Thomas Bernhard

an introductory essay by

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The essential details of Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard's formative years are unforgettably recorded in his autobiographical work *Gathering Evidence*, which is written in the same iconoclastic, relentlessly repetitive style of lyrical imprecation that he devised for his novels. There, we learn of the decisive impact of his encounter with the "terminal disease" that was his native city of Salzburg as well as his discovery, thanks to the guidance of his maternal grandfather, the writer Johannes Freumbichler, of the "alternative world" of society's outsiders into which he could hope to escape. His description of Salzburg well exemplifies Bernhard's notoriously hyperbolic prose style: "This city of my fathers is in reality a terminal disease which its inhabitants acquire through heredity or contagion. If they fail to leave at the right moment, they sooner or later either commit suicide, directly or indirectly, or perish slowly and wretchedly on this lethal soil with its archiepiscopal architecture and its mindless blend of National Socialism and Catholicism. Anyone who is familiar with the city knows it to be a cemetery of fantasy and desire, beautiful on the surface but horrifying underneath" (79). In Salzburg, Bernhard was to make the discovery, which resonates throughout all of his major novels, that human communities, fatally marked as they are by the twin evils of imbecility and native brutality, cannot resist persecuting the vulnerable individuals whom they find in their midst. The persecution of a crippled classmate and a laughingstock teacher, in particular, was a vividly recalled scene that will reappear with endless variations in the major novels:

> The crippled schoolboy and Pittioni were for me the most important figures at the school; it was they who brought out, in the most depressing manner, all that was worst in a ruthless society, in this case a school community. Observing them, I was able to study the community's inventiveness in devising fresh cruelties with which to torment its victims. I was also able to study the helplessness of the victims in the face of each new affliction, the increasing harm they suffered, their systematic destruction and annihilation, which became more terrible with every day that passed. Every school,
>
> being a community, has its victims, and during my time at the grammar school the victims were the geography master and the architect's crippled son. (137)

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As though he were intent upon a radical rewriting of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Bernhard has nothing but scorn and contempt for his Aryan compatriots, who flaunt their ineradicable barbarism throughout his work. It is always to the helpless outsiders who fall victim to persecution by the Austrian majority that Bernhard looks for inspiration and guidance. Thus, during one of his many hospitalizations for pulmonary infections, he met a Marxist socialist whose radical politics had excited the fury of the doctors and Catholic nuns who were supposed to tend to his illness:

> Here was an example of how an honest man can stick consistently and tenaciously to his ideas while leaving others with different opinions in peace and yet become an object of scorn and hatred. Such people are dealt with in such a way as to ensure their annihilation. The incredible decision to put him in the twelve-man dormitory with its stupid inmates, whose behaviour was as brutal as it was mindless, amounted to a punishment which was bound to destroy him. He was not allowed to read a book or a newspaper in peace; he never had ten minutes in which he could think without being disturbed. (327)

Bernhard challenges the communal contempt that this man has aroused, finding in him, rather, an inspiring model that will show him the way to the alternative world into which he will, throughout his own life, attempt to gain entry: "For a brief period he too had been my teacher, taking me back into a world to which my grandfather had introduced me with such passionate devotion, once more opening the door to the alternative world that is kept under, the world of the powerless and the oppressed" (328).

Bernhard pays unending tribute to his grandfather, not only in the biographical reminiscences of *Gathering Evidence* but also indirectly in his novels, where he reemerges in the portrayals of incorrigibly iconoclastic figures who refuse to succumb to the herd instinct that afflicts the rest of humanity. In *Gathering Evidence* Bernhard, generalizing from his own experience, praises all grandfathers as "our teachers, our real philosophers. They are the people who pull open the curtain that others are always closing" (10). For Bernhard, as for his grandfather, Austria was a country, whether during or after the Nazi occupation, over which "Catholicism waved its brainless sceptre" (13). He admired the unconventionality that made it unthinkable for his grandfather "to become a master butcher or a wholesale coal merchant" (19) and was grateful for the tutelage in the utterly contrarian rejection of social conventions that he offered him.

In one of the most poignant moments in *Gathering Evidence* Bernhard is hospitalized along with his grandfather (who would later die of an illness that his doctors had misdiagnosed). Here, in the midst of this "death factory" of a hospital, Freumbichler would visit Bernhard each afternoon, sitting at his bedside and holding his hand, thus providing a moment in which his grandson "felt supremely happy" (227). During these visits, his grandfather would give Bernhard the lessons in fighting against death that would accompany him throughout his own lifelong struggle with illness and despair.

It was also thanks to his grandfather that Bernhard made the acquaintance of Schopenhauer, whom he was to adopt as an important literary mentor. So, too, it was from his grandfather's lips that he first heard the names of several of the other greats—including Shakespeare, Hegel, and Kant—whom he will periodically invoke throughout his own work. Bernhard's characteristic fascination with greatness—his constant, almost obsessive praise for the truly sublime human achievements that expose the complete nullity of all other, merely apparent accomplishments—is yet another element of the lifesaving heritage bequeathed to him by his grandfather: "During my childhood and youth he would talk to me over and over again about the greatest artists—about Mozart and Rembrandt, Beethoven and Leonardo, Bruckner and Delacroix—constantly telling me about the great men he admired, constantly drawing my attention, even when I was

a child, to everything that was great, constantly pointing out greatness and trying to explain to me what it was" (98).

Bernhard will, in his turn, emulate his grandfather by repeatedly invoking the names of the great figures whose entry into the alternative world of artistic achievement would inspire his own efforts. He pays ultimate tribute, in the concluding pages of *Gathering Evidence*, to Dostoyevsky's *The Demons*, the novel that, more than any other, showed him the way out:

> Never in my whole life have I read a more engrossing and elemental work, and at the time I had never read such a long one. It had the effect of a powerful drug, and for a time I was totally absorbed by it. For some time after my return home I refused to read another book, fearing that I might be plunged headlong into the deepest disappointment. For weeks I refused to read anything at all. The monstrous quality of The Demons had made me strong; it had shown me a path that I could follow and told me that I was on the right one, the one that led out. I had felt the impact of a work that was both wild and great, and I emerged from the experience like a hero. Seldom has literature produced such an overwhelming effect on me. (335-36)

Likewise, his grandfather's utter absorption in his labor as a literary artist will—in spite of his grandson's recognition that "he was inevitably driving his life into a human and philosophical cul-de-sac" (184)—provide a model that Bernhard would imitate throughout his life. The sight of his grandfather methodically writing thousands of pages while insisting that "Everything that one writes is nonsense" would later influence Bernhard's own determination to continue his work even in the face of its utter absurdity.

Along with crediting his grandfather with saving him from the conventional life that would have been certain death, Bernhard also remembered his beginning, under Freumbichler's patronage, the musical education, which, although later discontinued because of his poor health, would have such a significant bearing on the characteristically musical features of his prose style. His grandfather's vision of him as a great violin virtuoso—and, later, after he had begun voice lessons, as the "Salzburg Chaliapin" (198)—was eventually to be fulfilled precisely in the literary realm in which the grandfather had, as Bernhard's precursor, already distinguished himself. As Chantal Thomas has said, Bernhard was, above all, an "instrumentalist of language" (6). Appropriately, the one significant material possession that his grandfather left to Bernhard after his death was his typewriter, "bought at an auction in the Dorotheum in Vienna in the early 1920s, on which he made what he called the fair copies of all his works. I still use this typewriter, an American L. C. Smith which is probably sixty years old, for typing my own works" (257).

Bernhard's debt to his grandfather was paralleled by the help that he received from the various dispossessed elements of the Austrian population whom he describes with moving simplicity as "the other people" and with whom he came into contact "by going in the opposite direction" (145). His decision to make a complete break with conventionality, "While the learning machine in the city was once more claiming its senseless victims" (153), led Bernard to the Scherzhauserfeld Project, "Salzburg's black spot" (156), where he found work in a grocery store. Scherzhauserfeld was, above all, the place where Bernard first encountered the iconoclastic verbal art of the dispossessed that would eventually become the hallmark of his own narrative style:

> At first I could not understand the offensiveness of certain customers—which did not make them any worse or any better than

> the others; I just could not make it out. I missed the point of their double-edged, triple-edged, or multi-edged remarks and turns of phrase, but it took me only a few days to realize what they were talking about and why. They spoke about things that were naturally not mentioned openly by people in the city, and it soon became clear to me why this open way of talking seemed sensible and more appealing than the silent hypocrisy of others. In no time at all I naturally became familiar with the so-called indecent remarks and turns of phrase that were current in the Scherzhauserfeld Project in hundreds and thousands of variations. These people never minced their words. I very soon got used to this openness, and after a few weeks and months I was often able to outdo them all in inventiveness on this score and did not hold back. (163-64)

Bernhard's life was marked by recurrent misfortunes, including the humiliation of an illegitimate birth and a childhood spent in part with a mother who never disguised her contempt for him, the physical illnesses that brought him several times close to death, the loss of his beloved grandfather as the result of a misdiagnosed illness, and his discovery of stupidity, brutality, and mendacity as the ruling passions of his fellow Austrians. Once he had discovered in the Scherzhauserfeld Project the aggressive verbal style that would permit him to transform his suffering into art, he held onto it with a tenacity that would give to each of his major novels an unmistakable air of authenticity.

Bernhard's major work combines an unflinching recognition of the radical ugliness at the core of life with an equally determined affirmation, however implicit, of its inexhaustible beauty. This paradoxical vision too was one of the gifts that his grandfather had bequeathed to him: "I now had an opportunity to examine my grandfather's assertions. I had an obsessive desire to gather the evidence in my head, and so I began a strenuous search for the evidence, tracking it down in every direction, in every corner of the city of my youth and its surroundings. My grandfather had been right in his judgment of the world: it was indeed a cesspit, but one which engendered the most intricate and beautiful forms if one looked into it long enough, if one's eye was prepared for such strenuous and microscopic observation" (305).

Such was to be the legacy of the unusually harsh circumstances that Bernhard had to face from a vulnerable age as well as of the indomitable lyric gift, assiduously cultivated from early in his formative years by his grandfather, with which he had been blessed from birth. Bernhard's admiration for the great writers and thinkers who formed his personal pantheon, as well as his determination to emulate their accomplishments in his own work, saved him throughout his life from the equally powerful temptation of suicide. Writing itself became for him a sublimated enactment of suicide in which the manuscript that was constantly "corrected" into extinction was just as constantly resurrected in the form of a permanent literary achievement.

In a related way Bernard will associate the birth of his literary career with the death of his grandfather:

> It was in Grossgmain that I first discovered reading. This was a sudden discovery which proved decisive for my subsequent life. This discovery—that literature can at any moment provide the mathematical solution to life and one's own existence provided that it is put into gear and operated as though it were mathematics, so that in time it becomes a form of higher mathematics and ultimately the supreme mathematical art, which can be called reading only when we have mastered it completely—this discovery was one which I could not have made until my grandfather had died: this idea, this

> insight, I owed to his death. (272)

Shortly after the death of his grandfather in 1949, Bernhard launched his own literary career with some short stories published pseudonymously in a Salzburg newspaper. His first important publication was a poem in rhymed couplets entitled "Mein Weltenstück" (A Piece of My World). This poem introduces a dichotomy, which recurs throughout Bernhard's major work, between the speaker of the poem, who celebrates in poetic song the beauty of the rustic scene that he observes from his window, and the "poor man in the cellar," who "weeps because he can no longer sing." While the pastoral lushness of the poem entirely disappears from his later work, Bernhard will re-create the contrast between the lyricism of the writer and the mere weeping of his alter ego in his major novels, which will oppose the bleak destiny of the protagonist to the implicit literary triumph of the narrator. *Stimmen der Gegenwart*, a Viennese literary magazine, accepted another significant early work, a short story entitled "Der Schweinehüter" (The Swineherd) in which Bernhard gave early indications of the aggressively antipastoral vision that would later characterize his recurrent portrayal of rural Austria.

Toward the end of the 1950s he wrote a group of prose pieces entitled *Ereignisse* (Events). The most important work of this period was *On the Mountain*, written in 1959, but not published until after his death in 1989. The critical importance of this work to Bernhard's development as a writer is precisely captured by Sophie Wilkin's moving afterword:

> The new-fledged court reporter of *On the Mountain* has been writing hundreds of poems but now begins to work on his first book as it comes to him, jotting down notes, splinters of ideas, observations, encounters, characters, feelings, out of these data making a loose net in which to catch the realities of his life. In the process he discovers the power of words, infinite combinations and permutations of words such as the German language, with its many-plied nouns, is uniquely capable of. He discovers words for their own sake. He can't stop for structured paragraphs or sentences, life is literally too short (what with his lung disease being aggravated by bunglers whom he sometimes has to instruct in the procedures, any treatment could mean the end of him). His writing has become synonymous with his breathing: it is his rescue attempt, trying to save his life, even if it is nonsense to keep struggling against the inevitable, nonsense to record the nonsense of life in the face of death. (130-31)

Curiously for a writer who would achieve literary fame primarily as a playwright and a novelist, Bernhard's first major publications were volumes of poems having a decidedly religious and mystical inspiration, beginning with *Auf der Erde und in der Hölle* (On Earth and in Hell) in 1957, followed the next year by *In hora mortis* and *Unter dem Eisen des Mondes* (Beneath the Iron of the Moon). In an interview with André Müller, Bernhard described his poetic beginnings as follows: "I wrote lots of poems, which I thought were better than those of Rilke, Trakl and everyone else, and so I went to see Otto Müller, in his second-floor office, rang his bell, and said to him, `I'm so-and-so and I have some poems for you. Would you like to publish them?' He sat down, picked a few of them, and they were indeed published. That was in 1956" (qtd. in Porcell 86-87). Throughout the major phase of his career, however, Bernhard was virtually to abandon the writing of poetry for publication. *Ave Virgil*, a collection published in 1981, actually contained poems written twenty years earlier, and *Gesammelte Gedichte*, the edition of his collected poems, did not appear until 1991, two years after his death.

A major turning point in Bernhard's career occurred in the spring of 1963 with the

publication of his still-untranslated first novel, *Frost*, which introduces a narrative situation—in which a reasonably sane narrator writes a narrative that increasingly mimics the discourse of the madman whom he has been observing—for which Bernhard was to show a decided predilection. The publication of this novel, which was greeted by reviewers as a significant literary event, led to his being awarded the Literature Prize of the Free City of Bremen. In his acceptance speech for this award, entitled "The Cold Argument with Clear Thinking," Bernhard, after proclaiming the death of the fairy tales that had sustained Europe, characterized the particular kind of difficulty posed by modern life: "Living without fairy-tales is more difficult, which is why it is difficult to live in the 20th century. Besides, we now do nothing more than exist; we don't live, no one lives any more. But it is lovely to exist in the 20th century; to move ahead; whereto? I have not, as I know, come from any fairy-tale and I will never go into a fairy-tale" (qtd. in Porcell 30). The money from this award was only a small part of the sum that Bernhard needed in order to purchase the farmhouse in upper Austria that he wanted. So he went to his publisher and requested the entire sum, threatening, otherwise, to find another publisher. A half-hour later, he left the office with the necessary sum in hand. Except for frequent trips outside of Austria, Bernhard would live on this property for the rest of his life, and houses in isolated regions of rural Austria would become a much-favored setting for his novels.

The following year saw the publication of *Amras*, a prose work that gathers together diary entries, a succession of unrelated episodes and aphorisms, which would be his greatest popular success in Austria and for which he received the Julius Campe Prize. *Gargoyles*, a second novel, appeared in 1967, as did a collection of short prose pieces entitled *Prosa* (Prose). The speech that he gave on the occasion of his receiving the Wildgans Prize in 1968 began with a statement that reads like a gloss on the predicament of the protagonists of his major work: "When we are searching for the truth . . . it is failure, death that we are searching for, our own failure, our own death, as far back as our thoughts or feelings go, or our imagination, or as far into the future

as we were to look, it is death, the absence of repose or repose as sign of weakness, of failure" (qtd. in Porcell 334).

In the same year the awarding of the Austrian National Prize was the occasion for Bernhard's giving an acceptance speech that provoked the first of the many public controversies that were to follow both himself and his work throughout his life. In it, he declared that "The state is a structure permanently condemned to failure, the populace is a structure incessantly condemned to infamy and to spiritual weakness. Life is despair to which philosophies look for support, philosophies in which everything is, finally, pledged to insanity" (qtd. in Porcell 43-44). Bernhard's own account of this awards ceremony, which appears in *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, is as amusing as it is implausible: "The encomium delivered by the minister in the audience chamber of the ministry was utter nonsense, because he merely read out from a sheet of paper what had been written down for him by one of his officials charged with literary affairs. He said, for instance, that I had written a novel about the south seas, which of course I had not. And although I have been an Austrian all my life, the minister stated that I was Dutch. He also stated that I specialized in adventure novels, though this was news to me. More than once during his encomium he said that I was a foreigner, a visitor to Austria" (70).

Bernhard's third novel, *The Lime Works*, widely regarded as marking the beginning of his major phase as a novelist, appeared in 1970 and was awarded the prestigious Georg Büchner Prize. The speech that Bernhard gave on this occasion began with a powerful indictment of language that expresses the love-hate relationship with words that would characterize the work of his major phase:

> the thousands and hundreds of thousands of words that we keep trotting out, recognizable by their revolting truth which is revolting

> falsehood, and inversely by their revolting falsehood which is revolting truth, in all languages, in all situations, the words that we don't hesitate to speak, to write and to remain silent about, that which speaks, words which are made of nothing and which are worth nothing, as we know and as we ignore, the words that we hang on to because we become crazed by impotence and are made desperate by madness, words only infect and don't know, efface and deteriorate, cause shame, falsify, cripple, darken and obscure; in one's mouth and on paper they do violence through those who do violence to them; both words and those who do them violence are shameless; the state of mind of words and of those who do them violence is impotent, happy, catastrophic. (qtd. in Porcell 53-54)

Bernhard's parallel career as a playwright began in 1970, as did his long collaboration with the director Claus Peymann, who directed Bernhard's first full-length play, *A Party for Boris*, at Hamburg's Schauspielhaus. A number of prestigious Austrian theaters soon adopted this play for their own programs. Popular interest in Bernhard's theatrical work of this period was demonstrated by the fact that, in 1974, Vienna's Burgtheater performed his new play *The Hunting Party*, while the Salzburg Festival presented *The Force of Habit*. Other important productions directed by Peymann included *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige* (The Ignoramus and the Madman) at the Salzburg Festival in 1972, the premiere of *The President* at the Burgtheater, *Minetti* in 1976, with the actor Bernhard Minetti in the title role, and, in 1979, the premiere of *Der Weltverbesserer* (The Universal Reformer).

Nineteen seventy-five, an especially important year in Bernhard's evolution, saw the publication of one of his fictional masterpieces, the novel *Correction*, as well as *An Indication of the Cause*, the first volume of the autobiographical work, the writing of which would continue for another seven years and which would eventually be collected in one volume as *Gathering Evidence* (where it appears as the second chapter). The accelerating rhythm of Bernhard's literary production was marked in 1978 by the publication of four new works, including a play entitled Immanuel Kant, the second volume of his autobiography, and two major works of fiction, *The Voice Imitator* and *Yes*. In 1979 *Erzählungen* (Stories) gathered together the major short fiction that Bernhard had produced over the previous decade.

The final decade of Bernhard's prematurely concluded career began in 1980 with a novel, *The Cheap-Eaters*, followed in 1981 by the arrival of a new volume of his autobiography, two plays—*Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* (O'er All the Treetops Is Repose) and *Am Ziel* (The Goal Attained)—and *Ave Vergil*. Nineteen eighty-two saw the publication of the final volume of the autobiography and two novels, *Concrete* and the much-admired *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, whose title alludes to Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* and which drew heavily on his actual friendship with Ludwig Wittgenstein's cousin Paul.

The Loser, the first novel of what was to become a trilogy dealing with artistic activity in its various forms, appeared in 1983. It concerns two would-be piano virtuosos whose dreams of glory are dashed by their meeting Glenn Gould as students in Salzburg. The second novel, *The Woodcutters*, presents a satirical portrait of high culture as practiced by the Viennese elite. The publication of this novel, with its ferocious and readily recognizable portraits of important figures on the Viennese cultural scene led to a suit for defamation of character by Gerhard Lampersberg, one of its leading denizens. The last novel of this trilogy, *Old Masters*, centers on Reger, a lovingly portrayed, aging music critic, who goes every other day to Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum in order to spend uninterrupted hours contemplating Tintoretto's "White-Bearded Man."

Yet another example of Bernhard's simultaneous publication of theatrical and fictional

Yet another example of Bernhard's simultaneous publication of theatrical and fictional works occurred in 1985 when, along with *Old Masters*, he published *Histrionics*, one of his best-known plays, which had its premiere at the Salzburg Festival. Again, in 1986, Bernhard published *Extinction*, the novel that was to be his last, while *Einfach Kompliziert* (Simply Complicated) had its premiere at the Schiller Theater in Berlin and *Ritter, Dene, Voss* was presented at the Salzburg Festival. These were, to be sure, vastly overshadowed by the 1988 production of *Heldenplatz*, in which Bernhard's portrayal of his fellow countrymen as a bunch of unregenerate Nazis led then-Chancellor Kurt Waldheim to condemn it as an insult to the Austrian people. Bernhard died of a heart attack on the morning of February 12, one day after the fortieth anniversary of the death of his grandfather. Shortly before his death, he had modified his will to prohibit all publications, performances, and public readings of his work in Austria. *Elisabeth II*, the only one of Bernhard's plays to have its premiere after his death, was produced in Berlin in November 1989 at the Schiller Theater.

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Serious critical interest in Bernhard's work dates in German-speaking countries from 1970, the date of the publication of Anneliese Botond's collection of essays, *Über Thomas Bernhard*. Other important early studies of his work include Heinz Ludwig Arnold's *Thomas Bernhard* (*Text und Kritik* 43) and Bernard Sorg's *Thomas Bernhard*.

Significant new work on Bernhard was regularly published during the 1980s, and, since 1990, approximately thirty books devoted exclusively to his work have appeared. In Germany and Austria, at least, Bernhard is that rarest of literary phenomena: a postmodernist writer who has attracted the highest possible critical acclaim and yet whose work is also known to the general reader. Bernhard's extraordinary gift for provocation doubtlessly played a role in establishing his fame. His reputation is not, however, by any means limited to his notorious public image, but extends to the broad range of his work as well.

In *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard*, Charles Martin notes that Austrian criticism of Bernhard has tended to choose from among three related approaches to his work. Some critics, for example, have emphasized his "critique of Austrian traditions and society." Others have interpreted Bernhard's Austria "as a symbol for contemporary (Western) civilization." A third group, which Martin regards as "more productive," have interpreted Bernhard's work as involving "a rejection of the entire human condition" (7). As Martin further observes, some critics have used Adorno and the Frankfurt School to suggest the wider application of Bernhard's critique. Thus Heinrich Lindenmayer "interprets the works of Bernhard as social criticism, in that they show individuals within a society which denies them human identity" (17) and Peter Buchka, on the occasion of Bernhard's death, characterized his work "as an investigation of the decline of the West" (20).

In "Die Verklärung des heiligen Bernhard" (Bayer 241-68), Claude Porcell observes that Bernhard, whose popularity in France dates from the publication of the French translation of *Wittgenstein's Nephew* in 1985, has become an absolutely necessary point of reference for any cultivated French reader. He won the Prix des Médicis for foreign literature in 1989, and, during the theatrical seasons from 1988-89 and 1989-90, he was the most frequently performed foreign playwright in France. Throughout the 1980s Bernhard was likewise the subject of numerous favorable notices that recognized him as one of the most important 20h-century writers. Porcell's own publication in 1986 of *Ténèbres*, a collection of essays and interviews, was yet another indication of the increasing recognition that Bernhard was receiving in France. Chantal Thomas's *Thomas Bernhard*, which appeared in 1990, was, in turn, the first significant critical study devoted exclusively to his work. Since 1991, Gallimard has been publishing Bernhard's work in paperback editions, which is, as Porcell notes, the unmistakable sign that Bernhard has been accepted into the pantheon of literary classics.

Bernhard has been accepted into the pantheon of literary classics.

Porcell likewise calls attention to the surprising fact that critics across the spectrum ranging from Catholics to communists recognized the positive, even radiant, vision that lay beyond the darkness of Bernhard's work. Some even compared him to the Charles Péguy of *Les Cahiers de la Quinzaine*. Jean-Maurice de Montrémys, writing for the Catholic newspaper *La Croix*, regretted that Bernhard had not received the Nobel Prize his achievement clearly merited, and Claude Prévost, writing for the communist *l'Humanité* called Bernhard's death a "catastrophe" for literature. Michel Cournot, writing for *Le Monde* at the time of Bernhard's death, called him the greatest contemporary writer and, in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, the only readable one.

In "Wenn die Metaphysik zur Politik wird" (Bayer 297-318), Luigi Reitani observes that serious attention to Bernhard's work began in Italy in 1974 when Isabella Berthier Verondini wrote a lengthy article on three novels (*Frost*, *Gargoyles*, and *The Lime Works*), which she regarded as forming a "trilogy about intellectuals" that pointed to a convergence, thanks to the critical function that Bernhard attributes to the writer, between his fiction and Marxist theory. A further sign of the precocious Italian interest in his work was the organization of a Bernhard Symposium, attended by the author himself, before any of his work had actually been translated into Italian. In 1978 Italo Calvino, praising Bernhard as the most important writer in the world, recommended his work to the publisher Einaudi, while the literary critic Luigi Golino argued that *Gargoyles* was one of the masterpieces of prose fiction of the century.

In 1982, the turning point for Bernhard's reception in Italy, he was awarded the Premio Prato, a symposium on his plays was held in Sesto Fiorentino, and the Italian premiere of *The Force of Habit*, directed by Dino Desiata, was presented by the Gruppo della Roicca theater company. The end of this same year saw the Italian translations of *Yes*, of the second volume of his autobiography, and of a collection of plays that included *A Party for Boris*, *The Force of Habit*, and *Der Weltverbesser*. The Turin newspaper *La Stampa* referred to Bernhard as the "literary event of the year."

Carlos Fortea observes, in "Der Beste Schriftsteller des Spanischen Realismus" (Bayer 319-37), that Bernhard first came to the attention of Spanish readers through the 1978 translation of *Gargoyles*, which, in spite of favorable critical response, did not enjoy popular success. The late 1980s saw the translation of his autobiography, *Wittgenstein's Nephew* and The *Woodcutters*, as well as collections of stories and of plays. Additionally, *Ave Virgil* appeared in a dual-language edition. The publication of the Spanish translation of *Correction* definitively established Bernhard's reputation and greatly accelerated the rhythm of publication of his work in Spain. Reviewing *Correction* for *Insula*, Domingo Pérez Minik declared of Bernhard that "In the field of contemporary fiction, from the Soviet Union to the United States, no other figure commands our attention more powerfully" (7).

According to Fortea, an important factor in the Spanish response to Bernhard had to do with the Catholic element of his work. Bernhard's portrayal of the oppressiveness of counterreformation Austrian Catholicism and its relation to the Nazi regime of his childhood resonated with a generation of readers who had endured the years of the Franco dictatorship as well as the dominance of a church that promoted the image of a rigid and oppressive God.

Fortea also points to two younger Spanish novelists who clearly shown signs of Bernhard's influence: Javier Garciá Sánchez, who shows stylistic affiliations with Bernhard in such novels as *Ultima carta de amor de Caroline von Günderode a Bettina Brentano* and *Los amores secretos*, and Félix de Azúa, the author of such novels as *Cambio de bandera*, *Diario de un hombre humillado*, and *Historia de un idiota contada por él mismo*. He concludes his overview with the observation that Bernhard's presence

as a significant writer in Spain is now beyond dispute. His works continue to be published, his readership is constantly growing, and many of his readers regard him as the summit of German-language literature. However, he has not yet attracted the significant critical work that one finds elsewhere in Europe.

David McLintock, one of Bernhard's several highly gifted translators, began his *Times Literary Supplement* article on him with the observation that "Thomas Bernhard is a best-selling author in German-speaking countries and much esteemed in France, Spain and Italy. Yet in Great Britain and the United States he has few readers, despite the efforts of two distinguished publishing houses and six or more translators" (7). It is worth noting in this respect that, while most of Bernhard's novels have, by now, been translated, he is virtually unknown as a poet and playwright. No translation of his poetry exists, and the only translation of his theatrical work is a volume entitled *Histrionics*, which contains just three of his plays.

As McLintock notes, reviews of Bernhard's novels were generally favorable, "indeed enthusiastic," and the posthumously published translation of *Extinction* received a Critics' Choice Award in 1995 in America. In 1983, while McLintock was working on his translation of *Concrete*, George Steiner told him that Bernhard would never be popular in the United States or Great Britain "because the Anglo-Saxon mentality differed fundamentally from the Central European." To corroborate his opinion, he disclosed that *Correction*, in his view one of the great books of the century, had sold only sixty copies in the United States.

In spite of the unfortunate neglect of Bernhard's work in English-speaking countries, several critics have responded enthusiastically to his solitary greatness. For example, Benjamin Weissman, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, regrets the lack of an American equivalent of Bernhard, which he attributes to differences in cultural climates: "Serious literary fiction writers here don't have the kind of impact here that they do in Europe, and if there was an American Bernhard his manuscripts would all be piled in his closet. No one would publish him. . . . In German-speaking countries almost everyone who reads is familiar with Bernhard and has a strong opinion of him." He further makes the entirely plausible claim that David McLintock's "exquisite" translation of *Extinction* "presents an English far richer than most English language books." Martin Seymour-Smith, reviewing *The Woodcutters* for the *Washington Post*, echoed Weissman's enthusiasm in his assessment of Bernhard as "not only Austria's most gifted living author, but Europe's" (3).

Writing for the *Village Voice*, in an article entitled "Saint Bernhard," Gary Indiana expressed the personal importance of Bernhard's work for him in a way that doubtlessly resonates among many of his readers: "I always read Bernhard with relief. Even though he was in Austria and not America, even though he wrote of Austria's hideousness instead of America's hideousness, even though he continually provoked and ridiculed the so-called cultural elite of Austria and not the so-called cultural elite of America, I felt grateful that someone, somewhere, could write exactly as he pleased with impunity, fearlessly, and that his reputation grew and grew as he became more and more disagreeable, more contrary, more intolerant of hypocrites and imbeciles" (19). Two literary journals, *Pequod* and *Modern Austrian Literature*, have featured Bernhard in special issues. In recent years, however, virtually no articles on his work have appeared in English-language scholarly journals. Donald G. Daviau appropriately concludes his overview of the American response to Bernhard by commenting that "a good beginning has been made over the past twenty years, but a great deal still remains to be accomplished before this `major author of Western literature' will actually be widely read in the United States and not just appreciated by a select audience" (262).

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The most striking of Bernhard's formal innovations is his pervasive use of repetition as a hallmark narrative device, one whose operations can be observed in at least three distinct aspects of his work: first, he tells essentially the same story over and over again in each of his novels; second, every significant word or phrase in each of these novels is endlessly repeated and permutated; finally, his stories are regularly recounted by narrators who claim to be merely repeating what has already been said to them by first-hand observers.

Bernhard's "ur-story," which resurfaces in all his major fiction, is the tale of a protagonist who, experiencing himself as a target of persecutory violence, seeks to displace this violence upon a surrogate. The omnipresence of reciprocal anxiety in human relationships is compellingly expressed by Prince Saurau in *Gargoyles*: "In conversation . . . people constantly feel as if they are treading a tightrope and are always afraid of falling down to the low level more proper to them. I too have this fear. Therefore all conversations are conducted by people who are treading a tightrope and constantly in fear of falling to their low level, of being pushed down to the low level" (160). What the prince does not say, but Bernhard implicitly affirms everywhere in his work is that the most reliable way to avoid being "pushed down" is to push down another in one's place.

The Lime Works is replete with allusions to the archetypal persecution narrative that is Bernhard's single, endlessly repeated story. Thus Konrad believes that anyone who devotes himself to serious intellectual labor becomes the "victim to a conspiracy that would ultimately involve the whole world and even whatever possibilities existed beyond the world" (54). Later, he will denounce "the increasingly disturbed, nervous so-called consumer society, with its chronically irritating and ultimately ruinous effect on everything in the nature of intellectual effort" (60).

At first, the lime works appears to be an ideal refuge from the violence of the surrounding world. Situated in an isolated location and possessed of walls whose thickness guarantees further insulation from a world that is, by definition, hostile to Konrad's intellectual labor, it appears to be the perfect setting for Konrad to work on his monograph on the sense of hearing. We realize upon reflection, however, that the lime works is not so much a refuge from violence as it is a setting in which Konrad can displace the violent persecution to which he believes he has been subjected upon an other. His preferred surrogate is his wife, whom he first tortures by reading to her from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, "a habit of his that was guaranteed to drive a woman up a wall" (173). Ultimately, he shoots her in the head with a shotgun, leaving her body "slumped forward, with her head all ripped to pieces from the shot or shots from that carbine" (8).

The major novels that follow *The Lime Works* will essentially work variations on the archetypal persecution narrative whose form Bernhard had already delineated in the story of Konrad and his wife. In *Correction*, for example, the lime works is transformed into Holler's garret, described by the narrator as the "thought dungeon" in which Roithamer will pursue his project of constructing the ideal human habitation for his beloved sister, who replaces Konrad's wife. Roithamer is deeply attached to his sister; this does not, however, prevent his provoking her death, which occurs on the very day that she moves into the house that he has built for her. Like Konrad, who forced his wife to participate in an insane experiment while preparing the book that he never writes on the sense of hearing, Roithamer has unwittingly killed his sister by forcing her to inhabit a house that was completely contrary to her own nature. Bernhard implies that the sister has, however unwittingly on Roithamer's part, become a surrogate upon whom he has displaced his violent hatred of his mother, whom he repeatedly refers to contemptuously as "that Eferding woman," and whom he blames for all of the torments that life has visited upon him. He remembers her in his childhood, "All day long she was on her feet in her repulsive state of slovenliness" (187) and as implacably opposed to

his interest in culture: "mother had never, to my personal knowledge, read a good book, she detested everything that had to do with books" (189). The mechanism whereby

violence is displaced from one object to another in Bernhard's novels seems, however, to guarantee that Roithamer's hatred of his mother will not lead to an overt act of violence directed against her. Rather, it is the sister who will die in her place.

A similar pattern appears in *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, an autobiographical work in which Bernhard displaces his own "deterioration" upon his friend Paul Wittgenstein. Bernhard and Wittgenstein are brought together at a sanitarium by their respective illnesses—physical for the former, mental for the latter. The mirroring quality of these illnesses allows for a displacement whereby Bernhard will occupy the comparatively invulnerable position of the narrator, while Paul Wittgenstein will serve as the protagonist who will at least partially relieve the narrator of his own suffering. Bernhard had underlined this sacrificial relationship between himself and his protagonists in an interview with André Müller: "When I write about this kind of thing, about this kind of centrifugal situation that leads to suicide, I am certainly describing a state of mind that I identify with, which I probably experienced while I was writing, precisely because I did not commit suicide, because I escaped from that" (qtd. in Porcell 99).

Midway through the novel, as though preparing him for what will amount to a sacrificial death, Bernhard describes Paul in a way that uncannily resembles a self-portrait: "He was the most ruthless observer and constantly found occasion to accuse. Nothing escaped his accusing tongue. Those who came under his scrutiny survived only a very short time before being savaged; . . . he would lambaste them with the same words that I myself employ when I am roused to indignation, when I am forced to defend myself and take action against the insolence of the world in order not to be put down and annihilated by it" (60-61). This blurring of the distinction between the narrator and his protagonist sets the stage for a death that Bernhard had long contemplated but that Paul will actually enact. Bernhard will reveal that "For years I had taken refuge in a terrible suicidal brooding" (79) and that "Every morning on waking I was inevitably caught up in this mechanism of suicidal brooding" (80). Yet, fortunately as it were, Paul "suffered from the same disease" (88), and it is he, rather than Bernhard, who will acquire "the odor of wretchedness and death" (93). Bernhard will shun him during this terminal period "because I was afraid of a direct confrontation with death" (98), while acknowledging the underlying relationship between Paul's death and his own survival: "It is not farfetched to say that this friend had to die in order to make my life more bearable and even, for long periods, possible" (99). In the novel's concluding sentence Bernhard will suggest that the friend whose life was so intimately connected with his own has now been definitively expelled: "He lies, as they say, in the Central Cemetery in Vienna. To this day I have not visited his grave" (100).

The sacrificial connection that Bernhard suggests between Paul Wittgenstein's death and his own continued life reappears in the novel *Yes*, in which the suicide of the Persian woman is prepared for by the narrator's own preoccupation with suicide. This motif of the surrogate victim is clearly established in the novel's opening sentence, where the narrator describes himself as in the process of "dumping" his problems on his friend Moritz. Later, he will persist in making these revelations even though he recognizes that they have "wounded" Moritz (30). Similarly, he will underline the Persian woman's role as a surrogate victim when he refers to her as the ideal "sacrificial mechanism" (116).

While the woman has literally arrived in this comically benighted corner of upper Austria because her companion, a Swiss engineer, has chosen it as the ideal location in which to build his new house, the reader recognizes this realistic motivation as simply a pretext for arranging the sacrificial death that Bernhard intends for her. We glimpse this archetypal pattern from the very beginning of his narrative, when the narrator describes the woman as "regenerating" and perceives the arrival of the couple as signifying his

"redemption" (15). While the narrator himself has never been able to act on his own suicidal impulses, it was his insinuating words, as we learn in the novel's closing sentence, that provoked the woman's suicide. After she has committed suicide (by throwing herself in front of a cement truck), he remembers discussing the frequent suicide of young people and asking her if she would kill herself one day, to which she replies, in the novel's closing word, "Yes" (135).

This sacrificial mechanism, whereby the protagonist plays the role of surrogate victim for the narrator, seems to achieve its most complete expression in *The Loser*, a novel throughout which we recognize the degree to which Wertheimer's suicide has, in effect, spared the narrator's own life. As in *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, Bernhard establishes affinities between narrator and protagonist that make one virtually a carbon copy of the other. Both the narrator and Wertheimer are aspirants to glory as piano virtuosos, both go to Salzburg to study with Horowitz, and both find their dreams of glory precipitously ended by their encounter with Glenn Gould. However, Wertheimer, like Paul Wittgenstein, will be the only one to suffer the terminal consequences of the emotional wound by which they are both equally afflicted.

The narrator's explicit account of Wertheimer's decline and eventual suicide is implicitly the story of how he himself—to recall the phrase that Bernhard used in *Wittgenstein's Nephew*—avoided "direct confrontation with death." Like Bernhard, who shuns Paul Wittgenstein during the terminal period of his madness, the narrator of *The Loser* fails to respond to the signs of Wertheimer's mental disintegration because this would interrupt work on his manuscript, "About Glenn Gould." As the novel's scapegoat, Wertheimer's destiny is to be progressively more crippled by his impossible desire to be Glenn Gould. His living this futile passion to its most despairing extreme thus liberates the narrator from a passion that he clearly shares with him. Thanks to Wertheimer's being mortally wounded by his encounter with Gould, the narrator escapes, not only intact, but regenerated.

The verbal repetitions that are the hallmark of Bernhard's prose style are—like the sacrificial mechanism that he continually stages in his novels—motivated by the desire to escape from the "terminal disease" that is humanity's common affliction. Unlike the sacrificial mechanism, however, Bernhard's verbal repetitions create a catharsis which—like the musical effects that they have now transposed to prose fiction—does not depend for its success on the persecution of a surrogate victim.

In *Gargoyles*, the earliest of his novels to have been translated into English, the syntactical repetitions that give to his novels their unmistakably Bernhardian texture is exemplified by the monologue that he creates for Prince Saurau. Until this point, the narrative has been recounted in a relatively conventional way by a young boy who is following his father, a doctor, as he makes his medical rounds. When, however, they enter the prince's castle, the prince himself will launch into a narrative that announces Bernhard's own radical departures from traditional narration. The "repetition compulsion" that generates his narrative leads, for example, to the following account of a man who has sought employment in his castle:

> "What I said and what he said, everything I did and everything I thought and what he did, pretended to do, what I pretended to do and what he thought, it was all this stereotype, this stereotyped idea of the inadequacy, poverty, frailty, inferiority, deathly weariness of human existence, and I instantly had the impression that a sick man had entered my house, that I was dealing with a sick man, with someone in need of help. Whatever I said was spoken to a sick man, Doctor, and what I heard, Doctor, came from the lips of a sick man, from an extremely submissive, morbid brain which is filled with the

> most fantastic but embarrassingly derailed notions that in themselves reveal him for what he is. . . . The man had no idea of what he wanted, and I made him aware of this in the most forceful way; I said that what he was doing was morbid, that his whole life was a morbid life, his existence a morbid existence, and consequently everything he was doing was irrational, if not utterly senseless." (83)

Here, as everywhere else in his subsequent oeuvre, Bernhard uses verbal repetition to create a literary work whose fundamental inspiration is not narrative, but musical. We can imagine, in this respect, the interest with which Bernhard must have contemplated the tribute paid to music by his beloved Schopenhauer: "It stands alone, detached from all the other arts. In it we do not recognize the imitation or reproduction of any Idea of the creatures in the world. Yet it is such a great and glorious art, its effect on man's inmost nature is so powerful, and it is so completely and so deeply understood by him in his inmost consciousness as a perfectly universal language whose clarity surpasses even that of the perceptible world itself" (162-63).

Schopenhauer's assertion that "music is entirely independent also of the phenomenal world, ignores it altogether, could to a certain extent exist if there were no world at all" (164) would have appealed powerfully to a writer as desperately in search of an "alternative world" as was Bernhard. Likewise, his insistence on the superiority of music, which, unlike those other arts that speak only of "shadows," speaks of the true "essence" of the world, surely must have confirmed Bernhard's own disdain for the traditional devices of conventional narrative—including plot, setting, characterization, etc.—that seemed inevitably to condemn it to contamination by the phenomenal world.

Schopenhauer himself believed that a language of mere words could never reach the depth and universality achieved by the language of music, which, in his view, betrayed its destiny by consorting too closely with words: "Thus if music tries to attach itself too closely to the words, and tries to mold itself to episode and instance, it is striving to speak a language that is not its own" (169). Bernhard, however, by transgressing all the narrative conventions (in particular, the injunction against needless repetition) that traditionally prevent fiction from attaining the perfection of music, will, in effect, disprove his master's strictures against merely verbal language. He will create a hybrid, musical and narrative composition, that, with its pervasive reliance on theme and variation as its structuring principle, will bring to its readers precisely the emotional gratification that his protagonists had vainly striven to achieve through a violent catharsis. Bernhard's major fiction will incorporate both the restless search for gratification and its recurrent achievement that Schopenhauer had attributed to the interplay of melody and the keynote in a musical composition: "the nature of melody is a constant digression and deviation from the key-note in a thousand ways . . . yet there always follows a return at last to the key-note. In all these excursions melody expresses the many different forms of the will's striving, but always its gratification, too, by finally returning to a harmonious interval and still more, to the key-note" (167).

The fundamental desire aroused by Bernhard's narrative melodies is the longing for a total, cathartic expulsion of psychic tension. In *The Lime Works* Konrad had spoken of his wish, while writing, to turn "his head over, suddenly, from one moment to the next, ruthlessly flipping it over to drop everything inside his head onto the paper, all in one motion" (241). Failing in this endeavor, he spilled his wife's brains instead and then sought refuge in a manure pit. Bernhard, however, achieves the goal that eluded Konrad by inventing a highly rhythmic, ritualized prose that produces a literary form of exorcism. His relentless repetitions descend into the core of humanity's "terminal illness," which it then cathartically expels. Reger, the hero of *Old Masters*, is himself an especially accomplished practitioner of Bernhard's verbal art, as evidenced by his rhythmical ranting against Martin Heidegger:

rhythmical ranting against Martin Heidegger:

> Heidegger is a good example of how nothing is left of a fashion in philosophy which at one time had gripped the whole of Germany, nothing left but a number of ridiculous photographs and a number of even more ridiculous writings. Heidegger was a philosophical market crier who only brought stolen goods to the market, everything of Heidegger's is second-hand, he was and is the prototype of the re-thinker, who lacked everything, but truly everything, for independent thinking. Heidegger's method consisted in the most unscrupulous turning of other people's great ideas into small ideas of his own, that is a fact. Heidegger has so reduced everything great that it has become German-compatible, you understand: German-compatible, Reger said. Heidegger is the petit bourgeois of German philosophy, the man who has placed on German philosophy his kitschy night-cap, that kitschy black night-cap which Heidegger always wore, on all occasions. Heidegger is the carpet-slipper and night-cap philosopher of the Germans, nothing else. (43)

Or consider his dismissive account of a papal audience:

> You go to an audience of the Pope, he said, and you take the Pope and the audience seriously, moreover for the rest of your life; ridiculous, the history of the papacy is full of nothing but caricatures, he said. Of course, Saint Peter's is great, he said, but it is still ridiculous. Just step into Saint Peter's and free yourself completely of those hundreds and thousands and millions of Catholic lies about history, you do not have to wait long before the whole of Saint Peter's seems ridiculous to you. Go to a private audience and wait for the Pope, even before he arrives he will seem ridiculous to you, and of course he is ridiculous when he enters in his kitschy white pure silk robes. (58)

In *Extinction*, the last of his novels, Bernhard used repetition to achieve a similarly cathartic effect while delivering himself of a parthian shot at the very language without which his own literary achievements would have been inconceivable:

> German is essentially an ugly language, which not only grinds all thought into the ground, as I've already said, but actually falsifies everything with its ponderousness. It's quite incapable of expressing a simple truth as such. By its very nature it falsifies everything. It's a crude language, devoid of musicality, and if it weren't my mother tongue I wouldn't speak it, I told Gambetti. How precisely French expresses everything! And even Russian, even English, to say nothing of Italian and Spanish, which are so easy on the ear, while German, in spite of being my mother tongue, always sounds alien and ghastly! To a musical and mathematical person like you or me, Gambetti, the German language is excruciating. It grates on us whenever we hear it, it's never beautiful, only awkward and lumpy, even when used as a vehicle of high art. The German language is completely antimusical, I told Gambetti, thoroughly common and vulgar, and that's why our literature seems common and vulgar. German writers have always had only the most primitive instrument to play on, I told Gambetti, and this has made everything a hundred times harder for them. (119)

The potentially awkward and infelicitous repetitions that Bernhard turns to aesthetic

purposes in these passages are also apparent in his continual recourse to reported speech, which requires that the secondary narrator repeat the words of the witnesses upon whom he depends for his account of events. The narrator of *The Lime Works* exemplifies this device when he acknowledges the various local inhabitants who have contributed to his knowledge of events leading up to and following Konrad's murder of his wife. Throughout the novel, we understand that the account that we are now hearing in his voice has its origins in voices for which he has, as it were, become a transmitter.

Bernhard underlines this imitative quality of the narrative voice in ever more explicit ways in his subsequent novels. Thus the narrator of *Correction* will base his narrative on the fragmentary notes Roithamer had been writing before his death. Throughout the second half of his narrative, he will frequently punctuate his text with interpolations in the form of clarifications such as "Roithamer wrote" or "so Roithamer." In this way he will constantly call attention to the fact that the narrative voice, which we would otherwise instinctively attribute to him, is in fact Roithamer's. Likewise, in *Old Masters* we think that we are listening to the inimitable voice of Reger, whose formidable denunciations are still ringing in our ears long after we have completed our reading. In fact, however, as Bernhard will periodically remind us, we have actually been listening from beginning to end to a "recording" of this magisterial voice which has passed, first, through a manuscript left by Atzbacher and, second, through the "performance" of this manuscript staged for us by the unnamed narrator.

Bernhard's most memorable representation of a speaker whose presumably personal voice actually echoes the voices of others occurs in the collection *The Voice Imitator*, where in the title story a professional impersonator regales audiences with his uncanny ability to mimic perfectly the manner of speaking of various well-known personalities. When, however, he is asked to imitate his own voice, he is forced to admit that this he cannot do. Like the protagonist of this particular vignette, the narrator of the collection itself will "perform" for his readers by quoting from the words of the anonymous witnesses to and newspaper reports about the "human interest" stories that he recounts.

Bernhard's use of reported speech—which allows his narrators to speak to us only on condition that they repeat the words of others—serves as a creative response to the potentially destructive anxieties provoked by the discovery of one's own "belatedness." Each of Bernhard's novels foregrounds the fear of losing one's own distinctive personality through contact with an other, more dominant personality. The narrator of *The Woodcutters*, for example, alludes repeatedly to his belief that, in allowing his personality to be molded by the upper-class Viennese, by whom he has, as it were, been adopted, he has (like the voice imitator, in this respect) lost contact with his authentic self. He complains that his whole life has been "simulated" (60) and regrets the life that he has inevitably spent as a "society ape" (87) and as a "Salzburg fool" (89).

The narrator is not, however, alone, since in this novel the destiny of every character is to relinquish personal authenticity in order to play a role whose fulfillment requires his self-alienation. He recognizes, for example, that his hosts, the Auersbergers, are themselves "apes" and that Jeannie Billroth—"the Viennese Virginia Woolf"—possesses a reputation that both elevates her through association with an acknowledged genius and consigns her achievements to a merely derivative status. Jeannie's self-alienating refashioning of herself in the image of Virginia Woolf is itself the pattern for a series of self-betrayals whereby authors trade their authenticity for literary success:

> While Jeannie always had her Virginia Woolf madness and hence suffered from a kind of Viennese Virginia Woolf disease, Schreker always had the Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein madness and suffered from the Marianne Moore and Gertrude Stein disease. At the beginning of the sixties both of them quite suddenly turned their

> literary madnesses and their literary diseases, which in the fifties had no doubt been quite genuine madnesses and quite genuine diseases, into a pose, a purpose-built literary pose, a multipurpose literary pose, in order to make themselves attractive to openhanded politicians, thus unscrupulously killing off whatever literature they had inside them for the sake of a venal existence as recipients of state patronage. (144-45)

The fear that our actions are not our own, that they are, rather, the by-products of the influence exerted upon us by others, is memorably expressed in *The Loser* by Wertheimer, the eponymous protagonist who complains to the narrator, "we don't exist, we get existed" (47). Wertheimer himself exhibits to a grotesque degree the incapacity for autonomous thought and action to which Bernhard's characters and, by inference, all human beings are prone. As the narrator explains: "Wertheimer wasn't capable of seeing himself as a unique and autonomous being, as people can and must if they don't want to despair; no matter what kind of person, one is always a unique and autonomous being, I say to myself over and over, and am rescued. . . . Wertheimer didn't have that possibility, and so he always only wanted to be Glenn Gould or, yes, Gustav Mahler or Mozart and comrades, I thought" (93). The narrator diagnoses Wertheimer as an "unrelieved emulator" who cannot resist trying to be like anyone whom he regards as his superior. Thus Wertheimer "tried to make his mark as Schopenhauer II, so to speak, or Kant II, Novalis II, filling in this embarrassing pseudophilosophy with Brahms and Handel, with Chopin and Rachmaninoff" (108). His profoundly ironic destiny is thus to become "the loser," which had been Glenn Gould's nickname for him.

This story of an aspirant to distinction destroyed by the encounter with his rival has as its counterpart, however, the contrasting story of the creative encounter between a master and a disciple who is inspired to produce his own unique creative achievements. By "quoting" his own precursors throughout his novels, Bernhard is free, in turn, to be Schopenhauer, Montaigne, Pascal, or any of his other models, without for a moment risking the potentially suicidal agony that led to Wertheimer's demise or ever suspecting that he is himself merely a derivative epigone. Bernhard's constant tributes to his precursors draw attention to the highly original way in which he has created a "disguised repetition" of the characteristic features of their work. Thus Schopenhauer, Montaigne, and Pascal, as well as Bach and Wittgenstein, return in Bernhard's own oeuvre not only as piously recited names but in the uncanny form of the novelistic creations to which they have contributed. Bernhard, in effect, resurrects them within a realm of cultural activity—narrative fiction—to which their own achievements would never in themselves have permitted their entry.

Bernhard had memorably expressed the potentially destructive effect of the encounter between the admired master and his disciple when he described his problematic relationship with Ludwig Wittgenstein: "The question is whether I can write even for a moment about Wittgenstein without destroying either him (Wittgenstein) or myself (Bernhard). . . . Wittgenstein is a summons to which I cannot respond. . . . Thus, I do not write about Wittgenstein not because I cannot, but rather because I cannot respond to him" (qtd. in Gargani 8). In *The Loser* Bernhard represents in the person of Wertheimer the fate of the disciple who never escapes from the impasse into which the master has led him. At the same time, he implies, through the creative activity of the narrator, the possibility of encountering the master without sacrificing one's own originality.

Wertheimer is led to an act of self-destruction by his tragic inability to want to be anyone other than Glenn Gould. His maniacal belief that Gould's performance of the Goldberg Variations is the unattainable model that he must struggle against all hope to emulate in his own performance of this work condemns him to utter despair. The self-

contempt to which he is driven by his obsession leads him, just prior to his suicide, to purchase "a completely worthless, a horribly untuned grand piano . . . A completely worthless instrument, a horribly untuned instrument" (170) on which he will perform a grotesquely self-deprecating version of the music whose performance by Glenn Gould had catastrophically ended his own aspirations to greatness.

The narrator, however, will transform his encounter with Glenn Gould into the creative occasion of the novel that he is about to write: "By writing about the one (Glenn Gould), I will order my thoughts about the other (Wertheimer), I thought, by listening again and again to the *Goldberg Variations* (and the *Art of the Fugue*) of the one (Glenn), in order to write about them" (157). Like Wertheimer, who prepared for his death by listening to the *Goldberg Variations*, the narrator will conclude his story about Wertheimer by listening to a recording of this piece: "If I had any interest in the matter, Franz said to me, he would describe to me the days and weeks that then took place in Traich. I asked Franz to leave me alone in Wertheimer's room for a while and put on Glenn's *Goldberg Variations*, which I had seen lying on Wertheimer's record player, which was still open" (170). Rather than competing with Gould on the pianist's own terms, the narrator repeats his accomplishment in the form of a literary work that, with its theme and variation structure, parallels the recording to which he has been listening.

By alluding to the *Goldberg Variations* in the novel's concluding sentence, Bernhard acknowledges the source of his novel, not so much in the various details of Wertheimer's life at Traich with which Franz would have provided him, as in the musical achievement that he will now emulate. The narrator's survival of his encounter with Glenn Gould parallels Gould's own success in encountering Bach without succumbing to anxieties about his own belatedness. The fact that Gould achieved immortality as a performer of the work of one of the greatest musical composers ever to have lived prefigures Bernhard's own literary appropriation of Bach, not only in The Loser but throughout his entire fictional oeuvre.

As Heinz Kuehn has observed, the key to understanding Bernhard's greatness rests with our recognizing the profoundly original, literary way in which he has appropriated his philosophic models. Kuehn rightly argues that "One cannot take Bernhard literally" and that reading him as though he were a philosopher "would mean to misread him" (550). He credits Bernhard with bringing to the pessimistic vision that he inherits from his precursors a radically original narrative language:

> It is a prose that mercilessly hammers away at the reader's nerves with endless repetition and elaboration of a few basic themes, but it also forces him or her to look, if you will, "heavenward," to let himself be moved by those passages in which Bernhard's love of nature, of simple people, of children and animals, of a good marriage and family life, of compassion for the suffering and downtrodden breaks through and redeems the bleakness, the doom and gloom that pervade his stories. Reinforcing and at times contradicting, not to say negating, the ambiguity in his creed of nihilism is his delight in playing with and inventing words—an inventiveness all but lost even in the best of English translations—and his obvious joy in writing. (551)

Bernhard's mantric prose does, indeed, perform for his readers the redemptive work that Kuehn attributes to it. As importantly, it allowed Bernhard himself to affirm his own utter originality while, at the same time, absorbing the myriad influences of his predecessors. His creative repetitions of their work—which transcend the double-bind of emulation and autonomy that had led his protagonists to self-destruction—have produced one of the profoundest as well as one of the most affirmative literary achievements of this recently completed millennium.

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