

NEW DIRECTIONS IN GERMAN STUDIES



THOMAS BERNHARD'S  
AFTERLIVES

edited by

STEPHEN DOWDEN,  
GREGOR THUSWALDNER  
and OLAF BERWALD

B L O O M S B U R Y

# New Directions in German Studies

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edited by Stephen Dowden, Gregor Thuswaldner, and Olaf Berwald

# Thomas Bernhard's Afterlives

Edited by  
Stephen Dowden,  
Gregor Thuswaldner, and  
Olaf Berwald

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# Introduction: The Master of Understatement, or Remembering Schermaier

Stephen Dowden

*The basis of art is truth, both in matter and in mode. The person who aims after art in his work aims after truth, in an imaginative sense, no more and no less.*

—Flannery O'Connor

According to Jean Améry—Austrian critic, writer, and Holocaust survivor—Thomas Bernhard stands in a line of Austrian writers infected by what he called *morbus austriacus*: the Austrian disease. Alluding to Kierkegaard's description of despair as a "sickness unto death," Améry offers *morbus austriacus* as the characteristic malady of other Austrian writers, too.<sup>1</sup> He had in mind Franz Kafka, Otto Weininger, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Ernst Weiß, and Joseph Roth. In Améry's view this condition presents as a passionate hatred for Austria.

The disease metaphor addresses the life and works of Thomas Bernhard accurately and productively. His characters often suffer from mental or physical illnesses or both, and the condition is usually congenital, because it arises from the pathology of his historical era. To be born Austrian in Bernhard's world means to suffer from a debility from which no recovery is possible, a sickness unto death. His own poor health is germane. For decades, Bernhard lived with a terminal pulmonary illness, and that condition—as much spiritual as somatic—spilled over into his writing. Moreover, his prose style and its characteristic motifs have proved to be highly contagious to other writers. As early as 1963, with the appearance of his first novel, *Frost*, reviews were

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1 Jean Améry, "Morbus Austriacus," *Merkur* 30.1 (1976), 91–94.

already affected, or afflicted, with the style that Bernhard made use of in his work. Bernhard's circulatory, highly repetitive, and therefore also musical style, his facility with monstrously long compound words, his offensive generalizations, meandering digressions, and abusive tirades were often imitated, adopted, and—later on, as the essays in the book will show—reconfigured and developed in imaginative ways.

But the German and Austrian context is not the only way of placing Bernhard's contagious effect. Thomas Bernhard belongs to a minuscule tradition of cosmopolitan modern writers whose foremost European figures are Kafka and Beckett. What links his works with theirs is above all the international impact of their seemingly small ambition. Beckett's aim was to write less and less. Kafka's ambition was to belong to a small (or minor) literature. Bernhard's ambition was to call attention to and mercilessly deride the brokenness of the provincial postwar country he inhabited. In the most immediate terms this brokenness refers to Austria in particular, heartland of Nazi anti-Semitism and of crimes whose infamy outstrips all possible description. Rather than describe them in the weary and wearisome realistic prose of his German contemporaries, Bernhard's characters harp cantankerously on a handful of themes, lacking all nuance or pretense of impartiality: Austria's wartime guilt, its postwar amnesia, its betrayal of its own tradition, the assent and collaboration of Catholics in the degradation of Austrian culture, the hardy survival of the fascist mentality into its postwar life and institutions, the decline of quality in all things after the apocalypse that he never calls by name. Like the writing of Kafka and Beckett in Europe and Flannery O'Connor in the United States, Bernhard's prose foregoes all uplift. It has no use for compassionate or tragic plots and offers no respite other than the one indirect, gestural moment that is the art itself. This, too, his works have in common with those of Kafka, Beckett, and O'Connor. He gives up all hope. But, as in the case of his great colleagues, he also gives up hopelessness—which is evident from the fact that he keeps on writing and that his protagonists keep on talking.

Like Kafka, O'Connor, and Beckett, too, Bernhard created his own uniquely distinctive style, ultimately comic, that is tailored to the needs of his imagination and its grasp of the true. He writes long, looping, repetitious sentences, largely monologues, page after page of print unrelieved by paragraph breaks. His minimal plots recur from novel to novel, if indeed his books can be called novels at all. They are tidal waves of prose that have the effect of carrying the reader away on a tsunami of manic loquacity from the perspective of an irascible outsider.

Finally, like O'Connor, Kafka, and Beckett, Bernhard's imagination has turned out to have an extraordinary reach and appeal, far beyond his immediate context. What Bernhard has in common with them and a handful of the other greatest twentieth-century writers is above all

this: a willingness to look at the worst without looking away and, in a feat of dialectical reversal, to transform that gaze at horror and failure and corruption into supremely affecting prose.

After the Second World War—when Bernhard, Beckett, and O'Connor were writing, and when Kafka emerged as the epitome of modern style—cities, cultures, and entire traditions lay in ruins, those of Austria not least of all—but not only Austria. Whole peoples vegetated on as survivors of a disaster that allowed of no survivors: the living cannot flourish in the true sense of the word, according to Bernhard's tales, in the spiritual wasteland of squandered tradition and a moral catastrophe that Austria had brought on itself. This world is so damaged, so lacking in spiritual nourishment that even those who seem to be alive have no idea that their lives are posthumous, zombie-like parodies of life. This specific variety of despair—the not-knowing that one is in a state of despair—is one that Kierkegaard and Bernhard depict. People in this condition are unaware that their new cars, custom homes, ever faster internet speeds, and luxury vacations are not expressions of success but much more just flimsy material substitutes for the right life. They dress up the underlying nihilism as a reassuring display of conspicuous consumption. Only Bernhard's obnoxiously garrulous protagonists—from Strauch in *Frost* to Franz-Josef Murau in *Extinction* and Reger of *Old Masters* (the last book Bernhard completed)—have the self-awareness to see how matters really stand with us.

Their animadversions, which are also Bernhard's, feel true and satisfying because only in rhetorically heightened elaboration does the horror underlying our supposed normalcy find proper expression. "You have to make your vision apparent by shock," wrote Flannery O'Connor in a similar spirit. "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures."<sup>2</sup> So it is in Bernhard's prose, in his larger-than-life figures: "The traces of the war are not yet wiped out," blusters the reclusive ex-painter Strauch in *Frost*. "This war will never be forgotten. People will continue to encounter it wherever they go."<sup>3</sup> The undead spirit of wartime devastation is omnipresent, not hidden: "Even today you keep encountering skulls or entire skeletons, covered over by a thin layer of pine needles," says the painter.<sup>4</sup> Though never invoked by name, the Shoah haunts the whole of Bernhard's writing as the ultimate but not exclusive source of Austrian guilt and shame—and not only Austrian. There is plenty of failure to go around. Bernhard's prose insists on wartime suffering and the presence of the

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2 Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country" (1957), *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 805–6.

3 Thomas Bernhard, *Frost*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: Knopf, 2006), 150.

4 Bernhard, *Frost*, 149.

dead as its legacy, even a perverse birthright, which—like some grave genetic defect—cannot be corrected except by obliterating the bloodline in which it occurs.

Still, it would be a mistake to take Bernhard's fiction literally. Despite what he may have said he believed about the emptiness and futility of life, the work itself is not ultimately nihilistic. That he continued to make art at all—instead of retiring from life and art (as Strauch does) or committing suicide (as Roithamer does)—is neither hypocrisy nor a logical flaw but an aesthetic clue. Bernhard chooses a backhanded affirmation by way of total negation. He is always concerned in his novels and plays to achieve a style that will best intervene in society, a style that provokes critical attention. He is fundamentally an ironist and a moralist, as were Swift and Rabelais, Nestroy and Karl Kraus.<sup>5</sup>

The eleven essays collected here demonstrate that *morbus austriacus* has infected and affected writers across the world. Let us not speak narrowly of "influence." For one thing, influence implies a single direction of pressure, from Bernhard to those who have felt and responded to the challenge of his creativity. What really is happening, rather, is that a conversation has been expanding and developing. As Bernhard's admirers explore the avenues he has opened, a new understanding of Bernhard will develop. He is no longer just an off-piste Austrian anomaly of post-war German prose, but a phenomenon of world literature. Moreover, like the singularity of Kafka and Beckett and O'Connor, Bernhard's uniqueness is untouchable. To imitate these writers too closely is to miscarry the standards they set, to be an epigone. But like them he has shown the way to new expressive possibilities in prose form that other writers have explored in various original ways over the last thirty years.

In his native land Bernhard, of course, has made a lasting impact, and Katya Krylova documents it in her contribution to this volume. She focuses on four figures. Robert Schindel and Gerhard Roth have Bernhard appear as a character in novels of their own. Alexander Schimmelbusch and Thomas Mülitzer both satirize Austria's posthumous retooling of Bernhard into a benign classic: Mülitzer imagines, along the lines of Austria's chocolate Mozartkugeln, a parallel "Bernhard torte," which a Viennese confectioner invents to celebrate the dead writer by turning him into an object of popular consumption—sweet and easy to digest.

Outside of Austria, the most conspicuous Bernhard acolyte in the German world is W. G. Sebald. Himself a writer of international

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5 W. G. Sebald, "Wo die Dunkelheit den Strick zuzieht: Zu Thomas Bernhard," *Die Beschreibung des Unglücks: Zur österreichischen Literatur von Stifter bis Handke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1994), 103–14, here 110–14.

stature, Sebald credits Bernhard as mentor and model. Agnes Mueller in her chapter demonstrates that the question of influence gives way to something more like a conversation between these two writers of immense imaginative resource. She brings Bernhard's *Extinction* and Sebald's *Austerlitz* into productive dialogue with each other regarding their visual dynamics and their narrative performance of correlations between writing and art, trauma and memory. A key feature in the prose writings of Bernhard and Sebald is the sense of the incommensurability between lived fact and written fiction, between truth and memory, reality and image. The things we think we know may be, perhaps largely are, stories we make up to reinforce or critique our beliefs, fears, hopes, and plans. Owing to this gap of uncertainty, Bernhard and Sebald write stories that unsettle our sense of how things are rather than endorse the settled conventions we take as true. Hence both of their works feature narrators who say outrageous or ambiguous or contingent things.

Some fail to say anything at all, despite great effort: a prominent Bernhard theme is the blocked writer or artist or scientist. Two essays in this volume deal with its afterlife in later fiction. Kata Gellen takes up the theme in Geoff Dyer's memoir, *Out of Sheer Rage: Wrestling with D. H. Lawrence*. She finds Dyer absorbed in conversation with Bernhard's *Lime Works*, in which the scientist-protagonist Konrad continuously fails to get his great study of hearing off the ground. Dyer likewise, in full Bernhardian regalia, fails to get his study of D. H. Lawrence off the ground, but he also fails his way into spectacular artistic success. Similarly, Martin Klebes takes up the protagonists and narrators of Bernhard's novels *Concrete* and *The Loser*, vis-à-vis the novels of William Gaddis. The protagonists of *Agapē Agape* and *J.R.* are consumed by an obsession with their (failed) writing projects.

In a chapter on Bernhard and Philip Roth, Byron Spring discovers unexpected affinities between two writers who at first seem far apart. No radical stylist himself, Roth coincides with Bernhard on the unreliability of language. Always we are writing fictitious versions of our lives, for which no final, authoritative text is even possible. Always there is a void between words and reality. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves necessarily get tangled up in each other and can't help but create contradictions, confusion, and falsehoods. These narrated versions of our lives, no matter whether they are obvious embellishments or unintentional misrepresentations, nevertheless constitute the best hold on reality we have and must stand as the provisory truth in place of any final truth.

It is similar with Susan Sontag. In a chapter focusing attention on the importance of radical style, I investigate the way that Bernhard's prose informs Susan Sontag's illness narrative "The Way We Live Now" and certain of Imre Kertész's works. Sontag was drawn to radical writers,

including Bernhard, and she modifies his stylistic radicalism for her own purposes. Both Bernhard and Sontag battled terminal illnesses for decades. While Bernhard struggled with lung disease, Sontag fought cancer. Written at the height of the AIDS crisis in the mid-1980s, "The Way We Live Now" tells the story—or, in a variation on Gellen's and Klebe's failure theme, manages pointedly to *not* tell the story—of a terminally ill man named Max, who never even gets to appear in the tale. He is the crucial void at the center. He himself, in his specificity and suffering, is beyond representation, as indeed any crisis is as a whole or any individual's fate. "Language is inadequate when it comes to communicating the truth," says Bernhard, "and the best the writer can offer is an approximation to the truth ... Language can only falsify and distort whatever is authentic."<sup>6</sup> What Sontag captures instead of the truth about Max, in wave after wave of Bernhardian digression, is the aspiration to truth expressed and the social repercussions surrounding a friend's severe illness.

Imre Kertész, in his own aspiration to telling the truth about Auschwitz, is also known for radical style. He felt a strong kinship with Bernhard and was attracted to his Austrian counterpart's way of writing. A survivor of Auschwitz, Kertész in his *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* was directly motivated by Bernhard's *Yes*. Though a native of Budapest, Kertész identified not so much as a provincial Hungarian writer but rather as a cosmopolitan European Jew with a special affinity for the Austrian tradition of German prose. Similarly, it seems fair to say that Bernhard, like Kertész, has become a cosmopolitan European writer who happens to be an Austrian provincial, much as Kertész just happens to be a native of Hungary.

In a similar vein, Heike Scharm shows that Thomas Bernhard found a ready audience among Spanish novelists in a conscious effort to free themselves of Franco-era conventions and leave behind what they conceived to be a cultural and political provincialism. His writing about Austria rang true and seemed familiar to them. Reading about Bernhard's presence in post-Franco Spain, one could come to the conclusion that Bernhard was indeed grounded in the literary and cultural context of twentieth-century Spain. Bernhard's influence on a young generation of disillusioned and skeptical writers, including Javier Marías and Félix de Azúa, was profound. In addition to reflecting on Bernhard's meaning for Marías and Azúa, Scharm finds telling affinities between the Austrian writer and Pío Baroja, a representative of the generation of 1898. Scharm suspects that especially Baroja's widely read novel *El árbol de la ciencia* (*The Tree of Knowledge*, 1911) paved the way for Bernhard's

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6 Thomas Bernhard, *Gathering Evidence: A Memoir*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Knopf, 1985), 314.

reception in Spain seven decades later. That both Spain and Austria have roots in the Habsburg baroque may also be significant.

Olaf Berwald hears echoes of Bernhard's voice in francophone prose. He takes up works by Hervé Guibert, Gemma Salem, Israel Eliraz, Linda Lê, and Cyril Huot. These writers have found a range of creative ways to carry out and expand on the purport of Bernhard's topoi and style. While Guibert's protagonist in *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (*To the Friend Who Didn't Save my Life*, 1990) wrestles with Bernhard's oeuvre and likens the Austrian author to a virus, Nicolas Stakhovitch's novel, *Les Aphorismes de Gralphy* (1991), was initially thought in France to be the translation of a posthumously published book by Bernhard, as its themes and language so closely resemble those of Bernhard. Gemma Salem was drawn to and drew on the ethical dimension of Bernhard's works, and Linda Lê's works engage in an ongoing dialogue with Bernhard's characters.

Saskia Ziolkowski explores both the role of Italy in Bernhard's works and the effect he exerted on Italo Calvino, Claudio Magris, and Elena Ferrante. Some of Bernhard's protagonists escape to Italy because they find living in Austria unbearable. Murau in *Auslöschung* (*Extinction*) lives in Rome because he cannot abide his homeland and particularly the family estate, Wolfsegg. Calvino discovered Bernhard in the 1960s, urging his publisher to translate his works, which did not happen until the late 1970s. For Calvino, Bernhard was something of an alter ego. Magris, both an influential scholar of Austrian literature and culture and a novelist in his own right, organized the first academic conference on Bernhard's works in the 1970s. Magris's recent novel *Non luogo a procedere* (*Blameless*, 2015) explores Bernhard's ambivalent view of victimizer and victimhood. Likewise, the mysteriously elusive novelist Elena Ferrante has responded creatively to Bernhard's use of language.

In her essay for this volume, Juliane Werner takes a different tack. She focuses on three variations of just one novel, Bernhard's *Extinction*, in different languages: Tim Parks's *Destiny* (1999), Horacio Castellanos Moya's *El asco: Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador* (1997), and Vitaliano Trevisan's *Il ponte: Un crollo* (2007). These books offer variations of Bernhard's topoi, style, and language that recall his last published novel. Set in three distinct cultural and linguistic contexts, the three novels under investigation reveal fascinating similarities to *Extinction*.

The ninth chapter analyzes Gabriel Josipovici's imaginative response to Bernhard in three monologue novels, *Moo Pak* (1986), *The Big Glass* (1991), and *Infinity: The Story of a Moment* (2012). Gregor Thuswaldner rejects the notion that Josipovici is "the English Thomas Bernhard," as Suhrkamp advertised the German translation of *Moo Pak*. Instead, Thuswaldner shows Josipovici's sophistication in appropriating and revising Bernhard's linguistic and literary strategies to suit his own purposes.

The musicality of Bernhard's works, and the acidity of his protagonists' comments on Austria and the human condition, continue to infuse world literature with vibrant possibilities. His style and topoi will remain viral, and many afterlives of Bernhard are yet to emerge. But what might account for the extraordinary appeal of Bernhard outside the German-language context, and for that matter in a context that is beyond any national language?

In an introduction such as this, it is tempting to provide helpful "context," to ease the newcomer into the topic via historical facts, biographical information, and literary background. The obliging editor could expound on Bernhard's harsh childhood, his suffering as a schoolboy at the hands of Nazi and Catholic schoolmasters, his mother's sharp tongue, his adoration of his despotic grandfather, his thwarted desire to be a singer, his degrading experiences as a tubercular teenager in the Austrian public health system that as good as handed him a death sentence. It was there, in Grafenhof sanatorium between 1949 and 1951, under threat of death, that he discovered literature. He took refuge in reading and then in writing. Bernhard covered this ground himself in his five very fine memoirs, collected in English under a single title, *Gathering Evidence*. Most famously we could emphasize his caustic insults at the official ceremonies that honored him with many writing awards. However, academic contextualizing entails not only explaining but also almost inevitably some "explaining away," as if biography could unlock his art. This introduction seeks to avoid that trap.

In life Bernhard was a divisive figure. His rancorous, unnuanced, and scalding contempt for Austrian life, Austrian Catholics, and Austrian cultural pretensions stems from his categorical rejection of the Austro-German Nazi past and its denial by many, as well as the nation's consequently unredeemable present. "The destruction and annihilation of our country," opines Franz-Josef Murau in a characteristic passage,

has been encompassed by *National Socialism* and *pseudosocialism*, aided and abetted by *Austrian Catholicism*, which has always cast its blight upon Austria. Today Austria is a country governed by unscrupulous profiteers belonging to parties devoid of all conscience. In the last few centuries, Gambetti, Austria has been cheated of everything and had all its sense knocked out of it by Catholicism, National Socialism, and pseudosocialism. In the Austria of today, Gambetti, vulgarity is the watchword, baseness the motive, and mendacity the key. Every morning when we wake up we ought to be utterly ashamed of today's Austria.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Thomas Bernhard, *Extinction*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Knopf, 1995), 325.

Bernhard's behavior in both his art and his public utterances reveals an artist who refused to engage the reasoned argumentation and virtue-signaling that is otherwise so characteristic of postwar German fiction: these refusals earned him both intense hatred and fervent admiration in Austria of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Krylova's account in her chapter contextualizes this reception, and we may be tempted to find a biographical reason for the specificity of his persona vis-à-vis Austria. But the writer's work should be allowed to speak for itself, too, as art rather than personal animus.

Often it is not allowed to. Now that Bernhard has been safely dead since 1989, a new, less troublesome simulacrum has replaced him as a culture hero in Austria. The writer's house in Ohlsdorf has become a public shrine. Salzburg, cruel to him formerly, celebrates "Bernhard Days." A scholarly organization devoted to his work has been formed. Once a hateful scourge beyond all possible reconciliation with the status quo, Bernhard has now been styled an endearingly grumpy eccentric—and therefore a true Austrian after all. He is now a national treasure embalmed—like Lenin lying pickled and harmless in his mausoleum—in fancy coffee-table photo books, online videos, popular publications, and academic seminars. He has become a monument to a once virulent affliction that it's now safe to ignore, like the Pestsäule in the middle of Vienna's first district. The baroque column memorializes the Black Plague that ravaged the city in 1679, but now is so familiar that it has become all but invisible.

One symptom of this faux-Bernhard reduced to a housebroken likeness of himself is an epithet frequently attached to him: *Übertreibungskünstler*, or "exaggeration artist." The currency of this refrain derives perhaps from a much-quoted collection of academic essays so titled.<sup>8</sup> The comforting platitude is only partly true, and true in only a trivial way that clichés are always true. Despite being drawn from a rant in *Extinction* ("The art of exaggeration is in fact the secret of all mental endeavor," says Murau to Gambetti), it falsifies Bernhard because it downplays the authentically destructive force of his anarchic comedy and his no-holds-barred relationship to the truth.<sup>9</sup> It implies that Bernhard was "only" exaggerating—just kidding around—that in fact things in Austria and in postwar life generally just are not all that bad. It insinuates that his own public rants and those of the protagonists are all just subjective anyway—entertaining, of course, but ultimately no more than the subjective exaggerations of a prose virtuoso.

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8 Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Der Übertreibungskünstler: Studien zu Thomas Bernhard*, 4th ed., ed. Martin Huber and Wolfgang Straub (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 2010). Originally published in 1986.

9 Bernhard, *Extinction*, 308.

To saddle Bernhard with the label "Übertreibungskünstler" diminishes him as an artist because it minimizes the earnest, abiding, and authentic negativity that is the essence of his art. Bernhard obviously intended to give offense, and this offense is part of the art, its *irreconcilable otherness*. His writing sides with the outcasts, not with comfortable intellectuals in academic lockstep. Its aggression toward the status quo is not to be overlooked, domesticated, or toned down as "exaggeration." It is instead what in his "Meridian" speech of 1960 Paul Celan calls a *Gegenwort*, a "counterword," a speaking *against*: against exhausted narrative ploys and poetic forms, against inherited cultural norms, against unthinking or forgetful complacency, against Austrian complicity in the horrors of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Bernhard's enemies probably have a better grasp of his aesthetic power than his supposed defenders do. Bernhardian negativity may well be grotesque and offensive, but it is no exaggeration. Like the kindred negations of Kafka, Beckett, O'Connor, and Paul Celan too, Bernhard's negativity epitomizes and reveals what affirmative culture refuses to accept or even see about itself. Encroaching darkness and debilitating cold draw Bernhard like a magnet. He takes pleasure in, delights in his rescue of endangered truths.

It's not that Bernhard endorses Konrad's barbaric behavior toward his disabled wife in *The Lime Works*, or Roithamer's lethal veneration for his sister in *Correction*, or Wertheimer's abusive relationship with his sister in *The Loser*. Rather, Bernhard endorses a frank acknowledgment of the negative energy that permeates and supercharges modern culture as a whole—even as it eats away at it from within. Art is not excepted from negation either. A basic Bernhard theme, as Gellen and Klebes observe, is the failure to complete artistic and scholarly projects. But there is more: the failure of even completed projects to offer transcendence is a basic theme too; for example, the utopian Cone in which Roithamer's beloved sister not only fails to experience the "supreme happiness" that he had planned for her but which in fact kills her.

Art is lethal: his fictional Glenn Gould, a supremely inhuman artist in Bernhard's novel *The Loser*, drops dead while playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. This variation on the failure theme emerges as early as the first novel with Strauch, a painter who has incinerated all his own paintings as misbegotten. Artists, he says,

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10 Paul Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials*, ed. Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmull, trans. Pierre Joris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 10. On the importance of the poetic "Gegenwort" for Celan, see Amir Eshel, *Poetic Thinking Today: An Essay* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), 45–8.

are the sons and daughters of loathsomeness, of paradisiac shamelessness, the original sons and daughters of lewdness; artists, painters, writers, and musicians are the compulsive masturbators on the planet, its disgusting cramps, its peripheral puffings and swellings, its pustular secretions ... I want to say: artists are the great emetic agents of the time, they were always the great, the very greatest emetics ... Artists, are they not a devastating army of absurdity, of scum?<sup>11</sup>

Bernhard's despair, not different from Strauch's, is all-devouring and includes four simple points to be made about this self-contradiction.

The first could be described as its Dostoevskian moment. Reading Dostoevsky, wrote Bernhard, made him strong at a time in his life when all indications were that he would die of tuberculosis in a squalid welfare sanatorium.<sup>12</sup> It also pointed him in the direction of writing. As in Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (where the Underground Man, a figure as perverse as Strauch, insists on his right to declare that two plus two equal five), self-contradiction and even self-negation stand as a paradoxically effective form of self-assertion. That doesn't mean the absurd claim is true, but it does voice the self's defining, if also negative, freedom. Moreover, it embodies the spirit of resistance (the *Gegenwort*) that is central to all Bernhard's writing. Similarly, Bernhard readers should not allow themselves to get snagged on the factuality of this or that seeming exaggeration. Truth is to be sought in the constellation of the work, and especially of his works altogether, as the detail relates to the whole, and what that larger constellation opens up to view.

Second is a Kierkegaardian moment, which distinguishes among different varieties of the sickness unto death. A key variant is what Kierkegaard calls demonic despair. Its defining feature is defiance. The Bernhard protagonist embodies this defiance. He carries on out of spite.<sup>13</sup> Strauch clings to his melancholia as if it were a raft in a storm. He revels in despair. It generates endless reflection and language in him. But suicide never tempts him: This sort of despairing person—Strauch, Reger, Murau, Saurau—does not really want release from his agony. Rather than seek help or commit suicide, he chooses to be himself amid and at least partly because of all imaginable torment. This being is expressed verbally and indirectly, in and as the striking musicality of Bernhard's prose.

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11 Bernhard, *Frost*, 143.

12 Bernhard, *Gathering Evidence*, 335–36.

13 Mikkel Frantzen, "The Demonic Comedy of Thomas Bernhard," *Journal of Austrian Studies* 50 (2018), 89–108, here 93.

Third is what might be described as his Arendtian moment of thinking poetically rather than discursively. According to Hannah Arendt, *poetic thinking* is a rare gift. What guides it, she writes, is the conviction that even when such a thinker has been subjected to the "ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization."<sup>14</sup> Bernhard has this strange gift. His prose works and theater plays are just such crystallizations that the energy released by decay has caused to form. Elaborating on the importance of Arendt's insight, Amir Eshel writes that "poetic thinking refers to artworks that open up *spaces of* and *spaces for* open-ended thinking."<sup>15</sup> Thomas Bernhard's works do precisely this. They are provocations that forcefully break open spaces for thought—hard-edged, sharp, clear crystals that draw the eye and invite response. The works that the contributors of this volume explore are themselves crystallizations formed from the energy that Bernhard's writing gives off.

Fourth is the question of why all this hate and pain should be written about to the exclusion of any kindness and love that might be expressed in a positive way. I don't think Bernhard was cynical about kindness and love. What interested him was not the denial of love but the ascendancy—outrageous and unacceptable—of its opposite. He does not celebrate cruelty or sanction misery. Instead, he calls them out so that he can rail against them. Note, too, the spiritual kinship of his celebrated publications to Walter Benjamin's famous remark that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."<sup>16</sup> Bernhard's writing recognizes itself as being embedded in the unresolved and unresolvable struggle to reconcile the two, and it implicates the reader in that struggle too.

This is not to suggest that Bernhard acquiesces in barbarism. The opposite is true. However, his protest against barbarism does not come from an intellectual's logically reasoned point of view. Indeed, Bernhard's heroes and Bernhard himself—as Thuswaldner writes in his contribution—are not intellectuals but *Geistesmenschen*, human beings driven by mind and by spirit, but not only or necessarily by instrumental reason. An intellectual's protest against barbarity would come from a moral high ground that is rational, argued, measured, tasteful, judicious, socially respectable, and in general acceptable from the discursive point of view that governs conventional novel writing and academic

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14 Hannah Arendt, "Walter Benjamin," trans. Harry Zohn, *Men in Dark Times* (Orlando: Mariner, 1970), 153–206, here 206.

15 Eshel, *Poetic Thinking Today*, 6.

16 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 256.

scholarship. In his poetic thinking, Bernhard, the instinctive artist akin to other *Geistesmenschen* such as Beckett, Celan, Kafka, and O'Connor, takes an approach that is audaciously *mimetic* rather than discursive.

As we will see in all of the essays in the volume, the mimetic dimension of Bernhard's writing has proved immensely attractive to other writers. His prose (like his protagonists' speech) has something monstrous and tyrannical about it. It has absorbed into itself the epoch's negativity and barbarism. The spirit of destruction and ruin has seeped into its very syntax and its narrative form. That is its mimetic moment, as is his refusal to resolve the most dissonant of his insults into the tonic key of common sense. Bernhard does not trust common sense. He grew up in an environment in which common sense dictated it would be best to be rid of Jews and homosexuals for good, to get shut of Roma and Sinti, to sterilize and euthanize the mentally and physically disabled. All this should be accomplished by the authorities for the greater social good and in the name of order.

Consequently, order's reputation is in question too. His protagonists' monologues seem always to teeter on the brink of chaos. The torrent of words never lets up or eases off. He never offers any merry wink of the authorial eye to signal ironic intent. There is no mitigating gesture to suggest it's all, so to speak, in good fun. This prose achievement is as monomaniacal as the murderous Konrad is in *The Lime Works* and as are Bernhard's other obsessives, those who are unable or unwilling to un-know the violent, unstable foundations of modern, postwar well-being. Its darkness inhabits them. It drives them. While it may be comforting to minimize Bernhard's insistence on negation as mere exaggeration, it is also misleading. It obscures what makes Bernhard an artist instead of a garden-variety crank.

The clinching indication that he is not quite taken seriously by at least some of his admirers, most obviously in his homeland, came shortly after his death. Bernhard's testamentary attempt to block the performance of his plays in Austria after his death was easily circumvented.<sup>17</sup> Presumably that ban, too, is to be seen as just another of his quirky exaggerations. In death, then, Bernhard has been reigned in, normalized, and domesticated by his advocates. (The fate of Randle McMurphy at the end of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* comes to mind. He, too, was a victim of normalization.)

Has Bernhard been irrevocably normalized and mainstreamed? Bernhard broke taboos, fearlessly and ferociously. Has that writer

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17 Stephen D. Dowden, "A Testament Betrayed: Thomas Bernhard and His Legacy," in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Matthias Konzett (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002), 51–68.

become a literary-historical monument effectively as remote from the present as, say, Rabelais and Swift or Vienna's Pestsäule? The essays gathered in this collection suggest otherwise. Bernhard's work continues to draw other writers, including and especially writers not connected with his immediate Austrian and German context. Possibly they are attracted to his penchant for the entertaining rant, a genre that has become ubiquitous in an era of "post-truth" or "truthiness." However, the more likely context of appeal may be the powerful, relentless, and compelling relationship of his fiction and drama to the true truth.

That relationship is guided by the Bernhardian sense that postwar Austrian and German life—and by extension the postwar world in general—is grotesquely false, smug, cold-hearted, and self-deceived. This world's prosperity, its progress, its faith in technological fixes for all problems, its obliviousness to atrocity past and present, the overall collapse of values that once had been self-evident: all these rest on foundations of ruin that have been concentrated into the signifier "Auschwitz." The overused word stands, inadequately but indispensably, for unimaginable cruelty and, by extension, for an irreversible and historically unexampled transformation that occurred in the twentieth century. It stands for an atrocity among countless atrocities that we cannot un-see, a boundary we cannot un-cross, a historical experience that mere writers cannot overstate. Exaggeration falls short.

Here we again veer toward Byron Spring's view of Philip Roth as a Bernhardian spirit. "The American writer in the middle of the twentieth century," said Roth to Stanford students in 1960, "has his hands full trying to understand, describe, and make *credible* much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination."<sup>18</sup> Another overexcitable exaggerator? No, Roth soberly corroborates the fundamental gesture of Bernhard's prose by his own parallel experience. And he is not even considering the more profoundly sickened condition of Europe in the aftermath of Nazi atrocities.

Given the radically altered world after Auschwitz, the postwar novel required a new language. Imre Kertész, novelist, Auschwitz prisoner, and Bernhard admirer, puts it this way:

the unbearable burden of the Holocaust has over time given rise to the forms of language that appear to talk about the Holocaust, while never even touching the reality of it. [...] Most people—and this is psychologically quite understandable—want to reconstruct

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18 Philip Roth, "Writing American Fiction," *Why Write? Collected Nonfiction 1960–2014* (New York: Library of America, 2017), 27.

what happened at Auschwitz in a pre-Auschwitz language and with pre-Auschwitz ideas, as though the humanistic world of the nineteenth century were still relevant and had only broken down for a single historical moment under the pressure of incomprehensible barbarism.<sup>19</sup>

We must connect this thought not only to language alone but also to the form of the novel, or to the novel as a form of language. Kertész discovered in Thomas Bernhard a post-Auschwitz narrative form adequate to his own needs as novelist of Auschwitz. He speaks not of “exaggeration,” though, but of dissonance and atonality in the novel’s form. Tonality, a uniform key, was once a universally accepted convention. But gradually its authority eroded and came to seem confining, coercive, and false to lived experience. Atonality declares that this agreement or tradition no longer stands as absolute. In literature, too, a tonic keynote once existed, a seemingly absolute set of values based upon a generally accepted morality and ethics that defined the system of relationships among statements and ideas. The European catastrophe of 1914–45 demonstrated, if by then such was still necessary, that the unthinkable can simply happen, that what once seemed like moral certainties can simply fail. Once again, the shorthand for this descent from an orderly universe into moral chaos is “Auschwitz.” In the degraded world of Bernhard’s fiction and drama, no universal certainties exist anymore, and that would include the predictable structures of traditional novel writing, structures both formal and moral. Uncertainty emerges as a major theme for the tormented souls in his plays and novels.

There is in fact a modest parallel between Bernhard and the death camp survivors who became writers, people such as Tadeusz Borowski, Imre Kertész, and Jean Améry. Though not as extreme as their actual survivor experiences, Bernhard’s stories bear a family resemblance to theirs. His own wartime childhood in Salzburg was saturated with death and shock that defined his later life as a writer. Like the Holocaust novelists who returned to “normal life” with stories that seemed like preposterous exaggerations to the few willing to listen, Bernhard too found that his memories and stories lacked what people thought of as real-life legitimacy. In his memoir he writes of his bafflement in postwar Salzburg:

When I visit the city today, I always ask people what they recall of that terrible period, but they react by shaking their heads. To

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19 Imre Kertész, “Language in Exile,” trans. Lewis P. Hinchman, *Hannah Arendt Newsletter* 4 (2001): 5–11, here 7.

me these shocking experiences are as vivid now as if they had happened only yesterday. Whenever I visit the city, I suddenly remember sounds and smells which they, it seems, have blotted out of their memories. When I speak to people who are old inhabitants of the city who must have been through what I went through, I meet only with extreme annoyance, ignorance, and forgetfulness. It's like being confronted with a concerted determination not to know, and I find this offensive—offensive to the spirit.<sup>20</sup>

The spirit of Auschwitz and the many other catastrophes of the twentieth century—including the carpet bombing of German cities, the nuclear obliteration of Japanese civilians, the mass slaughters in the Soviet Union, Rwanda, Bosnia, and on and on—have saturated Bernhard's protagonists, figures such as Franz-Josef Murau, Roithamer, Prince Saurau, and Strauch. They have been steeped in its poison. Small wonder that they appear to be demented.

In order to get a purchase on the truth of this spiritual situation, then, Bernhard needed a new language for the novel, a *Gegenwort*. His oeuvre might best be regarded as an arena or a theater in which the language is not referential but gestural, which is to say, mimetic. It signals: *This is art*, a space in which unpredictable encounters are probable, encounters that will give pause, pull us up short, and invite reflection. Thus the Bernhard narrative's relation to the world, its claim to truth-telling, is not one of factual representation (and seeming exaggeration) but instead the imaginatively exact expression of a spiritual climate in which chaos, anxiety, and uncertainty predominate. It would be similarly unhelpful, by way of comparison, to say that van Gogh exaggerates the colors of the landscape in Provence or of the people's faces there. What counts instead is the gesture of his style, its poetic thinking, the mimetic force of brushstroke and color choice, which mimic not the factual look of a thing but its spiritual dynamism. It would not be surprising to learn that some of van Gogh's sitters felt insulted by the way their images turned out. By the same token, it is not surprising that so many of Bernhard's countrymen have felt ill used by his fiction. Bernhard's style is radical and not designed to flatter his subject but to express something that cannot be directly represented without also being thereby grossly misrepresented.

The more conventional, more comforting novels of Bernhard's many West and East German contemporaries—Grass, Böll, Lenz, Walser, Wolf, and many more—raked through the still smoking crater of the

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20 Bernhard, *Gathering Evidence*, 95.

German devastation in fictional forms drawn from the pre-Auschwitz past. Not for nothing was Hemingway a mentor to that generation of writers. They are more comforting because the tried-and-true conventions of novel-writing imply, by their structural certainties, that reality has remained just as stable as it always has been, that novels still simply mirror the universal certainties that underlie outward fluctuations of circumstance. If the novel had not changed much after the catastrophe, then it must mean that the world, despite everything that had happened, was still pretty much the same too. Auschwitz could then be set to one side as a historical glitch, terrible and sad of course, but still we can and must now get back to the reality of how things always have been and still are.

In the late 1950s, Bernhard sensed this fraudulence in the novels being written by his colleagues, consumed by the reading public, celebrated by reviewers and critics. The secret power of contemporary novels written in the tradition of the nineteenth century, says Gabriel Josipovici, is this: "they look like mirrors held up to the world but what they are is machines that secrete spurious meaning into the world and so muddy the waters of genuine understanding of the human condition."<sup>21</sup> The formal certainties of conventional fiction make the world appear to be solid, not the other way around. Familiar structures reassure readers that the world has meaning, even after historical experience has offered a good deal of evidence to the contrary. Bernhard was not so sure that fiction ought to continue on its normal path. He went a different way, the opposite way. In a rich and strange access of spontaneous artistic combustion, Bernhard instinctively thrust novelistic conventions aside. With his imagination on fire, he created a bracing new form that functions not in accordance with the orderly laws of respectable fiction but molds itself directly to the disorderly contours of his era's lived reality. "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now," Beckett said in an interview in 1961.<sup>22</sup> Beckett found one way to do that. Bernhard found another.

It is as if Bernhard were the survivor of some nameless catastrophe that has left him in a landscape littered with frozen corpses, which he sees, though no one else does. Note, too, that the word "Auschwitz" never falls in his writing (just as the main character of Sontag's story never appears), though its chilling presence is felt everywhere in Bernhard's fiction, like an all-devouring wintery blast that coats everything

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21 Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 70.

22 Tom Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," *Columbia University Forum* 4 (1961): 21–5, here 23.

in ice: "The frost eats everything up," says the painter Strauch in 1963, when the war was still a fresh memory, "trees, humans, animals, and whatever is in the trees and the humans and the animals. The blood stalls, and at great speed. You can break apart a frozen human like a piece of stale bread."<sup>23</sup> This resort to figurative indirection—the image of a debilitating frost that immobilizes the spirit of postwar European life—is a typical example of Bernhardian understatement and tact. This *poetic thinking* avoids language that is too direct in certain matters. For example, no one in his fiction ever swears or curses. Such "real-life" talk is a staple of conventional fiction. Nor does he use Austrian vernacular in his art, though in his recorded interviews he hams it up for the camera with his I'm-just-a-country-boy-from-Salzburg routine. There is no such ingratiating hokum in his art.

Most significantly, though, he avoids naming or describing those horrors that would be diminished, falsified, cheapened through being pinned down in words at all, because words—as he repeatedly pointed out—inevitably miss the mark even in the best of circumstances. To talk about Auschwitz or the Shoah too directly would be tactless. He approaches these matters obliquely and with the utmost tact. Sometimes the approach is figurative, as in the frost metaphor. It coats and kills everything, which is an oblique way of pointing at the effect exerted by the cruelty, horror, and waste of Nazi Austria without naming it. To name it would reduce it.

Note that not even the vilely misanthropic Prince Saurau of *Gargoyles*, in his otherwise unsparing harangue, ever falls into anti-Semitic invective. There are in Bernhard's works many Jewish figures, beginning with the Bloch in *Gargoyles*. Bloch has remained in Austria even though his father was murdered by Nazis. But these characters are marginal, understated, even a bit ghostly since they are living out a posthumous existence.<sup>24</sup> Even Wertheimer, in *The Loser*, never appears. Circumspection with regard to this open wound in Austrian and German culture is also an expression of tact on Bernhard's part rather than a bow to political correctness. This is because anti-Semitism, Auschwitz, is the blight that brought about Austrian degradation and not a result of that degradation.

What is *not* said in Bernhard can be more crucial than what *is* said. Saskia Ziolkowski observes the importance of gaps and absences in Bernhard, not least of all in *Heldenplatz*, a play that guides Claudio

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23 Bernhard, *Frost*, 265.

24 For an overview of Jews and Jewish themes in Bernhard, see Karl Müller, "Über Jüdisches bei Bernhard," in *Bernhard-Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, eds. Martin Huber and Manfred Mittermayer (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2018), 427–32.