

## Meine Preise

*Th. Bernhard*

February 22, 2014

Those charming vignettes out of the life of the author were discovered in his *Nachlass*. They clearly were meant for publication, although Bernhard never got around to do it, and have been dated to 1980. They list a number of occasions when he has been honored with various literary prizes. He had thought little of the organizations and juries that made the awards, nor of the ceremonies and obligations connected with them. He has been in on it solely because of the money. Being hard pressed for cash, with many debts and gaps to be plugged, he has felt it a duty to accept them, those crumbs from the tables of wealthy organizations or Governments, whose members condescendingly hold literature at such a low level.

It was perhaps not always so. When he first got a prize for his literary achievement he was very proud and imagined that the whole world would be aware of his distinction. From that on he was a changed man, a celebrity of sorts, at least in the eyes of his friends. He went to the coffee houses with a new awareness of his worth, he ordered coffee in a different way, asked for the paper differently, read it differently. He was in short transformed.

But the ceremonies were a pain. The hypocrisy, the badly performed music, the empty speeches, and above all the indifference of the high functionaries, who even interchanged names, got biographical facts confused, and clearly could not care less. One even, he managed to provoke the minister to a rage, without having the slightest clue why. He had given a speech, an delivering speeches was not his metier, and the minister had stormed out, slamming the door, and by his example inspired the majority of the audience to follow suit, causing an abortion of the entire festivities.

Giving a speech. He knows he has to, but inspiration does not come. He puts it off, and off, and off, until the last hour. Yet he manages to squeeze by, but his speeches are by necessity uninspired and short (a couple of which are reprinted). It is all part of a sorrowful charade, which he has soon seen to see through.

But money. Without the money he should of course never have submitted himself to the empty rituals. What did he do with it, how did it change his life? Once he bought a fancy sports car for the money. Just like that. It was a British one, which added to the allure. Did he know how to drive a car? Actually he had never driven one, as far as we can tell, but he had driven trucks, in fact heavy trucks. He had learned the skill and become certified in anticipation of work to do in Ghana, which (fortunately) had fallen through at the last moment. Then years later, disgusted by his life as a writer after his debut of *Frost* he had supported himself driving trucks for a beer company. This stood him in good stead. To drive a small sports car was much easier than to handle a truck, and drunk with the excitement he drove all around Austria, just for the fun of it. He came to grief in Yugoslavia, his car was rammed, and he was spectacularly wounded, but not seriously it would turn out, in spite of all the blood welling forth from his skull. The car was smashed to smithereens, but a fancy lawyer managed to get reinstatement out of the Yugoslavian

authorities as well as generous compensations for his discomfort. Another time he bought a dilapidated farmhouse on impulse, putting down the prize money as a downpayment. An act that horrified his friend, the old woman, but to which he seems to have stayed true. It is not in character though, a man that professes to hate the countryside and only tolerate big cities, why should he actively seek a sanctuary out in the boondocks? He talked about the need to be surrounded by walls, to incarcerate himself. In short to escape the outside world.

Supposedly the pieces are factual not fictional. You learn about his *Tante* not a relative, but a woman thirty-seven years older than himself, to which he leaned and offered him constant support. She must be no other than Hedwig Stavianicek (1894 -1984), and then there is a brother, who also exists in real life as his half-brother Peter Fabjan. Of friends there are mentions, but never by name. His female companion he always refers to with warmth and respect. And as to prizes, there was one he truly appreciated, namely the one given at Salzburg by the *Bundeswirtschaftskammer* connecting to his apprenticeship as a grocers boy in his teens. Maybe the lack of pretense of the merchant community touched him, as well as sitting next to its president at the table, learning from his editor, that the former was due to die in cancer in two weeks. (In fact his prediction came true). The president remembered him from that time, but it was hard to carry on a conversation with a man you know is soon to expire. The gravity of his condition puts everything into perspectives, and as Bernhard would have occasion to say later. In face of death all our concerns are so petty.

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