

# The Art of Extinction

In 1988, to commemorate Austria's annexation by Adolf Hitler fifty years earlier, a new play was commissioned from Thomas Bernhard. The author of eleven novels and more than twenty plays, Bernhard had a well-deserved reputation as the country's most provocative postwar writer: he spent his career alternately mocking and mourning Austria's Nazi legacy, which, with typical bluntness, he once represented as a pile of manure on the stage. At first, he declined to participate in the commemoration, saying with caustic humor that a more appropriate gesture would be for all the shops once owned by Jews to display signs reading "Judenfrei." But the author of plays like "The German Lunch Table," in which family members gathered for a meal discover Nazis in their soup, could not resist such a rich opportunity to needle Austria's political and cultural élite. "All my life I have been a trouble-maker," he once wrote. "I am not the sort of person who leaves others in peace."

The scandal of "Heldenplatz," the verse drama that was Bernhard's contribution to the occasion, began well before opening night. The play takes its name from the Vienna square where cheering crowds greeted Hitler in 1938; that square also happens to be across from the Burgtheater, Austria's most prestigious theatrical institution, where the play was produced. The action revolves around the suicide of an Austrian Jew who, returning to Vienna after having fled during the Second World War, is dismayed to discover anti-Semitism still simmering in the country. After the press got hold of the script, which included lines such as "There are more Nazis in Vienna now / than in thirty-eight," politicians on the right, including Jörg Haider, called for the director's expulsion from Vienna. For the première, on November 4, 1988, the Burgtheater was put under police guard. At the play's finish, according to Bernhard's biographer Gitta Honegger, a "dissonant ovation" of "shouting, booing, clapping, and whistling" went on for forty-five minutes.

The hostility of the response surprised even the pugnacious Bernhard. Some of his friends said that the episode hastened his death, which occurred, by assisted suicide, three months later, when he was fifty-eight. (He had suffered from lung ailments since his teens, and spent the last decade of his life under constant medical supervision.) But he managed to have the last word. His will, released shortly after he died, forbade the publication, the production, or even the recitation in Austria of his works, "including letters and scraps of paper," for the next seventy years, the duration of their copyright. "I emphasize expressly that I do not want to have anything to do with the Austrian state and that I reject in perpetuity not only all interference but any overtures in that regard," he declared.

Bernhard's gesture of loathing toward the homeland that had miserably failed to appreciate him was also, of course, a masterly stroke of publicity, guaranteeing a storm of lawsuits as publishers and theatre administrators went to ridiculous lengths to circumvent the ban: the Vienna Festival mounted one of his plays in Bratislava, with buses chartered for the sixty-kilometre journey across the border. But one can also see it as the consummate prank of a satirist who, in the words of W. G. Sebald, found a dark humor in "the tension between the insanity of the world and the demands of reason." Sebald

went on, “While the reader may not feel inclined to break into laughter on the basis of the material presented to him, it rings out all the louder behind the scenes of the work.”

The past year has seen the publication in English, for the first time, of two of Bernhard’s earliest works. Michael Hofmann has translated his first novel, “Frost” (Knopf; \$25.95), which appeared in 1963, and James Reidel has translated a selection of his poetry, “In Hora Mortis / Under the Iron of the Moon” (Prince-ton; \$14.95), dating from 1957. Read in the context of Bernhard’s career, they reveal one of his most characteristic traits: a remarkable singlemindedness. Philosophically, there is no difference between the writing that Bernhard did in his twenties and his extraordinary late novels. All the elements of his intensely pessimistic world view—remorseless fury at a callous universe, lack of faith in human relationships, manic pursuit of aesthetic perfection—were likely set by the hardships of his youth. He was born February 9, 1931, in a Dutch clinic for unwed mothers. His mother had been working in Holland when she became pregnant, apparently as the result of rape. His father, a carpenter and petty criminal from Germany, never acknowledged him, and Bernhard always remembered the humiliation of having to undergo a blood test as a child to establish paternity. He was soon deposited in the care of his maternal grandparents, in Salzburg. His grandfather was an anarchist and a writer of pastoral novels, and Bernhard idolized him. He recalled the walks they took, during which his grandfather would extemporize about nature and philosophy, as “the only useful education I had.” This idyll ended when Bernhard was six; his mother married and moved the family across the border to Germany.

The best account of Bernhard’s early life, if hardly the most reliable, is the autobiography he published, in five volumes, between 1975 and 1982. (It appeared in English in a single volume titled “Gathering Evidence,” translated by David McLintock.) This work, which Bernhard describes as having been “assembled from hundreds and thousands of scraps of remembered experience,” contains some of his most memorable and disturbing writing and some of his blackest humor. Bernhard, a chronic bed-wetter, was humiliated when his mother hung out his stained sheets for the neighbors to see. At school, he was even more miserable: the target of bullies, he particularly hated his compulsory membership in the Deutsches Jungvolk, a junior branch of the Hit-ler Youth, whose activities consisted of “constantly singing the same brainless songs and marching down the same streets yelling my head off.” When he was eight, a social worker arranged to have him sent to a home for “maladjusted children,” where he was shunned and denied meals; his only friend was a boy with deformed hands and legs, who received similar punishments.

In 1943, at the age of twelve, Bernhard was sent to a school in Salzburg, where he lived in a “filthy, stinking dormitory”—officially, a National Socialist Home for Boys—presided over by an “archetypal Nazi.” Air-raid drills were soon taking place every day, and Bernhard witnessed people fainting and dying in the air-raid-shelter tunnels. “The streets were strewn with broken glass and rubble,” he wrote, “and the air carried the distinctive smell of total war”:

An enormous cloud of dust hung over the ruined cathedral, and where the dome had been there was a great gaping hole the size of the dome itself. From the corner by Slama's [a clothing shop] we had a direct view of the great paintings which had adorned the walls of the dome and were now for the most part savagely destroyed, what remained of them standing out against the clear blue sky in the light of the afternoon sun. It was as though this gigantic building, which dominated the lower part of the city, had had its back ripped open and were bleeding from a terrible wound. . . . On the way to the Gstattengasse I stepped on something soft lying on the pavement in front of the Bürgerspital Church. At first sight I took it to be a doll's hand, and so did my companions, but in fact it was the severed hand of a child. It was the sight of this child's hand that quite suddenly transformed this first attack on the city by American bombers from the *sensation it had been up to then—a sensation which produced a state of feverish excitement in the boy I was at the time*—into an atrocity, an enormity.

*After the war, Catholic priests replaced the school's Nazi administrators, but Bernhard continued to regard school as "a machine for the mutilation of my mind." At the age of fifteen, he quit and became an apprentice in a grocery store in a down-and-out neighborhood on the city's periphery. In contrast to his misery at school, Bernhard took great pride in his job; he seems to have had a knack for getting along with the customers, and particularly enjoyed their open, robust way of speaking, which helped to shape his digressive writing style. Inspired by his employer, a music lover, Bernhard began taking singing lessons with an opera singer; he was apparently very talented. But during the winter of 1949, after a bout of influenza, he was admitted to the hospital with a lung infection. It was the beginning of a lifetime of chronic illness. In the fourth volume of his memoir, "Breath: A Decision," he writes of a harrowing night spent in a way station for the nearly dead:*

*Every half-hour a sister comes and lifts my hand, then drops it again. She probably does the same with a hand in the bed in front of mine, which has been in the bathroom longer. The intervals between her visits get shorter. At some stage men in grey enter the bathroom carrying a closed zinc coffin. They remove the lid and put a naked body inside, then replace the lid. I realize that the person they are carrying past me out of the bathroom in the closed zinc coffin is the man from the bed in front of mine. Now the sister comes only to lift my hand, to see whether she can still detect a pulse. Suddenly the heavy wet washing hanging on a line stretched across the bathroom and right over my head falls on top of me. A few more inches and it would have fallen on my face and smothered me. The sister comes in, grabs the washing, and throws it onto a chair beside the bath. Then she lifts my hand. All night she calls at various rooms, lifting people's hands and feeling their pulses. She starts*

stripping the bed, the bed in which someone has just died. She throws the covers on the floor and then lifts my hand again, as though waiting for me to die. Then she bends down, gathers up the covers, and goes out with them. Now I want to live.

While recuperating, Bernhard contracted tuberculosis. The last volume of the memoir is a gruesome report of his treatment—including a botched procedure during which his doctor collapsed the wrong lung—and of an extended stay at the *Grafenhof* sanitarium. But, as he later told an interviewer, “When the body is ill the brain develops astonishingly well.” While he was in the hospital, his grandfather died, leaving him his typewriter. Requesting books from his grandfather’s shelves, Bernhard began, for the first time, to read literature: Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoyevsky. He also began systematically working through his memories of childhood, “gathering evidence” about his own past and making notes on innumerable slips of paper. “I had now discovered my method of working,” he wrote, “my own brand of infamy, my particular form of brutality, my own idiosyncratic taste.”

During his stay at *Grafenhof*, Bernhard published his first short story, an homage to his grandfather. After his departure (against doctor’s orders), he worked as a cultural journalist and court reporter with a Salzburg newspaper, and then studied acting at Salzburg’s Akademie Mozarteum. He published his first volume of poetry, “Auf der Erde und in der Hölle” (“On Earth and in Hell”), in 1957, and two others quickly followed. Critics have tended to regard Bernhard’s poetry as a curiosity, and at first glance it appears to have little in common with his later work. The cycle of poems “In Hora Mortis” (Latin for “In the Hour of Death”), in which the poet plangently complains of his sorrow to a silent God, seems particularly incongruous. But seeds of his obsessions have started to sprout; the poems in “Under the Iron of the Moon” draw a dismal landscape of decay, in which flowers “blossom in blood” and “fears blow / in the wind.” Bernhard was also refining a painstakingly precise approach to composition: Ingrid Büla, a friend from his days at the Mozarteum, remembered hearing him recite his poems into a tape recorder, erasing and rerecording himself until he had got the tone and the rhythm exactly the way he wanted.

Bernhard’s start as a novelist seems almost to have been an accident. His fourth book of poetry, titled “Frost,” was rejected by his publisher. In response, Bernhard went into retreat and emerged, seven weeks later, with the draft of his first novel, also called “Frost.” It consists of notes made by an unnamed medical apprentice who is sent on an atypical mission: he must observe the elderly painter Strauch and report on the man’s condition, all the while keeping his own identity and purpose secret. Strauch, an eccentric misanthrope, has been living in an inn in the mountains, where the student also takes up residence; he quickly ingratiates himself with the old man, joining him on his long daily tramps.

*It is unclear what purpose the student's observations serve; his letters back to the clinic are never answered. But the very act of logging the minutiae of a person's habits and language echoes the efforts of the young Bernhard in his mental note-taking in the sanitarium. In essence, the apprentice is learning how to be a writer. At first, he sticks to facts, noting how Strauch "spits out his sentences the way old people spray saliva into the air" and faithfully recording the painter's vaguely philosophical circumlocutions, while admitting that he does not understand them. But as the apprentice investigates his subject's deeply pessimistic state—Strauch has destroyed all his paintings, which are "a perpetual reminder of my worthlessness," and is fixated on suicide—he comes to "feel the contagion of his logically galloping illness." It is impossible for him to re-create the painter's persona through his language without somehow also taking on his identity.*

*Strauch quotes Pascal: "Our nature is motion, complete stasis is death." The novel's metaphor for this stasis is the gradually encroaching "iron frost" that will finally cover everything. The book's landscape is shot through with traces of pain; like the decaying bodies that the young Bernhard could still smell beneath the rebuilt streets of Salzburg, "grisly traces" of the war in the valley remain, occasionally shocking their way through the snow. Strauch describes the landscape as "ugly and menacing and full of wicked memory particles, a landscape that can really dismember a man." By the end, the painter has disappeared into the snow, both literally and figuratively: he goes missing, and the search for him must be called off because of a heavy snowfall. We must assume that it is suicide. "The cold is eating into the center of my brain," he tells the apprentice.*

*Like Kafka, one of the writers he most admired, Bernhard composed nearly all his fiction from a single template, a template already evident in "Frost." His typical protagonist—often loosely based on a real-life model, such as Glenn Gould or Ludwig Wittgenstein—is a genius who is obsessed with an impossible project and is eventually destroyed by the tension between the desire for perfection in his work and the knowledge that it is unattainable. In "Correction" (1975), the scientist Roithamer spends years building a structure in the shape of a geometrically perfect cone, only to commit suicide after the project's completion. Rudolf, in "Concrete" (1982), has been working for years on a book about Mendelssohn without writing a word of it.*

*Such obsessive themes demand an obsessive form. In his struggle to depict consciousness in action, Bernhard honed an exquisite union of structure and idea. His novels take the shape of extended monologues, which can continue for as long as a hundred pages without a paragraph break, and which hurtle through every emotion from the pensive to the hysterical. Bernhard's early training as an opera singer finds expression in the musicality of his prose, which creates, holds, and repeats key phrases and ideas as a composer might do with a melodic motif. Since there is no narrative or exposition, it is up to the reader to deduce the action. One entire book consists of a man's thoughts as he sits in a chair at a party; in another, a man spends nearly a hundred pages contemplating a photograph. The purpose, as the narrator of "Correction" explains it, is to penetrate the subject's mental state:*

*When I concern myself with Roithamer, with what order of magnitude am I dealing? I ask myself, clearly I am dealing with a head that is willing and compelled to go to extremes in everything he does and capable, in this reciprocity of intellectual interaction, of peak record performances, a man who takes his own development, the development of his character and of his inborn intellectual gifts to its utmost peak, its utmost limits, its highest degree of realization . . . and who must force everything he is, in the final analysis, to coalesce in one extreme point, force it all to the utmost limits of his intellectual capacity and his nervous tension until, at the highest degree of such expansion and contraction and the total concentration he has repeatedly achieved, he must actually be torn apart.*

*Unsurprisingly, this style, with seemingly interminable sentences wending from subject to subject without pause for breath, has its detractors. Even David McLintock, in an essay on the difficulty of translating Bernhard, calls him “a curiously unpromising writer.” But this stylistic obduracy was, for Bernhard, both a necessity and a source of glee. Bernhard has been called an *Übertreibungskünstler*, an artist of exaggeration. Not only do his novels, pushing every idea to its extreme, require a similarly extreme form; he also took pleasure in prose that is hyperbolic, over the top, even joyful in its own insanity. When he is in the mood, he can be very funny: his musings on the problems of the artist are serious, but he surrounds them with often hilarious digressions on everything from hand-knitted sweaters (“hideous knitwear”) to his theory that three-ring binders, and the bureaucracy they symbolize, are the downfall of German literature (“The one exception is of course Kafka, who actually was a bureaucrat”). The eternal troublemaker who once referred to his writing as his “particular form of brutality” might also have taken some delight in watching his readers squirm. He told of leaving one of his own plays early and getting his coat from the checkroom attendant, who said sympathetically, “You don’t like it, either, do you?”*

*There is a deeper purpose to Bernhard’s apparent linguistic sadism. He seems to have taken Wittgenstein’s well-known dictum “The limits of my language are the limits of my world” as a personal challenge. Accordingly, he tried to expand the outer limit of his own language to the point where it could encompass even the most extreme forms of human experience. “In Hora Mortis” ends with a poem that appears to depict the moment of death, unravelling into a string of barely articulated cries: “my thorn sticks / piercing / oh / piercing / oh / piercing / oh / oh / my / Oh.” In the novella “Amras,” Bernhard tried assembling fragments of notes and diary entries to depict a family’s pathology. In novels such as “Gargoyles” and “The Lime Works,” he began to develop his idiosyncratic use of long paragraphs and monologues, finding in their looping form a way of writing about the secrets hidden in the Austrian past and the problems faced by those who inherit them.*

*“Correction” marked the apotheosis of this style and is perhaps Bernhard’s masterpiece. The novel’s*

first section consists of a hundred-plus-page monologue by an unnamed friend of the scientist Roithamer, who has come to sort out Roithamer's papers after his suicide: thousands of slips of paper and a "bulky manuscript" titled "About Altensam and everything connected with Altensam, with special attention to the Cone." Altensam is Roithamer's family estate, which the scientist inherited, to his chagrin, after his parents died in a car accident. The Cone turns out to be an "edifice as a work of art" that Roithamer spent the last six years of his life perfecting, intending it to be a gift for his beloved sister: he designed it to exact mathematical specifications and had it constructed in a clearing at the absolute center of the Kobernausser forest. "The idea was to make my sister perfectly happy by means of a construction perfectly adapted to her person," Roithamer explains in the papers that he left behind. But his sister was so horrified by the Cone that she became sick and died just months after seeing it. On the way to her funeral, Roithamer attacks his manuscript, "correcting it over and over again," and says that he will burn the essay after he has "destroyed it by totally correcting it into the exact opposite of what he had started out to say." He hangs himself shortly afterward.

Roithamer's friend, overwhelmed by this literary archive, decides to "sort and sift" the papers but not to alter them. The second half of the book, another paragraph of more than a hundred pages, represents a narrative of sorts, entirely in Roithamer's words (indicated awkwardly in translation by the interjection "so Roithamer," meaning "according to Roithamer"), pieced together from his fragments. The notes record Roithamer's hatred for his family, primarily for his mother, who locked him as a child in a turret room filled with dead flies. And they describe with pride the process of building the Cone, the thrill of undertaking something that has never been done before, and the despondency that leads him to "correct" what he has done: "We're constantly correcting, and correcting ourselves, most rigorously, because we recognize at every moment that we did it all wrong (wrote it, thought it, made it all wrong) . . . that everything to this point in time is a falsification, so we correct this falsification, and then we again correct the correction of this falsification and we correct the result of the correction of a correction and so forth." But the "ultimate correction," he realizes, is suicide. In the book's virtuosic final passage, Roithamer's mind unspools toward its breaking point:

Correction of the correction of the correction of the correction. . . . We can't always exist at the highest pitch of intensity, so we start to slow down in our thinking and doing (feeling), so that after a while we can go back to thinking, doing, feeling with even greater intensity, and in this way we can eventually reach ever greater degrees of intensity; as long as we haven't crossed the border, the extreme limits, we're not crazy. . . . We always went too far, so Roithamer, so we were always pushing toward the extreme limit. But we never thrust ourselves beyond it. Once I have thrust myself beyond it, it's all over, so Roithamer, "all" underlined. We're always set toward that predetermined

*moment, “predetermined moment” underlined. When that moment has come, we don’t know that it has come, but it is the right moment. We can exist at the highest degree of intensity as long as we live, so Roithamer (June 7). The end is no process. Clearing.*

*This vision of death as the “ultimate correction” must be understood as one of Bernhard’s famous exaggerations: if the artist could achieve greatness only by surrendering his entire person, then Bernhard himself—who, after all, continued to write and publish steadily up to the end of his life—could not attain it. Even Bernhard recognized the “monstrousness,” as Roithamer says, of living such a life. It is the ultimate bleak joke.*

*In the plays and novels that Bernhard published during his last decade, culminating in “Heldenplatz,” he addressed himself ever more ferociously to disrupting the silence surrounding Austria’s Nazi past. His final novel, “Extinction” (1986), dramatizes most vividly what he termed Herkunftskomplex, or “descent complex”: how does one deal with an unwanted inheritance? Franz-Josef Murau, the speaker in this novel—which, again, is divided into two hundred-plus-page monologues—has just received news that his parents and brother have been killed in a car accident, leaving Wolfsegg, the family home, in his hands. He feels nothing but resentment toward them and toward the estate, where they sheltered Nazis before and after the war in the children’s playhouse. Even now, the former Gauleiters turn out in force for the funeral, a disgusting spectacle:*

*The bishops . . . will be followed—with measured tread, as they say—by the Gauleiters, the S.S. officers, and the members of the Blood Order. And these will be followed by the National Socialist Catholic population, I thought. And the music will be played by our National Socialist Catholic band. The National Socialist salvos will be fired, and the National Socialist bells will toll. And if we’re in luck our National Socialist sun will shine throughout the ceremony, and if we’re out of luck we’ll be drenched by the National Socialist rain.*

*Murau’s rage reaches its peak when he remembers a former friend of the family, a miner named Schermaier, who was informed on during the war, for listening to Swiss radio, and was sent to a concentration camp. Afterward, he received a token sum in reparation, while a former Nazi nearby receives a generous pension. “What kind of a state is it,” Murau asks himself, “that pays a fat pension to a mass murderer and showers him with honors and commendations, yet no longer troubles about Schermaier?” In his anger, he decides to write a book to be called “Extinction,” whose purpose will be “to extinguish what it describes, to extinguish everything that Wolfsegg means to me, everything that*

*Wolfsegg is, everything.” But he realizes that Wolfsegg, contaminated by its past, must be extinguished literally as well. On the novel’s last page, he reveals his decision to hand over the estate to the Jewish community in Vienna. There is something ridiculous in the gesture: an act of charity alone cannot redeem Austria’s pathology. But Murau has no other choice; he has reached the logical end of his arguments. Just as Roithamer must “correct” his manuscript out of existence, so must Murau extinguish Wolfsegg along with himself. Thus absolved of his responsibility, he soon dies.*

*“I won’t have anything to do with this state, or no more than is absolutely necessary,” Murau concludes toward the end of “Extinction.” The words are strikingly similar to those with which Bernhard’s will, only a few years later, attempted to ban his work from Austria. Whether Bernhard thought of himself as a Murau, disposing of his estate in as perverse a manner as possible, or as a Roithamer, destroying the eccentric edifice that was his life’s work, the verbal echo must surely have brought him a mordant satisfaction. “What a good thing it is that we have always adopted an ironic view of everything, however seriously we have taken it,” he mused in his memoirs. He kept it up to the end. ♦*

