

Nobel Prize in Literature 1901



Sully Prudhomme

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1901 was awarded to Sully Prudhomme *"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"*.

RESEARCH INFORMATION:

When Alfred Nobel decided to make the great donation which has justly received much attention, his entire life's work led him to favour the study of nature and to reward discoveries in some of the sciences concerned with it. Likewise, his cosmopolitan aspirations made him an advocate of peace and of the brotherhood of nations. In his will he also included literature, although he placed it after the sciences, to which he felt most drawn.

Literature is grateful to him that its practitioners have also been the object of his solicitude; one could argue that it comes last in the group of Swedish prizes for the very sound reason that the supreme flower of civilization, perhaps most beautiful yet also most delicate, will now bloom on the firm ground of reality.

In any event, the laureates receive in these floral tributes of modern times a recompense surpassing in material value the golden violets of a past era.

The award of the Nobel Prize in Literature poses its own problems. «Literature» is a very inclusive term and the statutes of the Nobel Foundation rightly specify that the competition must include not only belles-lettres but also works which, by their form as well as by their exposition, have literary value. But thereby the field is expanded and the difficulties are compounded. If it is difficult to decide - supposing that the merits of the proposed authors otherwise are approximately equal - whether the Prize should be granted to a lyric, an epic, or a dramatic poet, the task is complicated even more if it becomes a matter of choosing among an eminent historian, a great philosopher, and a poet of genius. The dimensions become, as the mathematicians say, incommensurable. But one may be consoled with the thought that, since the Prize is an annual one, more than one writer of merit who has to yield his place to another equally great, may be able to receive some other year the award he deserves.

Numerous and excellent recommendations for the literary Prize have reached the Swedish Academy. It has submitted them to the most scrupulous examination and in its choice among different names of universal reputation and almost equal literary importance, it has decided on one which it believed should have priority this time from several points of view. It has awarded the first Nobel Prize in Literature to the poet and philosopher Sully Prudhomme of the French Academy.

Sully Prudhomme was born March 16, 1839, and in 1865 emerged as an accomplished poet in his *Stances et Poèmes* [Stanzas and Poems]. This volume was followed by several others of verse, philosophy, and aesthetics. If the imagination of other poets is primarily turned outward and reflects the life and the world surrounding us, Sully Prudhomme has an introvert nature as sensitive as it is delicate. His poetry is rarely concerned with images and exterior situations as such, but principally with the extent to which they can serve as a mirror of poetic contemplation. The love of the spiritual, his doubts, his sorrows, which nothing earthly can dissipate, are the usual subjects of his work which, in its finished form and sculptural beauty, suffers no useless word. His poetry appears in exuberant colours and only rarely takes on the character of melodious music;

but it is all the more plastic in the creation of forms suited to expressing feelings and ideas. Noble, profoundly pensive, and turned toward sadness, his soul reveals itself in this poetry, tender yet not sentimental - a sorrowful analysis which inspires a melancholy sympathy in the reader.

Through the charm of his exquisite diction and through his consummate art, Sully Prudhomme is one of the major poets of our time, and some of his poems are pearls of imperishable value. The Swedish Academy has been less attracted by his didactic or abstract poems than by his smaller lyric compositions, which are full of feeling and contemplation, and which charm by their nobility and dignity and by the extremely rare union of delicate reflection and rich sentiment.

In conclusion, it is necessary to emphasize one characteristic. Sully Prudhomme's work reveals an inquiring and observing mind which finds no rest in what passes and which, as it seems impossible to him to know more, finds evidence of man's supernatural destiny in the moral realm, in the voice of conscience, and in the lofty and undeniable prescriptions of duty. From this point of view, Sully Prudhomme represents better than most writers what the testator called «an idealistic tendency» in literature. Thus the Academy believed it was acting in the spirit of Nobel's will when, for the first time it awarded the Prize, it gave its approval, among so many illustrious men of letters, to Sully Prudhomme.

As the laureate has agreed to accept this distinction but is unfortunately prevented by illness from being in our midst today, I have the honour to ask the Minister of France to receive the Prize and to present it to him in the name of the Swedish Academy.

At the banquet, C.D. af Wirsén addressed himself to the Minister of France and asked him to convey the homage intended for the French poet who has combined, to such a notable degree, the best qualities of the heart and the mind. Also, he asked the Minister to present to the French Academy greetings from her younger Swedish sister, who was proud to be able to send from the country of Tegnér and Geijer testimony of esteem to the country



which had witnessed the births of Racine, Corneille, and Victor Hugo. The Minister of France, Mr. Marchand, answered in a lively and spirited speech.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1901/press.html