

# Johannes V. Jensen's Nobel Prize – the Story of a Homecoming<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The Nobel Prize awarded to Johannes V. Jensen in 1944 was widely understood as a gesture of moral support toward the Danish people in its fight against the German occupation forces. The Swedish Academy justified this decision in very different terms, of course, since the statutes prescribe that the award should be given to a writer who has produced “the most outstanding work of an ideal tendency”, and that nationality may not be taken into account. The eulogy speeches of Per Hallström and Anders Österling in 1944-45 conceal a disagreement in the Nobel Committee that goes back to the very first discussion of JvJ's candidacy in 1925 (when his major works had long since appeared). At that time Hallström made it clear that under no circumstances could JvJ be considered for the prize because he did not live up to the requirement of idealism included by Alfred Nobel in his will. In 1944 JvJ had however reached so high a stature that Hallström could vote for him. Hallström's reviews for the Nobel Committee of JvJ's new books suggest that he read his oeuvre as a record of his returning home to what is best in himself, of finding his way to a deeper layer of the soul. Precisely this homecoming from Darwinist-materialistic barbarism to Golden Age, idealist harmony is what resulted in his Nobel prize.

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<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the Universities of Pisa and Rome on December 4 and 5, 2002, to be published in *Studi Nordici*, vol. 10, 2005. English translation by Barbara Dunn and Richard Raskin, supported by the Danish Humanities Research Council. Danish text in *Dansk Noter*, 2003, no. 2, pp. 54-62.

## Resumé

Nobelprisen til Johannes V. Jensen i 1944 blev af den brede offentlighed opfattet som et håndslag til den danske befolkning i kampen mod den tyske besættelsesmagt. Svenska Akademiens begrundelse var naturligvis en anden, idet statutterne foreskriver, at der ikke må tages hensyn til nationalt tilhørsforhold, men alene til, om modtageren har præsteret det ypperste "i idealisk riktning". Per Hallströms og Anders Österlings hyldesttaler 1944-45 tilslører en *de facto*-uenighed i Nobelkomiteen, som går tilbage til den første behandling af JVJ's kandidatur i 1925 (da forfatterskabets hovedværker jo allerede forelå). Hallström gjorde det dengang meget klart, at JVJ under ingen omstændigheder kunne komme i betragtning til prisen, fordi han ikke levede op til Alfred Nobels idealitetsfordring. I 1944 var JVJ imidlertid kommet "i særklasse", således at Hallström kunne stemme for ham. Hans fortløbende rapportering til Nobelkomiteen om JVJ's nye værker former sig som en læsning af forfatterskabet som en dannelsesroman, en beretning om, hvordan JVJ så at sige kommer hjem til sig selv. Netop denne hjemkomst fra darwinistisk-materialistisk barbari til guldalderlig-idealistisk harmoni udløste Nobelprisen.

## **Johannes V. Jensen's Nobel Prize – the Story of a Homecoming**

In his will, Alfred Nobel specified that in the yearly awards, no consideration be given “to the nationality of the candidates”, and that in particular, the literary prize should go to whoever has produced “the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency”. We can therefore assume that when the Swedish Academy announced on November 9th 1944 that the Nobel Prize would go to the Danish poet, Johannes V. Jensen, the Academy had reached its decision without taking into account that he was from a neighboring country which was occupied, and with the conviction that his writings expressed what at the time was interpreted as “the idealistic tendency”.

### **The Nobel Prize and World War II**

In the years 1940-1943, the awarding of the Nobel Prize was suspended. But the procedure itself was carried through exactly as prescribed. Obviously we cannot know what role the war played in the Nobel Committee's secret negotiations. But we do know on the basis of the recently published committee proposals covering the period 1901-1950, that the chairman of the committee, the writer Per Hallström made a point of not considering the political turmoil of the moment. In the material from 1944 the former Swedish prime minister, Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, acknowledged that he hardly dared put in writing that his candidate came from a neutral country (Schwitzerland). There is no reason to doubt the high ethical standards of the committee members. On the other hand, it is unlikely that they did not speculate at the consequences of their choice.

As soon as it became clear in October 1944 that an award would be made, the rumor spread that Johannes V. Jensen was the only serious candidate for the Literature Prize. On November 9th –

the day the official decision was announced – the Swedish evening paper *Aftonbladet* wrote that the rumors had “constantly, stubbornly revolved around a single name: Johannes V. Jensen.” It was believed that a prize awarded to Jensen would be “an encouragement for the entire Danish people in their struggle.” The members of the Nobel Committee and the Academy must also have been fully aware of these rumors and must have known very well how the prize to Jensen would be perceived: as an act of kindness toward the fighting brothers in arms.

The immediate reaction of the press was unanimously positive. The major Swedish newspapers published in-depth articles written by leading critics. The perception held by people from Denmark’s cultural circles who had temporarily taken refuge in Sweden, and prominent Danes in London, led to the headline “The Nobel Prize a handshake for Denmark.” Count Reventlow, Denmark’s ambassador to London, was quoted as saying that the prize would produce a feeling of extreme contentment in Denmark. “Against the backdrop of the current situation [it is] an expression of Sweden’s warmest appreciation of Danish spiritual values.” The prominent Danish exile politician John Christmas Møller declared in London that he considered it a pat on the back that Denmark should receive two Nobel Prizes at the same time. Everyone in Denmark felt proud that the author of “a great amount of our most beautiful poetry should be honoured by Sweden in this fashion.” A.H. Winsnes, head of the Norwegian Institute in London, was very pleased to see the prize go to Jensen, adding that Denmark was struggling “in these times” for the Scandinavian cause. Winsnes compared the prize winner (who ought rightly to have received the prize long before) with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, who was also a freedom fighter.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910), awarded the Nobel Prize in 1903, agitated ardently for a dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway (which

In Denmark, Jensen's prize was front-page material, whereas the public was barely aware of the prize awarded to the biochemist Henrik Dam. Even though Dam, the man who discovered vitamin K, was working in a country (USA) that, at least from a German censorship point of view, was the enemy, there were definitely more dangerous Danish nationalist vitamins in Jensen's prize. The leading Danish newspapers not only ran lengthy articles, but they also provided opinions from Jensen's colleagues and friends, presenting their perspectives on his work and its importance. The message from Stockholm arrived "like a light in the darkness," said the editorial in *Politiken*, producing "a profound and intense feeling of joy," in the words of *Social-Demokraten*.

The Danish underground press also took note of the award. In the very first issue of *Morgenbladet*, Arne Sørensen, a prominent member of the Danish resistance, congratulated the writer. He confirmed that in view of Jensen's age, it was reasonable to accept that the author had no ties to the fight against the Germans, but affirmed that he had contributed to the conquest of Denmark, giving the country over to the ownership of the people, and after the war, he would presumably help to ensure that the reality of the people did not give way to "a forced and conceited Danishness."

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actually took place in 1905). The Nobel Committee decided to nominate Bjørnson alone for the prize after having discussed the possibility of his sharing it with Henrik Ibsen. The committee did not refer to Ibsen's radicalism (about which the general report of 1902 reflects serious reservations), but to his health (he had become "a man of broken health and extinguishing life-flame" ("en till hälsan bruten man, hvars lifslåga är slocknande")). Even though at least one committee member in 1902 had found certain aspects of Bjørnson's character to be repugnant ("motbjudande"), he received the prize i.a. because his poetry "has always been distinguished by both the freshness of its inspiration and the rare purity of its spirit".

The press outside Scandinavia naturally also ran small notices informing readers that “the Danish writer Johannes V. Jensen” had been awarded the Nobel Prize. Undeniably, this Jensen was only known in small circles, and the world was obviously occupied with matters of more crucial significance. The United States had just re-elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and across Europe, large-scale attacks were being launched on a number of fronts. Even so, the “revival” of the Nobel Prize was perceived at least by some as an indication that the time of darkness was drawing to a close. American newspapers expressed hopes that the awarding of the prize to Jensen “should have the effect of other Nobel literary awards, stimulating American interest in a comparatively unfamiliar writer.” In *The New York Times* the Danish-born Signe Toksvig noted, “Never was the Nobel Prize for Literature more justly given to a great writer, nor surely did it ever cause more joy in the writer’s nation.” The American critic Hamilton Basso, on the other hand, likened Jensen to a capable baseball pitcher, who lacks the clout to be promoted “from the minor leagues to star in the majors.”

### **Swedish Statements 1944-45**

Signe Toksvig’s article appeared on December 10th 1944, the day Johannes V. Jensen would have received the prize, if the war had not prevented him from traveling to Stockholm. On the same day, Per Hallström gave a lecture on Swedish Radio, which as far as I know is his only public statement on Johannes V. Jensen. Hallström was not just anyone, especially not in relation to Jensen’s candidacy for the Nobel Prize. In fact he had composed a long series of very thorough, but also rather reserved commentaries (so-called special reports) on the Danish poet. But even more than that, as chairman of the Nobel Committee, he was the one who had formulated its recommendations to the Academy. This involved summarizing his own views as an expert in such a way that the wording would ade-

quately cover the views of the other committee members. This material provides a unique opportunity for the management of the task by this particular key player within this central body. And until 1941, Hallström had also been the secretary of the Swedish Academy!<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Because of Per Hallström's importance in this context, I would like to provide some information about him: Hallström (1866-1960), author, member of the Swedish Academy 1908, member of the Nobel Committee 1913-46, chairman 1922-46, secretary of the Academy 1931-41. As a poet in the 1890s with a degree in engineering and work experience in the U.S., Hallström established himself as a zealous guardian of tradition, frightened by reality and hungering for beauty, "lost in the world of action," according to Helge Gullberg ("Den bortglömde diktaren", *Ord och Bild*, vol. 55, 1946, pp. 411-18). In his broad, conscientious and death-fixated production, his psychological short stories stand out and show him to be a sharp-witted and stylistically competent moralist, influenced by the pessimism of Schopenhauer. He wrote essays on English Romantics and translated Shakespeare. In 1903, Hallström took part in the wave of criticism initiated by Gustaf af Geijerstam among others, when the historian Harald Hjärne was voted into the Swedish Academy. That vote was perceived as expressive of a wish to exclude writers of fiction, also after the Academy had taken on the Nobel Prize assignment. The circle of critics also included Verner von Heidenstam, Oscar Levertin and Tor Hedberg. When Hallström himself became a member of the Academy and was sourly congratulated by Georg Brandes, he replied among other things: "the blessed Nobel Prize has turned up and there is a need to raise the level of competence of those who award the prize." See Helge Gullberg, "Svenska Akademien i Gustaf af Geijerstams och Per Hallströms brevväxling", in *Göteborgsstudier i litteraturhistoria tillägnade Sverker Ek*, Göteborg 1954, pp. 283-92, and E.N. Tigerstedt's characterization in *Svensk litteraturhistoria*, 3rd ed., 1960, p. 448: "He was the most metaphysical and the most romantic of the writers of his day. In all respects, and even politically, he placed himself at the far right, and his election to Wirsén's Academy already in 1908 was fully justified." Through hard work and insight, and espe-

Naturally, in his radio lecture Hallström gave a summary of *Den lange Rejse* [The Long Journey], which the Nobel Committee had pointed to as Jensen's principal work. The stories of Himmerland were described as more "fully formed" artistically, and *Jørgine*, a tiny novel from 1928, was still the author's masterpiece, "great in its emotion, profound in its perception of life, and lovely in its shining freshness." What is more, Hallström was able to get a grip on the evasive, unruly myths. "Their unifying quality [...] actually lies in the effervescently fresh and spontaneous style." *Vor Oprindelse* [Our Origin] is "most highly impressive", while Jensen's poetic pieces here and there condense into pure, melodious Golden

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cially after Hjærnes death, Hallström established himself as the Academy's gray eminence. With respect to outlook, he did not break significantly with the Wirsén-Hjärne line (when Kjell Espmark describes him as the leading figure in "the era of the grand style," that was not on the basis of outlook). His national heroism (expressed for example in connection with the Dissolution of the Union in 1905) became the basis for a close friendship with Heidenstam (whose election to the Academy in 1912 and Nobel Prize in 1916 definitively sealed the right of "belles lettres" authors to join the ranks of the Academy's "Eighteen") and subsequently with Fredrik Böök. In the wake of World War I, heroism combined with an overall friendliness toward Germany filled Hallström (and many others) with bitterness over the Versailles Treaty's humiliation of Germany. He viewed the German nation as a bulwark against a global spread of communism, but Hitler's accession to power disturbed him, particularly with regard to the Nazis' pronounced anti-Semitism. See Helge Gullberg in *Svenskt biografisk lexikon*, vol. 18, 1969-71, pp. 53-61. – Hallström authored a considerable number of special reports on Danish candidates for the Nobel Prize: Karl Gjellerup 1914 and 1915, Ernst v.d. Recke 1914 and 1930, Johannes Jørgensen 1926, 1932 and 1942, Johannes V. Jensen 1926-28 and 1931-44, Valdemar Rørdam 1937, Karen Blixen 1950.



Age verse. Hallström then proceeds to sharpen his knife again, passing his definitive judgement over Johannes V. Jensen and his works.

Primarily he directed all his love to the machine age. He seemed spellbound by the astonishing and ever more rapid march of science. The faster the pace, the greater his enchantment. Such an outlook has no use for old values. It flies high over the nations, has no thought for them. Its Utopia needs no flowering meadows to walk in, no infinite space for dreams. / Fortunately, Johannes V. Jensen's richly creative mind has taken frequent holidays from the marvels of the future to dwell instead on those inherited aesthetic and emotional values which are fundamental to the spirit of man.<sup>4</sup>

When it came time to present the prize to Jensen the following year, the task of explaining the basis for the award fell to Anders Österling, who had succeeded Hallström as secretary of the Academy. What he did was pay homage to "the bold iconoclast and stylistic renewer," who metamorphosed into "the patriarchal classic writer, who now feels that his heart is most solidly anchored in the writing of the Golden Age." Österling extolled *Den lange Rejse* as Jensen's "perhaps most noble creation." The mythical, timeless figure of *Norne-Gæst* – "this odd globetrotter carrying the harp of the bard"

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<sup>4</sup> Original Swedish text: I stort sett har eljest hans idéliv och förkunnelsepathos gått upp i dyrkan av utveckling som bär maskinkulturens märke. Ju fortare triumftåget ilar, dess starkare förtrollar det hans fantasi. Den livssynen ser icke tillbaka på något, tar inga gamla värden med. Den flyger högt över länder och folk och har ingen tanke på dem. Dess lyckovärld för mänskligheten behöver ingen blommande mark att stå på, ingen rymd att drömma i. / Lyckligtvis har Johannes V. Jensens rika diktarnatur ofta tagit sig ferier från framtidens härlighet och odlat skönhets- och känslövärden, dem människor fått i arv och som grundats djupt i deras väsen.

– seemed to Österling to be “closely related to his literary portrayer.” In concluding, he summed up the essentials.

For Johannes V. Jensen, who grew up in one of these heath landscapes in Jutland, where in many places the numerous burial mounds rise like teeth along the horizon, it was natural for him to divide his attention in this fashion [as he does in *Den lange Rejse*] between myths and facts, to move among the shadows of the past just as much as in contemporary reality. We witness in him how the sensitive individual is drawn to the primitive, but also how brute strength is forced to tenderness. He reaches his peak as an artist in his portrayal of tension-filled contrasts. Throughout this entire authorship, there blows a fresh, salty breeze, which surges forth in a language exhibiting a rare tempo, expressive power, and energy. We occasionally find this sort of ingenious verbal art in just such writers, whose roots lie deep in the countryside. It is the voice of Jutland, and of Denmark. Thus endowed, Johannes V. Jensen has rightfully emerged as the most prominent portrayer of the Nordic tribes’ triumphant struggle against nature, and the ability of the Nordic temperament to preserve itself down through the ages.<sup>5</sup>

Jensen’s acceptance speech was hardly provocative at all. He sent a kind thought to Nobel “for a greatness of mind that stretches far beyond national borders and helps to make nations move closer to one another,” but otherwise he commemorated Carl von Linné and

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<sup>5</sup> Original Swedish text: För Johannes V. Jensen, uppvuxen i ett av dessa jylländska hedlandskap, där man mångenstädes finner synranden alldeles tandad av de många ättehögar, har det varit naturligt att på detta sätt [altså som det sker i *Den lange Rejse*] dela sin håg mellan myter och fakta, att orientera sig bland det förflutnas skuggor likaväl som i den aktuella verkligheten. Vi bevittnar hos honom, hur nervmänniskan drages till det primitiva, men också hur den brutala styrkan tvingas till ömhet. I tecknet av spännande motsatser når han högst som konstnär. Det blåser ett friskt, saltmängt väder genom hela detta författarskap, som brusar fram på ett språk av sällsynt fart, uttrycksfullhet och energi; den arten av genial ordpoesi möter oss ibland just hos diktare av djup allmogerot. Det är Jyllands röst och Danmarks. På så vis rustad har Johannes V. Jensen med rätta kommit att framstå som den ypperste skildraren av de nordiska folkstammarnas segerstrid mot naturen och det nordiska sinnelagets självbevarelse genom tiderna.

Charles Darwin – and Adam Oehlenschläger, too, because Esaias Tegnér crowned him as a poet laureate in 1829 in the cathedral of Lund, but also because a century later, Lund University conferred upon Jensen himself the title of Honorary Doctor.

The autobiographical article that Jensen prepared for the Swedish Academy (for publication in *Les Prix Nobel en 1940-1944*) was an altogether different story. This document established that, following his youthful travels, he initiated a turnabout in Danish literature, a redirection away from “the hitherto dominating preference for the Gallic, decadent taste” towards “impulses from the American, Anglo-Saxon spirit,” and that he would particularly like to regard his poetry as “a reaction to the manners of the time, poisoned as they were by Baudelaire, and to the poetically embellished style, a return, on my part, to the simple language, written in metre, dealing with healthy things.” Jensen also isolated the core element in his prose works, recounting that “it was my endeavour, throughout half a century’s work as an author, to introduce evolution into literature and to bring my readers to think along evolutionary lines.” In other words, no concessions on his part. At the same time, he stands by his return to a classical, Golden-Age-inspired poetry, which was undoubtedly a decisive factor in his winning the Nobel Prize. For as we shall see, it was not because of Darwinism, despite the fact that he adhered to a particular variety of it. Johannes V. Jensen’s view of evolution was committed to humanity. The writings of his mature years – from about 1907 and thereafter – were largely devoted to a poetic representation of Darwinism rather than a scientifically grounded exposition. In the evolutionary writings as well as elsewhere, his view is developed on the basis of poetic images, so even those texts are tinged with a touch of myth.

## **Jensen's Long Journey toward the Nobel Prize**

Johannes V. Jensen's journey toward the Nobel Prize in Literature would prove to be unusually long, considering the fact that he was on the literature committee's list of nominees no less than eighteen times. With the exception of 1929 and 1930, Jensen was nominated every year from 1925 to 1944, with twenty different people writing a total of sixty letters of nomination. The first was submitted by Frederik Poulsen, who was the director of Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen's museum of art. From 1925 to 1928, he was Jensen's sole nominator, subsequently submitting five additional nominations (1931-1933 and 1941-1942). In 1935, 1936, and 1939, Jensen had four nominators, but the number rose to seven in 1937, and to nine in 1938. During the war, the picture was somewhat unclear. From 1940 to 1943, the Nobel selection procedure was, as I have already mentioned, carried out as prescribed in the statutes, but no prize was awarded. Jensen had only two nominators in 1940, rising to four in 1941, and seven once again in 1942. In 1943 and 1944, however, the number was back down to two. This suggests that no outside pressure was exerted on the Nobel Committee to choose Jensen.

In *Neighbouring Nobel* (the result of a research project at Aarhus University and published in 2001), I retraced the arguments for giving Johannes V. Jensen the Nobel Prize, as they are expressed in the 60 letters of nomination, as well as in the judgments of his candidacy, as they appear both in the form of special reports and also in general reports from the Nobel Committee to the Swedish Academy. Since this material was published in 2001, the sections on Johannes V. Jensen can now be read in conjunction with the sections on the other candidates. In the present paper, I will focus on the way the situation looked in 1925, and on the way it looked in 1944, after which I will trace the path between those two moments in an effort to pin down what it was that made it possible for Jensen to get the prize.

### **The Situation in 1925: the Natural Scientist in the Classroom**

When the first Johannes V. Jensen nomination landed on the Academy's desk in 1925, the Nobel Committee asked the critic Sven Söderman to write a special report on the candidate's production, but his long and thorough report was interpreted in the general report to the Swedish Academy that Hallström wrote. This remarkable document makes it unequivocally clear that in ideological terms, Jensen's writings were not worthy of the Nobel Prize. "In any event, this ought to be out of the question, if one places any emphasis whatsoever on the requirement for an idealistic bent." This general report deals with twenty candidates, five of whom were new that year and consequently received relatively detailed treatment, with Jensen actually accounting for almost two of the nine pages in the report. Incidentally, the 1925 Literature Prize was not awarded until the following year, when it went to George Bernard Shaw "for his work, which is marked by both idealism and humanity."

It is worthwhile to delve deeper into this general report. It gives Jensen credit for the "fundamental power of the writer's imagination and descriptive talent" and for the "strength of his personality," but these qualities are cultivated to the detriment of aesthetic taste and – what is worse – "of the very humanity that, for less one-sidedly materialistic worshippers of evolution than Jensen, stands as one of its most precious acquisitions." This leads us directly to the problem of "whether the ideal quality that, according to the aim of the Nobel Prize, should be demanded of the writer is to be found here at all." Jensen's work rests on the Darwinist concept of natural selection. Such a view was impossible to defend as "idealistic in the usual sense of the word." Irrespective of the scope of Jensen's literary talent,

however colourful, titillating, and powerful the effects that this (in certain respects superior) talent is able to achieve, it does remain limited by its very curtailing of human emotions, and the works of art suffer for it. The plastically firm and round forms of great writing do not emerge out of such narrowness, against a background of such hard theory and rigorous preaching. Instead, abstractions are often presented that seek to hide their insubstantiality by means of exaggerated liveliness in their movements. The composition is lacking in repose, moderation, completeness, and clarity; its aim is to present a testing of strength, to dazzle, and even to bluff, and the sense of the eternal and new truth about the world is very close to an energetic and disheartening aim of emphasising the superiority of the prophet. Even with his considerable talent for psychological intuition, the writer is left with a meagre material to work with, for he has already in advance excluded most of that which enriches the life of the human soul. Indeed, he recognises as genuine only that which actually lies on the straight path of evolution from the gorilla to the natural scientist in the classroom.<sup>6</sup>

This is seen most clearly in *Den lange Rejse*. Jensen's regional stories of Himmerland, however, are among "the strongest in modern

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<sup>6</sup> Original Swedish text: [...] hur färgrika, nervretande och starka effekter en sådan på vissa områden överlägsen talang än kan åstadkomma, den blir dock inskränkt genom själva sin förkrympning av mänsklig känsla, och konstverken blir lidande därpå. Den stora diktens plastiskt fasta och runda gestalter springa icke fram ur sådan trånghet, mot en sådan bakgrund av hård teori och utmanande förkunnelse; i stället uppträda gärna abstraktioner som genom överdrivet liv i rörelserna söka dölja, att de äro tunna. Kompositionen kommer till att sakna lugn, jämnmått, fullständighet och klarhet; den går ut på att förevisa kraftprov, att blända och till och med bluffa; och inpräglandet av den eviga och nya sanningen om världen förbindes lätt med en energisk och förstämmande avsikt att framhäva profetens överlägsenhet. Även med ansenliga anlag till psykologisk intuition, står diktaren med ett fattigt stoff att laborera i, ty han har på förhand strukit det mesta som ger rikedom åt mänskligt själliv; han erkänner ju som äkta endast vad som ligger på den raka utvecklingslinjen från gorillan till den naturvetenskapliga seminaristen.

Danish fiction.” But Jensen reaches his peak – by means of “the remarkably vibrant, simple, and direct style of expression” – in his myths. In a few rare and intoxicating passages, Jensen comes close to the quality the Nobel Committee demanded of candidates during that decade: the Great Style.

### **The Situation in 1944: Jensen Given High Status**

Meanwhile, before we look into this matter in greater depth, let’s jump ahead to the time of the decision. In 1944, The Nobel Committee for Literature consisted of Fredrik Böök, Per Hallström, Hjalmar Hammarskjöld, Sigfrid Siwertz, and Anders Österling. They cast their votes on September 7th. The committee’s general report on the deliberations, written by Hallström, states that Johannes V. Jensen had “reached such a high stature that a majority of three committee members stated that, in their view, he ought to be given first consideration in a discussion of awarding the Nobel Prize.” Prompted by Henrik Schück, the Swedish Academy requested a supplementary report on September 21st, with full details of the recommendation. Such a report, “along with a clarification of the final result of the deliberations,” was presented by Hallström on September 28th. He reiterated the wording quoted and further elaborated on the reasons why he now cast his own vote in favour of Jensen. Böök, referring to his argumentation from the previous year, voted for the French poet Paul Valéry. Hammarskjöld was ill at the time, but in early October, he stated that he cast his vote in favour of the Swiss writer C.F. Ramuz, who was said to fulfil “to an eminent degree” the requirements in Nobel’s will regarding an “idealistic tendency”. And Ramuz – added Hammarskjöld hesitantly – came from a neutral country, “perhaps the most neutral of all.” Jensen’s candidature had consistently been rejected, “before 1940 by the Swedish Academy and later by the Nobel Committee,” and what he had written recently could not alter the total assessment.

It is understandable that Hammarskjöld found it difficult to see any decisive development in Jensen's most recent literary production, and it is fascinating to follow Hallström's long journey from total rejection to hesitant support for awarding the prize to Jensen. In the previous year, "Mr. Hallström abstained from voting," while Österling and Siwertz were in favour of Jensen, and Bök and Hammarskjöld voted for Paul Valéry and Gabriela Mistral, respectively. Nothing more happened that year, since the prize was not awarded at all. Hallström subsequently read *Folkeslagene i Østen* [The Peoples of the East], which he found difficult due to the ethnographic and anthropological views on racial characteristics, but which had finally captivated him: the story of "the Polynesian migration" had proved to him that Jensen, the apostle of progress, was "a good enough poet and, nowadays, a good enough human being" to feel sympathy for the beauty of the primitive world, which modern evolution had overtaken.

Good enough as a poet – and as a human being. But in any event, a poet first – and a human being second. The latter, let us call it nobility, seems to be a requirement, though one might reasonably assume that the former should suffice with respect to a literary prize. What is at stake is idealism, Alfred Nobel's controversial demand. As became clear in the 1925 judgment, it was idealism that Jensen lacked; for he was a poet, and there was, as duly noted, a fundamental power in his imagination and in his ability to give shape to things. And to crown it all, the 1944 official explanation makes it clear that the prize was awarded to him "for the rare strength and fertility of his poetic imagination" combined with "an intellectual curiosity of wide scope and a bold, freshly creative style."

What we can try to track down then are those aspects of the yearly expanding production that confirm and sustain the impression of a fundamental artistic power, a remarkable will to structure, and at the same time, those aspects that tone down the impression



of a lacking idealism and humanity, classicism and rootedness. The yearly expanding production – granted, but it is also important to point out that as early as 1925, when Johannes V. Jensen was so roughly denied his share, he had the early as well as most of his mature writings behind him, all the principal works, not only *Himmerlandshistorier* [Himmerland Stories, 1898-1910], *Kongens Fald* [The Fall of the King, 1900-01] and *Digte* [Poems, 1906], but also for example *Den lange Rejse* [The Long Journey, 1908-22], the work that Anders Österling focused attention on in 1945, as it were on behalf of the Swedish Academy. In 1928, in the explanation as to why Thomas Mann received the prize, mention was made of *Buddenbrook*, written at the turn of the century, at the same time as *Kongens Fald*. I mention this, because in 1999 Jensen's novel was hailed as the "Danish Novel of the Century." For obvious reasons, the Academy could not very well single it out, after a delay of 43 years. In fact, it is barely even mentioned in the material, and not at all by Hallström in his radio address, nor by Österling in his talk at the awards ceremony.

### **1925 > 1944: a Barbarian on His Way Home**

At this point, let's look more closely at the shift away from the barbaric and toward the human or the humane or ideal. Though the 1925 general report made it clear that Johannes V. Jensen lacked true humanity, his case did not appear to be entirely hopeless. In 1926 there is talk of "a new development in Jensen," referring to harmony in his essay collection *Aarets Højtider* [The Feasts of the Year]. And the following year, the stylistic gem *Jørgine* was described as "entirely within the best Danish literary tradition," which for Hallström means the Golden Age tradition of the 19th century. In the collection of mythical writings *Ved Livets Bred* [At the Shore of Life], we are in the company of Jensen the master linguist, but admittedly this work also presents ideas, allowing Hallström to

temper his admiration with pithy irony: "It is regrettable that he does not, more often than is the case, give himself completely over to his notable and quite abundant poetic intuition, without allowing his scientific hobby-horse to whinny and spit out ideas."

After the brief Jensen hiatus of 1929-30, Hallström notes that the latest books contained signs of a "partial reorientation." In the years that followed, it was especially the myths and poetry that moved him. The humane quality becomes more and more pronounced. *Form og Sjæl* [Form and Soul] has a thoroughly "humanistic spirit." In *Kornmarken* [The Cornfield], scientific fanaticism had to give way to humanity "and thereby to a more sensitive grasp of human things." About *Sælernes Ø* [Island of the Seals] it is said that it would have been possible to discuss awarding a Nobel Prize to Jensen, if the book had been typical for his production. And in *Paaskebadet* [The Easter Bath] Hallström indeed saw the beginnings of human feelings and sparks of kindness in Jensen's love of life.

In 1941, Hallström receives a copy of *Mindets Tavle* [Plaque of Commemoration], in which Jensen characterizes Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson; Hallström dwells on the core passage of this portrait: "That is what was truly great in him, that he had transformed an overwhelming, gushing physical presence into pure soul." The previously too inhumane Jensen has not become pure soul, but he has mellowed and become much more refined. "An intellect that by nature is hard and grim, but tirelessly nimble" had become "more and more humane in its approach to human circumstances."

And the following year, Hallström reads *Vor Oprindelse*. The decisive factor is "a new and impressive, comprehensive view that gives life and cohesion to his writing," the fact that evolutionism "now has a soul." Through the book's focus on work, mankind has become the active subject in his own history. Yet Hallström still does not feel prepared to discuss how heavily the book should weigh "in the discussion preceding the Nobel Prize nomination."

In 1943, the volume of poetry entitled *Digte 1901-1941* [Poems 1901-1941] was published, providing the opportunity for a retrospective assessment of Jensen's poetic writings. His development clearly moves from "doctrinaire and provocative preaching" to "pure lyricism," and this can be traced far back in Jensen's career. For instance, the six poems in *Digte 1906* that later came to be jointly known as his "journey around the world" are remarkable in form, "characterised by the ingenuity and confidence of the born master" (whereas the content is "unadulterated bragging"). Further on, the Darwinist gospel gives rise to remarks on biological development, presented in verse. But the eulogies to Denmark's natural beauty and to the woman-mother are magical and outstanding, creating an overall impression, despite the reservations, that the collection deserves a favourable evaluation "as the lyrical expression of a rich and intensely lived existence."

Note the way this last comment was formulated. Poetry – art – is an expression of life. Hallström makes no distinction, and instead looks precisely for that point where harmonious balance in the work of art virtually announces that life is now in balance and the ideal has been achieved. For that matter, it is almost unfair to go by comments in which Hallström takes a stand on and judges the purely artistic. But in any case, we can understand that *Den jydsk Blæst* [The Jutland Wind], for example, can by and large be placed within "the classical tradition from Denmark's Golden Age." The style in *Kornmarken* has become more immediate, more alive and organic, perhaps because the studies of Danish classical verse that came to fruition in Jensen's most beautiful poems had rubbed off on his prose work. *Sælernes Ø* serves up fresh descriptions of nature "in a streaming and bubbly style." Even *Dr. Renaults Fristelser* [The Temptations of Dr. Renault], which is not in itself Nobel Prize material, demonstrates "the fascinating qualities that this writer, over time, has increasingly and beautifully developed: richness, colour and radiance [...]" *Paaskebadet* was judged by Hallström in

1938 to be an honest piece of work with flashes of great poetry, calling to mind *Aarets Højtider*, in which Jensen “surprises with natural and resounding song, in conscious fellowship with the most beautiful poems of Denmark’s Golden Age – classical verse, pure and simple. [...] And what one is ever ready to admire is his direct and imaginative style as an artist.” (As a matter of fact Hallström wrote something very different about *Aarets Højtider* in 1925, which he must have forgotten!)

The following year he takes on the abridged two-volume version of *Den lange Rejse*, in which he finds both unreasonable and brilliant passages, but he is more impressed by the “overwhelming richness of imagination” than by “the intentional ingeniousness of daring conceptual constructions.” Jensen’s evolutionary biblical history was “a showpiece,” not “truly great writing.”

But underlying all of these commentaries is a monotonously repeated complaint that Jensen’s career had mainly a direction “which is very difficult to reconcile with the Nobel Prize demand for an idealistic aim.” The earliest works “had a tendency that was as diametrically opposed as could be to Alfred Nobel’s aim with the Literature Prize.” They “proved, in many respects, to be much too repellent to allow for such absolution as receiving a Nobel Prize would imply, and their spirit is so defiantly contrary to Alfred Nobel’s demands for the ideal that the reward in question would prove to be irreconcilable with faithfulness to the objective of the endowment.”

### **Jensen Read as a Bildungsroman**

In conclusion: Hallström quite often praised Jensen’s mastery of the craft, his brilliant style and poetic intuition. The master of language fascinated him. He read the myths with great pleasure, and he dwelt upon the poetry to the degree to which it fit within the tradition of the classical Danish Golden Age. It is therefore hardly an about-face on his part when he obtains a copy of *Folkeslagene i*

*Østen* (truly one of Jensen's least important works) and acknowledges that Jensen – the technical fanatic and evolutionist missionary – has become enough of a poet, and enough of a human being, to encompass and absorb into himself the historical past and his cultural legacy, and to assume a comprehensive view of the world. The savage who stepped out of the forest at the beginning of the twentieth century to proceed fearlessly with everyday life has become a civilised human being, mellowed and matured, with human emotions, at peace with himself, but at the same time rooted in Danish tradition, and in the popular, rural tones of his childhood Himmerland. But this development was late in coming, and Jensen carried with him a cumbersome and sinful baggage that did not live up to Alfred Nobel's demands for the ideal. His early works provoked all cultivated taste, fanatically and apostolically peddling a schoolroom barbarism, a materialistically based evolutionary theory, ridiculing his country's cultural heritage, wearing down and tearing apart its network of roots. As far as genre goes, Hallström focuses on Jensen's later formally disciplined poems and on his myths, whereas he finds the more extensive conceptual constructions in the novels less interesting, and also problematic in relation to composition. The epic proportions of *Den lange Rejse* tire him more than the essay-like style of *Vor Oprindelse*.

Remarkably enough, Per Hallström reads Johannes V. Jensen's literary production like a "dannelsesroman" (novel of Bildung), the story of a person who at long last returns home and discovers what is best in himself, from which he had so consistently allowed himself to be distracted. What matters for every individual is to become a human being, and that means finding one's way to a deeper layer of the self, down to the depths of humanness itself. This is a typical Golden Age project. In Goldschmidt's *Hjemløs* [Homeless, 1853-57], the very prototype of the Danish "dannelsesroman", we find (quite late in the book, where the main character, the poet Otto Krøyer is reunited with old friends after a life of wandering) that his mother

asks him: "What have you actually become, Otto?" To which he answers with great simplicity: "I think I have become more human, Mother." His friends had not succeeded with their lives at all, we understand, – they had made their way to high positions in society, but only by means of philistine conformity.

Standing at Oehlenschläger's grave at the Frederiksberg cemetery, one day in early spring in 1923, Jensen is inspired to write his famous poem "Graven i Sne" ["The Snow-Covered Grave"]. Jensen commemorates how beautifully Oehlenschläger met death, and then he quietly steps away across the snow, with a fragrance of spring and a cosmic scent in his nostrils. This reconfirms what he had already acknowledged during his trip around the world, upon seeing Mount Fuji – that "You are already in your eternity!"

This poem also contains a formula that Jensen would probably have liked to see applied to himself and his own work: "Doubly, he gave life form / in life itself, in noble norm." With Oehlenschläger as his model, he strove to give a soulful form to that which life had revealed to him: "The entire Earth and all human beings, from primeval times and up to ourselves, make up one single great Now, and in that enrapturing Now exists Eternity. The more you accept your own mortality, the closer you are to the centre of the universe and to Eternity."

### **On Following the Pattern of Nature**

On February 2nd 1946, a celebration was held for Jensen and his family in the rooms of the Copenhagen rowing club. Despite its nature as a private gathering, the occasion was not overlooked by the media. Frederik Poulsen, who had submitted the first nomination in 1925, held a speech and had it printed as a feature article in the following day's edition of *Politiken*, and *Billed-Bladet* also covered the event. In Jensen's own very personal speech, the writer distanced himself, as so often before, from the strenuous life of an artist in the spotlight of the public and the press. He, who as a

young man wanted to make daily life into a “mordant game” for the Danes, rejoiced at having lived “a reserved, harmonious life”, not as a sensation-hungry exception to the rule, but as a family man, pure and simple, “to be oneself, and follow the pattern of nature, to live an orderly life.” He did not so much as mention the Nobel Prize, however. To his close friend Aage Marcus, he once made the following remark: “Well, now I’ve been given this Nobel Prize, so I imagine someone must have appreciated what I wrote. But I must say that I derived more pleasure from seeing my three sons become doctors.”

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