



The Ariel Municipal Company

The Jerusalem International Book Forum

Michel Houellebecq: 2025 Jerusalem Prize- Acceptance Speech

When I was approached by the organizers of the Jerusalem Prize, they asked if I would be willing to accept the prize.

The first time I was awarded a literary prize was in 1992, for a collection of poems called *La Poursuite du Bonheur – The Pursuit of Happiness*. It was the Tristan Tzara Prize, awarded in Aubigny-sur-Nère, a small town – or perhaps a large village – in central France. Much less impressive than the Jerusalem Prize.

Despite its marginal status today, the village of Aubigny-sur-Nère played a historic role: during the Hundred Years' War, it was ruled by the Stuart dynasty of Scotland, then an ally of France against the English. In those days, France was on the verge of falling into the hands of the British. Had this happened, not only the history of Europe but – let us not forget the future colonial importance of the two countries – the history of the entire world would have changed. For example, it is not at all certain that the United States of America would exist today.

Still, compared to Jerusalem, this is a small matter. I am not a great scholar in matters of religion, but monotheistic religions have left their mark on me. Every Western writer, whether he likes it or not, has the imprint of monotheistic religions. No writer, and especially a Western writer, can be indifferent to Jerusalem. And even if my attitude toward monotheistic religions is qualified, to say the least, I must recognize the obvious: they are the source of much of the heritage of human culture, and Jerusalem plays a significant role in the history of mankind.

It is interesting that even then, in 1992, the prize committee dispatched a mutual acquaintance to probe the likelihood of my agreeing to accept the prize. I am forced to conclude that even then I was considered an unpleasant person, a misanthrope, one who tends to hold a grudge, what is called in French a "quarrelsome person" someone who does not hesitate to "spit into the pot of soup." I never fully understood why I earned this unpleasant reputation. It actually seems to me that I try to be ingratiating, within the limits of my abilities – which are limited, this is true. No matter what, however, it is not my nature to refuse gifts.

I remember at the time I was surprised at the very thought that a literary prize could be refused, and I asked Michel Bulteau, the publisher at the time, what he thought might justify a refusal.

The first reason he suggested is a poor one, even if it is the most common. It often happens that a person refuses to accept a prize that was previously awarded to a writer whom he does not like. This is stupidity. Given enough time, it is impossible that the literary choices of an awards committee, whatever they may be, will perfectly suit your own personal choices. Perhaps there is reason to be concerned if you dislike every single one of the committee's previous choices; but as for me, this was not so thirty years ago, and it has not been so since.

A more serious reason for refusal may be a reservation about the status of the prize or its name. Indeed, a person may be deterred by the thought that his name will be associated with that of some well-known historical figure. As an extreme example, I understand how one might hesitate to accept a prize named after Lenin. Today there is at least one prize in France that I would refuse to accept if someone thought of offering it to me, and that is in order not to contribute to the commemoration of the author who adorns it. However, while Tristan Tzara is not my favorite poet – not at all – and I do not have much regard for the Dada movement, there are things from Tzara that I do like, so everything was fine and I was amenable to receiving the prize.

The third reason for refusal is the most interesting of all. It is what stands behind the most famous historical refusal of all, Jean-Paul Sartre's refusal to accept the Nobel Prize. His reasoning was that he refused to become an institution, refused to accept a position of authority.

I do not like the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre, but in this case I appreciate his sincerity, and I wholeheartedly identify with the discomfort that gripped him at the thought that he would become an institution. I, too, am not interested in a position of authority, this lofty position, either, but I believe that Sartre held it against his will from the moment he established himself as an involved writer, which is what he was. In fact, in France, he was a model of the persona of the involved writer. And by doing so, he assumed the status of moral and political authority for his readers.

I am very dismayed when a writer announces who he will vote for in the next elections. Whether or not this is to suggest that your readers should vote as you do – and I would not want to do that – it is completely contrary to how I perceive my relationship with my readers. For the same reasons, I have always been reluctant to sign petitions, and in fact it seems to me that I have never signed a petition, except perhaps inadvertently.

I did deviate from this principle for one reason, and that is, quite simply, moral certainty. Time and time again, I have not hesitated to take a stand against any law that allows euthanasia, an issue that has been the subject of debate in France for many years. And today the polemic is reviving. It is being discussed in the National Assembly while I am speaking to you. I know that there will be those who will find it difficult to understand how an avowed agnostic can oppose euthanasia.

I take a moral stance, and that's why I'm often considered a cynic in France. In short, I have a hard time explaining myself. But I keep trying. And this is why today I am especially grateful to the Jury of the Prize for its desire to reward me, in their words, for my "moral aptitude." For these are not mere things. It is the exact opposite of what is usually said about me, and yet it is the truth: people will think what they will think of my

books, but it is the moral inquiry that nourishes and nurtures them. And for recognizing this, I thank you.

Michel Houellebecq