

Nobel Prize in Literature 1970



Aleksandr Isayevich Solzhenitsyn

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1970 was awarded to Alexandr Solzhenitsyn *"for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature"*.

Our passports show where and when we were born, facts that are needed to fix our identity. According to a current theory this also applies to authorship. A literary work belongs to its time, and its creator is a product of his social and political situation. There are weighty examples to the contrary but these must be jettisoned or the theory will founder. A case to which it does apply, however, is this year's Nobel Prizewinner in Literature. It is worth emphasizing this because from all points of the compass, not least the West, people are prone for various reasons to make exceptions in his case.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn's passport - I have in mind the one that will convey him to posterity - tells us when and where he was born, details that we need in order to establish his artistic identity. Born in 1918 in Kislovodsk, he belongs to the first generation of Soviet Russian writers who grew up with the new form of government and he is indivisible from the climate and the time in which he was born. Solzhenitsyn himself has said that he cannot

contemplate living anywhere but in his native land. His books can; they are already living all round the world, now, perhaps, more than ever before, in the future, perhaps, more than now. But their vitality springs not least from the feeling that roots his being to his country and its destiny. Here, too, Solzhenitsyn is of the incomparable Russian tradition. The same background offsets the gigantic predecessors who have derived from Russia's suffering the compelling strength and inextinguishable love that permeate their work. There is little room in their descriptions for idylls according to plan or prescribed information about the future. But it would be a gross misunderstanding of their quest for the truth not to feel in this their profound decisive identification with the country whose life provided their subject matter, and for whose life their works are essential. The central figure in this powerful epic is the invincible Mother Russia. She appears in various guises under diverse names. One is Matryona, the main character in one of Solzhenitsyn's stories. Her lined face recalls the constant, indomitable features and re-casts the spell of devotion that she is able to offer and which she so proudly deserves.

Love is blind, the saying goes, and if so, it signifies her instinct for self-preservation. Clear-sighted love does not always conjure up an immediate response. Time and distance may be - and have been - necessary for a true appreciation of the depth and warmth of perceptive feeling. This has not been so in Solzhenitsyn's case. When his novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, first appeared eight years ago, it was recognised at once in his own country, and soon all over the world, that a major new writer had entered the arena. As Pravda wrote, 'Solzhenitsyn's narrative is reminiscent at times of Tolstoy's artistic force. An unusually talented author has been added to our literature!' It would also be difficult to outdo Pravda's exposé of the power exercised by Solzhenitsyn's narrative art: 'Why is it that our heart contracts with pain as we read this remarkable story at the same time as we feel our spirits soar? The explanation lies in its profound humanity, in the quality of mankind even in the hour of degradation.'

A message about special circumstances seldom travels far and the words that fly round the world are those which appeal to, and help us, all. Such are the words of

Alexander Solzhenitsyn. They speak to us of matters that we need to hear more than ever before, of the individual's indestructible dignity. Wherever that dignity is violated, whatever the reason or the means, his message is not only an accusation but also an assurance: those who commit such a violation are the only ones to be degraded by it. The truth of this is plain to see wherever one travels.

Even the external form which Solzhenitsyn seeks for his work bears witness to his message. This form has been termed the polyphone or horizontal novel. It might equally be described as a story with no chief character. Which is to say that this is not individualism at the expense of the surroundings. But nor may the gallery of persons act as a collective that smothers the individuals of which it is entirely composed. Solzhenitsyn has explained what he means by polyphonism: each person becomes the chief character whenever the action concerns him. This is not just a technique, it is a creed. The narrative focuses on the only human element in existence, the human individual, with equal status among equals, one destiny among millions and a million destinies in one. This is the whole of humanism in a nutshell, for the kernel is love of mankind. This year's Nobel Prize for Literature has been awarded to the proclaimer of such a humanism.

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