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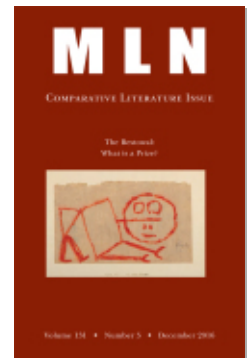
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MLN, Volume 131, Number 5, December 2016 (Comparative Literature Issue)  
, pp. 1218-1235 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2016.0087>



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# Thomas Bernhard, Prizefighter



*Dominik Zechner*

Ich hatte Angst vor einer Perversität und gleichzeitig vor einer Unrechtmäßigkeit und vor einer Unbilligkeit und vor einer absoluten Peinlichkeit. (*Meine Preise* 77)<sup>1</sup>

## **The Cunning of Prestige**

Thomas Bernhard, my main man, never had an easy time when responding to the call of honor. Class-A neurotic with paranoid edges, Bernhard wrote an entire *mémoire* on what it means to stand up, with sheer reluctance, and collect an award, collate one's testimonials. A distinctive document of searing ambivalence and tongue-in-cheek misanthropy retrieved from real-life shock and revulsion, *Meine Preise* appeared in 2009 as part of the *Nachlass*, detailing the pangs of dubious pleasure the chosen one undergoes when accepting an honor. Incalculable for the recipient yet painstakingly tabulated and evaluated, weighed and on point, calculatingly on target, the arrival of a distinction cannot be mastered. The prize more often than not shows up as *surprise*, a traumatic incursion blindsiding the honoree, binding him in a child's pose of deep passivity. Dispossessing and imposing, the prize overcomes you, strikes as portentous address. Still, you're called upon to react, find a position, a "voice" even. You're summoned, yes compelled somehow, to speak, becoming-author of your so-called work,

<sup>1</sup>"I feared something perverse, something unlawful, something unjust, something utterly embarrassing" ("My Prizes" 378). Subsequent quotes will be indicated by the page number of the translation followed by the reference to the original.

publicly claiming what's supposedly yours. The prize drives you out of the comfort zone of your study, and posits you as contributor to a public conversation. Hannah Arendt knew the score when, summoned to take the award, she gave expression to her own ambivalence—but there's an obligation to comply and take part in the creation of world that cannot simply be rebuffed.<sup>2</sup> Bernhard let himself be airlifted out of his man cave a bunch of times by well-meaning granters and bestowers—though he didn't respond with the kindness of the world-creator. Relentlessly set on complaint mode, the go-to rhetorical register for his acceptance speech is the diatribe, divulging the writer's sharp pique. Marking down the desecration of world, Bernhard let them have it. Ironizing the prize's obligation as unjust, the aggressive zeal of Bernhard's unexampled rhetoric of acceptance mirrors the violent imposition of the prize itself. Subliminally smoldering or overtly flashed, the violence that accompanies the advent of honor must be acknowledged. In Bernhard, the conferral of the prize takes on the aura of the kafkaesque, phrasing the moment of securing the honor in terms of a fiendish prod of destiny rather than a dignifying tribute. You're chosen not for whatever achievement may deserve recognition, not because you excel, but because you're marked by an *a priori* guilt.

In 1965, Bernhard feels marched off to trial when he's picked up at his Bremen hotel for the bestowal of the local *Literaturpreis*, the second one of his career: "In the cold, clarity increases [*Mit der Kälte nimmt die Klarheit zu*], I thought as several gentlemen were escorting me to the town hall, I had the feeling they were taking me away to a trial [*Gerichtsverhandlung*]" ("My Prizes" 362; 44). Irrational and no doubt hyperbolically revved up for effect, Bernhard's anxiety is nonetheless disclosive of what we could term the "cunning of prestige"—a subtle twist in the gesture of prize-granting through which an honoring circumstance inconspicuously shifts into a scene of persecution. Somebody must have slandered Thomas B., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was up for a prize.

Ontologically nimble, the prize oscillates unascertainably between invigorating upper and devastating blow of fate, at once narcissistic pump and murderous tool. Remembering the cab ride to the bestowal of the Austrian *Staatspreis für Literatur* three years later, Bernhard intensifies his sense of dread and finality and writes: "This journey was the journey to the scaffold" ("*Diese Fahrt war die Fahrt zu einer Hinrichtung*"; 378, 78). Hitching a ride on the death drive, the poet accepts his fate.

<sup>2</sup>See Avital Ronell's article on Hannah Arendt and the Lessing-Preis in this dossier.

For the prize doesn't forgive the fact that one has abandoned one's writing desk to reap the award. To the extent that writing consists in essential solitude and the effacement of social imperatives of any kind, manifesting as awardee and publicly surrendering to the honoring nudge scripts a break with the playbook of the lonesome work of literature. A marked man, stigmatized and *ausgezeichnet*, the awardee pulls out of the voluntary and infernal destruction to which he has signed up and is released from the hellhole of the writer's study in order to accept yet another burden. Hence the prize is but a penalty for the one who leaves literature behind, in search of something else.

Bernhard's prize trial attains to Kafkan lows in that the verdict to be reached by this "Gerichtsverhandlung" is already set in stone—passively posited, the author is summoned merely to endure and receive. The advent of honor is not controllable—as sheer announcement, the prize simply shows up, no questions asked. As the meaning of the prize flips from honor to imposition, its supposed elevation is experienced as punishment, if masochistically cast. Awaiting the honor, the writer occupies a place of vague anguish, taunted by a peculiar kind of *prize angst*—"suddenly I had nothing in my head," Bernhard writes, "except a feeling of fear" ("*Angstgefühl*"; 376; 77). In Bernhard, the prize is there to make you feel unhinged—for you're not supposed to accept it, not meant to corrupt your writing with the name of a co-signing institution, a State even, taint the integrity of the poetic word with the low lure of prize money. You don't want to be a pampered *Staatschriftsteller*, suckled on public funding and protected by the very institutions against which you write and rage, ideally.

Bernhard feels marched off to trial when about to accept a literary prize in Bremen, Germany. What's remarkable about this bizarre shift of registers from celebration to legal persecution is that the punishment the author experiences by accepting a prize is one that's issued precisely *for* accepting the prize. It's not enough to think that the prize shows up as institutional retaliation against the creation of a literary oeuvre—rather, the pernicious structure of the prize is self-referential, criminalizing its own incursion. Otherwise put, *Bernhard undergoes the punishment of being conferred a prize precisely for committing the crime of being conferred a prize*. The cunning of prestige consists in opening up a tautological hell in which the semantics of dis- and extinction collapse into one another, expunging in exhilaration. Honor is not only an "idiocy," as Bernhard once noted (*Aus Gesprächen* 99), it sets up a *mise en abyme* of self-perpetuating horror, furnishing a masochistic torture chamber that rewards the accrual of prestige with punishing

anguish. Thrown into the moral low-ground of the transfer of prestige, Bernhard's awardee-persona finds himself sucked into a fast-spinning cycle of self-incrimination.

Of course, there's always the temptation to refuse the prize. As soon as he was established on the German-speaking literary scene, Bernhard vehemently assumed the naysayer's pose, turning his back on the seduction of esteem: "But for 15 years now, I haven't accepted any award," he told Kurt Hofmann in conversation (99, my translation). "Neither prizes nor anything else." Practicing active restraint and the abstinence of the one who's over it, the only remaining *jouissance* for the retired laureate would reside in giving back the prize, return to sender. To this end, Bernhard hopelessly anticipated being awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, simply for the blast it would have been to throw it back—"yet one can't decline an award not given." Thomas Bernhard permitted himself to be frivolous when it came to declining proposed tributes and proffered awards as soon as it became possible for him to make a living off his writings—and because the pose of resolute negativity befitted his image as literary rascal and social outcast.

The advent of the prize invokes an *imperative to refuse*, not to budge and bow but instead to practice renunciation and to choreograph some tai chi moves against and around the menace of honor. Yet, the pecuniary allure of the prize pushes the up-and-coming literary existence under its sway. If the *price* is right, the award promises the prolongation of the artistic endeavor, which means that in the existence of a writer, the moment of the prize can mark the very demarcation between life and death, opening a corridor for survival, carrying on. Bernhard instructs us on how the prize yields its own temporality, and when it shows up in the decisive moment, it releases a whole new possibility of life, fatefully deflecting the catastrophic collapse of a *Dichterleben*. Such was the case when the dignitaries of Bremen informed Bernhard about their decision to distinguish his work: "I was still chained to a truly pitiful caricature of myself and my bottomless existential despair" [*ich war nur noch eine höchst bedauerliche Karikatur meiner selbst und an mein fürchterlichstes Existenzunglück gekettet*], when the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen came" ("My Prizes" 358-9; 36). You must say no, you can't say no. Even if the prize shows up as death sentence, as Bernhard believed the *Staatspreis* to do, it simultaneously carries the promise of living-on, breaking the "most horrendous existential misfortune" into which the forlorn writer has maneuvered himself. What drives and simultaneously debilitates Bernhard's reluctant responsiveness toward the gesture of prize-granting

is “the thought that the prize money . . . would enable me to get my life under control, give it a radical new direction, make it possible again” (“*der Gedanke, mit der Preissumme . . . mein Leben abzufangen, ihm eine radikale Wendung zu geben, es wieder möglich zu machen*”; 359; 36). The award’s pecuniary appeal turns out to mark its existential propulsion, intercepting the disaster of existence, saving a life for writing.

As economic need takes over, morality’s pull gets suspended and an ethically responsible relation to the prize becomes untenable. Pondering the prize money of “twenty-five thousand schillings,” to be received from the Austrian *Kunstschatz*, Bernhard describes how his moral compass gives up the ghost, forcing him to relent: “I am greedy for money, I have no character, I’m a bastard too” (“*ich bin geldgierig, ich bin charakterlos, ich bin selbst ein Schwein*”; 375; 72). Opening the banal abyss of one’s own cravings and primal rummaging, the prize targets the very regions of one’s animal being and brings *Schwein*-shame to the recipient who is put in touch with his piggish quests. The prize shows up as prize only to the extent that one must repudiate it in order not to lose *Charakter*. Turning pig anyway, Bernhard reduces the prize to its material value, keeping his eyes only on its economic advantage. Sidelining the promise of honor and esteem, Bernhard wants the prize solely for the money and thus pushes back on the transcendental surplus of the award, refuting the immeasurable and incalculable aspects of prestige. Even though he takes the prize—and spends the money—Bernhard’s quest to deflate the gift and downsize it to its commercial substructure, implies a subtle refutation of the prize. Capturing the somatic agony that’s bestowed together with the literary award, Bernhard poignantly pins down the perdition of morality as he ponders the bearability of awards:

After the Julius Campe Prize . . . I had a constant empty feeling in my stomach whenever there was a question of accepting a prize, and my mind balked every time. But I remained too weak in all the years that prizes came my way to say no. (390)

Nach dem Julius-Campe-Preis . . . hatte ich immer ein schales Gefühl im Magen gehabt, wenn es darum ging, einen Preis in Empfang zu nehmen und mein Kopf wehrte sich jedesmal dagegen. Aber ich war doch die ganzen Jahre, in welchen noch Preise auf mich zukamen, zu schwach, um nein zu sagen. (100)

The overwhelming weariness to which these lines testify incapacitates the imperative to refuse and leaves, as the only remaining option of confronting the prize, the passive stance of receptivity and excruciat-

ing affirmation. Bernhard's weakness, however, cannot suitably be explained by a reference to greed alone. Reaching beyond the explanatory grids of mere affectation, it testifies to an elementary resistance to rejecting the gift, not answering the honoring call.

### Death's Scandals

The rogue genre of the acceptance speech is constituted as perlocutionary effect of the prize's economic condition and involves as trade-off: collecting the prize is conditioned upon a public exercise in the rhetoric of acceptance. The poet gives language and receives, in return, his award. The rhetorical exigency prompted by the gesture of prize-granting perhaps opens the possibility, if ever so fragile, of perturbing the institutional imposition of the honoring call. Subject to the imperative to refuse the honor, the acceptance speech questions the prize in that it refuses to refuse. Called upon to receive, the writer takes recourse to the ambivalent registers of the lexicon of acceptance and gratitude, strategically planting rhetorical traps designed to shake up implicit political strangleholds. Otherwise put, if the bestowal of a prize forces the writer into a position of deep passivity, if the prize essentially shows up as an imposition on one's life and work that cannot be refused without leaving permanent scarring and toxic residue—then the built-in linguistic trade-off, the demand to give language and honor the honoring gesture from the vantage point of literature, can be turned into a defying stance. An acceptance speech always carries traits of a desisting bartlebism—one would prefer not to accept. One would prefer not to be here, unprotected, exposed to the spotlight, made answerable on behalf of something that ought not to be spoken for as it only ever speaks, if it speaks, for itself—literature.<sup>3</sup> Accepting the prize through language, the *Dankesrede* desists, seeming to hesitate before the sweet horror of fame, defying the award even in acceptance.

Thomas Bernhard never missed a chance to lay a snare or throw a rhetorical hand grenade. His speeches exemplify the fundamental ambivalence with which literature encounters something like "world" in the moment of being prized. Eyes on the *Staatspreis*, Bernhard relentlessly lashes out at his bestowers as he casts severe doubt on the very idea of praise: "Honored Minister, Honored Guests, / There is nothing

<sup>3</sup>"Aber das Gedicht spricht ja!" Paul Celan, in his *Meridian* speech (196), insists on poetry's surprising ability to speak and speak anyway.

to praise, nothing to damn, nothing to accuse, but much that is absurd, indeed it is all absurd, when one thinks about *death* (“es ist nichts zu loben, nichts zu verdammen, nichts anzuklagen, aber es ist vieles lächerlich; es ist alles lächerlich, wenn man an den *Tod* denkt”; 403; 121). Exposing the honoring call as misplaced, Bernhard’s opening shows up with an almost anacoluthic verve. Unanticipated and startling, it seems to come veering out of nowhere and overruns us with its *Sein zum Tode*-switchover. Hyperbolic and end-zoned, Bernhard’s sentence divulges its very context, its staging and scene of articulation, as a misunderstanding. For there is nothing to praise. Nothing to praise, nor to condemn or accuse—when we think of death. Instead of delivering an expression of gratitude, Bernhard interrogates the very legitimacy of praise and concludes that it cannot sustain the negativity of death that only allows for and yields—as much as it yields to—ridicule.

Two years after Bernhard delivered his *Staatspreis* speech, Ingeborg Bachmann, in the manuscript of her review essay “Thomas Bernhard: Ein Versuch,” rephrases Bernhard’s problematization of praise as she ends her study with a question, “Ist hier etwas zu loben?” (364). Is there something to honor here? The laureate’s response is resolutely negative. The *Ruhm* of Bernhard’s prose lies in exposing the senselessness that dwells in the possibility of the prize. Bernhard himself published an alternate version of his speech in the Viennese magazine *Neues Forum* in May 1968, in which he expresses his gratitude for “dieses Mißverständnis, das diese Auszeichnung zweifellos ist” (“Der Wahrheit und dem Tod” 78). The distinction is exposed as misunderstanding for there is nothing to honor when and as long and because “we think of death.” *Everything* becomes a misunderstanding when we think of death. Releasing the admonishing qualities implicit in the rhetoric of acceptance, Bernhard warns his bestowers not to forget this dilemma—“vergessen Sie den Tod nicht . . .” (Ibid.)—yet he still picks up the award, receiving it as the misprision that it is. Reaping a trophy that’s a misconstrual and as such ridiculous, Bernhard turns the moment of honoring into a contemplation of mortality. A scandalous act.

In an exemplary fashion, Bernhard unearths the outrageous potential inherent in the rhetoric of acceptance—the ways in which the *Dankesrede* can be used abusively to malign the bestower and transform the gesture of prize-granting into yet another currency that propels the dynamic of literary production: the scandal. The moment of acceptance marks a seductive spot to place a rant with which to close in on your alleged persecutor. Prone to scandal, the literary prize circumscribes the unnamed territory where the literary scene crosses over into the



lower regions of tabloid instinct and sensationalist defamation. Such conflation has to do with the ephemeral reserve of public attentiveness that the prize carries. The syntax of acceptance, beyond the weight of passivity with which it enframes the awardee, grants a shimmering moment in the spotlight of mediatized awareness—all eyes on the laureate—that easily lends itself as an arrow slit for a beleaguered *Schriftsteller* drawn out of his comfortable exile. It does not happen too often that the cultural minister of Austria himself takes up the position of direct addressee. Thomas Bernhard knew that, grabbed his chance and took a big swing: “The state is a construct [*Gebilde*] eternally on the verge of foundering [*fortwährend zum Scheitern verurteilt*]” (“My Prizes” 403; 121). Here’s what happened next:

I hadn’t even finished my text when the Minister leapt to his feet, bright red in the face, ran at me, and hurled some incomprehensible curse word at my head. He stood before me in wild agitation and threatened me, yes, he came at me with his hand raised. He took two or three steps, then an abrupt about-turn, and he left the hall. (380)

Ich war mit meinem Text noch nicht zuende gekommen, da war der Minister mit hochrotem Gesicht aufgesprungen und auf mich zugerannt und hatte mir irgendein mir unverständliches Schimpfwort an den Kopf geworfen. In höchster Erregung stand er vor mir und bedrohte mich, ja, er ging mit vor Wut erhobener Hand auf mich zu. Dann machte er zwei oder drei Schritte auf mich zu, darauf eine abrupte Kehrtwendung und verließ den Saal. (82)

It did not take Bernhard long—only a couple of sentences—to antagonize his main benefactor and principal bestower to such an extent that *Herr Minister* came raging at him, prepared to shut him down forcibly. Almost as though performatively prompted, the statesman swiftly enacted and embodied the permanently failed State that Bernhard had evoked in his address. The “acceptance” speech threw the politician into a momentary state of utmost excitation, perhaps even arousal—“in höchster Erregung”—marking him down as the protagonist of a literature that fuels on affective stores of roaring excitation. Banned from the shelves of Austrian bookstores, Bernhard’s novel *Holzfällen* would later carry the subtitle, “Eine Erregung,” exposing his prose as madly sexualized, destructively erotic in a ranting, raging fashion. Spurred by Bernhard’s killer gratitude, the minister manifests as ready to take a swipe at the misbehaved writer yet before the conflict can get any more physical the representative of the Republic of Austria

veers for reason and takes a hike.<sup>4</sup> Laconically, Bernhard notes: “The newspapers next day wrote about a scandal that the writer Bernhard had provoked” (381; 85).

The scandal that envelops this undermined scene of acceptance proves to be a scandal of withheld if not negated thankfulness. Bernhard shows up as an ingrate who assails his sponsors. On some level, the prize is there to domesticate its carrier, bequeathed so as to keep literature pacified, unaroused and unarousing. The award tames and terminates the permanent insurrection and dissident scandal of literature. Before the award, all writers are equal—equally harmless, that is. One wants, of course, to be a chronic misfit, though the coercive *Zumutung* of the prize forces a fit. Yet, the free-spirited laureate breaches the protocol and turns the tables—flipping an episode of demonstrative gratitude into the political endland of impending violence.

Bernhard had a knack for disclosing how Austrian society appears forever ready to tip over into pathetic barbarian scenes of savage man-hunts and fascist agitation. The tradition of Austrian letters, from Kraus via Bernhard through Jelinek, is marked by a great investment in and often mirror the lowest, declining stages of the so-called civilized. It exposes the uncultured in culture—and in the cultural minister—the ubiquitous readiness of seething societal rage to break lose and sting. Thomas Bernhard’s face-off with his *Kulturminister* is but a condensed tipoff, the thumbnail of a whole devastating cultural inclination, and literature’s ability to trigger, bust, and expose.

Hermeneutically vexing, the scandal of this broken scene of bestowal lies less in Bernhard’s provoking the cultural minister and with him the cultural establishment “zur höchsten Erregung”—than in the sheer provocability of the granting institution and its representatives. The face of scandal is that of the politician, and his outburst makes us understand that the pretense of “culture” doesn’t necessarily imply a civilized disposition. In any case, we see how *Herr Kulturminister* is turned on by Bernhard’s prose of acceptance and rejection—turned on and off at the same time, to be sure. The author assumes the supreme and even disciplined stance of a certain kind of *Dichtermut* that must provoke, and that represents the dissident qualities of literary transmission. Its job description prompts literature to scandalize

<sup>4</sup>Bernhard’s 1982 prose piece, *Wittgensteins Neffe*, offers a different, ironically enhanced and more explicit account of the *Staatspreis* ceremony in which Minister Theodor Piffli-Perčević is described to have “empört von seinem Sitz aufgesprungen und . . . mir [Bernhard] die geballte Faust ans Gesicht geschleudert” (116).

and not to hold back when scandal must be stirred. Provocation, in a word, is literature's business. In as much as it's directed at the State, the poetic word is subject to the task of scandalizing its addressee. Yet the structure of such provocation remains aporetic as the imperative to scandalize also marks the downfall and defeat of the literary endeavor: "Die Zeitungen schrieben am nächsten Tag von einem Skandal, den der Schriftsteller Bernhard provoziert habe." The moment of the literary prize is torn apart by the double movement of, on the one hand, literature's ongoing offense, the outcry of its deviant being, of nonconformity even and especially in moments of seeming ingratiation and institutional alignment—and, on the other, the raging hostility it earns and yields, the public blame it takes. The prize, in part, is there to subjugate the literary project, turning it into something "decent" and socially acceptable. Yet, the acceptance speech more often than not untames the force of literature precisely in the moment of its desired submission.

Beneath the superficial layer of tabloid scandalization and the *Kulturminister's* illiterate rage, Bernhard's speech confronts an existential matter, another force of scandal, disturbing and life-threatening: the speech interrogates the death-boundness of the honoring gesture and the literary prize as gift of death. "[E]s ist nichts zu loben, nichts zu verdammern, nichts anzuklagen, aber es ist vieles lächerlich; es ist alles lächerlich, wenn man an den *Tod* denkt." Witty spirits have termed Bernhard "the Beckett of the Alps," given his penchant for the absurd and general investment in the concise and uncompromising avowal of the inevitable hopelessness and helplessness of life.<sup>5</sup> Yet there's more to this mesh-up of quasi-rejected honor and *Todesneurose* than a timely celebration of the absurd and ridiculous. The connection between the conferral of literary prizes and the question of death and its abyss of meaning is no arbitrary one. For the prize essentially provokes the thought of death, is provoked by it, calls and conjures it up. Underneath the cover of its honoring impetus, the award comes equipped with a fatal blow. Relentlessly weighing down on the laureate, it mortifies and petrifies, paralyzes the literary existence. Indeed, the gesture of honoring performs a kind of "execution," promoting an abrupt public death. Precisely to the extent that he's supposed to be glorified, honored, granted entry into the annals of prized dignitar-

<sup>5</sup>In her "Attempt" to fathom the early Bernhard, Ingeborg Bachmann holds her conviction that "die letzte Prosa von Bernhard über die Becketts weit hinausgeht, ihr unendlich überlegen ist, durch das Zwingende, das Unweigerliche und die Härte" (363).

ies, the ambushed writer risks being eliminated, shut up and snuffed out. Much like the gesture of naming, the bestowal of a prize marks a little death, killing its target, the poor honored subject. Considering “l’acte de nommer,” Maurice Blanchot states how in order for me to name someone, say, “‘this woman,’ I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her” (“*il faut que d’une manière ou d’une autre je lui retire sa réalité d’os et de chair; la rende absente et l’anéantisse*”; 322; 37). The very act of securing and determining her being through the insinuation of a name rescinds her existence, obliterating it precisely *as* it’s pulled into presence. Part of the aporetic inventory of naming, the prize, in a similar fashion, performs an act of annihilating *nomination*—it names the awardee, marks him down as prize-bearer, and terms his an award-winning oeuvre. Yet precisely the creation or recreation of a writerly life through the honoring call irretrievably nullifies it. “The word,” Blanchot continues, “gives me the being, but it gives it to me deprived of being” (“*me donne l’être, mais il me le donne privé d’être*”; Ibid.). That’s the lethal trade-off to which the prize-winner signs on when accepting the wreath of adulation: in being named by dint of the prize, the literary existence becomes endowed with a being that’s deprived of being and is thus pushed into a death that occurs from the midst of life—a false life, perhaps.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, death looms in remembrance. On a crucial level, being awarded a prize means being remembered *already*; it means receiving an honoring call from the afterworld, being marked by a token that will remain after the writer’s *Dasein* has perished—*was bleibet aber stiften die Preise*, to paraphrase Hölderlin. Forcing a trice of afterlife into the life-sphere of its bearer, the prize instigates and propels a bizarre anachronicity, its conferral makes for a strange rift in time, pulling a work out of the here-and-now, depriving it of its presence and pronouncing it over, a matter of the past, something to be remembered. The imposition of an award monumentalizes the writer, pushed into the throes of a remembrance that unremittingly devivifies him. So-called “lifetime achievement awards” are a quite cynical institution in this regard, because they violently mark the end of an industrious life that’s actually still ongoing. The prize makes for an artificial moment of closure: ordained to terminate, the bestowal marks the end of a work and writerly life. More or less visible, more or less intense, that’s

<sup>6</sup>On the entanglement between the gesture of prize-bestowal and the question concerning a right life, see Gerhard Richter’s article in this dossier.

the case with any prize—there's the covert inclination to close down an oeuvre and tame it for good: *you've "achieved" this, now you're done. Pack it up and pack it in!*

The name—and naming—of the prize provides the very token and mark that'll survive both work and author, overtaking and outliving text and life. Insufferably intrusive, it threatens a literary existence from the side of posterity, breaching and reaching in from the future. Bringing forth a strange case of living-on, the prize as monument and tomb preserves and proclaims the non-irritating version of an "accomplishment" and accompanying biography to be remembered. Underneath its promised plethora of recognition and the promise of economic advantage, a prize's accolade affirms and stipulates the creative exhaustion of a given work and project, the depleted end-zone of a writing path—and pad. Reaching way beyond the symbolic grids of tabloid excitation, Bernhard's rhetoric of acceptance finds the actual scandal of the prize in death. How are we going to survive our prizes?

### **Incursions of Trauma**

As it petrifies the recipient into a memorialized carrier of cold survival, the prize figures as an opening to deep spheres of historical memory. Any kind of regime, any kind of *Öffentlichkeit*, exposes in the act or pretense of honoring its record of historical missteps and wrongdoings, a whole index of disavowed or half-repressed political atrocities whose blocked stores of anxiety and thwarted grief can well up and burst open in the moment of granting. This is to say, to receive a prize from the Republic of Austria enjoins one to assume a position against the broken historical record of this strange political body, which, owing to its accumulated criminality, must be seriously questioned. Serving a rhetorical register that plays on several levels, Thomas Bernhard, when insisting on the ridiculousness of honor "when we think of death," is aware of the way in which this death multiplies as its historical referents start creeping out of their forgotten crypts of political toxicity and trauma. A seismograph for subtle and subtextual political tremors, the prize detects historical injury and exposes unhealed laceration precisely when the intactness of public discourse is at stake, ensuring the unscathed appearance of the political institution that bestows the honor. Reaching far into the underworld of buried historicity, the prize provokes a welling-up of ungrieved life. To the extent that it memorializes, the honoring gesture pokes a hole into the sealed-off chambers of repressed historical

memory inevitably shifting the rhetoric of acceptance into a language of remembrance—thus carrying out a belated work of mourning for and against the granting institution that stands as a monument to unrepaired trauma.<sup>7</sup>

The case of Austria is a notoriously difficult one to fathom and sustain. Bernhard's 1988 novel *Korrektur* proffers a second-hand account of the architect Roithamer who is said to be forced, time and again, to apply his power of judgment to "the country of his origin [*Herkunftsland*], the country where he belonged [*Zugehörigkeitsstaat*], Austria, this most misunderstood country in the word, this country more problematical than any other in all world history" ("*dieses Land mit dem größten Schwierigkeitsgrad in der Weltgeschichte*"; 19; 29). Approaching the podium in order to accept-repudiate the *Staatspreis*, Bernhard is fitted philosophically, applying his *Urteilkraft*, as he seeks a viable way to take on the unmatched degree of difficulty named Austria. Put on the spot and shoved into the spotlight, Thomas Bernhard, poet and writer, assumes the pose of philosopher, seized by an urge conceptually to grasp the logic and pitfalls of the Austrian predicament. He continues his acceptance speech:

We understand: a clueless people, a beautiful country—there are dead fathers or fathers conscientiously without conscience, straightforwardly despicable in the raw basics of their needs . . . it all makes for a past history that is philosophically significant and unendurable. ("My Prizes" 403)

Man begreift: ein ahnungsloses Volk, ein schönes Land – es sind tote oder gewissenhaft gewissenlose Väter, Menschen mit der Einfachheit und der Niedertracht, mit der Armut ihrer Bedürfnisse . . . Es ist alles eine zuhöchst philosophische und unerträgliche Vorgeschichte. (121)

Bernhard presupposes the possibility of grasping and thus projecting a concept of Austria that will aid our understanding of its great difficulty and suppressed undercurrent of unredeemed and perhaps unredeemable delinquency and violence. Literature is called upon to recruit philosophy in order to grasp the unbearable—*man begreift: das Unerträgliche*. The rhetoric of acceptance forces literature out of its isolated being, transgressing the borders of genre and pressing the poet to think conceptually.

<sup>7</sup>Maintaining a similar point of view, Toni Morrison, in her Nobel lecture, defends a language that "signal[s] deference to the uncapturability of the life it mourns." She goes on arguing that language is not supposed to encapsulate political injury and historical injustice but that its "force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable" (203). For Bernhard, the moment of prize-granting, considering its political motivation and embedding, provides an opening that allows for such a reach. I would like to thank Cathy Caruth for bringing Morrison's dazzling acceptance speech to my attention.

Bernhard had the hardest time writing up his acceptance speeches; he often waited until the cab ride to the ceremony to whip up a short and powerful compilation of quasi-philosophical zingers.<sup>8</sup> The prose of acceptance consists in a strange collaboration, a nearness that binds the poetic word to a certain philosophical fervor that makes us want to understand. Narrativizing the unbearable, the symbolification of an obliterated prehistory—that's literature's imperative. Yet, the acceptance speech requires a literary exponent to think philosophically and extract a grain of intelligibility, if ever so transient, in order for repressed tanks of violence and injustice not only to become tellable but also graspable. Thus, the only possible place thus for the acceptance speech is the implausible juncture where philosophy and literature conflate to take on trauma—where they meet and separate at once.

"[E]in ahnungsloses Volk, ein schönes Land." Underscoring the country's legendary beauty, Bernhard the honoree switches on *The Sound of Music* and piggybacks on the cliché of Austria as exalted Alpine idyll. Engaging a similar tropology of clichéd self-portrayal, Elfriede Jelinek's early novel, *Die Liebhaberinnen*, opens with a question addressed to its reader, "do you know this BEAUTIFUL land with its valleys and hills?" ("Kennen Sie dieses SCHÖNE land mit seinen tälern und hügeln?"; 1; 5).<sup>9</sup> Marking the beginning of terror, the stated beauty of *Österreich* hosts the cluelessness of its people—whom Bernhard identifies as the generation of fathers who are either "dead" or "conscionably unconscionable" (a more audacious translation might go with "diligently reckless" for *gewissenhaft gewissenlos*). What distinguishes these people is their simplicity and infamy, the poverty of their need. Neither an island nor blessed, Austria's popular self-mirroring often consists in exploiting the trope of an "isle of the blessed" in the very midst of Europe—a beautified realm for the aggressively self-sufficient, world-champions in repression. Austrians don't need anyone to be happy, and they themselves certainly don't feel needed. "We're Austrian, we're apathetic" (403; 121). Bernhard modulates his rant as he stirs the layers of numbness that make up the Austrian condition. Divulging his compatriots' apathetic state of mind, he spots an idiosyncratic downplay of suffering that structures the Austrian relation to life in its suspended historicity. "[O]ur lives evince the basest disinterest in

<sup>8</sup>Wittgensteins *Neffe* calls the *Staatspreis* speech a "kleine philosophische Abschweifung" (116).

<sup>9</sup>Jelinek's incipit obviously riffs off Mignon's ode to Italy from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (150): "Kennst du das Land? wo die Zitronen blühen, / Im dunklen Laub die Gold-Orangen glühen, / Ein sanfter Wind vom blauen Himmel weht, / Die Myrte still und hoch der Lorbeer steht."

life” (“*wir sind das Leben als das gemeine Desinteresse am Leben*”), he goes on, projecting an emaciated life-world, emotionally underinvested, whose destitute vivacity consists in a stance of wicked indifference toward life itself. For the learned Austrian, the only possibility of life resides in its lazy nullification. Going beyond the Austrian principle of collective non-pleasure, Bernhard’s belligerent rhetoric of acceptance cuts through a social contract that stipulates an apathetic denial of historical vulnerability. The laureate thus calibrates the moment of granting as an instant of laceration—a wounding that knocks down the genuinely Austrian defense mechanism of militant frugality and affective deprivation.<sup>10</sup> As much as the prize may burden and hurt the awardee, its conferral can conjure up a pain that’s been effaced for political reasons, reanimating and stinging the inert tissue of collective repression. Inciting the vibration of trauma, the prize irritates the artificial self-sufficiency of a body politic whose social harmony relies on the unrelenting practice of active denial and affective indifference.

In a chapter entitled, “My Own Private Austria,” from his 2010 book, *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek explores some of the recent exposures of what he calls “the subterranean Austrian reality” (315) that has nurtured a stunningly wide range of incest criminals and basement slave owners. Putting up Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek as the uncompromising literary force that sublimates the quotidian terrors of the submerged violence that’s so distinctively Austrian, Žižek claims that Jelinek’s prose testifies to her untimeliness as a writer, recognizing in her “a precursor writing a history of the future, detecting in the present the potential for forthcoming horrors.” This peculiar structure of poetic premonition is made possible, he goes on, by “the condition of late modernity in which the real of history assumes the character of trauma” (316). Since the actual sites of destruction and historical injury are effaced, literature orbits the space of trauma in anticipation of a violence to come. “Es ist alles eine zuhöchst philosophische und unerträgliche Vorgeschichte,” says Bernhard. The priming with which the literary word concerns itself is unbearable and thus gets displaced into the non-symbolic sphere of that which comes *before* history. Unutterable and dislocated, the welling-up of trauma that takes place in Jelinek and Bernhard assumes the quality of *Vorgeschichte* in a doubled sense: it describes a pre-history that’s situated in a disavowed past whose unredeemed violence continues to determine what the signifier “Austria” means.

<sup>10</sup>See Christopher Wood on Panofsky and the prize as wound in this dossier.



Yet, it's also, as Žižek insists, a history of looking ahead, not merely preparative but something like a "pro"-history of dark premonition and horrific aspiration. As far as Bernhard is concerned, the character of Austria is distinguished by a remarkable degree of unteachability and resistance to moral self-improvement. Unshakably set on repetition compulsion, Bernhard's Austria is firmly stuck in the rut of its own perpetual pre-history. His final play, *Heldenplatz*, another site of scandal, suggests that, "In Austria you have to be either catholic/or national-socialist/nothing else is tolerated [*geduldet*]/everything else is crushed [*vernichtet*]" (56; 62). Verses like these are too easily dismissed with reference to Bernhard's alleged "art of exaggeration," his oft-cited *Überreibungskunst*. In an interview from 2004, Jelinek herself sharply dismisses this foreclosing point of view: "In the meantime, I've come to find that Bernhard did not exaggerate. He created absolutely realistic reflections of the Austrian society [*absolut realistische Abbilder der österreichischen Gesellschaft*]" (my translation).

Engulfed by an inescapable prehistory of unavowed violence that incessantly repeats itself, the award ceremony, as documented by Bernhard, becomes a trauma zone—a space not so much of rectification and the advent of historical justice, but a breach of political oblivion. With the conferral of the prize, a repressed memory is set in motion and it becomes possible to fathom the dull present of Austria as an outgrowth of trauma, such that the gesture of prize-granting becomes an instant of horrific self-recognition. "We populate a trauma," Bernhard continues, "we are frightened, we have the right to be frightened, we can already see in the background the dim shapes of the giants of fear" ("*wir fürchten uns, wir haben ein Recht uns zu fürchten, wir sehen schon, wenn auch undeutlich im Hintergrund: die Riesen der Angst*"; 403; 122). Addressing his countrymen, Bernhard also indicts himself deploying the personal pronoun "we"—*we Austrians*, we're a people of trauma, trembling, rightfully terrified for what becomes visible beyond the horizon are the giants of anguish. The speech of acceptance before the officials of the Republic of Austria provides the privileged site and channel to articulate, yes stipulate, a right to be terrified. Undermining the walling-in of repressive withdrawal, the right to terror and anguish voids, in the moment of prize-granting, a social contract that allows for collective silence and forgetfulness. Bernhard's choice of *Recht* over *Pflicht* in this context is especially worth noting as it displaces the usual anti-fascist rhetoric revolving around a set obligation "never to forget" for a notion of remembrance not as duty but as a prerogative and *right*. Facing the unmasked horror of a shared prehistory,

we—Austrians—are *right* to be terrified. It's the task of the honoree to seize such a right and make conscious the giants of anguish haunting a body politic that sustains itself in oblivion.

“Es ist nichts zu loben.” The award's disclosed nothingness thus provides an opening for all sorts of tropic shifts that turn the prize into the distorted token of an unanalyzed historical past. It opens the dossier of crimes committed and omitted on the part of the bestowing institution and the culture that it represents. Nothing's to be praised and all is ridiculous in view of the unaccountable deaths of so many. Every token of honor conferred by the Republic of Austria activates the scar tissue encrusting the memory of the Holocaust, turning each gesture of *Danken* into one of *Gedenken*, remembrance. Marking the award ceremony as rediscovered trauma zone, Bernhard's ambivalent rhetoric around and against the gesture of prize-bestowal rigorously recasts the urgency of Benjaminian insight: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (“*Es ist niemals ein Dokument der Kultur, ohne zugleich ein solches der Barbarei zu sein*”; 403; 696).

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