



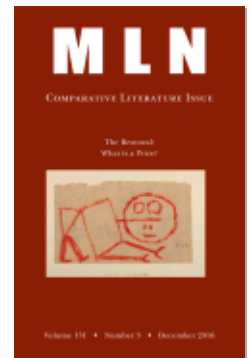
PROJECT MUSE®

The Prize-Bearers: A Brief Introduction

Dominik Zechner

MLN, Volume 131, Number 5, December 2016 (Comparative Literature Issue)
, pp. 1155-1163 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



➔ For additional information about this article
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/650011>

The Prize-Bearers: A Brief Introduction



Dominik Zechner

[H]e refused all awards and degrees,
declined membership in all honorary
institutions, granted no public interviews,
and chose not to be photographed, as
though to associate his face with his fiction
were a ridiculous irrelevancy.

Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (11)

Saying “thanks,” and meaning it, is quite a hard thing to do. That may be why the German version of the acceptance speech is called a *Dankesrede*—to make things difficult. The great poet, writer, or thinker must offer thanks to those who grant recognition. Yet, the obligation to thank, infantilizing the one impelled to show appreciation, marks a moment of powerlessness, the restraint of distressing passivity. Stating one’s gratitude nonetheless takes guts, all the more so if it happens publicly, *vor den Augen der Welt*. Words of thanks, no doubt chosen with care and a sense of exposure, can sting or linger as rhetorical time bombs, and constitute an instance of deferred retaliation in response to the violence of being called upon, urged to assume the pose of gratitude. Acceptance speeches have hardly ever been the object of study. We can provisionally view them as constituting a kind of rogue or sub-genre, barely determinable according to normative standards of critical discourse. Hent de Vries, in his contribution to this dossier, designates the lecture that frames the reception of an award as a

“public spiritual exercise.” He continues: “It exemplifies and raises the very stakes and tasks of critical thinking and the discerning judgment with which it must come.” Situated on the murky intersection among literary effort, philosophical reflection, commentary, and political statement, the *Dankesrede* coaxes the summoned writer out of his or her comfort zone, placing him or her on a tentative pedestal as signatory of a recognizably distinguished oeuvre. Prompted to respond to a nomination and accept the award, the writer stands before a decision. Not everyone is overjoyed by a token of external recognition. On the contrary, a number of recipients were tempted to decline the honor. Perhaps a greater number very often refuses to refuse the prize and chooses, despite a swell of resistance, to deliver a speech.

An invention of the 20th century, literary prizes have prompted a rich dossier of public *Rechtfertigungen*, an outlandish prose of hesitant gratitude crossed over with aggressive defiance. How do we situate the acceptance speech in relation to the literatures it presumes to defend and speak for? If we believe the rhetoric of its most prestigious recipients, the prize was not sought and represents rather an embarrassing, if not traumatic intrusion, an unwelcome imposition of institutional branding. Often unwanted and sidelined, in many cases a mere nuisance, it is not more than a kind of roaming supplementarity. Floating in-between discourses, the characteristic attributes of the acceptance speech hover at the margins of established categories and classifications. Yet, the archive comprising the prose of acceptance remains rich and multifaceted; it proves deserving of scholarly attention and invites hermeneutical spunk: Freud’s Goethe lecture, Paul Celan’s seminal “Meridian,” Jacques Derrida’s *Discours de Francfort*—to name but a few instances—acceptance speeches have innovated the ways we read texts, if not the way writers read and review their own works and worlds for which they are in part responsible. Acceptance speeches have accounted for massive discursive disruption and impact, in many cases they have taken on considerable canonical weight and interpretive authority. A striking case in this respect, “Der Meridian” has become something like a password, a shibboleth, opening up a royal passage into Celan’s oeuvre, performing a perhaps unwanted centering of the work. The acceptance speech allows the work to showcase itself in terms of a heightened readability—it offers a toolkit, an ensemble of philosophemes that may appear to unlock the hermetic seclusion of a given set of texts, serving the imperatives of schoolbook intelligibility and easy-to-grasp mnemonic jingles, catchphrases, and quasi-theoretical buzzwords. Hence, it may well be the case that the

acceptance speech unwittingly endows a literary work with the curse of ultra-legibility, as though the obscurest literary endeavor were to become magically legible through the sharp lens of the *Dankesrede*.

It still remains to be decided how the ceremonial oratory relates to the corpus of an oeuvre—whether it inhabits a place at the center of textual preoccupation or whether it spins a way out, beyond the rim of writerly achievement, scanning the uncharted outskirts of *écriture*. What kind of framing device is prescriptively proffered by the prose of acceptance as a unique form of recognition? Often enough, the prize risks scaring off its recipient because it coercively institutes community and institutional valuation. Jean-Paul Sartre issued an irritatingly gullible statement in 1964, meant to explain his reasons for famously refusing to accept the Nobel Prize in Literature. Anxiously protecting the presumed integrity of his signature, Sartre cites as the main motive behind his epochal desistance his unwillingness to let any institutional authority interfere with literary initiative: “The writer must . . . refuse to let himself be transformed into an institution, even if this occurs under the most honorable circumstances, as in the present case.” A writer involved with literature as *praxis* must resist the temptation of becoming-institution. Yet, it might turn out to be the case that literature itself carries the traits of a certain institutionality, or at least that its extraction from institutional enframings is not as easily conceivable as *l'écrivain engagé* wants to believe. The acceptance speech may delimit a fundamental battleground where literary values are decided and negotiated. Through the prose of acceptance, literature proves capable of transvaluing praise into blame, and loosens the institutional stranglehold that seeks to tame and domesticate the ongoing scandal of poetic utterance. For the most part, the speech of acceptance shows up as a relentless questioning of the award and the gesture of prize-granting—and it doesn't cease to pose its necessary question, if covertly and quietly, beneath the fanfare and noisy complacencies that can attend such conferrals.

Not everyone gets to act out scenes of repudiation when it comes to prize bestowals. Melancholically one thinks of all those who could not achieve recognition and didn't even get a chance rhetorically to face the uninvited imposition of the award. What about the so-called losers and unacknowledged, those who empty-handedly vanished from their age of writing, exiting the stage unregistered? An instrument of adjusting and bequeathing value, the prize prompts us to rethink what we consider noteworthy. What should be noted or denoted, who is excluded and who totally out of the question? *Who* notes you?

Once, David Lynch spent a whole day squatting on the corner of Hollywood Boulevard and La Brea in L.A. next to a live cow—all part of a campaign to make the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences aware of Laura Dern, star of his 2006 movie *Inland Empire*. He did not succeed. Overlooked and undetected, *Inland Empire* fell through the grids of Hollywood honorability. On the other hand, we cannot deny the sense of queasiness that comes with the sudden shock of appreciation, the stigma of being “distinguished.” To his unrelieved horror and dismay, writer Thomas Bernhard found himself noteworthy one day. He never recovered. The genuine writer, we’d like to think, lives boroughed and insulated, hardly noticeable. What writer does not dream of vanishing without notice? As for the prize-winners and owners included in this dossier, each rebelled in their own way against the insolence of being called up to accept a prize.

Put up for debate and critical parsing by the ambivalent gesture of prize-giving, the value of worth as such comes into play. Paul North, in his essay on Beckett and the Nobel, scopes out the terrain of a literature that renounces the transmission of value and thus attempts to forego humanizing mechanisms that are bound up with acts of valuing, validating, and evaluation. One can add to North’s insight that the prize as unstable supplement seems to insinuate an appreciation of the human that gets bloated up and generalized into a defense of humanity. The human being, figured as the animal able to confer value, is assumed already to carry an ineradicable and untimely supply of worth that discriminates human particularity in the first place. When Ingeborg Bachmann received the “Hörspielpreis der Kriegsblinden” for her radio play *Der gute Gott von Manhattan* in 1959, she delivered a speech in which she insists on the writer’s obligation to articulate and “make true” a pain that only humans can feel—“[diesen] großen geheimen Schmerz, mit dem der Mensch vor allen anderen Geschöpfen ausgezeichnet ist. Es ist eine schreckliche und unheimliche Auszeichnung” (“[this] great secret pain which distinguishes the human being before all other creatures. It’s a horrible and uncanny distinction” (my translation); 275). The distinction of the award is mirrored in that which distinguishes us as human—hence the prize becomes part of the repertoire of human suffering, an allegorical register of the pain that renders us conspicuous in nature. Terrible and uncanny, the *Auszeichnung* is already the essential feature of our ability to crack and break and suffer. What is being prized is the exposure to suffering that writers or thinkers or those who are “marked” must subject themselves to. And it’s that exposure and laying-bare that is

already the distinguishing feature of the distinction. In order to be *ausgezeichnet* one must already be *ausgezeichnet*—marked, martyred, disabled and disposed, summoned to answer the call of a disclosive wounding. As Christopher Wood demonstrates in his article on Erwin Panofsky, the token of distinction evinces an aesthetic of injury. The prize almost addresses to the wound.

Carried as distinction, the pain that makes us human can easily reverse itself and be inflicted on others. The facticity of the prize generates the loser as the social category encapsulating a particular class of sufferers, push-aways and humbled rejects. A moment in *Morgenröte* has Nietzsche jam on the “drive toward distinction” as he cuts to the social implications of prestige: “Das Streben nach Auszeichnung ist das Streben nach Überwältigung des Nächsten, sei es auch eine mittelbare oder nur gefühlte oder gar erträumte” (102; §113) (“The striving for distinction is the striving for domination over the next man, though it be a very indirect domination and only felt or even dreamed”; 68). Obliquely sensed or merely imagined, the destruction of the other sets the goal of a propensity for distinction. Intrinsically double-edged, one’s suffering for and under the weight of the mark of distinction finds its counterpart in the grudging pang felt by others, the “nearest ones,” often unwillingly exposed to the tokens of glory that have been denied them. As we cop the award, we’re turned on by the way in which “der Nächste an uns äußerlich oder innerlich leidet” (“. . . how the next man outwardly or inwardly *suffers* from us”; *Ibid.*), relishing not so much in the prize itself but in the outer and inner terrors it unleashes within our surrounding world. The thing or *Unding* of the prize causes suffering in the world, as if that were its purpose. The replenished worthiness of the distinguished awardee would stand empty without the attending worthlessness of the other, the one who gets the shaft, congealed in resentment-tinged awe before the prize-bearer. My neighbor needs to be worn down otherwise my award makes little sense in our shared environment.

Essential trait of the human condition or simply a function of the struggle for social recognition, the prize establishes while it also destabilizes identity. “*Wer bist Du?* Who are you?” asks the prize, as Avital Ronell puts it in her essay on Hannah Arendt. The gesture of prize-granting allows for moments of self-recognition only to the extent that the recognized self is resolutely put in question. Called upon to accept an award, the prize-carrier is prompted to account for herself. It might well be, however, that only by incorporating the prize can she assume a provisional knowledge of who she thinks she

is. “Who are you?” asks the prize. The answer does not tarry: “I am the prize-bearer.” Enacting a unique kind of apostrophe, the granting of awards and prizes manifests a celebratory form of appellation that performatively gives rise to the very existence it claims to ennoble.

That the prize puts forth a question, that it probes the limits of questioning, is allegorized in Toni Morrison’s Nobel lecture which tells the story of an old woman, “blind but wise.” One day, a group of youngsters invades the woman’s home; in an attempt to test the limits of her wisdom, the youths confront her with a devious question. “They stand before her, and one of them says, ‘Old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead’” (198-99). Is the bird alive or not? If the prize poses a question, what’s put into question is the life that’s being prized. In Morrison’s case, fragile life is that of language, precarious and ever under attack, menaced by the threat of being standardized, bureaucratized, consistently degraded. Yet the life of language does not posit a goal in itself—its “vitality . . . lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers” (202). To the extent that language proves to live in the expression of the lives that carry it, the one who speaks can be said to be alive only *through* the very language that grants the possibility of speech. We are alive to the extent that we are captured by language—and language is alive in as much as it channels our lives. The menace hovering over language thus poses a threat against the very fact of life—and the moment of acceptance crystallizes this hazard in a remarkable fashion. Stanley Corngold faces the abyss with poignant irony when he states, “in one’s acceptance speech, one may indeed enter a danger zone where one’s life may be at stake.” Death waits in the wings when awards are conferred.

Setting up a trajectory of endurance and sheer living-on, the prize partakes in the tropology of *überleben* as charted by Benjamin, Derrida, Hamacher, and others. The prize will survive us. Granting the survival of a name, the prize, as token of remembrance is bound to outlive its bearer. Conflating the celebration of life with a vexing *memento mori*, the award chimes like a call from the beyond, insisting on the finite constraints of our being. Alive and dead at the same time, the recipient of a prize is memorialized and already remembered. Yet, the prize does not refrain from qualifying the life it memorializes and extends. Rather, it has the tendency to instigate its own *Lebensphilosophie*, as Gerhard Richter points out in his reflection on the possibility of prizing the “right” life. With the conferral of the prize, the question of life is posed from the side of finitude. “[I]ch deute das Leben an,” Thomas

Bernhard writes in the notes accompanying his speech of acceptance for the “small” Austrian *Staatspreis*—life is insinuated, hovering as mere hint; “*ich deute das Leben an und spreche vom Tode . . .*” (“I’m insinuating life and I’m speaking of death”; 73). The acceptance speech tells us about “the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers” only insofar as it’s resolutely death-bound, addressed to the unavoidable perishing of the prize-bearer, and to perishability as such.

Exposing the spot where prestige becomes wounding, and the impact of honor causes unforeseen discomfort, the prize invokes a distressing ambivalence that leaves uncertain whether the conferral of an award indicates a blessing or issues a penalty. In a letter to his friend Robert Klopstock, Kafka found perhaps the most succinct formula to grasp the predicament of the one whose eyes are on the prize. Projecting an Abraham “who should come uncalled,” Kafka whips up a parable that centers on the dumbest student stepping up on commencement day to accept a prize. It’s the end of the school year, time to sift chaff from the wheat and distinguish the one who most excelled. Breaking the expectant silence in the room, it’s however not the best student who steps up to rake in the bonus, but the class dunce. Perhaps the nitwit misheard his name, says Kafka, perhaps not. Chances are the teacher made no mistake at all in summoning the weakest one, “sein Name wurde wirklich genannt, die Belohnung des Besten soll nach der Absicht des Lehrers gleichzeitig eine Bestrafung des Schlechtesten sein” (334) (“. . . his name was really named, the reward of the best was supposed to be, the teacher intended, at the same time a punishment of the worst”; 286). It can’t be known for sure whether it’s in fact *you* who’s destined to receive the call of honor. And if the name that’s passed down from the prize committee as metonymy for a prize-worthy oeuvre and writerly *Leistung* is indeed yours, the distinction might well arrive as punishment reserved for the screw-up, booking his work as failure. “A lot depends . . . on Kafka’s use of the term *gleichzeitig*,” Ronell observes in her reading of the parable, “on the simultaneous wish of the teacher to present reward and punishment” (294). The two-fold temporality with which the prize strikes its bearer points to an aporetic structure that entangles the bequeathment of distinguished Being with a chastising of subpar existence, effectively exposing the ones who’ve missed the mark. Coming forth from the last row to collect the award, the designated victor at once dominates the moment and is demoted, becoming the class clown as the whole audience bursts out in laughter.

The impact of the prize is incalculable, its capacity paradoxical. The meaning of the literary prize shows up as aporetically distorted in more

than one sense. Awards expose and take part in a larger economy with which literature seems helplessly aligned. As instruments of transferring and stipulating value, prizes tie down the literary endeavor, pushing it into the *mainmise* of economic constrictions that calculate the market value of the honoree. The gesture of prize-bestowal secures an opening of the scene of writing toward what James English has astutely termed “the economy of prestige,” as it “involves fundamentally the question of art’s relationships to money, to politics, to the social and the temporal” (3). Each prize comes at a price—and sometimes its assumption is justified by simple economic necessity and the prospect of a big check.

Nonetheless, bequeathed as *gift* the prize manifests as sheer expenditure outside the circuits of economy, sketching a domain of pure bestowal. As event of a gift, it should not have any value and can barely be registered. At once fragile and assertive, the prize mirrors the gifted writer, initiating a tautology that in its meaninglessness escapes any logic governed by economical principles. Radically disappropriating, the prize, strictly speaking, could never be bequeathed, and this secret knowledge seems to pervade the deliberations of its reluctant recipients. Yet, presented with and as a supplement of value, the gifted one *is* “gifted,”—something that suffices to re-initiate an economy. Where accomplishment was priceless, reaching even beyond any surplus value, part of a granting overflow, it now incurs values, receives a price tag. Unable to fulfill its aneconomic promise of sheer generosity, the modern prize, in an exemplary manner, exposes literature’s *malheur* as a discursive formation that’s inevitably tethered to the material imperatives and budgetary tallies of market appreciation. Following these considerations, I remain vexed by the vocabulary of economic analysis. The prize at once requires a thinking according to the calculative grid of cultural productivity; yet, it also refutes the premises of such an objectifying protocol. It’s the task of the prize-winner to bear the aporetic weight of a poisonous gift, which might explain why so many awardees appear somewhat embarrassed and shy and rejecting of the very acts of acceptance in which they find themselves fatefully entangled.

New York University

WORKS CITED

- Bachmann, Ingeborg. “Die Wahrheit ist dem Menschen zumutbar: Rede zur Verleihung des Hörspielpreises der Kriegsblinden.” *Werke*. Vol. 4. Ed. Christine Koschel, Inge von Weidenbaum, and Clemens Münster. Piper: München, 1993. 275–77. Print.

- Bernhard, Thomas. "Der Wahrheit und dem Tod auf der Spur." *Der Wahrheit auf der Spur*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012. 71–8. Print.
- English, James F. *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value*. Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2005. Print.
- Kafka, Franz. "An Robert Klopstock." June 1921. *Briefe 1902–1924*. Ed. Max Brod. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1958. 332–4. Print.
- Kafka, Franz. "To Robert Klopstock." June 1921. *Letters to Friends, Family, and Editors*. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston. London: John Calder, 1958. 285–6. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. "The Nobel Lecture in Literature." *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Ed. Carolyn Denard. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008. 198–207. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Morgenröte*. KSA vol. 3. Ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. München: dtv, 1999. Print.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the prejudices of morality*. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Eds. Maudemarie Clarke and Brian Leiter. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.
- Ronell, Avital. *Stupidity*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002. Print.
- Roth, Philip. *The Ghost Writer*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979. Print.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Sartre on the Nobel Prize." Trans. Richard Howard. *The New York Review of Books*. 17 December 1964. Web. 5 September 2016.