

# HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

## ALL WORDS SUDDENLY BECOME RIDICULOUS: On three recent translations of THOMAS BERNHARD



Christiaan Tonnis, *Thomas Bernhard #1*, 1985. Pencil and colored pencils on paper.



**Prose, tr. by Martin Chalmers (Seagull Books, 2010)**

***Victor Halfwit: A Winter's Tale*, tr. by Martin Chalmers (Seagull Books, 2011)**

***Heldenplatz*, tr. by Meredith Oakes & Andrea Tierney (Oberon Books, 2010)**

## **ANDREA SCRIMA**

1.

Thomas Bernhard (1931–1989), author of numerous novels, essays, short stories, and poetry in addition to plays, is inarguably one of the greatest writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His widely celebrated prose — including the masterpieces *Correction*, *Extinction*, *The Loser*, *Old Masters: A Comedy*, and *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, to name but a few — delivers an inimitable synthesis of comedy and *Weltschmerz*, existential dread and absurdity. His is a literature of profound alienation: from the family, society, the nation, history — but always, first and foremost, the self. The deformations in character brought about by familial abuse; the historical amnesia required to bask in nationalist pride: these are only a few of the targets of his acerbic wit. Although he would have no doubt scoffed at the term, Bernhard's writing is rooted in a moral conscience that sets out to ridicule the many-headed Hydra of hypocrisy, expose it in its brilliant comic light. Particularly now, with much of contemporary western culture trapped in a labyrinth of solipsism and self-reference, Bernhard's relentless stabs at deluded optimism and the inflated egos of hyperbolic self-importance are more crucial than ever, catching us off-guard at the very moment we find them illogical, unintelligible, or at least grossly exaggerated. Yet while subterfuge plays a key role in Bernhard's writing, his aesthetic concerns probe far deeper.

Bernhard sets out to expose how language itself leads us astray: how difficult it is to think independently, to formulate even a single thought that does not complete itself through the sheer force of collective use. His is a radical approach to form that mobilizes the power of music to communicate directly to

the psyche. When Bernhard introduces a theme and carries it through a series of subtle variations, he merges musical and syntactical structures to achieve a hybrid language based on repetition and permutation and polished to an almost geometric brilliance. But while Bernhard's art is ultimately affirmative, his quest for perfection in form also necessitates an isolation, an urge toward self-destruction. When asked about the role perfection plays in his writing, Bernhard replied: "That's the attraction of any art. That's all art is, getting better and better at playing your chosen instrument. That's the pleasure of it, and no one can take that pleasure away from you or talk you out of it. If someone is a great pianist then you can clear out the room where he's sitting with the piano [...] but he'll stay put and keep on playing. Even if the house falls down around him, he'll carry on playing. And with writing it's the same thing."<sup>1</sup>

Every lover of Bernhard's writing becomes, at some point, a missionary. We want to convert people to his circular logic, infect them with the bruised beauty of his mordantly comic rant; we want everyone to comprehend that Bernhard is not only dark, but deeply human and irresistibly *funny*; that he's not a pessimist, a cynic, or a misanthrope, but a relentless observer whose tender heart is encased in a prickly shell of invective: against hypocrisy, against stupidity, against duplicity in all its forms. We zealous lovers of Bernhard want to tell you all about the hypnotic pull of a passionate mind navigating whirlpools of obsessive repetition as it revolves around and around what cannot be expressed in words; we want to describe to you, in detail, how this mind finally succeeds in articulating the most elusive and elementary truths of the human condition. How the syntactical force of his prose conjures the compulsive patterns — evasion, self-deception, internalization, projection, idealization — thought undergoes as it seeks to conceal from itself what it already, all too well, knows.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Bernhard, in an interview from 1986 with Werner Wögerbauer, tr. by Nicholas Grindell, on the blog *sightandsight*: <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1090.html>. First published in German in the Autumn 2006 issue of *Kultur & Gespenster*. A shorter version was published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung* on October 22, 2006.

Yet although Bernhard's true genius still hasn't been sufficiently acknowledged in the English-speaking world, and I feel called upon to offer new evidence to argue his unique importance, shortcomings in the recent translation of his collection *Prose* — which compiles seven of the twelve early stories published in the 1979 Suhrkamp edition of *Erzählungen* — prevents it from becoming the milestone in contemporary letters it should. As a whole, the stories testify to the evolution of the author's singular voice: existential despair, alienation, impotence, the falsification of thought and experience that language itself brings about mark the territory Bernhard would continue to explore throughout his writing life. The present English edition does not, however, do justice to Bernhard's famously wicked wit, despite the numerous achievements of distinguished translator Martin Chalmers. Moreover, Seagull Books has additionally published a coffee-table volume of the story *Victor Halfwit* that could be considered the visual antipode to Bernhard's aesthetic, virtually obliterating the text with an excess of design and illustration that bears no relation whatsoever to the author's formal austerity and propels it into the realm of kitsch. But before I analyze the various shortcomings of the above-mentioned English translation, I will continue with a discussion of the works themselves.

Bernhard frequently employs a narrative device whereby a story is told in the voice of a narrator who was told the story by someone else, leading to a kind of box-within-a-box construction, a layered reality. Furthermore, several stories in this collection are studies in troubled consciousness once removed, with the narrator describing the process through which another character meets his downfall or loses his mind. Others describe the more familiar torture of self-loathing:

I also know that it is ridiculous to lead a desperate existence, even to conclude that one is leading a desperate existence is ridiculous, as the use of the word 'despair' is in itself already ridiculous ... and how, if one considers it, *all* words that one uses suddenly become ridiculous [...].<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Prose*, tr. by Martin Chalmers (London: Seagull Books, 2010) 81–82.

Being; one's perception of one's being; one's expression of this perception; the very words one has at one's disposal in order to express this perception form a fragile construct that buckles under its own weight in a kind of collapse of the self. Bernhard's mistrust of language is palpable here as he moves from describing mental states to reproducing them in analogy — through a sentence structure and thought process that spiral in on themselves in a maddening manner. In using repetition to expose language's inadequacy in the face of consciousness and subjective existence, he gets at the very heart of the phenomenon that subverts our attempts at true intelligibility.

Ultimately, the subject of writing becomes writing itself. In the story "Jauregg," life in the Jauregg Quarries, where the narrator has accepted a menial job offered to him by his uncle, quickly becomes intolerable:

A society grown coarse and embittered [...] must inevitably be met with the greatest adroitness, if a man like myself wishes to maintain himself in it for more than even the shortest period of time. Mistakes once made in front of a crowd of people seeking and finding a way to get by in nothing more than prying and malicious joy, endeavouring to mutually destroy each other, can no longer be made good, the least mistake can be the start of a conspiracy, a martyrdom [...].<sup>3</sup>

As the hapless narrator describes his efforts to escape some larger, unnamed persecution, Bernhard is also describing the author's role as a desperate clown who entertains his audience to stave off their hostilities:

From time to time, I think, I tell a joke I've made up, then my colleagues laugh. They know me as a good teller of jokes. I know of no greater torment than telling a joke, but, since I have no other possibility [...], I from time to time tell a joke I've made up which they describe as a good joke [...]. If I can tell it, I won't go under. If I tell it particularly well, for a while I rise in the estimation of my colleagues. But I am not a comedian.<sup>4</sup>

In "Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy?" the narrator, a medical student mired in an ambivalent relationship with the theater and forever planning to write a study on

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 87–88.

the discipline (“One describes best what one hates, I thought”)<sup>5</sup> suddenly, although he has purchased a ticket and changed his clothes (“You’ve *changed* for the theatre, I thought”),<sup>6</sup> finds himself unable to attend the performance. “When you’ve written your theatre study, I thought, then it will be time, then it will be permissible for you to go to the theatre again, so that you can see, that your treatise is *right!*”<sup>7</sup> Seated on a park bench, he is addressed by a man who asks him the time, engages him in a somewhat perplexing conversation, and finally persuades him to accompany him on a walk. He, too, is obsessed with the theater; he would like to know whether it’s a comedy or a tragedy being performed that evening.

‘No, don’t say what it is! It should not be hard,’ he said, ‘by studying *you*, by concentrating entirely on *you*, by concerning myself exclusively only *with you*, to discover whether at this moment a comedy or a tragedy is being performed in the theatre [...] in time the study of your person will inform me about everything that is happening in the theatre, and about everything that is happening outside the theatre, about everything in the world, which at every moment is entirely linked to you.’<sup>8</sup>

In a microcosmic/macrocosmic inversion, the social is extrapolated from the individual; in order to gain a larger understanding, Bernhard seems to be saying, one must leave the stage, abstain from the world’s dramas, and look within. Yet as writing becomes a stand-in for life, and an inability to live becomes the stuff of writing, language nonetheless fails to express what is at the heart of human experience at its bleakest: torpidity of thought and the numbing incarceration of incommunicable interiority.

On a broader level, much of Bernhard’s writing is essentially about the impossibility, the futility of writing. It is rooted in a thought process that resembles a house of mirrors where the merest mental stirring is reflected hundredfold, thousandfold; where consciousness reels in despair at the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 60.

phantasms of its own making, the grotesque magnifications, fabrications, and distortions of its own inner workings. Here, the act of writing corresponds to a cognition stuck in perpetual repetition, a living-by-proxy bound by the compulsion that numbs much of human thought. And if compulsion is the illness, the relentless drive to repeat is its symptom — to repeat again and again and again in a Sisyphean effort to convey an unthinkable content that is often, paradoxically, hidden in plain view. And then, unexpectedly, thinking skips over its self-imposed strictures and an aberration in the machinery of things emerges, a jewel-like deviance that is uniquely capable of expressing some stark truth about our subjective selves and the phenomena in the world surrounding us.

By comparison, an analysis of Bernhard in translation is unfortunately somewhat less riveting — but essential to an English-speaking reader's understanding nonetheless. Although there is always a core quality of Bernhard's convoluted prose that can't be reproduced outside the German, the present translation is rife with unnecessary inaccuracies. Here are two random examples: in the story "Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy?" the first paragraph contains a syntactical error whereby the word "therefore" is placed ahead of the clause from which it should follow in causal connection ("in my room, therefore, even as I was still engaged in my scholarly work" should read: "even as I was still engaged in my scholarly work and, therefore, in my room"). In "Two Tutors," the "inconsiderately" inborn sleeplessness should be replaced with "ruthlessly" (*rücksichtslos*), a word that recurs constantly in the Bernhardian universe. While this might seem like nitpicking, near misses such as these abound, rendering the text unintelligible at times.

Moreover, translations of Bernhard require that they rise above a word-by-word, clause-by-clause treatment; adherence to the German syntax does not reproduce the inherent lightness of Bernhard's language, but obscures it, weighs it down. Thus, the English translation is encumbered by lumbering passages that hardly do justice to the austerity of the German original: "That it is possible to punish someone, who is helpless and seeking help, for his helplessness, in, as I

think, such a spiteful way, by not only not allowing him to come close but each time, at even the slightest attempt to come close, to join them, by obscene silence or to offend him by obscene remarks, shocked me.”<sup>9</sup> Here is my own proposal for this passage from “Jauregg,” which I also set forth as a working alternative to translating Bernhard in general: “I was appalled that it was possible to punish a helpless person, a person seeking help, punish him for his helplessness in such a, I should think, perfidious manner by not only not allowing him to come close, but rather to offend him outright each time at the merest approach, at even an attempt at the merest approach or attempt at joining in with them, with scurrilous silence, or with scurrilous remarks.” For the record, the German original is as follows:

Daß es möglich ist, einen Hilflosen, Hilfesuchenden auf solche, wie ich denke, niederträchtige Weise für seine Hilflosigkeit zu bestrafen, indem man ihn nicht nur nicht an sich herankommen läßt, sondern ihn jedesmal bei der geringsten Annäherung, bei dem Versuch auch nur der geringsten Annäherung, sich ihnen anzuschließen, durch unflätiges Schweigen oder durch unflätige Äußerungen vor den Kopf zu stoßen, entsetzte mich.<sup>10</sup>

I would argue that the sonorous use of rhythm and repetition in Bernhard’s sentences needs to be approximated in English with the possibilities available to this language, and not by means that are intrinsic to German syntax alone, for instance dangling the verb at the end of a long, idiosyncratically punctuated, intricately complex sentence. It is not a matter of reproducing something that cannot be reproduced, but rather of creating a living analogy that comes close to the aesthetic of the original. Furthermore, when one translates words such as “*Niedertracht*,” “*niederträchtig*,” one is translating words that echo throughout *all* of Bernhard’s writing — and hence one should choose them carefully and with a full understanding of their scope. Thus, “perfidy” and “perfidiousness” come closer to the register of associations played upon here. Another example in this vein is the term “*unflätig*,” which I’ve translated with the word “scurrilous” and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979) 44.



not the above-quoted translator's choice "obscene" — Bernhard knew full well when to use the superlative, of course, and far be it from anyone to second-guess him.

But the translator is not always to blame, of course: rendering the downward pull of a Bernhardian quicksand of words is at times an impossible task. Sentences become arguments waged against language's inadequacy; meaning is wrested from the form as it spirals around an absent center, teetering on the brink of senselessness. When asked if he was interested in translations of his works, Bernhard replied: "a translation is a different book. It has nothing to do with the original at all. It's a book by the person who translated it. [...] It has nothing in common with your own work, apart from the weirdly different title. Right? Because translation is impossible. A piece of music is played the same the world over, using the written notes, but a book would always have to be played in German, in my case. With my orchestra!"<sup>11</sup> Whether we take him at his word or not, the essence of Bernhard lies in the syntax: in the way in which, clause by clause, a train of thought is kept dangling until it finally, in a chain of incremental changes, comes full circle and its elegant awkwardness gives rise to hilarity. Or vice-versa: hyperbole and humor succumb to the centrifugal force of Bernhard's language, resulting in vertiginous bewilderment. Which brings us back to literature's essential dilemma as it takes a good long look at life and wonders: is it a comedy — or a tragedy?

2.

When Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* [Heroes' Square] premiered in 1988, self-appointed defenders of Austria's noble heritage unloaded a truckload of horseshit in front of the steps to the Burgtheater in Vienna. The year marked a turning point: it was the 50th anniversary of the Nazi occupation, and the Waldheim affair had reached its pinnacle, with the Austrian president and former Secretary-

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Bernhard, in an interview from 1986 with Werner Wögerbauer, tr. by Nicholas Grindell, on the blog *sightandsight*: <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1090.html>.

General of the United Nations having nothing better to say to the alleged atrocities of his wartime past than that he'd done his patriotic duty. Austria was undergoing a profound identity crisis: long comfortable in its role as the uncontested first victim of National Socialist aggression, the country could no longer deny the darker nature of its participation in recent European history or masquerade its enduring anti-Semitism and fascist undercurrents. Although known and feared as the *enfant terrible* of Austrian letters, Thomas Bernhard was vilified when he probed the political, ethical, and intellectual reality in Austria and found the predominance of hatred, ignorance, and moral degeneration to be even more endemic in 1988 than it had been fifty years previously.

Bernhard's diatribe on Austria, however, doesn't only seem as fresh today as it was over twenty years ago; much of it remains almost universally true. As one character observes:

It doesn't make any difference what government we've got / they're all the same / it's always the same people / it's always the same deals these people make / it's always the same interests / it's always these out and out corrupt people / driving the state to ruin day after day<sup>12</sup>

To which another answers:

And the language those people use / it's abominable / just listen to the prime minister / he can't even form a complete sentence / nor can the rest of them / nothing but rubbish comes out of their mouths / they think rubbish / and the way they articulate it is rubbish too<sup>13</sup>

Heldenplatz: this is where Professor Schuster, an old Jewish intellectual who has returned to Vienna from English exile, leaps to his death because he can no longer stand Austria and the continued prevalence of anti-Semitism fifty years after his escape from Nazi aggression; this is where his wife, who hears the crowds screaming "Sieg Heil!" as Hitler announces the *Anschluss* in March of 1938, goes slowly insane. It matters little that the professor's wife is the only one who can

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Heldenplatz*, tr. by Meredith Oakes and Andrea Tierney (London: Oberon Books, 2010) 98.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

hear the jubilant cries; her madness merely articulates what each member of the Schuster family already senses deep inside.

For ten eleven years / Frau Professor has been hearing the shouting  
from the Heldenplatz / nobody else hears it she hears it / It's driving  
me mad Frau Zittel it's driving me mad [...] Here in Vienna it's worse  
now than fifty years ago Frau Zittel / They spat at my daughter Frau  
Zittel / Living in fear every day Frau Zittel / I can't cope with it any  
longer / I am too old and too weak for Austria / Existence in Vienna  
is inhuman <sup>14</sup>

Bernhard's play, which premiered three months before he died, was probably the greatest scandal in the history of Austrian theater; by far his most political work, it is said to have hastened his demise. Director Claus Peymann had commissioned Bernhard to write the piece to commemorate the centennial of the Burgtheater at its present location, and while Bernhard was not one to shy away from defaming the fatherland, *Heldenplatz* proved far more damning than his critics' worst apprehensions. Calling Austria a "nation of six and a half million feeble-minded raving mad people," Bernhard is "surprised the entire Austrian people didn't commit suicide long ago."<sup>15</sup> The play unleashed a wave of righteous indignation; 200 policemen had to be stationed around the theater to prevent a riot. Waldheim himself called *Heldenplatz* an abuse of freedom and "a crude insult to the Austrian people,"<sup>16</sup> to which Bernhard responded: "Yes, my play is atrocious. But the piece that's being staged all around it now is just as atrocious."<sup>17</sup> Austria itself had become the setting for the author's last dramatic work, and Bernhardian exaggeration the conduit for igniting an explosive taboo.

Unfortunately, the scandal surrounding *Heldenplatz* also drowned out much of its subtlety. Twenty-three years after its turbulent premiere, after all the indignation and rage have simmered down to quiet murmurs of posthumous reverence, *Heldenplatz* emerges as something far more complex than a mere

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 29, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74, 75.

<sup>16</sup> Austrian president Kurt Waldheim quoted in: *Kurier*, October 11, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Bernhard, in an interview with Claus Peymann, *Kurier*, October 14. The full version was published in *Basta*, October 26, 1988.

invective against Austrian society. This new translation by Meredith Oakes and Andrea Tierney, published in tandem with the play's 2010 English-language premiere at the Arcola Theatre in London, reproduces the musical cadences in Bernhard's prose while deftly conveying the work's many nuances and ambiguities, in which victim and aggressor are sometimes, disturbingly, blurred. As the piece opens, the housekeeper describes a scene in which the professor shows her how to fold a shirt properly; he insists, screaming, that he is not sick, but merely a perfectionist:

I couldn't do it / my hands were trembling so much / I couldn't fold  
the shirt / Like this the Professor said like this / and he turned in the  
sleeves / you see Frau Zittel see see see / he threw the shirt in my  
face / and I had to fold it / merciless <sup>18</sup>

Later, he will make an astonishing confession to Frau Zittel:

We always want our children to be different from what we finally  
have to realize they've become [...] Suddenly one day you discover  
your own children are non-humans he said / we think we're raising  
human beings / and then they're just carnivorous cretins / hysterics  
megalomaniacs chaotics <sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, Schuster is a misanthrope; his relationship to his family is poisoned by a deeper-lying alienation that belies a prevailing misconception of the play as the quintessence of the Bernhardian vituperative rant. Tyranny, it seems, is handed down from parent to child, from master to servant, while annihilation ultimately stems from within. Reflecting upon her father's suicide, Anna muses:

Married people always murder each other / the only question is  
who gets exterminated first / who lets themselves be destroyed  
and exterminated first / that's what marriage is based on <sup>20</sup>

Bernhard's prose is famously infectious, irresistibly inviting fans and critics alike to imitate his circular syntax in a kind of slapstick pastiche that misses the finer points of his logic. Additionally, the prevalence of what clearly seems to be

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Heldenplatz*, tr. by Meredith Oakes and Andrea Tierney (London: Oberon Books, 2010) 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

hyperbole can easily detract the reader's attention away from layers of meaning that only emerge when the characters' claims are accepted at face value. As *Heldenplatz* probes the pernicious endurance of anti-Semitism, it also explores one of the many contradictions inherent in human character: the intricate relationship between complicity and individual responsibility in the body politic. Frustrated by her uncle's refusal to become involved in the affairs of the world, Anna exclaims:

That's what's so terrible / everyone complains all the time / but no-one protests / people are always worked up about something / but no-one does anything to stop it <sup>21</sup>

To which Professor Robert retorts:

When everything stinks of decay / and everything screams out for destruction / the voice of a single person has become useless / it's not as if nothing is said or written against this disastrous process / every day things are being said and written against it / but whatever is said and written against it is not being heard or read / the Austrians do not hear any more and do not read anymore / that's to say they hear something about catastrophic conditions but do nothing about them / and they read about catastrophic conditions but do nothing against them / the Austrians are a people full of indifference toward their catastrophic condition <sup>22</sup>

Replace "Austrian" with "American" or any other adjective of national allegiance — and you're left with a cogent criticism of contemporary society where mindless hatred wears many masks, but remains everywhere largely the same. As an analysis of political apathy and the passive complicity it inexorably gives rise to, this new translation, more than twenty years after his death, offers a timely testimony to Thomas Bernhard's enduring relevance.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

Andrea Scrima was born in New York and lives in Berlin. Her first book, *A Lesser Day*, was published by Spuyten Duyvil Press in 2010. In addition to *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, she also writes literary criticism for *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Rumpus*, and *BOMB* magazine. Contributions to *Quarterly Conversation* are forthcoming. The second part of this essay was published in slightly modified form in June 2011 in *The Brooklyn Rail* under the title “When Everything Stinks of Decay.”