrange the traditional prize festivities in Stockholm. The two German laureates in Chemistry, Johann Butenandt and Leopold Ruzicka, and the German laureate in Physiology, Gerhard Domagk, had rejected the honors on Hitler's order, and the Physics prize was handed to American Ernest Orlando Lawrence via the Swedish ambassador in his country. The Prize for literature was celebrated at a heavily reduced, informal ceremony at the Swedish Academy's own premises. Combined with cold winter weather, the Soviet attacks made it impossible to travel from Helsinki to Stockholm across the Baltic. But Sillanpää refused to let anything stop him from enjoying his big moment. With his wife and three of his children, he took a northbound train from southern Finland to the national border, around the Gulf of Bothnia and then southbound to the Swedish capital. He was the only laureate present in Stockholm on Nobel Day, December 10.

Having received the prize—and gotten tremendously drunk at the quiet ceremony with the Academy—Sillanpää stayed in Sweden for several months to collect money for the Finnish military defence, using his new Nobel stature to help his country fight the invaders (Österling 240). A week after this campaign, the war with the Soviet Union ended: Finland had somehow managed to escape the powerful claws of Moscow.

Personally, however, things disintegrated. After divorcing his wife, Sillanpää's severe alcohol problem worsened, and his mental health gradually deteriorated. In the spring of 1942, he wrote:

Darkness is closing in. There is an old issue of a journal on the table in front of me. A whole

> page is filled with pictures about me, and the text on the opposite page tells my story. From all this I realize that I was awarded the Nobel Prize. I am even told that I was present to receive it with my own hands. (Enckell 295)

After just a couple of years, the whole episode had turned into an unrealistic, dreamlike memory for Sillanpää. It was a dream of two small countries in the northern periphery of Europe joining ranks to fight off an aggressive power. It was a dream of a literary award with a distinct potential to meddle with world politics, and a particular prize decision with an unusually dramatic and multilayered backdrop.

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