

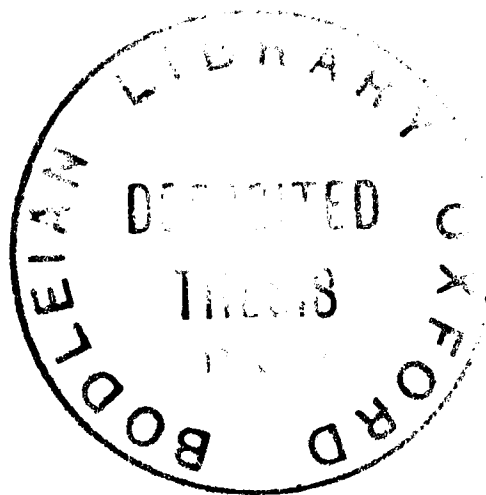
Communication and Hope in  
Thomas Bernhard's Later Prose Writings

by

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**COMMUNICATION AND HOPE IN  
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The aim of this study is to make an original contribution to the body of scholarship on the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931-89) by presenting a text-based investigation of his five-part autobiographical cycle (*Die Ursache* (1975), *Der Keller* (1976), *Der Atem* (1978), *Die Kälte* (1981), and *Ein Kind* (1982)), and the prose narratives, *Beton* (1982) and *Auslöschung* (1986).

In the Introduction, I detail the method adopted to construct the argument of the thesis, after discussing pertinent aspects of Bernhard criticism and its reluctance to approach the prose fiction from a textual perspective. Chapter I examines specific stylistic devices and themes found in the autobiographies and relates them to the emergence of a greater narratorial desire to communicate with the reader and a nascent sense of personal hope. After the tortuous narratives of the sixties and early seventies which made Bernhard's reputation as a nihilistic, negative writer, the autobiographical pentalogy gives evidence of a lighter, more direct expression. The second chapter, on *Beton*, focuses on a number of themes (human contact, perfectionism, and music and literature) which reveal a more positive outlook in the aftermath of the autobiographical project. The third chapter, on *Auslöschung*, concentrates on a protagonist who has achieved considerable personal fulfilment and who manages to overcome the emotional and psychological obstacles which his predecessors in Bernhard's prose were unable to surmount.

The aim of the thesis, to expose and analyse the aspects of communication and hope recurrent in Bernhard's prose works after 1975, is achieved through close reading reinforced by pertinent biographical and literary evidence. It is hoped that, by undertaking a critical examination of selected narratives, this thesis fills a critical lacuna in the substantial secondary material on Bernhard.

# COMMUNICATION AND HOPE IN THE LATER PROSE FICTION OF THOMAS BERNHARD

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The prose fiction of the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931-89) is widely regarded as unremittingly nihilistic and negative about people and human nature. Much Bernhard criticism has unquestioningly accepted this reputation and centres upon extra-literary factors — such as biography, philosophy, politics, or Bernhard's casual remarks in interviews — often to the detriment, even exclusion, of close and sensitive readings of his work. Reacting against these prevailing tendencies, Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler and Stephen Dowden, two of the most prominent academic critics of Bernhard's writing, have separately called for a marked shift in approach. At a Bernhard symposium in London in 1994, Schmidt-Dengler began proceedings by expressing a wish for the critical bias and method to swing back to textual analysis ('zurück zu den Texten'). In his influential Bernhard monograph of 1991, Dowden prefaces his study with the judgement: '[Writers of dissertations and scholarly articles on Bernhard often] force a foreign system of thought on a highly individual and idiosyncratic *creative writer*' [emphasis in original]. He goes on to warn: 'It will take much work by many hands before a reasonably complete image of Bernhard's achievement is formed.' I intend this dissertation to make an original contribution to this corrective work by undertaking a text-centred scrutiny of selected prose narratives (Schmidt-Dengler's method), leading to a thorough investigation of literary and creative aspects of Bernhard's prose (Dowden's long-term aim). This investigation strives to redefine some of the stereotyped notions

about the texts by uncovering recurrent themes of communication and hope which can help us to understand the works under discussion in a different light.

The Introduction is split into two sections: ‘Bernhard’s Reputation’ and ‘Method’. The first section, ‘Bernhard’s Reputation’, shows that Bernhard criticism concentrates more on him as a cult figure and public provocateur than on his narratives. Bernhard was a satirist whose mischievous posing in his drama, prose, and controversial public statements gave him an early and lasting reputation in Austria and Germany as an *enfant terrible*. Much of Bernhard’s later prose has been interpreted in the light of his early novels which were characterized by dense prose, hypotactic syntactical structures, and consistently depressing topics, such as mental and emotional illness, loneliness, and death. As a result, many critics see no thematic or stylistic development in his prose fiction. I show that such a development does indeed exist. The second part of the Introduction explains the method and structure used in the text-based investigations contained in this dissertation. Many critics rely on the reputation of Bernhard’s earlier, gloomy tales about provincial Austria to define the later, more optimistic works. However, if one looks closely at the stylistic and thematic subtleties of these later texts, a different writer emerges – not one determined to repeat nihilistic visions from one work to the next in endless variations, but a rich creative force who is fighting with himself to articulate a self-development best detected and understood through the literary and creative dimensions of a narrative.

Chapter I is divided into four sections: ‘Critical Reception’; ‘Bernhard and Autobiography’; ‘Communication’, and ‘Hope’. The first section, ‘Critical Reception’, traces the separate works of Bernhard’s autobiographical pentalogy (*Die Ursache* (1975), *Der Keller* (1976), *Der Atem* (1978), *Die Kälte* (1981), and *Ein Kind* (1982)) and their reception both in the press and in academic writing. It shows that, although a handful of critics have detected hope and a desire to communicate in these five works, no one has taken up these themes in earnest in critical material on the pentalogy. The second section

of this chapter, 'Bernhard and Autobiography', focuses on Bernhard's autobiographical aims through an exploration of the themes of self-knowledge (further subdivided into reconstruction, ordering, and self-improvement), truth, and the process of writing. In this section, I examine the personal and moral impulses which drive Bernhard's autobiographical project and method. My critical exposition is aided by reference to Freud's concept of 'Durcharbeiten' and the idea of 'narrative truth' formulated by Donald F. Spence, an American theoretician of psychoanalysis; the application of a psychoanalytical model suggests how Bernhard's protagonists seek and partially obtain a release from past unhappiness. After considering the purpose behind the pentalogy, my argument turns to Montaigne's search for self-knowledge in the *Essais* (1580-95), prompted by Bernhard's allusions to them in the autobiography. The third section of this chapter, 'Communication', looks in detail at the way in which Bernhard establishes a close relationship with his reader, by dissecting his unusual use of tenses in parts of the pentalogy and analysing his sometimes idiosyncratic and revealing employment of the phrase, 'einerseits ... andererseits', and the keyword, 'naturgemäß'. The final part of this first chapter tackles the themes of lapsed idealism and life affirmation under the heading of 'Hope': this section addresses the largely neglected issue of Bernhard's stubborn determination to live when confronted by extreme illness. The protagonists of the pentalogy (and in particular, *Der Atem* and *Die Kälte*) cling on to life despite apparently decrying its meaninglessness. I show here that thwarted idealism fires Bernhard's criticisms of people and of human nature; however much they are disappointed, these Bernhard protagonists do not lose their idealistic instincts and hopes. Far from repeating his desperate messages of the prose of the sixties and early seventies, clear signs emerge in the pentalogy that the ailing, lonely adolescent has overcome or 'worked through', to use Freud's term, his travails to emerge a stronger, happier, and distinctly less negative person, even if many of the indicators of this change are only to be found in narrative clues.

In Chapter II, I investigate *Beton* (1982) by applying and developing the findings of the first chapter. At first sight, the narrator-protagonist, Rudolf, would appear to be closely related to his predecessors in Bernhard's prose: he is ill, frustrated, unhappy, and lonely. However, a closer look at the narrative reveals that the failing, miserable loner is, indeed, a man learning to seek self-improvement who begins to understand and find happiness at the end of his story. After a section on critical reception, which details not only how the text was interpreted in the shadow of Bernhard's previous works but also how much *Beton* was (and still is) neglected by reviewers and academic critics, there are five further sections: 'Human Contact'; 'Perfectionism, Hope, and Imperfection'; 'Music and Literature'; 'Presentation of Narrator', and 'Anna's Story'. The section on human contact indicates a new preoccupation in Bernhard's prose of the '80s: Rudolf may severely criticize all his acquaintances, but ultimately he puts friends and family before his intellectual project — most notably Anna Härdtl whom he meets in Palma — and consequently learns to look at his own life from a fresh perspective. In the third section of this chapter, 'Perfectionism, Hope, and Imperfection', I show how the theme of perfectionism, which had plagued many of Bernhard's obsessed protagonists, takes an uncharacteristically positive turn. Through the memory of a Mendelssohn work, Rudolf learns not only to accept imperfection, but to regard it as desirable. He realizes that interaction with others can be a positive, life-affirmative experience and achieves what one critic, Martin Chalmers, has called a 'potential for humanness'. By emphasizing the importance of Rudolf's Mendelssohn experience, I show how other clues in the text fit into place. In the fourth section of the chapter, 'Music and Literature', I link Rudolf's understanding of human imperfection to his all-important musicological project and his literary allusions, most notably to Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747). The sudden, unannounced reference to *Zadig* marks a major breakthrough in Rudolf's account: he experiences an entirely natural moment of happiness, without the emotional, mental, and physical struggles by which he is otherwise dogged. In the penultimate section, 'Presentation of

the Narrator', I argue that Bernhard lays a consistent trail of clues about Rudolf which reinforce my evolving interpretation of the narrator's development. Shifting narrative perspectives and narratorial unreliability often disclose Rudolf's true intentions – what Bernhard termed 'inner landscapes'. My analysis and interpretation of inconsistencies in Rudolf's account reveals a figure who subtly, often indirectly upholds positive, dignified human values, not a nihilist bent upon decrying and destroying everything around him. In the final section, 'Anna's Story', the influence of another human being's desperate plight is related to Rudolf's situation: unlike the autobiographical cycle, where self-contemplation led to self-knowledge, here Rudolf learns about himself through another person. As a result, he casts aside his own concerns briefly in order to make a hopeful 'new start'. Rudolf shares much with Bernhard's previous protagonists, but his story marks a significant departure: hope and the potential for happiness are realized, albeit in brief glimpses of insight.

It is not until *Auslöschung* (1986), widely acknowledged as Bernhard's *magnum opus*, that these glimpses become more enduring. Chapter III dissects Murau's story in three sections: 'Critical Reception', 'Personal Values and People', and 'Writing against Death'. In the first section, 'Critical Reception', a detailed overview of the critical responses to this text shows that important aspects of authorial and narratorial communication have been largely overlooked. As with the pentalogy and *Beton*, some critics openly acknowledge the text's optimistic undercurrent and hopeful outlook, but none has really explored it. I aim to address these critical questions in Chapter III. In the second section, 'Personal Values and People', Murau's circle of friends and acquaintances are analysed one by one in order to show, by adducing detailed textual evidence, how different this Bernhard protagonist is from any of his predecessors. Bernhard's use of certain words, such as 'Mensch' and 'naturgemäß', is examined, and a clear development from the earlier works (the pentalogy and *Beton*) is outlined. Murau is happy in Rome, his 'paradise', and he copes psychologically with the memories and

attendant problems associated with the forced return to Wolfsegg, his family seat in Austria. The last section of this chapter, 'Writing against Death', is divided into three subsections: 'Wolfsegg and Rome', 'Obliteration', and 'Social Criticism'. In 'Wolfsegg and Rome', I examine the references to the contrast between the North and South (reflected in the stark comparisons between Wolfsegg and Rome) which betray more than first meets the eye. For instance, memories of Murau's beloved humanist uncle and the psychological confidence his life in Rome gives him, enable him to confront his family and past experiences in Wolfsegg when he returns for the funeral of his recently deceased parents and brother. In the second subsection, 'Obliteration', my close textual analysis shows that obliteration can, indeed, be quite the opposite of what it appears to be: by 'obliterating' his childhood and adolescent home (by disposing of it and wiping it from his mind), Murau is paradoxically able to preserve his identity and his happiness in Rome. He is able to look forward to a more positive, hopeful future. In the final subsection, 'Social Criticism', I draw attention to the novel, positive outcome of Murau's attacks on National Socialism and Catholicism. In Bernhard's previous prose works, political comment had been confined to incidental satire (*Amras* (1964), for instance) or to awkward excursions (as in the pentalogy and *Beton*). Murau, on the other hand, squarely addresses questions about Austria's recent history which intersects with his own past; he is thereby able to effect a more complete 'working through' of his memories of the past than any of Bernhard's previous protagonists since he brings together the expiation of his personal and national identity in the single act of relinquishing Wolfsegg. Rudolf ends up as a reintegrated, social being who has not allowed his own high standards and expectations to destroy him. He has survived, and his survival is not just physical; it is also an emotional (his life in Rome) and moral (disposal of Wolfsegg to the Jewish community) victory.

The Conclusion brings together the questions of communication and hope explored in the main body of the thesis and traces a development in the works under

discussion as well as showing how complementary these two concepts are. The pentalogy is shown to mark the beginnings of hope; *Beton* depicts a figure who turns away from his intellectual endeavours and concentrates upon people and ends up achieving limited but real moments of happiness. Murau's personal circumstances in *Auslöschung* are altogether calmer, and hope is far more than just a potential possibility or distant memory; more than any of his predecessors in Bernhard's prose, Murau achieves self-fulfilment and positive human communication.

The principal impulse in reinterpreting the narratives under review here was to investigate and bring to the reader's attention the quality of Bernhard's prose, to 'come back to the texts' (Schmidt-Dengler) after the last forty years when critical interpretations have been obscured by accepted notions about Bernhard's narrative aims and literary method, often without reference to the text itself. The sections on 'Critical Reception' in each of the three main chapters adduce evidence in order to substantiate this point. More recent interpreters (Alfred Pfabigan, for instance) have finally started to provide textual evidence to clarify theories about the narrative, but the stress has switched in these more recent criticisms to social, political, and historical content, and not towards aspects of communication and hope. Despite these beginnings of a shift in critical emphasis, Bernhard's label as a harbinger of and reveller in gloom has endured in the reception of the prose works. In the three central chapters of this thesis, my aim has been to show how the prose narratives under discussion can be read from a fresh perspective, with the result that the narratives are transformed from reflecting repetitive monomania to indicating lapsed idealism: the pained search for hope and solutions supersedes loneliness, fear of the self, and confrontation with death. It is this search which the works after 1975 undertake. By concentrating on Bernhard's use of language, his use of tenses, his narrative reconstruction, and his presentation of the narrator, the thesis shows how a creative, challenging, and more positive prose writer emerges in place of the one tarred by a clichéd reputation as a nihilist and indiscriminate satirist of

Austria (an uncompromising 'Nestbeschmutzer'). By looking closely at stylistic devices and their relation to recurrent thematic concerns, the thesis attempts to convey a sense of the intensity and the difficult, but rewarding denseness of the prose style, as in the analysis of Bernhard's tense usage in a long passage from *Der Atem* in Chapter I.

In summary, the aim of the thesis is to expose and analyse the aspects of communication and hope recurrent in the prose works after 1975. This is achieved through close reading reinforced by pertinent biographical, literary, and personal evidence in order to re-evaluate the later prose fiction of a writer whose sensational reception and public image have all too often outshone his literary qualities. It is hoped that, by undertaking a critical examination of selected narratives, this thesis fills a critical lacuna in the substantial secondary material on Bernhard.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I have also incurred a number of other notable debts. I should like to express my gratitude to St John's College for financial and general support during my years at Oxford. The staff of the following libraries helped me through the labyrinth of secondary material which I had to consult: St John's College, the Bodleian, and the Taylor Institution; in particular, I am very grateful to Jill Hughes for her kind, unassuming, and consistently professional assistance in the sometimes arcane process of tracking down books and articles. Early drafts of my work were read by Professor Peter Pütz (Bonn) and Dr Eve Mason (Cambridge), and I am most indebted to both of them for their criticisms and encouragement. Selina Morphet and James Gibbons have made constructive and helpful suggestions which have improved the final draft. Dr Kenneth Segar (Fellow Emeritus of St Edmund Hall) inspired me to explore Bernhard's works in the first place, and he re-awakened my interest in Austrian literature. The project would never have been undertaken without his encouragement.

I dedicate this work to the most important people in my life: my parents, Soli and Khorshed Darukhanawala, and my partner, Selina Morphet.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis investigates selected prose texts of Thomas Bernhard written between 1975 and 1986. By concentrating on certain aspects of communication and hope recurrent in these prose works, I aim to show that Bernhard is not principally the unremitting, thwarting nihilist which much critical writing has assumed him to be; on the contrary, he is a writer whose prose narratives of this period not only actively seek to engage the reader, but also reveal idealism, moral stringency, and, above all, life affirmation and human-centred values in the form of hope and happiness. In this introduction to the dissertation, I start by examining Bernhard's reputation among critics and the wider public, before detailing the method I have adopted in order to expose and analyse the pertinent aspects of communication and hope in Bernhard's prose works after 1975.

### 1. BERNHARD'S REPUTATION

Many accounts of Bernhard's life and writings begin fittingly by detailing the dramatic events surrounding his death – which was not made public until four days had elapsed

and he had been buried in the Grinzinger Friedhof in Vienna.<sup>1</sup> The carefully worded will, the deliberately timed announcement to the press of his death, even the subsequent opening of his posthumous papers (against the wishes of Bernhard in the will) to a group of selected academics are all appropriately sensational for a writer who had very skilfully managed and nurtured his public reputation and image throughout his writing career.<sup>2</sup> Even if many Austrians had not read a word of his prose narratives, they knew all about Thomas Bernhard: he was the wilful ‘Nestbeschmutzer’ who had no love or respect for his country; he was the misunderstood Austrian patriot who, like Anton Wildgans and Robert Musil before him, had publicly disparaged his native Austria;<sup>3</sup> he was, at the same time, the ‘Alpen-Beckett’ whose nihilism and propensity to express repeatedly the meaninglessness of life knew no bounds, and yet a major literary figure whose humorous and fun-poking public appearances towards the end of his career made him a media celebrity and household name in Austria.<sup>4</sup> The public knew exactly what Bernhard looked like, they knew where he lived, they knew that he drove an immaculate old Mercedes, they even saw the exact wording of his will. The one area of his life which remained something of a mystery was his writing, and in particular his prose narratives.

In an article written just before Bernhard’s death, Helen Chambers structures the critical reception of Bernhard’s works into five categories: ‘the listing of themes’; the ‘repeated use of keywords’; ‘critics’ tendency to imitate his style’; the practice of ‘compar[ing] him with other writers’, and, finally, ‘the assertion that Bernhard is writing

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<sup>1</sup> See: Hans Höller, *Thomas Bernhard* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993), p.7; Bernhard Sorg, *Thomas Bernhard*, Beck’sche Reihe, Autorenbücher, 627, 2nd edn, rev. by author (Munich: Beck, 1992), p.7. In this, and subsequent chapters, where he/him/his is used for the reader, she/her/hers are also to be understood. She/her/hers have been omitted for ease of reading only. Similarly, for ease of reading only *and* where appropriate, ‘he’ or ‘men’ are used to refer to mankind or ‘men and women’ where Bernhard simply uses ‘Mensch’ or ‘Menschen’.

<sup>2</sup> For a photocopied reproduction of Bernhard’s will, see: *Thomas Bernhard - Karl Ignaz Hennetmair: Ein Briefwechsel 1965-1974*, ed. by Peter Bader in collaboration with Karl Ignaz Hennetmair (Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, 1994), pp.12-14.

<sup>3</sup> There are many accounts about Bernhard’s treacherous stance towards Austria. A good example of the hyperbole and polarized emotional responses his outbursts elicited can be found in: Dieter Kindermann, ‘Das darf man sich nicht gefallen lassen’, *Neue Kronen Zeitung*, 10 October 1988. For a defence of Bernhard as a patriot, see: Friedrich Heer, ‘Ein österreichischer Patriot’, in *Thomas Bernhard: Portraits, Bilder und Texte*, ed. by Sepp Dreissinger (Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, 1991), pp.47-9.

<sup>4</sup> See: Fritz Rumler, ‘Alpen-Beckett und Menschenfeind’, *Der Spiegel*, 31 July 1972, p.98.

the same book over and over again'.<sup>5</sup> Chambers's conclusions in this essay — that Bernhard's exaggerations not only distort but also demystify or clarify certain aspects of reality — run counter to many of the received ideas about his work in mainstream criticism.<sup>6</sup> Her categories provide an interesting starting-point for the analysis of Bernhard's prose fiction since they reflect the neglect of a textual focus; only one of her five headings ('keywords') points to a direct concern with Bernhard's style – and studies on keywords have been either short or incorporated into larger, more substantial arguments.<sup>7</sup> All the other categories tackle only obliquely or inadvertently the question of how Bernhard constructs his text (the listing of themes), or they sidestep the issue: imitation of Bernhard's style; comparison with other writers and philosophers (studies more of influence and intellectual history than stylistic analysis), and writing the same book with slight variations. Although, theoretically, there is scope in these last three categories for engagement with the way in which Bernhard writes, in practice this question has all too often been overlooked by the secondary literature on Bernhard's prose.

Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, arguably the most prominent and prolific Bernhard critic of them all, sets out clearly how the critical reception of Bernhard's work has come to overshadow its independent literary qualities:

Bernhards Aktionen haben immerhin dafür gesorgt, daß sich der Wirbel darum zwischen ihn und seine Texte schiebt, daß sie ein Objektiv für das abgeben, was

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Chambers, 'Thomas Bernhard', in *After the 'Death' of Literature: West German Writing of the 1970s*, ed. by Keith Bullivant (Oxford: Berg, 1989), pp.197-211 (p.208).

<sup>6</sup> These conclusions are based on findings by Walter Weiss ('zugleich Verzerrung und Erhellung der Wirklichkeit'): Walter Weiss, 'Thomas Bernhard — Peter Handke: Parallelen und Gegensätze' in *Literarisches Kolloquium Linz 1984. Thomas Bernhard: Materialien*, ed. by Alfred Pitterschscher and Johann Lachinger (Linz: ORF Landesstudio Oberösterreich, 1985), pp.1-17 (p.14). Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler talks of Bernhard's need 'die Welt zu entstellen, um sie kenntlich zu machen'. See: Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Der Übertreibungskünstler: Zu Thomas Bernhard*, 2nd. edn, rev. by author (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 1989), p.104.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance: Hans Joachim Piechotta, "'Naturgemäß': Thomas Bernhards autobiographische Bücher", *Text + Kritik* 43 (1982), 8-24; or the subsection, entitled "'Anschauung", "Künstlichkeit", "Übertreibung"' in: Alfred Pfabigan, *Thomas Bernhard: Ein österreichisches Weltexperiment* (Vienna: Zsolnay, 1999), pp.249-57; the specific analysis of the word 'Auslöschung' in: Silke Schlichtmann, *Das Erzählprinzip 'Auslöschung': Zum Umgang mit Geschichte in Thomas Bernhards Roman 'Auslöschung: Ein Zerfall'*, *Trierer Studien zur Literatur*, 27 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1996), pp.23-31. There has even been a pastiche on the subject: Ernst Strouhal, 'Naturgemäß', in *Der Bernhardiner. Ein wilder Hund: Tomaten, Satiren und Parodien über Thomas Bernhard*, ed. by Jens Dittmar (Austria [n.p.]: Edition S, 1990), pp.80-2. This volume contains thirty-nine pastiches and other witty articles which confirm many of the prejudices about the negativity and unreadability traditionally associated with Bernhard's work.

in seinem im engeren Sinne literarischen Werk aufscheint. Darüber hinaus scheint es, daß gerade durch diese Auftritte die Bernhard-Rezeption nicht unwesentlich gesteuert wird. [...] So hat sich die Rezeption der Texte Bernhards weitgehend emanzipiert von dem, was seine erzählenden und dramatischen und lyrischen Texte denn auch bewirken können. Bernhard ist zur Kunstfigur geworden, und sein Werk läßt sich nicht mehr ablösen von der Wirkung, die es gehabt hat.<sup>8</sup>

Schmidt-Dengler here succinctly summarizes the major problem with Bernhard criticism: the combination of Bernhard's publicity-seeking and the image-making of journalists, leading to a marked critical reluctance to engage directly with the texts. Ever since Bernhard's literary debut in 1963 with his long novel, *Frost*, he was renowned for staging publicity stunts, ranging from acerbic letters in the press to sensational statements about leading public figures.<sup>9</sup> Like Peter Handke with his famous Princeton outburst in 1966, Bernhard was the Austrian provincial who was determined at an early stage in his career to make his mark on the German-language literary Establishment.<sup>10</sup> Even more than Handke, however, Bernhard's courtship of media attention has resulted in extra-literary factors overshadowing the literary aspects of his work.

Stephen Dowden, in his well-balanced and extremely useful monograph, traces an important link between Bernhard's public outbursts and his commercial acumen:

[Bernhard] is also a commercially successful writer, since 1965 a mainstay of West Germany's prestigious Suhrkamp publishing house. Bernhard's *popular* reputation probably rests on his aggressive personal style; he liked to antagonize the prominent and the powerful. His popularity also stems in part from the exotically repulsive things he chose to write about: disease, isolation, madness, and death.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Schmidt-Dengler, *Übertreibungskünstler*, pp.93-4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp.93-106. This chapter (entitled 'Bernhards Scheltreden: Um-und Abwege der Bernhard-Rezeption') gives a useful summary of major controversies in which Bernhard was embroiled; it originally appeared in: Pittertschatscher and Lachinger, pp.89-112. For a reliable introduction to Bernhard's public provocations, see: Höller, *Thomas Bernhard*, pp.7-17. For more detailed accounts, in the form of long conversations about Bernhard's sometimes attention-seeking and unpredictable behaviour, see the following works: Maria Fialik, *Der konservative Anarchist: Thomas Bernhard und das Staats-Theater* (Vienna: Löcker, 1991) and: Maria Fialik, *Der Charismatiker: Thomas Bernhard und die Freunde von einst* (Vienna: Löcker, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> For an extremely succinct but useful introduction to the post-War literary scene in Austria, see: Stephen D. Dowden, *Understanding Thomas Bernhard* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp.11-15. For an up-to-date and much more detailed study, see: Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien: Vorlesungen zur österreichischen Literatur 1945 bis 1990* (Salzburg and Vienna: Residenz, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Dowden, p.2 [emphasis in original].

Dowden's 'popularity' might be more closely defined as Bernhard's notorious ability to elicit polarized responses from literary critics, journalists, and even members of the Austrian public.<sup>12</sup> Bernhard was by no means only popular; he was pilloried by members of the press and sections of the literary Establishment, many of whom he had denigrated in public statements, such as speeches, letters to newspapers, and television and radio broadcasts. These hostilities served only to bring Bernhard more and more into the public eye, and they had the effect of enhancing his literary reputation. Many of the early critical accounts of Bernhard state that he is a prominent and important writer, but little or no evidence is adduced from the texts to support the claims.

Unsurprisingly, Bernhard's mischievous, sometimes malicious rants against the Austrian state made him into something of an *enfant terrible* among certain intellectuals within Austria. Bernhard subtly manipulated his outward stance towards his native country: his provocative statements about Austria's part in the Second World War (in such works as *Auslöschung* (1986) and *Heldenplatz* (1988)) meant that he occupied an unimpeachable moral high ground on war guilt, certainly as far as most critics and commentators outside Austria were concerned. To the outside world, Bernhard was a gloomy and difficult nihilist; to many Austrians, however, he was in addition an irksome trouble-maker. In a letter to Claus Peymann, the Burgtheater director at the time rehearsals were taking place for *Heldenplatz*, a member of the public drew a direct comparison between Bernhard and Hitler, seriously suggesting that Bernhard be sent to a mental asylum for corrective treatment.<sup>13</sup> However, Bernhard's fame and many accolades (including the Büchner Prize and a nomination for the Nobel Prize) meant that the authorities in Austria often turned a blind eye to his antics in order to exploit his high profile abroad: in the same article that decried *Heldenplatz* as a 'grobe Beleidigung des

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<sup>12</sup> Bernhard's last major act of provocation was his play *Heldenplatz* (1988). The public furore spilled over into the newspapers. For a selection of responses, including excerpts from the notorious *Neue Kronen Zeitung*, see: Burgtheater [no author given], *Heldenplatz: Eine Dokumentation* (Vienna: Burgtheater, 1989), p.251.

<sup>13</sup> Burgtheater, *Heldenplatz*, p.124.

österreichischen Volkes', Kurt Waldheim, the then Federal President, was quoted as describing Bernhard as 'diesen großen Dichter'.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the Austrian state from which he so ruthlessly distanced himself in his will (no work of his was to be published, no play performed in Austria after his death) now subsidizes the maintenance of his literary estate to the order of over one million schillings every year.<sup>15</sup> It was the combination of Bernhard's desire to shock the public (in horrific early tales, where the inescapability of death led to a painful, hermetic, self-imposed exile (*Frost*) or where parents committed suicide leaving their children stranded in an empty house (*Amras*)) and his astute commercial sense which made him something of a literary performer and celebrity, or 'Kunstfigur' (Schmidt-Dengler). Bernhard always managed his literary career very carefully, often using his publishers as a protective and obscuring smokescreen, as in the many public controversies (such as the Onkel Franz affair or the *Holzfällen* confiscation), during which either his German (Siegfried Unseld of Suhrkamp) or Austrian publisher (Wolfgang Schaffler of Residenz Verlag) was always at his side in interviews and official meetings.<sup>16</sup>

Outside Austria, where the local, political, and personal animosities were simply less immediate, critics concentrated more on the existential and literary aspects of Bernhard's output.<sup>17</sup> An early review of the novels by D.A. Craig acknowledges the social aspect of the prose fiction: '[In Bernhard's novels of the 1960s] Austria is in a final state of decay and the people of that country are the victims of that decay.'<sup>18</sup> However, Craig reserves his critical acclaim for the way in which Bernhard writes:

The primary attraction of Bernhard is no doubt his individual and compulsive style, the extraordinary gift he has, like Kleist, of capturing the reader in the first

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.34. For the original article, see: Kotanko Kittner, 'Waldheim: In der Burg kein Platz für Heldenplatz', *Kurier*, 11 October 1988.

<sup>15</sup> For further details, see: Sigrid Löffler, 'Wiedergänger und Kultfigur', *Die Zeit*, 11 February 1999.

<sup>16</sup> The Onkel Franz affair is discussed in Chapter I; the *Holzfällen* controversy with Gerhard Lampersberg, Bernhard's erstwhile friend and patron, is explained at the beginning of Chapter III.

<sup>17</sup> This is especially true of the anglophone world; see, for example, the compendium of North American and English reviews up to 1988, in: Donald G. Daviau, 'The Reception of Thomas Bernhard in the United States', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 21 (1988), 3/4, 243-66.

<sup>18</sup> D.A. Craig, 'The Novels of Thomas Bernhard: A Report', *German Life and Letters*, 25 (1971-2), 343-53.

phrases and taking him through, almost breathless, to the end of the work. [...] One feels confronted by a long pent-up confession to which one feels the obligation to give complete attention.<sup>19</sup>

In the three main chapters of this dissertation, I discuss some of the methods Bernhard uses to gain the ‘complete attention’ of the reader. Many journalistic and academic accounts of Bernhard’s prose do not give an idea of the quality of his prose. While I hope to give a critical and scholarly account of the prose narratives under discussion, I also intend to convey a sense of how Bernhard endows his prose with a creative, literary dimension.

It is another anglophone critic, this time writing after Bernhard’s death, who draws attention to the serious, literary side of Bernhard’s prose. In urging the reader to approach Bernhard’s *œuvre* from a fresh perspective, Dowden identifies three influential elements: first, a moral undercurrent driving the stringency in Bernhard’s work; second, certain biographical concerns, most obviously Bernhard’s life-long pulmonary illness, and third, the unusual, ‘musical’ nature of his prose.<sup>20</sup> There is little doubt that biographical and stylistic concerns have a large part to play in any detailed description of Bernhard’s writings. However, in order to understand the apparent gloom in his works as something more than monomaniacal nihilism, the most important of the aspects picked out by Dowden is Bernhard’s moral impulse. The moral impetus behind the apparent bitterness in his writing helps to address a largely unanswered question about Bernhard’s work: how can it matter sufficiently to an alleged nihilist to write detailed, agonized descriptions about human misery and low human standards? Dowden’s comments can be seen to provide a compelling explanation: ‘Bernhard’s inexhaustible rancor is that of an outraged moralist. [...] His bitterness gives the measure of severely disappointed

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.348.

<sup>20</sup> A number of critics have made a link between Bernhard’s musical background and the musical nature of his prose narratives. See, in particular: Andrea Reiter, ‘Thomas Bernhards “musikalisches Kompositionsprinzip”’, *Literaturmagazin*, 23 (1989), 149-68; Andreas Herzog, ‘Thomas Bernhards Poetik der prosaischen Musik’, *Zeitschrift für Germanistik: Neue Folge*, 4 (1994), 35-44.

expectations and impossibly demanding claims on human nature.’<sup>21</sup> By using the term ‘moralist’, Dowden is here referring to Bernhard not as the adherent of a specific ideology or moral system, but as a thinking individual observing his human environment and making personal statements and judgements about it. As Bernhard confides unequivocally to Krista Fleischmann: ‘*Innere Vorgänge, die niemand sieht, sind das einzig Interessante an Literatur überhaupt. [...] Das was niemand sieht, das hat einen Sinn aufzuschreiben.*’<sup>22</sup> Even in his political statements, Bernhard never really sought to provide specific solutions to existing political and social questions; he preferred, instead, to provoke: *Heldenplatz*, for instance, does not furnish the audience with any practical answers to Austria’s supposed ills; rather, it provocatively keeps reminding the onlooker of her past misdemeanours and current problems. Viewing Bernhard’s vitriolic outpourings as the result of disappointed personal standards and moral values casts his prose narratives into a different, more positive light. Dowden talks of a ‘paradoxical humanizing effect’.<sup>23</sup> The aspects of hope discussed in the three main chapters of this thesis explore and develop this human aspect to Bernhard’s narratives which has been largely neglected in critical accounts of the works under discussion. As the sections on the critical reception of the autobiographical pentalogy (1975-82), *Beton* (1982), and *Auslöschung* show, some critics have hinted at positive elements in Bernhard’s prose, but none has explored them in depth.

Even in the spate of articles which appeared on the tenth anniversary of Bernhard’s death in 1999, little progress has been made in this direction. Sigrid Löffler, a consistently negative critic of Bernhard’s works over the years, tempers her criticism in a reappraisal in *Die Zeit* and adds: ‘Zehn Jahre nach dem Tode Thomas Bernhards ist die Zeit reif für eine Revision seines Werkes.’<sup>24</sup> There is also evidence in her review that a

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<sup>21</sup> Dowden, pp.7-8.

<sup>22</sup> Krista Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard - Eine Begegnung: Gespräche mit Thomas Bernhard* (Vienna: Edition S, 1991), p.274 [emphasis in original].

<sup>23</sup> Dowden, p.8.

<sup>24</sup> Löffler, ‘Wiedergänger und Kultfigur’.

move in Bernhard criticism towards biographical and political questions has taken place, doubtless inspired in part by the huge impact of *Auslöschung*. However, Löffler remains sceptical about the value of Bernhard's work. Wolfgang Schreiber, writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, opens his account with the words: 'War er der Geist [*sic*] der stets verneint?'.<sup>25</sup> There is a small yet noticeable shift in critical approach in the very fact of Schreiber's calling into question Bernhard's generally accepted nihilism. Schreiber also concentrates on biographical influences (what he terms 'die schon frühe Amalgamierung von Leben und Werk').<sup>26</sup> However, he undermines the tentative reinterpretation signalled by his opening words when he claims, contrary to the reports of many of Bernhard's friends, that Bernhard was a bitter and cold man in real life. He cites scathingly critical passages from Bernhard's early works and speeches to justify this opinion.<sup>27</sup> The article could almost have been written in the early 1970s; no concession is made to the more optimistic, humane outlook of the prose fiction Bernhard wrote in the late 1970s and '80s.

In her belated commemoration of Bernhard's death, Christiane Zintzen, writing in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, also hints at a change in Bernhard criticism since 1989; she points to a more historical approach to Bernhard's writing which is not centred upon his personality and image: 'Dass man den Dichter allmählich distanzierter und historischer zu sehen beginnt, belegen mehrere Publikationen.'<sup>28</sup> There is, however, little change in the fundamental stance taken on Bernhard's works in these articles written ten years after his death. Many of the renowned traits of Bernhard criticism persist. Löffler, Schreiber, and Zintzen, for instance, all revel in inventing puns on Bernhard titles ('Die

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<sup>25</sup> Wolfgang Schreiber, 'Von der Kälte in den Frost', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12 February 1999.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Bernhard was by no means a completely unsociable loner; he regularly received friends, including Karl Ignaz Hennetmair, Claus Peymann, and Wieland Schmied, at his house in Ohlsdorf. See, for example, the section 'Freunde' (photographs with some text) in Sepp Dreissinger's extensive and impressive collection of Bernhard memorabilia, including photographs, quotations, personal accounts and articles: Dreissinger, *Thomas Bernhard: Portraits*, pp.163-76. See also Krista Fleischmann's brief but glowing personal reference in the same volume (p.203). Other useful sources of information about Bernhard's real-life interaction with friends can be found in: Gerda Maleta, *Seteais: Tage mit Thomas Bernhard* (Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, 1992) and: Bader, *Thomas Bernhard - Karl Ignaz Hennetmair*.

<sup>28</sup> Christiane Zintzen, 'Nach dem Skandal: Neue Annäherungen an Thomas Bernhard', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 8/9 May 1999.

Auslöschung der Realitäten durch Literarisierung ist noch nicht gelungen' (Löffler); 'Von der Kälte in den Frost' (Schreiber), and 'Es wäre Bernhard damit gewissermaßen *Am Ziel* angelangt' (Zintzen)).<sup>29</sup> This allusive, insider idiom, where the critic expects the reader to pick up the word-play, is a particular feature of Bernhard criticism and confirms Chambers's assertion about imitation of style. Moreover, it typifies a marked reluctance to grapple with the texts themselves and the continuing preoccupation of much Bernhard criticism with non-literary concerns.

## 2. METHOD

In 1975, Bernhard decided to take stock of his life in the form of an extended autobiography of his childhood and adolescent years; the project took seven years (1975-82). The resulting pentalogy (*Die Ursache* (1975), *Der Keller* (1976), *Der Atem* (1978), *Die Kälte* (1981), and *Ein Kind* (1982)) helps to demarcate two distinct periods in Bernhard's prose output: the first (1963-75) consists of the early years of his prolific writing career, during which Bernhard established himself as a prominent Austrian literary voice whose narrative landscapes were marked by human isolation, pain, and death: in the second (1975-89), we find a calmer writer, less disposed to concentrate on his problems and more intent upon finding a way to live happily with himself and others. This happiness is reflected in the prose narratives of this later period (most notably, the pentalogy, *Beton*, and *Auslöschung*). Where the earlier works were hard to follow, these later narratives exhibit a more limpid prose style and more human-centred, optimistic concerns.

In a fragment of 1969 published on the tenth anniversary of Bernhard's death, Ingeborg Bachmann paid compliment to the overpowering intensity of Bernhard's prose

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<sup>29</sup> See: Löffler, 'Wiedergänger und Kultfigur'; Schreiber, 'Von der Kälte in den Frost', and: Zintzen, 'Nach dem Skandal: Neue Annäherungen an Thomas Bernhard'.

works by claiming that reading them from cover to cover was beyond her; she refers to: ‘Seiten [in *Prosa* (1967), *Verstörung* (1967) und *Watten* (1969)], die so peinigend zu lesen sind, daß ich nicht beschwören möchte, alle gelesen zu haben, auch nicht imstande bin, alle zu lesen’.<sup>30</sup> Bachmann chooses to highlight Bernhard’s high literary pedigree: ‘die größte Schönheit, Genauigkeit, Art, Tiefe und Wahrheit’.<sup>31</sup> According to her, Bernhard is a writer’s writer. Like Bachmann, Stephen Dowden perceives the true value of Bernhard’s narratives to lie in their literary qualities: ‘[Writers of dissertations and scholarly articles on Bernhard often] force a foreign system of thought on a highly individual and idiosyncratic *creative writer*’.<sup>32</sup>

Dowden’s criticism here of existing secondary material on Bernhard is echoed by another eminent Bernhard scholar: in 1994 at a Bernhard symposium in London, Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler made a bold statement. Speaking five years after Bernhard’s death, he expressed a desire for critics to put peripheral issues to one side and to begin concentrating on reading and interpreting the narratives.<sup>33</sup> It is a mark of how far Bernhard criticism had moved away from analysis of the texts that Schmidt-Dengler felt a need to make such a suggestion; after all, close reading of a writer’s text is a fundamental prerequisite or, at least, starting-point for its critical treatment. Bernhard’s critics, he goes on to argue, rely on speculations about his life and works in the absence of accurate personal and biographical records:

Trotz der Flut von literaturwissenschaftlichen Texten kann von einer Bernhard-Philologie im strengen Sinne nicht gesprochen werden; dazu verfügen wir über zu wenig Unterlagen. Die Materialgrundlagen sind wenig abgesichert; die

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<sup>30</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, ‘Gläserne Ruhe im Umgang mit einer zerbröckelnden Welt’, *Die Zeit*, 11 February 1999. This unpublished fragment, dating back to 1969, was reconstructed from Bachmann’s posthumous papers by Monika Albrecht and Dirk Göttsche.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Dowden, p.xiii [emphasis in original].

<sup>33</sup> Schmidt-Dengler’s paper, originally entitled ‘Zurück zu den Texten: ein Versuch Thomas Bernhard neu zu lesen’, appears in the conference proceedings three years later under a different, more specific title: Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, ‘Zurück zum Text: Vorschläge für die Lektüre von Thomas Bernhards *Frost*’, in *Thomas Bernhard: Beiträge zur Fiktion der Postmoderne. Londoner Symposium*, Publications of the Institute of Germanic Studies, University of London, 69, ed. by Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, Adrian Stevens, and Fred Wagner (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1997), pp.201-20.

Entstehungsgeschichte der meisten Werke liegt völlig im Dunkel, und man wird lange auf Spekulationen angewiesen bleiben.<sup>34</sup>

In this article of 1997, Schmidt-Dengler argues that the scandals which accompanied Bernhard throughout his life eclipsed his works. His logical conclusion is that the required close analysis of Bernhard's texts has rarely been undertaken:

Gesichert ist das Gelände der Wirkung [von Bernhards Schriften], der Rezeption, und das ist ja einer der beliebtesten Tricks der neueren Literaturwissenschaft, die die Auseinandersetzung mit dem Primärtext scheut und daher das Interesse auf die Rezeption lenkt. Die Frage nach dem Text selbst und den Problemen, die sich aus ihm ergeben, wird so ausgelagert.<sup>35</sup>

It is the purpose of this dissertation to make an original contribution to this corrective work by undertaking a text-centred scrutiny of selected prose narratives (Schmidt-Dengler's method), leading to a thorough investigation of literary and creative aspects of Bernhard's prose (Dowden's desired aim). This investigation strives to redefine some of the stereotyped notions about the texts by uncovering recurrent themes of communication and hope which can help us to understand and read differently the works under discussion.

Schmidt-Dengler's method and Dowden's aim are complementary. By reading the narratives attentively, the reader finds not only that Bernhard's texts are richly rewarding, literary documents, but also that his narrators are eager to communicate with their reader. There are many stylistic and thematic clues which reveal an authorial impulse to engage the reader in the narrative. After 1975, there is growing evidence in Bernhard's protagonists of greater sociability and a desire to communicate. Despite his widespread reputation for being a dismal prophet of gloom, a close reading of the narratives under discussion here attests to a writer who does not want his reader to put

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<sup>34</sup> Schmidt-Dengler, 'Zurück zum Text', pp.202-3. For a clear digest of recent articles and information about Bernhard's posthumous papers and the decision of Peter Fabjan (his half-brother) to open up the archive against the wishes expressed by Bernhard in his will, see: [no author], 'Testament und Stiftung - Thomas Bernhard'. *Fachdienst Germanistik* 6 (1998), 2-3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.203.

the book down at any cost. Far from pointlessly hammering home nihilism, Bernhard creates a productive, positive balance between the content and form of his narratives, or as Dowden puts it: 'The inner tension between *what* Bernhard says and *how* he says it is central [to militating against the outward nihilism that he propounds].'<sup>36</sup> By concentrating on the literary, creative intricacy of the texts, a more communicative, hopeful text emerges, and the reader necessarily finds that the 'outward nihilism', for which Bernhard is renowned, is undermined.

The following synopsis sets out and clarifies the structure of the chapters. Chapter I is divided into four sections: 'Critical Reception'; 'Bernhard and Autobiography'; 'Communication', and 'Hope'. The first section, 'Critical Reception', traces the separate works of Bernhard's autobiographical pentalogy and their reception both in the press and in academic writing. It shows that, although a handful of critics have detected hope and a desire to communicate in these five works, no one has taken up these themes in earnest in critical material on the pentalogy. The second section of this chapter, 'Bernhard and Autobiography', focuses on Bernhard's autobiographical aims through an exploration of the themes of self-knowledge, truth, and the process of writing. In this section, I examine the personal and moral impulses which drive Bernhard's autobiographical project and method. My critical exposition is aided by reference to Freud's concept of 'Durcharbeiten' and the idea of 'narrative truth' formulated by Donald F. Spence, an American theoretician of psychoanalysis; the application of a psychoanalytical model suggests how Bernhard's protagonists seek and partially obtain a release from past unhappiness. After considering the purpose behind the pentalogy, my argument turns to Montaigne's search for self-knowledge in the *Essais* (1580-95), prompted by Bernhard's allusions to them in the autobiography. The third section of this chapter, 'Communication', looks in detail at the way in which Bernhard establishes a

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<sup>36</sup> Dowden, pp.9-10 [emphasis in original].

close relationship with his reader, by examining his unusual use of tenses in parts of the pentalogy and analysing his sometimes idiosyncratic and revealing employment of the phrase, 'einerseits ... andererseits', and the keyword, 'naturgemäß'. The final part of this first chapter tackles the themes of lapsed idealism and life affirmation under the heading of 'Hope': this section addresses the largely neglected issue of Bernhard's stubborn determination to live when confronted by extreme illness. The protagonists of the pentalogy (and in particular, *Der Atem* and *Die Kälte*) cling on to life despite apparently decrying its meaninglessness. I show here that thwarted idealism fires Bernhard's criticisms of people and of human nature; however much they are disappointed, these Bernhard protagonists do not lose their idealistic instincts and hopes. Far from repeating his desperate messages of the prose of the sixties and early seventies, clear signs emerge in the pentalogy that the ailing, lonely adolescent has overcome or 'worked through', to use Freud's term, his travails to emerge a stronger, happier, and distinctly less negative person, even if many of the indicators of this change are only to be found in narrative clues.

In Chapter II, the argument focuses on *Beton* by applying and developing the findings of the first chapter. At first sight, the narrator-protagonist, Rudolf, would appear to be closely related to his predecessors in Bernhard's prose: he is ill, frustrated, unhappy, and lonely. However, a closer look at the narrative reveals that the man who seems to be a failing, miserable loner is in fact someone learning to seek self-improvement; more than any of the autobiographical narrators, Rudolf begins to understand himself and find happiness, albeit towards the end of the narrative. After a section on critical reception, which details not only how the text was interpreted in the shadow of Bernhard's previous works but also how much *Beton* was (and still is) neglected by reviewers and academic critics, there are five further sections: 'Human Contact'; 'Perfectionism, Hope, and Imperfection'; 'Music and Literature'; 'Presentation

of Narrator’, and ‘Anna’s Story’. The section on human contact indicates a new preoccupation in Bernhard’s prose of the ’80s: Rudolf may severely criticize all his acquaintances, but ultimately he puts friends and family before his intellectual project — most notably Anna Härdtl whom he meets in Palma — and consequently learns to look at his own life from a fresh perspective. In the third section of this chapter, ‘Perfectionism, Hope, and Imperfection’, I show how the theme of perfectionism, which had plagued many of Bernhard’s obsessed protagonists, takes an uncharacteristically positive turn. Through the memory of a Mendelssohn work, Rudolf learns not only to accept imperfection, but to regard it as desirable. He realizes that interaction with others can be a positive, life-affirmative experience and achieves what one critic has called a ‘potential for humanness’<sup>37</sup>. By emphasizing the importance of Rudolf’s Mendelssohn experience, I show how other clues in the text fit into place. In the fourth section of the chapter, ‘Music and Literature’, I link Rudolf’s understanding of human imperfection to his all-important musicological project and his literary allusions, most notably to Voltaire’s *Zadig* (1747). The sudden, unannounced reference to *Zadig* marks a major breakthrough in Rudolf’s account: he experiences an entirely natural moment of happiness, without the emotional, mental, and physical struggles by which he is otherwise dogged. In the penultimate section, ‘Presentation of Narrator’, I argue that Bernhard lays a consistent trail of clues about Rudolf which reinforce my evolving interpretation of the narrator’s development. Shifting narrative perspectives and narratorial unreliability often disclose Rudolf’s true intentions – what Bernhard termed ‘innere Landschaften’.<sup>38</sup> My analysis and interpretation of inconsistencies in Rudolf’s account reveals a figure who subtly, often indirectly upholds positive, dignified human values, not a nihilist bent upon decrying and destroying everything around him. In the final section, ‘Anna’s Story’, the

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<sup>37</sup> See: Martin Chalmers, ‘Introduction’ in: Thomas Bernhard, *Concrete*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Quartet, 1989) p.v. There are no page numbers; Roman numerals are used for references to Chalmers’s text in order to place the reference in his five-page introduction. This translation was first published in the United Kingdom five years earlier: Thomas Bernhard, *Concrete*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Dent, 1984).

<sup>38</sup> Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard - Eine Begegnung*, p.15.

influence of another human being's desperate plight is related to Rudolf's situation: unlike the autobiographical cycle, where self-contemplation led to self-knowledge, here Rudolf learns about himself through another person. As a result, he casts aside his own concerns briefly in order to make a hopeful 'new start'. Rudolf shares much with Bernhard's previous protagonists, but his story marks a significant departure: hope and the potential for happiness are realized, albeit in brief glimpses of insight.

It is not until *Auslöschung*, widely acknowledged as Bernhard's *magnum opus*, that these glimpses become more enduring. Chapter III dissects Murau's story in three sections: 'Critical Reception', 'Personal Values and People', and 'Writing against Death'. In the first section, 'Critical Reception', a detailed overview of the critical responses to this text shows that important aspects of authorial and narratorial communication have been largely overlooked. As with the pentalogy and *Beton*, some critics openly acknowledge the text's optimistic undercurrent and hopeful outlook, but none has really explored it. I aim to address these critical questions in Chapter III. In the second section, 'Personal Values and People', Murau's circle of friends and acquaintances are analysed one by one in order to show, by adducing detailed textual evidence, how different this Bernhard protagonist is from any of his predecessors. Bernhard's use of certain words, such as 'Mensch' and 'naturgemäß', is examined, and a clear development from the earlier works (the pentalogy and *Beton*) is outlined. Murau is happy in Rome, his 'paradise', and he copes psychologically with the memories and attendant problems associated with the forced return to Wolfsegg, his family seat in Austria. The last section of this chapter, 'Writing against Death', is divided into three subsections: 'Wolfsegg and Rome', 'Obliteration', and 'Social Criticism'. In 'Wolfsegg and Rome', I examine the references to the contrast between the North and South (reflected in the stark comparisons between Wolfsegg and Rome) which betray more than first meets the eye. For instance, memories of Murau's beloved humanist uncle and

the psychological confidence his life in Rome gives him, enable him to confront his family and past experiences in Wolfsegg when he returns for the funeral of his recently deceased parents and brother. In the second subsection, 'Obliteration', my close textual analysis shows that obliteration can, indeed, be quite the opposite of what it appears to be: by 'obliterating' his childhood and adolescent home (by disposing of it and wiping it from his mind), Murau is paradoxically able to preserve his identity and his happiness in Rome. He is able to look forward to a more positive, hopeful future. In the final subsection, 'Social Criticism', I draw attention to the novel, positive outcome of Murau's attacks on National Socialism and Catholicism. In Bernhard's previous prose works, political comment had been confined to incidental satire (*Amras*, for instance) or to awkward excursions (as in the pentalogy and *Beton*). Murau, on the other hand, squarely addresses questions about Austria's recent history which intersects with his own past; he is thereby able to effect a more complete 'working through' of his memories of the past than any of Bernhard's previous protagonists since he brings together the expiation of his personal and national identity in the single act of relinquishing Wolfsegg. Rudolf ends up as a reintegrated, social being who has not allowed his own high standards and expectations to destroy him. He has survived, and his survival is not just physical; it is also an emotional (his life in Rome) and moral (disposal of Wolfsegg to the Jewish community) victory.

The Conclusion brings together the questions of communication and hope explored in the main body of the thesis and traces a development in the works under discussion as well as showing how complementary these two concepts are. The pentalogy is shown to mark the beginnings of hope; *Beton* depicts a figure who turns away from his intellectual endeavours and concentrates upon people and ends up achieving limited but real moments of happiness. Murau's personal circumstances in *Auslöschung* are altogether calmer, and hope is far more than just a potential possibility or distant

memory; more than any of his predecessors in Bernhard's prose, Murau achieves self-fulfilment and positive human communication.

In summary then, and as stated at the outset, the aim of the thesis is to expose and analyse the aspects of communication and hope recurrent in the prose works after 1975. This is achieved through close reading reinforced by pertinent biographical, literary, and personal evidence in order to re-evaluate the later prose fiction of a writer whose sensational reception and public image have all too often outshone his literary qualities. It is hoped that, by undertaking a critical examination of selected narratives, this thesis fills a critical lacuna in the substantial secondary material on Bernhard.

## CHAPTER I

### COMMUNICATION AND HOPE THROUGH SELF-KNOWLEDGE: *Die Ursache, Der Keller, Der Atem, Die Kälte, and Ein Kind*

#### INTRODUCTION

##### (a) Bernhard's Publications: 1975-1982

Bernhard's autobiographical pentalogy appeared between 1975 and 1982.<sup>39</sup> Bernhard did not, however, confine himself exclusively to work on the autobiographical project during these years. *Korrektur* (1975) appeared just after *Die Ursache* (1975), and the drama, *Die Berühmten* (1976), came out before the publication of the second instalment, *Der Keller* (1976). Two more plays, *Minetti* (1977) and *Immanuel Kant* (1978), filled the gap before *Der Atem* (1978), the third volume of the pentalogy. Three plays (*Der Weltverbesserer* (1979), *Vor dem Ruhestand* (1979)) and three prose pieces (*Ja* (1978) and *Der Stimmenimitator* (1978) and *Die Billigesser* (1980)) then followed before *Die Kälte* (1981). Bernhard also found time during this productive period to launch a bitter invective against Bruno Kreisky in an article ostensibly reviewing a book about the

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Die Ursache: eine Andeutung* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1975); *Der Keller: eine Entziehung* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1976); *Der Atem: eine Entscheidung* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1978); *Die Kälte: eine Isolation* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1981), and: *Ein Kind* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1982).

Austrian Premier by Peter Turrini and Gerhard Roth.<sup>40</sup> Before the publication of the final part of the autobiographical cycle, *Ein Kind* (1982), Bernhard brought out the play *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* (1980).<sup>41</sup>

1975 was an important year for Bernhard's prose; it marks a turning-point in his prose output. In *Korrektur*, he produced a narrative reminiscent of his early prose, most notably *Das Kalkwerk* (1970): the tortuous descriptions of Roithamer's intentions, thoughts and building project are reminiscent of and closely related to Konrad's story with its long sentences, deliberately extending conjunctions and resultant relative clauses. *Die Ursache*, on the other hand, is a new kind of Bernhard prose text: it presents the reader with a narrative which is easier to read and follow than any of Bernhard's previous prose: 'The autobiographical works with their more conventional [than the prose before 1975] narrative mode are for many readers the most accessible part of Bernhard's opus.'<sup>42</sup> *Die Ursache* announces a more transparent style of writing and a more direct form of communication with the reader: Bernhard transports his narrator back to wartime Salzburg with the specific intention of evaluating his own past. The greater accessibility of *Die Ursache* is also to be found in the other four autobiographical volumes and in the prose of the 1980s. However, the autobiographies are not a straightforward, factual account of Bernhard's childhood and adolescence. The mode of narration in the pentalogy calls on stylistic ploys more at home in a creative, fictional narrative; the autobiographical narratives switch regularly between factual descriptions of the past ( schooldays, illness, and family life, for instance) and the narrator's comments about the themes and subject areas which arise from his descriptions (the teaching and

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<sup>40</sup> See: Thomas Bernhard, 'Der pensionierte Salonsozialist', *profil*, 26 January 1981. For a bibliography of articles and responses to this controversy, including letters from the public to newspaper editors, see: *Thomas Bernhard Werkgeschichte*, 2nd rev. edn, ed. by Jens Dittmar, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990), p.433.

<sup>41</sup> There were also various other small publications, including newspaper articles, a poem, and a collection of previously written and published stories. For full details of these publications with examples of their critical reception, see: Dittmar, *Werkgeschichte*, pp.169-237.

<sup>42</sup> Chambers, p.208.

medical professions, the lives of so-called 'normal' people, and social conditions in Salzburg, to name a few).

(b) Narrative Synopses<sup>43</sup>

The reader of the autobiographies can be forgiven for thinking the texts, in terms of their content, to be bitter and negative – depressing sequels to the stories of mental and physical anguish characteristic of Bernhard's prose in the '60s and early '70s. From a summary of these five books, however, it becomes clear that something more positive emerges. The emergence of optimism is, in part, inherent in the nature of the autobiographical project: the narrator who mediates and structures his own past experiences may be insistently evasive about his aims, but consistent clues throughout the narrative point to a man striving for personal happiness by reassessing his past in the form of a literary project.

The narrative of *Die Ursache* consists of two long sections entitled 'Grünkranz' and 'Onkel Franz', named after the heads of the home for schoolboys (pre-war) and then Catholic hostel (post-1945) in the Schranngasse in Salzburg, respectively. The first section concentrates on the school's prevailing inhumane, survival-of-the-fittest culture and on the tyranny of its Nazi director. The narrator — a forty-five-year old man looking back upon himself at the age of thirteen — launches from the outset a full-blooded attack on Salzburg and its environs for the many mental diseases and general cases of personal unhappiness, typified by the regular suicides committed by the schoolchildren. The book has descriptions of the devastation wreaked upon Salzburg by extensive bombing. Much of the early description centres upon the thirteen-year-old boarder's preoccupation with music and his thoughts about killing himself. The book describes not only the fear but

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<sup>43</sup> For a clear synopsis of all five works, see: Helmut Gross, 'Biographischer Hintergrund von Thomas Bernhards Wahrheitsrigorismus', *Text und Kritik*, 43 (1991), 112-21. For a thorough account of Bernhard's life, Hans Höller's acclaimed monograph is indispensable: Höller, *Thomas Bernhard*. Höller's chapter on the autobiographical works (pp.97-108) contains an interesting and original section which traces some of the factual inaccuracies in the narratives (pp.102-4).

also the human warmth born of desperation characteristic of the ‘Todesgesellschaft in den Stollen’, as Salzburg’s inhabitants flee to the unusual underground shelters for survival during air raids.<sup>44</sup> As the narrator looks back, he realizes that the child suffered from a lack of understanding and humanity in a town of cold, hypocritical emotional cripples.<sup>45</sup> However, contrary to Bernhard’s earlier prose, the narrative is not steeped in fundamental doom and gloom. There are markedly happier memories, too: for example, the boy’s enjoyment of playing the violin;<sup>46</sup> his love for his grandfather;<sup>47</sup> and his athletic prowess at school which brought him welcome self-confidence.<sup>48</sup> The second section of the narrative begins with a long diatribe against the way in which schools and parents destroy children’s souls and minds (‘die Vernichtung der Seele [...] Geistesmord’).<sup>49</sup> Having left the home for schoolboys in Autumn 1944, the young Bernhard is now back at the re-named ‘Johanneum’ in late summer 1945. Franz, the new director, is every bit as cruel as Grünkranz was, and the narrator launches a further volley of bitter attacks: the corruption of schools and teachers;<sup>50</sup> the similarity between Nazism and Catholicism;<sup>51</sup> even the hypocrisy surrounding the ‘Festspiele’.<sup>52</sup> The book ends as the protagonist reaches the age of fifteen and decides to leave school.

The events of *Der Keller* mark a turning-point in the adolescent’s life: he finds happiness by turning his back on school and instead going to the Employment Office to find a job. The narrator is keen to impress on the reader that, metaphorically and literally, the adolescent has made a decision to go ‘*in die entgegengesetzte Richtung*’.<sup>53</sup> A newly-won sense of autonomy (‘Ich hatte mein Leben wieder’) accompanies his relief at having

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<sup>44</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.44.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp.60 and 75.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.53.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., pp.60-3. His grandfather was the writer Johannes Freumbichler (1881-1949). For an account of his life and some aspects of its relevance to Bernhard, see: Caroline Markolin, *Die Großväter sind die Lehrer: Johannes Freumbichler und sein Enkel Thomas Bernhard* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1988).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.76.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.94 [emphasis in original].

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.118.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., pp.114-6.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.112.

<sup>53</sup> Bernhard, *Der Keller*, p.9 [emphasis in original].

escaped from school.<sup>54</sup> Where *Die Ursache* outlined the negative influence exerted upon the powerless child by two sadistic men, here the emphasis is on learning, self-development and love – embodied in the figures of the grandfather and Podlaha.<sup>55</sup> The descriptions of the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung, the ‘Aussätzigenlager’ on the outskirts of Salzburg, alternate with the fifteen-year-old boy’s thoughts about his own life.<sup>56</sup> The boy who, in *Die Ursache*, hid away in a shoe-cupboard in order to escape from his tormentors and other people, now seeks and is comfortable ‘im Umgang mit Menschen’.<sup>57</sup> The sharp criticism of everyday life in Salzburg has not disappeared, however. The narrator steps aside from the autobiographical memories to talk disparagingly about the psychological and physical illnesses suffered by the inhabitants of the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung which, he insists, are the result of their unhappy family lives and of the dreadful social conditions in which they live. The weekends — when there is no work to take their minds off the misery of their lives — symbolize and intensify these problems.<sup>58</sup> Aside from criticisms of human nature, the narrator describes the aftermath of the war in Salzburg.<sup>59</sup> He also outlines his increasing interest in singing as a career.<sup>60</sup> The final section of the book describes the illness which plagued him for the rest of his life: unloading potatoes in the driving snow, he catches a heavy cold which eventually develops into a serious lung infection.<sup>61</sup> It is now 1947, and the protagonist is sixteen years old.

*Der Atem* is possibly the most harrowing of the five volumes: it describes Bernhard’s subsequent stay in the Landeskrankenhaus in Salzburg on the so-called ‘death ward’, a section of the hospital from which no one, it would seem, emerges alive. At one

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>55</sup> See, for instance: *ibid.*, p.67.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.66.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.86-92.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.132-48.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p.149.

point, the ailing adolescent is relegated to the bathroom, the 'Sterbezimmer', usually the last stop before death.<sup>62</sup> The young Bernhard survives the ordeal through sheer determination, however, and the narrative traces an intensely personal struggle to come to terms with the pain and difficulties of the patient's life. Bernhard describes with unerring immediacy and precision the weightlessness, disorientation, and near-asphyxiation felt by the adolescent patient as he is manipulated like an object by insensitive doctors and nurses.<sup>63</sup> His problems are compounded by his grandfather's concurrent illness. Much of the narrative is preoccupied with descriptions, sometimes tinged with black humour, of other patients, like the Hungarian General who dies suddenly and quietly, the tradesman from Mattighofen whose head is horrifically split open by the bathroom sink, and the money-postman from Upper Austria who suffers an alarmingly violent death.<sup>64</sup> Descriptions of the boy's love for his now late grandfather and even the phases of tenderness in his otherwise acrimonious relationship with his mother, Herta Fabjan, née Bernhard (1904-50), are cut short by his discharge and new life in the convalescent home in Großmain, known as the 'Hotel Vötterl'.<sup>65</sup> In keeping with *Der Keller*, the descriptions centre upon people, and in Großmain, the narrator details the convalescent's relationship with a student of architecture.<sup>66</sup> The narrative's concentration on largely unproblematic human closeness is unusual for Bernhard's work up to 1976. The convalescent home turns out to be a place where serious cases come to die, and the luckless adolescent's travails are far from over as he catches a lung infection while there.<sup>67</sup> It is 1949, and as the book ends, he is on his way to the TB hospital in Grafenhof.

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<sup>62</sup> Bernhard, *Der Atem*, p.26.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.14-18, 66, and 70.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.20 and 24 [other patients' deaths], 74 [Hungarian General], 78-9 [Marktfahrer aus Mattighofen], and 82-6 [Geldbriefträger].

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.122.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

*Die Kälte* describes the horrors of Grafenhof ('ein Schreckenswort'), the sanatorium in St. Veit (im Pongau), where Bernhard stayed for two spells: the first, from 27 July 1949 until 26 February 1950, and the second, from 13 July 1950 until 11 January 1951.<sup>68</sup> The early part of the narrative concentrates upon the misery of being confined once again to an institution because of illness. The descriptions of the routines of a hospital, with all their insensitivities, inefficiencies, and instances of human inconsideration are, in parts, indistinguishable from *Der Atem*. The narrator describes, with convincing psychological realism, the grotesque absurdity of a sputum competition ('Sputumproduktion [...] Wettbewerb') where, until the patient has filled the sputum flask and tested positive, he is not accepted properly into the patient community.<sup>69</sup> Amid the loneliness, despair and hopelessness of his situation, the adolescent decides to embrace life and rebels against acceptance of his miserable circumstances.<sup>70</sup> It is an inner, deeply psychological, positive decision which defies his external condition. In the Landeskrankenhaus he had to contend with his grandfather's illness; in horrific parallel, it is now his mother's terminal illness which preoccupies him.<sup>71</sup> Yet another relationship punctuates the potentially hopeless situation as the young Bernhard befriends Rudolf Brändle, a fellow-patient who is a conductor.<sup>72</sup> The intellectual stimulation afforded by conversations about music with Brändle revitalizes the flagging patient whose mother's death prompts a long reflection about his family, and the older narrator is brought to reflecting about the past.<sup>73</sup> A brief interlude in Salzburg, after a short-lived discharge, is followed by a second spell in Grafenhof as he is re-diagnosed with tuberculosis.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Bernhard, *Die Kälte*, p.7.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.34-5.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50. Brändle has written an informative and entertaining account of his friendship with Bernhard which includes interpretations of the pentalogy. See: Rudolf Brändle, *Zeugfreundschaft: Erinnerungen an Thomas Bernhard* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1999). For a description of the time spent together in Grafenhof, see Chapter Two, 'Höhenluft' (pp.45-87).

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.58-84 and 132 (mother's death).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.88-91.

Horrendous medical misjudgements and blunders stunt any recovery.<sup>75</sup> Again, he is plunged into self-contemplation, and he is further distressed by the hierarchy in the hospital, with private patients predictably receiving the best treatment.<sup>76</sup> As his physical condition finally improves steadily, he reads more and even turns to writing. The book concludes dramatically: he discharges himself prematurely from Grafenhof, nearly dies again, is required to return immediately but refuses and never goes back.<sup>77</sup>

The final volume of the pentalogy, *Ein Kind*, returns to Bernhard's childhood, describing his early years from birth until his entry to the home for schoolboys in the Schrannengasse. The narrative opens with a tale about the optimism and ambitiousness of the eight-year-old Thomas who takes his step-father's bicycle without permission, in an attempt to ride the thirty-six kilometres from his mother's house in Traunstein in Bavaria to his aunt's house in Salzburg.<sup>78</sup> The resulting story about his misdemeanours and punishment sets the tone for much of this charming book: his terror at his mother's anger is offset by his deep love for his universal protector, his grandfather;<sup>79</sup> his affection for his time in Ettendorf, the 'Paradies' where his grandparents lived;<sup>80</sup> his close friendship with Schorschi, a local village boy;<sup>81</sup> and a potted biography of his grandfather whose achievements both protagonist and narrator manifestly revere.<sup>82</sup> For the first time in the pentalogy, the narrator is able to talk freely about his own early life.<sup>83</sup> In keeping with the increasingly positive tone of the pentalogical cycle, the narrator describes his happy friendship with Hippinger Hansi, a boy from a neighbouring farm, including the first days of school when the young Thomas excels under the influence of a benevolent,

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.96. Brändle confirms that Bernhard's descriptions, although they might sound hyperbolic, did in fact reflect the true state of affairs in Grafenhof. See: Brändle, p.49.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.128. Brändle, too, talks of a 'Krankenhierarchie' in Grafenhof. See: Brändle, p.50.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp.149-51.

<sup>78</sup> Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.7.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp.28, 77 and 84.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.48 and pp.56-9.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp.60-71.

encouraging and loving teacher.<sup>84</sup> The family move to Traunstein breaks the childhood pastoral idyll, but the unstinting love for the grandfather remains a constant factor and neutralizes the pain. Bullying at school brings thoughts of suicide, and the young Thomas is marginalized although he stubbornly remains an individualist ('Bald sah ich, daß ich weder zu der einen Gruppe gehörte noch zur anderen, daß ich in keine paßte').<sup>85</sup> The boy loses faith in school, plays truant and is eventually sent to a Nazi correction camp in Thuringia where there is a particularly strict regime, and he is further persecuted, this time for bed-wetting.<sup>86</sup> The shadow of war is present as the book ends.<sup>87</sup> However distressing the descriptions of his mother's, teachers' and classmates' cruelty, the young boy's love for his grandfather repeatedly comes to the surface as a reason for being happy and looking forward to the future. Small details — such as the boy's recollection of the counter-attacking Me 109 fighter planes — betray the narrator's fascination with recreating his past.<sup>88</sup> Far from presenting a nihilistic recollection of a continuously unhappy childhood, the narrator seems to take pleasure in pitting the positive influences in his life against the negative ones: as so often in the pentalogy, when a decisive moment is reached, survival (in Grafenhof), love (for his grandfather, mother, friends and Traunstein), and optimism (about his future singing, commercial and literary careers) prevail.

## 1. CRITICAL RECEPTION

### (a) Reviews

Given the change in direction taken by Bernhard's prose with and after the publication of *Die Ursache*, it is understandable that many reviewers continued to read this first volume

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp.82-92.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p.119.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp.132-48.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., pp.162-4.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.162.

of the autobiography through Bernhard's previous prose narratives. It is somewhat more surprising that this tendency did not diminish with the appearance of the other four volumes. It is only gradually that reviewers began to discern any signs of hope and optimism within the narratives.

(i) *Die Ursache*

It is hardly surprising that, when *Die Ursache* appeared in September 1975, the critical reaction was characterized by controversy.<sup>89</sup> Unveiled references to real people and actual dates alerted the public, especially in Salzburg, to potential scandal. In his prose fiction before 1975, Bernhard had used recognizable, explicitly-named geographical locations such as Innsbruck (in *Amras* (1964)) and Ungenach (in the story of 1968) as the backdrops for his tales of emotional stultification and disturbance, but there were no libellous references to real people on the scale of *Die Ursache*. Although in *Korrektur* (1975), published almost simultaneously with *Die Ursache*, Roithamer was modelled on Ludwig Wittgenstein, no controversially negative implications surfaced in the critical reception; Bernhard was, after all, a good friend of Wittgenstein's nephew, Paul, and the book's potentially inflammatory content (incest) was not taken up seriously by polemicizing reviewers and journalists. In *Die Ursache*, however, Bernhard pulled no punches: its two subsections, 'Grünkranz' and 'Onkel Franz', exposed two named characters from his real-life past as Nazi collaborators and barbarians. The depiction of Salzburg, with its named streets, landmarks and characters, was readily identifiable to many readers and added to the immediacy of the text; in part, it contributed to the critical preoccupation with extra-literary factors. In an overview of the critical reception of the autobiographical pentalogy, Martin Huber prefaces his comments thus: 'Zu den am wenigsten erfreulichen Erscheinungen der Rezeption Thomas Bernhards zählt gewiß die

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<sup>89</sup> For a selection of reviews, see: Dittmar, *Werkgeschichte*, pp.166-8. Dittmar also provides a useful bibliography of reviews (*ibid.*, pp.411-13).

fortschreitende Loslösung vom Werk, die Beschäftigung mit allem Möglichen, nur nicht mit den Texten.’<sup>90</sup> *Die Ursache* was certainly no exception. Its reception was marked by three principal trends: first, the ‘Onkel Franz’ affair; second, the use of Bernhard’s past as a means of explaining his supposed all-embracing pessimism; third, and most pertinently for this investigation, there were hints in some of the reviews of hope and faith in humanity, beyond the immediately negative and destructive.

In German, and especially Austrian newspapers, attention was deflected from the literary aspects of the narrative as a result of the court case brought by (‘Onkel’) Franz Wesenauer against the head of Residenz Verlag, Wolfgang Schaffler, on account of the allegedly libellous claims in *Die Ursache* about Wesenauer’s neglectful, even cruel behaviour towards the children in the Johanneum which Bernhard attended from the late summer of 1945.<sup>91</sup> The first major review of the book in Salzburg sets the tone for this non-literary bias: ‘hier [in *Die Ursache*] wird nichts verschlüsselt oder angedeutet: Hier werden Personen und Orte und Geschehnisse schonungslos beim Namen genannt und vor den Richterstuhl des aburteilenden Autors gezerrt.’<sup>92</sup> While Elisabeth Effenberger is right here to point to the overtly critical nature of the book, her review does not address the question of the presence and literary value of the narrative’s formal subtlety and stylistic nuance. Subsequent journalistic accounts build on Effenberger’s early review: the *FAZ* refers to Bernhard’s ‘Konflikt-Abonnement [in Sachen Salzburgs]’;<sup>93</sup> Hellmut Jaesrich in

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<sup>90</sup> Martin Huber, “‘Möglichkeitsfetzen von Erinnerung’: Zur Rezeption von Thomas Bernhards autobiographischer Pentalogie”, in *Kontinent Bernhard: Zur Thomas-Bernhard-Rezeption in Europa*, ed. by Wolfram Bayer (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau, 1995), pp.44-57 (p.44).

<sup>91</sup> For a clear, contemporary résumé of this court case see: Anonymous, ‘Klage vom “Onkel Franz”’, *profil*, 16 March 1976. See also: Anonymous, ‘Ein Priester klagte den Autor Thomas Bernhard’, *Kurier*, 4 October 1975; Anonymous, ‘Thomas Bernhard und sein “Onkel Franz” nun vor Gericht’, *Die Presse*, 10/11 April 1976; Togger [sic], ‘Widerlich’, *Neue Kronen Zeitung*, 11 April 1976; o.f.b. [sic], “‘Onkel Franz fühlt sich getroffen”’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 22 April 1976. All editions of *Die Ursache* after 25 May 1977 are published without the following passages: ‘Der Onkel Franz war gutmütig [...] gegen uns ausgelassen’ (p.103); ‘[...] und der Onkel Franz hatte die Fürsorgerolle [...] sein nationalsozialistisches’ (pp.105-6); ‘[...] schon aus diesem Grunde ist es ein Verbrechen [...] im Internat gegeben’ (pp.107-8), and: ‘Der durch und durch katholische Onkel Franz [...] immer wieder den Onkel Franz’ (pp.115-16). The settlement constituted a moral victory for Wesenauer, with Bernhard making a conciliatory statement and agreeing to delete parts of the original first edition. For full details, see: Martin Huber, “‘Romanfigur klagt den Autor’: Zur Rezeption von Thomas Bernhards *Die Ursache: Eine Andeutung*”, in *Statt Bernhard: Über Misanthropie im Werk Thomas Bernhards*, ed. by Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler and Martin Huber (Austria [n.p.]: Edition S, 1987), pp.59-110 (pp.62-7).

<sup>92</sup> Elisabeth Effenberger, ‘Scheitern in Salzburg’, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 13 September 1975.

<sup>93</sup> Grn [sic], ‘Bestätigung’, *FAZ*, 23 October 1975.

*Die Welt* sees *Die Ursache* not only as the ‘Dokumentation über eine verschüttete Kindheit’, but also as a ‘Pamphlet gegen Bernhards Landsleute’;<sup>94</sup> Hans Heinz Hahl’s review of the book also takes issue with Bernhard’s criticism of Austria, the reason for which, he feels, lies in feelings of desperation traceable to Bernhard’s damaged childhood.<sup>95</sup> By the time Hahl’s review re-appears *verbatim* three weeks later in the *Kärntner Tageszeitung*, its title has changed to ‘Bernhards Salzburgbeschimpfung’, almost certainly to reflect the increasing media interest in Wesenauer’s case against Residenz.<sup>96</sup>

The second marked trend in the immediate reception of the book is found in many commentators’ readiness to link Bernhard’s virulent criticisms directly with his difficult childhood, as Hahl does. While this practice provides rewarding connections between Bernhard’s real life and his work, it does not address the way in which the text is written. Many of these reviews give the impression that Bernhard’s book is an uncomplicated autobiography about his childhood, without literary guile. Like Jaesrich and Hahl, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* explains, in a piece aptly entitled ‘Albtraum einer Kindheit’, ‘die Aggressivität [Bernhards] ist aus dem Schmerz zu verstehen’.<sup>97</sup> Norbert Tschulik, writing in the *Wiener Zeitung*, refers to *Die Ursache* as a ‘Seelenstriptease’ which shows that ‘Thomas Bernhard leidet an seiner Kindheit’.<sup>98</sup> Marcel Reich-Ranicki, in describing Bernhard as ‘der deutschen Literatur düsterster Poet und bitterster Prophet’ and talking about his ‘Suada der Verzweiflung’, reflects the views of many of the reviewers of this text.<sup>99</sup> In a scathing review, which claims that Bernhard’s repetitive, sterile prose has reached a terminal stylistic and thematic impasse in *Die Ursache*, Walter Scheiner sees schizoid, angst-ridden personal traits behind the narrative which, he

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<sup>94</sup> Hellmut Jaesrich, ‘Protest gegen alle geheuchelte Wohlanständigkeit’, *Die Welt*, 14 February 1976.

<sup>95</sup> Hans Heinz Hahl, ‘Erniedrigt und beleidigt’, *Arbeiter Zeitung*, 19 September 1975.

<sup>96</sup> Hans Heinz Hahl, ‘Bernhards Salzburgbeschimpfung’, *Kärntner Tageszeitung*, 7 October 1975.

<sup>97</sup> Haj [Hansres Jacobi], ‘Albtraum einer Kindheit’, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 6 November 1975.

<sup>98</sup> Norbert Tschulik, ‘Eine Salzburg-Beschimpfung’, *Wiener Zeitung*, 10 October 1975.

<sup>99</sup> Marcel Reich-Ranicki, ‘Thomas Bernhards entgegengesetzte Richtung’, *FAZ*, 8 April 1978.

would have it, is the product of Bernhard's overriding inferiority complex.<sup>100</sup> Given the scarceness of information about Bernhard's life and family until the publication of *Die Ursache*, many critics, including Scheiner, were tempted to seize upon real biographical detail as an explanation for Bernhard's 'erbarmungsloses Urteil der [*sic*] Stadt und ihren Menschen [...] gegenüber';<sup>101</sup> Duglore Pizzini calls the book 'Thomas Bernhards Abrechnung mit Salzburg' and situates the extra-literary, personal importance of its contribution outside the text: 'ein bedeutendes Werk, weil hier in seltener Klarheit dargestellt wird, wie sich aus einem Kindheitstrauma eine lebenslängliche Haßliebe zu entwickeln vermag.'<sup>102</sup> The important word here is 'weil'; the clear implication is that the book's significance lies in what it can tell us about this writer's past which, in turn, can explain his miserable tirades against Austria and humanity. It is perhaps surprising that little is made of the change in stylistic direction from the earlier works; after all, *Korrektur*, which appeared around the same time, is a typically dense, impenetrable, tortuous prose text in contrast to *Die Ursache* which is much shorter and altogether easier to read. Many reviews perceive *Die Ursache* as just another example of Bernhard's difficult, truculent prose fiction, and the literary qualities of the text are not seriously taken up in any reviews of the book. These reviews contain little explanation as to why Bernhard's book received immediate and, specifically, literary plaudits: it was, for instance, chosen book of the week by *Die Presse* and book of the month by the panel of the prestigious 'Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung' in Darmstadt.<sup>103</sup>

Of the few critics, like Scheiner, who do indeed allude in passing to Bernhard's style, they either dismiss it as élitist and unreadable or they liken it to that of previous works. Heinz Beckmann, in his review of *Die Ursache*, warns the potential close reader: 'dank seines [Bernhards] sprachlichen Niveaus [ist seine Prosa] auf eine verhältnismäßig

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<sup>100</sup> See: Walter Scheiner, 'Ein mißglücktes Experiment', *Vorarlberger Nachrichten*, 22 November 1975.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Duglore Pizzini, 'Von Tod und Kindheit', *Wochenpresse*, 8 October 1975.

<sup>103</sup> See: Karin Kathrein, 'Eine Kindheit, die nicht vergessen wurde', *Die Presse*, 10 September 1975; Lothar Sträter, 'Zorniger Rückblick auf Salzburg', *Mannheimer Morgen*, 14 October 1975.

eingeschränkte Leserschaft angewiesen.’<sup>104</sup> Ulrich Greiner is less forgiving in his review: Bernhard’s prose, he opines, does not convey any recognizable form of reality, and *Die Ursache* epitomizes the grim, trademark bleakness endemic in Bernhard’s writing and discouraging to the reader: ‘Bei Bernhard bleibt kein Genuß mehr, die Monotonie ist tödlich.’<sup>105</sup> Greiner emphasizes the vehemence of his point dramatically by ending his review with a verbless two-word sentence: ‘Eine Tortur.’<sup>106</sup>

While these first two trends in the critical reception encapsulate accurately reviewers’ attitudes towards Bernhard’s prose, it is notable that, for the first time in his career, critics were beginning to use words like ‘hope’ and ‘human’ to describe the tone and content in one of Bernhard’s prose works. The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* review highlights Bernhard’s portrayal of Salzburg’s ‘menschliche Züge’.<sup>107</sup> Tschulik calls Bernhard’s narrative observations ‘noch einigermaßen menschlich’.<sup>108</sup> The critics most sensitive to the hope inherent in the text are Ernst Wendt and Karin Kathrein. Wendt refers to the text extravagantly as a ‘Liebeserklärung’ whose invectives are made possible only because of a ‘tief innerliche Heimatliebe’.<sup>109</sup> Kathrein goes further in her recognition of the turning-point marked by *Die Ursache* in Bernhard’s prose: ‘Doch sein Zorn ist ein verstecktes Liebesbekenntnis, nicht Resignation über eine mißglückte Schöpfung klingt aus diesem Buch, sondern ein neuer kräftiger Ton.’<sup>110</sup> Her closing words (‘Es ist aber auch eine Hoffnung’) can, with the benefit of hindsight, be seen as an invitation to explore an important element in Bernhard’s works after 1975.

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<sup>104</sup> Heinz Beckmann, ‘Zweimal Bernhard’ [this article reviews both *Korrektur* and *Die Ursache*], *Rheinischer Merkur*, 13 February 1976.

<sup>105</sup> Ulrich Greiner, ‘Die Tortur, die Thomas Bernhard heißt’, *FAZ*, 27 September 1975.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> haj, ‘Albtraum einer Kindheit’.

<sup>108</sup> Tschulik, ‘Eine Salzburg-Beschimpfung’.

<sup>109</sup> Ernst Wendt, ‘Trauer über eine unglückliche Jugend’, *Die Zeit*, 29 August 1975.

<sup>110</sup> Kathrein, ‘Eine Kindheit, die nicht vergessen wurde’.

(ii) *Der Keller*

Three issues dominate the reception of *Der Keller*: first, public controversy, this time in the repercussions of Bernhard's portrayal of Karl Podlaha; second, the reiteration of Bernhard as a hopeless pessimist, and third, hints of hope and communication, beyond the stock critical charge of nihilism.

The question whether Bernhard and Residenz consciously used the sensationalism generated by the media coverage of the controversy over *Die Ursache* to boost sales of *Der Keller*, or whether writer and publisher were victims of small-minded personal and media vindictiveness, is made redundant by the fact that media and Bernhard alike benefited from the public outrage: 'Da der Residenz Verlag anscheinend die Publicity des noch laufenden Prozesses zu Marketing-Zwecken nutzen wollte, ergänzten sich Sensationsgier der Zeitungen und ökonomisches Interesse des Verlages ideal.'<sup>111</sup> There is little doubt that this second volume of the pentalogy was less widely reviewed than the first, a sign, according to Ernst Wendt, of a fading star: '[...] ein sicheres Indiz, daß ein Stern im Kulturbetrieb ins Sinken geraten ist.'<sup>112</sup> The effect of this perception — that Bernhard had run out of options in his prose and was merely repeating a hackneyed formula in order to ply his trade — gave critics even more reason to concentrate on events unconnected with the narrative. Podlaha replaced Wesenauer as the centre of attention. In a review which appeared upon publication of the book, Jürgen Wallmann refers to Bernhard's narrative portrayal of Podlaha as 'ein intelligenter, redlicher Mann'.<sup>113</sup> Almost three weeks later, an article in *profil* quotes Podlaha admitting that Bernhard's portrayal of the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung in *Der Keller* "im großen und ganzen schon stimmt."<sup>114</sup> Bernhard sent his former employer a personally-

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<sup>111</sup> Huber, "Möglichkeitsfetzen von Erinnerung", p.47.

<sup>112</sup> Ernst Wendt, 'Servus, es ist alles egal', *Die Zeit*, 17 September 1976. For evidence of the narrow press coverage of this second volume, see Dittmar's much shorter bibliography for this text in his *Werkgeschichte*, pp.417-18. For a selection of extracts from reviews, see: *ibid.*, pp.178-80.

<sup>113</sup> Jürgen Wallmann, 'Thomas Bernhard als Ladenschwengel', *Rheinischer Merkur*, 3 September 1976.

<sup>114</sup> Anonymous, 'Preßlufthammer oder Schreibmaschine', *profil*, 21 September 1976.

signed copy of the work, and Podlaha seems to have been impressed: “an den Bernhard kann i mich noch gut erinnern, und der war immer a netter Mensch.”<sup>115</sup> Yet a few weeks later, the *Salzburger Volkszeitung* paints a quite different picture; Podlaha, the paper reports, has been threatened by irate Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung inhabitants, and Podlaha himself is quoted as saying: “Ich war schockiert, als ich das alles lesen mußte, vieles ist völlig aus der Luft gegriffen und beleidigend für die heute noch Lebenden.”<sup>116</sup> Largely as a result of the media manipulation (it seems unlikely that what many academics found too turgid, residents of the infamous estate in Salzburg read closely from cover to cover), Podlaha conspicuously failed to attend the Bundeswirtschaftskammer Prize ceremony for *Der Keller*.

The effect of this second controversy within a year was, yet again, to deflect attention away from the subtle stylistic and formal qualities in Bernhard’s rich narrative. Reviewers were still reading Bernhard in the light of his reputation for negativity. Picking up from her review of *Die Ursache*, Elisabeth Effenberger refers to Bernhard’s ‘ähnlich lustvoller Vernichtung’;<sup>117</sup> Claudia Lipp, writing as much as three months after the book’s publication, alludes to ‘diesem kafkaesken Entwurf eines negativen Universalismus’;<sup>118</sup> Wallmann, too, harks back to previous works to link *Der Keller* with Bernhard’s other ‘Monologen der Hoffnungslosigkeit und Verzweiflung’.<sup>119</sup> Heinz Schafroth goes one step further by talking of a near-systematic ‘Prinzip Hoffnungslosigkeit’ in *Der Keller*.<sup>120</sup> Schafroth sees Bernhard’s evocation of the frustrated relationship with his mother not as a thwarted plea for intimate communication and unreturned love, but as a source of irrevocable bitterness and nihilism.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Anonymous, “‘Keller’-Kaufmann bedroht”, *Salzburger Volkszeitung*, 10 November 1976.

<sup>117</sup> Elisabeth Effenberger, ‘Thomas Bernhard entzieht sich’, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 25 September 1976.

<sup>118</sup> Claudia Lipp, “Es ist alles egal”, *Die Welt*, 11 December 1976.

<sup>119</sup> Wallmann, ‘Thomas Bernhard als Ladenschwengel’.

<sup>120</sup> Heinz F. Schafroth, ‘Die unmögliche und skeptische Hoffnung’, *Weltwoche*, 19 January 1977. The ‘unmöglich’ of the title refers to *Der Keller*; ‘skeptisch’ refers to Wolfgang Koeppen’s *Jugend* (1976).

Despite the confirmation and reiteration of Bernhard's pessimism, one or two critics do look behind the surface of this narrative and discover a change in what the writer chooses to document in his memoirs. Tellingly, away from all the media attention a good six months after the Podlaha controversy, Harald Hartung can see the depiction of the young apprentice shop-keeper as the announcement of a new focus in Bernhard's writing: 'Das ist der gewandelte, der andere Thomas Bernhard.'<sup>121</sup> Hartung goes on to warn his reader not to take Bernhard literally, to look for clues in the texts, rather than to interpret the content without due regard for the form: 'Nicht das Berichtete ist wichtig, sondern der Ton, in dem berichtet und gerichtet wird.'<sup>122</sup> Günter Blöcker, who a year previously had described *Die Ursache* as being 'unter dem Diktat totaler seelischer Auszehrung, geistiger Bedrückung und permanenten Schreckens', titles his review of *Der Keller* 'Unverhoffte Entdeckung des Glücks'. Blöcker points his reader to 'breite, ruhevollere Passagen objektiver Schilderung ohne überhitzte Rhetorik'.<sup>123</sup> Of the older writer's assertion that the young Bernhard was often unequivocally happy in the basement-shop, Blöcker says: 'Wer hätte einen solchen Satz bei diesem vermeintlichen Belcantisten der Verzweiflung vermutet?'<sup>124</sup> Kurt Lothar Tank takes up Blöcker's point about optimism by putting the onus of positive vision on the reader and the act of reading: 'Ihn [Bernhard in *Der Keller*] zu lesen ist ein Wagnis. Es erfordert eine hohe Anspannung, erfordert Kraft. Aber Befreiung von dem, was Illusion oder feiger Optimismus in unserem Leben bedeutet, ist billiger wohl nicht zu erlangen.'<sup>125</sup> In invoking the reader as the catalyst responsible for uncovering a real, and not 'cowardly' or false hope, Tank's words here provide a point of departure for the text-centred investigation in this chapter.

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<sup>121</sup> Harald Hartung, "Es ist alles egal", *Der Tagesspiegel*, 12 June 1977.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Günter Blöcker, 'Unverhoffte Entdeckung des Glücks', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 9 September 1976.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Kurt Lothar Tank, 'Ein Rutengänger im Grenzbereich', *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*, 28 November 1976.

(iii) *Der Atem*

In a long review in the *FAZ* of the first three volumes of the autobiographical pentalogy, occasioned by the publication of *Der Atem*, Marcel Reich-Ranicki describes the trilogy (as it then was) as a continuation and explanation of Bernhard's prose fiction up to this point:

Die bisweilen haarsträubenden Verallgemeinerungen, die pauschale Weltablehnung und die grandiose Daseinsverurteilung, diese in Bernhards vorangegangenen Büchern oft juvenil anmutenden Elemente, finden in der Autobiographie ihre ebenso einfache wie einleuchtende psychologische Begründung.<sup>126</sup>

As far as Reich-Ranicki is concerned, the autobiographical works inhabit the world of Bernhard's fiction with its 'radikalen und globalen Negativität [...] Weltverneinung und [...] Menschheitsklage'.<sup>127</sup> Reich-Ranicki's review, although more subtle and detailed than many others, was typical of much of the response to this text which, like the two volumes before it, was still approached by reviewers via Bernhard's previous reputation. Kurt Kahl rather starkly describes *Der Atem* as the product of a failed past ('verpfuschte Vergangenheit') which leaves Bernhard looking for scapegoats (doctors and social structures) in order to settle a score.<sup>128</sup> Martin Lüdke echoes Kahl's sentiments when he accuses Bernhard of aggressive monomania in a review of *Der Atem* and *Ja*; he likens these two works to each other and links the desire for suicide ('die Konsequenz eines verfehlten Lebens') in *Ja* to Bernhard's own past described in the three autobiographical works.<sup>129</sup> Neither Lüdke nor Kahl grapples with the fact that the protagonist of *Der Atem* makes a positive, life-embracing decision: to continue to breathe. They both acknowledge this fact towards the end of their reviews, but only in passing: Lüdke talks of a protest against death: Kahl thinks that the young Bernhard's commitment to life is

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<sup>126</sup> Reich-Ranicki, 'Thomas Bernhards entgegengesetzte Richtung'.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Kurt Kahl, 'Letzte Ölung für den Autor', *Kurier*, 8 April 1978.

<sup>129</sup> W. Martin Lüdke, 'Ein Stück hinter der Grenze', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 12 August 1978.

heightened since it is formulated so near to death. Like Reich-Ranicki, Lüdke and Kahl, many of the text's reviewers mention but skate over the protagonist's conscious decision to survive, preferring to concentrate on his self-dependence (Beckmann), the disruption to his career plans (Burger) and the other unhappy experiences, such as his grandfather's death (haj), which take place around the time described in *Der Atem*.<sup>130</sup>

As with the previous autobiographical volumes, one or two critics perceive signs of more positive hope and human warmth in the text, most notably Rolf Michaelis:

Er [Bernhard in *Der Atem*] ersetzt die nonchalante, oft als hochmütig verkannte Geste des Schulterzuckens mit der einer, dem alles 'egal', alles 'gleichwertig' ist, von sich schiebt, durch den Ausdruck liebevoller Hinwendung zu Menschen, wie sie bisher in keinem Buch von Thomas Bernhard in solch versteckter Zartheit zu finden waren.<sup>131</sup>

Krista Hauser reinforces Michaelis's words here when she describes *Der Atem* succinctly as a 'Wende zum Leben'.<sup>132</sup> Jochen Hieber reminds his reader that for an unreligious writer, Bernhard does not surrender to nihilism; there is a consistent sense in *Der Atem* of forward movement ('Progreß [...] Entwicklung').<sup>133</sup> None of these reviews, however, couples the onset of hope with the way in which Bernhard wrote, and they are all still taken, almost exclusively, with the critical outpourings against doctors, society and humanity. Change is perceived principally in what the older writer says about his past, not in the way he chooses to say it.

#### (iv) *Die Kälte*

Franz Wesenauer, Podlaha, and the critical stance towards doctors superficially dominated the reception of the first three works; the repeated criticisms of medical care,

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<sup>130</sup> See: Heinz Beckmann, 'Im Sterbesaal', *Rheinischer Merkur*, 21 July 1978; Hermann Burger, 'Atem-Wende', *Weltwoche*, 17 May 1978, and: haj [Hansres Jacobi], 'Entscheidung für das Leben', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 29 April 1978.

<sup>131</sup> Rolf Michaelis, 'Aus dem Totenbett ins zweite Leben', *Die Zeit*, 31 March 1978.

<sup>132</sup> Krista Hauser, "'Mein Leben leben, wie und solange ich es will'", *Tiroler Tageszeitung*, 11 July 1978.

<sup>133</sup> Jochen Hieber, 'Sich das Leben nehmen', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2 May 1978.

this time in the TB hospital in Grafenhof, now tested one or two critics' patience. In his scathing review, Kurt Kahl feels that Bernhard was simply wrong to accuse doctors of neglect, that he suffered from 'Verfolgungswahn', and that in *Die Kälte* he ('nicht ein Mensch von besonderem Talent') had produced a work 'ohne literarischen Belang'; Kahl concludes: 'da kaschiert einer sein frühes Versagen mit der Überheblichkeit von heute.'<sup>134</sup> Huber states that, with one or two exceptions, *Die Kälte* was altogether better received than the previous three volumes of the pentalogy. Like Kahl, however, there was no shortage of critics who continued to level all the well-established charges at Bernhard: self-pity (haj), creative stultification and repetition (Hartung), being a harbinger of doom and a 'Verzweiflungsartist' (Löffler), and creating yet another 'Labyrinth der Hoffnungslosigkeit' (Matheja).<sup>135</sup> Christoph Geiser, writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, even accuses Bernhard at one point in *Die Kälte* of 'Todessehnsucht' – which is a curious claim given that much of the narrative is devoted to the protagonist trying to escape death and the TB hospital, consistent with the 'decision' to live made in the previous volume.<sup>136</sup>

After the grim prose fiction of the '60s and early '70s, critics had thought of Bernhard's name as synonymous with death, suicide, and gleeful nihilism. While this perception dominated the critical reception of *Der Atem*, one or two commentators were more daring in their interpretations of *Die Kälte*. Even the otherwise negative Elisabeth Effenberger talks of a writer who, in this fourth autobiographical volume, regards the (metaphorical and physical) landscape with a friendly eye and whose trademark repetitions 'kommen kaum noch vor.'<sup>137</sup> It is, however, Rolf Michaelis and Rainald Goetz who provide the most sensitive and searching analyses of hope and human warmth

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<sup>134</sup> Kurt Kahl, 'Nur der Schamlose ist authentisch', *Kurier*, 5 February 1981.

<sup>135</sup> See: haj [Hansres Jacobi], 'An der Anklagemauer', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 14 March 1981; Harald Hartung, 'Gegen die Unausweichlichkeit', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 17 May 1981; Sigrid Löffler, 'Die Leiden des jungen Bernhard', *profil*, 2 May 1981, and: Bernd Matheja, 'Grauen wider den Tod', *tip* [Berlin], 7 (1981), 42-3 (p.43).

<sup>136</sup> Christoph Geiser, 'Beispiel einer Jugendkrise', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 11/12 April 1981.

<sup>137</sup> Elisabeth Effenberger, 'In der Isolation eingerichtet: Thomas Bernhard', *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 7 February 1981.

in the text. Goetz, a former medical student, points out that the supposed exaggerations of the text ('grotesk überspitzte Karikaturen') are, indeed, quite true-to-life: 'Ich habe an einem derartigen [Grafenhof] Ort Zustände und Situationen erlebt, ebenso ungeheuerlich wie von Bernhard beschrieben.'<sup>138</sup> Goetz, an historian as well as medical scholar, inadvertently raises an important issue here: many of the Austrian reviewers were dismissing Bernhard for his supposedly overstated claims about the inefficiency of an Establishment stronghold, the medical profession. Goetz's counter-suggestion that the perennial exaggerator might just not be exaggerating, places the narrative in a different light: rather than being the predictable product of a serial nihilist, it can be regarded with greater confidence as a realistic description which requires serious, close reading: 'Wir sollten Thomas Bernhard mit etwas weniger Ehrfurcht und tiefsinnigem Schaudern lesen und ihn dadurch zugleich ernster nehmen.'<sup>139</sup>

In his appraisal of *Die Kälte*, Rolf Michaelis goes one step further: he asks the reader to look more closely for positive clues in Bernhard's work, and he refers to 'den von manchen Lesern bedauerten "Pessimismus", der in Wahrheit Optimismus ist'.<sup>140</sup> The reader will achieve this insight by way of 'einer zugleich langsamen wie gehetzten Lektüre'; Michaelis concludes by pointing out that Bernhard is no hardened misanthropist and that *Die Kälte* represents 'ein Schritt in die Welt'.<sup>141</sup> Erich Skwara echoes Michaelis's sentiment here but extends retrospectively the relevance of his statement to earlier works: '[Bernhard] beschreibt [...] in diesem jüngsten Buch und auch früher selten, aber überzeugend und wärmend genug, seine Sehnsucht nach einem Menschen, einem Freund, einem Halt.'<sup>142</sup> To read Michaelis's and Skwara's words here, it would seem that the nihilist of *Amras*, *Verstörung* and *Das Kalkwerk* has revised his outlook considerably.

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<sup>138</sup> Rainald Goetz, "'Wahr ist nur, was nicht paßt'", *Der Spiegel*, 27 July 1981, pp.229-32 (p.231).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Rolf Michaelis, 'Einmal Hölle und zurück', *Die Zeit*, 27 March 1981.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Erich W. Skwara, 'Tropfenweise, wie bittere Medizin', *Rheinischer Merkur/Christ und Welt*, 6 February 1981.

(v) *Ein Kind*

Without any ostensible controversy to direct the attention of critics away from this text, reviews of *Ein Kind* finally began to concentrate on Bernhard's narrative. Thomas Anz describes it as a book which is quite different from his earlier works, one which 'auf abstrakte Reflexionen und lange philosophische Exkurse verzichtet.'<sup>143</sup> While it is not necessarily true that Bernhard resisted his earlier tendency to make general statements about life and human nature as a direct result of the particular incidents described in the narrative, the text is much easier to read, with shorter, clearer sentences, as Alice Villon acknowledges: 'Bernhard schreibt [...] ruhig und einfach.'<sup>144</sup>

If evidence were needed that the previous volumes were sometimes not read thoroughly and each individual volume placed in its proper context within the pentalogy, then Kathy Zarnegin belatedly provides it in her review of the paperback edition in the *Basler Zeitung* where she describes *Ein Kind* as 'der vierte und abschliessende Teil einer Tetralogie'.<sup>145</sup> However, on the whole, reviewers finally began to engage with Bernhard's narrative after the digressions which surrounded the reception of the first four volumes. Paul Konrad Kurz, in a review which places the text (and, for once, not a hidden political, social or ideological agenda) at the heart of Bernhard's project, can talk of 'der autobiographischen Abrechnung' and 'der literarischen Bewältigung'.<sup>146</sup> Rolf Michaelis includes all five volumes, and not just *Ein Kind*, in his assessment that the pentalogy should be read and understood 'weniger als Dokumentar-Literatur denn als Dichtung'.<sup>147</sup> Paul Reitze, too, looks for linguistic and stylistic clues, declaring: 'Die Sprache ist verräterisch.'<sup>148</sup> He even goes on to look at Bernhard's use of 'naturgemäß', albeit only in one sentence, concluding that Bernhard uses it only when he is 'völlig

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<sup>143</sup> Thomas Anz, 'Thomas Bernhard, der große Komödiant', *FAZ*, 6 April 1982.

<sup>144</sup> Alice Villon, 'Der alte Mann und das Kind', *Weltwoche*, 14 April 1982.

<sup>145</sup> Kathy Zarnegin, 'Was lese ich heute?', *Basler Zeitung*, 7 May 1994.

<sup>146</sup> Paul Konrad Kurz, 'Der Großvater war der Weise, der Gute', *Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt*, 2 May 1982.

<sup>147</sup> Rolf Michaelis, 'Himmelssturz, Höllenflug', *Die Zeit*, 4 June 1982.

<sup>148</sup> Paul F. Reitze, 'Dädalus turnt auf dem Turm', *Rheinischer Merkur/Christ und Welt*, 25 June 1982.

ratlos'.<sup>149</sup> However brief and approximate the analysis, there is a willingness to enter into Bernhard's text in many of these reviews.

The effect of this move towards the text is for critics to see that the book is not a settling of personal scores or a therapeutic linguistic tirade against humanity, but a search for something more positive, perhaps even happiness on occasions, partly through the expression of a lapsed idealism or thwarted hopes: Anz mentions 'Augenblicke vollkommener Glückseligkeit'; Wolfram Schütte calls the book 'eine Parabel vom spontanen Glücksverlangen eines Menschen und seinem Scheitern'.<sup>150</sup> Otto Beer, albeit reluctantly and with the shadow of Bernhard's previous works hanging over him, also admits to a positive, lighter touch: 'ein beinahe helles Buch, natürlich kein glückliches (dessen würde sich Bernhard ja schämen!)'.<sup>151</sup> Accompanying this more positive, hopeful outlook, critics identified the human aspects of the narrative. In recognition of a narrative imbued with love, humanity and hope, Harald Hartung concludes his review in *Der Tagesspiegel* with the words, 'Ganz einfach, menschlich; es ist vielleicht das schönste Buch, das Bernhard geschrieben hat.'<sup>152</sup>

#### (b) Articles and Books

It is clear from the discussion of reviews of all five works that a handful of critics did, indeed, detect the expression of hope and a positive desire to communicate in Bernhard's reminiscing narratives. It is, therefore, somewhat surprising that this thread is not taken up in earnest in any of the academic critical material on the pentalogy. The body of critical writing is best appraised in two principal categories: first, books and articles about the pentalogy specifically, and second, monographs and general books about Thomas Bernhard's works.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Wolfram Schütte, 'Kindheit oder: In der Fremde', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 15 May 1982.

<sup>151</sup> Otto F. Beer, 'Abenteuer und frühes Leid', *Die Welt*, 8 May 1982.

<sup>152</sup> Harald Hartung, 'Das Scheitern und das Höchste', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 16 May 1982.

All the specialist books on the pentalogy place these works within Bernhard's *œuvre*. They are strongly influenced by the reception of the early works and, consequently, these commentators dwell upon the critical, social, and political comments about Austria and the public. Personal moments and thoughts about happiness and hope for the future are largely overlooked.

The most detailed text-centred study of Bernhard's autobiographical works remains Urs Bugmann's doctoral thesis published in 1981.<sup>153</sup> Without the hindsight afforded by the later, more optimistic prose works (including *Die Kälte* and *Ein Kind*), Bugmann concentrates on Bernhard's distressing childhood experiences and his inability to overcome their terrible shadow. Bugmann's critical examination centres on the fact of literary creation as an activity which helps Bernhard to overcome personal problems, rather than on the effects of stylistic techniques or linguistic detail on the reader. By examining in great detail the effect of the autobiographical cycle, Bugmann draws the reasonable conclusion that these works exhibit the striving towards self-knowledge which Bernhard unsuccessfully tried to attain in his work before 1975: 'Darin musste [*sic*] er [Bernhard] scheitern, weil er sich aus der Unmittelbarkeit dieses solipsistischen Kosmos nicht zu lösen vermochte.'<sup>154</sup> While the autobiographical works overcome this impasse ('die Ueberwindung [*sic*] dieser Ausweglosigkeit'), they still fail because they cannot attain any satisfactory definition of objective self-knowledge or truth which he sees as Bernhard's ultimate, albeit notional, goal.<sup>155</sup> Because Bugmann ascribes to Bernhard's fictional writing a near-absolute literary agenda of objective, unquestionable truth, it is not surprising that he concludes that the project is doomed to failure *a priori*. Yet, in his analysis of the then trilogy, there is also the detection of a more realistic motivation behind the autobiographical project, one which is validated and realized by

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<sup>153</sup> Urs Bugmann, *Bewältigungsversuch: Thomas Bernhards autobiographische Schriften*, Europäische Hochschulschriften: Series 1, 435 (Berne, Frankfurt and Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1981).

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p.337.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

the prose works of the '80s: 'Nicht die Widerstände sind für ihn [Bernhard] der treibende Motor, sondern der Wille zur Heilung, die Hoffnung auf Rettung.'<sup>156</sup> The desire to be saved, in both *Der Atem* and *Die Kälte*, is a physical necessity in the face of extreme illness. There is little textual evidence to suggest that Bernhard was minded to explore the validity of notions of objectivity; indeed, these texts, like the other three volumes, are concerned with his life and his thoughts about the past. The pentalogy is a creative document; it is not principally philosophical, theoretical or analytical.

Reinhard Tschapke's study of 1984 sees the protagonist of the pentalogy as a victim of his education, his character, and his social, geographical, and historical environments. At the heart of the autobiographical works is 'das Thema des ewigen Scheiterns'.<sup>157</sup> Like Bugmann, Tschapke sees Bernhard's attempts to overcome his problems as a lost cause in view of a pre-existent 'ewige[n] Disharmonie'.<sup>158</sup> When Tschapke describes the contents of the pentalogy as a personal 'Reise von Isolation zu Isolation, von Fremdheit zu Fremdheit, von Gefahr zu Gefahr', he fails to acknowledge the adolescent's immutable resolution to live and the joy of the child growing up with its grandfather.<sup>159</sup>

Thomas Parth's later study of the pentalogy also sees Bernhard's narrator as doomed to failure ('zum Scheitern').<sup>160</sup> Parth's aim is to uncover narrative structures underlying the text. The autobiographies are 'eine Antwort auf vorhergehende gescheiterte Erzählpositionen', but they themselves are subject to failure.<sup>161</sup> In his section on *Ein Kind*, entitled 'Der siegreiche Erzähler', Parth is concerned with whether the events recalled by the narrator really took place; he explains the glorious sports-day athletics victory of the young protagonist as resulting from a fear of losing and hatred of

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p.150.

<sup>157</sup> Reinhard Tschapke, *Hölle und zurück: Das Initiationsthema in den Jugenderinnerungen Thomas Bernhards*, Germanistische Texte und Studien, 22 (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1984), p.163.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p.164.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Thomas Parth, 'Verwickelte Hierarchien': *die Wege des Erzählens in den Jugenderinnerungen Thomas Bernhards* (Tübingen: Francke, 1995), p.146.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

the sport.<sup>162</sup> He prefers a biographical approach, failing to acknowledge as a possibility the dry humour of a phrase such as ‘Ich war nur immer aus Angst so schnell gelaufen, aus Todesangst.’<sup>163</sup>

Both Parth and Bugmann understandably relate the narratives principally to the considerable personal problems encountered by Bernhard in his childhood and youth. Later commentators, like Hyun-Chon Cho, have failed to trace any development specifically from the autobiographical works onwards to the prose works of the '80s. Cho sees the pentalogy as an embodiment of Bernhard's *œuvre* (“den ganzen Bernhard”) which is characterized by a tense struggle with the self and the external world: ‘Dieser Prozeß spiegelt sich in seinem gesamten Erzählwerk, konzentriert sich noch einmal im letzten, in *Auslöschung*.’<sup>164</sup>

Of works which have an area of interest wider than the autobiographies, Barbara Saunders's thesis gives a brief but close and rewarding reading of the texts. In her chapter on Bernhard, Saunders focuses on aspects of the ‘formal organization of experience’ which pertain specifically to the narrator's identity in the first four volumes of the autobiography.<sup>165</sup> Her ultimate goal is not to analyse the narratives from within, but to compare and contrast Bernhard with other post-1945 German-speaking writers of literary autobiography. Manfred Mittermayer adopts a more tendentious stance with his perceptive, theoretical concept of ‘Ich-Gewinnung’ which sees Grünkranz and Onkel Franz as ‘Repräsentanten für zwei ideologische Systeme’ against which Bernhard employed the narratives.<sup>166</sup> David McLintock, in his fascinating and meticulous study of tense and narrative perspective in *Die Ursache* and *Der Atem*, puts a translator's,

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., pp.145.

<sup>163</sup> Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.128.

<sup>164</sup> Hyun-Chon Cho, *Wege zu einer Widerstandskunst im autobiographischen Werk von Thomas Bernhard*, Studien zur neueren Literatur, 2 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1995), p.213.

<sup>165</sup> Barbara Saunders, *Contemporary German Autobiography: Literary Approaches to the Problem of Identity*, Bithell Series of Dissertations, 9 (London: University of London Institute of Germanic Studies, 1985), p.76.

<sup>166</sup> Manfred Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard*, Sammlung Metzler, 291 (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 1995), p.85.

sometimes even a grammarian's, linguistic interpretation on Bernhard's complex narratives, but he does not attempt to link them to Bernhard's wider literary aims.<sup>167</sup>

The overall significance of these narratives, rather than the precise effects of Bernhard's literary methods, have been investigated from specifically social and existential, psychological, theoretical, and linguistic viewpoints in relation to his *œuvre*, his life, and political or intellectual schools of thought. In sympathy with some of the journalistic accounts, Hans Höller takes a cynical view of Bernhard as a literary opportunist: 'Einmal mehr zeigt sich hier [in der autobiographischen Pentalogie] Bernhards Fähigkeit, die Rezeptionsbedingungen in sein literarisches Kalkül einzubeziehen.'<sup>168</sup> In his portrayal of social and existential problems in Bernhard's prose, Charles Martin provides an interesting interpretation of the autobiographical writings as a personal reconciliation with the past, and he concludes: 'The process of writing the autobiography has enabled Bernhard to come to terms with the traumas of childhood. The nihilistic withdrawal from the world is no longer necessary or appropriate, and a critical view of existing society becomes possible.'<sup>169</sup>

Few critics have attempted to look at the narratives through a close reading; of those who have, most emphasize Bernhard's scepticism about language's power to express or communicate effectively. These critics see in the autobiographical texts an extension of the solipsistic self (described by Bugmann, Parth, and Cho) which fails to escape from the shackles of language: 'Das Ich, eingeschlossen in die Grenzen seiner Sprache, regrediert von der Spannung der erstrebten sozialen Identität in die autistische Immanenz ...'<sup>170</sup> Although there is little doubt that Bernhard was highly sceptical about

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<sup>167</sup> D.R. McLintock, 'Tense and Narrative Perspective in Two Works of Thomas Bernhard', *Oxford German Studies*, 11 (1980), 1-26.

<sup>168</sup> Höller, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.97.

<sup>169</sup> Charles W. Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard: The Portrayal of Existential and Social Problems in his Prose Works*, *Amsterdamer Publikationen zur Sprache und Literatur*, 121 (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1995), p.135.

<sup>170</sup> Johann Strutz, "'Wir, das bin ich.'" Folgerungen zum Autobiographienwerk von Thomas Bernhard', in *In Sachen Thomas Bernhards*, ed. by Kurt Bartsch, Dietmar Goltschnigg and Gerhard Melzer (Königstein: Athenäum, 1983), pp.179-98 (p.193).

the ultimate capacity of language to communicate perfectly, even adequately, the autobiographical narratives attest to a new desire to engage his reader by making the narrative more readily accessible. The most obvious sign of this development is the shorter sentences and less dense prose which differentiates these works from the previous fictional output; Bernhard Sorg confirms this new phase in Bernhard's writing: 'sie [die fünfteilige Autobiographie] bezeichnet eine neue Phase der schriftstellerischen Möglichkeiten.'<sup>171</sup> Manfred Mittermayer approaches these works as an attempt to re-establish the self or 'Ich-Gewinnung' by the 'Selbstdurchsetzung eines Ichs gegen eine Umwelt, die es zu hindern trachtet.'<sup>172</sup> Mittermayer talks of the narrator-protagonist's desire 'seine Existenz wieder in die Hand [zu] nehmen', but it remains unclear what this self-appropriation precisely involves or means.<sup>173</sup> Like many critics, he concentrates on trying to separate the factually accurate from the invented, in Bernhard's autobiographical accounts. This desire to create generic boundaries or definitions is especially productive if applied to understanding the diverse narrative aspects of the texts. Urs Bugmann sees the narrative as providing a 'Bewußtseinsentwicklung', not only by the reminiscing author but also by the protagonist.<sup>174</sup> Bugmann connects this development with a subsequent liberation for Bernhard's solipsistic characters in the prose fictions of the late '70s and '80s. Eva Marquardt, too, regards the autobiographical works as part of Bernhard's development as a prose writer, but she insists that, far from marking a new phase in his writing, they are only apparently more accessible in the hope of appeasing critics who had previously criticized him for his monomania.<sup>175</sup>

These accounts generally omit to address the fact that possibilities of communication outside the self are not just reserved for the later writings but also exist

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<sup>171</sup> Sorg, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.132.

<sup>172</sup> Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.84.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>174</sup> Bugmann, *Bewältigungsversuch*, p.338.

<sup>175</sup> Eva Marquardt, *Gegenrichtung: Entwicklungstendenzen in der Erzählprosa Thomas Bernhards* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1990), pp.120 and 175.

within these narratives. Barbara Saunders presents the autobiographies as a collective reassessment by Bernhard of his personal and literary identity: 'This autobiography goes a long way, however, towards destroying the image the media have created of Bernhard's misanthropy and misogyny.'<sup>176</sup> Somewhat distanced from the diseased world of earlier stories, such as *Amras* (1964), there emerges in these books a strong impulse in Bernhard's narratives to 'give his life intelligible meaning and form'.<sup>177</sup> Unusually, but profitably, Stephen Dowden links Bernhard's controversial public image to his verbal and literary expression, and his warning is an apt one for the pentalogy with all its media attention: 'The coy interviews, the buffoonery of his letters to the press, and the theatrical posing at award ceremonies all point to the deliberate cultivation of an image designed to conceal the inner man, or possibly to conceal the lack of a strong sense of inner self.'<sup>178</sup> Instead, close analysis of the narratives as a route to a meaning beyond apparent nihilism emerges as the only reliable, long-term option. Bernhard's autobiographical narratives, as well as the prose fiction, demand an alert, sensitive reader who is prepared to slow down, retrace his steps and, perhaps most importantly, apply his experience of life to the narrative:

Bernhard's style [in *Die Ursache*] attempts to encourage an attitude of 'Hellhörigkeit' in the reader, a stance which he himself learned from his grandfather. 'Hellhörigkeit' requires a sensitivity to the hidden essence of experiences, as well as a resistance to the 'Stumpfsinnigkeit', the indifference of the majority of people.<sup>179</sup>

In the earlier fiction, there was always a sense of thwarted idealism invisibly driving the narratives; in the pentalogy, the desire to establish a context for the self, a sense of personal identity through communication and survival, is more evident. Whereas the early stories are littered with incomplete sentences, innumerable marks of ellipsis and

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<sup>176</sup> Saunders, p.73.

<sup>177</sup> Dowden, p.47.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Saunders, p.66.

incoherent fragmentation of thought processes and plot (especially *Frost* (1963), *Amras* (1964), and *Verstörung* (1967)), the pentalogy comprises coherent, eminently comprehensible prose narratives where the action can be clearly followed by the reader.

Dowden is right to point out that these texts are primarily creative narratives and that a link between Bernhard's writing and his life should not be made as a matter of course:

There is no necessary link between the circumstances of his youth and his intellectual life. Bernhard's outlook is a matter of thoughtful choice. In his memoirs [the autobiographies], as in his novels, he is the creator of his experience. He frames his own life with the sensibilities of a novelist, and he consciously establishes the mood that governs our response to it. Thus Bernhard's memoirs must be understood as an imaginative achievement in their own right.<sup>180</sup>

After many years of quibbling amongst critics about whether these books are really autobiographical or not, Dowden here sensibly side-steps the issue to concentrate on what a reading of these stories demands: scrupulous perusal of the subtle, often intangible aspects of the complex narratives. There is a basic tension which underlies these narratives, and it is born of two, sometimes conflicting impulses: one to guide and involve the reader, the other for the author to exploit the narrative for his own intensely personal purposes.

While many critical accounts of the autobiographies grapple with thematic problems posed by the texts, few stop to look at the narratives proper. In some form, all the critical positions adduced above acknowledge possibilities of communication in the pentalogy. None of them, however, undertakes a specific narrative analysis to illustrate how this communication is achieved and subsequently any sense of hope attained. This critical lacuna marks the starting-point of this chapter's textual investigation.

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<sup>180</sup>Dowden, p.47.

## 2. BERNHARD AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Since a critical analysis of the pentalogy in this study is meant to provide a basis for a close critical dissection of the later prose works, the argument here does not lay a theoretical stencil for study of the autobiographical narratives; rather it uses pertinent research in order to explain how Bernhard employed and adapted certain autobiographical devices to express and exploit his own creative and literary aims in the pentalogy and to communicate with the reader. Some critics (Saunders, Bugmann, and Ludewig, for instance) have used the history and theory of autobiography specifically to explore cultural (Saunders), theoretical (Bugmann), and historical (Ludewig) sides to the pentalogy; however, historical and theoretical aspects of literary autobiography in general are considered in the discussion here only in as much as they illuminate Bernhard's communication with his reader and the related sense of hope which emerges from these texts.<sup>181</sup> The specific purpose of this section is to detail how Bernhard used the autobiographical project to find meaning in his past life. By classifying Bernhard's aims into three sections ('self-knowledge', 'truth', and 'narrative'), the analysis traces how the older writer moulds his memories of the past for his own personal ends.

It is indisputable that Bernhard's adolescence and childhood, as portrayed in the pentalogy, were plagued by uncommon misfortune; they could even be described as traumatic. The first eighteen years of Bernhard's life were accompanied by a number of major obstacles to happiness: the absence of his real father; a mother who had financial difficulties and found it near-impossible to cope with an energetic, independent-minded son; recurrent ill-health, and loneliness compounded by hypersensitivity, to name a few.

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<sup>181</sup> For a clear, detailed, yet succinct account of German autobiography the following is an excellent starting-point: Saunders, pp.1-5 and 19-36. Saunders's account places Bernhard's pentalogy within the broad scope of autobiographical theory and post-1945 autobiography in German-speaking countries. For a briefer account, see: Alexandra Ludewig, *Großvaterland: Thomas Bernhards Schriftstellergenese dargestellt anhand seiner (Auto-)Biographie*, European University Studies: German Language and Literature, 1718 (Berne: Peter Lang, 1999), pp.45-51. For a more specific introduction to German autobiographical writing in the 1970s, see: Andrew Plowman, *The Radical Subject: Social Change and Self in Recent German Autobiography*, Britische und irische Studien zur deutschen Sprache und Literatur, 13 (Berne: Peter Lang, 1998), pp.11-43 (in particular, pp.33-43). For a less up-to-date but extremely useful critical history of autobiography, see: Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960).

The autobiographical project can be regarded as a literary tool which enables Bernhard in his own mind to come to terms with his past and to use his reflections as a platform to detect hope and achieve future happiness.

Critical literature on the autobiographical works has failed to explain precisely why Bernhard chose to take stock of his early life around 1975. The mid-1970s were undoubtedly a significant time in Bernhard's personal and literary development. After the serious health problems and acute family difficulties associated with his adolescence, he had made a comfortable, financially independent life for himself: he had settled in his large house (the 'Vierkanthof' in Obernathal near Ohlsdorf, much of whose interior he had painstakingly designed), whence he commuted regularly to stay in Vienna for long spells with Hedwig Stavianicek, his lifelong companion; he had established his literary reputation by 1975 (having won such prestigious prizes as the 'Österreichischen Staatspreis' in 1968 and 'Georg-Büchner-Preis' in 1970), and his health had stabilized enough, at least on the surface, for him to be free most of the time of hospitals and convalescent homes.<sup>182</sup> None the less, Bernhard was not a well man: Peter Fabjan (b. 1938), his half-brother and lifelong personal physician, makes it clear in an interview of 1989 after Bernhard's death that the ailing writer spent the last ten years or so of his life in complete uncertainty about his health: 'Er hat nie gewußt, leb' ich nächstes Jahr noch oder halt' ich noch ein Jahr durch, halt' ich noch zwei Jahre durch.'<sup>183</sup> Bernhard's pleurisy in the '50s repeatedly brought him into perilously close contact with death, but as Hans Höller claims, this threat was not, as is commonly assumed, diminished in the '70s, and his illness remained a lurking presence: 'Seit der zweiten Hälfte der siebziger Jahre war sich Thomas Bernhard bewußt, daß er verloren ist.'<sup>184</sup> Fabjan reports how

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<sup>182</sup> For an excellent introduction (including many revealing photographs) to Bernhard's three properties (the other two: 'Krucka' am Grasberg and an isolated house in Ottwang), see: Wieland and Erika Schmied, *Thomas Bernhards Häuser* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1995). The Vierkanthof is now open to the public. See: *Das Bernhardhaus*, ed. by Peter Fabjan. (Neumarkt: Neumarkter Druckereigesellschaft m.b.H., [n.d.]).

<sup>183</sup> Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard - Eine Erinnerung*, p.161. Fabjan provides a succinct summary of Bernhard's illnesses and last days (ibid., pp.160-1 and p.164).

<sup>184</sup> Höller, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.129.

Bernhard was at pains to conceal his suffering from the public and that there were times when he could hardly breathe during this period of 'Martyrium' from the late '70s right up to his death in 1989.<sup>185</sup> Bernhard's awareness that he was a man whose days were numbered contributes to the personal and, above all, immediate descriptions of illness and dying prevalent in all five narratives, especially *Der Atem* and *Die Kälte*. His (terminal) illness also made it natural for him to want to look back and assess his life up to that point.

Two reasons for writing down the past in a literary format are put forward in the first volume of the pentalogy: one, to remind people of the external realities (here, of the conditions of war in Salzburg), which so many of them seem to have forgotten;<sup>186</sup> and two, for the narrator somehow to do justice to ('gerecht werden') his past experiences.<sup>187</sup> The first reason is self-explanatory. In the second reason, however, lies a potential illumination of the deeply personal goals behind Bernhard's autobiographical endeavours.

A clearer picture of how Bernhard shapes a sense of hope through the autobiographical project emerges if a psychoanalytical perspective is selectively brought to bear on the texts. In psychoanalysis, the patient recalls the past in order to overcome it by facing up to it. Moreover, the patient's recollections are presented in the form of a narrative. In the essay, 'Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten' (1914), Freud describes a process by which a patient can confront his unhappy past by recalling it and then dealing with it; this process can be likened to the way in which Bernhard actively grapples with his past in the pentalogy.<sup>188</sup> Of course, Bernhard's narrator is not on the analyst's couch — and it is not the purpose of this critical interpretation to paint him as a

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<sup>185</sup> Karl Woisetschläger, 'Thomas Bernhard - eine Erbschaft: Nachfragen in Gmunden, Obernathal, Weinberg', in: Dreissinger, *Thomas Bernhard: Portraits*, pp.312-19 (p.313). This article was originally published in: *Die Presse*, 24 June 1989. Woisetschläger provides an informative account of Bernhard's ailing health, especially in the late '70s and '80s.

<sup>186</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.48.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p.106.

<sup>188</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Studienausgabe*, ed. by Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards, and James Strachey (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1969-75), Ergänzungsband: *Schriften zur Behandlungstechnik*, ed. by Ilse Grubrich-Simitis (1975), pp.205-15.

clinically disturbed psychological case study — but Freud's observations do not just pertain to hysteria or chronic psychopathological disorder; they are relevant to any individual with unhappy memories who tries to confront them later in his life.

In Freud's method of treatment, aimed at enabling the subject to come to terms with traumatic memories via analysis ('in der analytischen Kur'), remembering the past initially serves the function of undoing the forgetting which marks the patient's relationship with his own past; in short, the treatment addresses the patient's amnesia which is the result of repression.<sup>189</sup> By being encouraged to recall the past, the patient 'repeats' what has happened in his life. In Freud's essay, the precise reliability of the narrated events is less important than the nature of the patient's narration: it is what the patient reveals unwittingly ('zeigt') during his confessions, rather than any conscious self-analysis, which facilitates an improvement.<sup>190</sup> Freud refers to this process as 'die therapeutische Arbeit'.<sup>191</sup> If the patient feels unhappy about his past in some way, then by way of the therapeutic process the patient appropriates or internalizes the bad memories ('Krankheit', as Freud refers to it) which otherwise make him so unhappy: 'Die Krankheit selbst darf ihm [dem Patienten] nichts Verächtliches mehr sein, vielmehr ein würdiger Gegner werden, ein Stück seines Wesens [...] aus dem es Wertvolles für sein späteres Leben zu holen gilt.'<sup>192</sup> The future prospect of making something good from past unhappiness must be left to the patient: 'Man muß dem Kranken die Zeit lassen, sich in den ihm nun bekannten Widerstand zu vertiefen, ihn *durchzuarbeiten*, ihn zu überwinden.'<sup>193</sup> The end result of this tripartite therapeutic process is to make the patient feel better about not only the past but also the future: in short, it is a treatment which offers hope to the patient.

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p.208.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p.210.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p.211.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p.212.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., p.215 [emphasis in original].

There are distinct parallels between Freud's exposition and the pentalogy: Bernhard's narrator attempts to undo forgetting; he recalls, thereby repeating (in Freud's terminology) his past; like Freud's patient, he 'shows' ('andeuten' in the case of *Die Ursache*) his past rather than trying to analyse it directly; in writing down his past experiences and reflecting upon them from a later perspective, he can be seen to carry out something akin to Freud's 'therapeutic work'; most importantly, in making his narrator write down his thoughts in the pentalogy and face up to the past, Bernhard deals with his bitterness and unhappiness with the result that he is able to move on to the markedly more optimistic prose which follows the publication of the last autobiographical volume, *Ein Kind*.

(a) Self-knowledge:

In a critical précis of the background to autobiographies of the *Neue Subjektivität* in Germany in the 1970s, Andrew Plowman writes:

The 1960s [...] marked the end of the post-war period in the Federal Republic, its political agenda set by reconstruction and integration into the West; and they ushered in a new agenda defined by the problems of post-industrial society (such as the rise of a mass intelligentsia and a loss of confidence in economic growth). This new agenda [...] contributed to a transformation of political discourse in which a traditional class-based politics yielded to a pluralistic politics grounded in personal experience and exemplified by the women's and alternative movements of the 1970s.<sup>194</sup>

What Plowman here refers to as 'pluralistic politics grounded in personal experience' yielded a host of subjective autobiographies in the 1970s in West Germany, based as much on the author's inner psychological state of mind as on the external facts of his life. In Austria, however, the political impulse was less marked, but the effect was not dissimilar: subjective autobiographical works were produced in the 1970s by her most

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<sup>194</sup> Plowman, p.14.

prominent writers, such as Peter Handke, Elfriede Jelinek and Thomas Bernhard. Allyson Fiddler justifiably refers to 'the generally apolitical and rather stagnant atmosphere of its [post-War Austria's] artistic production'.<sup>195</sup> She alludes to a two-pronged literary response to the aftermath of the Second World War: on one hand, a return to Austrian literary tradition, and on the other, a trend 'to anchor Austrian culture within a firm national identity', looking abroad for inspiration.<sup>196</sup> She explains Austria's apolitical bias in literary matters through the 'enforced neutrality which Austria had to accept when it signed the *Staatsvertrag* of 1955'.<sup>197</sup>

While at first sight Bernhard would appear to be part of the trend of subjective writing outlined above, he does not fit comfortably into any of the categories put forward by Plowman or Fiddler. As a writer, he followed his own path and was at no time attached to any of the Austrian literary groups such as the Grazer Gruppe, the Wiener Gruppe or the Konkretisten. H.C. Artmann confirms Bernhard's independence: 'Die literarische Szene in Wien war damals [in den Fünfziger Jahren] dreigeteilt: Die Gruppe um Hans Weigel, wir — Ossi Wiener, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Rühm, Ernst Jandl und ich —, und schließlich er, Thomas Bernhard. Absolut unabhängig.'<sup>198</sup> Although some critics, like Höller, saw in Bernhard an opportunist keen to take advantage of the literary bandwagon of the 1970s with its emphasis on personal, subjective, autobiographical accounts, equally there were personal reasons behind Bernhard's autobiographical project.

No serious autobiographical work can be undertaken without understanding oneself and one's past, without self-knowledge. One of the best clues Bernhard gives about the impulse driving his own autobiographical project can be traced to an interview

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<sup>195</sup> Allyson Fiddler, *Rewriting Reality: An Introduction to Elfriede Jelinek* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), p.18. For useful links between Bernhard's autobiographies and other (post-war) Austrian writing, see: Ludewig, pp.43-6 and 299-328.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18. For a succinct summary of Bernhard's autobiography in the context of the literary scene of the 1970s, see: Strutz, pp.179-80.

<sup>198</sup> Dreissinger, *Thomas Bernhard: Portraits*, p.39.

after the publication of *Ein Kind* where he made it clear that the pentalogy was the result of a deeply personal process of taking stock:

Tatsache ist, daß ich in einem gewissen Moment meines Lebens Neugier auf meine Kindheit verspürte. Ich sagte mir: 'Ich habe nicht mehr so lange zu leben. Wieso nicht versuchen, mein Leben bis zum Alter von neunzehn aufzuschreiben? Nicht so, wie es in Wirklichkeit war — Objektivität gibt es nicht — sondern so, wie ich es heute sehe.'<sup>199</sup>

In this statement — not coincidentally formulated after the entire project is over — Bernhard expresses curiosity about his past life in the form of a desire to trace a path to his present circumstances, and it is this impulse which drives his search for self-knowledge. The product of this impulse is the autobiographical narratives. This personal explanation corresponds with one of the fundamental aims of autobiography, according to John Sturrock: 'Autobiography raises into consciousness whatever unconscious process the autobiographer accepts has brought him to his present condition.'<sup>200</sup> There was no obvious direction for the development of Bernhard's prose output up to 1975 unless he steered away from the intense psychological descriptions of the mental breakdowns experienced by obsessive individuals. In his account of autobiography, Sturrock concludes that (what he terms) a 'turn' or 'some dramatic reorientation of the life being narrated' stands at the heart of the impulse for the writer to delve into his own past.<sup>201</sup> Metaphorically and literally, this turn in the pentalogy is best expressed by the about-turn 'in die entgegengesetzte Richtung' of the adolescent in *Der Keller* whose life changes immeasurably as a result of his decision to find a job instead of continuing his education at school.<sup>202</sup>

The search for self-knowledge in the pentalogy can most usefully be divided into three sections: reconstruction, ordering, and self-improvement.

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<sup>199</sup> Thomas Bernhard, 'Ich behaupte nicht, mit der Welt gehe es schlechter', *FAZ*, 24 February 1983.

<sup>200</sup> John Sturrock, *The Language of Autobiography: Studies in the First Person Singular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.6.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p.289.

<sup>202</sup> See: Bernhard, *Der Keller*, pp.7-9.

(i) Reconstruction

It is evident from the passages where Bernhard discusses the aims of his project that, although he refers to the autobiographical task in hand from time to time in the narrative, he is not concerned with explaining in any detail what prompted him to write the reminiscences of his youth. In explaining the difficulty involved in writing his account, the narrator indirectly describes the process of reconstruction which is the initial stage of the autobiographical work here:

[...] die Schwierigkeit ist, [...] die Empfindung von damals und das Denken von heute zu Notizen und Andeutungen zu machen, die den Tatsachen von damals, meiner Erfahrung als Zögling damals entsprechen, wenn auch wahrscheinlich nicht gerecht werden, jedenfalls will ich den Versuch machen.<sup>203</sup>

This explanation is conspicuously marked by imprecision: the narrator wants to know how to fuse or make ('machen') yesteryear's experiences into today's written expression of them; he wants his written account to correspond to ('entsprechen') or do justice to ('gerecht werden') the past. Precisely what these terms mean or entail is not clarified, and no definition is attempted. If Bernhard's reputation is to be believed — for being a writer who affirms at every turn that language is powerless to convey or capture the reality we experience — then the narrator here would be predestined to failure. The vagueness of the terminology is supported by qualification ('wahrscheinlich', 'jedenfalls') which points to even greater narratorial uncertainty. Yet it is not Bernhard's ostensible aim here to reinvent his views about language or to embellish his past in order to hide specific skeletons in the cupboard. The reason he wants to make the attempt ('Versuch') at recreating the past becomes clearer later in the book.

Towards the end of a tirade against society's methods of educating people, in *Die Ursache*, Bernhard's narrator re-addresses the subject of the purpose behind his

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<sup>203</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.106.

remembrances. His use of the word 'Ursache', while unrelatedly discussing the modern world, causes the pertinent excursus about his own attitude to the past. He describes the personal difficulties he experiences returning to Salzburg twenty years after the experiences he is recounting. He can cope easily with the thought of going back, but once he is there, the city suddenly has a depressing ('deprimierend') effect on him; it presses down upon him ('schwer auf den Kopf drückend').<sup>204</sup> As with the earlier attempt ('Versuch') at reconciling past actions with his present perspective upon them, it is, however, not the past which the narrator is trying to negate or obliterate; the decisive action (emphasized in the text and embodied in the title) lies in working out (or reconstructing) how he arrived at where he is: 'auch noch nach zwanzig Jahren, *frage ich mich nach der Ursache* dieses Geistes- oder Gefühlszustands.'<sup>205</sup> Yet, thoughts and words are useless ('wirkungslos') in the face of feelings: here, the depressing reality of Salzburg.<sup>206</sup> The people are the same, their repulsive ways and habits have not changed, and will not change. The need to ask the question about the past, about how he has become who he is — a fundamental step towards self-knowledge — stems from a desire to put behind him the pain of Salzburg. This desire has an inherently optimistic outlook or expectation attached to it: 'Ich bin nicht mehr gezwungen dazu und gehe doch immer wieder (in Wirklichkeit und in Gedanken) und oft ohne zu wissen, warum, in Erwartung.'<sup>207</sup> The delving into the past (the search for self-knowledge) releases the narrator from the shackles of depression caused by returning to Salzburg and creates expectation ('Erwartung') or hope for the future. The fact that the people of Salzburg have not changed is irrelevant here; it is his own state of mind and his feelings ('Geistes- und Gefühlszustand') which matter to him and which govern his happiness. However unpleasant this mental process may be, it is, none the less, a necessary component in

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., p.144.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., p.143 [emphasis in original].

<sup>206</sup> Ibid., p.145.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p.143.

making him feel better about the effect of returning to Salzburg. This process is, therefore, a practical means to a personal end, rooted in his life outside the literary sphere of experience, rather than a purely mimetic, intellectual, artistic or creative exercise.

In Freud's version of the therapeutic work undertaken by the patient (with the guidance of the analyst), as outlined above, the way in which the patient remembers his past is more important than the (necessarily unverifiable) accuracy of the events related. By assessing how the patient recalls his past (his language, his motivations, his overall behaviour), the analyst is better able to understand his case. Similarly, in the pentalogy, the precise facts of Bernhard's youth are less relevant than how he chooses to portray them. Bernhard approaches his past in precisely this way, as he discloses in the 1983 *FAZ* article quoted above. In taking a sceptical view of Freud's 'process of uncovering the past as a kind of archeology', Donald P. Spence refers to an unavoidable link between the past and the present: 'Once expressed in a particular set of sentences, the memory itself has changed [...] The new description *becomes* the early memory.'<sup>208</sup> In Spence's view of the past being created anew, the emphasis is placed more on the present recollection than on the experienced, past event.

From a literary perspective, Spence's observation here can be applied to the pentalogy: the way in which Bernhard recalls the past — in the case of a work of literature, the way in which he writes down his past and what he selects from it (style and content) — can be seen to provide insights into his project as a whole. As Freud says in 'Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten': '[Wir dürfen sagen:] Der Analysierte *erinnere* überhaupt nichts von dem Vergessenen und Verdrängten, sondern er *agiere* es.'<sup>209</sup> Again, if Freud's insights are applied to a critical interpretation of Bernhard's literary project, the autobiographical narratives can be seen as the medium through which Bernhard reconstructs or plays out his past. If this is true, then by looking at what

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<sup>208</sup> Donald P. Spence, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth: Meaning and Interpretation in Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1982), p.93 and p.92 [emphasis in original].

<sup>209</sup> Freud, p.209 [emphasis in original].

Bernhard's narrators in the pentalogy say and how they express their memories, the critic can look behind the text in order to discover information which can reveal insights into the nature of the project and its links with questions of hope and communication. The parallels between the psychoanalytical work and literary reconstruction encourage, even justify, a close reading of Bernhard that focuses on his style.

## (ii) Ordering

Looking back and 'reconstructing' the past is only the first step towards self-knowledge for Bernhard's autobiographical narrator; ordering his experiences is the next stage of a project through which he ultimately seeks self-improvement.

According to Peter Sloterdijk, one of the most fundamental tasks of autobiographical work is to order experience ('die Organisation von lebensgeschichtlicher Erfahrung').<sup>210</sup> Sloterdijk describes the compulsion to examine oneself because of pain or personal crises as a fundamental impulse behind many serious autobiographical projects. Self-examination, he goes on to say, is an intrinsically optimistic activity ('den Optimismus der Selbstreflexion') in this context since it presupposes the desire to overcome and find a way out of (past) personal unhappiness.<sup>211</sup> Both unhappiness and the subsequent desire to find hope are clearly relevant to Bernhard, as the events recounted in the autobiography show.

Ordering the past in a literary narrative is very closely related to questions of selection and style: what the narrator chooses to highlight about the past and the way in which he presents his material define the terms of his project in no small measure. Again, a parallel to psychoanalysis can provide a productive insight. In his account of the patient's desire to overcome past traumas, Spence likens the choice of expression open to

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<sup>210</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Literatur und Lebenserfahrung: Autobiographien der Zwanziger Jahre* (Munich: Hanser, 1978), p.8.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

the patient to the possible genres available to the writer. Selection is a pivotal element in (recalling and) expressing past memories: 'If the patient wants to speak in an ironical tongue, he will be forced to choose certain pieces of his experience and ignore others.'<sup>212</sup> Later in his account, Spence borrows literary terminology (from the Russian Formalists) in order to place the emphasis of a patient's ordering of memories firmly on 'narrative' expression: 'The craft of fiction can be defined in part as the way in which the *fabula* [content of the story or narrative] are [*sic*] rearranged to form the *sujet* [order of events], and the manner and method of rearrangement constitutes the narrative technique.'<sup>213</sup> In this explanation, 'narrative technique' comprises the way in which the account is structured in being recounted. If transferred from the psychoanalytical dialogue (between patient and analyst) to literature (the relationship between Bernhard and his reader), narrative technique can become a significant clue to understanding the suffering subject (in the pentalogy: the narrator). The narrative of Spence's patient provides the trained analyst with a clue to what the patient is really thinking and what is really affecting him on a subconscious level. Similarly, the narrators' impulse in the pentalogy towards improving their personal circumstances (their search for hope and happiness) influences the way in which they seek to express the past and their later thoughts about it (communication). This link places the emphasis on the narrator's text, his narrative expression.

By learning to order their experiences, Bernhard's autobiographical narrators become happier; in the process, they formulate a sense of hope for their future lives. The source of this positive impulse can be traced back to the 1950s when Bernhard first began writing. Jens Dittmar productively links aspects of Bernhard's journalistic essays with his literary work. Since Bernhard worked for the *Demokratisches Volksblatt* in Salzburg, the scene of all his childhood and adolescent experiences, it is perhaps no

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<sup>212</sup> Spence, pp.127-8. Spence relates this aspect of selection to literature, too: 'If we are writing satire, we have a more limited choice of topics than if we are writing poetry' (p.127).

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p.250.

surprise that the end products of the two activities share certain important common themes, the most pertinent of which for this discussion is hope. Dittmar explains that the young Bernhard (like the narrator in *Der Keller*) was shocked by the social devastation he found in Salzburg in the 1950s after leaving his protective grandfather and his idyllic life in Henndorf. The process of literary ordering, already detectable in his reports for the newspaper, reaches a culmination in the autobiographical project: ‘Erst durch die Fiktionalisierung der Wirklichkeit gelang es dem jungen Schriftsteller, Ordnung in den wirren Kopf zu bringen.’<sup>214</sup>

The ordering of past experience plays an important role in marking not only a sense of hope for the future, but also a development of optimism from the first to the second volume of Bernhard’s pentalogy. Where the narrator of *Die Ursache* was helpless to change what depressed him in Salzburg, the narrator of *Der Keller* employs a process of mental clarification or ordering in order to neutralize the effects of negative influences: ‘Die Tücken, die mich stolpern und verzweifeln, die mich halb verrückt werden lassen an jedem Tag, werden gegen mich, indem ich sie mir vollkommen klarmache, wirkungslos, wie mich nichts mehr angreift oder gar abtötet, wenn ich es mir klarmache.’<sup>215</sup> It is no coincidence that the narrator uses the same word (‘wirkungslos’) here, to describe his immutability in the face of Salzburg’s ‘Tücken’, as he used in *Die Ursache* above to denote his helplessness when coming back to Salzburg.<sup>216</sup> The word-association signals at very least an important textual link, and arguably a link in his own mind between the two memories. The narrator of *Der Keller* attributes this newly-found strength (‘Kraft’) to a mental ‘tagtägliches Ordnungmachen’.<sup>217</sup> As in *Die Ursache*, the narrative remains vague about precisely what this ordering entails: ‘die Dinge werden

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<sup>214</sup> Jens Dittmar, *Aus dem Gerichtssaal: Thomas Bernhards Salzburg in den 50er Jahren* (Austria [n.p.]: Edition S, 1992), p.29.

<sup>215</sup> Bernhard, *Der Keller*, p.150.

<sup>216</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.145.

<sup>217</sup> Bernhard, *Der Keller*, p.151. It is precisely ‘Kraft’ (again, the same word used: *Die Ursache*, p.19) which he lacked before.

jeden Tag an ihren Platz gestellt.’<sup>218</sup> The reader requires great patience if he is to piece together these clues or ‘hints’ (the ‘Andeutung’ of *Die Ursache*’s subtitle); if he is to make sense and coherence out of the narrative, the reader will need to have tenacity and stamina in order to make the rewarding intertextual links. In this example here, it is, again, not until the next volume that the patient and persistent reader will gain a more precise insight.

In a passage in *Die Kälte* where the narrator is bemoaning his lack of acceptance by others, he presents reconstruction of his past, re-ordering and self-knowledge as a lifelong process: ‘Wie war das also wirklich, fragte ich, chronologisch?, und packte alles Eingepackte Festverschnürte wieder aus.’<sup>219</sup> The process of recompiling his past is synonymous with questioning himself here, unpacking that which is packed and forgotten. The narrator better defines here what he earlier described as an autobiographical ‘Methode’;<sup>220</sup> it is not a moment of insight or a turning-point upon which the aims of the autobiography focus: ‘Ich trage es [dieses festverschnürte Paket] noch, und manchmal mache ich es auf und packe es aus, um es wieder einzupacken und zuzuschnüren.’<sup>221</sup> This daily process of renewal is not marked by systematic progress to an ideal of self-knowledge; on the contrary, there is no concrete progress in terms of self-development (‘ich bin dann nicht gescheiter’).<sup>222</sup> However, this is not the only criterion for judgement; sitting on the tree-stump, contemplating his life, the narrator can describe his feelings not only of hatred but also of love towards himself and his life (‘meine Existenz [...], die ich so innig lieben, gleichzeitig so entsetzlich hassen mußte’).<sup>223</sup> This peace with himself marks a major step forward, especially when measured against the background of Bernhard’s preceding prose: madness (*Amras*); murder (*Das Kalkwerk*)

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Bernhard, *Die Kälte*, p.62.

<sup>220</sup> Bernhard, *Der Atem*, p.129.

<sup>221</sup> Bernhard, *Die Kälte*, p.62.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p.63.

and suicide (*Korrektur*). However much it is expressed in a negative way, this self-admission points to a positive impulse hard to detect in Bernhard's prose fiction before the onset of the autobiographical project. Bernhard's figures of the '60s and early '70s would never have considered such a statement about themselves. This discussion in the pentalogy marks a move away from those works and prefigures crucial positive developments in the prose of the 1980s.

### (iii) Self-improvement

Although Bernhard's autobiographical narrators talk freely about their aims, they disclose little explicitly about their underlying motivations. None the less, it is clear that the narrators of the five books all seek to improve their circumstances by better understanding their past. If they are regarded as overcoming their previous misfortunes by working through them (Freud's 'Durcharbeiten'), then the narratives of the pentalogy are not only chronicles of the past but they are the essential means by which Bernhard, consciously or subconsciously, effects the healing of wounds which had their origin in his childhood and later formative years. Spence alludes to Freud in referring to 'the persuasive power of a narrative'; he adds that by linking two sets of circumstances (in the case of the autobiographies, the past and present), a narrative can create satisfaction via 'coherence' and contribute significantly to a 'process of therapeutic change'.<sup>224</sup> And 'process' it is. For the patient, therapeutic change in Freud's treatment is not effected by straightforward enlightenment: it is not as if the patient is informed of the problem in order that he can somehow just solve it. In fact, the treatment and potential cure are liable to founder if the patient is made aware of his situation; it is, rather, a gradual, even indirect process of self-realization.<sup>225</sup> In Freud's model, the patient must be left, as discussed above, to his own devices to immerse himself ('sich vertiefen') in an internal

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<sup>224</sup> Spence, p.21 [all three quotations].

<sup>225</sup> Freud, p.215.

conflict with himself.<sup>226</sup> Only in this way can change occur. His illness and pain do not vanish; rather, they are internalized and reassessed, regarded from a fresh perspective, by the patient. Internalization and reassessment of the past also figure prominently in the narratives of the pentalogy.

Self-improvement is the motivation behind the search for self-knowledge in much of Bernhard's autobiographical cycle. The question of improving one's circumstances, of simply having a better, or happier, life, is central to the autobiographical project; Bernhard was clearly thinking about his past in a literary context since the autobiography is not Bernhard's only prose project of the mid-1970s where this question arises. In the prose work *Ja*, which came out after *Der Atem* but before *Die Kälte*, the narrator refers to his own project of writing down his thoughts: 'Gleich mehrere Zwecke will ich durch das Aufschreiben dieser Skizze erreichen, die Erinnerung an die Perserin [a meeting with whom takes up much of the narrative] einerseits festhalten und meinen Zustand verbessern, meine Existenz verlängern.'<sup>227</sup> The fictional narrator here seeks not only to keep hold of a memory, but also to improve his circumstances – as in the pentalogy, he does not reveal precisely how, and again, general, even vague terminology ('meine Erinnerung festhalten', 'meinen Zustand verbessern') accompanies this aside to the reader. It is not necessarily important that the close details of the narrator's aims are not sketched; the literary work ('Skizze' here, as in *Beton* and *Der Untergeher* (1983)) aims not only for an improvement in the narrator's circumstances, but it also embraces life by expressing a desire to live longer ('meine Existenz verlängern').<sup>228</sup>

Bernhard's autobiographical narrator is acutely aware of the importance of altering his perspective on the past. But this is no small or easy matter; in personal terms,

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Ja* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), p.128.

<sup>228</sup> See, for instance: *Beton* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), p.69, and *Der Untergeher* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), pp.106-7.

it is a monumental task which cannot be achieved straightforwardly; moreover, changing one's understanding of the past is not an act of will, but rather a slow process of change effected via the reminiscing narratives. In what is the only sustained reference to the autobiography of another writer, Bernhard's narrator enlists the help of Montaigne to formulate and encourage this change.

Montaigne is a seminal figure in early modern European autobiography and pertinent to Bernhard's self-explorations, not least because of his concentration on the self as a most productive and least unreliable source of knowledge.<sup>229</sup> Montaigne's task, as he sets it out, in the first book of the *Essais* (1580-95), is self-knowledge through concerted self-study. In Montaigne's scheme, the world provides a reflection which enables the contemplating subject to understand himself better: 'Ce grand monde [...] c'est le miroüer où il nous faut regarder pour nous connoistre de bon biais.'<sup>230</sup> While the tone of sanguine wonderment, apparent in 'ce grand monde', is absent in Bernhard's bleaker experiences of life, Bernhard's autobiographical works do draw inspiration from Montaigne's twin aims of self-knowledge and self-improvement.

For both autobiographers, self-improvement equates to learning from experience: there is a profound sense in the autobiographies, as in the *Essais*, of *a posteriori* reasoning, of moving to judgement about oneself and the world *after* experience. Montaigne, too, reflects, digests, and processes his experiences, refusing to wrap them up in neat conclusions or subjugate them to *a priori* principles: 'Qui se souvient de s'estre tant et tant de fois mesconté de son propre jugement, est-il pas un sot de n'en entrer pour jamais en deffiance?'<sup>231</sup> The emphasis here is on experience as a source from which to learn how to achieve self-improvement. Montaigne's words here point to self-correction or enlightenment through analysing and describing one's experiences – which involves a

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<sup>229</sup> Bernhard makes a number of references to Montaigne in *Die Ursache*: pp.82-3, 88, and 95. The prefatory quotation in *Der Keller* (p.5) is also from Montaigne.

<sup>230</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, 3 vols (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1979), I, p.205.

<sup>231</sup> Montaigne, *Essais*, III, p.284.

deeply self-questioning, even sceptical, process. As Montaigne develops his argument, his appeal to Bernhard becomes more readily apparent: 'Quand je me trouve convaincu par la raison d'autroy d'une opinion fauce, je n'apprens pas tant ce qu'il m'a dict de nouveau et cette ignorance particulière [...], comme en general j'apprens ma debilité et la trahison de mon entendement [...]'.<sup>232</sup> This is not just self-questioning; it is self-doubt. Montaigne here raises questions about the very process upon which he has to rely in order to comprehend the world, and, therefore, himself: his intellect or powers of understanding. Bernhard's narrator is acutely aware of Montaigne's sceptical, self-questioning stance: the onus is not just on working out the past logically by thinking about it hard enough and applying rational analysis; it is on knowing oneself better ('nous connoistre de bon biais') – a goal which is reached by description and, above all, description of the self in the form of a narrative.

Bernhard's narrator specifically alludes to Montaigne to focus more closely on the link between his project and self-improvement. Towards the end of *Die Ursache*, the narrator outlines the influence of Montaigne's *Essais* on his self-awareness in his writing. The central section of this exposition pinpoints self-description as an aid for the discontented individual:

Montaigne schreibt, [...] es gibt nichts Schwierigeres, aber auch nichts Nützlicheres, als die Selbstbeschreibung. Man muß sich prüfen, muß sich selbst befehlen und an den richtigen Platz stellen. Dazu bin ich immer bereit, denn ich beschreibe mich, und ich beschreibe nicht meine Taten, sondern mein Wesen.<sup>233</sup>

Description of the self (in this context, a literary description) is directly linked here with a sense of self-knowledge, of who one is, what one's place in the world is. The narrator's paraphrase of Montaigne signals a perennial concern of deeply personal serious literature, and autobiography in particular: the quest for self-identity through self-description. However, its interest for the discussion here lies in its pertinence to

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.127.

Bernhard's specific autobiographical aims. None of Bernhard's protagonists up to 1975 really stands back and considers his position in this way, with the result that they are all swamped by the urgent chaos of desperation. It is no coincidence that suicide, almost a foregone conclusion for the narrators of the prose works of the '60s and early '70s, is not taken as seriously as an option in the autobiographical works.<sup>234</sup> More striking in the pentalogy is the honesty with which the fear of suicide is confronted ('Er [der Junge] war aber für einen solchen Entschluß immer zu schwach gewesen').<sup>235</sup> This subtle qualification, almost hidden in a long sentence, reflects the balanced nature of the subtextual discussion about life; the grand gestures of earlier works (the family's attempt at communal suicide in *Amras*, for instance) are modulated into balanced self-analysis and self-criticism, even gentle self-mockery.

As Bernhard made clear in the 1983 *FAZ* interview quoted above, the individual, no longer content with just describing the malevolent influence the outside world has on him, is obliged to examine himself, take control of his circumstances and to try to find peace in his identity – that is, in who he is or, reduced by the absence of objectivity, at very least perceives himself to be.<sup>236</sup> These requirements are fundamentally connected with how one should lead one's life; the connection between literature and everyday life is thereby cemented in the extract from *Die Ursache*. After all, self-description, self-improvement and the search for one's identity are all concepts which can be directly applicable to how one leads one's life. Although it would be an overstatement to think of *Die Ursache* (or the pentalogy) as a structured literary programme in the form of, say, a 'Bildungsroman', the fundamental purpose of the narrator's project right from the outset

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<sup>234</sup> See also *Ja* (p.148), where in the last sentence, an affirming 'Ja' to suicide, is accompanied by laughter.

<sup>235</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.19.

<sup>236</sup> See: Bernhard, 'Ich behaupte nicht'. Although Bernhard goes back almost four centuries, with Montaigne, to announce his personal manifesto here, these goals also came to the fore in Austrian writing of the '60s and '70s. See, by way of example, Peter Handke's 'Bücherecke' broadcast on 26 April 1965, calling for the individual 'sich seiner annehmen ... schreibend und beschreibend.' For a fuller account of this broadcast, see: Alfred Holzinger, 'Peter Handkes literarische Anfänge in Graz' in *Wie die Grazer auszogen, die Literatur zu erobern: Texte, Porträts, Analysen und Dokumente junger österreichischer Autoren*, ed. by Peter Laemmle and Jörg Drews (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1975), pp.183-98 (p.192). This article can also be found in: *Peter Handke*, ed. by Raimund Fellingner, Suhrkamp taschenbuch materialien, 2004 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), pp.11-24.

is positive and hopeful: to effect an improvement in his life. The comments about Montaigne in *Die Ursache*, revealing an inextricable link between self-description and self-improvement, provide yet another basis for an optimistic outlook in these narratives.

(b) Truth

Throughout the pentalogy, Bernhard is at pains to emphasize that he is attempting to put together an uncensored, 'true' version of events. In her review of *Die Ursache*, Karin Kathrein wonders whether Bernhard has not overstepped the mark: his revelations are 'schonungslos', and Kathrein asks 'ob die Grenze dessen, was ein Dichter an Persönlichem unverklausuliert preisgeben sollte, nicht überschritten wird.'<sup>237</sup> There is little doubt that Kathrein is right in general terms: Bernhard's admissions about his lack of maternal love, his ambivalent feelings towards his family, and his own insecurities are remarkably personal, intimate, and honest confessions which frequently give the impression of having escaped the kind of internal censorship often naturally found in personal revelations.

The definition of truth in the autobiographies is a subjective and personal one, and it can once again be linked with the narrative of a patient undergoing psychoanalysis. It is important to distinguish historical accuracy from what the narrator perceives to be true many years after the event because, by discounting any notion of objective truth, the narrator relativizes the problem (of truth and honesty) and makes the solution to it centred more upon the individual than on any universal truth: 'Narrative truth is confused with historical truth, and the very coherence of an account may lead us to believe that we are making contact with an actual happening.'<sup>238</sup> It is how the patient regards the past, not how the past necessarily was (in objective, historical terms) which counts for Spence here. He describes the patient's version of the past (in collaboration with the analyst) as

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<sup>237</sup> Kathrein, 'Eine Kindheit, die nicht vergessen wurde'.

<sup>238</sup> Spence, p.27.

an 'aesthetic experience'; it is imprecise, not verifiable.<sup>239</sup> Historical fact or truth is not the main aim; narrative or 'artistic truth', as Spence calls it at one point, becomes the centre of attention in determining the patient's state of mind: 'Once a given construction has acquired narrative truth, it becomes just as real as any other kind of truth.'<sup>240</sup>

Spence sees a double function for the aesthetic experience: first, as a way for the patient to see his past differently; and second, for him to retain the new self-knowledge that he has gleaned. He writes: 'As with any good story, form is as important as content, and insight often emerges when an old memory is told in a new context.'<sup>241</sup> Bernhard's narrator, who takes stock of the past, from a much calmer and more comfortable perspective, bears out Spence's theory here. Spence's second point, that artistic or narrative truth enables the patient (or artist/narrator) 'to retain what he [has] learned' also applies to Bernhard's autobiographical narrator. The autobiographies were the product of an extended process of reflection over seven years (1975-82); the period is longer if one considers Bernhard's possible thoughts about the project before 1975. If these narratives are analysed as conveyors of narrative truth, then not only does the much-discussed question of historical accuracy (in Bernhard criticism) become less significant, but the critical emphasis is placed squarely on analysis of the protagonist's version of events, on the way in which he recalls the past and, therefore, on a close reading of the text.

If some of the principles of psychoanalytical treatment point to the importance of the 'narrative', it should be noted that more traditional sources of critical material on autobiography also endorse this approach. Bernhard is, of course, not the first writer to grapple with the question of truth in literary autobiography. From Roy Pascal's major study, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, three broad qualities of serious autobiography emerge. First, he refers to 'a search for the true self'.<sup>242</sup> This search, in turn, can be seen

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p.268.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., p.270 and p.31.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p.270.

<sup>242</sup> Pascal, p.39.

to necessitate a consideration of the subtle, often latent stylistic aspects of an autobiographical account since the true self cannot be revealed straightforwardly: 'The quality of a personality is perhaps most rapidly detected in the style'.<sup>243</sup> Finally, the effect of these two aspects of the problem of tackling identity is to create an 'intimate collusion of past and present'.<sup>244</sup> Pascal's categories are useful because Bernhard's aims in the pentalogy are expressed subtly, sometimes obliquely, in a literary narrative; in fact, the autobiography is merely the vehicle for self-examination, and its real clues are to be found between the lines, in Bernhard's tone, his consistent statements from one text to the next, and in his style.

In his interviews and utterances outside these books, Bernhard zealously guarded his privacy. The obvious flippancy behind a comment like 'Ich meine alles, was meine Figuren sagen [...]' is not only typical of Bernhard's habitual, mischievous undermining of serious discussion of his work, but more significantly, it is symptomatic of a man who still has a lot to play for and is not prepared to reveal directly his innermost thoughts.<sup>245</sup> It is no different in the autobiographies. Any reader who accepts Bernhard's self-professed claims of 'truth' will risk overlooking the implications of the narrators' memories. The autobiographical statements are not the general, satisfied reminiscences of a contented writer looking back on the successes and regrets of his career: Bernhard was, after all, only forty-four when *Die Ursache* was published. There is no sense here of a serene and satisfied chronological ordering and categorizing of his career development. The five books did not, indeed, even appear in the right order, for *Ein Kind*, dealing with his early childhood, was the last to be published. On the contrary, the pentalogy is much more a chronicle of intensely psychological processes and personal experiences, ordered to suit the writer.

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p.79.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>245</sup> Conny Bischofsberger and Heinz Sichrovsky, 'Der letzte Akt', in *Von einer Katastrophe in die andere: 13 Gespräche mit Thomas Bernhard*, ed. by Sepp Dreissinger (Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, 1992), pp.154-8 (p.157).

However much Bernhard used interviews and his public statements to confound and tease eager interpreters, his style in these books under discussion can be seen often to disclose privileged or private information. It is these insights, peculiar to prose narrative, which make the autobiographies valuable not only for a potential biographer of Bernhard but also for a literary critic seeking to appraise the creative work. Saunders describes this ‘overtly artistic structure’ of the pentalogy as being ‘unusual for autobiography [...] [dispensing with] exact external biographical detail, focusing primarily on the emotional nature of experiences.’<sup>246</sup> Yet, the ‘Andeutung’ of the first volume’s subtitle pertains not only to Bernhard’s transcription of his experiences which, thirty years on, can only provide a clue to the reasons behind what happened (‘die Ursache’), but it also signals the text itself as a hint or clue to be explored in the hope of piecing together a picture of the nature of the narrator’s personal identity.

In his chapter entitled ‘The Elusiveness of Truth’, Roy Pascal’s refinement of the concept of truth in autobiography throws light upon and can be seen to corroborate a subjective, personal understanding of truth in the pentalogy: ‘We have [...] to define what sort of truth is meant [in autobiography], and this we can discover only in relation to the author’s general intention. It will be not be an objective truth, but the truth in the confines of a limited purpose.’<sup>247</sup> Bernhard discusses his own understanding of truth in relation to his specific project, his ‘limited purpose’, in most detail in *Der Keller* where the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung, the dirty, underprivileged quarter of the city, is introduced as a symbol of everything which Salzburg is not: ‘hier war alles zu finden, was die Stadt zu verschweigen oder zu vertuschen versuchte.’<sup>248</sup> The autobiographical account here presents a negative definition of truth: a rejection of the self-deceiving, one-sided touristic views of Salzburg.

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<sup>246</sup> Saunders, p.57.

<sup>247</sup> Pascal, p.83.

<sup>248</sup> Bernhard, *Der Keller*, p.34.

The entire town avoids the 'truth' as characterized by the estate. Bernhard conveys this in statements which are at once metaphorical and literal, such as his description of how people avoid going into the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung, but also stop themselves thinking about it: 'Die ganze Stadt machte einen Bogen um die Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung.'<sup>249</sup> The effect of this statement is to guide the reader's attention both to the external (social, geographical, physical) aspects of the description and to the inner (personal, psychological) dimensions of the account. The hypocrisy and falseness prevalent in Salzburg are also absent from the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung inhabitants' use of language: 'Diese Leute hatten nie ein Blatt vor den Mund genommen.'<sup>250</sup> In their truthfulness, they hurt each other, but there is honesty, and for the narrator honesty is as close as the individual can come to truth. His cheerfulness in the shop indicates that the rugged honesty of the working-class folk in the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung is preferable, better than the hypocrisy found elsewhere in the town (school, hospitals, even at home): 'Jetzt existierte ich in der Gegenwart, in allen ihren Gerüchen und Härtegraden.'<sup>251</sup> Truth is equated with living and fulfilling one's human potential here and contrasted with books which inhabit the world of theory, not real-life experience. In the context of everyday life, these people are happier than the self-deceiving inhabitants of Salzburg with their conceited self-importance and their self-deception. The link is crucial: honesty is the cause of a happier everyday life (no broader moral judgements are made). Given that truth is a precondition of hope and happiness for Bernhard's narrator, its importance can be traced to the object of the descriptions here, not just the comments about self-deception. The consistency of message between the narrator's professed aims for the autobiography and the objects of his descriptions (here the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung) is too pressing for the reader to overlook.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p.36.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p.51.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p.13.

The search for honesty and truth meets with resistance from human nature. It is not just that the adolescent's family do not believe what he reports at home about his adventures at Podlaha's shop; they do not want to believe it: 'Zuhause deutete ich an, was ich sah, aber wie immer, wo man Menschen etwas Furchtbares [...] mitteilt, glaubten sie es nicht, sie wollten es nicht hören.'<sup>252</sup> The distinction is crucial: if his family, like everyone ('immer, wo man Menschen'), ignores what it does not like, then any definition of truth in interaction with other people is near-impossible to attain. If truth is knowledge from which one can achieve clarity which, in turn, may bring happiness and hope, then the entire literary, autobiographical process, aimed at such truth, militates against prevailing circumstances; it is a lone voice in the darkness. However much the narrator may craft the narrative to communicate with the invisible reader, communication is harder to achieve in the world he describes. Attaining self-honesty and truth in his literary account is the first step towards the happiness and hope promised by the autobiographical process: 'Meine Aufgabe kann nur sein, meine Wahrnehmungen mitzuteilen, gleichgültig, wie die Wirkung ausfällt.'<sup>253</sup> Provided he is honest with himself (and, therefore, the reader, too) the admission and then communication of his feelings and perceptions ('Wahrnehmungen') take precedence over politeness or propriety. There is no attempt here at establishing a wider or universal notion of truth, at equating his truth with 'the' truth. In this same passage, the narrator subtly places 'facts' in apposition to the earlier 'Wahrnehmungen', establishing an all-important semantic link in the reader's mind and eradicating any lingering doubts about the validity of objective truth for the narrator: 'Indem ich aufmerksam mache auf Tatsachen, die stören und irritieren.'<sup>254</sup> This clause, rendered as a sentence, repeats what he has been saying for two pages or so, but the subtle insertion of 'Tatsachen' creates a telling qualification of meaning. Initially, he

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p.40.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., p.41.

claims that he only says what he sees ('Zuhause deutete ich an, was ich sah');<sup>255</sup> this is then followed by a claim that these perceptions are important to his autobiographical project ('Meine Aufgabe kann nur sein, meine Wahrnehmungen mitzuteilen');<sup>256</sup> it is these perceptions which make him a trouble-maker in others' eyes ('Ich habe immer gestört, und ich habe immer irritiert');<sup>257</sup> the linking sentence (above) repeating the two verbs 'stören' and 'irritieren' make the connection with fact ('Tatsachen') and truth. Perception is slowly manipulated into fact over the course of a winding, repeating, subtly qualifying narrative. It is in such passages that the stylistic, literary qualities of these so-called autobiographies bring Bernhard's aims into sharper focus.

A few lines later in this discussion of truth and honesty, the narrator subverts his own definition: 'Die Wahrheit, denke ich, kennt nur der Betroffene, will er sie mitteilen, wird er automatisch zum Lügner.'<sup>258</sup> So, here, it is the process of communication which disturbs any easy definition of truth. Everyone knows what they feel, even know, to be true, but they cannot communicate it to other people. This is where the narrative intervenes as a communicating interface which can break the deadlock. It is as if Bernhard adapted Kafka's 'ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns';<sup>259</sup> for Bernhard, it was the frozen sea 'between' people which the literary work had to counteract. If one cannot depend upon language to convey feelings and 'truths' accurately, then a less direct route is required; this route is description: 'Das Beschriebene macht etwas deutlich, das zwar dem *Wahrheitswillen* des Beschreibenden, aber nicht der Wahrheit entspricht, denn die Wahrheit ist überhaupt nicht mitteilbar.'<sup>260</sup> Here, Bernhard comes close to Roy Pascal's contention, as well as the arguments of Freud and Spence, that style can reveal more than apparently factual reporting, and in

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., p.39.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., p.40.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., p.42.

<sup>259</sup> Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Max Brod, VIII: *Briefe* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1983), p.28.

<sup>260</sup> Bernhard, *Der Keller*, p.43 [emphasis in original].

this discovery the narrators of the autobiographical cycle are markedly different from the more scientific, perfectionist heroes of the earlier work, such as Roithamer (a scientist) who sought precise, absolute meaning in human, inherently imprecise matters and subsequently faltered and perished when reality could not meet his aspirations. The more pragmatic narrators of the pentalogy are bent upon preserving their lives; they accept more readily flaws in themselves and others and realize that thoughts and external, everyday reality are two quite different propositions. The narrator of *Ein Kind* even approvingly recalls his grandfather's reminder: 'Aber die Theorie ist nur die Theorie'.<sup>261</sup> Such a practical acceptance of life's circumstances were unthinkable in the stories of Walter, Konrad, and Roithamer.

### (c) The Process of Writing

In the very useful introduction to her study of post-1945 autobiographies in German, Barbara Saunders states that in serious autobiography 'episodes of significance emerge *partially* through the process of writing'.<sup>262</sup> The optimism and insight of self-understanding are achieved through the 'process of writing' the accounts, according to Saunders, but this act would remain esoteric and personal if there were no other feeling, thinking presence to validate the narrative content. Since Bernhard's narrator does not depend upon any absolute notion of truth, and given the lack of absolute, external values, the reader (like the analyst) acts as a listener and thereby a validator – part of an audience which ensures that the words and thoughts are not lost and do not remain uncommunicated just because there is no one overriding truth against which to gauge the narrator's observations. By employing fictional techniques to 'widen the sphere of

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<sup>261</sup> Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.23.

<sup>262</sup> Saunders, p.1 [emphasis in original]. For a clear and up-to-date overview of the most important theories of narrative in post-war fiction in German, see: Chloe E.M. Paver, *Narrative and Fantasy in the Post-War German Novel: A Study of Novels by Johnson, Frisch, Wolf, Becker, and Grass* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp.1-19.

relevance' of these works, the narrator seeks an ally;<sup>263</sup> the marginal man, persecuted by certain aspects of society, his family and, sometimes, even himself looks to present a self-defence – like many of the defendants in the court cases Bernhard witnessed as a newspaper reporter in the 1950s. Unlike those court cases, however, the pentalogy does not have as its operating idiom logical, cogent argument; it is principally a creative medium which calls on the powers of narrative expression to allow different reader interpretations of the text in order to find hidden meanings and subtleties. This study is one such interpretation.

The process of interpreting the past is not confined to the reader. Bernhard's narrator interprets his own past by selecting certain episodes and drawing particular links between them. There is, of course, no real question of him uncovering or reproducing a blow-by-blow historical, objectively-verifiable truth. Spence makes an important link between the patient's discovery of associations between past episodes in his life with an improvement in the patient's circumstances:

And we may come to find that it is the excitement of the discovery [finding correspondence between events that are separated in time and space], in finding an explanation or in participating in its unfolding, that accounts for its therapeutic effect [...] In other words, it is the interpretation as a creative act — as a piece of narrative truth — that takes precedence.<sup>264</sup>

Spence's statement can be seen to apply in Bernhard's case both to reader and writer. It is in the process ('participating in its unfolding') of rediscovering or 'interpreting' his past that the patient can find fulfilment. It is through linguistic expression (writing down his thoughts, as far as the autobiographical narrator is concerned) that the patient achieves insight: 'putting the formulation into words helps the patient "see" in a new way and gives reality to what was previously unknown or misunderstood.'<sup>265</sup> The most

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<sup>263</sup> Saunders, p.3.

<sup>264</sup> Spence, p.164.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p.166.

pertinent part of Spence's explanation above for the discussion in this chapter is marked by the words 'therapeutic effect'.

Once Bernhard has vented his anger against Grünkranz and Onkel Franz in the first volume, the pentalogy becomes progressively calmer: it is as if he has worked off his anger towards his childhood tormentors in the first volume before turning to more personal self-reflection. At times, the autobiographical account comprises painstaking descriptions which would not be out of place in a novel or other narrative of prose fiction, as already indicated in Blöcker's review ('breite ruhevoll Passagen objektiver Schilderung').<sup>266</sup> Calm description of past episodes from his life, relatively unfettered by argumentative discussion and comment, is nowhere more evident than in the last part of the pentalogical cycle, *Ein Kind*.

The narrator is less distanced in this book from the object of his descriptions than in the four previous volumes; there is even evidence of a healing process found in the *rapprochement* between lived past and the present, embodied in the reminiscing narrative. Short, clear sentences with transparent syntax reveal, for the first time in the pentalogy, a consistently easy relationship with the past events being related. In the episode with the waitress in the inn where the child is stranded after his bicycle escapade, there is a conflation of temporal planes as the narrator juxtaposes description of the past with comment from the older writer: 'Die Kellnerin fragte, ich antwortete und weinte. Das Kind fiel auf einmal wieder kopfüber in seine Kindheit hinein.'<sup>267</sup> In previous volumes, the two perspectives had been kept apart. Here, the reminiscing narrator is able to maintain a narrative description (the child in the inn) with a comment from without; the two perspectives are, none the less, separate in as much as they appear in consecutive sentences.

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<sup>266</sup> Blöcker, 'Unverhoffte Entdeckung des Glücks'.

<sup>267</sup> Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.16.

The narrator goes one step further when he fuses the two perspectives a few lines later: he compares the people enjoying themselves on the stage with his own family. He relates the scene in the eyes of the child who feels rather separate from the entire occasion as an unfortunate gate-crasher. When a question appears in the narrative, child and recounting adult merge into one: ‘Aber existierten wirklich die einen [die Leute auf dem Podium] natürlich und die anderen [die Meinigen] künstlich [...]? Ich war nicht imstande, meine Vorstellungen zu einem Gedanken zu machen.’<sup>268</sup> The imperfect tense here (‘existierten’) suggests that the narrator is still in child mode, telling the reader what the child thought, yet the complexity of the thought (about people’s naturalness) cannot be accredited completely to a child, so the description has elements of both child and the narrating adult – they are, after all, the same person displaced in time. Moreover, the expressed thought validates the act of description since what the narrating adult felt as a child (something he can only express now) cannot be encapsulated adequately in language or a thought; it is rather a product of the imagination (‘Vorstellungen’) which is best captured by description. As if to emphasize the point, the narrative returns immediately to describing the scene inside the inn with the calming clarinet music.

Proof of the narrating adult’s reconciliation with his past is signalled by an unusual narrative event: a potted history of his family on his mother’s side.<sup>269</sup> In itself, such a succinct and straightforward description of his grandfather’s sister, Rosina, is hardly out of place in an autobiography; however, it is unusual in Bernhard’s accounts which, up to this point, were anything but succinct, informative self-biography. Martin reports Bernhard claiming (in a radio interview) ‘that he would not have been able to write the story of his early childhood if he had not already produced the first four books in the sequence.’<sup>270</sup> The writer who for four volumes reports what has been going through his mind as he looks back on his past can now detach himself sufficiently from

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<sup>268</sup> Ibid., p.17.

<sup>269</sup> See: *ibid.*, p.57.

<sup>270</sup> Martin, p.131.

the mental concerns which have tortured him to provide an objective, clear biographical overview. The process of ‘unpacking’ and re-packing the tightly bound parcel — the symbol of the entire autobiographical project, in *Die Kälte* — is complete.<sup>271</sup>

### 3. COMMUNICATION: ENGAGING THE READER

The previous section has shown how fine, or even invisible, is the line between fiction and autobiography in Bernhard’s fictionalized autobiography. But, as Jean Starobinski writes, the distinction between these two genres is blurred at the best of times: ‘In autobiography or confession, despite the vow of sincerity, the “content” of the narrative can be lost, can disappear into fiction, without anything preventing the transition from one plane to another, without there even being a sure sign of that transition.’<sup>272</sup> One of the main effects of the fictionalisation of the autobiography is the subtle communication which it allows between writer (via the text) and reader.

In her study of Kafka’s work, Elizabeth Boa refers to Kafka’s ‘textual intercourse’ with Felice Bauer, his one-time fiancée.<sup>273</sup> Felice, she argues, is a way out of the text, an escape from solipsism for Kafka; she is a presence which means that ‘writing need not mean enclosure in the imaginary but can be a link to the outer world as a mode of human contact and an act of communication.’<sup>274</sup> More than in any of his previous works, Bernhard offers the reader paths into his narratives in the pentalogy. As with Kafka’s prose, much of the reader-text interaction is to be found in the subtlety, often near-invisible on a first reading, of the narrative. The writer who in *Verstörung* had been accused by Heinrich Vormweg of producing a dense, incomprehensible text (‘Der Text

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<sup>271</sup> See: *Die Kälte*, p.62.

<sup>272</sup> Starobinski, ‘The Style of Autobiography’, p.286.

<sup>273</sup> Elizabeth Boa, *Kafka: Gender, Class, and Race in the Letters and Fictions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p.65.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

ist von einer Dichte [...] [die] das Absurde erreicht'), is described in *Der Atem* by a reviewer as creating 'beinahe eine Sprache der Kommunikation'.<sup>275</sup>

This section looks at two principal aspects of communication between text and reader: first, how the deceleration of reading speed and careful inspection of the narrative by the reader is encouraged through the unusual use of tenses; and second, the effect of Bernhard's trademark repeated use of individual phrases and words. This second part will show that repetition is not arbitrary and that Bernhard often employed the same word or phrase at strategic moments in order to make a specific point, taking a pair of complementary examples as illustration: (i) 'einerseits ... andererseits'; (ii) 'naturgemäß'.

#### (a) Tense

In one of the few text-centred analyses of the autobiographies, David McLintock casts a translator's eye over the use of tenses in *Die Ursache* and *Der Atem*. He provides useful statistics and evidence about the 'idiosyncratic distribution of tenses' in the two works.<sup>276</sup>

If some of McLintock's findings are applied to a literary analysis of sections of the pentalogy (including some which he does not consider), then insights about the narrator's aims and state of mind — pertinent to the discussion in this chapter — are revealed.

McLintock describes the pluperfect as the 'principal narrative tense' of *Der Atem*. It constitutes 42.4% of the total incidence of finite verb-forms in that book.<sup>277</sup> The average incidence of this tense in written German is less than 10%.<sup>278</sup> The pluperfect expresses 'anteriority or completion with regard to a point in the past'.<sup>279</sup> In *Der Atem*, its preponderance gives the text the effect of being distanced from the events related. The other main tenses are the imperfect (28.9% in McLintock's table) to relate past events

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<sup>275</sup> Heinrich Vormweg, 'Thomas Bernhards Studium der menschlichen Verstörung', *Merkur* 21 (1967), 785-8 (p.788); Krista Hauser, "'Mein Leben leben. wie und solange ich es will'".

<sup>276</sup> McLintock, 'Tense and Narrative Perspective', p.1.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

when the pluperfect is not used and the present indicative (12.9%) which Bernhard uses either to move from the past into the present to address the reader or to relate the past events in a historical present thereby lending their retelling a dramatic and immediate effect.

Bernhard's use of tenses in the pentalogy is unconventional; it cannot be schematized. Non-standard tense usage and unexpected switches between tenses, when analysed, can help to ascertain how and to what effect Bernhard manipulates, guides, even ensnares his reader. A detailed example from *Der Atem* illustrates the effects of this ploy. Near the beginning of the book, there is a sentence which is 370 words in length ('Als ich [...] hören gewesen'), describing the adolescent patient's first thoracic puncture and the medical preparations for it.<sup>280</sup> The immediate effect of the sentence on the reader is to guide him into the methods employed in the hospital: the way in which patients are treated like objects, pushed around unfeelingly. It is important to establish this mood early on since it prepares the reader for what is to come both in this book and in *Die Kälte*. By stating and describing repeatedly the insensitivity and inconsideration shown by individuals (Grünkranz, Onkel Franz) and the unprofessionalism inherent in social institutions (medicine, teaching), he habituates the reader to this kind of criticism; once the reader has read the same (or related criticism) of the medical profession for the seventh or eighth time, it inevitably seems less exaggerated, and related criticisms can be made more easily. The hospital's spartan environment and cruel methods become an unquestioned fact. The criticism of the preferential treatment given to the wealthier patients and the persecution of the socialist doctor of law are better and more easily understood in the light of the criticisms set in the reader's mind early on.

The switches from one tense to another within this sentence provide an interesting point for analysis:

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<sup>280</sup> Bernhard, *Der Atem*, pp.12-14.

Als ich zum erstenmal zur Punction abgeholt worden war, sind mir naturgemäß noch nicht die ganze Größe und die ganze Häßlichkeit dieses Krankensaales zu Bewußtsein gekommen, was ich wahrgenommen hatte, waren Schatten von Menschen und Mauern und von Gegenständen an diesen Menschen und Mauern und die mit diesen Menschen und Mauern und Gegenständen zusammenhängenden Geräusche, alles zusammen hatte ich auf diesem Weg durch den Krankensaal, auf welchem mir mehrere geistliche Schwestern und wie diese weißgekleidete Pfleger behilflich gewesen waren, schon ein von den vielen Penicillin- und Kampferspritzen auf ein Minimum herabgesetztes, mich aber tatsächlich in einen gegenüber meinen Anfangsschmerzen nicht nur erträglichen, sondern angenehmen Zustand versetzendes Wahrnehmungsvermögen gehabt, von allen Seiten hatten mich Hände, mir war vorgekommen, eine Unzahl von Händen, ohne daß ich diese Hände und auch nicht die zu diesen Händen gehörenden Menschen hätte sehen können, aus meinem Bett heraus und auf eine Tragbahre gehoben und gezogen und geschoben und in dicke Decken gewickelt und schließlich, alles war mir verschwommen und in der größten Undeutlichkeit, durch den ganzen, wie mir vorgekommen war, von Hunderten von Leidensgeräuschen angefüllten Krankensaal hinaus auf den Gang befördert und durch den langen, mich vollkommen aus dem Gleichgewicht bringenden Gang mit seinen unendlich vielen offenen und geschlossenen, von Hunderten, wenn nicht Tausenden von Patienten bevölkerten Zimmern in eine, wie mir vorgekommen war, enge, kahlgraue Ambulanz gebracht, in welcher mehrere Ärzte und Schwestern beschäftigt waren, deren Gespräche oder auch nur einzelne Wörter oder auch nur Rufe ich nicht verstehen hatte können, die aber ununterbrochen miteinander gesprochen und immer wieder etwas gerufen hatten; wie ich mich auch noch an die Tatsache erinnere, daß plötzlich, nachdem meine Bahre abgestellt gewesen war, gleich neben der Tür neben einer anderen Bahre, auf welcher ein alter Mann mit einem vollkommen verbundenen Kopf gelegen war, mehrere ärztliche Instrumente zu Boden gefallen waren, an das fürchterliche Aneinanderschlagen von Blechkübeln, dann wieder Lachen, Schreien, Zufallen von Türen, wie plötzlich hinter mir Wasser aus einem Leitungshahn in eine Emailschüssel heruntergelassen, der Leitungshahn abrupt wieder zuge dreht worden war; mir war vorgekommen, gerade in diesem Augenblick hatten die Ärzte eine Reihe von mir unverständlichen lateinischen Wörtern gesprochen, nur für sie bestimmtes Medizinisches, darauf waren wieder Befehle, Anweisungen, Geräusche von Gläsern, Schläuchen, Scheren, Schritte zu hören gewesen.<sup>281</sup>

McLintock does not look at this sentence; however, if one applies and develops a few of his findings, then some interesting discoveries emerge. This long sentence can be divided into six principal sections, demarcated by two semi-colons (ll.25 and 33) and four 'extending' commas (ll.3, 6, 11, and 35) which Bernhard uses copiously throughout the pentalogy (and especially in *Die Ursache* and *Der Keller*) to lengthen sentences artificially where a full stop would be more idiomatic and elegant. The six main sections

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid.

of the passage run thus: introduction to the process of medical puncture (ll.1-3); the patient's personal sense perception (ll.3-6); how he is taken through the hospital in a semi-conscious state (ll.6-11); his sense of alienation as he sees alien hands manipulating him and unfamiliar (medical) jargon baffles him (ll.11-25); the conscious act of remembering the process of puncture and the mistakes made by the medical staff (ll.26-33); and, finally, two clauses (ll.33-5 and 35-6) recalling the incoherence for the patient of the entire scene. The punctuation and sheer length of this sentence from *Der Atem* would require most readers to read at least parts of it twice in order to make sense of what is going on and to capture the nuances of the reported perceptions. But it is the interplay of tenses here which challenges the reader most and allows a productive way into Bernhard's intricate prose.

The initial pluperfect followed by the perfect, both in the passive voice, is disorienting for the reader since it creates an unexpected combination of tenses: 'Als ich zum erstenmal zur Punction abgeholt worden war, sind mir naturgemäß noch nicht die ganze Größe und [...] Häßlichkeit [...] zu Bewußtsein gekommen' (ll.1-3). 'Abgeholt wurde' would be standard here for someone recalling an event many years before, but given that Bernhard uses the pluperfect, the second half of the clause, in the perfect, jars all the more and decelerates, even stops the reader who is not expecting it. It lends an immediacy to the description as the perfect tense here creates a link between the present and the narrated past, heightened all the more by the preceding, distancing pluperfect. This disjointing effect is further intensified because the penultimate sentence before this one in the text, describing his gaze at the vaulted ceiling, is exceptionally in the imperfect ('Auf diesem Gewölbe [...] haftete [...] mein Blick').<sup>282</sup> One would, after all, expect the imperfect for all these descriptions in standard narrative German (or the perfect in spoken and dialect South German and Austrian), 'haftete mein Blick [...] als ich zur Punction

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid., p.11.

abgeholt wurde [...], was ich wahrnahm [...]' and so on. The perfect is used in these books, according to McLintock, either in the context of 'the reflections of the narrator' or as a means of 'relating the events of the narrator's past to the [...] present.'<sup>283</sup> In this instance, the reduction of temporal distance between narrated past and the narrator's present serves to create an intense moment of remembering which enables the narrator to reconstruct the scene in the hospital. As we have seen, this reconstruction is an integral part of the autobiographical process for Bernhard.

In the second section of the sentence (ll.3-6), where a pluperfect ('wahrgenommen hatte') is followed by an imperfect ('waren') to describe the shadows and noises the adolescent patient can make out, there is a distancing effect created by the pluperfect (imperfect would have been more normal here); subsequently, the earlier immediacy is replaced by a distancing reminder that the event has passed and is being related from the perspective of a calmer viewpoint many years thence – especially with the inclusion of 'was ich wahrgenommen hatte' which is not strictly necessary to convey the meaning and reiterates to the reader that the narrator is trying to describe what the eighteen-year-old patient felt then. So far in this sentence, the narrative has made the reader aware of the narrator looking back to the event while imparting a sense of immediacy by way of a shift to the perfect and then immediately distancing himself from the events with the reinstatement of the pluperfect. Of course, the narrator could have opted for the present tense instead of the perfect to give a sense of immediacy, but this would have made the sentence more unidiomatic and therefore jar to the extent of breaking the spell of the descriptive flow. The perfect is a half-way point between the two tenses and disorients while just about keeping the narrative coherent. The difference in tenses is uncomfortable without breaking the reader's concentration on the narrated facts.

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<sup>283</sup> McLintock, 'Tense and Narrative Perspective', p.16.

In the third section (ll.6-11), a protracted pluperfect clause follows where a qualified noun ('ein von den vielen Penicillin- und Kampferspritzen auf ein Minimum herabgesetztes, mich aber tatsächlich in einen gegenüber meinen Anfangsschmerzen nicht nur erträglichen, sondern angenehmen Zustand versetzendes Wahrnehmungsvermögen' (ll.8-11)) informs us that the powers of perception of the young man (referred to in the first person) are reduced. By now, the tenacious reader will begin to suffer from the 'grammatical disorientation' which McLintock ascribes generally to both *Die Ursache* and *Der Atem*.<sup>284</sup>

The next section ('von allen Seiten [...] gerufen hatten' (ll.11-25)) is very long, and it is the crux of the whole sentence, since it describes the anonymous and inhuman manhandling of the patient, which sets the tone for the rest of the narration about Großmain and Grafenhof. Again, the main tense here is the pluperfect, but the narrator includes a conditional phrase ('ohne daß ich diese Hände und auch nicht die zu diesen Händen gehörenden Menschen hätte sehen können' (ll.13-14)) which intensifies the sense of uncertainty and disorientation by suggesting that the hands and bodies of the manipulating orderlies are separate entities: the bodies are appendages to the hands, and not the other way round as one would expect. The inclusion of 'auch nicht' is not necessary to maintain the meaning of the clause; it serves, however, to highlight the separation of the hands from the bodies, and it acts as a signpost for the reader; by decelerating the reading speed, the narrator emphasizes the patient's uncertainty. The narrative vertigo is created skilfully in a collaboration of meaning, syntax, and sentence structure. Now that we are in mid-sentence and used to the pluperfect as the principal mode of narration in this section, the reminders ('mir war vorgekommen' (l.12)) to the reader — that the narrating subject is remembering how he perceived all of this — are not as distancing as in the opening of the sentence. These reminders set up a dual

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p.10.

narrative perspective, and the sense that this is the narrator retelling his story is merged with a second element: the direct thoughts of the adolescent. Although the reader, were he to apply cold rationality, would be aware that the narrator (or the writer who invents him) is the only possible source of narration, an illusion is set up here momentarily by the narrative flow. Briefly, we are seeing the swimming corridor and the threatening hands under the influence of camphor. The vertiginous effect is further enhanced by the use of such words and phrases as ‘verschwommen’ (l.16), ‘Undeutlichkeit’ (l.16) ‘aus dem Gleichgewicht’ (l.19), and ‘nicht verstehen’ (l.24) all grouped close to each other. In this central section, with its subtly contrastive conditional sub-clause, Bernhard draws the reader into the dizzy prose with its cascading relative clauses and carefully chosen language, at the same time generating an immediacy for the description which enables him to create a precise delineation for the reader willing to follow these tortuous paths, and the unusual use of tense contributes subtly to the literary effect.

The fifth part (‘wie ich mich [...] zgedreht worden war’ (ll.26-33)) of this long sentence is primarily in the pluperfect, but, in an attempt to drag the reader away from the previous intense and heady description of the fast movement along the corridors, the narrator switches to the present (‘wie ich mich auch noch an die Tatsache erinnere’ (l.26)) and draws a sharp distinction between his depiction of this quite straightforward procedure (the puncture has not even begun yet; he has only been taken to the theatre) and his present distanced state, thereby slowing down the hectic flow of short clauses. Instead of reducing the immediacy of the description, the switch to the present tense in fact highlights by contrast the reader’s immersion in it directly prior to this point. The reader has to work so hard to keep track of the subsequent relative clauses and their sub-clauses that he is not fully in control and is immersed headlong again into the desperation, fear, and urgency of the young man’s plight. Two sub-clauses qualify the relative clause with ‘Bahre’ (l.27, twice) following ‘wie ich mich [...] erinnere, daß

plötzlich [...]’ (l.26). When he does arrive at the main part of the clause which follows on from ‘plötzlich’, the narrator immediately introduces another clause. The narrative intensifies the sense of sudden movement (‘plötzlich’) with an accumulation of verbal (general and non-specific) nouns (‘das [...] Aneinanderschlagen [...] Lachen, Schreien, Zufallen von Türen [...]’ (ll.29-31)) which contribute to the sense of an isolated observer surrounded by unspecific actions outside his control. This sense of a helpless individual drowned by what is going on around him is sharpened by the use of the passive voice: ‘[wie plötzlich] [...] Wasser aus einem Leitungshahn in eine Emailschüssel heruntergelassen, der Leitungshahn wieder abrupt zuge dreht worden war’ (ll.31-3). The very structure of the sentence, with the verbs at the end, creates a confusion and brings home to the reader that the boy has no control over his own fate and is in the hands of those whom he can neither properly see nor trust.

The sentence, long and at times into its second or third sub-clause, often threatens to spiral out of control, and its grammatical framework is on the verge of breaking down – but Bernhard skilfully keeps it syntactically and semantically intact. The narrative structure here serves a mimetic, personal (authorial) and textual function: it reflects, recreates for the writer and creates for the reader the helplessness of the boy. The absence of a collocating conjunction between the two halves of the clause add to the sense of disjointedness and confusion of the adolescent by quickening the reading speed. The final part of this sentence (ll.33-6) returns to the narrator recalling what the boy thought at the time – memory at one remove, and it completes the boy’s confusion in more conventional terms: he simply does not understand a word they say. They are literally speaking a different language: Latin.

Bernhard is careful to retain a firm sense of direction in the narration throughout the sentence, and the present, imperfect, perfect, and conditional tangents to the ‘preterite plane’ — which McLintock refers to as the main temporal level of narration — add to

the subtleties of meaning in this important sentence found at a significant point in *Der Atem*.<sup>285</sup> This long sentence, if dissected closely, reveals why Bernhard's reader is ill-advised to skip and overlook the apparent repetitions and instead, should remain 'bei den Zeilen', like Ilse Aichinger's ideal reader of Bernhard, if the potential of the rich narrative is to be realized.<sup>286</sup>

The effort required from the reader to follow this sentence is so great that he will either become frustrated and give up or, alternatively, subtleties of tense and language will transport him vividly between the death chamber with all its horrors and the calmer standpoint of the narrator.<sup>287</sup> The near-seamless link is frightening. The reader could be the patient. The laconically-related inventory of ordinary but extremely precise observations leave room for the reader's completion of the sentence. The narrator is careful to impart a mood, a sense of what it is like to be pushed around in a hospital. This is a disorienting description of a disorienting experience. The reader is not just told how the patient is pushed about; the reader himself is pushed about in the narrative, not knowing where he is by the end of the sentence. Of course, he must re-read it, and to understand it, he is obliged to recreate the scene of this helpless patient in his own mind. Many readers who have experience of a modern hospital's methods will recognize the description; others might regard with trepidation the fine dividing line between normal good health and the degrading experience that falling ill can be. Yet this is not what the narrative here relates. It is a description, a retelling of the incidents and thoughts the narrator remembers; it becomes more than a mere description, and develops into a dialogue, when the reader takes up the gauntlet thrown down by the author to follow the

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid. McLintock borrows and translates this phrase from: U. Hauser-Suida and G. Hoppe-Beugel, *Die Vergangenheitstempora in der deutschen geschriebenen Sprache der Gegenwart*, Heutiges Deutsch I/4 (Munich and Düsseldorf: Max Hueber, 1972), pp.160-72.

<sup>286</sup> Ilse Aichinger, 'Bernhard und Stifter', in Dreissinger, *Thomas Bernhard: Portraits*, p.322 (p.322).

<sup>287</sup> Literary critics were not the only ones to be frustrated by Bernhard's prose. In an article where she recounts a conversation with Bernhard, Marlies Hörbe describes how she meets a policeman in Gmunden on her way to visit Bernhard and ends up talking to him about the writer. The policeman expresses his puzzlement at the farmer's lifestyle Bernhard cultivates, most specifically at his desire to buy a cow. He adds: 'Ich habe versucht, ihn zu lesen ... aber sagen Sie ehrlich, verstehen Sie ihn?' See: Marlies Hörbe, 'Man weiß nie, wo und wann: ein Gespräch mit Thomas Bernhard', in: Dreissinger, *Thomas Bernhard: Portraits*, pp.45-6 (p.45).

complexities of this description. In effect, there are two descriptions here: one is the summarizable sequence (or simultaneity) of events; the other is a more imaginative, literary reading which involves creating meaning by piecing together clues or tesserae: 'Hier sind Bruchstücke mitgeteilt, aus welchen sich, wenn der Leser gewillt ist, ohne Weiteres ein Ganzes zusammensetzen läßt.'<sup>288</sup>

(b) Words

The repeated use of individual phrases and words is a trademark of Bernhard. Careful examination of these texts shows that such repetition is not arbitrary, but that the same word or phrase appears at strategic moments in order to make a specific point in the narrative. As with his idiosyncratic tense usage, Bernhard uses individual words to link ideas and sections of a narrative, often even between the different volumes of the entire pentalogy. When these instances are closely inspected, they reveal internal consistencies which, in turn, disclose information about the literary method Bernhard employs to communicate with the reader.

(i) 'Einerseits ... andererseits'

This bipartite adverb is commonly employed by Bernhard's narrators. Bernhard often uses it to tease the reader by presenting two viewpoints upon an argument without coming down on one side. 'Einerseits ... andererseits' is an analytical, rather than descriptive, device which often discloses two irreconcilable sides of a tension. This phrase is used less and less as the pentalogy progresses: by far its greatest frequency is to be found in *Die Ursache*. By the time *Ein Kind* appears, the phrase occurs conspicuously with only one of its two elements.<sup>289</sup> This usage can be seen to reflect the growing self-

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<sup>288</sup> Bernhard, *Der Atem*, p.87.

<sup>289</sup> See: Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, pp.33 and 49.

confidence of the writer who in 1975 was not sure how to categorize his past life, but who, by 1982, was less preoccupied by the stalemate of looking back at past experiences and more interested in looking forward with confidence and hope.

The important instances of this adverb in *Die Ursache* indicate a tension between two distinct sides — inner feelings and external influences — of the adolescent protagonist. After describing the gruesome suicides of the schoolchildren who had fallen to their deaths from the Mönchsberg on to the hard tarmac of the Müllner Hauptstrasse, the narrator points to an unresolved problem which marks his own life as he describes how he is brought to thoughts of suicide, ‘von der brutalen, rücksichtslosen [...] Umwelt einerseits, von der in jedem jungen Menschen größten Sensibilität und Verletzbarkeit andererseits’.<sup>290</sup> This is not only a statement about the brutalizing, negative effect the social environments of school, Salzburg and his family had on him, but is also an affirmation of the inherent sensitivity and vulnerability of the child. The use of ‘einerseits ... andererseits’ accentuates the opposition between the two influences on the child. The older writer’s ability to detect and describe this opposition is important since it serves the autobiographical function of explaining (to himself and his reader) his earlier confusion and unhappiness. The narrator’s negative criticism here is not directed at all people; it is not a confirmation of rampant nihilism, but rather a gentle statement about the potential of the child whose spirit is destroyed by those around him. This tension between the sensitive, impressionable individual in his formative years and hard, cruel social influences cannot be overlooked since it provides a crucial clue about the development of the child: the writing adult is not an older version of a protagonist who is a bitter and twisted product of poverty, illness, and general failure, but rather a man reflecting and chronicling the reasons behind his initial disappointments in life. The two are very different. The embittered nihilism so often attributed to Bernhard’s works even after

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<sup>290</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.21.

1975, is overshadowed here by thwarted idealism; consequently, the narratives can be regarded as the product of an authorial voice trying to come to terms with high expectations of people and life, rather than the ravings of an uncontrollable monomaniac and depressive.

The opposition between the positive inner feelings of the child and the negating external influences on it is repeated and qualified later in the book – tellingly, by this same adverb. As the older writer looks back on his own days at the home for schoolboys in the Schranngasse — characterized by Grünkranz ‘einerseits’ and the war ‘andererseits’ — the earlier general statement about natural sensitivity and vulnerability is made more specific and thereby qualified.<sup>291</sup> The war is reported by external organs (newspapers, relatives of soldiers, his own uncle) whereas the fear of the sadistic Grünkranz is a personal, inner fear, and it is the juxtaposition of these two influences which causes him so much pain and confusion. He likes playing the violin, yet his fear of Grünkranz reduces this artistic act to an escape into the shoe-cupboard to avoid the harsh realities of everyday life in the school. Through the apparently simple repetition of an adverb, Bernhard here introduces and develops an important theme of his work. This relatively small and insignificant stylistic device trains the willing reader to expect meaning in the smallest detail of the narrative, and it thereby forms part of the narrative’s richness and pleasure for the meticulous reader. The adverb is repeated, again with reference to Grünkranz and the war (droning fighter planes), as the narrator indicates an individual under siege from the outside world.<sup>292</sup> The repeated use of this adverbial phrase at these strategic moments not only gives the writer a clear structure for his thoughts — no small matter in a narrative devoid of paragraphs, indentions and, by most writers’ standards, replete with long, overladen sentences — but it also provides a clue to the reader about what is important to the older writer as he looks back on his troubled

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., p.28.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., p.29.

school-days. Any reader who notices the repetition of phrase will be rewarded with an important insight into the thoughts of protagonist and narrator.

Other examples of the tension between inner feelings and external influences upon the child are likewise accompanied by the 'einerseits ... andererseits' phrase, such as the schoolchild's natural wandering attention versus the respectful, fearful attention he lends to his strict violin teacher,<sup>293</sup> and his innate love of violin-playing as opposed to his hatred of theory which he perceives as an empty following of rules which has little to do with feeling and love.<sup>294</sup> A further instance occurs in the course of the narrator's criticisms of the masters at his Gymnasium which are accompanied by affirmation of the tension between their innate, natural traits and their external, conditioned fear of the headmaster.<sup>295</sup> The individual, be he an innocent child or a (less innocent) teacher is torn between his innate nature and the exigencies of social intercourse and participation, a theme which runs throughout Bernhard's *œuvre* and to which he returns specifically in *Auslöschung*.

As the agitated narrator has settled his scores with the past — with Grünkranz and Onkel Franz in particular — the pentalogy becomes less and less concerned with the individual's crisis *vis-à-vis* his social environment and concentrates increasingly on accepting the tension as inherent in the human condition. The adolescent's love of music elicits an ambivalent response from his boss: 'Es war dem Podlaha einerseits gar nicht recht gewesen, daß in meinem Kopf fortan auch die Musik und insbesondere der Gesang einen Platz hatte, aber andererseits merkte ich, wie er daran interessiert gewesen war.'<sup>296</sup> Again, an opposition, here between business expediency (his apprentice's future commitment) and a more personal, inner interest (music and the emotions it evokes and feeds), is announced by the same adverbial phrase which recurs and links questions of

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., p.49.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., p.53 (in this example, there is a slight variation as 'so' follows 'einerseits').

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., p.140.

<sup>296</sup> Bernhard, *Der Keller*, p.136.

inner feeling and external influence. Instead of the deadlock which resulted in *Die Ursache*, here happiness ensues: 'Ich ging jetzt noch lieber in den Keller als vorher.'<sup>297</sup> This development is significant since it marks a step forward for the trainee in the shop.

In *Der Atem*, the same phrase invokes a calm sense of acceptance of human nature. The narrator contemplates his discharge from hospital through his family's ambivalent viewpoint: 'einerseits wünschten sie tatsächlich den Zeitpunkt meiner Entlassung [...], aber andererseits fürchteten sie sich vor diesem Datum.'<sup>298</sup> Where the earlier instances of this tension in human nature between the practical demands of everyday life (here, looking after a convalescent) and the love grandparents and a mother would naturally have for the boy (their genuine desire for his discharge) resulted in anger, confusion and narrative invective (most notably with Grünkranz in *Die Ursache*), here the tone of the narrative is calmer, and there is no adverse judgement of his family. The attention of the narrative is not focused upon the problems and insoluble, irreconcilable stalemates which figured in *Die Ursache*, but upon the positive signs for the future, such as the adolescent's commercial training, which, it is reported here, he passes a year later.<sup>299</sup>

Like so many of Bernhard's literary ploys, the use of the contrastive adverbial phrase, 'einerseits ... andererseits', is a hook for catching the reader's attention and then guiding it. The question of the tension between inner feelings and external demands is crucial to an understanding of the older writer's reminiscences of his childhood and youth. Any reader overlooking this tension, as encapsulated in the phrase under discussion here, does so at his peril since he will miss the all-important question of the individual's corruption by social forces. This lack of understanding may, in turn, lead to an interpretation of Bernhard's prose which is based on reputation, past works, and

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<sup>297</sup> Ibid., pp.136-7.

<sup>298</sup> Bernhard, *Der Atem*, p.110.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., p.111.

expectation rather than painstaking inspection of the qualifying and subtle narrative itself.

(ii) 'Naturgemäß'

'Naturgemäß' ('in the nature of things' or 'inherently') occurs frequently in the narratives of the pentalogy. In fact, it is one of Bernhard's favourite words in his prose fiction – so much so that it has even been used sarcastically or ironically in parodies of his style.<sup>300</sup> It is found throughout the narratives of his early stories (*Amras*, for instance) as well as in his later prose fiction (for instance, in *Der Untergeher* and *Auslöschung*). As Hans Joachim Piechotta states, the frequency of this word and its cognates in the pentalogy is too great to be ignored:

Dies tritt in einer Häufigkeit auf, die das zufällige Vorkommen dieser Wörter, oder eine regionale sprachliche Sonderform, eventuell einen Austriazismus, ausschließen dürfte und den Eindruck eines methodischen bewußten Sprachgebrauchs erweckt.<sup>301</sup>

Piechotta's interest is in relating the usage of these words to a broad moral and epistemological system in the pentalogy. He perceives the authorial stance to be unequivocal:

Bei ständigen Appellen an quasi naturhafte, naturgemäße Funktionalisierungen menschlicher Theorie und Praxis insistiert der Autor auf der Dignität einer zwar stets unterdrückten, oder pervertierten, gleichwohl ursprünglicheren 'Naturgeschichte', der gegenüber Kultur und Menschheitsgeschichte als Fälschung bestimmt werden.<sup>302</sup>

Piechotta's statement here about the stifling of natural instincts by social forces is quite true of *Die Ursache*; there is, however, a marked change in the last four parts of the autobiographical cycle.

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<sup>300</sup> See: Strouhal, pp.80-2.

<sup>301</sup> Piechotta, "'Naturgemäß': Thomas Bernhards autobiographische Bücher", p.8 [emphasis in original].

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

Bernhard's use of 'naturgemäß' complements the effect created by the strategic repetition of 'einerseits ... andererseits'. He employs 'naturgemäß' to direct the reader to the child's natural instincts. The first instance of this adverb in the pentalogy is significant because it establishes a connection between the autobiographical narrator and the protagonist by bringing into focus themes of love, death, and the intellect which preoccupy them both: 'Daß ihn [den Zögling] jene, die ihn, wie er immer geglaubt hat, liebten, bei vollem Bewußtsein in diesen staatlichen Kerker [das Internat] geworfen haben, begreift er nicht, was ihn schon [...] beschäftigt, ist naturgemäß der *Selbstmordgedanke*.'<sup>303</sup> The destruction of his own life is the child's natural response to being rejected; he cannot understand how a mother and grandparents, if they really loved him, could subject him to the torture of the home for schoolboys. This disbelief reveals much about the child's expectations. Like the forlorn brothers in *Amras* or Roithamer, he cannot see further than ending his life if imperfection and compromise prevail. Unlike the brothers and Roithamer, though, the child has survived, and so any serious thought of suicide is academic. The third-person narration further distances the older writer from the child and enables the narrative to concentrate on the child's perceptions without the interfering presence of the narrator. A few pages later, in a very long sentence, 'naturgemäß' occurs three times, and each time it is linked with suicide and death, as the result of the brutal insensitivity of the child's environment: the children who kill themselves are criticized bitterly by the headmaster;<sup>304</sup> the Nazi and Catholic environment ('die katholisch-nazistische Umwelt') conspires to bring about the innocent child's downfall;<sup>305</sup> and the regime in the home for schoolboys could drive any sensitive child to suicide.<sup>306</sup> This repeated association between 'naturgemäß' and the innocent (unlike the Church and the Nazis), natural (signalled by thwarted expectations), and

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<sup>303</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.14 [emphasis in original].

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., p.24. The long sentence ('Wenn einer auf einmal [...] ein Grund zum Selbstmord gewesen') runs over three pages (pp.23-5).

<sup>305</sup> Ibid.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p.25.

positive inclinations of the child (familial love) paves the way for later use of this adverb in the last three volumes of the pentalogy.

It is not until *Der Atem* that the narrator — by now somewhat reconciled with the painful experiences of his schooling in Salzburg and the war — applies ‘naturgemäß’, with its inherent connotations of instinctive response, to the question of the family bond. Three distinct themes emerge: first, the indelible closeness between the child and his immediate family, especially the grandfather, despite the criticisms he directs at them all; second, the validation of human emotions in an environment often hostile to them; and third, the affirmation of life, opposed to thoughts of suicide in *Die Ursache*.

The first two volumes of the pentalogy air some of Bernhard’s personal grievances about people from his early life; the next three present a countercurrent where the bond with his family, however strained at times, is presented as undeniable and irresistible. The focal point of the bond is the grandfather. He is the one who protects the grandson ‘ganz naturgemäß’ from the rest of the family;<sup>307</sup> he helps the ailing adolescent through his illness with moral support;<sup>308</sup> even when the child is left to fend for himself in the hospital, the mere presence of the grandfather (‘unterstützt naturgemäß von der Nähe meines Großvaters’) helps the boy through his difficulties.<sup>309</sup> In all these instances, the description is qualified by ‘naturgemäß’; the implication is that, whatever the problems and dysfunctions of the family, familial love is very important to him, and far from rejecting it, the autobiographical reminiscences form an indirect confirmation of this love and the narrator’s attempts to come to terms with it. The word accompanies his report of the grandfather’s death, and it refers to the pain felt not only by him but by the entire family upon the old man’s death.<sup>310</sup> Even after his death, the grandfather continues

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<sup>307</sup> Bernhard, *Der Atem*, p.31.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100.

to extend his influence over the grieving family, and ‘naturgemäß’ accompanies the description of his mother’s grief.<sup>311</sup>

The word is also used in conjunction with other family members, especially in *Die Kälte*: it qualifies the pain of his mother’s rejection, which is rooted in her hatred of the child’s natural father, and implies that it is her closeness to the child which occasions her scolding of him in the first place;<sup>312</sup> ‘naturgemäß’ is also found in discussions about his family past (‘meine Herkunft’) in *Die Kälte* and *Ein Kind* where at two specific points he questions his own curiosity about his natural father and his mother’s love-hate response to his natural queries.<sup>313</sup> There are other examples where the occurrence of the word accompanies discussions about his mother and natural father.<sup>314</sup>

The most revealing use of the word occurs in *Der Atem* when the narrator describes how he suppresses his mild pneumonia in order to stay at home with his grandfather.<sup>315</sup> It is not until the grandfather himself becomes ill that the child, according to the narrator, submits to the illness and comes out in sympathy; mental determination overcomes a medical condition. This is a remarkable observation because the implication is that love for his grandfather overcomes a physical fact. It is a case of mind over matter, love over illness. The assertions of familial bonds, of the everyday problems of the poor and fraught family circumstances, are briefly overshadowed here by a declaration of love. The reinforcement of this statement by the use of ‘naturgemäß’ brings home the inherent, instinctive nature of the response: the boy cannot help it.

‘Naturgemäß’ also arises in the text to validate the world of emotions and love over physical reality even where the grandfather is not concerned. For instance, later in *Der Atem*, the narrator decries the delusion of doctors about their own power to cure:

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid., p.105.

<sup>312</sup> Bernhard, *Die Kälte*, p.73.

<sup>313</sup> See: ibid., p.81 and: Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.39.

<sup>314</sup> See: *Die Kälte*, p.90 and *Ein Kind*, p.50.

<sup>315</sup> Bernhard, *Der Atem*, p.28.

‘Ihre Medizin war naturgemäß machtlos.’<sup>316</sup> This statement stands in stark contrast to the salutary influence of his love for the grandfather. In *Ein Kind*, too, external reality is subjugated to the reality of his mind and fantasy, and, once again, ‘naturgemäß’ accompanies the description. He loses all sense of time as a result of his excitement about his ill-fated bicycle excursion (‘im Überschwang meines Ausflugs’).<sup>317</sup> The possibilities of visiting his aunt and the thrill of his newly-found independence overcome his fears and sense of responsibility here. Emotion triumphs over common sense not as a result of a personal decision, but naturally and without conscious effort. As he becomes drenched in the downpour, his fear of his mother’s reprimand preoccupies him, but even then, thoughts of the grandfather (‘Auf ihn setzte ich wieder alles’) come to his rescue.<sup>318</sup> Love is connected here with hope, and unlike his suicidal thoughts in *Die Ursache*, here he is saved from despair.

‘Naturgemäß’ is crucially linked elsewhere in the pentalogy to a desire to live. The young boarder’s thoughts of suicide — despite the grim, sobering reality of Grafenhof — are contrasted with a defiant will to survive as he encounters death in *Die Kälte*. Those released from Grafenhof are said to be at the mercy of their ‘tatsächlich unersättlichen Lebens- und Existenzhunger’, and again the qualifying adverb is ‘naturgemäß’.<sup>319</sup>

The most striking incidence of the word for the discussion here occurs towards the end of the pentalogy during the description of the humiliation meted out to the unfortunate Quehenberger in the Nazi correction school: ‘Erzieher wie Schwestern redeten uns naturgemäß auch oft gut zu, aber die meiste Zeit verloren sie die Beherrschung und mißhandelten uns.’<sup>320</sup> At first sight, this statement might appear as a criticism of the sisters, and, indeed, it is a criticism. It is revealing, however, that

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p.70.

<sup>317</sup> Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.12.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>319</sup> Bernhard, *Die Kälte*, p.43.

<sup>320</sup> Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.146.

‘naturgemäß’ qualifies the good side of the sisters’ behaviour. The circumstances of the sisters’ mistreatment of Quehenberger and the young Bernhard are not mitigated by the implication about their goodness, but the narrator does give an insight here into his view of human nature. It is clear that the frustrated expectations of the young boy have endured; the sentence would read as a laconic description if ‘naturgemäß’ were omitted. Its inclusion reveals more about the narrator’s optimistically-inclined views about human nature than about the sisters’ behaviour.

#### 4. HOPE: A CONVERSATION WITH THE WORLD

In his review of *Der Keller*, Günter Blöcker denies that the happiness the new apprentice feels in the basement-shop is a brief and self-deluding over-reaction to his release from the fetters of school. On the contrary, Blöcker points out, the young Bernhard is aware ‘daß er abermals in eine Hölle geraten ist, aber es ist eine Hölle, die es ihm erlaubt, Solidarität zu empfinden und zu üben.’<sup>321</sup> Blöcker’s observations here are important because they root Bernhard’s sanguine perceptions of his first real job in a measured sense of hope. As a reporter for the *Demokratisches Volksblatt* in Salzburg, Bernhard was once sent to write an account of the multicultural sub-culture at the margin of the town which consisted of immigrant workers who lived in cramped accommodation (twelve to thirteen family members often crowded into twenty square metres of living space). The young reporter’s sketchy description is reminiscent of the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung in *Der Keller*; as far as this investigation is concerned, the most apposite element of his journalistic impression concerns the poor families’ sense of hope which is all-important to survival: ‘Sie haben alles bei sich, was sie besitzen, Bettzeug, Küchengeschirr, Kleider und Schuhe. Was sie aber außer diesen Dingen mittragen, ist Hoffnung.’<sup>322</sup> Elsewhere in

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<sup>321</sup> Blöcker, ‘Unverhoffte Entdeckungen des Glücks’.

<sup>322</sup> Quoted from: Dittmar, *Aus dem Gerichtssaal*, p.21. For full article, see: Thomas Bernhard, ‘Schicksale am Hauptbahnhof’, *Demokratisches Volksblatt*, 10 March 1952.

the same report, referring to the workers' lives once they have survived, he talks about them rebuilding their lives, 'was das Wichtigste ist, wieder Hoffnung in sich zu tragen.'<sup>323</sup> Bernhard's acute awareness of the importance of hope in real-life situations for those in desperate straits, like the refugees of his newspaper report, is reflected in the pentalogy.

#### (a) Lapsed Idealism

The protagonist of the pentalogy, as already witnessed in the discussion of 'naturgemäß', is a vulnerable and sensitive individual, especially in matters close to his heart, most notably his family. If the narrator's virulent criticisms of individuals and social institutions are regarded as the product of dashed hopes, and as not the gleeful expression of a systematically, *a priori* nihilistic view of the world, there emerges an incipient, yet stubborn optimism expressed at points throughout the pentalogy as thwarted, lapsed idealism.

The earliest allusion to this sense of disillusionment or betrayal ('Verrat') occurs in *Die Ursache* when the protagonist is unable to understand why he must attend the dirty, hostile home for schoolboys in the Schrannengasse away from his beloved family.<sup>324</sup> The ensuing utter despair, culminating in thoughts of suicide, creates further confusion and incomprehension ('begreift er nicht') in the boy.<sup>325</sup> Later on, the narrator reflects on the pain the boy feels as a result of others' coldness towards him, and he alludes to the 'völlige Verständnislosigkeit' which the young child encounters from the inhabitants of Salzburg.<sup>326</sup> This allusion is only made in passing, but it illustrates, by implication, that the boy yearns to be understood; the sense of a lost hope or ideal is always present at the back of the reminiscing narrator's mind.

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.13.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., p.59.

The implication common to all these examples is clear: the boy's natural expectation is to understand the emotional processes which affect him. When this expectation is thwarted, he becomes unhappy and feels betrayed. The logical consistency he expects between people's actions and their words and promises is unrealistic; the narrator makes this clear in *Die Kälte* when describing the hospital doctors' appalling treatment of the ailing socialist doctor of law:

Hier hatte ich ein Beispiel für die Erfahrung, daß der Ehrliche, der seinen Gedanken mit Konsequenz und Ausdauer folgt, gleichzeitig aber jene, die anderer Ansicht sind, durchaus in Ruhe läßt, mit Verachtung und mit Haß konfrontiert ist.<sup>327</sup>

The older narrator, looking back on his time in Grafenhof, uses *a posteriori* reasoning here to draw conclusions about life from his experiences. The word 'Beispiel' suggests that he uses this example from real life to reinforce his view, articulated in the first two volumes, that someone with consistent views and ideals will be disappointed, even destroyed by those around him. The effect of this story is to focus the reader's attention on the protagonist's and the narrator's state of mind since the specific story of the legal doctor is not relevant to the account here: he is not a character whose fate is central to the narrative or autobiographical self-exploration. His story can be seen as a way for the narrator to clarify his own views about the adolescent's unhappiness and stubborn expectations and idealism. The irony of the situation in *Die Kälte* is not lost on the narrator who pointedly and sympathetically terms the doctor's death 'das Ende eines Idealisten'.<sup>328</sup> Elsewhere, the narrator refers to the child as 'das gebrannte Kind';<sup>329</sup> by recalling half of a proverb ('ein gebranntes Kind scheut das Feuer'), he invites the reader to complete not only the saying but also the meaning of this part of the narrative which is centred on the disappointment experienced as a result of thwarted recurrent expectation.

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<sup>327</sup> Bernhard, *Die Kälte*, p.121.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., p.83.

Moreover, in *Ein Kind*, the use of 'Enttäuschung' highlights the fact that the narrator, even in the final volume of the pentalogy, is preoccupied by this question. He is far from having reconciled himself with disappointment: covered in oil and unsuccessful in his attempt to visit his Aunt Fanny, the child's 'disappointment' ('Enttäuschung') hurts more than anything else;<sup>330</sup> similarly, when he is (as he thinks) sent erroneously to Saalfeld in Thuringia rather than to Saalfelden near Salzburg, he is more disappointed (again, the same word: 'Enttäuschung') by his grandfather's negligence than by the terrifying and traumatic experience of the school.<sup>331</sup> The narrator cannot stop recalling his disappointments, and no number of cynical, negative observations about human nature and other people can hide the fact that his expectations endure despite all his experiences and words.

#### (b) Life Affirmation

The expressions of the young boy's lapsed idealism and the older narrator's returning, stubborn optimism are accompanied by open declarations about the sanctity of human life. Nowhere is this positive attitude more apparent than in *Der Atem* when his life is most threatened. The 'theoretical' thoughts of suicide of *Die Ursache* contrast starkly with his experiences in the Landeskrankenhaus where he not only sees others dying but where his own life is under threat. The expression of the will to live is conspicuously terse and dramatic in its effect: 'Jetzt will ich leben.'<sup>332</sup> The reality of death is manifestly different from thoughts about it, and a significant turning-point is achieved as the adolescent takes responsibility for himself: 'Von zwei möglichen Wegen hatte ich mich in dieser Nacht in dem entscheidenden Augenblick für den des Lebens entschieden.'<sup>333</sup> This decision does not stave off despair once and for all, but it does mean that he is better

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<sup>330</sup> Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.11.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

<sup>332</sup> Bernhard, *Der Atem*, p.19 [emphasis in original].

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20.

equipped to tackle the adversities which life in the so-called 'death ward' brings. At another low point later in *Der Atem*, he finds happiness ('Glück') through an awareness that progress is possible ('entwicklungsfähig').<sup>334</sup> He even recovers sufficiently from the psychological trauma of being given the last rites to be able to affirm: 'es war schon wieder alles auf der Seite des Optimismus.'<sup>335</sup> 'Wieder' is a revealing word here in that it indicates a recapture of existing optimism; the difference from the past, however, is that instead of expecting people to respond in a certain way, he himself has changed his response to his environment. Experience changes his way of looking at the world, as he admits to himself in Grafenhof: 'Ich war [bis jetzt] einer Logik verfallen [...] Ich hatte meinen Standpunkt wieder am radikalsten geändert, jetzt *lebte* ich wieder hundertprozentig, jetzt *wollte* ich wieder hundertprozentig leben.'<sup>336</sup>

The clearest indication in the narratives of the new desire to survive physical and mental pain is found in *Der Keller* in the form of an implied contrast with *Die Ursache*. In the earlier book, the Mönchsberg was presented as a symbol of death: the place from which suicidal schoolchildren fell to their death.<sup>337</sup> In *Der Keller*, however, it is a place with altogether different associations: 'An den Abenden stieg ich auf den Mönchsberg hinauf und setzte mich unter eine Baumkrone und dachte an nichts und beobachtete und war glücklich.'<sup>338</sup> The simplicity of the syntax and the uncomplicated nature of his happiness ('dachte an nichts [...] war glücklich') completes the change: the Mönchsberg is now a place where he can retire after a hard day at work and his singing lessons. Where in *Die Ursache* he saw smashed bodies, now he experiences happiness. The association of height as a place of danger in *Die Ursache* is exchanged in the later book for the sense of being safely on top of everything, securely above the battle, as it were. The significance of this change of association is enormous: it acts as an external

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., p.47.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., p.46.

<sup>336</sup> Bernhard, *Die Kälte*, p.26 [emphasis in original].

<sup>337</sup> Bernhard, *Die Ursache*, p.20.

<sup>338</sup> Bernhard, *Der Keller*, pp.147-8.

counterpart to the change which takes place within him and which, as already witnessed, he reports more explicitly in *Die Kälte*.<sup>339</sup>

The recurrent affirmation of life in the pentalogy confirms the turn in Bernhard's prose: the love for the grandfather gives birth to an openness which leads to a narratorial engagement with people, as proved by the many friendships and close relationships in which the protagonist is involved during the course of the five narratives. In an interview of 1980, before the publication of *Die Kälte*, Bernhard outlined a passionate belief in common experience and its communication between individuals: 'Ich habe das Gefühl, daß ich und alle verwandt sind [...] Man könnte sich mit allen identifizieren. Das ist die Frage, wie weit unterdrückt man oder beherrscht man alle diese Millionen oder Milliarden von Möglichkeiten von Menschen, die man in sich hat?'<sup>340</sup> This statement underlines the importance of the reader-text relationship for Bernhard; where individuals have experiences in common, the literary work can function as a medium of communication. According to Wieland Schmied, a lifelong associate and close friend of Bernhard, it was a desire to communicate with his readership which drove Bernhard from poetry to prose in the early 1960s. Schmied reports Bernhard as wanting 'ein Gespräch mit der Welt und über die Welt, eben [durch] Prosa'.<sup>341</sup> While the early prose bemoans the inability to communicate effectively, the pentalogy finally breaks the deadlock. Bernhard's narrator here is the first who can refer to his own 'kraftvoll-positive innere Einstellung'.<sup>342</sup> The most important development, however, is the capacity to accept the shortcomings of others and to live with these imperfections, as he reminds himself: 'Ich mußte in meinen Betrachtungen und Beobachtungen davon ausgehen, daß auch das Fürchterlichste [...] das Selbstverständliche ist, wodurch ich überhaupt diesen Zustand

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<sup>339</sup> See: *Die Kälte*, p.26.

<sup>340</sup> Erich Böhme and Hellmuth Karasek, "'Ich könnte auf dem Papier jemand umbringen": Der Schriftsteller Thomas Bernhard über Wirkung und Öffentlichkeit seiner Texte', *Der Spiegel*, 23 June 1980, pp.172-82 (p.178).

<sup>341</sup> Wieland Schmied, 'Der Lyriker wird Romancier', in Dreissinger, *Thomas Bernhard: Portraits*, pp.320-1 (p.320).

<sup>342</sup> Bernhard, *Der Atem*, p.56.

hatte ertragen können.’<sup>343</sup> In a hospital ward where many die every day and where the chances of survival are slim, such acceptance might seem self-evident to many readers; however, it is a major step forward for a successor to Bernhard’s otherwise uncompromising, perfectionist narrators.

## CONCLUSION

Any close critical exposition of narratives as intense as those under discussion here is bound to run the risk of portraying the creative document as an accumulation of narrative techniques and authorial intentions. In an article written after Bernhard’s death, David McLintock — whose knowledge of the linguistic detail of Bernhard’s prose texts is very detailed since he is Bernhard’s principal English translator — pinpoints a characteristic ‘voice’ which emerges from the prose narratives as Bernhard’s major achievement.<sup>344</sup>

Like many interpreters and critics before him, McLintock finds it hard to define what this voice is; he resorts to citing a large chunk of his own translation in the absence of a better definition. He does, however, make a comment which is particularly pertinent for Bernhard’s fictional writings: ‘Bernhard insisted on the priority of form over content.’<sup>345</sup>

While Bernhard does sometimes employ the narrative in the pentalogy as a medium for his opinions and observations, he reserves his most scathing and witty outbursts for his plays, articles, interviews and other non-literary, public declarations; his autobiographical narratives do not collectively build an argument or consist of racy, eye-catching accounts. On the contrary, they comprise a complex web of elaborate, creative, and deeply personal processes.

In his appraisal of the first four narratives of the pentalogy, Martin Lüdke articulates the constraints and hopes of these elusive narratives: ‘Weder glaubt er

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<sup>343</sup> Ibid., p.45.

<sup>344</sup> David McLintock, ‘The Voice of the Salzburg Fool’, *TLS*, 6 September 1996, pp.7-8 (p.7).

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

[Bernhard], daß man heute noch so umstandslos erzählen kann, wie anno dazumal, noch bezweifelt er, daß man auch heute erzählen, beschreiben, schreiben kann.’<sup>346</sup> Lüdke’s article appeared a year before the publication of *Ein Kind*. While its validity is not diminished by this book, it is in *Ein Kind*, more than anywhere in the pentalogy, that Bernhard achieves narration unfettered by awkward tenses, critical illness, brutally insensitive institutions or individuals, and the generally thwarting forces which prevent any unrestrained pleasure for narrator and protagonist alike. The apogee of his literary project of self-exploration is attained in moments of unburdened, simple description. Two examples from *Ein Kind*, the last of the five volumes, illustrate how far the self-exploring narrator has come in his quest to reconcile himself with the past.

Towards the end of *Ein Kind*, the narrator relates the rather amusing and revealing episode of the grandfather and the boy going to purchase a useless easel in Ruhpolding near Traunstein. There is humour, even a cheeky snipe at the grandfather’s delusions about the young boy’s artistic talents, but none of the heavy and structurally disjointing syntax characteristic of the preceding narrative. The deliberate, tortured concern with the smallest of observations has disappeared here, and the brutal black humour of the hospital is replaced by a gentle, mocking tone: ‘Er hatte das Inserat mehrere Male rot unterstrichen. Wir fahren mit dem Dampfzug nach Ruhpolding. Wir fragten uns bis zu dem Haus, in welchem die angebotene Malerstaffelei auf uns wartete, durch. Ein uraltes, halb verfaultes und vermodertes Monstrum stand in einem beinahe finsternen Vorhaus. Die Enttäuschung war groß. Die Staffelei wurde gekauft.’<sup>347</sup> The comfortable imperfect tense is maintained in a sentence which describes the episode with a swiftness most uncharacteristic of Bernhard’s prose narratives here. Even the almost totally dark hallway has no significance other than as a description of the hallway; it is not an allusion to the brutality of a state-run hospital or to the terror of a cruel Nazi group

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<sup>346</sup> W. Martin Lüdke, ‘Ein “Ich” in der Bewegung: stillgestellt: Wegmarken der Bernhardschen Autobiographie’, *Merkur* 35 (1981), 1175-83 (p.1180).

<sup>347</sup> Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.153.

or hypocritical religious institution. The prose can be read with consummate ease. The mocking of the grandfather's delusions of grandeur is made clear by the incongruity of the last two sentences with the strange absence of a contrastive conjunction like 'aber' – as if there is no apparent inconsistency in the grandfather's decision to buy the easel given its decrepit state. This calmly critical gaze over his grandfather's actions is reinforced by the use of the passive voice for the last sentence which imparts a mildly ludicrous ceremonial loftiness to the proceedings. There is also an element of implied self-criticism on the part of the narrator given his earlier pronouncements about his grandfather's sound judgement. Yet, whatever the degree of the criticism, it is expressed in a calm, understated way.

A few pages later, the narrator relates another seemingly trivial childhood episode. Again, there is no apparent ulterior motive to the description, and it is related in the straightforward, narrative imperfect. Jumping about in the snow in high spirits one Christmas, the young boy inadvertently drops some of the money given to him to pay for his violin tuition: 'Bei dieser Gelegenheit schleuderte ich plötzlich ein Fünfmarkstück in einen Schneehaufen. Alle Versuche, wieder an das Fünfmarkstück zu kommen, mißlingen. Im März, als der Schnee wegschmolz, fand ich es wieder. Auf einmal glitzerte es.'<sup>348</sup> The wonderment at finding the coin again transports the narrative to the world of the little boy. The short sentences attest to a narrator-writer for whom describing and recalling the past no longer seems an unbearably heavy burden. For the reader who has persisted patiently with Bernhard's narrator throughout the narratives this is the reward – not just a few sentences which are easy and comfortable to read but evidence of how the project of gaining self-knowledge can make a change to the way one sees things. For a moment, the narrator recreates the untroubled world of the innocent child concerned only with the gleaming coin. The passage just stands as a description of

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid., p.159.

his immediate thought when he found the coin; it simply gleams. The syntactically complex, hypotactic sentence structures have gone, and the narration cheerfully skips on to the next story about his time working as a child for Hilger the baker.

The boy terrorized by Grünkranz and the embittered narrator describing his hell are not recognizable here. This is a different narrator, one who has finally been able to come to terms with his past experiences enough to be able to describe them without the emotional baggage of his memory-laden pain. It is critical that he has been through the few hundred pages of the pentalogy's four and three-quarter books before he can arrive at this new narration, for without the previous documentation, the stylistic and thematic resolution of his experiences, it is unlikely that he would have been able to reach this lighter, easier mode of narration.

## CHAPTER II

### HAPPINESS THROUGH IMPERFECTION: *Beton*

#### INTRODUCTION

*Beton* (1982) was Bernhard's first major prose work to be published after the completion of the autobiographical pentalogy.<sup>349</sup> The only publication to appear after *Ein Kind*, but before *Beton*, was 'Goethe schtirbt', the fragment in which Bernhard ironized Goethe's last words before his death ('Mehr Licht') by maintaining that the old man was misheard: what he really said was 'Mehr nicht!'<sup>350</sup> This essentially light-hearted, ironic offering symbolizes the steady change in Bernhard's prose writings since 1975 from turgid, near-impenetrable accounts about isolation and despair to lighter, more limpid narratives about protagonists who better understand themselves and their personal and social environment.

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<sup>349</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Beton* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982).

<sup>350</sup> Thomas Bernhard, 'Goethe schtirbt', *Die Zeit*, 19 March 1982.

(a) Bernhard and *Beton*

There is little precise or entirely reliable information about the genesis of *Beton*. Bernhard's most prominent academic biographers, Louis Huguet and Hans Höller, virtually ignore this text.<sup>351</sup> Huguet provides very little information about *Beton* in his first extensive biographical work of 1991, and, in the massive tome entitled *Chronologie: Johannes Freumbichler, Thomas Bernhard*, includes no entries under 1982, the year in which *Beton* came out. Höller, in his informative literary biography, provides a parallel between Bernhard's life and many of his major works – but *Beton* is not one of them.

A number of links can nevertheless be made between Bernhard's real life and the fictional world of *Beton*. Of the more personal accounts about Bernhard's life from friends, the publications of Gerda Maleta, Krista Fleischmann, and Karl Ignaz Hennetmair are of interest with regard to this text.<sup>352</sup> From what Maleta says in her open letter to Bernhard after his death, it is clear that *Beton* had been completed by February 1982, when she made an emergency visit to Majorca (where Bernhard wrote it) in order to deliver some much-needed medication to the ailing writer.<sup>353</sup> As Fleischmann reports in her series of conversations on the island with Bernhard, which took place in 1981, the setting of Majorca was not imaginary since, on health grounds, Bernhard often spent the cold winter months in the Mediterranean, away from the Vierkanthof. Anna Härdtl had a counterpart in real life, called Gabriele, from Miesbach in Bavaria. Anna is said to be from Trudering near Munich.<sup>354</sup> The link with his own life is teasingly made by Bernhard with Anna's surname – which is the same as the maiden name of Bernhard's friend,

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<sup>351</sup> See the following: Louis Huguet, *Thomas Bernhard ou le silence du Sphinx*, Cahiers de l'Université de Perpignan, 11 (Perpignan: Presses universitaires de Perpignan, 1991); Louis Huguet, *Chronologie: Johannes Freumbichler, Thomas Bernhard*, trans. by Renate Langer (Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, [n.d.]), and: Hans Höller, *Thomas Bernhard* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993).

<sup>352</sup> See: Maleta, *Seteais*; Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard - Eine Begegnung*; Bader, *Thomas Bernhard - Karl Ignaz Hennetmair*. Maleta was a good friend of Bernhard and travelled with him on many occasions; Hennetmair was Bernhard's estate agent and former confidant; Fleischmann also knew him well; she originally made the interviews transcribed in this volume as films for ORF.

<sup>353</sup> Maleta reports how Bernhard takes her round the island, showing her such spots as the hotel where he had written *Beton*. See: Maleta, p.44.

<sup>354</sup> Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard - Eine Begegnung*, p.74, and: Bernhard, *Beton*, p.180.

Christa Altenburg. Fleischmann reports that Gabriele's husband fell inexplicably from a hotel room in Santa Ponsa, and she even provides a picture of Bernhard and Gabriele at the cemetery in Palma.<sup>355</sup> Furthermore, the setting for Fleischmann's interview with Bernhard, in his favourite café on the Passeig d'es Borne opposite the 'Canaellas' perfumery mirrors the scene in *Beton* where Rudolf describes his first meeting Anna and having a drink with her.<sup>356</sup> The marked similarities between Bernhard and Rudolf transport the reader back to a world akin to that of the autobiographies where there are recognizable intertextual links and revelations consistent with biographical documentation about Bernhard's life: Bernhard suffered from sarcoidosis and was first admitted to hospital for this condition in 1967;<sup>357</sup> moreover, he was an insomniac;<sup>358</sup> Bernhard had a cleaner called Frau Kienesberger at his home in Ohlsdorf, introduced to him by Hennesmair; Bernhard's letters to Hennesmair reveal how, even while lying seriously ill in Vienna, he was concerned, like Rudolf, about precise domestic arrangements, such as special arrangements for keys and a leaking boiler.<sup>359</sup> Other personal references, many familiar from the autobiographies, also abound: the grandfather's famous blanket;<sup>360</sup> Bernhard's well-documented love of maps and atlases;<sup>361</sup> the affection for ordinary people ('die sogenannten einfachen Leute'), reminiscent of the adolescent's experiences in the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung,<sup>362</sup> and references to real-life friends and acquaintances, like Paul Wittgenstein.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard - Eine Begegnung*, p.74.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, p.75. The variant spelling, Cañellas, is another minor change made by Bernhard. Augustin Baumgartner's beautifully photographed volume of the landmarks in Bernhard's books includes a useful section on *Beton*: Augustin Baumgartner, *Auf den Spuren von Thomas Bernhard* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), pp.70-7.

<sup>357</sup> Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.17.

<sup>358</sup> Huguet, *Le silence du sphinx*, p.32 [footnote 51]: 'Thomas Bernhard, qui souffrait des séquelles d'une tuberculose pulmonaire et qu'étouffait la position couchée, fut insomniaque pendant de nombreuses années.' See also: Bernhard, *Beton*, p.199.

<sup>359</sup> Bader, p.57.

<sup>360</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.11.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, p.148.

<sup>363</sup> See: *ibid.*, pp.99 and 103. For a detailed literary exposition of the relationship with Paul Wittgenstein, see: Thomas Bernhard, *Wittgensteins Neffe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982).

Many of the events in *Beton* are clearly not invented even if they are fictive. It is such authorial adaptation of real-life events which leads Mittermayer to say: 'die Grenze zwischen Authentizität und Fiktion [in *Beton* ist] auffällig porös.'<sup>364</sup> These links are, however, not a back-door route to indirect autobiography for Bernhard. The seven years before 1982 had seen five autobiographical volumes, and as Bernhard admits, he had had enough by 1982: 'Nach dem fünften Band [der Autobiographie] entschied ich mich, einen Schlußstrich zu ziehen.'<sup>365</sup> Rudolf's narrative, though in an urgent and subjective first-person mode, is encased in third-person sentences (on the first and last pages) which remind us that author and narrator, however closely related, are distinctly separate entities.<sup>366</sup> Bernhard ensures that any reader tempted to forge biographical or systematic identification between author and the narrator-protagonist is thwarted. *Beton* is, indeed, a deeply personal narrative exploration, but major narrative episodes, like Anna's story, are used by the author within Rudolf's narrative as a creative and literary device for the fictional protagonist's self-exploration. Rudolf's external circumstances distance him from his creator: Bernhard did not have a family home like Peiskam to fall back on; he had no older sister; unlike Rudolf, he had no private income, and Rudolf's spendthrift attitude contrasts starkly with the parsimonious home life portrayed in autobiographical volumes, such as *Der Keller* and *Ein Kind*; the journal's references to Rudolf's illustrious ancestors, such as a field marshal and an ambassador to Moscow, have no parallels in Bernhard's real life.<sup>367</sup>

The result of a fictional work where the writer is naturally more distanced from the narrated story than in autobiography is that the narrative can become a literary exploration in which the author can experiment and probe certain thematic and stylistic

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<sup>364</sup> Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.106.

<sup>365</sup> Jean-Louis de Rambures, 'Alle Menschen sind Monster, sobald sie ihren Panzer lüften', trans. by Andres Müry in Dreissinger, *Von einer Katastrophe*, pp.104-13 (p.107). This interview originally appeared in *Le Monde* (7 January 1983), followed by an abridged version in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (24 February 1983) entitled 'Ich behaupte nicht, mit der Welt gehe es schlechter'.

<sup>366</sup> See: Bernhard, *Beton*, pp.7 and 212-13.

<sup>367</sup> See: Huguet, *Chronologie*, p.21: 'Diese [Bernhards Vorfahren] sind keineswegs die betuchten Bürgerleute, als die sie der Autor beschreibt [...].'

concerns using his narrator figure. However, while Bernhard is clearly not Rudolf, it would be wrong to discount manifest links between author and protagonist since all the parallels adduced above clearly illustrate that events from his personal life captured Bernhard's imagination sufficiently to make him want to explore them within a fictional, literary narrative. Prose, unlike his plays, is always Bernhard's principal creative medium for self-exploration. It is the medium in which intense self-exploration can take place, away from the dramatic expedients necessary for a performed piece in front of a live audience (“[beim Roman] bleibt man allein”).<sup>368</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that, more than ever after the start of the autobiographical project in 1975, Bernhard's protagonists share an important element of their identity, even personal situation, with their creator, although they are also, above all, fictional characters in their own right. It should additionally be considered that, in 1981, when Bernhard was working on *Beton*, the autobiographical cycle was clearly still very much in his mind. But *Beton* is emphatically a work of fiction, and it marks a final step away from the autobiographical recollections back to a fictive narrator.

The years between 1975 and 1982 formed a period of transition in Bernhard's output as the middle-aged writer (Bernhard was in his mid-forties when he began writing the autobiographies) took stock of his life. He emerged a more positive writer in the '80s; there is greater evidence of a more sanguine, less jaundiced narratorial attitude to other people, life, and the possibility for happiness than before the narrative ordering of his life began in 1975. As explained in the previous chapter, the final part of the pentalogy is probably Bernhard's least gloomy prose work up to 1982. Just months after the publication of *Beton*, Bernhard gave an interview in which he dismissed accusations of unmitigated nihilism; while readily admitting that his books contain negativity and hatred, he made the counter-claim in this interview that there is in equal measure

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<sup>368</sup> Karin Kathrein, 'Es ist eh alles positiv: Thomas Bernhard über seine Bücher, seine Feinde und sich selbst' in Dreisinger, *Thomas Bernhard: Portraits*, pp.187-91 (p.188). This interview originally appeared in *Die Presse* (22/23 September 1984).

constructive, positive emotion at work in his writing: 'Bei jedem meiner Bücher bin ich zwischen Leidenschaft und Haß [...] hin und her gerissen.'<sup>369</sup> There is an oscillation between these extreme positions without a definitive resting place; it is a movement which applies to Bernhard's prose in general which is composed to a large extent of themes in opposition and complementing stylistic techniques, as witnessed in the chapters on the autobiographies.

From what Bernhard said to Karin Kathrein in 1984, he did not envisage any final resolution to this alternating movement between opposites; Kathrein reports that he seeks 'weniger de[n] Mittelweg, vielmehr die Balance zwischen den Extremen'.<sup>370</sup> Later in the interview, Bernhard talked of his 'Haßliebe' for Austria. The inseparability and natural co-existence of positive and negative impulses provides one of the most potentially revealing areas of discussion and interpretation in his entire *œuvre*. As the autobiographies revealed, both positive and negative elements were present in the protagonist's self-exploration and perception of his environment; in the narratives, consequently, Bernhard's figures can be true to themselves and best show their innermost self with honesty and accuracy when they accept that the world is neither a 'Paradies' nor a nihilistic hell. *Beton* is the first fictional work where both elements co-exist, with the narrator's and protagonist's constructive, conciliatory and positive impulses coming to the fore. In the interview with Kathrein, Bernhard made some of his most unequivocal refutations of his tag as a prophet of unrelenting negativity: "Wenn ich wirklich so negativ wäre, würde ich nicht mehr leben."<sup>371</sup> Moreover, he gives a warning in this interview to any reader willing to interpret uncritically his negative landscapes.

In the case of previous books, where Bernhard depicted suicide, despair, and existential boredom, critics have almost unanimously concluded that the works revel in

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<sup>369</sup> Rambures, 'Alle Menschen sind Monster', p.107.

<sup>370</sup> Kathrein, 'Es ist eh alles positiv', p.187. This piece is an interview-article, so opinions Kathrein attributes to Bernhard can be regarded more as third-person paraphrase of the interview than her own critical judgement.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid.

and condone these emotions and actions and that the writer behind the story must be equally negative and despairing. Kathrein reports how Bernhard says that “positive Regungen, Gefühle, Gedanken” can be aroused by painting an ostensibly negative narrative picture.<sup>372</sup> The implication is clear: the reader needs to look for clues beneath the surface of the narrative to find another meaning. In such a narrative, small details can be more important than they seem, and a close reading becomes a powerful interpretative tool. A perceptive and versatile reader is required in such a view of the artistic work. If he is to succeed in creating such a work, Bernhard must ensure that the exploration undertaken by the narrative does not run significantly counter to experience: “Dem Leser einer idealistischen Dichtung, dem kann dagegen Abscheu vermittelt werden. Wer die Absicht durchschaut und erkennt, wie in Wirklichkeit ganz anders ist, der fällt ins Negative zurück.”<sup>373</sup> Although Bernhard does not detail precisely how the writer must remain faithful to reality, the implication is clear: the reader will lose faith in the literary document if it is unrealistically idealistic or prescriptive and does not depict life with all its problems and difficulties. Bernhard can be seen here to assign an extremely active role to the reader who is invited not to accept any narratorial diatribes at face value but rather to discern positive elements through them.

In an interview with Niklas Frank, given in the same year as he was working on *Beton*, Bernhard insisted: ‘Ich brauch’ überhaupt nix erfinden.’<sup>374</sup> In a slightly later interview, he elaborates to Rambures: ‘Wenn Ihnen die Wirklichkeit weniger erstaunlich erscheint als meine Erfindung, liegt das einzig daran, daß die Tatsachen in zerstreuter Form auftreten. [...] Das Geheimnis besteht darin, die Wirklichkeit unerbittlich zu raffen [...]’<sup>375</sup> For Bernhard, the literary narrative is not there to invent pleasing scenarios but to rework in concentrated form (‘raffen’) the writer’s experiences and explore them within

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., p.188.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Niklas Frank, ‘Ansichten eines unverbesserlichen Weltverbessers’, in Dreissinger, *Von einer Katastrophe*, pp.89-94 (p.91). This interview was originally published in *Stern* (4 June 1981).

<sup>375</sup> Rambures, ‘Alle Menschen sind Monster’, p.111-12.

a creative, literary framework. Communication between reader and text depends on the reader's willingness to look closely enough and to follow the text scrupulously, however difficult the author might make it for him. By pointing the way to interpretation which looks beyond the surface or the immediately perceptible, Bernhard can be seen here to be inviting the reader to look for a positive outlook and hope in his writings while acknowledging the social and personal criticisms contained in the text. Even for readers and critics particularly impressed by Bernhard's existential and social nihilism, it is difficult to cast aside the unequivocal positive thrust in his strident comments to Kathrein: "Es ist eh alles positiv [...] Das hat ja das Übergewicht - das Positive."<sup>376</sup> Kathrein reports 'wie ihn das Etikett des unerbittlich Negativen ärgert.'<sup>377</sup> It is not only in the light of all these authorial statements, but principally as a result of the manifest evidence consistent with a more positive narratorial outlook and attitude in the narrative of *Beton*, that the search for aspects of hope and communication is justified and validated. This textual evidence enables the reputation of an unremittingly negative writer to be modified.

#### (b) Narrative Synopsis

For the most part, *Beton* is typical of Bernhard's prose in its absence of plot: Rudolf, suffering from crippling sarcoidosis and writer's block, is the psychologically and physically tortured narrator whose rambling self-analysis centres principally upon the influence exercised on him by his domineering older sister, Elisabeth, and upon his ten-year futile project to write an academic piece on his favourite composer, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy.<sup>378</sup> He lives in Peiskam, the large and well-appointed house left to his sister and him by their late parents. On the surface, Rudolf could easily be taken for another difficult, socially-maladjusted Bernhard protagonist venting his anger and

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<sup>376</sup> Kathrein, 'Es ist eh alles positiv', p.187.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> See, for instance: Bernhard, *Beton*, pp.13-19 and 24-35.

bitterness at the world around him; a closer look at his account, however, reveals consistent hints of hope. The narrative is mostly a first-person transcription from Rudolf's diary. Four-fifths of the narrative is devoted to his observations while he is in the house, with the remainder describing his sojourn in Palma. The narrative is striking for its casual yet intense discussions of specific and personal subjects, like Rudolf's encounters with perfectionism,<sup>379</sup> friendship,<sup>380</sup> and hypocrisy,<sup>381</sup> as well as less striking detours into broad areas like the abject state of Austrian culture and life,<sup>382</sup> the depravity of the press,<sup>383</sup> politics,<sup>384</sup> and the medical profession;<sup>385</sup> it is also notable for more unusual discursive excursions, such as the 'Hundekomödie', a trenchant, perceptive, but also surreal sermon — with freely associative narrative elements — about the exaggerated status afforded to pets by people and how dogs rule the world indirectly by causing wars and even taking over great minds, like Schopenhauer.<sup>386</sup> The narrative is, however, not principally a tool to vent the author's personal, social, and political frustrations. In fact, many of its most fruitful parts contain small, apparently insignificant descriptions, ranging from the narrator's thoughts about his prospective clothes purchases<sup>387</sup> to specific details about the musical development of his intellectual companion in Palma, the young Cañellas girl.<sup>388</sup> It is in descriptions such as these that the concealed meaning of the text, outlined by Bernhard to Kathrein, can be located. The narrator covers such subjects as his past life,<sup>389</sup> his sister's materialistic and domineering nature,<sup>390</sup> her shamelessly hypocritical friends and business associates,<sup>391</sup> as well as more

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<sup>379</sup> Ibid., pp.116-17.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., p.72.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., pp.58-61.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., p.88.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., p.149.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., p.146.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid., p.150.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., pp.74-9.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., p.106.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., p.200.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., pp.142-7.

<sup>390</sup> See, for instance: *ibid.*, pp.13 and 25.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.62-5.

pleasant encounters, including his sympathetic descriptions of Frau Kienesberger, his loyal maid,<sup>392</sup> and his visit to an eccentric old war veteran whom he likes.<sup>393</sup> His sister's suggestion that he should go away to a warmer climate for his psychological and physical well-being preys on his mind, and — after prolonged agonizing about where to go — he eventually decides in favour of going to Palma and taking his favoured Room 734 at the stylish and comfortable Hotel Meliá.<sup>394</sup> Just as the reader is giving up all hope of a change of scene from a man whose departure is forever imminent and in whose case words would seem to speak louder than actions, the reader is suddenly informed, in mid-sentence, of Rudolf's arrival in Palma.<sup>395</sup> After an initial period of rest and sleep, the narrative concentrates on the uncharacteristically racy and action-packed tale of Anna Härdtl upon whom the narrator chanced about two years prior to this diary entry. Rudolf recalls in some detail her horrific tale about the decline of the family business in a suburb of Munich and the family's subsequent disastrous holiday in Majorca where her husband, Hanspeter, falls to his death mysteriously from the balcony of their hotel room.<sup>396</sup> These distressing events are followed by a description of the administrative inefficiencies and bureaucratic errors which torment the hapless Anna, even after the demise of her husband. The book ends as Rudolf visits Härdtl's grave on an impulse only for him to find out that now Anna's name has been added to the gravestone. The keeper of the cemetery informs him that it was a case of suicide. Back in the hotel, and with the help of sleeping pills, the otherwise insomniac narrator sleeps soundly and without interruption for a full twenty-six hours.

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<sup>392</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., pp.92-7.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., pp.79-98.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., p.170.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., pp.180-200.

## 1. CRITICAL RECEPTION

For a text which Charles Martin calls a ‘major work’, the volume of substantial secondary material on *Beton* is surprisingly small.<sup>397</sup> This is possibly due to the fact that it was published so soon after the release of *Ein Kind*, the fifth and final part of the autobiographical pentalogy. It was reviewed by the mainstream German and Austrian press only a few months after *Ein Kind*.<sup>398</sup> The critical reception of the autobiographies, and most pertinently in 1982, *Ein Kind*, continued the marked trend in Bernhard criticism since the early 1960s of tracing the supposedly negative and nihilistic traits in Bernhard’s narratives back to his opinions and personal life: for instance, the hard upbringing within a poor provincial family, the absence of a natural father during his childhood, and the effects of his persistent pulmonary illnesses. Most critics had been generally reluctant to engage with Bernhard’s autobiographical narratives from the point of view of language and style; they approached *Beton* no differently. The publication of the semi-autobiographical *Wittgensteins Neffe* in October 1982, a few weeks after *Beton* appeared at the end of August, exacerbated this tendency. *Beton* was inconveniently sandwiched between two works which enabled inquisitive critics to delve into the personal life of an otherwise scrupulously private writer, a man who gave extremely little away in public about his everyday affairs.<sup>399</sup> In some ways, the biographical, non-literary approach to Bernhard’s works is explicable by the fact that all three of these texts, especially *Beton*, are difficult to read. Moreover, it is hard for the reviewer, usually permitted only a few hundred words of column space, to explain or describe the literary purpose of Bernhard’s intricate sentences with their intensely personal, often contradictory and always repetitive, challenges to the reader. The temptation is there to relate the works’ apparent prolix gloominess to awkward personal circumstances (especially in the cases of *Ein*

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<sup>397</sup> Martin, p.103.

<sup>398</sup> For a comprehensive list of reviews, see: Dittmar, *Thomas Bernhard Werkgeschichte*, pp.440-3.

<sup>399</sup> See, for instance: Maleta, pp.9-10.

*Kind* and *Wittgensteins Neffe* which are traceably autobiographical in content) and, further, to collocate the prose with earlier examples within the writer's *œuvre*. Most reviewers succumbed to this temptation to the detriment of an analysis or, at least, an indication of the rich complexity of the narrative.

(a) Reviews

The majority of reviews of *Beton* appearing in the German or Austrian press in 1982 were either negative or eager to confirm Bernhard's hatred of most things Austrian or human. Few asked why such a highly acclaimed writer — Bernhard had won a host of major awards by 1982 — would seek to repeat the same thoughts time and again in creative prose form in his writings.<sup>400</sup> Bernhard never made any secret of his contempt for journalism and journalists, especially the 'Feuilletonisten' writing in Austrian and German newspapers and magazines; these same critics, unwilling to engage with the narrative itself, were now exacting revenge on him. In Austria, commentators were keen to unite author's and narrator's voices, with such uniform verdicts of *Beton* as 'Eingemauert in Angst und Ablehnung', 'Lebensekel für die Schöngelster' and 'Verstörung in Peiskam'.<sup>401</sup> The fact that this last review takes the title of an earlier Bernhard story is no coincidence; many reviewers were eager to see *Beton* as a reiteration of Bernhard's early prose, another example of the grumbling negativity ('Murren hinter der Maske') and world-weariness ('Nichts als Weltschmerz') reputedly characteristic of all of Bernhard's prose prior to 1975 when *Die Ursache*, the first instalment of the autobiographical cycle, appeared.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>400</sup> His list of prizes up to 1982 reads impressively: 'Julius Campe-Preis' (1964); 'Literaturpreis der freien Hansestadt Bremen' (1965); 'Literarische Ehrengabe des Kulturkreises im Bundesverband der deutschen Industrie' (1967); 'Österreichischer Staatspreis' (1968); 'Anton Wildgans-Preis' (1968); 'Büchner-Preis' (1970); 'Franz Theodor Csokor-Preis' (1972); 'Adolf Grimme-Preis' (1972); 'Grillparzer-Preis' (1972); 'Hannoverscher Dramatiker-Preis' (1974); 'Prix Séguier' (1974); 'Literaturpreis der Österreichischen Bundeswirtschaftskammer' (1976); 'Premio Prato' (1982).

<sup>401</sup> Elisabeth Effenberger, 'Eingemauert in Angst und Ablehnung', *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 2 October 1982; Gisela Elsner, 'Lebensekel für die Schöngelster', *konkret*, 10 (1982), 116; Hans Jansen, 'Verstörung in Peiskam', in *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 December 1982.

<sup>402</sup> Reinhold Tauber, 'Murren hinter der Maske', *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*, 12 November 1982, and: Harry Lachner, 'Nichts als Weltschmerz', *Stuttgarter Nachrichten*, 6 October 1982.

In Germany, the story was not much different: reviewers sought either to evaluate the book from a biographical standpoint or to pass it off as another nihilistic, ill-tempered diatribe against anything and everything. A typical example of this approach was Hellmuth Karasek's preview of the book in *Der Spiegel*; Karasek previewed *Beton* together with a review of one of Bernhard's plays which had been published the previous year, *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* (1981).<sup>403</sup> Little space is given to *Beton* in Karasek's article, and what is said is unsympathetic and does not highlight or discuss narrative complexity; Karasek insists that in *Beton* Bernhard has just served up more of the same by creating another predictably miserable *alter ego*: '[...] Rudolf ist so unverkennbar ein aufs Papier gebrachter Doppelgänger des Einödschreibers Bernhard, daß man selbst die Paradoxie der schreiberischen Impotenz kopfnickend zur Kenntnis nimmt: wer bei Bernhard viel redet, sagt nichts.'<sup>404</sup> This perspective on the text, where a distinction between Rudolf and his creator is, at best, blurred, regards the narrator in *Beton* as an extension of Bernhard's views and the creative work as an oblique manifesto of personal opinions about favourite subjects. Clearly, Bernhard's attempt to decelerate the reading speed does not work for Karasek, who reduces Rudolf's arguably intricate, rich narrative to a long-winded, dismal tirade. Karasek sets aside the finer details of a subtle and demanding text, preferring instead to concentrate upon extra-literary factors; indeed, he disregards narrative concerns to such an extent that he also misreads the plot: 'Rudolf ist fast nur noch auf dem Friedhof zu finden, wo er die betonierten Gräber des Selbstmörders und seiner Frau, die ihn in den Tod gefolgt ist, aufsucht.'<sup>405</sup> Rudolf only visits the grave of Anna and Hanspeter Härdtl once during his sojourn this time, and Karasek's earlier assertion that Rudolf bumps into Anna during this visit is inaccurate since he does not see her at any point during his latest stay in Majorca.<sup>406</sup> The events

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<sup>403</sup> Hellmuth Karasek, 'Vom Unglück des Ruhms und Glück des Unheils', *Der Spiegel*, 5 July 1982, pp.134-6.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134. Although Karasek's words on the play can properly be termed a review, the account of *Beton* is a preview since it was published at the end of August. Karasek's article appeared in June.

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, p.136.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*

recounted by Rudolf in his journal refer back to a time eighteen months to two years before, when he first made Anna's acquaintance. The avoidance of textual analysis does not stop there: Karasek is particularly curious about Bernhard's commercial activities. His comments are delivered with cutting sarcasm which hints at personal animosity: 'Bernhard hält also zwei Verlagshäuser in Trab, die mit dem rastlosen Ausstoß seiner Prosa beschäftigt sind. Und auf dem Theater ist es nicht anders. [...] Doch keine Angst, die nächsten Dramen kommen bestimmt.'<sup>407</sup>

Peter Buchka in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* concludes that enough is enough; his review echoes the views of many critics who were incensed by what they perceived to be the lack of variety in Bernhard's prose output. Bernhard's repetition and tirades can no longer be taken seriously, according to Buchka, and he is honest enough to admit that he is not prepared to enter into the text in any meaningful way: 'Ich las zwei Seiten, lachte über die Unverfrorenheit, mit der Bernhard seiner irrsinnigen Virtuosität noch einen weiteren Kick gegeben hatte - und legte das Buch beiseite.'<sup>408</sup> Buchka, like Karasek, feels that time has not changed Bernhard's writing; he likens reading *Beton* to encountering a once-close friend whom one has not seen for a long time but who none the less now still displays 'die früheren Marotten und Verschrobenheiten'.<sup>409</sup> Wolfram Schütte in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* also sees Rudolf as typical of Bernhard's protagonists: a man in crisis, one who is growing old and perceptibly nearing death. Schütte concludes that the journal entries of Bernhard's scholar *manqué* are ultimately the laments of contrition, 'Klagelieder um ein verlorenes Leben'.<sup>410</sup>

While Karasek and Buchka do not concern themselves with the literary aspects of the narrative, Günter Blöcker adopts a more text-centred approach; he provides one of the most sympathetic, sensitive, and perceptive reviews of *Beton* in the German-language

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<sup>407</sup> Ibid., p.134.

<sup>408</sup> Peter Buchka, 'Nörgelei als Widerstand', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 October 1982.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> Wolfram Schütte, "'Ich frage mich, und ich antworte mir'", *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 6 October 1982.

press. Blöcker engages directly with the way in which Rudolf's story is written; he detects a development, or at least a marked change, from the pre-autobiographical fiction. He argues constructively and convincingly that the pentalogy was a way for Bernhard to order thoughts about his life but, equally significantly, it heralds an important stylistic change in his prose: 'Von Band zu Band [der Autobiographie] wich der obsessive Monologcharakter seiner Prosa einer immer stärker objektivierenden Darstellungsweise und damit einer entspannteren Erzählhaltung.'<sup>411</sup> Unlike Karasek and Buchka, he does not regard *Beton* as a typical Bernhard prose text but sees signs of 'einer typischen Bernhard-Situation'; the distinction is important.<sup>412</sup> The difference from the earlier works, according to Blöcker, lies in the book's readability; it is 'geradliniger und durchsichtiger' than prose fiction up to *Korrektur* in 1975.<sup>413</sup> The clear implication is that the external circumstances with which Bernhard's latest protagonist has to contend have not changed; the change lies in his attitude and in his creator's treatment of him. In keeping, however, with the prevalent biographical perspective on Bernhard's prose rife in the German-language press, Blöcker is sometimes tempted to conflate protagonist and author; he concludes how much happier Bernhard has become since 1975, by contrasting Rudolf with Konrad (of *Das Kalkwerk*).<sup>414</sup> In his enthusiasm to differentiate *Beton* from earlier prose, Blöcker describes *Beton*, perhaps somewhat over-neatly, as a 'Synthese der vom Verfasser seither entwickelten Stilfiguren' and Rudolf as a man who is 'durch Ekel dem Leben verbunden'.<sup>415</sup> Rudolf certainly signals a more manifestly hopeful Bernhard protagonist. However, Bernhard's contradictory, self-correcting narrative strives to make the reader work hard to achieve insights through his own sensitivity to language and narrative techniques and rhythms; it is difficult, in the case of *Beton*'s elusive narrative,

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<sup>411</sup> Günter Blöcker, 'Ein paar Totenköpfe', *FAZ*, 25 September 1982.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*: *Das Kalkwerk* appeared in 1970, and it is unclear here precisely to what the date 1975 refers. Blöcker might well be thinking of the appearance of the first volume of the autobiographical pentalogy, *Die Ursache*, which was indeed in 1975 - or it may be a typographical error.

<sup>415</sup> Blöcker, 'Ein paar Totenköpfe'.

to justify an interpretation which points to Blöcker's stridently programmatic authorial intentions.

In England and America, reviewers in newspapers and literary journals struggled to come to terms with Bernhard's long sentences and intricate descriptions. David McLintock, Bernhard's English translator, ascribes this to the 'misplaced fidelity' of translators who reproduced in English Bernhard's ostensibly impenetrable prose.<sup>416</sup> He concludes that a British and American readership, brought up on shorter sentences and a more conventional sense of tense usage and plot linearity, is understandably averse to Bernhard's elaborate sentence constructions. This incompatibility can be seen as the main reason why McLintock can say as late as 1997: '[*Concrete*] erhielt in England nur eine einzige gute Besprechung.'<sup>417</sup> He is referring here to Philip Brady's extremely short review in the *TLS* of McLintock's English translation. Like many of the German reviewers, Brady does not regard Rudolf as a figure whose narrative is self-revealing: 'The result [of the narrative] is not self-portrayal - Rudolf's identity is not so much revealed as obliterated by his obsession [the unwritten book on Mendelssohn].'<sup>418</sup> Brady here follows German and Austrian critics in ascribing to the narrative of *Beton* general insights into Bernhard's protagonists rather than highly individual and specific information about Rudolf and his motivations; Brady excludes the possibility that when Rudolf 'fulminates, rambles, repeats himself, contradicts himself', he makes and subtly qualifies statements about himself.<sup>419</sup> In his own review of *Beton*, McLintock, like Blöcker, feels that there is more to Rudolf than meets the eye: '[...] these [descriptions in *Beton*] are not simply the ravings of a madman.'<sup>420</sup> However, McLintock's conclusions indicate that a message emerges from the book; his discussion here does not concentrate

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<sup>416</sup> McLintock, 'The Voice of the Salzburg Fool', p.7.

<sup>417</sup> David McLintock, 'Thomas Bernhard und der englischsprachige Übersetzer', in *Thomas Bernhard: Beiträge zur Fiktion der Postmoderne. Londoner Symposium*, ed. by Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, Adrian Stevens and Fred Wagner (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1997), pp.177-99 (p.187).

<sup>418</sup> Philip Brady, 'Elegant Overkill', *TLS*, 28 September 1984, p.1085.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>420</sup> David McLintock, 'Dog Days in Vienna', *TLS*, 4 March 1983, p.223.

on the process of narration or self-examination: '*Beton* is an eloquent and despairing indictment of our society and of the human nature that created it.'<sup>421</sup> John Simon in the *New York Times Book Review*, in his review of McLintock's faithful translation of the work, favours a stock interpretation of Rudolf which casts him not only as a determined nihilist but also as someone who resolutely shuns life: 'Is Rudolf one of the walking dead? Mr Bernhard's characters are drawn to death, either jaggedly harrying themselves toward it or helplessly drifting into it.'<sup>422</sup> While this latter comment might apply to some of the protagonists of the early work, such as the brothers in *Amras*, it is out-of-date by 1984 and certainly not appropriate for Rudolf who fights for his life in Majorca. Simon, like some of the dismissive German critics, links extreme and acerbic criticism of humanity and society to desire for death, universal misanthropy and contempt for life. However, Bernhard's prose is richer and his optimism more marked if one differentiates between the scathing criticism and the impulse behind it. This distinction is crucial because it enables Bernhard's work to be seen as a balance of narrative tension between thwarted idealism and actual misery against a backdrop of stubborn hope present in the narrative, rather than as a succession of dour reminders of death and obliteration.

#### (b) Books and Articles

For a narrative of its scope and magnitude, *Beton* is arguably Bernhard's most neglected major prose work. Curiously, academic writers have shied away from it. There are no books and few academic articles largely or entirely devoted to *Beton* and its narrative. The major critical studies on Bernhard's prose and his *œuvre* devote little critical attention to it. In his 1991 survey of Bernhard's literary output, Stephen Dowden provides no separate discussion of the book.<sup>423</sup> Mittermayer, in his comprehensive survey

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid. There is a fuller discussion by this critic of Bernhard's style and individual voice in: McLintock, 'The Voice of the Salzburg Fool', pp.7-8.

<sup>422</sup> John Simon, 'The Sun Never Rises on Rudolf', *New York Times Book Review*, 1 July 1984, p.9.

<sup>423</sup> Dowden only mentions it twice in the entire book: Dowden, pp.61 and 62.

of 1995, only gives *Beton* a couple of pages, and his comments centre mainly on the links between Rudolf's and Anna's circumstances and their parallels in real life.<sup>424</sup> He does not undertake a critical study of any aspects of the narrative. Olivier Jahraus, in his 1992 study of the prose works, similarly gives no sustained account of the book, alluding to it only in connection with other works or Bernhard's overall development.<sup>425</sup> None of the essays in Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler's important collection of articles published in 1991 tackles this text, either.<sup>426</sup> In Charles Martin's book, with its impressive compendium of critical responses to Bernhard's works, some space is admittedly given to *Beton*, but Martin's interest is primarily in 'social or existential problems'.<sup>427</sup> Martin starts by declaring, '[...] Bernhard finally abandons his nihilistic stance [in *Beton*]',<sup>428</sup> but he does not explore this aspect of the narrative, preferring instead to conclude that Rudolf's human contact is 'vestigial'.<sup>429</sup> Martin focuses on what he perceives as 'slapstick humour which is present throughout Rudolf's monologue [...]'.<sup>430</sup> For him, *Beton* is not a productive source of self-examination — what Mittermayer calls 'ein Buch der Selbstanalyse'<sup>431</sup> — which enables the reader to assess the direction of Bernhard's prose after the autobiographies. Instead, according to Martin, Rudolf is a pathetic figure of fun, 'a manifestly unprepossessing character, nothing short of hilarious'.<sup>432</sup> Despite the not uncommon view that the writing of the autobiographies can be seen as 'a new point of departure for the characters of the second period of narrative fiction' (Martin), and the fact that *Beton* stands at a pivotal juncture in Bernhard's output in that it was the first book to be published after the autobiographies, critics have not examined it closely in

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<sup>424</sup> Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard*, pp.105-7.

<sup>425</sup> Olivier Jahraus, *Das 'monomanische' Werk: eine strukturelle Werkanalyse des Œuvres von Thomas Bernhard*, Münchener Studien zur literarischen Kultur in Deutschland, 16 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992).

<sup>426</sup> Schmidt-Dengler, *Übertreibungskünstler*.

<sup>427</sup> Martin, pp.155-64.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, p.164.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155.

<sup>431</sup> Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.107.

<sup>432</sup> Martin, p.159.

this context.<sup>433</sup> In the opening paper surveying and introducing Bernhard's work at a colloquium in Norway in 1986 (four years after *Beton* came out), the speaker refers to 'eine durchgehende radikale Negativperspektive' as entirely characteristic of Bernhard's writing since the publication of *Frost* back in 1963.<sup>434</sup> The same critic, Kurt Bartsch, goes on to add: 'Monomanisch umkreist Bernhard, sich endlos wiederholend, auch sprachlich das Immergleiche.'<sup>435</sup> By making hope, a positive impulse, the focus of a textual investigation of *Beton*, however, a different reading of the text can emerge.

### (c) Hope

Hope, happiness, a positive outlook towards life – these are words used very sparingly in Bernhard criticism. The above brief survey of critical material on *Beton* attests to the fact that many critics have elected to bypass the narrative's merit in their analyses in favour of focusing on the overwhelming negativity of Rudolf's statements about Austria, human nature, and himself. There are, however, one or two critics, including anglophone commentators — far removed from the immediate social, political, and cultural implications of Bernhard's criticisms — who saw that there was more to the text than provocative, topical criticism; these critics detected that any death wish had modulated into a realization of the value of life, almost as if the long descriptions of illness in *Der Atem* and *Die Kälte* had reminded Bernhard of his own stubborn desire to overcome physical frailty and achieve something more positive or hopeful in his fictional writings. Most German and Austrian critics had not detected optimism and hope in the text; even potentially prompting signals went unheeded, such as on the dust-jacket of the book where the narrative is described as consisting of 'Sätzen, die warnen, bloßlegen und damit doch auch Hoffnung machen'.<sup>436</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., p.108.

<sup>434</sup> Kurt Bartsch, 'Das Fürchterliche ist ja auch immer lächerlich: einführende Anmerkungen zum Werk Thomas Bernhards', *Text und Kontext*, 14 (1986), 185-97 (p.185).

<sup>435</sup> Ibid.

<sup>436</sup> [Anonymous]: Bernhard, *Beton*, back cover.

Although no detailed account or literary analysis of the narrative has appeared, both Blöcker in the review cited above, and Martin Chalmers in his excellent short introduction to the 1989 English edition of *Beton*, point the way forward in this regard.<sup>437</sup> Blöcker is the first when he suggests a ‘positive Kraft in der Verneinung’.<sup>438</sup> He signals the long-overdue reminder that nihilism cannot be attributed to a character who is deeply concerned by what goes on around him, whose anger points beyond itself, to his cares and hopes: ‘Wem die Welt so viel bedeutet, daß er sie zum Gegenstand einer derart vehementen Kritik macht, ist noch nicht ganz für sie verloren.’<sup>439</sup> In discussing Bernhard’s uncompromising last wishes in his will, Chalmers describes the attempt to distance himself at any cost from Austria as an ‘expression of injured love’.<sup>440</sup> In an inversion of the opinion expressed by many critics (such as John Simon), he asserts that ‘Bernhard wrote against death.’<sup>441</sup> His introduction to *Beton* concludes that much of Bernhard’s work derives its narrative power from ‘an underlying intimation of a loss, a waste, of the potential for humanness’.<sup>442</sup> It is by looking at this text through the lens of authorial-narratorial disappointment, thwarted idealism and wasted opportunity that some revealing insights about the text can be uncovered, insights which are obscured if the narrative is perceived solely as the expression of anger, frustration and dull repetition.

## 2. HUMAN CONTACT

For a figure who has been accused by critics of wanting to die (Simon), being an empty vessel (Karasek), and a laughable nonentity (Martin), Rudolf is remarkably comfortable and well-adjusted in his social environment. He might give the impression of being an aggressive, even obsessive character — closely related to some of his predecessors in

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<sup>437</sup> Chalmers, p.v.

<sup>438</sup> Blöcker, ‘Ein paar Totenköpfe’.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Chalmers, p.i.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., p.iv.

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., p.v.

Bernhard's prose narratives — but his actual contact with his sister, the war veteran from Niederkreut, Frau Kienesberger, the Cañellas girl, and Anna Härdtl gives evidence of a vital character and outlook which call into question the view of him as a social outcast and misanthropic loner.

Rudolf's contact and dealings with other human beings can be broadly split into three parts. The first two-thirds or so of the narrative see him describing his contact with his domineering sister and the placid Frau Kienesberger. About half-way through the narrative, he visits the old war veteran in Niederkreut, and description is replaced by actual contact with another human being. In the final third of the journal, Anna and, to a lesser extent, the twenty-four-year-old Cañellas girl dominate proceedings.

Rudolf's relationship with his sister, Elisabeth, has two distinct sides: his words about her (in her absence) and his behaviour towards her when she is there. They are quite contrasting. In the first half of the book, Rudolf spends a lot of time attacking her verbally or complaining about her, never to her face, but in his journal: since their earliest childhood, she has taken delight in driving him out of his 'Geistesparadies';<sup>443</sup> she humiliates him in front of his Viennese friends;<sup>444</sup> she is presented as hypocritical and devious in her business dealings, and so on.<sup>445</sup> However, in his actions and contact with her, Rudolf is a different man, altogether more compromising, gentle, even loving. She exercises a marked influence on him in three main areas: as a thwarter of his plans; as a representative, sometimes a metonym, for the brutal, insensitive outside world; and as an emphatic controller of Rudolf, at times verging on the role of sexual temptress, even dominatrix. In all three functions, she dominates him or perhaps, more accurately, he allows her to dominate. As early as the second page, her 'Herrschaft' is mentioned.<sup>446</sup> Since there are only Rudolf's descriptions of past events to go by, it is hard

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<sup>443</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.15.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*, p.52.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.61 and 63.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

to judge to what degree she is plainly bossy and to what extent Rudolf enjoys playing the role of the submissive younger brother. The fact that he seems to revel in her domination suggests the latter. When he describes her, even in childhood, trampling on his beloved atlas, his description is like a cinematic freeze-frame, near-erotic in its sudden intrusion as it contrasts starkly with his child-like imagination ('meiner kindlichen Phantasie'): '[...] sehe ich ihren plötzlich und böseartig daraufgesetzten Fuß.'<sup>447</sup> The sudden use of the present tense here in a passage principally in the pluperfect, makes the presence of her foot immediate and forceful and reiterates the effect of the childhood bullying which endures in his mind as he writes the journal. As such, it is a reminder that she affects him and matters to him, and an early sign that the aloof scholar is not as separate from the apparent objects of his wrath as he would have the reader believe.

Elisabeth's repeated taunts of 'mein kleiner Bruder' have such an effect on him that he calls himself 'der kleine Bruder' later on, as if in homage or obedience to her wishes.<sup>448</sup> At a dinner-party, where she is humiliating him in front of mutual acquaintances, his impulse to get up and leave is crushed by a mere look ('ein Blick meiner Schwester genügte').<sup>449</sup> The domination gains a physical, even sexual dimension as reports of her strong character and domination of men, including her husband, are interspersed with descriptions of gratuitous suggestiveness: she crosses her legs and earns a year's upkeep by charming some helplessly-smitten old baron;<sup>450</sup> she dismisses the need for pets, and dogs in particular, by claiming that she has her own lovers, with Rudolf adding tellingly: '[...] da hatte sie einen Hund, der so klein war, daß er in meiner Phantasie jedenfalls, unter ihren Stöckelschuhe hätte durchkriechen können.'<sup>451</sup> There is no definite indication of an impulse towards incest on either side. Sexual and erotic undertones are not actualized. Rudolf's relationship with his sister, though problematic,

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<sup>447</sup> Both quotations: *ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.26 and 64.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, p.79.

is not fundamentally disturbed; here finally is a fictional Bernhard figure who — any sexual suggestions or the usual sibling rivalry notwithstanding — has a working relationship with a close family member for whom he cannot deny his love. Rudolf might criticize Elisabeth vehemently, but he admires her too;<sup>452</sup> he can see through her attempts to undermine him, but he respects her opinions too - so much so that they make him question himself and his actions.<sup>453</sup> The contempt and hatred he feels for her are matched by a more conventional brotherly love, and even at his most critical, the vestiges of his love endure and are not obliterated: 'ich habe sie immer geliebt, mit allen ihren Fürchterlichkeiten.'<sup>454</sup>

On the one occasion he relates in detail the nature of a conversation with her — the telephone call he makes to her before leaving for Peiskam — he expresses warmth towards her as he is, for once, moved by their simple and natural conversation: 'Andererseits hatte sie sich mit einer ganz einfachen Bemerkung, daß ich nämlich auf mich aufpassen solle, von mir verabschiedet, die mich wiederum rührte.'<sup>455</sup> Never before in Bernhard's prose fiction has a protagonist taken such simple pleasure in close contact with a loved one. The positive, edifying contact between the young Bernhard and Podlaha or some of the inhabitants of the Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung in *Der Keller* comes closest, but Podlaha was not a blood relation; even the close liaison with the grandfather is fraught with difficulties and is, of course, not on an equal footing. Before 1975, familial bonds are stultified and impossible, most notably in *Amras*, *Das Kalkwerk*, and *Korrektur*. Rudolf has to hold back the tears here during his phone call, and the surge of emotion towards his sister here brings him into closer contact with the outside world, as his next comment reveals:

Wie zerbrechlich wir sind, habe ich gedacht, wir führen alle so große Wörter im Mund und pochen tagtäglich und fortwährend auf unsere Härte und auf unseren

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<sup>452</sup> Ibid., p.64.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., pp.27 and 28.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., p.52.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., p.110.

Verstand und kippen von einem Augenblick auf den andern um und müssen ein Weinen erdrücken.<sup>456</sup>

In the term 'wir' here, Rudolf very much includes himself; there is nothing to suggest that he is distancing himself from other people, to whom at one stage he refers as 'die Andern'.<sup>457</sup> He could have used 'ich' here but instead prefers the more inclusive and general plural form. He goes on to say how he will ring her on a regular basis and she him while he is abroad: 'Wir haben es immer so gehalten.'<sup>458</sup> It is as if the real, human bond between brother and sister — the expression of a tacit love — is exposed here; this expression, in turn, leads to an urgency to make the best of life – to reject hardness and logical or theoretical argumentation in favour of more natural, emotional, non-cerebral forces symbolized by Rudolf's sudden urge to cry ('plötzlicher Weinkrampf').<sup>459</sup> This clear realization on Rudolf's part of man's (and his own) fragility is an emotional moment unusual in Bernhard's books. Rudolf's repeated references to the fact that he only has a year or two to live imbue the diaristic recollections with a mixture of nostalgia and bitterness; there is often an overwhelming sense of Rudolf looking back on his life. More pertinently, within the context of Rudolf's narrative, the realization of vulnerability signals an acceptance not only of the value of life as a concept but of his own life, the life he has to contend with – warts and all. The ailing adolescent in the autobiographies dearly wanted to survive, but he was made inconsolably angry by his thoughts about society and people. Rudolf, here, fundamentally questions his cerebral approach and emotional hardness. His situation is a far cry from the bleak deadlock experienced by Roithamer and Konrad, both of whom suffer as a result of their intense feelings but neither of whom can overcome them. After his telephone call to his sister here, Rudolf's admission of vulnerability is tantamount to a statement of hope – hope that he can cast

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., p.153.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., p.110.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid.

aside his false pride and hardness and not turn away from emotional closeness for ever. It is significant that he yields to a spontaneous and natural emotion which manifests his innate humanness. This essentially human act is not occasioned by any manufactured or artificial logical sequence or thought process; the feeling is genuine and ultimately untraceable, and it signals a telling jolt for the reader looking for or habituated to negative, nihilistic Bernhard protagonists.

Rudolf's relationship with Frau Kienesberger acts as a counterbalance to his relationship with his sister; there is none of the thwarted intimacy and seething frustration; there are no sexual tensions, no disagreements, and no personal power politics but, equally, no deep love. Unlike his attractive, changeable sister, Frau Kienesberger is ordinary, quiet (she has speech impediments), reliable, and someone with whom Rudolf can converse naturally and easily.<sup>460</sup> It is worthy of note that Bernhard enabled the fictional Kienesberger to be able to communicate with words; the real-life one, as Peter Bader reports in Hennenmair's collection of correspondence with Bernhard, was a deaf-mute and worked for him loyally from 1975 until his death in 1989.<sup>461</sup> She marks another milestone in Rudolf's process of socialization, his positive experiences in the arena of human contact and communication. In his relationship with his cleaning lady, Rudolf strikes up the kind of easy-going, uncomplicated friendship that the young Bernhard is seen to enjoy with some of the manual workers in *Der Keller*. Rudolf's relationship with his sister is at its closest and most heightened when they communicate with each other about neutral matters (such as her saying to him, 'Take care of yourself') rather than arguing theoretically – about their advice to each other regarding how the other one should lead his or her life, or the merits or otherwise of music, business practice or travelling plans. With Frau Kienesberger, a calmer, more

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>461</sup> Bader, p.48.

reflective side to Rudolf's observations emerges as he portrays her to be the epitome of common sense, unreflective and natural:

[...] sie erzieht ihre Kinder, indem sie überhaupt nicht über diese Erziehung ihrer Kinder nachdenkt, sie praktiziert auf die ideale Weise, was andere sich erst ausdenken müssen in ihrem Spekulationsfanatismus und scheitert nicht, wo die andern scheitern müssen.<sup>462</sup>

It is noteworthy that the narrator adds the verb 'müssen' at the end of this long sentence. It is *necessarily* impossible to supplant human, natural responses with well-meaning, thought-out, rational constructions. It simply does not work; life is not like that. In certain situations, a human response must take precedence. The example of bringing up children is most pertinent since the narrator criticizes the way other parents rear their children. It is not accidental that Frau Kienesberger's unconsciously warm and human methods succeed where others' theoretical approaches founder. While it is clear that Rudolf might here be indulging in the tendency among intellectuals to idealize so-called 'simple' people, this narrative episode, more importantly, shows that he is not a resigned nihilist; he is eager to think about others' self-development or education.

Rudolf's comment, just before the endorsement of Frau Kienesberger's methods of child-rearing, that she spoils her children neither too much nor too little ('nicht zuviel und nicht zu wenig') shows a concern for a gentle balance in matters of human interest (here: bringing up children), and it rather gives the lie to a narrator who has been termed an aesthete, a 'Schönggeist'.<sup>463</sup> It is important that Rudolf's extended paean to Frau Kienesberger ends with the question: 'Wo gibt es das noch?'<sup>464</sup> The universal and general criticism of human nature, especially rife in the first half of the journal, is counterbalanced here by a positive and specific statement about his cleaner, but implicit in this statement is a criticism of prevailing social attitudes: other people do indeed

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<sup>462</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.126.

<sup>463</sup> Elsner, p.116.

<sup>464</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.127.

complicate the issue, rear their children unnaturally, rely on wild theories ('Spekulationsfanatismus'), and fail ('scheitern'). It is noteworthy that this ringing endorsement of the qualities of Frau Kienesberger is an actual example, not a generality, like the vague blasts at human behaviour earlier in the book ('Seit dreißig Jahren dasselbe Bild, dieselben Menschen, dieselben Stumpfsinnigkeiten, dieselben Infamien, Niederträchtigkeiten, Verlogenheiten').<sup>465</sup> Anyone who can chide humanity for showing no genuine concern for fellow human beings, as Rudolf does, but show warmth and derive hope from individual and specific contact might be regarded as disproving his own theory, but he cannot be classed as unremittingly negative.

Elsewhere in *Beton*, Rudolf's association with people is in keeping with the above account of the life-affirmative, humane aspects of his relationship with his sister or his cleaner. In his contact with the war veteran from Niederkreut and, in Majorca, with the Cañellas girl and Anna, his manner is exemplary. The introverted and unhealthy scholar, as his sister would have it, behaves like a perfect gentleman. He cannot help being polite when he visits the old man although he admits that he is going to see him for his own benefit, and he even chides himself for being over-polite and not being able to help using some of his sister's stock phrases.<sup>466</sup> Human beings make a difference in *Beton*, whereas they simply did not make an impression on earlier protagonists. Strauch, Konrad, Roithamer all know what they think; they have effectively reached the end of a process and perpetually regret the mental and existential impasse in which they find themselves, the rhythms of their own thought processes and descriptions providing what little consolation there is.

Rudolf, on the other hand, is open to change and a new perspective. He goes to the old man's house expecting a sympathetic cup of tea and confirmation that he should not travel to Palma; instead, he is captivated by the old man's unusual story about

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., p.94.

picking a random name out of the London telephone directory to be his will's sole beneficiary, like Murau in *Auslöschung*, since handing all his worldly possessions down to his family is undesirable in the extreme. Rudolf admits to being caught unawares by the old man's story ('ich hatte ihm so etwas nicht zugetraut');<sup>467</sup> in fact, the entire visit has exactly the opposite effect of the one he intended, and his frank self-admission is not only a refreshing thought ('erfrischende[r] Gedanke'),<sup>468</sup> it also leads to action as he decides in favour of going to Palma directly as a result of his visit: 'Hatte ich ihn aufgesucht, damit er mich von meinem Reiseplan abbringt, so hat er mich im Gegenteil gerade auf diesen Reiseplan hin halb verrückt gemacht.'<sup>469</sup> This change of plan indicates a major internal (psychological) development which bears an influence on his external (everyday) life: a human encounter has not only changed Rudolf's views about certain things, it also has determined his actions – unprecedented in this form in Bernhard's fiction.

Once he is in Palma (and recounting Anna's story and his encounter with her), Rudolf is at pains to stress the sensitivity and consideration with which he approaches Anna. He is horrified right from his first glimpse of her at the distressed impression she makes. He is overcome by a 'Gefühl [...] der unmittelbaren Betroffenheit über ein solches verzweifeltes Gesicht'.<sup>470</sup> For a man who said earlier in his diary that any kind of charitable action is a hypocritical lie, his natural concern for Anna is spontaneous and unreflective – the word 'plötzlich' is repeated in this section of the narrative as Rudolf's emotional and mental dislocation is brought home.<sup>471</sup> His self-reproach at talking to her in a 'gar nicht feinfühligem Ton' and his 'brutale Art [Anna] zu etwas zu zwingen' are genuine indicative statements, entirely untainted by the ironic qualifications, sarcasm,

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid., p.97.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., p.98.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., p.177.

<sup>471</sup> See: *ibid.*, p.180.

and bitterness apparent in other tirades elsewhere in the narrative.<sup>472</sup> Rudolf's words in this awkward situation betray shame ('Scham'), nervousness ('Nervosität'), and a sympathy for Anna's plight ('die junge Frau in ihrer höchsten Verzweiflung und Verwirrung').<sup>473</sup> He is keen for the Cañellas girl to stay; the diffidence and misanthropy of the journal-writer have dissolved in a real-life situation.<sup>474</sup> In fact, the presence of the attractive and talented young Spanish girl bewitches him. The ailing intellectual casts off his emotional problems and dances with her until two o'clock in the morning. So influential is the evening with the Cañellas girl that he recalls it vividly during his dozing reverie on the café terrace. There is, indeed, a hint of yearning in the description of his memory: 'Mit diesem Bild erwachte ich [...] und schaute zu den Fenstern der Cañellas hinüber.'<sup>475</sup> Thoughts of his illness return the morning after, and he is unsure whether he will be able to accompany Anna, but there is little doubt that the man who earlier claimed he had no friends other than dead philosophers, is now affected by the emotional and physical warmth of another human being (this time, outside the immediate family).

### 3. PERFECTIONISM, HOPE, AND IMPERFECTION

Perfectionism and hope are closely linked with each other from the outset of Rudolf's narrative. However, there is a development in *Beton* which sees the protagonist's stubborn perfectionism questioned and modulated into a more mature self-understanding, eventually leading to positive acceptance of imperfection. The effect of this development is to bring Rudolf closer to people, as detailed in the previous section, to make him more tolerant and understanding of human weakness and less harshly judgemental – an

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid., p.179.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., pp.180 (first two references) and 179.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid., p.185.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid., p.200.

important step towards realizing the ‘potential for humanness’, as Chalmers calls it, which accompanies Rudolf’s personal development in the journal.

As in *Das Kalkwerk* and *Korrektur*, perfectionism is a subject which preoccupies the protagonist in *Beton*. The difference between Rudolf and the earlier figures, Konrad and Roithamer, is that Rudolf learns to recognize and control this strong impulse where Konrad and Roithamer become stultified and perish. Like the earlier two protagonists, Rudolf is by nature an extreme perfectionist. However, he differs markedly from protagonists in Bernhard’s work up to 1975, in that repeated disappointment does not lead exclusively to cynicism and disillusionment – as embodied in his attitude towards his Mendelssohn project where his enthusiasm to begin the study is not dampened by ten years of manifest failure.<sup>476</sup> In fact, he does not surrender hope in any aspect of his life. He is repeatedly fired up by the prospect of a potential breakthrough in his work; he does not give up trying to communicate with his sister despite all the apparent bad feeling between them, and he cares passionately about the more trivial and domestic aspects of his life, such as whether he should go to Majorca for a convalescent break and whether all his lists have been updated and all his chores completed. His are neither the actions nor the attitudes of an intellectual, nihilistic drifter indifferent to life’s everyday worries: he cares precisely about the kind of domestic detail that the narrator in *Der Keller* (in what might be termed the ‘Samstagkritik’) disparages as the near-universal self-deluding escape from the hard facts of life, such as death.<sup>477</sup> Rudolf may be outspokenly critical about his environment, and, word for word, the negative outweighs the positive in his journal; but, as the narrative unravels, it becomes clear that the positive affects and qualifies his tirades and one-sided responses to people and situations; conversely; the statements of hope are all the more marked because they contrast with the background

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<sup>476</sup> For striking instances of his belief that he will start, see: *ibid.*, pp.20, 23, 24, 43, 47-8, and 138.

<sup>477</sup> See: Bernhard, *Der Keller*, pp.86-92.

hum of negativity (his sister, other people, society, Austria) which accompanies Rudolf's journal but which gradually fades.

In fact, far from being the root of his downfall, Rudolf's perfectionism in *Beton* is equated with hope. From the (very long) opening sentence of the book, it is made clear to the reader that Rudolf's musicological study looms large over his existence. The narrative presents an immediate and significant discrepancy: Rudolf cares very much about his academic project, yet, he is easily distracted and does not seem determined to start working on it. Whether it is the breaking daylight or the hypothetical thought of neighbours disturbing him, he finds any excuse not to sit down at his desk and work.<sup>478</sup> Early in the narrative, the word 'Hoffnung' is associated indirectly but unmistakably with his attempts at writing: 'Das Tageslicht zerstörte endgültig meine Hoffnung [...]'.<sup>479</sup> It is his hope to start writing which is dashed here, and a little later, when he reveals that he asked his sister to come to Peiskam, a compound of the same lexical stem is used to express his intentions in inviting Elisabeth to come: 'Tatsächlich erhoffte ich von ihr eine Hilfestellung [...]'.<sup>480</sup> Hope is connected with his work, and his work is connected with perfectionism – for it is made clear from the first page that part of Rudolf's writer's block lies in his unrealistically high expectations of himself, not necessarily in an inability to produce the written word. The distinction is important. Bernhard establishes a subtle link early on between these three important ideas (perfectionism, his work, and hope) in this narrative, and it is a connection which assumes greater cohesion and relevance for the reader's understanding of the text and Rudolf's understanding of himself, later in the journal. Rudolf's perfectionism in the matter of his work makes him apparently uncompromising: he wants to create a piece of writing that is 'wissenschaftlich einwandfrei'.<sup>481</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, pp.11 and 23-4.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., p.36 [emphasis added].

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., p.7.

As the narrator reveals thoughts and aspects of his character in the opening pages, the reader is baffled how such an apparently committed and self-disciplined scholar can have spent ten years on a project without even having begun to write it: 'Ich hatte um vier Uhr mit meiner Arbeit anfangen wollen, jetzt war es fünf, über diese unvorhergesehene Nachlässigkeit, besser noch Disziplinlosigkeit, meinerseits, war ich erschrocken.'<sup>482</sup> Rudolf directly links his writer's block here with more general inadequacies: the glaring discrepancy here between the implied high standards (meticulousness, discipline) of his self-perception and the reality of his unwritten, hitherto failed project is important because it presents in essence a situation which recurs in other aspects of his life. He has a strong sense of how things should be: when his sister should leave, what time of day his work should be carried out, even precisely what time he should rise in the early morning. When this desired expectation is thwarted — his sister outstays her welcome, he is unable to work or he oversleeps — unhappiness follows in the form of mental frustration, verbal abuse, and even physical dissatisfaction: he sits at his desk in a 'mich beinahe wahnsinnig machende Erregung'; he curses the cause of his thwarted perfectionism, here his sister, 'das geistfeindlichste Wesen', and he tries to overcome physical tension: 'Ich preßte beide Handflächen an die kalte Mauer, eine schon oft bewährte Methode dieser Erregung Herr zu werden.'<sup>483</sup>

The fundamental problem for Rudolf is that he has no definitive position on any of the topics he discusses; there is no one certainty which acts as a perspectivizing yardstick for all his perceptions. His tirades are at least as much an expression of his frustration, in the specific form outlined above, as they are accurate statements about his views on any given subject. In moments of calmness, he realizes this, such as when he recalls one of his sister's vituperative attacks: '*Du bezichtigst alle aller Verbrechen, das ist dein Unglück. [...] erst jetzt ist es mir klar geworden, daß sie sozusagen den Nagel auf*

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<sup>482</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>483</sup> All three quotations: *ibid.*, p.12.

den Kopf getroffen hat.<sup>484</sup> The journal serves a useful purpose for Rudolf here: by recalling a past event and assessing at the time of writing his journal, Rudolf is able to qualify his previous opinion. The painful certainty of being right about the consistent disappointment presented by life and other people — characteristic of earlier protagonists — is replaced here by a self-questioning which yields greater self-understanding. Instead of judging himself and others by an unrealistic, unattainable measure of perfection, Rudolf opens his eyes to his own imperfections and that of others; this insight marks an important step forward in his formulation of hope. In an existence where forthrightly expressed opinions are subject to qualification and where reality does not meet expectation, the perceiving subject cannot be certain of itself and is inevitably under threat. However, Rudolf finds out here (with the help of his narrative) that the absence of outside certainty need not entail complete confusion and desperation; instead of caving in, he places the onus of self-determination upon himself. This self-determination lies at the root of his journal, and it effects something of a redefinition of the self which leads him to greater optimism and communication with others. The self-knowledge Rudolf needs to be able to come to this realization links him with the first-person protagonist of the autobiographies. No pre-1975 Bernhard protagonist qualifies his criticisms of the world and himself as Rudolf does.

Unlike Konrad and Roithamer, Rudolf begins to overcome the threat of complete confusion and uncertainty by discovering the difference between theory and practice, between talking *about* people and talking *to* them, engaging with them in social intercourse. On one hand, he may criticize Elisabeth's hypocritical or repulsive friends and business associates, but he is on safe ground because he is communicating only with himself about his own opinions and past experiences (a humiliating dinner-party, his sister's blatant attempts to undermine his musicological work). On the other hand, when

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<sup>484</sup> Ibid., p.33 [emphasis in original].

he is in actual contact with a person, he cannot hide behind thoughts or words. He finds himself charmed by the old man, captivated by Anna's plight, and sympathetic to Frau Kienesberger's situation. People answer back – as he painfully finds out when his sister attacks him at the dinner table for his aggressive and outspoken misanthropy. The difference between the past and the present is that now he utilizes his pain: in this instance where his sister accuses him of criticizing all and sundry, Rudolf acknowledges that she has hit the nail on the head; his qualifying 'erst jetzt' is crucial because it reveals that the realization that she might be right has occurred to him while he is writing his journal.<sup>485</sup> Defeatist humiliation gives way to productive self-knowledge. The thought she is right did not come to him when he was sitting at the table with her. The implication is that in writing down the incident, his view of it has changed. This is extremely significant because it guides the reader's attention to the writing of the journal and shows that the act of writing can affect how Rudolf views and assesses his past. There is, indeed, it would seem, hope for change; the man who frustratedly pressed his hands against the cold wall out of sheer uncontrollable frustration at the beginning of his journal has come a long way already. The journal Rudolf writes helps him to live with a positive attitude: he learns while and through writing it. By contrast, the Mendelssohn project is a dead, futile endeavour, a misguided attempt by Rudolf to emigrate into the sphere of intellectual perfection, away from human untidiness. However important, this insight is a signpost of things to come; it is not in itself a move away from the fundamental problem of desired perfection and actual disappointment.

It is in a discussion with himself about Frau Kienesberger's shortcomings as a cleaner that, having criticized her, Rudolf pauses to consider the other side of the coin. In doing so, he initiates a clearly formulated, more general, but none the less explicit discussion about perfectionism:

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<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*

Gleichzeitig mußte ich mir sagen, wir stellen immer zu hohe Ansprüche an alles und jedes, alles ist uns zu wenig gründlich getan, alles ist uns nichts als unvollkommen, alles nur Versuch, nichts Vollendung. Meine krankhafte Sucht zur Perfektion war wieder einmal zum Vorschein gekommen. [...] Wir sehen den Niedergang, wo wir den Aufstieg erwarten, wir sehen die Hoffnungslosigkeit, wo wir Hoffnung haben, [...]. Wir fordern immer alles, wo naturgemäß nur wenig zu fordern ist, das deprimiert uns. [...] Und wir stellen naturgemäß an uns selbst die höchsten und die allerhöchsten Ansprüche und lassen dabei zur Gänze die Menschennatur außer acht, die ja für diese höchsten und allerhöchsten Ansprüche nicht geschaffen ist. [...] Aber andererseits, denke ich, wohin kämen wir, wenn wir den Maßstab fortwährend zu niedrig ansetzten?<sup>486</sup>

Instead of short explosions of criticism interspersed with the odd admission of self-doubt or awareness of his own exaggeration — which is what much of the narrative has comprised up to this point — Rudolf manages a sustained and calm reflection here upon his circumstances. While the discussion is certainly about perfectionism as a general concept (with the repeated use of ‘wir’), its real purpose is to explore the personal, painful discrepancy between reality and expectation which has plagued Rudolf since the opening page (signalled by the sudden and somewhat incongruous switch to ‘meine’ at the beginning of the second sentence). In outline, the views expressed here are: people expect too much (‘zu hohe Ansprüche an alles’); perfection is not realizable (‘alles ist nur Versuch, nichts Vollendung’); rampant perfectionism is an illness (‘meine krankhafte Sucht zur Perfektion’); we become depressed because we do not realize what we have (‘wir sehen die Hoffnungslosigkeit, wo wir Hoffnung haben [...] das deprimiert uns’); we omit to take human nature into account (‘wir [...] lassen zur Gänze die Menschennatur außer acht’), and if we adhere to these insights we might go too far the other way and end up with standards which are too low (‘den [zu niedrigen] Maßstab’). The final insight here is important because it re-qualifies his own qualifications about being too stringent in his standards. Rudolf does not reach a conclusion here, other than to affirm that the way to live is to be found neither in extreme perfectionism nor in low standards.

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid., pp.116-17.

Narrative qualification makes the text elusive; subsequently, it can be regarded as less complete than some critical commentators have made it seem: '[...] through him [Rudolf], every aspect of the solipsistic world which they ['Geistesmenschen'] typically inhabit is systematically ironized.'<sup>487</sup> Rudolf's world — that is to say, the experiences he has had — is too unordered and inconsistent for there to be any kind of 'systematic' irony or ridicule. The rhythmic oscillation ('[zwischen Leidenschaft und Haß] hin und her gerissen') which Bernhard mentions to Kathrein is a crucial part of this process.<sup>488</sup> Like the protagonists of the autobiographies (who stand in marked contrast to those of the prose up to 1975), Rudolf is constantly discovering new knowledge about himself and life, and he is making these discoveries while, and as a result of, writing down his story – his experiences and thoughts.

The admission in the above passage about perfectionism — that there is hope, but that we just do not realize it — is a big step away from emotional and existential unhappiness and marks a stride forward in the direction of hope. For once, hope is not associated with the perfectionist impulses which mark Rudolf's desire to embark on the Mendelssohn project. Instead, he admits to himself that too many expectations and his obsession with perfectionism lead to illness and depression. He locates the object of his strivings here as the source of his downfall. The important defining factor in this depicted situation is human nature which simply is not made ('geschaffen') for such expectations. The implication here is that one's impulse towards perfectionism must be altered if depression and illness are to be averted. Like the protagonists of the pentalogy (and unlike the main characters of the prose before it), Rudolf seeks a better way to live here; he locates his unhappiness and uses thought and literary analysis (in the form of his narrative or journal) to modulate it into survival and happiness.

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<sup>487</sup> Martin, p.155.

<sup>488</sup> Rambures, 'Alle Menschen sind Monster', p.107.

Of course, Rudolf finds no final answers here, and at the end of the quoted passage, he changes the subject and returns to his contemplations about his suitcases. The effect of the question mark closing the discussion is to put the emphasis on open-endedness, not on a specific solution: Rudolf's thoughts here might not help him to decide whether to go to Palma or whether to continue with his Mendelssohn project, but they do help him to recognize his past failings (stringent perfectionism) and to chart a potentially happier way forward (attaining a balance between standards which are too high or too low). While he might not have any new way to lead his life or watertight answers to his depression and illness, he has expressed and acknowledged the need for balance in his self-perception. The discussion within the journal here sees not only a reassessment of certain central concepts (perfectionism, hope), this reassessment has an effect on his actions thenceforth. This important passage about perfectionism occurs shortly after the half-way point in Rudolf's journal and signals a turning-point. The second half of the journal is, regarded in its entirety, much less vitriolic. Throughout the first half of his narrative, Rudolf has been on the attack, primarily against his sister. In the second half of the narrative, Rudolf is a milder character, not only in his personal dealings (with Anna, Frau Kienesberger, the war veteran, the Cañellas girl, and even Elisabeth) but also in his reflections about human nature and people. The contribution of the above monologue about perfectionism in this modifying, redefining process is decisive.

The new hope outlined by Rudolf, one where he has to open his eyes to what is already there, is not just the product of a logical process of deduction; it is a deep-seated response from within his innermost self. It is also a reflex action, as witnessed elsewhere in the text. The implication of this newly-won hope is to put the onus of change firmly on Rudolf's shoulders: as in the autobiographies, where the protagonist had to learn from past experiences, Rudolf reassesses his past actions in the light of present self-

knowledge. When he asks his sister to come to Peiskam and her arrival signals more unhappiness for him, Rudolf is not surprised. He has often asked for her help in the past only to be deflated and crushed every time. Yet this does not stop him committing the same action or reflex 'error': 'Und obwohl ich das weiß, habe ich ihr wieder telegraphiert, zum hundertstenmal habe ich meine Zerstörer in ins Haus geholt.'<sup>489</sup> The hope, the expectation that she will help is a reflex action. He does not learn from past experience. The reason is: despite recurrent disappointment something inside him ('die Menschennatur')<sup>490</sup> makes him believe it just might be better this time; this is precisely the identical impulse to the one which gives him logically unfounded optimism about starting his work on the morning he wakes up when his journal takes up the story.

The same happens later on, and significantly, after the perfectionism monologue. He is musing, before his departure for Palma, on how he is going to spend his days in Majorca, and he ironizes the hopes and aspirations he has for his stay there in a general statement: 'So alt wir sind, wir erwarten immer noch eine Wendung, [...] weil wir vom klaren Verstand entfernt sind.'<sup>491</sup> This observation could be regarded as bleak within its context in the midst of an excursus about self-deception. While it is true that hard, logical thought might remind us that such decisive turning-points do not actually occur, there is another side to this thought: his expectations have not waned; they remain high. However unequivocal the hopelessness of a decisive change, stubborn hope does not allow the human spirit to give up. At the beginning of the narrative, hope was associated with the practically untenable impulse towards perfectionism; now, it is an enduring human impulse which is just there and will not be denied even by intellectual reasoning. Without recourse to logic or reason, it creates the expectations of improvement. The persistence of this reflex hope cannot, in the final analysis, be ignored by Rudolf or the reader. As his story progresses, Rudolf learns to respond to this natural impulse which often, as here,

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<sup>489</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.36.

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, p.155.

questions and supersedes mental reasoning. Rudolf uses the same phrase — this time in an implied positive sense — which he defined a couple of pages earlier in derogatory terms: ‘Wir redeten immer vom klaren Verstand, hatten aber nie einen [...]’.<sup>492</sup> In the light of this earlier use of the phrase (‘vom klaren Verstand’) and earlier examples of reflex hope, the passage in question here can be seen to point to an ineradicable sense of hope and expectation.

Recurrent expectation and hope are, however, not just defined by implication. In an excursus about clothes, Rudolf affirms that some garments he owns are associative signposts for past experiences and feelings in his life. He only keeps items of clothing with positive memories: ‘[Kleidungsstücke] die mich an ein ganz hohes Glücksgefühl erinnern und die mir [...] ja nach Jahrzehnten [...] höchstes Glück bedeuten. Aber davon wäre tatsächlich ein ganzes Buch zu schreiben.’<sup>493</sup> It is hard to believe that the narrator of the first few pages who ranted against everyone and everything and who had to use a wall to vent his anger and frustration, now makes the possible admission that he could write a book about his many instances of great happiness. Again, Rudolf signals a landmark in Bernhard’s fiction as a figure who can, however momentarily, contemplate an unfettered sense of positive expectation. Rudolf can look back on the past and see times of happiness; moreover, this thought and these memories bring him happiness now too. Rudolf has learned to uncover what is there. Where earlier in the narrative he concentrates solely on the many negative examples of his mental associations (his sister, her hypocritical clients, and Viennese friends), now he can contemplate the possibility of an entire book with all the good memories contained in the clothes he has kept, and such a contemplation gives birth to happiness of the highest order as the superlative form of the adjective ‘hoch’ is repeated. Previously, the existence of negativity blinded him to and annulled the conscious possibility of happiness and hope. Now, the unbridled

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid., p.153.

<sup>493</sup> Ibid., p.131.

perfectionism of the first half of the book has been modified; it is still there, but Rudolf is more cautious in his attitude, and it is not coincidental that he can subsequently recall and contemplate greater happiness and hope, too.

The memory of clothes with good associations is an example of a distinct move away from a definition of hope marked by negative implication to a less guarded, more forthright expression. However, it is Rudolf's appreciation of imperfection which completes his conversion from hard-line perfectionism to a more cautious, balanced view. Appropriately enough, it is directly after revising his views about his sister's vulgar residence in Vienna (he concedes, with the caution of self-knowledge, that it might be envy pure and simple on his part), that he recalls having attended a performance of Mendelssohn's *Die wandernden Komödianten*.<sup>494</sup> Again, the distance of time and the effect of writing down his thoughts leads to a new piece of self-knowledge: 'Damals hatte ich noch nicht gewußt, warum dieses Stück so eindringlich gewesen war, heute weiß ich es. Wegen der genialen Unvollkommenheit.'<sup>495</sup> These are strong words. The repetition of the verb 'wissen' in consecutive sentences — contrasted in positive and negative statements — has the effect of demarcating a boundary between the past and the present, directly implying a sense of development. Rudolf is not given to exaggeration about such matters, and he is usually very diffident about being moved emotionally or affected intellectually. Here, however, the piece is seen to penetrate him ('eindringlich'), and the effect is elemental ('eine elementare Wirkung auf mich');<sup>496</sup> it is not just an intellectual experience. He does not seek to analyse the feeling or to trace its component parts in an attempt to understand it; no aspect of the performance is discussed or adduced for presentation to the reader or as a reason for a monologue. The emphasis is placed on the fact, not detail, of the 'brilliant imperfection'. Where a little earlier he wistfully accepted the imperfections of existence ('Wenn wir die Welt wirklich kennen, ist sie

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<sup>494</sup> Ibid., p.164.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

nurmehr noch eine solche voller Irrtümer'),<sup>497</sup> here imperfection enriches his experience. Bernhard here completes an important strand of the personal development of the protagonist who has, in the first instance, become more open to accepting flaws in life and, moreover, to finding imperfection uplifting and desirable. The 'elemental' nature of the experience is important here because it points to the force of his deepest nature. Rudolf's devotion to a composer of the second rank (and not, say, to Beethoven or Bach) can be seen to show that he is attracted to Mendelssohn's own deeply human imperfection. Rudolf's major flaw hitherto lies in trying to eradicate imperfection from everyday life and human nature. The correction of Rudolf's perfectionist impulses is not just reported but reflected in the way that his journal is written.

The carefully-timed and repeated use throughout the narrative of the word 'naturgemäß' aids Bernhard in presenting the antidote to Rudolf's perfectionist impulses, and it provides a signpost or clue to the reader. The word crops up in the monologue on perfectionism. There, it points to an irony; by their very nature ('naturgemäß') people set their standards too high and thereby ignore (imperfect) human nature.<sup>498</sup> The presence of 'naturgemäß' shows Rudolf to be powerless to assert himself over natural impulses. In the example from the perfectionism monologue, 'naturgemäß' is extended to apply to people in general ('wir'); it is not just specific to Rudolf;<sup>499</sup> it refers not just to his human nature but to human nature as a whole. The word signals imperfection of the kind which made him invite his sister although he knew it would be futile or to seek a change in circumstances; yet, by linking this imperfection with people in general, he reduces his own sense of dismay. The internal logic in his mind is that if all people make such mistakes, and not just him, then imperfection cannot be such a negative or culpable quality. 'Naturgemäß' also appears just before the moment of high emotion when he speaks to his sister on the phone: 'Ich bin neugierig, was aus deinem Mendelssohn

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<sup>497</sup> Ibid., p.147.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid., p.117.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

Bartholdy wird, hat sie noch gesagt und naturgemäß von mir keine Antwort erwarten können.’<sup>500</sup> His instinctive natural response is not to reply because he does not know how to respond to her – the impasse inherent in his failed intellectual project is not resolved until he is in Palma. ‘Naturgemäß’ is a word which appears in the text at times when Rudolf has a discussion with himself; it provides a counterweight to the arguments of reason: ‘Ich bildete mir ein, keinen Menschen zu brauchen, ich bilde mir das noch heute ein. Ich brauchte keinen und also hatte ich keinen. Aber naturgemäß brauchen wir einen Menschen [...].’<sup>501</sup> The fact is that however many clever games he might play with thoughts, his innermost nature always returns and imposes itself and influences him: ‘Wenn ich sage, ich habe die ganze Schrift oder was immer für ein Werk im Kopf, kann ich es naturgemäß auf dem Papier nicht mehr verwirklichen. So ist es.’<sup>502</sup> The impossibility of transferring information from his head on to paper is qualified by ‘naturgemäß’, and the short sentence which follows indicates the finality of his innermost nature here: there is nothing more to be said. For once, the process of perpetual qualification and relativity has stopped, and it is because of an inner, natural impulse about which he can do nothing. Although, as already witnessed, ‘naturgemäß’ was used more frequently and with a more versatile range of associations in the pentalogy — with its connotations of natural instincts (*Die Ursache*), the family bond (*Der Atem* and *Die Kälte*), and hope and expectation (*Ein Kind*) — the important development in *Beton* is the link between the word and Rudolf’s acceptance of himself and others, as well as his self-development.

The most prophetic use of ‘naturgemäß’, as far as the ending of the book with Anna’s story is concerned, occurs during an observation Rudolf makes when thinking about travelling: ‘Der Betrachter durchschaut einen Menschen, den er betrachtet,

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid., pp.109-10.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid., p.42.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., p.46.

naturgemäß rücksichtsloser und authentischer als der Betrachtete sich selbst [...].'<sup>503</sup> If it is in the very nature of a human being to be able to analyse and understand someone else's situation better than his own, then Rudolf's later obsession with Anna's story and circumstances can be seen as a subtle indication of his continued self-exploration. The turning-point for Rudolf comes in his changed perception: instead of thinking of himself and life's processes as immutable (and repeatedly bemoaning this supposed fact), he re-inspects them and himself through his journal. His recollection of the Mendelssohn performance (part of the journal) proves crucial to the overall reassessment. It is not pre-planned; it just happens. Once he makes the recollection, however, he analyses it and presents his results to the reader. The implication of what lies at the root of the 'brilliant imperfection' is clear: in learning first to accept, and then to like human imperfection, Rudolf learns to accept and then to like himself. This process is central not only to his self-development but to the personal sense of hope for his future life.

#### 4. MUSIC AND LITERATURE

Music and literature are two important elements of Rudolf's emotional and intellectual experiences. Their contribution to the text is unusual, however, in as much as neither is discussed in any specific detail. Mendelssohn, Rudolf's projected work and the names of various writers (Voltaire, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Novalis, and so on) occur in the narrative, but they are motifs, not substantial points of discussion in their own right. They are part of Rudolf's self-exploration; they are not points of departure for a specialized discussion. For Rudolf, music and literature represent hope, detached from the hitherto disappointing world of social intercourse and his sister's wheeler-dealing. Despite the prominence of the Mendelssohn theme, it is literature which is seen to intervene more

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid., p.83.

actively and effectively in Rudolf's life. He may say that music is the most important thing in the world to him,<sup>504</sup> but the effects of a literary reference (to Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747)) marks for Rudolf a defining moment more significant in the narrative than any incident connected with music.

For a man whose ostensible main narrative thread is his writer's block in respect of his musicological work, little is made of his obsession with Mendelssohn. It is mentioned, but not described or scrutinized. The method or thesis or finer points of his work are not once discussed. In *Die Ursache*, there were paraphrases from the young Bernhard's readings of Montaigne's *Essais*; here, in *Beton*, there is no such active engagement with intellectual primary material (other than the quotation of one line from Voltaire's *Zadig*). In *Die Ursache*, music was at its most potent when allowing the young pupil — tyrannized by Grünkranz and Nazi ideology — to escape from his tormentors under the pretext of violin practice. However useful, music was far from representing a high cultural ideal which afforded edification. For much of *Beton*, it plays a similar role. Rudolf does not engage with his subject matter. The reader knows only that Mendelssohn is his favourite composer;<sup>505</sup> the precise purpose of this study is not disclosed.

In the early part of the journal, music is used by Rudolf to outline and substantiate his own agenda which has little to do with music *per se*. Apart from the work on Mendelssohn, about which little is revealed after the opening page, music is introduced as yet another area in his life which is spoiled and dominated by his sister and people like her: '[...] aber meine Schwester und alle ihr ähnlichen Menschen [...] hat [*sic*] alle meine [musikalischen] Pläne zunichte gemacht [...].'<sup>506</sup> Music here acts as a symbol of a personal goal which is thwarted by the outside world — here, by his sister. No greater detail is supplied about his interest in the works that he mentions (*Jenufa*, *Moses und*

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<sup>504</sup> *Ibid.*, p.168.

<sup>505</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

Aron, and others).<sup>507</sup> Later on in the journal, it is the same story: when his sister belittles him at the dinner-table in front of her client-friends for his ten-year musicological project which has yet to see the first sentence, the implication is that his intellectual integrity is mocked for a good laugh among the assembled in order that the wheels of business may run smoothly for his scheming sister. Music is a means in the text to point to something else – here, his insecurity and frustration at being dominated and used by his sister for her commercial purposes. A little later, when he describes his sister's stage-managed excursions to the opera in Vienna in order subtly to sell off her remaindered plots, music is, again, used as a means to an end which is far removed from any inherent musical or artistic qualities. For his sister, music represents a way of doing business ('Die Leute sind ganz verrückt von der Musik [...] und kaufen mir meine Ladenhüter ab');<sup>508</sup> for Rudolf, relating this fact is way of ridiculing his sister's practices. So he also uses music to make his point, to justify himself ultimately. In his extended criticism of virtually every aspect of Vienna, in the monologue just after he visits the old man, music is the ammunition which feeds his cannons: Vienna has put him off listening to live music; music is nothing but 'ein abgeleierter Leierkasten' in this dreadful city in a dreadful country.<sup>509</sup> The criticism in this entire tirade against Vienna, with its weak-minded orchestras and sensation-seeking once-great, now faded conductors, remains vague, even superficial. There is no argument as such. Music is subjugated by Rudolf to the cause of the narrative with its self-analysis.

After the perfectionism monologue, with the slow emergence of a less belligerent narrator, music is mentioned in a much more positive vein: Mozart's Haffner Symphony calms him as he listens to it with his eyes shut while he tries to overcome personal tension;<sup>510</sup> he remembers how at university music saved him from the fury he felt at

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<sup>507</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., p.65.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid., p.100.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid., p.144.

professors who did not understand their subjects or know how to teach;<sup>511</sup> even Vienna, the source of so many evils, is thanked for at least introducing him to music, ‘das Alleridealste’;<sup>512</sup> it is, in short the most important thing in the world to him.<sup>513</sup> The climax of these positive references to music is the brilliant imperfection which he extracts from the Mendelssohn performance which is central to the evolving redefinition and emergence of human values in *Beton*.

As in the debate about perfectionism, there is a progression here: in the early part of the narrative, Rudolf uses music, almost as his sister does; however, the passages where music is seen to have a personal direct effect upon him signal the growth of Rudolf’s humanity and of hope as abstract thoughts are, once again, superseded by experience.

Although Rudolf’s energies centre (at least in theory) on his musical plans, literature is more directly influential in the question of hope and the presentation of Rudolf’s human qualities – his personality and character. As with music, allusions to literature are frequent in Rudolf’s account, but they do not constitute deep reflections on literature or serious engagement with literary themes, specific works, and authors. In fact, on the one occasion Rudolf has an opportunity to start a discussion about literature with the old man who brings up the subject, he declines.<sup>514</sup> The old man derides the competence of writers who scribble down any half-baked thought, but Rudolf steadfastly refuses to engage with him, preferring to concentrate on observing the old man’s habits, quirks, and possessions – observations which ultimately lead to the Sarah Slother story and Rudolf’s decision to leave for Palma. As with the theme of music, literature is used by Rudolf for his own purposes of self-knowledge and self-analysis in the journal. When he remembers how his sister, as a child, used to delight in snatching his grandfather’s

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<sup>511</sup> Ibid., p.161.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid., p.162.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid., p.168.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid., p.95.

volume of Novalis's poetry from the young Rudolf in the garden on Sundays, the emphasis is firmly on his sister's spoiling tactics, not on the merits of Romantic poetry or the effect of his reading of Novalis. At best, his mention of the book being 'blaugebunden' — an unnecessary adjunct to a sentence concentrated exclusively on indicating his sister's mischief — points to the pleasure he takes in the physical character of the book; the possible suggestion is that books are for him fetish-objects rather than places of serious self-discovery.<sup>515</sup> Unsurprisingly, as with music, literature in *Beton* is a motif which illustrates Rudolf's intellectual bent and his sister's pragmatic, self-seeking impulses; it is not explored in its own right. The poetry itself, he confesses, was not really comprehensible to him then; the idea of literature was at least as important as reading.<sup>516</sup> When the reader is told later that most people would rather Voltaire went to the guillotine before their pet dog ('Lieber würden sie ihren Hund vor dem Fallbeil retten, als Voltaire'), Rudolf cites Voltaire as an example of the deep lack of cultural values in society; for Voltaire, one could just as easily read Diderot, Dostoyevsky or another one of Rudolf's favourites because nothing is said in any detail about this writer's work.<sup>517</sup> Voltaire is used here not specifically as an icon of literary or Enlightenment values, but as a contrasting example to highlight man's inhumanity or lack of concern for his own species. It is, indeed relevant that the human-centred ideals of the Enlightenment present in Voltaire's works mark him out as a writer who stands in stark contrast to the dog-loving masses, but the principal thrust of the comments here lies in the absence of human values in society.

Before Rudolf's delayed departure for Palma, literature intervenes in his thought processes and his narrative in a more active and decisive way. While forced to kill time as he waits to set off, he wonders whether it might perhaps not be better to stay in Peiskam after all with his beloved Voltaire and Diderot. In a sudden apparent change of

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<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.15-16.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76.

subject, the very next sentence makes a deeply personal revelation: 'Ich bin ja nicht der gefühllose Mensch, als der mich so mancher sieht, weil er mich so sehen will, weil ich mich sehr oft auch so zeige, weil ich mich sehr oft auch nicht so zu zeigen getraue, wie ich bin.'<sup>518</sup> Sudden changes of subject rarely mark *non sequiturs* in Bernhard's prose, and this well-crafted, complex yet compact sentence is no exception. Mention of Voltaire and Diderot directly precedes Rudolf's searching self-analysis in this sentence, and there is a link. Within a narrative every bit as associative as the autobiographies, this intimate admission points to literature as an area where he can indeed show his true self, where exceptionally he does not have to employ means of dissimulation or self-protection in his contact with other people; writing is an uncensored means of communication. The verb 'sich getrauen' signals his vulnerability and indirectly excuses his external coldness which is just a front. In his own account, as his description continues, he asks 'Aber wie bin ich?'<sup>519</sup> He is unable to answer the question and has to admit defeat: 'Die Selbstspekulation hatte mich wieder eingeholt.'<sup>520</sup> Literature enables him to be his true self, but he cannot articulate or formulate just what this means, in the journal. This inability does not diminish the importance of literary influence here. In this passage, the thought of great literature initiates self-understanding, but it does not lead to expression of this self-understanding. Rudolf declares his own humanness by way of a negative definition established by literature: literature reminds him that he is not the callous person many see him to be. The apparent callousness is a dissimulation, a façade to cope with the harshness of life. His warmth and sensuality, only implied here, are formulated a few pages later in a more direct literary reference, this time specifically involving Voltaire.

As Rudolf continues to kill time before his departure for Palma, by contemplating his mortality and denigrating virtually every aspect of Austria, his attention turns to the

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<sup>518</sup> Ibid., p.145.

<sup>519</sup> Ibid.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid., pp.145-6.

self-delusion in men: sick people hate admitting they are sick and, ultimately, old people cannot face up to their old age. In another typical apparent change of narrative focus, Rudolf suddenly adds: 'Jeder will leben, keiner tot sein, alles andere ist Lüge.'<sup>521</sup> This statement of fundamental truth, albeit subjective, establishes a benchmark here in the narrative: however self-deluding people may be in their actions, it is important for Rudolf that he maintain a perspective on their ultimate motivations. The universal desire for life is a given as far as Rudolf is concerned. This is an important statement; to a large extent, it subverts the potential existential nihilism ascribed to the text by placing the emphasis on life. He goes on to muse about how people do not look back on their lives honestly when they are older, preferring self-delusion to the truth. Having already affirmed the ultimate desirability of life, he specifies how life could be, in another general statement which is striking in its strident expression of hope for potential happiness: 'Es müßte nur glückliche Menschen geben, alle Voraussetzungen dazu sind da, aber es gibt nur unglückliche.'<sup>522</sup> The assertion that there is nothing standing in the way of human happiness, allied to the statement two sentences previously that everyone wants to live, further singles out *Beton* from the rest of Bernhard's major prose output before 1982 for its human-centred concerns and its unequivocal statement of the potential for human happiness. This declaration about possible reality is quickly followed by a critical sequence of short sentences describing actual reality:

So lange wir jung sind und uns nichts weh tut, glauben wir nicht nur an das ewige Leben, wir haben es. Dann der Bruch, dann der Zusammenbruch, dann die Lamentation darüber und das Ende. Es ist immer dasselbe. [...] Ich lasse mir von jedem, der es will, in die Karten schauen. Im Augenblick denke ich so. In *diesem* Augenblick. Die Frage ist eigentlich nur, wie wir möglichst schmerzfrei den Winter überstehen. Und das noch viel grausame Frühjahr. Und den Sommer haben wir immer gehaßt. Der Herbst bringt uns dann wieder um alles.<sup>523</sup>

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<sup>521</sup> Ibid., p.151.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid. [emphasis in original].

Rudolf is certainly accurate here in saying that his thoughts are valid for the moment and only this moment because only a few pages before this, as already seen, he asserted how he does not normally reveal his true identity to people; now, he says that he is happy for anyone to know who he is, 'see his hand' as it were. The use of the Austrian variant 'schaun' adds to the passionate sincerity of this statement; there is no formal distance. As in the autobiographies, lexical and grammatical Austrian variants signal deeply personal expression. The vulnerability of the earlier thought has dissolved for a moment; his confidence in what he is saying here makes the passage read almost like a challenge to all comers: the protagonist, who but a few pages earlier did not dare to disclose his true self lest he be misunderstood, is now happy to lay himself open to the reader by presenting his views and claiming that he has nothing to hide. This passage validates a subjective view of life: when young and far from death and pain, people cannot imagine that they will die; they imagine that they are immortal and because they think they are immortal, there is nothing to say that they are not;<sup>524</sup> with older age and illness comes a process of collapse, then sorrow at this collapse and then death. Perceptions of life, according to the narrative here, depend upon the individual situation. Since an individual cannot transcend his own perceptions, he can forget about any objective viewpoint. What Rudolf can rely on, however, are his senses: what he has seen, felt and perceived, time and again, the constants in people's experiences of life ('Es ist immer dasselbe'). One year after another, the seasons pass predictably; the question is ascertaining how to survive the pain, for pain is real; it comes constantly with the cyclical passage of the seasons, the passing of time. The cycle of pain seems unbreakable. Unlike the earlier

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<sup>524</sup> The comment about immortal youth might also be something of a personal joke, as Bernhard reveals to Fleischmann in 1981 in Majorca (at the time he was writing *Beton*). He recounts how, when he was six or seven, his best friend Fackler Gusti died of appendicitis. Because he perceived he did not have a natural father, unlike his friend, the young Thomas thought he also could not have organs such as an appendix, unlike Fackler Gusti, and therefore he could not die: 'Ich glaub' ich war Jahrzehnte alt, bis ich draufgekommen bin, ich hab' auch Organe, an denen Mann sterben kann. Also der Gedanke war der, keinen Vater und keine Organe und überhaupt nichts an mir, was sterblich ist. Ich glaub', das war eine Hauptvoraussetzung, jahrelang [...] bis [...] fünfzehn, sechzehn.' Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard - Eine Begegnung*, p.51 [emphasis in original].

assertion about writing, where the inflexible ‘so ist es’ signalled finality, there are signs of hope here, albeit from an unexpected source.

The impasse caused by the cyclical nature of pain is resolved by a sudden and apparent *non sequitur*, and if the reader is prepared to make an associative link, a revealing interpretation of the narrative can follow: ‘*Dann ließ sie den entzückendsten Busen sehen, den die Welt je gesehen hatte, Zadig.*’<sup>525</sup> This quotation from Voltaire’s tale spontaneously makes Rudolf laugh and brings him relief, and he realizes that somehow it is decisive.<sup>526</sup> The quotation has three major effects here. First, and most importantly, it brings relief to Rudolf’s tension and anxiety or agitations (his ‘Erregungen’), and he laughs.<sup>527</sup> The laughter is a spontaneous, unrehearsed human reaction of pleasure and stands in striking contrast to the pain he refers to in the description of seasonal monotony. From this basic, but important point of view, literature provides physical and mental release and relief;<sup>528</sup> it helps him to survive the winter of discontent and pain, to overcome, however briefly, the coldness or frost to which earlier titles of Bernhard’s own prose allude. If the only question is how to survive without pain, the quotation from *Zadig* provides Rudolf with a momentary answer: sensuality can alleviate the unbearable.

Second, the sensual nature of the quotation, which refers to the magnificent bosom of Almona, the beautiful young widow, corroborates his earlier assertion that he is not a callous and sensually cold person devoid of feelings – an assertion which also came about as a result of literary association (with the names of Voltaire and Diderot). Literature, here, does not belong to a remote world out of touch with humanity (the view with which Elisabeth taunts Rudolf); it is a medium of communication for Rudolf with himself which enables admission of sensuality. He is reluctant to admit anywhere in his

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<sup>525</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, pp.151-2 [emphasis in original]. The original reads: ‘Alors elle laissa voir le sein le plus charmant que la nature eût jamais formé.’ See: Voltaire, *Romans et Contes* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1966), p.62.

<sup>526</sup> *Ibid.*, p.152.

<sup>527</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>528</sup> See: *ibid.*, p.51: ‘Tatsächlich hatte ich mich durch dieses urplötzliche Gelächter über mich selbst aus meiner Verkrampfung gelöst [...]’ On this occasion, the fog thwarts and depresses him, though.

tale that he is motivated by sensuality or sexual urges. He even alludes to sex earlier as a dirty act ('[...] ich beschmutze mich dabei [sich mit jemandem ins Bett legen] wenigstens nicht'),<sup>529</sup> but literature enables him here to be open about a natural human impulse. There is no doubt that the quotation about Almona expresses sexual need and desire on Rudolf's part.

Third, the context of this quotation within Voltaire's tale is of relevance here. The non-italicized 'Zadig' would suggest that the quotation emanates from Zadig's mouth. But this is not the case, since the words are the narrator's in Voltaire's tale. In saving Zadig from a death sentence, Almona exposes the hypocrisy of the priests who agree to pardon Zadig provided she grants them sexual favours. She is a prophet of justice and an exposé of lies. As such, the implications of her actions are of direct relevance to Bernhard's narrator and text here. Relief from mental anguish, sensual pleasure, and enlightened justice come together in this quotation, and they represent an affirmation of life and of humanness. Almona's honesty contrasts strongly with the hypocrisies and deceits Rudolf has criticized throughout his narrative up to this point. Moreover, this literary allusion can be interpreted as Bernhard equating Rudolf with Voltaire's priests, locked in dogmatism and in need of liberation through sensuality.

Elisabeth's many earlier assertions that Rudolf's books and music never help him are proved wrong here, and although Rudolf does lapse back into negativity, he is seen here to achieve a major breakthrough. He can gain pleasure, unlike her, without the baggage of exploiting people in business, putting others down or all the other cheap methods ('die billigen Methoden')<sup>530</sup> people use either to gratify themselves or avoid the truth about the basic, irrefutable circumstances of life: '[Daß ich lachte] Über einen Gegenstand, unter welchem ich mich nicht zu schämen brauchte.'<sup>531</sup> It is as if this experience is separate from the petty power struggles and guilt-ridden conflicts of which

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., p.55.

<sup>530</sup> Ibid., p.152.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

he is so critical: it is simply a calm, pleasurable, warm, and entirely natural moment of happiness which lights up the winter.

## 5. PRESENTATION OF NARRATOR

In the pentalogy, the shifting narrative perspectives and complex, sometimes particularly fraught relationship between narrator and protagonist revealed important information, often indirectly, about the earlier life of the writing subject and the later attitude of the reminiscing writer. In *Beton*, the two third-person sentences which encase the narrative are almost cosmetic in effect. The first-person narration of Rudolf's diary makes this book all but a first-person narrative. The long sentences, the tortured self-descriptions, the virulent criticisms of human nature and institutions are all still there from the earlier work. The departure from the earlier works comes in the areas of humanness and hope, not in any fundamental change in style or narrative method. As Herbert Pütz says — from the point of view of a linguist — in his detailed, linguistic reading of the narrative in *Beton*: '[...] ich [kann] mich allerdings nach der Lektüre von etwas mehr Bernhard des Eindrucks nicht erwehren [...], daß es womöglich gar keinen spezifischen *Beton*-Stil gibt, weil in *Beton* vorkommende Eigenheiten sich in anderen Texten von Bernhard ähnlich gehäuft wiederfinden.'<sup>532</sup> As in the autobiographies, it is the way in which the narrator discloses information which reveals much about his motivations and himself.

In the 1981 Majorca interview with Fleischmann, when *Beton* was doubtless a major preoccupation in his mind, Bernhard revealed: 'Ich schreibe immer über innere Landschaften, und die sehen die meisten Leut' nicht, weil sie innen fast nix sehen.'<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>532</sup> Herbert Pütz, 'Einige textlinguistische Bemerkungen zu *Beton*', *Text und Kontext*, 14 (1986), 211-36 (p.213). This is an unusual article in that Pütz is not a literary scholar but a linguist and examines the work accordingly: 'Da ich nicht Literaturwissenschaftler bin, werde ich mich bei den folgenden Bemerkungen zu *Beton* ans Deskriptive halten und von Interpretationsversuchen so weit wie möglich absehen' (p.211).

<sup>533</sup> Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard - Eine Begegnung*, pp.14-15.

This comment, if such a warning be needed, should guard against a literal reading of the text: Rudolf is not simply a near-psychotic introvert with writer's block, in extreme ill-health. If he were considered such, *Beton* would become a case study and not a subtle and challenging literary narrative. The 'hin und her' movement detailed to Kathrein takes an interesting form in the presentation of the narrating Rudolf: on one hand, Bernhard ironizes and distances Rudolf from the reader; on the other, however, he encourages identification and intellectual, emotional engagement with his narrator. Where an omniscient, entirely reliable narrator's personality would have been inconspicuous, the effect of this distancing and engaging with Rudolf is to bring into relief each of the two prominent aspects of his personality: for Rudolf is indeed an oddball, detached from social contact and the outside world, but he is also a humane figure who observes and reflects perceptively on his environment and who needs human warmth. As with the autobiographies, the principal effect of these changes of focus is to encourage the reader to seek out the inner landscapes of Rudolf's narratives where the fertile territory of the book lies, as far as questions of hope and humanness are concerned. It is through the presentation of the narrator that Bernhard guides his reader to such questions of importance in this text.

In *Beton*, Bernhard manifestly distances the narrator from the reader. The three principal ways in which Bernhard creates a critical distance between the narrator-protagonist and the reader are: first, by sometimes making Rudolf appear ridiculous; second, by gently mocking his human weaknesses and third, by highlighting his unreliability as a narrator and as a person. The most ostensibly ridiculous fact about Rudolf is his ten-year preoccupation with the Mendelssohn study. Some of the comments Rudolf makes early in the narrative announce his eccentricity: '[...] bevor ich nicht weiß, wie der erste Satz lautet, kann ich keine Arbeit anfangen.'<sup>534</sup> This sounds less like a man

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<sup>534</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.9.

determined to complete his work and more like someone trying to manufacture excuses for avoiding putting something down on paper. He is prepared to go to great lengths to convince himself that the responsibility for his project lies firmly in his own hands, yet apparently the moment, and not he, determines when he begins his work: 'Ich stand da und schaute durch die Tür auf den Schreibtisch und fragte mich, wann der Moment da sei, an den Schreibtisch zu treten und mich hinzusetzen und mit der Arbeit anzufangen.'<sup>535</sup> The distancing absurdity of these assertions should not be dismissed without thought.

When, a little later, the narrative reveals Rudolf's unusual attitude to restaurants he himself chooses to dine in, it invites the reader not just to smile at Rudolf but to question why he commits an action: 'Wenn ich essen gehe, fliehe ich, kaum daß ich eingetreten bin und meine Mahlzeit, vor welcher es mich ekelt, gegessen habe, aus dem Gasthaus.'<sup>536</sup> He elects to write a work on Mendelssohn but shies away from writing up his extensive notes; he goes to eat in a restaurant but flees as soon as possible. The reader can make a link between these two apparently incomprehensible actions and connect them to Rudolf's unhappiness – the fact that he finds himself in situations (of his own making) which he would rather not be in. It is not just what the narrator says or the writer behind him makes him say, it is how the narrator says it and how he comes across to the reader, that determines the interpretation. In a text rich with 'inner landscapes', this process is particularly important.

Directly after this description of his restaurant experiences, Rudolf goes off on a seemingly digressive excursus about his problems with linguistic communication, both with others in general and with Frau Kienesberger in particular; the reader wonders whether this narrative is a series of unconnected, disjointed descriptions or whether there is, indeed, a connection between his inability to relate to the customers in the restaurant

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<sup>535</sup> Ibid., p.23.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., p.27.

and his withdrawal from society. This, in turn, leads to the question why he has withdrawn from society at all, and so on. Such a narrative, if followed assiduously, requires interpretative stamina from the reader. Bernhard establishes links — be they intertextual links as evidenced in the section on perfectionism and hope, or biographical links between author and protagonist — which provide satisfaction to the reader by helping him to piece together and complete coherent and consistent lines of interpretation; they thereby demand and reward a close, meticulous reading.

Instances of near-autism when Rudolf practises talking<sup>537</sup> and laughs out loud for no apparent reason<sup>538</sup> or rushes out somewhat inexplicably into the yard and stretches his arms and breathes deeply<sup>539</sup> when he is on his own, make the reader question the protagonist's normality, and they establish him to an extent as a morbid, somewhat obsessive person. This view is intensified by the many attacks on Rudolf by his sister. She is in many ways the epitome of an impressive businesswoman: sociable, successful, and articulate. Her criticisms of Rudolf are hard to refute: she berates him for his morbid interest in dead people (philosophers, writers) over people who are living now and with whom he could have profitable contact; she accuses him of making the house into a near-morgue, in short, of becoming 'eine traurige, komische Figur'.<sup>540</sup> Her normality — she has been married, has friends and lovers, travels, enjoys reading and is ambitious — marks her out in the text as a symbol for society. She is contrasted starkly with Rudolf, and he is happy to allow this opposition by casting himself as the imaginative one and her as the realistic one ('phantastisch' and 'realistisch').<sup>541</sup> The effect is that Rudolf is presented as alien to life, unhealthy in more than the physical sense, while Elisabeth comes more and more to represent the healthy aims of so-called normal society.

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<sup>537</sup> Ibid., pp.27-8.

<sup>538</sup> Ibid., p.51.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid., p.41.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid., p.26.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid., p.52.

Although Rudolf is ridiculed, perhaps sometimes rather unfairly and cruelly, as an eccentric, he also brings upon himself a good deal of gentle mockery through inconsistencies in his account. The principal area of this mockery is in his perception of how others regard him. Rudolf is at pains to inform his reader that he does not care what others think of him: 'Ich hatte mich ja immer höchst wenig um die öffentliche Meinung gekümmert [...].'<sup>542</sup> However, this simply is not true: he often recounts with anger the humiliation he has suffered at his sister's hands in public. She ridicules him for his ongoing work on Mendelssohn. If he really did not care what she or her friends, such as the Agriculture and Culture Minister, thought, then he would not dwell on the matter.<sup>543</sup> It clearly irks him. After his sister's departure, he comments with apparent defiance: 'Und ich denke nicht daran, alles das wieder in Ordnung zu bringen, was sie in Unordnung gebracht hat.'<sup>544</sup> Yet there is an inconsistency here because, near the beginning of the book he definitely was most preoccupied with this very matter: 'Auch an diesem Abreisetag hatte sie [Elisabeth] ihr Zimmer vollkommen unaufgeräumt hinterlassen, so daß ich mich vor [...] Frau Kienesberger [...] genierte [...].'<sup>545</sup> Similarly, he rues making a fool of himself in front of Frau Kienesberger on the occasions in the past when he confidently told her that he would be gone on one of his trips for months only to return red-faced within days.<sup>546</sup>

Bernhard puts the onus on the reader to find such inconsistencies; they are not presented straightforwardly. The effect on the reader of this narratorial unreliability is to see that Rudolf is not perhaps as removed from the values of the society, symbolized by his sister, as he would like to think. The tables are turned, and Rudolf is suddenly cast in the light of a sensitive, human figure: he is not the hopeless case study perceived by some critical commentators ('Das Buch ist die Geschichte einer Selbstausslöschung, einer

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<sup>542</sup> Ibid., p.133.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid., pp.28-9.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid., p.68.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid., p.134.

Hypochondrie [...]’),<sup>547</sup> rather a man who shares the same basic impulses as Anna or Elisabeth but who defines and expresses them differently.

Narratorial unreliability acts as a jolt to the reader to recognize Rudolf’s normality. In the first thirty pages or so of the book, Rudolf unequivocally berates his sister and criticizes her presence in the house, blaming his inability to write, in part, on her unwelcome presence. Then, all of a sudden, in a monologue about how she and women in general have ruined him, he asks disingenuously if he himself had not invited her to Peiskam and immediately adds: ‘Ich hatte ihr ein Telegramm geschickt, in welchem ich sie aufgefordert habe, nach Peiskam zu kommen.’<sup>548</sup> Even having led the reader up the garden path in this way, Rudolf tries to wriggle out of his duplicity by saying: ‘Es stellte sich heraus, daß sie selbst ohne meine Aufforderung genau an demselben Tag nach Peiskam gekommen wäre [...]’.<sup>549</sup> Since Rudolf has shown the reader how unreliable he is, this second revelation cannot be taken at face value. The reader wonders whether Rudolf is justifying his secrecy or whether he is simply unwilling to admit his weakness in asking his sister to come and ‘rescue’ (‘erretten’) him.<sup>550</sup> Either way, the reader cannot rely upon his word, and this unreliability is extended into other areas of the text. It is, consequently, difficult to know whether to believe this coincidence about his sister’s arrival. Given their open rows, it is further difficult to believe his assertion that, had he not asked her to come, he could ask her to leave now.<sup>551</sup> All these slightly incredible and illogical observations are signposts revealing a character who is trying to hide or cover up something, for Rudolf can be perfectly straightforward and coherent when he chooses to be – as the monologue on perfectionism shows. The reader can rely on narratorial unreliability to tell him something, even if it is not what the narrator intends.

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<sup>547</sup> Otto F. Beer, ‘Selbstbespiegelung in Fugentechnik’, *Die Welt*, 18 September 1982.

<sup>548</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.35.

<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38.

Given that Rudolf is not presented as an omniscient and reliable first-person narrator and that the narrative is hard to follow with its long sentences, repetitions and apparent *non sequiturs*, Bernhard needs to lend the narrative some cohesion if it is not going to degenerate into the unconnected impressionistic episodes of a narrative guide who unseats the reader without consoling him or directing him to something. While Rudolf points out that his journal entries are ‘Skizzen’,<sup>552</sup> and therefore necessarily fragmentary and incomplete, there are recurrent clues about the text’s purpose. Narratorial presentation contributes to the reader’s natural desire to want to find meaning, to want to understand Rudolf’s actions and motivations and the purpose of the writer behind the fiction. Pütz, in his linguistic study, terms this narrative meaning ‘Textkohärenz’.<sup>553</sup> He argues that coherence is achieved by the thread, ever-present throughout the scant action in the book, of Rudolf’s intention to carry out the Mendelssohn study – the one common factor to which all of his ‘Denk-Eskapaden’ return.<sup>554</sup> As Pütz says: ‘Aber darüber, daß er [Rudolf] nicht schreiben kann, schreibt er gute 200 Seiten.’<sup>555</sup> Pütz goes on to present a case for narrative cohesion through the lexical association of certain compounds, like ‘Hotelaufenthalt’, ‘Hotelbewohner’ and ‘Hotelbett’ to give just one of many examples.<sup>556</sup> From a linguistic point of view, Pütz’s case is compelling; from a literary point of view, he chooses not to consider Bernhard’s ‘inner landscapes’. Pütz refers to the ‘inneren Chaos’ of the text. Provided Rudolf’s actions remain unconnected, incoherent, those of an unpredictable madman, chaos will remain at the core of the narrative. It is by making connections after close reading — here, considering the themes of hope and humanness and seeing how Bernhard presents his narrator, the central figure — that critic and reader can hope to make sense of the potential chaos.

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<sup>552</sup> Ibid., p.69.

<sup>553</sup> Pütz, p.219.

<sup>554</sup> Ibid.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., p.218.

<sup>556</sup> For quoted example, see: Pütz, p.222. For a fuller exposition of this thesis, see: pp.219-24.

As already discussed, the associations which Rudolf forces the attentive and patient reader to make, create a meaning and coherence which show Rudolf 's narrative to be packed with unconventional incident. The conventional understanding of narrative action, used by Pütz, is redefined by being transferred, to a large extent, to thoughts and reflections, not external actions. Rudolf's mind is the scene of the action. Pütz's assertion that Rudolf does not do much ('Rudolf tut angesichts der 200 Seiten Buchlänge sehr wenig')<sup>557</sup> is only accurate if it is taken to refer solely to the external action. As the analysis of narratorial unreliability shows, even the relatively banal disclosure that he did indeed invite his sister to Peiskam is a major narrative event or incident. From the point of view of a literary discussion, a linguistic interpretation of a text such as this can be as misleading as a literal one. In the 'Hundekomödie', by saying that a dog is responsible for a world war, the narrator stretches the reader's willingness to give him the benefit of the doubt beyond the limit of reasonableness.<sup>558</sup> Bernhard will have lost the reader bent upon literal or even symbolic interpretation. After all, a man claiming that dogs are responsible for world wars must be mad or joking. It is at times like these that the reader is called on to apply the knowledge he has gleaned of Rudolf elsewhere in order to create an interpretation more in keeping with the tenor of the narrative. The reader, encouraged to find associations and clues by the narrator, will look for the reason behind this surreal or absurd claim about dogs. In this instance, the reader has to wait for a few lines before the real reason for the absurd distortion becomes apparent in a human-centred thought process which can be traced back to the contents of the sentence which precedes the 'Hundekomödie': the disgust he feels at a paper factory poisoning the air he breathes by polluting the atmosphere, thereby precipitating his demise.<sup>559</sup> This description bemoans the infringement of basic human rights (nothing more basic than breathing) because of commercial greed and fundamental civic inconsideration. When the largely absurd

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid., p.219.

<sup>558</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, pp.74-8.

<sup>559</sup> Ibid., p.74.

‘Hundekomödie’ follows, the reader with interpretative stamina will detect a common thread or link with this thought about man’s inhumanity to man when Rudolf eventually discloses: ‘[...] die Menschheit [pflegt] die Hunde besser [...] als ihre Mitmenschen [...]. Ich erlaube mir, eine solche Welt tatsächlich als eine perverse und im höchsten Grade unmenschliche und total verrückte zu bezeichnen.’<sup>560</sup> In this entire ‘Hundekomödie’, any reader seeking verification of Rudolf’s ludicrous exaggeration and propensity to nonsense, will find much ammunition; however, the discerning reader will ask what the incoherence or apparent chaos means or indicates. He will be obliged to reread the passage and reassess Rudolf’s aims, look back at where the subject changed and why and how. He will then have to reassess past narrative events. After this process, the same man Elisabeth called a sad, comical figure may in fact appear here as a sensible and dignified upholder of human values.

Bernhard encourages a close reading of Rudolf’s narrative: by piecing together all the clues about and from Rudolf — the one here from the discussion about dogs being but one element of the whole — the reader will find it easier to see coherent meaning in the text. It emerges that, as well as being unreliable, Rudolf is unerringly consistent in leaving clues about his meaning. The human-centred views resulting here from the comments about the paper factory and dogs are in keeping with the perceptive sensitivity of Rudolf’s subtle revelations, be they in the perfectionism monologue or in the other clue-laden elements of the narrative, such as the descriptions of Frau Kienesberger. Of course, the reader is not obliged to interpret or see the narrative in this way, but there can be little doubt that a reader willing to make links, look for connections and look behind the words here at the inner landscapes will find the narrative richer than one given to a literal, theoretical, ideological or dismissive reading of the text or interpretation of Rudolf.

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<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.77-8.

## 6. ANNA'S STORY AND ITS AFTERMATH

When Rudolf finally leaves Peiskam for Palma, the narrative undergoes a modification. The final forty pages describe Rudolf's time in Majorca where he claims to be writing the journal. His journal entries, once he arrives in Palma, are dominated by his recollection of the story of Anna Härdtl. Anna's story is important for the narrative; its introduction has a significant effect on Rudolf. More than anywhere in the rest of the journal, there are perceptible changes in Rudolf and self-revelations, and one can begin to speak here in terms of a personal development.

The notion of a personal development is problematic in that *Beton* is not the story of a character transformation or a systematic progression; Rudolf is no Wilhelm Meister; neither is he a political, social or moral symbol whose actions can be judged using a supra- or non-literary yardstick. None the less, the disclosures — direct and indirect — from Anna's story and its aftermath signal a development in the character of Rudolf. The impact of Anna's story on Rudolf is felt in three principal areas: one, his detachment from her situation which enables him to learn from her misadventures by analysis; two, the effect her story has on his actions and perceptions or way of looking at the world, and, three, on the narrative itself.

Anna's story presents imaginative possibilities for Rudolf. It is no coincidence that it is introduced in a manner strongly reminiscent of an earlier scene in the narrative when, his eyes shut, Rudolf is listening to the Haffner Symphony: '[ich] dachte [...], mit geschlossenen Augen aufeinmal über den Namen derjenigen jungen Frau aus München nach, die ich bei meinem letzten Palmaaufenthalt hier auf der *Borne* angesprochen habe [...].'<sup>561</sup> Listening to the music in the earlier scene provided Rudolf with 'das größte aller Vergnügen';<sup>562</sup> here, the mood is not much different with Rudolf in relaxed mood: '[...] während ich einen großen Espresso trank und die Sonne durch die leider noch kahlen

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<sup>561</sup> Ibid., pp.175-6. For the Haffner Symphony example, see: *ibid.*, p.144.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., p.144.

Platanen glitzerte.’<sup>563</sup> Right from the outset, Rudolf’s tone in recounting the encounter with Anna is distanced and calm. But, crucially, it is this detached calmness which relaxes him, enables analysis and allows him to engage with her story. The hectic desperation of the earlier descriptions of trying to start work with near-autistic stretchings and pressings against the wall are replaced here by a more laconic tone. His description of meeting Anna is marked by detail irrelevant to the story, like the nature of the Cañellas business.<sup>564</sup> Even his self-reproach at having asked her to join them for a cup of coffee is made into an issue; it is distinctly more solemn and formal than the repetitive, deeply subjective narrative mode hitherto prevalent, thereby lending it weight and importance: ‘[ich] beschuldigte [...] mich, denn ich hatte diese Einladung in einem möglicherweise die junge Frau sogar verletzenden, nicht sie beschützenden Ton gesagt und es tat mir schon leid, die Einladung überhaupt ausgesprochen zu haben [...]’.<sup>565</sup> He cannot recall what she says and repeats the prefatory phrase ‘something about’ (‘etwas von’), when recalling her version of events, to describe the contents of her account, as if it is a trivial matter – which it clearly is not.<sup>566</sup> In fact, he is so much an observer in the entire matter that he even records finely the reactions of the Cañellas girl who, he thinks, is angry with him for having invited this strange girl to their table.<sup>567</sup> In order to satisfy his curiosity, Rudolf behaves quite disingenuously. Despite the obvious embarrassment of the situation (to both Anna and the Cañellas girl), he does not do anything to alleviate the all-round embarrassment. He is set on hearing Anna’s story, and when he describes her delivery as ‘wie von einem Menschen gesprochen, der nahe dem Wahnsinnigwerden ist’, he could easily be describing himself a hundred pages earlier.<sup>568</sup> Anna’s plight

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<sup>563</sup> Ibid., p.175.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid., p.176.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid., p.177.

<sup>566</sup> Ibid., p.178.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid., pp.179-80.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid., p.178.

distracts Rudolf from his own problems, but it also reminds him of them as this inadvertent self-description shows, and he is far from being a misanthropic observer here.

Rudolf is determined to benefit from Anna's story by applying it to his own circumstances. When Anna has a fit of crying, after he asks after her (third-rate) hotel, his description of the incident contains no sympathy: 'Das hätte ich nicht sagen sollen, denn die Folge meines *Da wohnen Sie?* war ein heftig aus ihr herausquellender Weinkrampf.'<sup>569</sup> He does not explore or explain the reasons behind her distress; instead, he concentrates on how a fit of crying was the result of his statement. His embarrassment takes precedence over her pain. The sentence structure and expression is cold, official, almost scientific, in its objective, distanced precision. It is hard to believe that the description here relates to a woman who has lost her husband in tragic circumstances. At all points during the retelling of her story, Rudolf's distance suggests a desire to stand back and analyse Anna's story. When he says that the Cañellas girl and he agree out of decency ('wir hatten nicht nein sagen können') to accompany Anna to the cemetery the following day, it is clear that his curiosity is at least as great as his desire to assist Anna.<sup>570</sup> He even admits that it is impossible for him to sever all links with such an unfortunate woman without explaining why.<sup>571</sup> The plausible explanation for this admission is curiosity. However charitable an interest he may take in her welfare, he does not give her much practical help. The principal motivation driving his continued interest in Anna's plight is personal; that is to say, how he can relate her circumstances to his own. Even when Anna describes the moment she saw her husband's dead body on the concrete, his recollection is of her delivery, the effect he has on her, not of the horrific incident itself: 'Die junge Frau hatte ihren Bericht aufeinmal ganz ruhig vortragen können und ich hatte den Eindruck, daß sie sich gerade deshalb, weil ich sie dazu

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<sup>569</sup> Ibid., p.198 [emphasis in original].

<sup>570</sup> Ibid., p.199.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid., p.198.

gebracht habe, ihren Bericht zu machen, beruhigt habe, dachte ich jetzt.’<sup>572</sup> By consciously bringing his analysis of her story into the foreground, Rudolf shows his motivation behind recounting this tale in such depth: again, he single-mindedly uses Anna’s story to learn about himself. He learns — as did the narrator of the pentalogy — that by retelling one’s own grief, one can achieve some peace. Anna’s story, here, provides a justification for his own diary. He learns this fact consciously (emphasized by the inclusion of ‘jetzt’) by looking back on her story with distance. In the same way that the reader is encouraged to distance himself from and engage with the narrative, Rudolf looks back with the distance of time on a story which engaged him immensely when he encountered Anna eighteen months to two years previously.

By standing back from Anna’s story, Rudolf carries out analytical work; it makes him think about people’s lives and about society, but the insights almost always lead back to deeply personal and subjective matters, such as what the Cañellas girl thinks of him or the effect of his words on Anna. Although he describes in depth the social, commercial and industrial breakdowns which lead to the demise of the Härdtl business (‘und überhaupt heute niemand mehr irgendeine Verantwortung trage für irgendetwas’), these insights are passed off in one long sentence before the narrative returns to concentrate on the personal side to Anna’s history.<sup>573</sup>

Rudolf is most affected and concerned by the sides of Anna’s story which are common to his own personal experience, such as her despair, alienation from society and new-found loneliness; he is not affected by her fate on a personal level and never offers any real, practical help: ‘An diesem Abend war ich, allein durch den Gang auf die Borne und wieder zurück und vor allem durch die Katastrophe dieser Härdtl, die mir die ganze Zeit nicht aus dem Kopf gegangen war, völlig erschöpft gewesen.’<sup>574</sup> On his own, able to analyse events, he is so preoccupied by his reflections about Anna’s situation that he

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<sup>572</sup> Ibid., p.189.

<sup>573</sup> Ibid., pp.183-4.

<sup>574</sup> Ibid., p.206.

becomes exhausted. This vibrant mental activity contrasts starkly with his inertia and resultant frustration at the beginning of his journal when he finds excuses not to get down to his Mendelssohn study and, at best, can only talk about his plans and intentions. By analysing and studying Anna's predicament two years on, by writing down his memory of it, he performs an essentially literary act; he does not just write down the factual outline of the case; he relates it to himself within the literary framework of a story (Anna's) within a story (his journal). It comes as no surprise when a few lines later, he declares: 'Meine Arbeit über Mendelssohn Bartholdy ist ja *eine literarische* [...] keine *musikalische*.'<sup>575</sup> At this moment, he realizes that his intended study is about more than just music; it is somehow about himself and his life. Precisely how, he does not know. He conjectures that perhaps an unordered desk has been at the root of his writer's block all these years, but this is not the case since he has clearly forgotten that he ordered his desk meticulously in Peiskam in preparation for starting his writing, only to find that this did not work.<sup>576</sup> This oversight proves irrelevant here, for the insight into his Mendelssohn work leads to a significant action: Rudolf gives a generous tip to hotel staff purely out of a positive feeling which, for once is not tinged with a counterbalancing irony or qualification: 'Sie [Hotelpersonal] haben ja immer alles getan für mich, sie sind so liebenswürdig wie immer. Ich komme [...] seit über zehn Jahren ins Meliá, den Leuten ist der Österreicher vertraut.'<sup>577</sup> Rudolf has here escaped the relativity which frustrated and straitjacketed him earlier: the repetition of 'immer', the phrase 'so liebenswürdig' are both uncharacteristic, not only in their appraisal of other human beings but by their unequivocalness, too. He steps out of himself for a moment, referring to himself as 'der Österreicher'. The fact that he is prepared to give himself this label after his virulent criticisms of Austria also marks a development, an acceptance of what he is, and it is a calm acceptance, not a tortured, linguistically elaborate one.

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<sup>575</sup> Ibid., pp.206-7 [emphasis in original].

<sup>576</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid., p.207.

Self-acceptance is not just the result, on Rudolf's part, of contemplating the circumstances of someone else worse off than himself and realizing his own good fortune: 'Tatsächlich richten wir uns an einem *noch* unglücklicheren Menschen sofort auf. Und unsere Krankheit, selbst unsere Todeskrankheit, ist beinahe nichts';<sup>578</sup> it is also, and above all, the result of stepping out of his stultified ways of looking at the world. Anna's story, allied with his contemplation of it two years on, shows him another perspective.

This perspective helps his literary production. The realization of how unlucky and unhappy some people are, compared to him, makes him see the obvious: he has postponed, swept under the carpet his work for the last ten years ('*zehn Jahre aufgeschoben, hinausgeschoben*').<sup>579</sup> This piece of self-knowledge suddenly yields a host of possibilities for the hitherto elusive opening sentence. Ironically, despite the ten-year wait, the Mendelssohn project suddenly no longer matters, and he does not note down any of the possibilities for the first sentence which ironically now come into his mind; instead, he considers learning about himself from Anna's unfortunate circumstances by observing and analysing her. He now realizes that self-knowledge, self-development are ways of improving his existence, and if the Mendelssohn work really is a literary one, then he has succeeded in this aim by producing his journal. The first sentence of the work has never been that important, anyway; it has been the lack of self-knowledge which does not allow it which has been the problem. Now that is solved, it is no longer relevant to him. This accounts for the absence of elation at the thought of a number of first sentences and his immediate change of subject back to Anna's plight.

With the Mendelssohn work being described as literary, the distinction between his journal and his academic project becomes blurred: 'Anstatt über Mendelssohn schreibe ich diese Notizen, denke ich [...]'.<sup>580</sup> In the word 'Notizen' is embodied a fusion

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid., p.210 [emphasis in original].

<sup>579</sup> Ibid. [emphasis in original].

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

of the two works because he is writing a literary work (which he earlier described as ‘Skizzen’),<sup>581</sup> but he uses the word ‘Notizen’, a word earlier associated with his Mendelssohn work.<sup>582</sup> The sojourn in Palma, directly connected as it is with Anna’s story and Rudolf’s analysis of it, leads to a new beginning for Rudolf, and even in informing the reader about this new beginning Rudolf illustrates it: ‘Es ist gut, daß ich aus Peiskam weg bin und in Palma neu begonnen habe. Es ist ein Neuanfang, dachte ich [...]. Die Palmen [...] waren jetzt noch viel größer, an die zwanzig Meter hoch [...] Wie herrlich die Lichter der Passagierschiffe vom großen Hafen herüberglimmten.’<sup>583</sup> The unencumbered description of the gleaming lights from the cruise ships marks an immense step forward. For once, the journal-writer does not ‘say’ that he is calm; instead, and tellingly, he ‘shows’ his calmness through his medium of communication: the narrative. This passage marks a new height of narrative consciousness, and it marks a step forward for Rudolf in his capacity as the writer of his own journal. In the very next sentence, criticism of the *nouveaux riches* who have spoiled his pleasure at the old Hotel Victoria does nothing to dampen the impact of the preceding description; it reminds the reader that Rudolf has not ultimately transformed; he is no dreamy idealist now, and it keeps the change in check, but there is, none the less, a change. The description of the gleaming lights is quite different from anything which was described during his time in Peiskam. It embodies a positive value judgement (‘herrlich’) which is not in opposition to anything or at the cost of anyone. It is a moment of calmness when Rudolf can appreciate beauty without any psychological (the past), emotional (his sister) or physical (illness) impediments.

The more relaxed narrative is reflected by a more relaxed protagonist; the relationship is, of course, mutual. Since the beginning of the novel, Rudolf has learned that the vicious circle of unhappiness and frustration can be broken. With self-acceptance comes acceptance of others, too; Rudolf displays toleration which signals a marked

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid., p.69.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid., p.204.

development in his socialization or integration into his environment. Rudolf's descriptions, and Anna's story in particular, pave the way for new possibilities of action, perceptions and descriptions. Just before his declaration that Palma marks a new beginning for him, Rudolf asks himself an important question: 'Und welcher Ort und welche Gegend und was immer, dachte ich, hat nicht seine Kehrseite?'<sup>584</sup> The 'was immer' is important because it leaves the door open for this rhetorical question to embrace other aspects of life, most notably people. Rudolf is definitely more tolerant of human failing here than anywhere else in the book: he suddenly decides to call his sister, even refers to her as Elisabeth for the first time and personalizes, humanizes his description of her;<sup>585</sup> he consciously chooses to be amused rather than irritated by the English 'For Sale' signs on the boats in the harbour ('Der Satz belustigte mich, obwohl er mich hätte noch trauriger machen können');<sup>586</sup> he is genuinely curious in the hotel lobby about who people are, in stark contrast to the person who boasted earlier about not speaking to a soul during the course of a normal day,<sup>587</sup> and he is more understanding of the hotel staff, even gently mocking the activity of writing as he observes himself with ironic distance as the man who uses up ('vollgeschrieben') a ream of paper, as if it is a physical rather than intellectual and creative activity.<sup>588</sup> This altogether more gentle relationship with himself and more tolerant attitude towards others is traceable to his transcription and analysis of Anna's story.

The most important change in Rudolf's attitude and actions occurs very near the end of the book when he has a sudden impulse to visit the cemetery where Hanspeter Härdtl, Anna's husband, is buried: 'Ich muß so schnell als möglich auf den Friedhof, sagte ich mir, ich weiß nicht, aus was für einem Grund auf einmal mit einer entsetzlichen

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<sup>584</sup> Ibid.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid., p.210.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid., p.205.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid., pp.205-6.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid., p.208.

Entschiedenheit.’<sup>589</sup> The lighter, less cluttered narrative has yielded a more relaxed character here. ‘Entschiedenheit’ is certainly not a word associated with Rudolf anywhere in the text up to this point. He acts here on impulse, arguably even intuition (for his unspecified anxiety is confirmed when he finds Anna’s name on the gravestone); he does not know why, and he does not want to know why. Essentially non-cerebral, human qualities, like impulse and intuition, compel him to take a taxi to the cemetery: his actions are not the product of indecisive hyperrationality (no long sentences or self-justifications here); he does not consult anyone else (the old man, his sister) but acts spontaneously. ‘Aufeinmal’ replaces sentences of elaborate truth seeking. His actions, motivations, and decisions about what to do in life cannot all be analysed and subjected to perfectionist ideals before he acts. Here, he just acts. The fact that on his return home he can sleep, albeit drug-induced, uninterrupted for twenty-six hours is another manifest, positive development for a man who suffers from insomnia. That he wakes up in a fright is attributable largely to his concern for Anna which kept him up most of the previous night.

The ending frustrates the narrative closure one would normally expect, but Rudolf’s story is clearly not meant to end smoothly with an easily digestible conclusion; his abrupt awakening can be regarded as a point on a continuum of self-development for Bernhard’s protagonists, one which begins with the autobiographical narrators and ends with Murau in *Auslöschung*. Rudolf is certainly not ‘gefühllos’ any more. He might not have thought about Anna for two years, but the retelling of her story and its aftermath affects him deeply. From the author’s point of view, the ending has to be handled carefully. Any suggestions of a clean-cut happy ending would not be in keeping with Bernhard’s proclaimed aims of mirroring the inner landscapes of a man who, after all is

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<sup>589</sup> Ibid., p.212.

said and done, remains a problematic character – albeit one who has progressed and gleaned self-knowledge from his recollections.

As a narrative, Anna's story eases communication with the reader by bringing more conventional and easily digestible literary features into Rudolf's journal; it provides a conventional story with action and suspense, compact expression, an outside perspective, and a story within a story. All these elements contribute to the dual concerns of hope and concentration on human values under discussion here.

Anna's story, with its switches from the narrator's recollections to the more detailed passages in the subjunctive which all but put the narratorial voice in Anna's mouth, provides suspense. A man has died under suspicious circumstances, and although the story eventually fizzles out, Rudolf maintains the reader's interest through the anticipation of finding out what happens next in a story which starts out as a digressive anecdote but turns slowly into a whodunit. Although the narrator obviously knows the outcome, he maintains the tension with phrases like, 'Das Merkwürdigste der ganzen Angelegenheit war aber [...].'<sup>590</sup> The suggestion of murder (the Cañellas girl's suspicion)<sup>591</sup> brings Anna's tale to the fringes of the detective story. The laconic but fast-moving prose offers a relief to the reader bogged down in the intensity of the more typically Bernhard-like prose of the preceding section of the journal. The odd twists and turns — the hotel manager not calling her when he finds her husband, her husband's burial in her absence, the calmness of her reaction to his death — accentuate the change of narrative pace. As always with Bernhard's prose, however, the change of pace and relief is double-edged, for the reader cannot forget that even this story is subject to the same principles as earlier – namely, that the descriptions, oddities, and finer detail all reveal Rudolf in some way. When, in the middle of relating events, Rudolf pauses to add a phrase like 'und allein die Wahrscheinlichkeit die größte ist, daß [...]' (here, that Hårdtl

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<sup>590</sup> Ibid., p.192.

<sup>591</sup> Ibid.

probably just went out on to the balcony for a cigarette and fell off accidentally), it is not just an innocuous adjunct.<sup>592</sup> Rudolf is contributing here to the interpretation of Anna's story, writing it in more than the sense that he is recalling it. This additional small relative clause is then a signal to the reader of Rudolf's participation. Bernhard does not allow the reader to forget that behind Anna's story Rudolf's is progressing.

Another respect in which Rudolf's personal development at the end of the book is matched by the narrative is the straightforward ease of expression which marks out Anna's story. The reader is not obliged to stop and reread sentences here; the sentences are on average shorter than in the rest of the narrative, and even in longer sentences Bernhard achieves a compactness of expression absent elsewhere in Rudolf's account:

So stand sie [Anna] mit ihrem Kind schon zwei Tage nach dem Tod ihres Mannes, der, niemand wisse, aus welchem Grunde und wie vom Balkon des Hotel Paris in die Tiefe gestürzt war, vor einer längst zubetonierten Grabstätte, auf welcher nicht einmal sein Name gewesen verzeichnet war, nur der Name einer ihr vollkommen fremden, zweiundsiebzigjährigen Frau und die auf die gelbliche Marmortafel aufgepickte Nummer, die die Nummer ihres Mannes gewesen war.<sup>593</sup>

This succinct summary in one sentence stretches the inherently hypotactic qualities of the German language without creating an exaggerated and dense effect. There is a mine of information in this sentence. From this point of view, it can be compared to the opening sentence of the book; that sentence, however, is much longer, and the information is imparted with contradiction, lack of confidence, and tortured expression. It would be most unusual for someone picking up Bernhard's text for the first time not to have to reread the first sentence. This later summarizing sentence, however, is crystal-clear, and it marks Rudolf's ability to stand back and sum up a situation, without having recourse to inconclusive qualifications. Earlier in the book, he is so involved that digression, contradiction and repetition intermingle to form a textual weave which is hard to take at

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<sup>592</sup> Ibid., p.193.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid., p.191.

face value. The greater perspicacity in his mind, the preoccupation with someone else's problems, and the need to stand back and look at the whole, produce clarity. This is an important element in what can be termed Rudolf's rejuvenation via social reintegration.

The story within a story, which sees Rudolf as a third-person narrator, enables Bernhard to cast him as an observer and reteller. This enables social exposition, and the main targets of criticism are low standards in a mechanized society where systems and the people who oversee and operate machines and these systems fail, money and the discontents it engenders, and the younger generation packing off their older parents to places like Majorca to die rather than be a burden at home.<sup>594</sup> These criticisms are mentioned rather than described in detail, and they mark passing reference to genuine concerns of the writer, but they are not allowed to distract from Rudolf's personal development here. Rudolf notices how Anna is calmed, how she is upset, and, as already discussed, even records his own responses to the entire scene. As so often in Bernhard's prose, personal concerns supersede social or political matters.

## CONCLUSION

In the 1984 interview with Kathrein, Bernhard made a statement about human nature and then linked it with his creative writing:

Man kann nicht gegen seine Natur angehen. Aber es ist ja nicht so, daß ich alles schiach und negativ sehe. Wenn das nur in einer Richtung wäre, hätte ich nicht zwanzig Jahre Bücher veröffentlichen können. In allen meinen Büchern ist Spaß drin. Wie man ja auch selber ist, alles in sich hat, nur einmal mehr in die Richtung geht, einmal in die andere. In den Büchern, die man schreibt, setzt sich ja letzten Endes wieder die Natur durch.<sup>595</sup>

For Rudolf, self-analysis is the impulse behind his narrative and it is also the result of his narrative; it is the legacy of the autobiographies. Self-acceptance for him does not entail

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<sup>594</sup> See: *ibid.*, pp.183-4, 209, and 197-8, respectively.

<sup>595</sup> Kathrein, 'Es ist eh alles positiv', p.187.

a change of personality, but rather a better understanding of who he is: self-knowledge. In a world where everything is subject to qualification, where the protagonist never quite knows even what his own sister is thinking or what to do next with his own life (go to Palma, stay in Peiskam, or visit the old man), human nature provides a constant.

Bernhard's figures after 1975 fight against death, beginning with the ailing writer himself in the autobiographies. In the Kathrein interview here, Bernhard insisted that one cannot fight against one's nature. For Rudolf, delving into certain events of the past using a literary narrative is an exploration which helps him to know his own nature better. He learns to discover sides of it which simply do not come to the fore earlier in his tale. The anxiety with which he wakes up even after twenty-six hours of (drug-aided) sleep at the end of the story reminds the reader that here is a character who is still a nervous perfectionist preoccupied with the events in Palma, but the big difference between his action-packed stay in Palma and his musings in Peiskam is his new positive outlook. At the outset of the narrative, he is frustrated, infuriated, unhappy; the desire to seek self-improvement of some kind is an important part of what drives the narrative enquiry. Initially, this enquiry takes the form of trying to find a first sentence for his musicological study. But this is not the real issue.

Music and literature, like Anna's story (a narrative in its own right), do indeed help Rudolf to understand himself better. However, the moving, emotional, personally meaningful points of the narrative always involve people (the emotionally-charged call to his sister, the sleepless urgency about Anna's predicament); Rudolf does not like people, but he needs them. He may deride the hypocrisy, unreliability and selfishness of others, but he comes to realize that human qualities can create happiness. His self-exploration is a fulfilment of his own human potential or humanness, of what is possible for him given his nature. It is a realization of his individuality, the 'Eigenes' so lacking in the erstwhile

friends of his who have become dull and lifeless ('uninteressant') with time.<sup>596</sup> This positive, human-centred fulfilment erodes, even if it does not eradicate, the nihilism which is Bernhard's trademark. *Beton* is the first work of prose fiction to signal this announcement of hope and the potential for happiness. The major realization about the elemental nature of imperfection marks a turning-point. At the end of the narrative, greater self-acceptance and toleration of others result in calmness and a certain happiness, encapsulated within moments and glimpses of insight.

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<sup>596</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.156.

## CHAPTER III

### SURVIVAL THROUGH OBLITERATION: *Auslöschung*

#### INTRODUCTION

##### (a) From *Beton* to *Auslöschung*

After the publication of *Beton* (1982), Bernhard maintained a steady flow of one major work of prose fiction every year until 1986. Bernhard made no secret about writing in order to pay off his mortgages and to maintain a good lifestyle (he owned a Mercedes, often stayed in five-star hotels and was renowned among his friends for having expensive taste);<sup>597</sup> he reportedly boasted to Hennetmair about his financial success: “‘Wenn ich denke, daß ich heute solche Summen [...] erhalte, dann muß ich schon sagen, ich hab’s zu was gebracht.’”<sup>598</sup> This was a prolific time for Bernhard: apart from *Ein Kind* and *Beton*, 1982 also saw the publication of *Wittgensteins Nefte*. In 1983, Suhrkamp brought out a collection of his dramas (*Stücke 1969-1981*), and Bernhard published the play *Der Schein trügt* as well as the prose narrative, *Der Untergeher*. In 1984, *Holzfällen* came out, and it was followed in the same year by the plays *Der Theatermacher* and *Ritter*,

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<sup>597</sup> See Maja Lampersberg’s cutting comments in: Fialik, *Der Charismatiker*, pp.109-10.

<sup>598</sup> Karl Ignaz Hennetmair, *Aus dem versiegelten Tagebuch: Weihnacht mit Thomas Bernhard* (Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, 1992), p.35. Murau in *Auslöschung* also values money very highly: ‘Es ist sein [Onkel Georgs] Verdienst, daß ich Geld zwar sehr hoch, aber nicht am allerhöchsten einschätze [...]’ (*Auslöschung*, p.44, ll.25-7; for full reference, see footnote 617 below).

*Dene, Voss*. In 1985, apart from *Alte Meister*, Bernhard was embroiled in a public row — which was initially caused by his criticisms of Austria in *Der Theatermacher* and which ended up being about state subvention to artists — with the then Finance Minister, Franz Vranitzky; Bernhard produced a scorching reply to Vranitzky's assertion that plays like *Der Theatermacher* should not be tolerated on the Austrian stage. In 1986, he brought out the play *Einfach kompliziert* prior to the release of *Auslöschung*.<sup>599</sup>

The 1980s were a busy period for Bernhard's more ambitious prose projects: *Der Untergeher* (1983), despite the title, confirms Bernhard's post-autobiographical concentration on protagonists who overcome personal crises and survive — in this case, the narrator-protagonist whose instincts see him avoid personal downfall and outlive the fictional Glenn Gould and the underdog, Wertheimer;<sup>600</sup> *Holzfällen* (1984) caused a great deal of controversy in its heavy-handed and all but explicit lampoon of Gerhard and Maja Lampersberg, the composer-operettist and his wealthy wife, both of whom, as friends and patrons, did much to further Bernhard's career in the 1950s before he fell out with them in 1960;<sup>601</sup> *Alte Meister* (1985), like *Holzfällen* and, to a slightly lesser extent, *Der Untergeher*, was a humorous, but serious and intensely personal account of the pretensions displayed by fashionable, mediocre devotees of culture and art.<sup>602</sup> *Alte Meister* gleefully attacked Austrian sacred cows, like Stifter and Bruckner, with the overt aim of public provocation. Despite these satirical digressions from the more sober existential concerns of the pentalogy and *Beton*, the presence in all three of these works of a figure resilient enough to survive crises confirms the change in Bernhard's prose narratives since 1975 to a more human-centred position.

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<sup>599</sup> For full details of Bernhard's output during these years, including excerpts from selected reviews, see: Dittmar, *Werkgeschichte*, pp.236-311.

<sup>600</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Der Untergeher* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983).

<sup>601</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Holzfällen: Eine Erregung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984). There are various accounts of the events and drama surrounding the confiscation of the book and the subsequent withdrawal of his complaint by Lampersberg. The entire public spectacle lasted from 29 August 1984 until 15 February 1985. For a clear, chronological account of the scandal and background information to it, see: Eva Schindlacker, 'Thomas Bernhard: "Holtfällen: Eine Erregung": Dokumentation eines österreichischen Literaturskandals', in Schmidt-Dengler and Huber, pp.13-39. For Lampersberg's version of his friendship with and subsequent estrangement from Bernhard, see the following information-packed volume of conversations: Fialik, *Der Charismatiker*, pp.49-50.

<sup>602</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Alte Meister: Komödie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985).

*Der Untergeher* is ostensibly about the friendship between three erstwhile music students: the virtuoso pianist, Glenn Gould, Wertheimer, and the narrator. However, the impulse driving the narrator's observations indicates Bernhard's favourite subjects of personal survival, artistic representation, and perfectionism. Continuing the theme of survival from *Beton*, the first-person narrator outlives both his friends. Gould is ultimately destroyed by the high standards he sets himself; even his perfect mastery of the piano cannot compensate for his loneliness.<sup>603</sup> Wertheimer, too, is reduced to suicide by his obsessive, uncontrollable perfectionism which compounds his disappointment with his life, when his sister marries and moves away to Switzerland. The title refers to Wertheimer who, unlike the compromising narrator (who is gregarious and writes articles about music), is predestined to failure in an imperfect world.<sup>604</sup> Wertheimer is strikingly reminiscent of earlier extreme Bernhard figures (such as Roithamer and Konrad), and, as if to emphasize the development in Bernhard's prose, there is even adverse narratorial comment about his high standards ('Daß er immer alles gefordert, aber nichts gegeben hat').<sup>605</sup> Even his suicide is mocked by the narrator as the product of a madman.<sup>606</sup> At least Gould's artistic talents make him happy ('*Glenn ist ein glücklicher Mensch*'), but his talent is a calling not a choice and therefore closed as an option to Wertheimer and the narrator, who are mere mortals.<sup>607</sup> Unlike Wertheimer, the narrator can relinquish his earlier dreams about becoming a musical virtuoso in the knowledge that he will never attain Gould's heights.<sup>608</sup> By comparison with his friends, he leads a balanced existence. This narrator endorses the change in Bernhard's narrators after Rudolf.

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<sup>603</sup> Bernhard, *Der Untergeher*, p.35.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*, p.144.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, p.178.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*, p.145 [emphasis in original].

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.158-9.

In *Holzfällen*, Bernhard exacts revenge on Gerhard Lampersberg after the acrimonious dissolution of their friendship over twenty years previously. The narrator, observing quietly from his wing chair at a chic Viennese dinner-party, minutely dissects the empty lives behind the chit-chat of those assembled. The narrative conveys the overwhelming impression that Bernhard is principally concerned with undermining previous acquaintances, like the actress Jeannie Ebner (portrayed in the book by the mediocre writer, Jeannie Billroth) and, of course, the Lampersbergs whom, in the form of the party's hosts, he calls 'Parasiten' among other things.<sup>609</sup> Self-reflection occurs less frequently in this polemical satire than in *Der Untergeher*, but towards the end of *Holzfällen*, the narrator insists upon self-honesty and declares himself just as flawed and corrupt as the superficial people he has unremittingly criticized for three hundred pages.<sup>610</sup> Like the narrators of the pentalogy and Rudolf, the narrator of *Holzfällen* realizes at the end of his tale that however much he may hate the people he has just described, they are in another way 'die besten Menschen' and that he 'loves' them.<sup>611</sup> An insistent sense of hope yet again fundamentally undermines the blustering, potential pessimism of his observations.

In *Beton*, the elemental, brilliant imperfection of the Mendelssohn performance jolts Rudolf out of his lethargic misanthropy and affords him unexpected hope in the form of Anna's tale — a real human situation from which he can learn about himself — as opposed to his dry, fruitless academic work. Reger, in *Alte Meister*, is by his nature more closely attached to people, in particular his wife. Bernhard's narrator repeatedly alludes to Reger's interest in all things human: Reger openly states that he cannot live without people;<sup>612</sup> he affirms almost proudly that no work of art can replace a living,

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<sup>609</sup> Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p.154. See the comments of Jeannie Ebner and Gerhard Lampersberg in: Fialik, *Der Charismatiker*, pp.17-70.

<sup>610</sup> *Ibid.*, p.316.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, p.321.

<sup>612</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, p.291.

breathing human being.<sup>613</sup> For him, perfectionism or absolute standards have no place in personal relationships, and where Rudolf could only reluctantly acknowledge the value of human warmth, Reger actively embraces it: ‘auch einem Menschen hängen wir ja nur deshalb ganz besonders an, weil er hilflos ist [...] und nicht vollkommen.’<sup>614</sup> Human flaw is no longer the object of lament as it was in the prose of the 1960s and the early 1970s. In fact, Reger, the art historian, makes a career out of observing and dissecting the ‘Hilflosigkeit’, ‘Unfähigkeit’, and ‘Scheitern’ which characterize human endeavour in the visual arts.<sup>615</sup> It is no coincidence that Reger is successful and well-balanced in his chosen career where Rudolf was thwarted and unable to complete (or begin) his project. Rudolf’s repeated evaluations of the shortcomings of human nature contrast starkly with Reger’s analysis of its ineffably human and, although flawed, positive qualities. That is not to say that Reger is less critical than Rudolf of human weaknesses, such as hypocrisy, coldness and pretentiousness; he just acknowledges more readily and calmly the need to engage with them: ‘Ich hasse die Menschen, aber sie sind gleichzeitig mein einziger Lebenszweck.’<sup>616</sup> *Alte Meister* contains a good deal of knockabout polemic, like *Holzfällen*, but it ends up indisputably as a moving expression of personal loss and loneliness. It thereby confirms the growing importance of human values in Bernhard’s prose of the 1980s.

None of these three works contains the breadth of subject and literary subtlety of *Auslöschung*. In *Der Untergeher*, the narrator explores the positive side of survival by contrasting himself with two friends who perish. *Holzfällen*, for all its subtle comments about human nature, is predominantly shameless polemic. The references to Stifter, Heidegger, and Bruckner in *Alte Meister* evoke the rural Austrian (and South German) culture which is exposed as the setting for fascism in *Auslöschung*. It is not until this later

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<sup>613</sup> Ibid., p.285.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid., pp.43-4.

<sup>615</sup> Ibid., p.71.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid., p.102.

work that Bernhard brings together the personal and social aspects of his prose fiction of the '80s into one work.

Although it was not published until 1986, *Auslöschung* was the result of five years of hard, meticulous work which began as the autobiographical project was nearing completion.<sup>617</sup> It has been linked directly with the pentalogy: Manfred Mittermayer, in his Bernhard monograph of 1995, refers to the writing of *Auslöschung* as 'eine literarische Parallelaktion zum Abschluß der fünf autobiographischen Schriften'.<sup>618</sup> Given that *Beton* adapted and explored, within a fictional framework, many of the concerns of the reminiscing and reconstructing writer of the autobiographical pentalogy, *Auslöschung* can legitimately be regarded, more than any of the prose narratives of the 1980s, as its natural successor. Ulrich Weinzierl adduces Schmidt-Dengler and (a telephone conversation with) Peter Fabjan to confirm that Bernhard was working on *Auslöschung* in the early 1980s.<sup>619</sup> Mittermayer appropriately draws attention to the respective geneeses of both these works as 'zeitlich benachbart'.<sup>620</sup> The similarities extend beyond these external parallels to the themes and central concerns of the two works. The narrative in *Beton* really comes alive and attains a poetic resonance when Rudolf reassesses his own life by recalling and analysing Anna's story, and in particular her husband's and then her mysterious deaths. Rudolf's account closes almost immediately after he finds out about Anna's alleged suicide. Death contributes decisively to the open ending in *Beton*. The reader is left to ponder the possible interpretation and meaning of Rudolf's subsequent uncharacteristically long, uninterrupted sleep. As if to take up this theme and to continue where *Beton* left off, *Auslöschung* has death as its starting-point

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<sup>617</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Auslöschung: ein Zerfall* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986). Since this is such a long work with many words to each page, line numbers are included with page references for direct quotations from the text. For a copy of the last page of the original, typed manuscript, with the dates '1981-1986', see: Hans Höller and Matthias Part, "'Auslöschung'" als Antiautobiografie: Perspektiven der Forschung', in *Antiautobiografie: Thomas Bernhards 'Auslöschung'*, ed. by Hans Höller and Irene Heidelberger-Leonard (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp.97-115 (p.106). This published copy is a rare example showing handwritten corrections by Bernhard.

<sup>618</sup> Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.110.

<sup>619</sup> Ulrich Weinzierl, 'Bernhard als Erzieher: Thomas Bernhards *Auslöschung*', *The German Quarterly*, 63 (1990), 455-61 (p.459).

<sup>620</sup> Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.112.

on the opening page of the book, and it is the fundamental catalyst for Murau's entire narrative musings.

#### (b) Narrative Synopsis

As with *Beton*, much of the narrative of *Auslöschung* could easily be considered negative – but consistent clues suggest a counter-reading which embraces and develops some of the questions of hope and communication broached in the autobiographies and *Beton*. Despite its length, *Auslöschung* is not one of Bernhard's most impenetrable prose texts. Earlier narratives, such as *Verstörung* (1967), *Korrektur* (1975) and even the short book, *Amras* (1964), make the reader work much harder if he takes up the writer's challenge to piece together and make sense of the thought processes inside the narrator's disturbed, obsessive, often incoherent mind. Like Rudolf in *Beton*, the first-person narrator of *Holzfällen*, and Atzbacher, the narrator of *Alte Meister*, Murau presents an altogether more relaxed, less frantic narrative expression to the reader.<sup>621</sup> Exceptionally for Bernhard's prose in the '80s, *Auslöschung* is divided into two parts. This break from the relentless narrative flow can be seen as a rare concession to the reader by Bernhard and an early and uncharacteristic signal of his desire to invite him into the text.

The first section, 'Das Telegramm', describes in detail the thoughts and memories which swirl around in Murau's head directly after hearing about the sudden death in a car crash of his parents and elder brother, Johannes.<sup>622</sup> Much of his reconstruction of the past is prompted by three photographs: one of his parents at Victoria Station in London in 1961; another of Johannes on his sailing-boat on the lake at St. Wolfgang and the last one of his two sisters, Amalia and Caecilia, at the villa in

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<sup>621</sup> Where 'Murau' is used in this chapter, it refers to the narrator-protagonist, Franz-Josef Murau, not his father, brother or uncle, all of whom share the same surname.

<sup>622</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, pp.7-310.

Cannes of their uncle, Onkel Georg.<sup>623</sup> Whether through the status symbols of Burberry coats (parents), a favourite pleasure boat (Johannes) or a luxury villa on the French Riviera (sisters), the photographs bring home to Murau the superficiality of his family life – and much more about their personal values, by associative extension. In time-honoured Bernhard fashion, the narrative runs through a number of favourite targets of criticism and objects of admiration. Murau relates much of his story in the form of his reported comments (in indirect and direct speech) to his Italian pupil, Gambetti.<sup>624</sup> His comments to the reader are at a double remove: he tells the reader what he has already told Gambetti. After sketching brief portraits of his immediate family, Murau casually introduces the reader to his circle of friends in Rome where he has settled since leaving Wolfsegg, the impressive family estate in the Hausruck region of Austria, just over a hundred miles north-east of Salzburg and forty odd miles south-west of Linz. Familiar subjects of narrative focus include: self-development,<sup>625</sup> social hypocrisy;<sup>626</sup> the inherent ills of Catholicism;<sup>627</sup> the continued presence of Nazism in Austria, specifically in Wolfsegg;<sup>628</sup> life-destroying doctors;<sup>629</sup> the hostility in Austria to great art and intellectual thought (described in previous Bernhard narratives),<sup>630</sup> and, of course, the pernicious influence of the family on an initially adolescent and then adult individual who is deprived of love and warmth by his family's signal human inadequacies.<sup>631</sup> One of Murau's most revealing comments in this first half of the book is his statement to Gambetti that he proposes to write an account ('Bericht') whose aim it is to obliterate the terrible memories of Wolfsegg from his life.<sup>632</sup> That this literary project is to be called

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<sup>623</sup> For a clear account of the importance of photographs in *Auslöschung*, see: Kathleen Thorpe, 'Reading the Photographs in Thomas Bernhard's Novel *Auslöschung*', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 21 (1988), 3/4, 39-50.

<sup>624</sup> The constant references to his comments to Gambetti are too numerous to list, but they start as early as the second page of the book (p.8) and recur until almost the last page of the narrative (p.649).

<sup>625</sup> See, for instance: Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, pp.76-7.

<sup>626</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.141-6.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.194-6.

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*, p.204.

<sup>630</sup> *Ibid.*, p.272.

<sup>631</sup> See for instance: *Ibid.*, pp.12, 22, 78, 120, 122, 180, 290, 297.

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, p.199, l.5.

‘Auslöschung’ alerts the reader to its central importance to the narrative itself. The first section ends with Murau’s apprehensive departure for Wolfsegg where he must attend the funeral and, as sole heir, decide on the future of the family seat.

The second section, ‘Das Testament’, takes place in Wolfsegg and spans a day and a half as Murau arrives ‘home’ and looks ahead to the funeral the following day.<sup>633</sup> This second half contains immediate and extended recollections of his family, prompted by the servants and buildings of Wolfsegg where Murau grew up and which he exchanged for Rome twenty years previously. Murau introduces the reader to his beloved gardeners and contrasts them starkly with the insensitive, boorish huntsmen;<sup>634</sup> he visits with manifest indifference the orangery where the dead bodies are lying in state;<sup>635</sup> he coldly contemplates the funeral arrangements;<sup>636</sup> he weighs up his options for dealing with Wolfsegg;<sup>637</sup> he looks on from a distance as the guests arrive;<sup>638</sup> he meets personally his most-valued guests, Alexander, his cousin from Brussels, and Spadolini, the senior Roman Catholic priest who was his mother’s lover;<sup>639</sup> he even fits in a brief critical salvo at Goethe (a ‘Scharlatan’ and ‘philosophischer Schrebergärtner’) which soon extends to the entire corpus of German literature (‘kleinbürgerliche Beamtendichtung’, Kafka excepted);<sup>640</sup> he describes the hypocrisy and coldness of the guests as the funeral day begins, and then finally decides on the fate of Wolfsegg – which he hands over as a gift to the Jewish community in Vienna courtesy of Eisenberg, a Viennese rabbi and friend from student days.<sup>641</sup>

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<sup>633</sup> Ibid., pp.311-651.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid., pp.330-9.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid., p.396.

<sup>636</sup> Ibid., p.418.

<sup>637</sup> Ibid., p.432.

<sup>638</sup> Ibid., p.488.

<sup>639</sup> Ibid., pp.518 and 540, respectively.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid., p.576, ll.11 and 19-20, and p.608, ll.16-17.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid., pp.624 and 650.

## 1. CRITICAL RECEPTION

### (a) Reviews

The most informative introduction to the critical reception of *Auslöschung* is by Hans Höller, a renowned Bernhard biographer and researcher.<sup>642</sup> Höller provides his own commentary with selected excerpts from reviews. What emerges from this summary glance at the reviews of *Auslöschung*, Bernhard's longest prose text, is that critics found it hard to agree on virtually anything about the narrative. Höller comments: 'Das Bild der *Auslöschung* erscheint im Spiegel der Zeitungskritik zunächst wie ein Abbild seines Protagonisten Franz-Josef Murau, der sich selber fortwährend widerspricht. Kaum ein dezidiertes Satz, dem nicht, in einer anderen Rezension, ebenso dezidiert widersprochen würde.'<sup>643</sup> Since Bernhard's narrative method unstintingly relies upon emphatic contradiction, reviewers, like academic critics, have always been able easily to choose parts of a text in order to substantiate a particular argument about Bernhard's work. *Auslöschung* was no different; in fact, its length meant that there were simply more contradictions from which to pick and choose.

*Auslöschung* turned out, of course, to be Bernhard's last major prose work.<sup>644</sup> By 1986, Bernhard's reputation as a 'Nestbeschmutzer' was complete. Controversies like those concerning Onkel Franz, *Holzfällen*, and Vranitzky had confirmed his reputation as an all-round trouble-maker and, more specifically, an outspoken critic of almost anything Austrian. *Auslöschung* quickly became another headline-writer's dream. *Kurier* in Vienna reports: 'Thomas Bernhard sorgt wieder für Schlagzeilen.'<sup>645</sup> Helga Schultheiss,

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<sup>642</sup> Hans Höller, 'Rekonstruktion des Romans im Spektrum der Zeitungsrezensionen', in Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.53-69. Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard also include in this informative, excellent volume reprints of six of the more prominent reviews: *ibid.*, pp.70-93. See also: Dittmar, *Werkgeschichte*, pp.305-9; Dittmar provides a bibliography of newspaper and magazine reviews (pp.469-71) of *Auslöschung* which overlaps but also complements Höller's. For a clear and well-documented account of the state of Bernhard criticism in America up to 1988, see: Daviau, pp.243-66.

<sup>643</sup> Höller, 'Rekonstruktion des Romans', pp.53-4.

<sup>644</sup> The diary-cum-sketchbook, *In der Höhe: Rettungsversuch, Unsinn* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1989) was published in 1989, but it was written in 1959, as indicated on the last page of the text (p.123). For further review details and bibliographical information, see: Dittmar, *Werkgeschichte*, pp.338-40 and 477.

<sup>645</sup> See: Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, p.55.

in her review of *Auslöschung*, expresses the extent to which Bernhard's rantings had been familiarized, even institutionalized, by referring to him as 'Österreichs schreibender Lieblingsfiesling'.<sup>646</sup> Some months after these reviews, Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler was to write: 'Sein Name [Thomas Bernhard] ist immer gut für einen Skandal.'<sup>647</sup> While all these and other notorious episodes made Bernhard a household name in the 1980s in Austria, they deflected the reception of his work away from the texts – even more than had been the case in the past. By the mid-1980s, Bernhard had gained quite a reputation, and German and Austrian literary journalists (many of whom had come in for his searing criticism) were not about to let him forget.

Although Höller's summary of critical reception is divided into eleven brief sections, the main disagreement about the text was whether this was a new offering by Bernhard or a predictable, even near-identical reworking of previous themes and narrative style. Most critics saw *Auslöschung* as a tired repetition of previous works. As Edwin Hartl wrote: 'Neu ist [...] weder die Tendenz noch die Diktion, neu ist der Umfang des Buches.'<sup>648</sup> Schultheiss, too, sees no real development in the writer's approach since the early prose: 'Thomas Bernhard ist um kein Gramm weniger giftig-gallig und bitter denn je.'<sup>649</sup> Her sentiments largely echo Eberhard Falcke's damning comments in his review in *Der Spiegel*: 'Der neue Bernhard ist nicht im mindesten neu.'<sup>650</sup> He pejoratively refers to 'dieser Bernhardschen sogenannten Neuerscheinung', and he is incensed at the author's audacious 'Wiederholungsinfamie'.<sup>651</sup> Werner Thuswaldner's sarcastic review, which concludes that Bernhard is a show-off and snob ('die Suche nach Exklusivität, nach Angeberei'), says that the book prompts '[eine] Wiederbegegnung mit

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<sup>646</sup> Helga Schultheiss, 'Wie überleben? Alles weglachen! Die *Auslöschung* von Österreichs Lieblingsfiesling Thomas Bernhard: schon bö!', *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, 22 November 1986. This review is reprinted in: Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.79-85 (p.79).

<sup>647</sup> Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, 'Von der unbegründeten Angst, mit Thomas Bernhard verwechselt zu werden', in Schmidt-Dengler and Huber, pp.7-11 (p.8).

<sup>648</sup> Edwin Hartl, 'Bernhards Konzept', *Die Furche*, 10 October 1986.

<sup>649</sup> Schultheiss, 'Wie überleben?'

<sup>650</sup> Eberhard Falcke, 'Abschreiben: Eine Auflehnung', *Der Spiegel*, 3 November 1986, pp.256-60. This article is reprinted in: Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.70-4 (p.70).

<sup>651</sup> *Ibid.*

altbekanntem Motiven [und] erweckt den Eindruck, als hätte man das alles schon einmal gelesen.’<sup>652</sup> All these reviews presume that *Auslöschung* not only represents the work of a writer who is keen to write the same book time and again but who revels in the despair and negativity contained in his narrative: they draw on a stereotyped view of Bernhard. Schachtsiek even goes as far as to sum up the book as a ‘Verzweiflungssorgie’.<sup>653</sup> Heinz Schafroth is left numb and blinded by what he perceives to be the uniformity of Bernhard’s hyperbole (‘In Bernhards Superlativsprache und totalitärem Stil wird alles eingeebnet und plattgewalzt’), and his grand claim that *Auslöschung* is ‘Bernhards weitere Inszenierung des Untergangs des Abendlandes’ inadvertently pinpoints the source of many of the broad-brush critical dismissals of the text.<sup>654</sup> If understood as primarily an attack on Western morality or even as general social criticism, *Auslöschung* would indeed be a repetitive, defective text expressing a cultural pessimism which is too wide-ranging to be persuasive and is, in any case, old hat. Murau’s intense psychic conflicts and deep-rooted personal preferences do not lend themselves to specific historical and political engagement in the narrative. These reviews of the work ascribe to Bernhard’s long narrative the same traits of nihilism and impenetrability which were present in early works. They fail to account for the more human, less uncompromising, calmer developments after the autobiography — such as the ones already witnessed in *Beton* — discernible through close and patient analysis of narrative patterns.

As in *Beton*, the problem of inattention to the narrative of *Auslöschung* is, to some extent, caused by the conflation of Bernhard and his protagonist in a good number of the reviews: ‘Murau alias Bernhard’ (Hans Heinz Hahl); ‘Bernhard, alias Murau’ (Andrea Köhler); ‘[Franz-Josef Murau] Thomas Bernhards aktuellster Doppelgänger’ (Helga Schultheiss); ‘It takes little effort to see Bernhard himself in the book’s

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<sup>652</sup> Werner Thuswaldner, ‘Möchtegern-Weltmann aus der Provinz’, *Salzburger Nachrichten*, 15 November 1986.

<sup>653</sup> N. Schachtsiek, ‘Im Malstrom des Hasses’, *Kölnische Rundschau*, 19 November 1986.

<sup>654</sup> Heinz F. Schafroth, ‘Hauptwerk – oder doch nicht’, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 4 October 1986.

protagonist, Franz-Josef Murau' (Denis Staunton).<sup>655</sup> If observed from these perspectives, Murau's narrative can easily become principally or exclusively a repetitive paraphrase of Bernhard's dissatisfaction with social and political conditions in Austria via a fictional character, and the text becomes difficult to read without succumbing to boredom – which is precisely how many critics end up regarding the book: 'ein endloser Satz-Rollteppich, auf dem der Frust einherlatscht' (Reinhold Tauber); 'Leicht macht es Thomas Bernhard einem nie' (Roland Gross); '[In *Auslöschung* ist Bernhard] immer noch der Jammerpriester mit Syntaxdefekt [...]. [Ich habe mich] über sechshundertfünfzig Seiten hindurchgelangweilt' (Eberhard Falcke); '[650 Seiten von Thomas Bernhard lesen] Welch Terror, Terror für Seele und Gedanken' (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg).<sup>656</sup>

Some critics, less harsh than the majority cited above, conceived of *Auslöschung* as a summing up of Bernhard's work, with the latent implication that Bernhard almost knew this was going to be his last major prose project. Rolf Michaelis, in his insightful review in *Die Zeit*, refers to *Auslöschung* as 'die Summe des literarischen Werkes von Thomas Bernhard'; Hans Jansen calls it a 'Kompendium all seiner bisherigen Schriften'.<sup>657</sup> For Karl Birkenseer, it is 'die Summe [von Bernhards] bisherigen Schreibanstrengungen'.<sup>658</sup>

A third category of critical opinion was more adventurous and saw something new in this text. Konrad Paul Liessmann, in his review, calls Murau a 'Novum für die Helden Bernhards'.<sup>659</sup> Harald Hartung also detects 'neue Nuancen', a move away from earlier narratives, created by a 'Stimme, [...] die alles auszulöschen scheint und doch

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<sup>655</sup> Hans Heinz Hahnl, 'Wunschträumer Thomas Bernhard', *Arbeiter-Zeitung*, 4 October 1986; Andrea Köhler, 'Amoklauf in Verdunkelungsprosa', *General-Anzeiger für Bonn*, 7 December 1986; Schultheiss, 'Wie überleben?': Denis Staunton, 'Extinction', *The Observer*, 5 November 1995.

<sup>656</sup> Reinhold Tauber, 'Das Leben, eine Komödie', *Oberösterreichische Nachrichten*, 16 October 1986; Roland Gross, 'Familiäre Haus-Schlachtung', *Rheinischer Merkur*, 3 October 1986; Falcke, 'Abschreiben: eine Auflehnung'; Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 'Dieses Schweigen zu übertönen mit wildem Reden', *Die Tageszeitung*, 1 October 1986.

<sup>657</sup> Rolf Michaelis, 'Vernichtungsjubel. Thomas Bernhards monumentales Prosawerk "*Auslöschung: Ein Zerfall*": Politisches Pamphlet und Roman der Trauer', *Die Zeit*, 3 October 1986; Hans Jansen, 'Der Verdammte von Wolfsegg', *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 November 1986.

<sup>658</sup> Karl Birkenseer, 'Der Tod erwischt den Helden im Zentrum der Welt', *Mittelbayerische Zeitung*, 3 October 1986.

<sup>659</sup> Konrad Paul Liessmann, 'Gedämpfter Sarkasmus', *Falter*, 25 September 1986.

alles erhält'.<sup>660</sup> Even Helga Schultheiss, albeit reluctantly, concedes that Murau, in contrast to his predecessors, is 'viel gelöster, viel nuancenreicher und mit einer Menge mehr Zutrauen in Witz und Komik'.<sup>661</sup> The desire to find new directions in this prose does admittedly lead to one or two unusual interpretations, not least Schachtsiek's assertion that in all probability Murau kills himself, or Lutz Flörke's contention that, among other things, Murau is suffering from 'Midlife-Crisis'.<sup>662</sup>

As far as this study is concerned, the most relevant strain of the critical opinion expressed in reviews of the book concerns its humane elements. Although they are expressed in the journalistic reviews and critical literature as an afterthought and, where mentioned, often only in passing, they mark an important starting-point for the exposition in this chapter. Staunton refers to *Auslöschung* as 'both funny and humane'; Höller draws attention to a 'sich in *Auslöschung* auf neue Weise artikulierende Lebensfreude'; Dietmar Kanthak is full of praise for Bernhard's achievements in *Auslöschung* and calls it 'sein [...] menschlichstes Buch'; Michaelis, too, concentrates on the positive elements although he overlooks the negative and somewhat overstates the case: 'Bernhards Werk, das "Auslöschung" fordert, ist keineswegs "negativ" oder "pessimistisch", sondern verwandelt sich in einen Hymnus der Errettung, ja Erlösung'.<sup>663</sup> These critical remarks contain the seeds of the line of enquiry this chapter proposes to pursue. None of the above critics, however, addresses how Murau is different from his predecessors; none of them gives examples from the text which reveal Murau's or Bernhard's consistently humane attitude. None of them links this humaneness with a development nascent within and traceable since the autobiographical pentalogy, most notably in *Beton*.

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<sup>660</sup> Harald Hartung, 'Wolfsegg oder Die [sic] hohe Schule der Übertreibung', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 26 October 1986.

<sup>661</sup> Schultheiss, 'Wie überleben?'

<sup>662</sup> Schachtsiek, 'Im Malstrom des Hasses'; Lutz Flörke, 'Solange man redet, ist man nicht tot: Hermann Peter Piwitt, Thomas Bernhard und die Kunst des Schweigens', *Die Tageszeitung*, 14 July 1987.

<sup>663</sup> Staunton, 'Extinction'; Höller, 'Rekonstruktion des Romans' in : Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, p.63; Dietmar Kanthak, 'Übertreiben, um zu überleben: Thomas Bernhards großer Roman *Auslöschung*', *General-Anzeiger für Bonn*, 3 February 1987; Michaelis, 'Vernichtungsjubel'.

## (b) Articles and Books

For the most informative review of academic articles and books about *Auslöschung*, the Bernhard scholar is once again indebted to the invaluable volume edited by Hans Höller and Irene Heidelberger-Leonard.<sup>664</sup> In an article summarizing some secondary material on the text under discussion, Höller and Matthias Part centre their survey upon the question of 'Antiautobiografie'.<sup>665</sup> They concentrate their attention on studies by Annegret Mahler-Bungers, Eva Marquardt, Christian Klug, Andreas Gössling, and Willi Huntemann.<sup>666</sup> Many of the studies on *Auslöschung* treat it as an end-point in Bernhard's collective work (Klug), as a symptom of the tension between his real and fictive worlds (Marquardt), or even as a literary game (Gössling). According to these critics, the narrative relies on intellectual points of interest outside it – or, at most, in the author's life; it is not often exploited as a source of information in and about itself through close textual analysis. It is in keeping with a marked tendency in Bernhard criticism that the terms used by Höller and Part to describe the conclusions afforded by some of the discussed studies are vague and left unclarified. The narrative construction in *Auslöschung* is termed 'Schreiben gegen sich selbst' and 'ein ständig neues Überwinden von bereits erreichten Positionen'.<sup>667</sup> It is, therefore, unsurprising when Höller and Part

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<sup>664</sup> Höller and Part, pp.97-115. This article also contains a useful bibliography of books and articles about *Auslöschung* (pp.112-15).

<sup>665</sup> This term appears in *Auslöschung* (p.188, l.18) and refers to 'ein mehrere hundert Seiten umfassendes Manuskript' (ibid., ll.18-19) which Murau's favourite relative and early mentor, Onkel Georg, had been writing but which mysteriously disappeared after his death.

<sup>666</sup> The studies in question are: Annegret Mahler-Bungers, 'Die "Antiautobiografie": Thomas Bernhard als Antiautobiograph?', in *Über sich selbst reden: Zur Psychoanalyse autobiographischen Schreibens*, ed. by Johannes Cremerius (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1992), pp.121-33; Eva Marquardt, *Gegenrichtung: Entwicklungstendenzen in der Erzählprosa Thomas Bernhards* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1990); Christian Klug, 'Interaktion und Identität: Zum Motiv der Willensschwäche in Thomas Bernhards *Auslöschung*', *Modern Austrian Literature* 23 (1990), 3/4, 17-39; Andreas Gössling, *Die 'Eisenbergrichtung': Versuch über Thomas Bernhards 'Auslöschung'* (Münster: Kleinheinrich, 1988); Willi Huntemann, "'Treue zum Scheitern": Bernhard, Beckett und die Postmoderne', *Text und Kritik*, 43 (1991), 42-74.

<sup>667</sup> Höller and Part, p.103. Their contention that analysis of Bernhard's manuscripts would be a most rewarding critical exercise cannot be denied: 'Das Typoskript auf die verschiedenen Entstehungsschichten hin zu untersuchen wäre eine der dringendsten philologischen Aufgaben' (ibid., p.109). Even the two manuscript pages reprinted in their article (ibid., pp.99 and 106) are most revealing as they witness corrections made by Bernhard – minute alterations of style which could give an insight into his literary intentions and method. Since Peter Fabjan selectively opened access to Bernhard's posthumous papers, it is just a matter of time before work on this area is completed. For an overview on recent developments in this area, see: Anonymous, 'Testament und Stiftung: Thomas Bernhard', *Fachdienst Germanistik*, 6 (1998), 2-3.

(in this piece of 1995) acknowledge the critical lacunae inherent in the reception of this long and important work almost ten years after its publication: 'Die literaturwissenschaftliche Forschung [...] zum bedeutendsten Werk Thomas Bernhards hat noch viel vor sich.'<sup>668</sup>

Of the critics who do engage with the text, there are two distinct groups: those who perceive Murau as a nihilist and a failure, and others who unearth in Bernhard's narrative new directions and potentially exciting possibilities of interpretation.

The majority see in Murau another of Bernhard's failed protagonists, a man whose literary and personal project has gone horribly wrong and who, like his predecessors, cannot escape misery. For Leslie Bodi, Murau is 'einer der Misanthropen und Nörgler der österreichischen Literaturtradition'.<sup>669</sup> Charles Martin detects a regressive move, a 'change in direction [...] reminiscent of the uncertainties which inform the prose work of the first period'.<sup>670</sup> Like many critics, Martin sees Murau as a 'projection of the author himself', and, consequently, the narrative as a reminder from Bernhard that there 'is no escape from the nihilistic state'.<sup>671</sup> Martin surmises that this text is a literary farewell, that it 'reflects a desire on the [dying] author's part to round off his *œuvre* in a convincing way'.<sup>672</sup> Contrary to Kanthak's and Michaelis's comments about the new heights scaled by *Auslöschung*, Martin sees the narrative undermining 'the validity of the developments in his prose since 1975'.<sup>673</sup> Mittermayer, too, is doubtful if Murau really does achieve any real self-knowledge or self-development: 'Wenn man *Auslöschung* als Bernhards Bilanz einer lebenslangen literarischen Selbstforschung versteht, so fällt diese äußerst skeptisch aus.'<sup>674</sup> Bernhard Sorg, similarly, sees little hope

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<sup>668</sup> Höller and Part, pp.109-10.

<sup>669</sup> Leslie Bodi, 'Österreicher in der Fremde - Fremde in Österreich: Zur Identitäts- und Differenz erfahrung in Thomas Bernhards *Auslöschung: Ein Zerfall* (1986)', in *Akten des VIII Internationalen Germanisten-Kongreß*, x, ed. by Eijiro Iwasaki (Munich: Iudicum, 1990), pp.120-5 (p.121).

<sup>670</sup> Martin, p.189.

<sup>671</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.201 and 203.

<sup>672</sup> *Ibid.*, p.190.

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*, p.202.

<sup>674</sup> Manfred Mittermayer, "'Die Meinigen abschaffen': Das Existenzgefüge des Franz-Josef Murau', in Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.116-31 (p.127).

or sense of individual freedom in the figure of Murau: 'Es gibt keinen Neuanfang, weder in Rom noch anderswo, keine Freiheit von den Prägungen der Kindheit und der Geschichte.'<sup>675</sup> Adrian Stevens, writing on hermeneutics and Bakhtinian carnival in *Auslöschung*, also remarks that Murau's project to overcome the debilitating influence of Wolfsegg is doomed *a priori*: 'Wolfsegg kann in Muraus karnevalistischen Schimpftiraden nie ausgelöscht werden.'<sup>676</sup>

Recent contributors to this debate about Bernhard's most significant work have increasingly discovered somewhat more fulfilment and less frustration in the figure of Murau and his project. In his analysis of *Auslöschung*, Alfred Pfabigan deliberately sets aside the personal and literary aspects of the narrative in favour of broader philosophical and historical issues, such as gender relations, Nazism, Catholicism, and Austria.<sup>677</sup> None the less, he does briefly discuss Murau's personal project, talking of a 'Befreiung vom österreichischen Ungeist', and, without providing any pertinent interpretative framework, he calls *Auslöschung* a 'hoffnungsvolles Buch'.<sup>678</sup> Silke Schlichtmann's useful thesis centres upon the concept of obliteration, 'Auslöschung'. She lists and analyses many instances of the word and its cognates from *Auslöschung* and comes to the conclusion that, while 'Auslöschung' is a fundamental concept behind and within the narrative, its precise meaning is not consistent but dependent upon context.<sup>679</sup> She sees Murau ultimately as defeated by his project, since he dies one year after completing it.<sup>680</sup> The text attests to a victory for the march of time, after a struggle between the positive and destructive forces of history, what she calls 'die Verknüpfung von Geschichte und Gegengeschichte'.<sup>681</sup> However, Schlichtmann is sensitive to the potential gain for Murau in transcribing his thoughts into his 'Bericht'; she sees the process of narration occurring

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<sup>675</sup> Sorg, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.127.

<sup>676</sup> Adrian Stevens, 'Schimpfen als künstlerischer Selbstentwurf: Karneval und Hermeneutik' in Schmidt-Dengler, Stevens, and Wagner, pp.61-91 (p.85).

<sup>677</sup> Pfabigan, pp.227-34, 234-45 and 245-8, respectively.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.238 and 244.

<sup>679</sup> Schlichtmann, pp.23-7.

<sup>680</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.135-7.

<sup>681</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.93-121.

‘im Rahmen eines therapeutischen Schreibmodells’.<sup>682</sup> Another recent contribution to this debate also sees the narrative as comforting therapy: ‘Aus dem pädagogischen wird ein therapeutisches Gespräch [zwischen Murau und Gambetti].’<sup>683</sup> Dowden, likewise, finds that something good comes out of Murau’s report. He starts by claiming that ‘the principal theme of *Auslöschung* is the maiming of Austria’, but he concludes that ‘Bernhard does not succumb to the facile temptations of moralizing politics’ and that he ‘is committed to the [...] humane ethic of insight’.<sup>684</sup> ‘Humane’ is certainly not a word which would have formed part of any Bernhard critic’s vocabulary before the autobiographical pentalogy; if Dowden’s words are taken seriously here, *Auslöschung* marks the end of a long journey of humanization and social integration for Bernhard’s often disillusioned, often lonely protagonists.

The last word about the critical reception of *Auslöschung* should appropriately come from Hans Höller who has written extensively about the narrative as well as the historical and biographical background to the genesis of the work. In a conference paper of 1994, Höller hints at a lightness of touch in Bernhard’s last major prose work (‘austriakischen Sensualismus’ and a ‘neue[n] mediterrane[n] Heiterkeit’)<sup>685</sup> where even the grave political comments and actions (such as the disposal of Wolfsegg) are ultimately a ‘Geste’.<sup>686</sup> Although he recognizes the historical and political dimension of the theme of obliteration, Höller chooses to stress its ‘zerstörende reinigende Kraft’ which is fired by Bernhard’s immense sense of personal idealism and faith in literary expression: ‘Enthält diese Wendung des Auslöschungs-Themas in Bernhards Post-Holocaust-Roman nicht eine ungeheure Utopie und ein ungeheures Vertrauen auf die

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<sup>682</sup> Ibid., p.136.

<sup>683</sup> Steffen Vogt, ‘Zur Sprache bringen: Thomas Bernhard als politischer Autor’, in *Thomas Bernhard: eine Einschärfung*, ed. by Joachim Hoell, Alexander Honold, and Kai Luehrs-Kaiser (Vorwerk 8: Berlin, 1998), 10-16 (p.16).

<sup>684</sup> Dowden, pp.66 and 70.

<sup>685</sup> Hans Höller, ‘Thomas Bernhards *Auslöschung* als Comédie humaine der österreichischen Geschichte’, in *Bernhard-Tage: Ohlsdorf, 1994. Materialien*, ed. by Franz Gebesmair and Alfred Pittertschatscher (Weitra: Bibliothek der Provinz, [1994?]), pp.58-73 (p.63). This article can also be found in: Schmidt-Dengler, Stevens, and Wagner, pp.47-60.

<sup>686</sup> Ibid., p.67.

Literatur?’<sup>687</sup> This potentially positive perspective marks the starting-point for the critical appraisal of the text in this chapter.

## 2. PERSONAL VALUES AND PEOPLE

Bernhard has little or no critical reputation as a humanist. As shown above, critics have concentrated on the critical diatribes in his prose, focusing on Bernhard as nihilist and iconoclast. Yet since the pentalogy, more human-centred, even humane elements to the prose output are increasingly in evidence: Bernhard’s later protagonists have long-standing friends, are more comfortable in their presence and talk about them in positive terms more than any of their predecessors of the ’60s and ’70s. The most telling early reference in Bernhard’s prose fiction to this concentration on what Robert Vellusig calls ‘die soziale (und pragmatische) Dimension des zwischenmenschlichen Austausches’ occurs in an early short story entitled ‘Jauregg’(1966).<sup>688</sup> Although it is a tale of the dashed hopes of a young man who goes to work at his uncle’s quarry, the narrator-protagonist does recognize the importance of social contact for everyday life. He dreads being sucked into conversations with his fellow-workers but adds: ‘Aber um leben zu können, muß man mit Menschen zusammen sein.’<sup>689</sup> Although the typical Bernhard protagonist has a strong bond with his family (Konrad and his wife, Roithamer and his sister, the autobiographical narrator and his grandfather, Rudolf and his sister), it is not until 1985 in *Alte Meister* that this theme becomes a focal point in one of Bernhard’s prose narratives. Reger, like the protagonist in ‘Jauregg’, recognizes his need for people (‘Ich habe mich immer ausschließlich mit Menschen befaßt’),<sup>690</sup> but unlike the young

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<sup>687</sup> Both quotations: *ibid.*, p.70.

<sup>688</sup> Robert Vellusig, ‘Thomas Bernhards Gesprächs-Kunst’, in Schmidt-Dengler, Stevens, and Wagner, pp.25-46 (p.31) [emphasis in original].

<sup>689</sup> Thomas Bernhard, ‘Jauregg’, in Thomas Bernhard, *Prosa* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), pp.49-64 (pp.49 and 61-2). This story was originally published in *Literatur und Kritik*, 1 (1966), 18-25.

<sup>690</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, p.102.

man twenty years before him, he differentiates between people as an anonymous entity, or humanity as a concept, and real, living individuals: 'ich bin [...] ein Menschenfanatiker [...], kein Menschheitsfanatiker'.<sup>691</sup> Reger is obsessed with people (and in the main, not with humanity as an intellectual concept) where the young man is just painfully aware of them as a necessary evil. For Murau, people represent a lifeline despite all his criticisms, and his account expresses and rediscovers this fundamental piece of self-knowledge in different ways.

One of the principal ways in which Bernhard conveys this to the reader is through his protagonist's attitude to themes often discussed in the earlier prose. For instance, the contrast in attitude between Murau and past figures towards intellectual pursuits is marked and informative. The development from Rudolf (one of Bernhard's more compromising intellectuals) to Murau is highlighted in their different attitudes to the value of intellectual endeavour. Where Rudolf, initially at least, put his intended work on Mendelssohn before anything else, Murau is able to ironize unequivocally his intellectual pretensions in favour of lived personal experience:

Ich ertrage das Alleinsein nicht und rede fortwährend davon, ich predige das Alleinsein und hasse es zutiefst, weil es wie nichts sonst unglücklich macht, wie ich weiß [...] Ich sage zu Gambetti, Gambetti, *das Höchste ist das Alleinsein*, weil ich mich als sein Philosoph aufspiele, aber ich weiß ganz genau, daß *Alleinsein die fürchterlichste aller Strafen* ist.<sup>692</sup>

The verbs in this passage are crucial in expressing Murau's attitude to his life; the discrepancy between what Murau knows ('weiß') and what it suits him to think (as Gambetti's tutor), although he knows it is not the case ('mich [...] aufspiele'), represents a fundamental shift from *Beton*. Rudolf, or at least the reader of his narrative, finds out in Majorca after meeting Anna how much more urgent his need for human contact is than the call of his intellectual work. Murau knows it from the beginning of his account, and

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<sup>691</sup> Ibid.

<sup>692</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, pp.308-9, ll.27-31 (p.308) to l.2 (p.309) [emphasis in original].

this self-knowledge culminates explicitly in this passage; he readily acknowledges his need for others. Preaching loneliness is, in part, an intellectual, professional pose; Murau must, after all, have had to spend much time on his own to write his report (*Auslöschung*). The direct link established here between loneliness and unhappiness ('weil es [das Alleinsein] wie nichts sonst unglücklich macht') suggests, by implication, a connection between happiness and human contact. If loneliness makes Murau unhappy, then the logical implication is that happiness could possibly be brought about by human contact. The ironical detachment from intellectual pursuits (Murau as 'Philosoph') points to gentle self-mockery, and it signals less faith than in previous prose works in the power of the intellect to create a better life, and a greater belief in social contact as a path to a balanced life and happiness. Although they have never lacked self-doubt, the intellectuals of Bernhard's prose have always taken their intellectual projects very seriously (Roithamer, Konrad, narrator in *Der Untergeher*, even Rudolf). Murau's attack here, therefore, signals a development all the more conspicuously.

The direct influence of people on the protagonist is marked in *Auslöschung*. In *Beton*, Elisabeth was a very dominant and influential presence in Rudolf's mind, and the effect she had on him and his work was almost always debilitating and negative. In *Auslöschung*, however, Murau's friends and the people he knows have a much more positive impact on his account and life. The mere presence of the gardeners has a salutary effect on Murau's perception of his mother: 'Bei den Jägern empfand ich meine Mutter immer als abstoßend, bei den Gärtnern nicht. Die Gärtner [...] hatten immer eine heilsame Wirkung.'<sup>693</sup> People are the most important element of the environment in the narrative, and as here, they make a difference to the way in which the protagonist sees the world.

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<sup>693</sup> Ibid., p.334, ll.11-14.

So considerable is the influence of people that at one point, Bernhard even blurs the distinction between the physical environment and the human landscape. Talking of his childhood excursions into the village — in contrast to the obedient, more socially withdrawn Johannes — Murau adds: ‘Jede Gelegenheit benützte ich, um den Ort [das Dorf Wolfsegg] aufzusuchen, ich war, sobald ich gehen hatte können, von ihm fasziniert gewesen, von den für mich neuen, anderen Menschen.’<sup>694</sup> The narrator can be seen to place ‘Menschen’ in apposition with ‘Ort’ here. The repetition of the preposition (‘von’) creates a rhythm which encourages the reader to connect the semantic contents of the two relative clauses, even to equate the two. Unusually for a Bernhard protagonist, Murau has clearly been comfortable around people since a young age.

The narrative contains many such signposts which encourage a life-affirmative interpretation of Murau’s responses and attitudes to his environment. Where Rudolf is sometimes weary and almost defeated, Murau has much more enthusiasm for life. Even while criticizing, he does not lose sight of his priorities. In his virulent broadside against most middle-class people (whom at one point he puts down as ‘der sogenannte gebildete Mittelstand, vor welchem einem immer graust’)<sup>695</sup> who seek false security behind qualifications and titles, he presents the primacy of life as a more valuable alternative: ‘So gering schätzen sie [die meisten Leute] das Leben an sich, daß sie nur die Zeugnisse und Titel sehen und sonst nichts.’<sup>696</sup> Although a precise or detailed definition of ‘das Leben an sich’ is not provided, Murau intimates the positive value to be found in life when it is denuded of qualifications and pretentious titles which prop up the fragile personal identity of most people. Again, the focus is on the human aspect of existence: ‘Nicht die Menschen werden seit Jahrhunderten gesehen, sondern nur Titel und

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<sup>694</sup> Ibid., p.87, ll.9-12.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid., p.175, ll.17-18.

<sup>696</sup> Ibid., p.80, ll.5-7.

Zeugnisse.’<sup>697</sup> This is a typical instance from *Auslöschung* of the underlying idealism about people, hidden in explicit criticism about their behaviour and attitudes.

All the references above, along with Murau’s altogether calmer, more sanguine outlook, result in a consistent but unprogrammatically set of personal values emerging in *Auslöschung*, as Murau reveals his relatively easy relationships with people and friends; these values can be divided into three broad areas of ‘human warmth’, ‘character’, and ‘love’.

Bernhard establishes Murau’s humane credentials right from the outset of the narrative; not only his awareness of essentially human qualities but also his warmth and friendliness towards a wide range of people immediately contrasts him with all of Bernhard’s previous protagonists. In his attitude to people and life, Murau is more closely related to Rudolf than to earlier figures like the reclusive, obsessive, and abnormally intense Walter (*Amras*), Konrad (*Das Kalkwerk*) or Roithamer (*Korrektur*). Even when compared with the later protagonists — who put their faith in their work (narrator in *Der Untergeher*), or are somewhat reclusive (Rudolf and the narrator in *Holzfällen*) or devote themselves lovingly to one person (Wertheimer and Reger) — Murau is a more sociable, better balanced figure.

One of the clearest stylistic clues Bernhard provides to this social and personal development is the repeated employment in the narrative of the word ‘Mensch’ and its compounds. Murau’s choice of words makes clear his commitment to humane values, even if it is often only by implication. From the outset of Murau’s tale, the narrator impresses the importance of the word ‘Mensch’ upon the reader. As early as the second page of his narrative, he refers to the ‘menschenunwürdige Last [der deutschen Sprache]’.<sup>698</sup> A few pages later, the climate in Wolfsegg is called ‘menschenvernichtend’.<sup>699</sup> Later, while still in Rome, Murau rants against the teaching

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<sup>697</sup> Ibid., ll.25-6.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid., p.8, l.21.

<sup>699</sup> Ibid., p.17, ll.15-16.

and legal professions: 'Wenn wir uns mit einem Lehrer unterhalten, kommen wir bald darauf, daß er ein aus Unzufriedenheit mit sich selbst, menschenzerstörender, ja letzten Endes weltzerstörender Charakter ist, genauso [wie] mit einem Richter.'<sup>700</sup> In all these examples, Bernhard need not have used the prefix 'mensch'; if anything, it makes the sentences a little stilted since the meaning would be conveyed in all three instances equally well, even more idiomatically, without it. In isolation, these adjectives could be passed off as idiolectic figures of speech, even exaggeration for effect; after all, can a language be described, without a more specific context or more precise definition, as placing an inhuman burden on man? Together, however, these descriptions provide a hint to the reader about Murau's priorities and personal values; preservation of human values underpins his expression in all these examples. In the last one, by placing 'menschenzerstörend' and 'weltzerstörend' in successive clauses which climax into a crescendo ('weltzerstörend' is a heightened, more extreme version of 'menschenzerstörend'), he invites or allows the reader to associate 'Menschen' with 'Welt'. In what otherwise might be considered a typically hyperbolic attack on teachers, Bernhard gently encourages an alternative interpretation in the reader prepared to make an associative, semantic connection between these two related adjectives.

Stylistic subtlety provides a subtext here and enhances the content of the passage. The effect is that the text presents the reader with two possible lines of enquiry: first, an obvious and (in previous works, oft-repeated) specific social criticism about a profession; and second, and more tellingly, the narrative provides the reader, prepared to be led by Bernhard's clues, with an insight into the private thoughts and personal values which fire Murau's observations and criticisms. What initially looks like familiar, somewhat tired social criticism is in fact revealed as an enquiry into humane values. By making the

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<sup>700</sup> Ibid., p.92, ll.5-9. A variant of these examples is used later on when Murau refers, in both literal and metaphorical terms, to Nazi prisons and concentration camps as 'Menschenvernichtungsanstalten' (p.447, ll.5-6). Bernhard uses this same word to describe schools in *Alte Meister* (p.58).

personal interpretation rewarding and multifaceted, Bernhard guides the reader into Murau's psychological world: his way of thinking and of perceiving the world.

The art of defining positive values and feelings through implication was much used by Bernhard in the pentalogy and *Beton*. In *Auslöschung*, however, a more forthright narrative expression emerges, and with it, a clearer understanding of the protagonist's positive relationships with other people. Even the word 'Unmensch', used by Murau's family to put down Onkel Georg for his enquiring mind ('Dein Onkel Georg ist ein Unmensch! haben sie [die Meinigen] oft gesagt'),<sup>701</sup> can have positive connotations. Over two hundred pages after Murau informs us of this criticism, he describes an incident where his mother scolds him as a child for secretly reading instead of attending to family duties: 'Plötzlich schaute sie [meine Mutter] mir ins Gesicht und sagte: *du bist unser Unmensch!*'<sup>702</sup> It is clear that the humanistic acts of having an enquiring mind, asking lots of questions (Georg), and of reading serious literature (the young Murau) — linked by the word 'Unmensch' — highlight, by contrast, the closed-mindedness of Murau's family here. It is clearly they who are 'unmenschlich', and the word, albeit by implication, asserts Murau's and his uncle's crusade against the provincial, conservative values of Murau's parents. His parents' misuse of the word is an inversion of standard idiom and, as such, an example of the way in which language can be manipulated grotesquely to personal ends. As if to signal the link between these two instances of the same word, Bernhard includes exclamation marks — a seldom used mark of punctuation in *Auslöschung* and Bernhard's prose generally — in both examples.

Throughout the narrative, humane values, embodied by 'Mensch' and its compounds are a useful means by which Bernhard brings Murau closer to other people. In depicting the close bond between Onkel Georg and himself, for instance, Murau

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<sup>701</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.39, ll.10-11.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*, p.267, ll.12-13 [emphasis in original].

emphasizes the positive value of the link between real life and human contact, and again the word 'Mensch' appears:

Mein Onkel Georg hat mir die Musik und die Literatur aufgeschlüsselt [...] und die Dichter als lebendige Menschen nahegebracht [...]. Meinem Onkel Georg verdanke ich, daß ich [...] ein durchaus als frei zu bezeichnender Mensch geworden bin. [...] Ich habe durch meinen Onkel [...] keine toten Völker aufgesucht, sondern lebendige.<sup>703</sup>

This passage can be read as a direct antithesis to the accusations levelled at Rudolf by his sister in *Beton* that the only friends he has are dead philosophers and poets.<sup>704</sup> It is, in part, through seeing poets as living people ('lebendige Menschen') that Murau, in contrast to Rudolf, achieves a sense of release ('frei') from frustration, loneliness, and one-way communication. People (the poets and Georg), the source of much misery for earlier protagonists, are transformed into a liberating force here. In case the reader is tempted to think that Murau's living musicians and poets are the same as Rudolf's writer and philosopher 'friends', Murau opportunely distances himself from the notion of 'intellectual' or thinker and firmly comes down in favour of healthy social contact. Moreover, the repetition of 'lebendig' leads back to Georg: it is his uncle, after all, who has brought alive the very poets and writers whom Elisabeth in *Beton* cruelly mocked as a society of dead friends. Onkel Georg presents the young Murau with a positive possibility which releases him from (here unspecified) shackles. Onkel Georg's role here can be compared to the positive influence exercised on the young Thomas by his grandfather, in the pentalogy. The emphasis on the importance of Georg is not to say that Murau does not respect great writers; the reading list he compiles for Gambetti reminds the reader that Murau retains respect for intellectual history, but he does not seek solace exclusively from it.<sup>705</sup>

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<sup>703</sup> Ibid., p.45, ll.1-28.

<sup>704</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, pp.41-2 and 55.

<sup>705</sup> The reading list comprises the following works (see: *Auslöschung*, pp.7-8, ll.27-8 and ll.1-2, respectively): *Siebenkäs* (Jean Paul); *Der Prozeß* (Kafka); *Amras* (Bernhard); *Die Portugiesin* (Musil); and *Esch oder die Anarchie* (Broch).

Once Murau arrives in Wolfsegg and is confronted physically by reminders of all the negative realities that in Rome he only thinks about, Bernhard reveals further clues centring upon the word 'Mensch'. The word becomes a source of solace to counteract the reminders of the negative influence of his childhood home. Towards the end of a stinging attack on the hopelessly bourgeois values of Caecilia's husband (himself a South German and a reminder of Germanic values and qualities), Murau comments: 'Von den Maschinen und von den Büros ist ein Großteil, ist der größte Teil der Menschen zerstört und vernichtet worden.'<sup>706</sup> This general statement occurs in a passage of the narrative which deals ostensibly with the bourgeois inadequacies of Caecilia's husband who belongs to a social class, according to Murau, which is devoid of individuality and personifies the 'Sklave der Maschine'.<sup>707</sup> This strand of thought is hardly new to Bernhard's prose, as Konrad's comments to Wieser attest: 'denn heute ist ja jeder Mensch Funktionär, alle seien Funktionäre, alle funktionierten, es gibt keine Menschen mehr.'<sup>708</sup> In both examples, 'Mensch' is set in opposition to essentially cold, automatic, non-human qualities. Given that *Auslöschung* is hardly a sustained critique of post-industrial, modernist dehumanization, Murau can be seen in the comment about machines and offices to be pointing the reader again to the personal ideal (here, implied via negative definition) of acceptable human values or inherent humanness.<sup>709</sup> As in the previous examples, his character's views are not revealed in a nutshell. It is only in conjunction with his other criticisms about the lack of humanity in social structures and intercourse that passages like these make sense and enable the reader to gain a measure of Murau.

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<sup>706</sup> Ibid., p.380, ll.20-2.

<sup>707</sup> Ibid., l.7.

<sup>708</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Das Kalkwerk* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), p.26.

<sup>709</sup> See: Chris Thornhill, 'Thomas Bernhard and Karl Kraus: The Art of the Impossible', in Schmidt-Dengler, Stevens, and Wagner, pp.127-44. Thornhill notes in Bernhard's works the 'departure of integral humanity from the sphere of social and political existence' and equates it with Kraus's understanding of 'Entmenschung' (both quotations, p.132).

As in the autobiographical pentalogy and *Beton*, the reader is required to work hard and piece together a picture which attains coherence via narratorial corrective qualification over the course of a long narrative. The repeated use of 'Mensch' in compound adjectives or the selective placing of words and phrases in apposition, along with explicit and indirect allusion to the high value and preciousness of life guides the reader initially to an understanding of how important people are for Murau and then to the proximity between Murau's need for people and the most basic fact of existence, life. He achieves all of this through his friendships and essential warmth as a person. The employment in the narrative of 'Mensch' and its compounds is not schematic. Many of the above instances point to the word having the simple meaning of 'person'; however, Murau's positive attitude to other people and the repeated references to 'human' qualities often suggest the presence of a more subtle definition of the word. This potential meaning is made more explicit towards the end of Murau's account.

At a point in Wolfsegg when he feels he cannot cope any more with the complicated and demanding responsibilities of the funeral preparations, Murau contemplates his writing project, and his thoughts turn to Gambetti. A sudden self-correction in mid-sentence alerts the reader to a linguistic and semantic distinction which is clearly important to Murau: 'Aber diese Leute wie Gambetti, sagte ich mir, ich verbesserte mich gleich und sagte, diese *Menschen*.'<sup>710</sup> The thought behind this comment is by no means unique in the text; Murau's narrative contains many references to the importance of people as individuals ('Menschen') — including the human values associated with personal relationships — as opposed to an anonymous, non-descript group ('Leute'). In previous books (especially pre-1975), the protagonists have very few friends or companions; they fail to differentiate between individuals, and they utter broad, generalizing criticisms of humanity. The rare references to man's dependence on

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<sup>710</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.544, ll.2-4 [emphasis added].

his fellow man, where they occur, are begrudging and often futile. Here, the self-correction is deliberately conspicuous and provides a clue about a distinction very important to Murau.

A little later, Murau provides his most explicit statement about the nature of humane values in *Auslöschung*. In a rare criticism of Spadolini, he comments on the clergyman's tendency to idealize the qualities of people now dead, his 'Verfälschungskunst':

[Spadolini macht] Aus der Häßlichkeit Schönheit, aus der Niedrigkeit und Gemeinheit innere und äußere Größe, aus Unmenschen sozusagen Menschen, wenn wir genau sind. Aus einem scheußlichen Land ein Paradies und aus einem stumpfsinnigen Volk ein ehrenwürdiges.<sup>711</sup>

Again, the narrative reveals Murau's values indirectly. The criticism of Spadolini is really a cover for Murau's own articulation of how things should really be. The use of the word 'Unmensch' is ironical given that it is used previously by the family to describe Murau and his uncle.<sup>712</sup> A set of opposing values emerge: one on hand, ugliness ('Häßlichkeit'), base, mean behaviour ('Niedrigkeit und Gemeinheit'), a negative environment ('scheußliche[s] Land'), and stupidity ('stumpfsinnige[s] Volk'), and on the other, beauty ('Schönheit'), inward and outward greatness ('innere und äußere Größe'), a perfect environment ('Paradies'), and a nation worthy of respect ('ein ehrenwürdiges [Volk]'). At the centre of these oppositions stands the contrast between 'Mensch' and 'Unmensch'. By including these words in a sentence without a verb, Bernhard highlights the importance of the opposition; it is a stark expression. The qualifying adverb ('sozusagen') and phrase ('wenn wir genau sind') further isolate the opposition between brute and human being. The inclusion of the word 'genau', referring to and qualifying the term 'Menschen', focuses on the specific meaning of 'Mensch' as the opposite of brute or monster, i.e. humane person; it is the one word in a long list of opposing qualities

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<sup>711</sup> Ibid., p.579, ll.11-16.

<sup>712</sup> See: ibid., p.39, l.11 [Onkel Georg] and p.267, l.13 [Murau].

whose meaning Murau chooses to pinpoint. It is not the first time that Murau's narrative has drawn a contrast between the truly human and that which is not worthy of the name (South Germans are compared to pigs earlier when Murau alludes disparagingly to his brother-in-law).<sup>713</sup> For once, however, the description is not restricted to implication; instead, a list of specific 'human' qualities emerges.

Bernhard further qualifies this understanding of humanity and human warmth through Murau's notion and use of the word 'Charakter'. Human warmth is largely a straightforward quality in the narrative; 'character' in *Auslöschung*, however, is altogether more elusive and difficult to pin down. In *Beton*, 'Charakter' is cited by Rudolf as one of his grandfather's favourite words.<sup>714</sup> Reger, too, is critical, not of teachers but of artists, for their overall lack of character ('sie haben sogar immer einen sehr schlechten Charakter'), and he equates good character with incorruptibility: 'und ich verstehe unter einem guten Charakter ganz einfach einen unbestechlichen.'<sup>715</sup> In *Auslöschung*, Murau links the idea of character and self-development directly with leading a productive, happy life. Although Bernhard uses the term in a familiar, everyday sense, its reappearance throughout the narrative alerts the reader to its significance and harks back to the self-knowledge so important in the pentalogy.

In a passage about self-improvement and self-development — which is otherwise reminiscent of sections in *Ein Kind* where the narrator-protagonist, like Murau, bemoans the lack of self-development in his grown-up ex-friends — Murau takes up a favourite Bernhard target of criticism: 'Denn wer aufhört, seine Erkenntnisse zu erweitern und seinen Charakter zu stärken, also an sich zu arbeiten, um soviel wie möglich aus sich zu machen, hat aufgehört zu leben.'<sup>716</sup> The positive value of life is clearly uppermost in Murau's mind. The 'breath' of *Der Atem* highlighted the difference between living and

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<sup>713</sup> See: *ibid.*, p.480, ll.15-22.

<sup>714</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.154.

<sup>715</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, pp.66 and 67.

<sup>716</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.77, ll.12-15.

perishing; the narrator in *Auslöschung*, on the other hand, equates life with much more than physical survival. In Grafenhof, the young Bernhard was all but given up for dead; in Murau's tale, death ('aufgehört zu leben') is defined as the end of emotional self-development. Murau is simply less desperate than the protagonists of the autobiographies. Indeed, so comfortable is Murau in the judgement of his brother-in-law's class that he deliberately employs an idiom which could easily be used by the very people he ridicules. When Murau talks of 'so viel wie möglich aus sich zu machen', this phrase at the same time typifies and gently ironizes the materialist strivings and what he considers the unworthy values of the merchant class to which his brother-in-law belongs. Again, the principal focus of narrative attention here is not on the South German bourgeoisie or the true value of materialism, but on Murau's underlying set of beliefs and values which inform his narrative perceptions and judgements. Murau, of course, likes certain groups, such as the gardeners and the old people of the village; his criticism here is not misanthropy but a specific attack on lack of self-development and an unreflective, inhuman way of living. Bernhard's narrator achieves a subtle recasting of idiom by showing how death can occur within life. By using such persuasive narrative ploys, the narrator asks the reader to reassess and sharpen his awareness of language, call into question otherwise accepted forms of language and reassess internalized, habitual forms of self-perception and ways of looking at other people and relationships. Murau is the catalyst for this process of redefinition in the reader.

The question of character and self-development also features in Murau's recurring criticisms of his family. In a carefully constructed passage, he outlines his family's spoiling tactics and describes the stultification in self-development evident in them. Five phrases which outline the desired state of affairs link the rambling and repeated criticisms over two pages: 'eine Erweiterung [der] Kenntnisse und Erkenntnisse und [des] Charakters'; 'Geistesbereicherung'; 'eine stete Weberschulung des

Charakters'; 'sich verbessern'; and 'den Charakter [...] bilden und [...] stärken'.<sup>717</sup> At no point is it made clear what Murau does consider to be mind-enriching or character-forming or exactly what kind of character training he has in mind, but, as so often in Bernhard's late prose, a contrast or negative definition makes the meaning clearer. The reader is told what is not character-strengthening, namely the shallow values exhibited by his parents and siblings, all of whom clearly fail the test of 'Charakter'. They prefer to find security in words and names which bear no real correspondence ('das *sogenannte* humanistische [Gymnasium]') to their meaning.<sup>718</sup> The misuse of language here, ostensibly occasioned by a mixture of laziness (people do not question the term), historical precedent (it is a word unthinkingly used for this kind of school), and insensitivity to language (people just do not think of what the word really means) alerts the reader to the narrative's potential power to encourage redefinition of hackneyed language; in this particular case, the potential redefinition is consistent with Murau's yearning for a human-oriented environment, as expressed by his use of the word 'Mensch'. An important link to this strand of thought is established some one hundred and fifty pages later when Murau is in Wolfsegg: 'Die Leute mit dem sogenannten guten Charakter sind die, die uns mit der Zeit nurmehr anöden und umbringen.'<sup>719</sup> Murau reminds the reader — 'sogenannt' being the lexical link — not to be fooled by false definitions of self-development and character, and again, life stands at the centre of Murau's thinking here: it is death within life to be surrounded and influenced by counterfeit good character. By using 'sogenannt', moreover, he indicates to the reader the importance of word selection and usage, thereby again inviting close and careful inspection of the narrative.

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<sup>717</sup> Ibid., p.76, ll.10-11, 1.20, ll.22-3, and p.77, ll.9 and ll.11-12, respectively.

<sup>718</sup> Ibid., p.76, ll.15-16 [emphasis added].

<sup>719</sup> Ibid., p.231, ll.11-13.

Onkel Georg is the signal exception within the family: he is seen to oppose the concept of 'Arbeit' with 'Leben'; he is responsible for Murau's 'ganze Entwicklung'.<sup>720</sup> He embodies the concepts of life, character and development. In a tribute to his actions and character, Murau describes with vigour and defiance how his uncle would ruffle his parents' feathers at Wolfsegg by opening windows in order to let in light and air, by championing the positive, natural, rustic life of the Mediterranean and by attaching great importance to mental development.<sup>721</sup> Murau describes him as: 'einen solchen außerordentlichen Charakter'.<sup>722</sup> Yet again, the words (more specifically, word: 'Charakter') Murau chooses to describe an important, essentially human trait link his description of Onkel Georg with his more general articulation of human values. It is what the narrative at this point reveals about Murau, however, and not the deceased Onkel Georg, which is particularly revealing. Murau makes the point that his family only produce exceptional individuals like Georg every hundred years or so and that such people are persecuted, but this observation is irrelevant to the deeper narrative concern here: the link between 'Charakter' and 'Menschen'. It is via apposition that the narrator connects these qualities, and he invites the reader to do the same. The passage, if regarded in this way, from the point of view of Murau's qualities, is transformed — from a tired criticism of Austrian and general human mediocrity or a repeated description of the high calibre of Georg as a person — into a well-constructed further contribution to the puzzle of Murau's set of values and personal standards. By placing side by side with 'und' the terms 'Menschen' and 'Charakter', Bernhard draws the reader's attention to the fact that, although they are undoubtedly complementary, these two words do not mean the same. This is narrative apposition subtly qualified, and the reader is kept on his toes. Bernhard takes both words out of a familiar context where they can both mean simply 'person', and he induces the reader to evaluate carefully their meaning. A significant

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<sup>720</sup> Ibid., p.36, l.8.

<sup>721</sup> Ibid., pp.32-48.

<sup>722</sup> Ibid., p.77, ll.21-2.

effect of this re-evaluation of common idiom is to alert the reader to future uses of these terms in the narrative.

When, some three hundred and fifty pages later, the narrator criticizes his brother-in-law, the words he chooses are significant as they link again the words and ideas of knowledge and character discussed earlier in the narrative: 'Selbst, wenn er [der Weinflaschenstöpsel-fabrikant] nicht wüßte, wer Kant ist, wäre es vollkommen gleichgültig, seinen Charakter betreffend.'<sup>723</sup> In case the reader is tempted to think that broadening one's knowledge ('Kenntnisse') is a euphemism for cultural snobbery, the narrator-writer here corrects the potential misunderstanding; it is the fact that his brother-in-law has no character ('[er] hat keinen Charakter') that matters, not whether he is conversant with the relevant information behind intellectual allusions; in fact, knowing the reference behind the allusion does not automatically qualify him as having character.<sup>724</sup> The narrative here becomes a more interconnected and thereby coherent and fulfilling experience for the reader if the earlier criticism at lack of self-development is read as being directed at the values which are neglected and destroyed by the education system, not at specific details about that system itself. The interlinking of words and concepts in the narrative sees Bernhard, the literary artist, at his most comfortable when subtly nudging and encouraging the reader via narratorial and narrative ploys like these rather than by leading statements or unequivocal definitions.

Murau is Bernhard's most philanthropic prose figure. The instances of 'human warmth' and discussions in the narrative about 'character' help the reader to understand Murau better. A development, complementary but further to these two qualities, is the presence of love, marked by more frequent instances of the word 'Liebe'. Love is a word hardly ever associated with Bernhard's writing. In an interview published in the same

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<sup>723</sup> Ibid., p.437, ll.6-8.

<sup>724</sup> Ibid., ll.9-10.

year as *Auslöschung*, Bernhard gave this reply to the question whether he felt the need to be accepted as a writer and a person in Austria:

Der Mensch lechzt von Natur aus nach Liebe, von Anfang an. Nach Zuwendung, Zueignung, die die Welt zu vergeben hat. Wenn einem das entzogen wird, kann man hundertmal sagen, man sei kalt und sehe und höre das nicht. Es trifft einem mit aller Härte.<sup>725</sup>

Like his protagonists of this decade, Bernhard is far less reluctant to talk about love than at any time before. The semi-autobiographical narrator of *Wittgensteins Nefte* (1982) contemplates life without his 'Lebensmensch[en]'.<sup>726</sup> He affectionately comments: 'Ohne sie wäre ich überhaupt nicht mehr am Leben [...] Diese für mich in jeder Beziehung vorbildliche, gescheite, mich niemals auch nur einen entscheidenden Augenblick im Stich lassende Frau.'<sup>727</sup> This glowing reference to Hedwig ('Hede') Stavianicek (1894-1984), Bernhard's lifelong platonic companion since adolescence, whom he met at the convalescent home in St. Veit in 1949 while recovering from pulmonary tuberculosis, is echoed three years later in *Alte Meister* when Reger refers to his late wife: 'Wir wollen gar nicht mehr weiterleben, wenn wir den uns am nächsten stehenden Menschen verloren haben.'<sup>728</sup> Hede finally died in 1984 after protracted illness. Bernhard took Stavianicek's death very badly, and it has been suggested that he never got over it.<sup>729</sup> So close was Bernhard to Stavianicek that he is even buried in the same grave as her and her husband in the Grinzinger Friedhof in Vienna.<sup>730</sup> Since Bernhard was working on *Auslöschung* at

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<sup>725</sup> Asta Scheib, 'Von einer Katastrophe in die andere', in Dreissinger, *Von einer Katastrophe*, pp.135-53 (p.143). This interview originally appeared in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 January 1987.

<sup>726</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Wittgensteins Nefte: Eine Freundschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), p.31 [emphasis in original].

<sup>727</sup> Ibid.

<sup>728</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, p.247.

<sup>729</sup> See the comments of Ingrid Bülau, an old friend from Bernhard's student days at the Salzburger Mozarteum, in: *Thomas Bernhard: Eine Erinnerung. Interviews zur Person*, ed. by Krista Fleischmann (Vienna: Edition S, 1992), pp.34-7.

<sup>730</sup> For further details about their relationship, see: Susanne Kuhn, 'Hedwig Stavianicek: Eine Dokumentation. Bilder und Dokumente zur Ausstellung, Ohlsdorf 1996', in *Thomas Bernhard, Johannes Freumbichler, Hedwig Stavianicek: Bilder, Dokumente, Essays*, ed. by Manfred Mittermayer, *Die Rampe - Extra* [special edition] (Linz: Rudolf Trauner, [1999?]), pp.91-110. This photo-article by Bernhard's half-sister discloses previously unpublished information and exposes a side of Bernhard rarely documented in secondary literature. See, for instance, an unpublished letter from Stavianicek, dated 9 February 1971, on the occasion of his fortieth birthday: '- wie [sic] kann man einem so "Glückbegabten" Menschen wie du [Thomas] bist, noch mehr Glück wünschen [...] Deine eigenen Wünsche sind u. [sic] gehen alle in Erfüllung, so mögen die *meinigen* für dich es auch! immer, immer!' (p.104) [emphasis in original].

this time, it is no surprise that the importance of people, and more specifically Murau's feelings of affection and love, is a central theme in this work.

However critical he may be about his immediate family, there is no doubt that Murau is deeply attached to and loves his parents and siblings. Unlike Rudolf, Murau is at no point resigned to being alone. Bernhard obliquely gives the reader an insight into Murau's bond with his family when, after arriving at Wolfsegg, he looks back critically on the artificiality of Caecilia's wedding and all the other pretensions of his family. He recalls how Johannes had often told him that only in his car, away from his family and other people, was he able to breathe properly and think clearly; Murau adds, 'es deprimierte mich, das von ihm zu hören, es für die Wahrheit nehmen zu müssen'.<sup>731</sup> The clear implication of Johannes's lonely self-sufficiency here is that it is a sorry state of affairs not to need anyone else. In contrast to earlier comments about the deficiencies of human beings, though, he is depressed by this thought – precisely because it concerns a loved one. His father, similarly, can only be himself when he is alone on his tractor, away from the family and other people, as Murau recalls him saying: '*soweit hat es kommen müssen, daß ich nurmehr noch auf dem Traktor allein und glücklich sein kann.*'<sup>732</sup> In direct opposition to Murau's own words equating loneliness and unhappiness, when he derides solitary intellectual endeavour just before leaving Rome, his father associates being alone ('*allein*') with happiness ('*glücklich*').<sup>733</sup> Despite knowing that it is a sad state of affairs ('*soweit hat es kommen müssen*'), his father can do nothing about it. The father here is a spectre of Rudolf, for whom true friendship was impossible despite his reluctant recognition of the need for people.<sup>734</sup> The way in which Murau discloses his brother's and father's views about companionship here — and the fact that he proceeds

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<sup>731</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.353, ll.9-11.

<sup>732</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.3-5 [emphasis in original].

<sup>733</sup> See: *ibid.*, pp.308-9.

<sup>734</sup> See: Bernhard, *Beton*, p.42: 'Und es war mir immer schon schwierig gewesen, überhaupt einen Menschen zu haben, da denke ich gar nicht an ein so von allen mißbrauchtes und unappetitliches Wort Freundschaft [...] Ich brauchte keinen [Menschen] und also hatte ich keinen.'

to talk about himself and how they have affected him, in both instances — reveals more about Murau's own view of the importance of people than it does about them. Father and brother are not really developed within the text as individuals in their own right. From a narrative point of view, they are used to substantiate Murau's characterization.

There is a certain irony, even humour in the fact that finally for one of Bernhard's protagonists the tables have turned; instead of looking venomously at the outside world with its superficial notions of friendship, Murau pities Johannes and his father for their lack of real friendship, companionship and love. The personal idealism and values which are often otherwise only intimated in this text, become more apparent to the reader here. These two statements about his brother and father — exposing a protagonist not embarrassed to show his hand on the subject of emotional dependence and intimacy — represent a major development from *Beton*, or, indeed, any of the prose narratives of the '80s.

*Auslöschung* is Bernhard's most complete narrative statement about the otherwise sensitive and prickly subject of love. Murau is, for instance, constantly aware (or made aware) of the influence of love on his life, and it is often such a strong force that he is powerless to repel it. He may hate his family for their bad treatment of him, but he does not stop loving them. Georg's wholesale criticisms of the family, too, are tempered by reminders to the reader of the enduring familial bonds: 'Im Hotel de la Ville [...] hat mein Onkel einmal zu mir gesagt, daß er seine Familie lieben müsse, obwohl er sie zu hassen gezwungen sei.'<sup>735</sup> The inherent, powerless will to love is pitted here against the idea of an emotional response based on rational analysis (Georg's lifelong experience of his family's baseness), not only by the choice of verbs but also by the inclusion of the contrastive conjunction, 'obwohl'. As Georg confides elsewhere to Murau during a character assassination of Murau's father, 'Gerade weil ich deinen Vater,

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<sup>735</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.54, ll.15-19.

meinen Bruder, immer geliebt habe und auch heute noch liebe, erlaube ich mir, so über ihn zu sprechen.’<sup>736</sup> The inner compulsion to a loving fraternal bond is contrasted with the conscious, albeit reluctant, desire to speak ill of him. Despite all his protagonists’ protestations, blood is always thicker than water in Bernhard’s prose, and nowhere is the protagonist more calmly, even if painfully, aware of this bond than in *Auslöschung*. Dislike, which is born of negative experience, does nothing to dampen the natural, emotional pull. Murau reminds himself of this fact during a description of his sisters: ‘Ich habe sie immer geliebt, heißt nicht, daß ich sie nicht immer auch verflucht habe.’<sup>737</sup> Bernhard, here, nudges the reader, tempted to think of Murau as a nihilistic ingrate because of his vehement tirades, in the direction of the protagonist’s multi-dimensionality and subtle, humane individuality.

Throughout *Auslöschung*, there is a sense that the impulse to love, however much abused and thwarted during the course of a lifetime, is ineradicable – and Murau is not unduly uncomfortable about this fact. Unlike Rudolf, he is not dominated in every regard by a member of his family; he has his own life in Rome. In *Beton*, human nature (‘die Menschennatur’) was powerless to counteract impulses of hope and perfectionism.<sup>738</sup> As outlined in the previous chapter, Rudolf’s repeated and strategic use of the word ‘naturgemäß’ forges the link and subsequent tension between rational realization and the irrational demands of human nature. In *Auslöschung*, too, this tension appears, and it is often introduced by the same word. Unlike *Beton*, however, the significant occurrences of this word in *Auslöschung*, refer repeatedly to the deeply personal sphere of the family – what Murau coins ‘Herkunftskomplex’.<sup>739</sup>

There are well over fifty instances of the word ‘naturgemäß’ in the narrative. However, there is an immense amount of ill-will in Murau’s family (‘Ich wollte [...] von

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<sup>736</sup> Ibid., p.53, ll.4-6.

<sup>737</sup> Ibid., p.62, ll.11-13.

<sup>738</sup> See: Bernhard, *Beton*, pp.116-17.

<sup>739</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.201, l.5.

ihnen [meinen Eltern und meinem Bruder] schon lange nichts wissen, umgekehrt sie nichts von mir').<sup>740</sup> Murau despises his sisters, he looks down on his brother and does not allow the reader to forget what a sham his parents' marriage was. However, Bernhard repeatedly links 'naturgemäß' with the love inherent in family ties, and family affection emerges against the grain of the book. 'Naturgemäß', a commonplace word, even cliché, is largely responsible for expressing this counter-meaning and its attendant subtleties.

Early on, with the help of this word, Murau establishes an ambivalent perspective on the love-hate relationship he has with his family:

Wir lieben naturgemäß unsere Eltern und genau so naturgemäß unsere Geschwister [...] und bemerken nicht, daß wir sie von einem bestimmten Augenblick an hassen, gegen unseren Willen, aber auf dieselbe natürliche Weise, wie wir sie vorher geliebt haben.<sup>741</sup>

From a meditation in the first person singular about returning to Wolfsegg, Murau switches here into the first person plural in order to state a generally valid fact about the undeniability of the family bond. The love is unfettered, entirely natural; the hatred is the natural or logical consequence of experience. Tellingly, the hatred is 'gegen unseren Willen'. The narrator repeats the adverb 'naturgemäß' to affirm the initial love for the family, but he chooses a different adverbial phrase ('auf dieselbe natürliche Weise') to describe the hatred which grows. This switch in expression indicates a difference between the source of the two emotions: hatred emerges naturally from the years of neglect and indifference; love, however, is the default, the original starting-point, part of human nature. In time, they become equally strong, but hatred does not annul love; it exists in addition to it.

In linking 'naturgemäß' with familial love, Bernhard develops a theme of earlier books. Konrad, Roithamer and even Rudolf are all too close to their families to analyse or dissect their relationships calmly: Konrad kills his wife; Roithamer kills himself, and

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<sup>740</sup> Ibid., p.12, ll.12-14.

<sup>741</sup> Ibid., p.13, ll.4-12.

Rudolf escapes from Peiskam. Murau, on the other hand, confronts his past in a calmer way. There is a conspicuous lack of violence in the book (apart from the fatal car accident which occurs before the story begins), and moreover, Murau does not find solace in a temporary situation: he is not a tourist, unlike Rudolf in Palma; he lives in Rome permanently. His return to Wolfsegg and his reflections about his childhood, far from marking regression, help to achieve a continuity in his mind between past and present. This continuity, in turn, facilitates a development of the self (Murau constantly asks questions of himself and about his own family's behaviour) which is the source of much optimism and hope in the text. This Bernhard protagonist is not trying to pull himself out of an emotional mire with the help of an intellectual project; Murau is, indeed, already happy in Rome when the book begins. The word 'naturgemäß', where it is used to reveal his relationship with his family, is part of a process of working through the past – as in the autobiographies, but at a more advanced stage of self-acceptance and happiness.

While, at times, hatred is intermingled with it, love is a consistent presence where 'naturgemäß' converges with discussions about the family, and it complements Bernhard's portrayal of Murau's friends and his sense of personal values. Despite Murau's insistence that he is not in turmoil as a result of the sudden deaths, he increasingly reveals his attachment to his family. Of the fatal accidents, he says: 'Wir haben ein solches Unglück *naturgemäß* auszuhalten, zu ertragen mit allen Fürchterlichkeiten.'<sup>742</sup> The simple fact that it is in the 'nature' of things — death being an ineluctable fact of life — might here be a private allusion by Bernhard to the steady physical decline and death of Hede Stavianicek, but for Murau, it points to his pain at losing most of his family at one fell swoop. By placing 'naturgemäß' in italics, the narrator draws attention to the word and its emotional connotations of natural closeness.

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<sup>742</sup> Ibid., p.107, ll.11-12 [emphasis in original].

It is not until two hundred and fifty pages later when he is in Wolfsegg that Murau admits this fact to himself, and, again, the word ‘naturgemäß’ is used:

[...] ich hatte mich naturgemäß nicht mit den Folgen dieser Todesnachricht [...] in seiner ganzen Wucht auseinandergesetzt, weil ich mich schützen wollte, zu schützen hatte, mich nicht erdrücken lassen konnte und wollte von der Tatsache des Todes meiner Eltern und meines Bruders.<sup>743</sup>

These are the words of a man who wants to be indifferent to the deaths of his brother and parents, even sees the merit of shutting out the enormity of the impact, but he cannot be: his natural response counteracts his desire. Modal verbs (of desire and necessity) are important here: he does not want and cannot let himself be overwhelmed or crushed by the news (‘mich nicht erdrücken lassen konnte und wollte’). The tension between his natural responses of wanting to protect himself (‘mich schützen wollte’) and of feeling the heavy impact of the news and its aftermath (‘den Folgen dieser Todesnachricht [...] in seiner ganzen Wucht’) provides the narrative impulse. If he did not care about his family at all, he would not spend the best part of six hundred and fifty pages discussing the minutest details about their lives and their undeniable impact upon him. Again, a close reading of the narrative subtleties unravels a protagonist who is more emotionally involved with his family than he would have the reader or himself believe. Bernhard undermines his protagonist’s words with carefully-laid narrative and stylistic clues for the reader. Hope emerges at least as much from a reading of the text, between the lines, as from Murau’s self-analysing statements.

For Murau, the difficult and ambivalent tension associated with his family bonds represents an awkward emotional impasse. When the impasse cannot be explained, described or solved further, the word ‘naturgemäß’ appears as a final statement about the matter. In such instances, it serves as a textual device to resolve a potential emotional or mental deadlock.

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<sup>743</sup> Ibid., p.387, II.18-24.

Murau is not Bernhard's first character to show intense jealousy towards outsiders coming into the family: Roithamer is obsessively possessive about his sister; Wertheimer, too, cannot bear the thought of his sister moving away; even Rudolf, who claims to hate Elisabeth, is drawn to her like a magnet however much he refuses to admit it explicitly and is jealous of her friends and acquaintances. The use of 'naturgemäß' in *Auslöschung* helps to render normal this uncomfortable fact. After viewing the coffins and bodies in the orangery, Murau affirms that it was with the living people, not the dead bodies, that he had a bond ('meine Bindung').<sup>744</sup> However, he makes a conscious effort to keep his feelings of vulnerability and warmth from his sisters. No reason is given why he is so keen to keep his feelings private at a time like this, and he changes the subject very soon afterwards: 'Ich hütete mich natürlich, meine Empfindung meiner Schwester oder irgendeinem andern zu eröffnen, naturgemäß.'<sup>745</sup> Although Murau refuses to give himself away here to his sisters, his comment reaffirms — to the reader through the narrative — the natural, inherent ('naturgemäß') familial bond and love towards his mother.

When, a little later, Murau contemplates with glee how Caecilia's plan to spite her mother by her marrying the Freiburg industrialist has now backfired in the light of the deaths, he assumes that Caecilia has already resolved to leave her husband and that Amalia is aware of this decision: 'nicht nur in Caecilias [sondern auch in Amalias] Kopf [...] hat schon zu arbeiten begonnen, was auszusprechen sie sich naturgemäß noch nicht getrauten.'<sup>746</sup> The assumption underlying this comment is that of ultimately unbreachable familial solidarity; everyone but the poor 'Weinflaschenstöpselfabrikant' knows that he is a sacrificial pawn in a power game; the implication made through 'naturgemäß' is that both sisters would, of course, not say what they naturally felt inside because the family comes before Caecilia's husband. Murau does not disclose his innermost opinions to his

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<sup>744</sup> Ibid., p.396, l.21.

<sup>745</sup> Ibid., ll.23-5.

<sup>746</sup> Ibid., p.423, ll.25-8.

sisters about their thoughts, but Bernhard allows the inquisitive reader to see inside Murau's emotions here through the narrative. The family comes first every time, even if, as here, exacting revenge on the over-protective, tyrannical mother is the purpose of the entire, laborious exercise. Whether the sisters really are as devious as Murau makes out is debatable. After all, there is no proof anywhere in the text as to whether this summary disposal of the spouse is, indeed, really what Amalia and, especially, Caecilia intend; the contradiction between Murau's use of 'naturgemäß' and the absence of any proof of Caecilia's intentions reveals how threatened Murau is by her marriage and her new husband (so much so that he does not once refer to him by his real name) and reaffirms his close bond to his sister. The narrative does not disclose whether Murau is right about Caecilia, but since it is almost exclusively an insight into his mind and perceptions, this line of enquiry would appear to be relevant neither to Murau nor Bernhard.

There are many other instances in the narrative of 'naturgemäß' being placed in conjunction with Murau's deep love for and inseparability from his family. Even if the context is sometimes ostensibly one of criticism, the word repeatedly reveals aspects of Murau's close bond with his family. On one hand, 'naturgemäß' delineates his love-hate relationship with his sisters,<sup>747</sup> the indelible congenital link,<sup>748</sup> and his permanent inability to free himself from his sisters' scornful gaze and emotional grip;<sup>749</sup> on the other, it also accompanies the positive side of Murau's relationship with his family: his brother's affection for him;<sup>750</sup> his desire for his parents' approval and affection;<sup>751</sup> his admiration for his grandparents' fair-mindedness and affection for him;<sup>752</sup> the inevitable effect of the bereavements;<sup>753</sup> the natural physical and mental link between father and

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<sup>747</sup> Ibid., p.62, l.2.

<sup>748</sup> Ibid., p.99, l.30.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid., p.245, ll.21-2.

<sup>750</sup> Ibid., p.255, l.27.

<sup>751</sup> Ibid., p.261, ll.15-16.

<sup>752</sup> Ibid., p.262, l.11.

<sup>753</sup> Ibid., p.300, l.9.

son (in this case, Johannes),<sup>754</sup> and the dutiful but heartfelt filial and fraternal concern for the bodies lying in state.<sup>755</sup> The Bernhard of *Auslöschung* is no longer writing about the exotic emotions of solitary eccentrics, but about the irritating yet indispensable family bonds which are part of most people's everyday life. It is, therefore, appropriate that Bernhard consistently employs a commonplace word, such as 'naturgemäß', to express and uncover this fundamental, ultimately unresolvable tension. It is as if language cannot find a more eloquent or succinct way of encapsulating this banal but important duality in familial bonds.

There is no doubt that the natural bond between Murau and his family is a problematic one; his dilemma would be solved either if his family behaved in a way he found acceptable or, if he did not feel attached to them. As the examples above with 'naturgemäß' illustrate, however, nature, and more specifically, human nature is the main obstacle to creating a conflict-free relationship between Murau and his family. He is simply too attached to them to walk away and never turn back. This logical solution is not an emotional possibility. Human nature can be seen to be destructive here, and it is precisely this kind of emotional deadlock which leads Alfred Pfabigan to call Murau an 'Enthusiast der Künstlichkeit'.<sup>756</sup> Yet, a close reading of the text shows that, like Rudolf, Murau is at odds with the effect certain people have on him, not with human nature *per se*. Human nature and life would be less problematic were it not for repressive, artificial institutions. Murau praises 'das natürliche Leben' in Rome which is nowhere to be found in Austria.<sup>757</sup> He derides the Catholic spirit which conspires 'gegen die Menschennatur'.<sup>758</sup> Above all, he bemoans the absence of natural behaviour in the

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<sup>754</sup> Ibid., p.353, l.19.

<sup>755</sup> Ibid., p.384, ll.6-7. Although 'naturgemäß' almost always appears in relation to familial themes, it sometimes simultaneously refers to other areas of discussion, such as women (for instance, p.100, l.13 and p.193, l.5) or Catholicism (p.269, l.28, p.280, l.30, and p.364, l.13). Never a writer to give ready-made codes to the reader, Bernhard also includes a number of insignificant, trivial uses of the term (see, for instance, p.78, l.21, p.86, l.7, p.136, l.13, and p.208, l.11).

<sup>756</sup> Pfabigan, p.250.

<sup>757</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.82, ll.21-2.

<sup>758</sup> Ibid., p.143, l.7.

reviled ‘Kunstmenschen, künstliche Menschen, keine natürlichen’ who are responsible for the artificiality and feigned emotions which ultimately lead to unhappiness.<sup>759</sup> If Bernhard does articulate a concept or definition of human nature in *Auslöschung*, then it is to be found in his narrative exposition, in examples like the ones with ‘naturgemäß’, rather than in any clear-cut statements or constructed theory. Such terms as ‘Leben’, ‘Menschennatur’ and ‘Charakter’ cannot be used precisely; their value in ordinary language consists in their cloudy range of associations, and Bernhard employs them in *Auslöschung* in just this ordinary way.

Murau’s wide circle of friends is the single, most unusual defining feature for a Bernhard protagonist. Murau’s search for a humane, sensitive and loving response from the world has already met with considerable success before the reader even encounters him. Precisely because his relationship with his family is complicated, sometimes even bordering on the impossible, his liaisons with his friends and the people he likes stand out in greater relief in his articulation of hope and happiness.

By the 1980s, Bernhard himself had fallen out with many former friends and colleagues: Jeannie Ebner, Gerhard and Maja Lampersberg, Karl Ignaz Hennetmair, and Gerda Maleta, to name a few.<sup>760</sup> But he was not just the hard, uncompromising man he was often portrayed to be. His unplanned reconciliation with Jeannie Ebner a year before his death proves the point.<sup>761</sup> In the 1986 interview with Asta Scheib, he commented:

Man ist immer abhängig von Menschen. Es gibt niemanden, der nicht von irgendeinem Menschen abhängig ist. Ein Mensch, der immer mit sich allein ist, würde in Kürze zugrunde gehen, tot sein. Ich glaube, es gibt für jeden entscheidende Menschen.<sup>762</sup>

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<sup>759</sup> Ibid., p.125, ll.13-14.

<sup>760</sup> For fuller accounts of these disagreements, see: Fialik, *Der Charismatiker*, pp.36 [Ebner], 49 [Gerhard Lampersberg], and 53 [Maja Lampersberg]; Maleta, pp.52 and 81 [Maleta] and Hans Höller, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.130 [Hennetmair]. See also Bernhard’s own comment on the subject: Kathrein, ‘Es ist eh alles positiv’, p.190: “‘Meine Verbindungen gehen immer jäh zu Ende, auch wenn sie Jahrzehnte gedauert haben.’”

<sup>761</sup> See: Fialik, *Der Charismatiker*, pp.43-4. See also Krista Fleischmann, ‘Mallorca: Kein Problem mit dem Schwierigen (Statement)’ in Dreissinger, *Thomas Bernhard: Portraits*, p.203: ‘Thomas Bernhard gilt zwar als schwierig, ist aber im direkten Kontakt, wie viele sensible und zurückgezogene Menschen, sehr kooperativ, liebenswürdig und freundlich.’

<sup>762</sup> Scheib, ‘Von einer Katastrophe in die andere’, p.137.

Glenn Gould and Wertheimer become insufferable individuals because of their misanthropy: ‘Wie Glenn, duldet auch Wertheimer keine Menschen um sich. So wurde er mit der Zeit unerträglich.’<sup>763</sup> The narrator, on the other hand, far from just providing negative examples of human friendship, makes an emphatically positive evaluation, later in the book: ‘Jeder Mensch ist ein einmaliger Mensch und tatsächlich, für sich gesehen, das größte Kunstwerk aller Zeiten, so habe ich immer gedacht und denken dürfen.’<sup>764</sup> This universal statement about humanity is based on his own experiences: ‘denken dürfen’ here implies that he has been able to think this because of the remarkable people he himself has been lucky to know. In what is very possibly an oblique reference to Hede Stavianicek (who died in the same year as the book came out and whose long illness was a source of great unhappiness to Bernhard), the wry, grumbling narrator of *Holzfällen* opines ruefully, yet prosaically: ‘Wir sind mit Menschen so innig zusammen, daß wir glauben, es ist eine Bindung für das ganze Leben, und verlieren sie auf einmal über Nacht [...]’<sup>765</sup> Even the well-balanced and successful Reger puts the place of intellectual pursuits in perspective where love for his wife is concerned: ‘Immer habe ich geglaubt, die Musik ist es, die mir alles bedeutet, [...] auch, die Philosophie [...], aber alles das [...] ist nichts gegen diesen einzigen geliebten Menschen.’<sup>766</sup> People, and not just family, mean more and more in the prose of the 1980s.

Murau has more friends than any of Bernhard’s protagonists. However, their characterization is far from complete, and they largely serve to shed light on Murau’s thoughts and motivations. As Alfred Pfabigan says about the presentation of Murau’s friends in the narrative of *Auslöschung*: ‘Mit Ausnahme Spadolinis verzichtet Murau auf individualisierende Porträts und konzentriert sich auf eine summarische Beschreibung

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<sup>763</sup> Bernhard, *Der Untergeher*, p.42.

<sup>764</sup> *Ibid.*, p.134.

<sup>765</sup> Bernhard, *Holzfällen*, p.73. See also: *ibid.*, p.76.

<sup>766</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, p.285.

des Beziehungstypus.’<sup>767</sup> The effect of Bernhard’s reluctance to characterize Murau’s friends in detail is to make them extensions of the protagonist’s thought processes and inner thoughts, thereby developing Murau’s own characterization in and through the narrative.<sup>768</sup> The effect of the first-person narrative focused on Murau is less to portray him as a self-centred person and more to focus on his intense self-exploration. The following section of the chapter will assess the contribution of the following characters: Gambetti, Spadolini, Maria and Eisenberg, and the villagers of Wolfsegg.

Gambetti, Murau’s gifted pupil, is a remarkably marginal figure in *Auslöschung*, especially given the frequency with which his name and comments appear in the text. Schlichtmann calls him a figure about whom the reader finds out ‘relativ wenig’.<sup>769</sup> As with all the characters in the narrative, Bernhard uses Gambetti to reveal important information about Murau’s psychological state and human relationships.

From the very beginning of his account, it is clear that the relationship between Murau and Gambetti is unusual: ‘Unser Verhältnis ist das ideale.’<sup>770</sup> The reason given by Murau for this good chemistry — never before in a Bernhard prose narrative has a relationship between two people been ‘ideal’ — is that they do not play the standard student and teacher roles, and there is no real hierarchy; theirs is allegedly an exchange of intellectual information on equal terms. It is a real and mutual relationship rather than the often one-way mentor-student relationships which characterized previous works (narrator and Podlaha or grandfather; Rudolf and his overpowering dominatrix of a sister). As Murau informs the reader, Gambetti really teaches him at least as much as he teaches his supposed student. Of course, Murau is ultimately in control (as teacher), and it is this power which enables him to talk of the relationship in such liberal terms; at no

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<sup>767</sup> Pfabigan, p.257.

<sup>768</sup> The following critics provide separate analyses of characters in *Auslöschung*: Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard*, pp.113-17; Schlichtmann, pp.67-84, and Pfabigan, pp.230-64. For an informative biographical background to the major figures in the narrative, see: Hans Höller, ‘Menschen, Geschichte(n), Orte und Landschaften’, in Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.217-34. The section entitled ‘Namen und Geschichten’ (ibid., pp.217-29) is of particular interest.

<sup>769</sup> Schlichtmann, p.71.

<sup>770</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.10, ll.18-19.

point does Gambetti state that the relationship is equal. It is important and unusual that the financial pretext (Murau does not need the money, anyway) enables Murau to enjoy life in the company of a friend: they talk about literature in a relaxed manner and regularly walk up and down the Pincio, engaging in relaxed and pleasant conversation.<sup>771</sup>

Murau uses Gambetti in the narrative to air his own views by reporting what he has said to Gambetti. The reader is rarely informed of Gambetti's opinions on specific matters, so the depiction of their relationship becomes a self-revelation on Murau's part. Gambetti thereby acts as a decoy for Bernhard, not only in his narrative function in relation to the reader, but also within the action of the narrative.

A human being is at the centre of Murau's day-to-day existence. Unlike previous books, an intellectual project is no longer an unhealthy obsession; it is, rather, modified into civilized, friendly social intercourse. Murau is simply more relaxed and able to exchange information easily with Gambetti without the major blocks of interpersonal communication witnessed in *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, *Holzfällen*, and even, although to a lesser extent, *Alte Meister*. The fact that Murau cultivates familiarity with Gambetti ('ich [pflege] einen mehr oder weniger vertrauten Umgang [mit ihm]') also stands out as being unusual for Bernhard's normally secretive, socially diffident and often uncertain protagonists.<sup>772</sup> Furthermore, Bernhard provides in Gambetti a natural foil for Murau's self-revelations to the reader, and it is again through subtle narrative manipulation that Bernhard achieves this effect.

Gambetti subtly aids Murau's characterization. Since he is not a native speaker of German, Gambetti is cleverly used by Bernhard to highlight certain words. He does not, for instance, understand the word 'aufgepäppelt' which refers to two deer nurtured by Murau and his brother in their childhood.<sup>773</sup> It transpires that they enlisted the help of the forest workers to release the deer back into the wilderness after some months of

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<sup>771</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>772</sup> Ibid., p.16, ll.4-5.

<sup>773</sup> Ibid., p.136, l.13.

domestication. This minor narrative diversion gives an opportunity for Bernhard to show and develop Murau's friendliness to other people; the outcome is a statement of marked personal warmth couched in an apparently digressive, but actually crucial, relative clause: 'ich liebte sie [die Forstarbeiter] wie keine andern Menschen.'<sup>774</sup> The author has taken the opportunity to communicate a little more to the reader about Murau's human tendencies and set of personal values. More significantly, when Gambetti does not understand the German word for the occupation of Caecilia's husband, the reply Murau gives is strikingly self-revealing: 'Was ein *Weinflaschenstöpselfabrikant* sei, hatte mich Gambetti gefragt, ich habe es ihm zu erklären versucht, gesagt, Freiburg sei eine entsetzliche Stadt, kleinbürgerlich, katholisch, unerträglich.'<sup>775</sup> At first sight, it would appear that Murau has failed to answer his student's question; however, the answer he gives is pertinent and revealing as long as it is not interpreted literally. The alternative to a literal interpretation is a subtle, indirect one: the reader must ask what exactly Murau is getting at if he is to make any sense of his seemingly irrelevant reply to Gambetti. The fact that Murau continues along the same line of thought directly after answering the question shows that he does not deem his reply to be impertinent or phatic. It is clearly what the brother-in-law represents in his mind, rather than his individual traits, which interests Murau. There is no suggestion that Murau is interested in what Gambetti really wants to know, and a psychological, inner subtext takes precedence over communication of external fact. On another occasion, Gambetti cannot understand the word 'abgehärtet'. Murau extends this incomprehension to imply that the concept of toughness is unknown to the Southern, Mediterranean mentality in a way that an Austrian would immediately understand.<sup>776</sup> Again, the emphasis is on Murau's self-observations.

Gambetti is employed as an authorial plant to give Murau another option for articulating his personal values and opinions. Gambetti is said to be 'von dem

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<sup>774</sup> Ibid., I.31.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid., p.131, ll.13-16 [emphasis in original].

<sup>776</sup> Ibid., p.180, l.4.

Indieluftsprenge und Zersägen der Welt besessen’;<sup>777</sup> it is as if the bookish, destructive impulses of a Bernhard narrator have been projected onto Gambetti, in whom they take a harmless adolescent form, thereby freeing Murau, the narrator, to experience productive, positive emotional relationships with actual people. At one point, Murau warns himself about the dangers of being hypocritical as a teacher, and about the necessity of performing his duties towards Gambetti with distinction: ‘Gambetti darfst du dich niemals als Heuchler zu erkennen geben [...] denn du bist sein Lehrer [...]. Du stehst zu Gambetti in einem absoluten Vertrauensverhältnis.’<sup>778</sup> The word ‘Vertrauensverhältnis’ is of interest here since earlier in the narrative Murau states explicitly how hard he finds it to trust people, unlike his brother who had always trusted blindly and then suffered the pain of disillusionment and subsequent bitterness:

Mein Bruder hatte allen Menschen zuerst immer Vertrauen geschenkt [...] ich habe umgekehrt beinahe niemandem zuerst Vertrauen geschenkt und bin dadurch selten [...] enttäuscht worden. Vor lauter enttäuschem Vertrauen hatte sich sein Gefühlszustand schon früh verbittert gehabt.<sup>779</sup>

The tone of this passage is conspicuously cautious. The qualifying ‘zuerst’, ‘beinahe’ and ‘selten’ attest to a more discerning protagonist who is moulded by a creator less extreme, absolute and unrelenting in his expression than in previous books. The Austrian colloquial pluperfect (‘hatte sich [...] verbittert gehabt’) and the emphatic ‘lauter’ provide a counterbalance to Murau’s qualification and attest to his strength of feeling about being let down. Johannes here shares some of the traits of past, disappointed Bernhard figures with their thwarted idealism; Murau’s expression, moreover, betrays his own sympathy with his brother’s plight whatever he may profess elsewhere. A word-link crystallizes this sympathy later in the narrative when Murau describes himself as being ‘in einem *absoluten* Vertrauensverhältnis’ with Gambetti with the result that a

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<sup>777</sup> Ibid., p.513, ll.17-18.

<sup>778</sup> Ibid., p.135, ll.22-3.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid., p.92, ll.10-17.

connection between the brother's misplaced trust and, after all, Murau's need for complete trust is established by compounds of the same word ('Vertrauen');<sup>780</sup> it is not trust which is good or bad, but how one regards and employs it in everyday life. Murau has clearly succeeded with Gambetti where his brother has failed with most people. It is a stylistic, literary narrative device, a word-link, which helps here to achieve this important contrast within the narrative. That Murau is enthusiastic about, even fortified by the thought of a relationship based on absolute trust is a sign of a character who has risen to the challenge of compromising, of learning to live with people and not losing all faith in them at the slightest opportunity.

In a description which shows that he has clearly progressed from Rudolf's state of mind, Murau adds here:

Und daß ich selbst sehr oft rücksichtslos und gemein bin, darüber besteht kein Zweifel, dieser Gefahr und diesem Übel entkommt der denkende Mensch nicht, damit muß er rechnen, damit muß er sich abfinden, damit muß er existieren.<sup>781</sup>

The last word of this passage ('existieren') discloses what is really behind Murau's self-admonishments. He has been using Gambetti in this entire description as a narrative sounding-board through which to formulate a mode of existence or a way of existing, living at ease with other people, which protagonists of even the later fiction — from Rudolf in *Beton*, via the first-person narrators of *Der Untergeher* and *Holzfällen*, to Atzbacher in *Alte Meister* — are signally unable to achieve. In effect, he uses the narrative here to give himself a pep talk about his own self-development.

As in all Bernhard's prose after 1975, the principal authorial line of enquiry here is how to lead one's life; Murau is a figure who is gradually coming to terms with deeply personal and problematic aspects of himself and his situation, and Gambetti provides a specific source of help both as narrative device in Murau's own account and as a

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<sup>780</sup> Ibid., p.135, ll.22-3 [emphasis added].

<sup>781</sup> Ibid, ll.27-31.

narrative ploy to Bernhard in his communication with the reader. However passive a role Gambetti may play in the narrative ('vorwiegend die Funktion des Zuhörenden'), he is critically important for Bernhard's development of Murau and of his understanding of people and his own existence.<sup>782</sup>

The figure of Spadolini is in many respects based on Cesare Zacchi (1914-1991) who was introduced to Bernhard in March 1977 in Rome by his friend, Gerda Maleta. The real-life Zacchi was, like Spadolini, an archbishop and Papal nuncio who lived in Rome.<sup>783</sup> However, there is no inkling in Maleta's descriptions of him that he is an adulterer or rogue; on the contrary, it would seem that Bernhard admired Zacchi greatly. This admiration would account for the fact that Bernhard included a separate character called Zacchi: the obvious identification between Spadolini — who breaks his Catholic vows of celibacy and is more secular than religious in his outlook and everyday actions — and the real-life Zacchi could have caused much acrimony.

Like Gambetti, but for different reasons, Spadolini is an unusual narrative invention. On the surface, he is the 'Erzbischof',<sup>784</sup> 'Weltmann',<sup>785</sup> artist<sup>786</sup> and unscrupulous adulterer.<sup>787</sup> These essentially external functions coexist with a less manifest, largely psychological role, resulting in what Schlichtmann terms 'einen positiven Einfluß auf Muraus Entwicklung'.<sup>788</sup> For any character of Spadolini's dubious credentials to have a positive effect on a Bernhard protagonist shows just how far Murau has come. Pfabigan calls him 'eine neue Figur im Bernhardschen Spiel der Geschlechter'.<sup>789</sup> For Pfabigan, he is a symbol, an embodiment of an authorial idea: 'Spadolini repräsentiert ein Lebensmodell, [...] eine Synthese von Geist, Macht, Religion

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<sup>782</sup> Schlichtmann, p.71.

<sup>783</sup> For more biographical information, see Höller, 'Menschen, Geschichte(n), Orte und Landschaften', pp.223-5. Louis Huguet provides detailed information about his career; see: Huguet, *Chronologie*, p.483.

<sup>784</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.498, l.10.

<sup>785</sup> *Ibid.*, l.31.

<sup>786</sup> *Ibid.*, p.499, l.22.

<sup>787</sup> *Ibid.*, p.558.

<sup>788</sup> Schlichtmann, p.79.

<sup>789</sup> Pfabigan, p.231.

und Sexualität.’<sup>790</sup> Mittermayer takes a more daring but equally insightful perspective by defining the relationship between Spadolini and Murau as ‘von eigenartiger ödipaler Ambivalenz’.<sup>791</sup> For the purposes of this investigation, it is in Bernhard’s narrative manipulation of this character and in his relationship to Murau both as a role-model and as a father-substitute that the real value of his narrative contribution and inclusion resides.

Murau’s conversations with and reported comments to Gambetti in Rome present an opportunity for Bernhard to develop the literary presentation of his protagonist; Spadolini allows Bernhard to take this process of Murau’s development one stage further. Gambetti, as seen above, provides Murau with the impetus for potential answers on the subject of how to lead life (‘existieren’); Spadolini is more than a source of self-knowledge for Murau; the effect Spadolini has is more precise than Gambetti’s: ‘Spadolini ist zuzutrauen, was ich niemandem sonst zutraue [...], mir zu sagen, was jetzt zu tun ist.’<sup>792</sup> The directness of the phrase ‘was jetzt zu tun ist’ signals a development for Murau. This statement refers both to the general question of what to do with one’s life and with the more specific issue of disposing of Wolfsegg now that his parents are dead. The reason Murau trusts Spadolini implicitly is not because he can necessarily provide an answer or even the right answer; Spadolini will provide the conditions, or intellectual and emotional environment for Murau to come to an answer for himself: Spadolini is not a mentor whom Murau follows blindly but a man whose qualities Murau analyses in his literary account and uses to reach a decision about his life at the end of his narrative. Spadolini’s influence and effect are oblique; it can, therefore, come as no surprise that how Spadolini speaks rather than what he says makes most impact on Murau: ‘Wie er etwas sagt [...] nicht *was* er sagt, ist das, das meine Bewunderung herausfordert.’<sup>793</sup> He

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<sup>790</sup> Ibid.

<sup>791</sup> Mittermayer, “Die Meinigen abschaffen”, p.124.

<sup>792</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.507, ll.22-4.

<sup>793</sup> Ibid., p.555, ll.7-9 [emphasis in original].

later admits, form obscures content where Spadolini is concerned: 'Sein Wie hat immer das Was zugedeckt.'<sup>794</sup> In stark contrast to many Bernhard protagonists before him, Murau does not systematically and dispassionately strip down Spadolini's social façade to uncover the bare, human reality behind his empty, social pretences; instead, he prefers to concentrate on aspects of the man which suit his ulterior motive of finding a way forward for his own life. Murau's attitude to Spadolini represents a moral retreat for a Bernhard character: Murau overlooks Spadolini's obvious faults in order to glean information about himself from other aspects of Spadolini's personality. None of Bernhard's previous protagonists compromised their notion of truth to this extent for the sake of pragmatic gain.

Apart from Maria, who is suspicious of the wily churchman, everyone in the narrative admires some facet of Spadolini. In referring to Spadolini's acting ability, Gambetti raises him to near-divine status in a declaration which is as much humorous as it is serious in its hyperbole: 'er [Spadolini] weiß schon alles, er kann schon alles, er ist schon alles.'<sup>795</sup> While it is not always easy to understand Murau's own almost unqualified admiration ('daß ich Spadolini immer bewundert habe [...] Spadolini das zweifellos außerordentlichste'), even love ('Tatsächlich liebte ich ihn') for the urbane clergyman, there is, at the same time, no doubt that his attitude to Spadolini is tinged with self-interest.<sup>796</sup> Murau's devotion frequently borders on cupboard love: Spadolini helped the young Austrian set up his life in Rome twenty years previously; it was Spadolini who introduced Murau to Gambetti<sup>797</sup> and Zacchi,<sup>798</sup> his principal Italian friends; it was Spadolini who saved Murau from his depression and even thoughts of suicide in Rome.<sup>799</sup> It is also Spadolini, it transpires, who is behind Murau's enjoyment

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<sup>794</sup> Ibid., p.574, ll.21-2.

<sup>795</sup> Ibid., p.638, ll.11-12.

<sup>796</sup> Ibid., p.496, ll.16-24, and p.636, l.10.

<sup>797</sup> Ibid., p.500.

<sup>798</sup> Ibid., p.499.

<sup>799</sup> Ibid.

of good food and the high life. Murau admits this influence with an easy candour which marks him out as different from Bernhard's other more stringent, uncompromising protagonists:

Geistesübungen haben wir zusammen gemacht und sind sehr oft gut essen gegangen nach Trastevere [...] *gut essen einerseits, gut denken andererseits*, das waren sehr oft Spadolini's Worte gewesen, die er mir eingehämmert hat.<sup>800</sup>

Here, Spadolini becomes an educator; he teaches Murau to live. In the same way that the protagonist of *Der Keller* (1976) received both intellectual instruction and a practical schooling in everyday life, so Murau has in the past undergone this two-pronged process of development. In *Der Keller*, the grandfather and Podlaha performed the two contrasting functions; Spadolini performs both in *Auslöschung*. In fact, he is a curious amalgam of grandfather and Podlaha. His methods ('eingehämmert') are reminiscent of the persistent, unremitting grandfather figure, and his ability to instil in Murau a taste for life's pleasures is reminiscent of Podlaha. If both these figures from the autobiographies were possible father-surrogates, then Spadolini is their unlikely successor.

As is already clear, Murau was an avid thinker from his adolescent days and before, but the role of bon vivant adds an important dimension of human, sensual qualities for which Spadolini is responsible. Where he alludes to this Trastevere episode elsewhere, it is made clear that Murau, far from simply being an overburdened, frustrated intellectual, can relax, enjoy and, above all, glean happiness from the simple pleasures of life: 'Fische zu essen, Wein zu trinken, die Beine auszustrecken und allein darüber glücklich zu sein.'<sup>801</sup> This capacity to enjoy simple sensual pleasures marks a big step forward, especially since previous protagonists were physically paralysed by thoughts (Konrad and Rudolf), generally unable to forge meaningful relationships (narrator of *Der Untergeher*) and even ended up killing themselves (Walter, Roithamer).

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<sup>800</sup> Ibid., p.500, ll.16-20 [emphasis in original].

<sup>801</sup> Ibid., p.282, ll.3-5.

There is further endorsement of Spadolini's positive influence in a narrative episode which acts as a direct validation of the high place friends occupy in Murau's hierarchy of personal priorities. Having already established the importance of his childhood devotion to reading his favourite books in Wolfsegg's libraries in the first half of the narrative, Murau settles down to *Siebenkäs* in the family house on the evening before the funeral. He is, however, distracted and unable to sustain his interest: 'ich hatte [...] nicht die dafür notwendige Ruhe, auch ging mir Spadolini nicht aus dem Kopf, der unerhörte Eindruck, den er wieder auf mich gemacht hat, war stärker, als der *Siebenkäs*, ich legte das Buch weg.'<sup>802</sup> The straightforward sentence construction here, with its succinct, self-contained phrases and simple, direct thought ('war stärker, als', 'ich legte das Buch weg'), provides proof that Murau is a new kind of Bernhard protagonist. Most importantly, the effect of a human being perceptibly triumphs over the lure of an intellectual document. This revelation about Murau confirms his people-centred outlook and marks a development, even since *Beton*.

Spadolini provides a source of pleasure for Murau even when he is not consciously educating him. By going out of his way to show that Murau is not troubled by Spadolini's glaring human defects, Bernhard steers the reader elsewhere to look for Murau's priorities. Unlike much of *Beton*, the narrative is not preoccupied with bemoaning human weakness. The fact that Spadolini is a calculating and mendacious person is surprisingly not the basis for strong criticism. On the contrary, every minor detail about him would appear to enthral Murau, even if his pleasure borders on the perverse: 'Es machte mir ja ein Vergnügen, die Berechnung Spadolinis für mich selbst noch einmal zu wiederholen Wort für Wort, seinen Tonfall, die Redekunst Spadolinis studierend.'<sup>803</sup> The reason that Murau does not disapprove openly of the low standards Spadolini has, when he himself tries to set such high personal standards, is that he looks

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<sup>802</sup> Ibid., p.540, ll.26-30.

<sup>803</sup> Ibid., p.571, ll.2-5.

to Spadolini for other qualities, like pleasure and instruction – which are at least as important to him as any theoretical high personal standards of behaviour. For a protagonist committed to finding out more about himself, this variance with his own high standards does not necessarily represent an inconsistency. Viewed from this perspective of self-knowledge, Spadolini is an exploitable tool not only for the writer behind the narrative, but also for the protagonist; consequently, a comment such as the following is more laden with authorial irony than might first appear: ‘An Spadolini kann ich viel lernen [...] immer wieder neu.’<sup>804</sup> Whether it is in Spadolini’s unaspirated pronunciation or in his ingenious use of German idiom, Murau derives great pleasure in observing him; such pleasure is not to be taken lightly in the narrative of a writer whose human landscapes are often riven with illness, disturbance and frustration.<sup>805</sup> Murau can look back with a satisfied glow upon the Etna excursion — despite the painful and embarrassing subtext of the ongoing adulterous affair between Spadolini and his mother — and recall memories without mental or emotional encumbrance: ‘Alle drei waren wir die glücklichsten Menschen, die sich denken lassen.’<sup>806</sup> The negative in Spadolini’s actions here is outweighed by the positive connotations in Murau’s mind. Lived experience, in the form of happiness, provides the enduring proof of Spadolini’s positive influence and is manifestly more important than the observed deficiencies in his personal standards. Experience supersedes thought, and pleasure supersedes morality.

The Etna excursion in *Auslöschung*, as Höller documents, has its roots in a trip to Sicily undertaken by Bernhard in March 1977 with Gerda Maleta and the real-life Zacchi.<sup>807</sup> Höller refers to this rather odd episode as ‘eine komisch-groteske ödipale Szenerie’.<sup>808</sup> The Etna story — with its emotional Oedipal triangle between Murau, his

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<sup>804</sup> Ibid., II.5-6.

<sup>805</sup> Ibid. The real-life Zacchi was indeed able to aspirate when speaking German. An example of his properly aspirated German can be witnessed in Krista Fleischmann’s documentary. See: *Thomas Bernhard: Eine Erinnerung*. Dir. Krista Fleischmann. Edition S. 1992.

<sup>806</sup> Ibid., p.559, II.5-6.

<sup>807</sup> See: Höller, ‘Menschen, Geschichte(n), Orte und Landschaften’, p.225.

<sup>808</sup> Ibid.

mother, and Spadolini — is introduced by a revealing association in Murau's mind: he remembers how his mother would desert him in Italy and go to Spadolini's bed after the evening meal rather than accompanying her son home: 'Sie nahm mich auf diese entsetzlichen Abendessen mit, von welchen sie nicht mit mir nachhause ging, weil sie die Nächte mit Spadolini verbringen wollte und auch verbrachte.'<sup>809</sup> The last three words are the most revealing here: Murau is clearly jealous. Rather surprisingly, he does not criticize his mother here for cheating on her husband; nor does he chastise Spadolini for breaking his Catholic vows of celibacy. An important parallel with Oedipus suggests itself: 'Many a man before you,/ in his dreams, has shared his mother's bed.'<sup>810</sup> Jocasta's attempt at comforting Oedipus here is reflected in Murau's jealousy towards Spadolini who wins his mother sexually. Throughout his description of the Etna episode, it is as if Spadolini is taunting Murau: he describes how he took his mother's hand and ran down the mountain, how they hugged each other, how she and he went to bed (with the sexually suggestive phrase, '[Die Halberfrorenen, sagte Spadolini] haben sich in die Betten gelegt aus Erschöpfung'), and the rather tactless reminder, here on the eve of the funeral, of how attractive his mother looked that evening in her cream-coloured dress.<sup>811</sup> Yet, none of this upsets Murau. It is almost as if he secretly approves. Straight after the recollection of the Etna story, Murau comments extensively on Spadolini's elegance, especially his stylish shoes;<sup>812</sup> Murau is fascinated, even a little obsessed, with Spadolini's mannerisms and physical presence. He reports how the clergyman describes Austria as 'herrlich' without aspirating the initial 'h'. He then repeats the word: 'errlich, errlich, errlich'.<sup>813</sup> Spadolini is not just a rival but someone to whom Murau looks up. The fact that he is a priest crystallizes another parallel with Sophocles where Oedipus

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<sup>809</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.558, ll.16-20.

<sup>810</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, and Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. by Robert Fagles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p.215 [ll.1074-5].

<sup>811</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.561, l.4.

<sup>812</sup> *Ibid.*, p.562.

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid.*, p.562, l.1.

looks up to the Priest as a man of experience. Murau sees him as a substitute father: not only is Spadolini the sexual partner of Murau's mother, but he is a priest who is called 'Father'.

Spadolini can do little wrong as far as Murau is concerned. The one exception occurs when Murau's thoughts turn to his dead mother. He is repelled by two thoughts: first, that his mother does not really mean that much to Spadolini ('Spadolini wird ganz gut ohne die Mutter auskommen in Zukunft'); and second, by the prospect of Spadolini's subtle manoeuvres in the future to wheedle money out of him by using his deceased mother as a pretext.<sup>814</sup> For a man whose entire account is ruthlessly aimed at finding out the truth about the past, Murau is surprisingly ready to turn his back on the reality of this situation by trying to cast from his mind this thought about Spadolini's deviousness, but it simply will not go away: 'Er [dieser Gedanke] mußte gedacht werden [...], wie so viele andere Gedanken, die nicht gedacht werden wollen, aber gedacht werden müssen von uns.'<sup>815</sup> Again, the generalization of the problem into the first person plural form betrays Murau's reluctance to face the music. Filial love is the emotion driving the description here (marked by the recurrent modal verb 'müssen' denoting a natural affinity). It is all simply too painful. He cannot accept that his mother is disposable to Spadolini whose life will go on as normal. The one thing which can take precedence over his admiration for Spadolini is his indelible love for his mother. It is as if Bernhard has taken over the narrative from Murau here, and the paean to Spadolini dissolves, with the protagonist no longer in control of himself, but reminded, against his will, by his creator of what is closest to his heart. Murau tries to escape the thought by trying other books, but all to no avail; he is 'zu unruhig', and, yet again in this text, intellectual diversion comes second to lived experience and feeling, here in the form of emotional, familial love.<sup>816</sup>

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<sup>814</sup> Ibid., p.585, ll.20-1.

<sup>815</sup> Ibid., p.586, ll.3-6.

<sup>816</sup> Ibid., p.587, l.9.

The figure of Spadolini provides a puzzle to the reader: why does Murau like him, despite the hypocritical archbishop's affair with his mother, his reduction of Murau to an 'Alibi' for his sexual satisfaction, his blatant lies, and distasteful pretences?<sup>817</sup> It is not until five hundred pages into the narrative that Bernhard tells the reader. The answer can be seen to lie in the question of self-identity: 'Meiner Mutter hat er immer wieder klar zu machen versucht, was und wer ich sei.'<sup>818</sup> The question of being acknowledged and understood ('*anerkannt*') by others, especially his mother, is clearly important enough for Spadolini to be forgiven almost anything.<sup>819</sup> Spadolini, the substitute father, provides the answers sought by the protagonists of the autobiographies and Rudolf.

As seen in the chapter on the autobiographies, this question of self-identity preoccupies Bernhard's prose from 1975 onwards. All his protagonists want to know who they are, and in order to find out, they often dissect the past. Spadolini provides Bernhard with another tool, first to probe his character and, second, to present him to the reader in a way which reveals the relevant information about him.

The character of Zacchi plays a cameo role in *Auslöschung*. Little is said about him over the course of six hundred and fifty pages. If Bernhard liked the real-life Cesare Zacchi as much as Maleta affirms, then it seems likely that he wanted to protect this figure in his narrative; the roguish character of Spadolini, who shares so much with him from an external biographical point of view, would hardly have fitted the bill.<sup>820</sup> What is said in *Auslöschung* about Zacchi is positive, and it serves to highlight Murau's own sociability in Rome.

All of Bernhard's' protagonists in the '80s, however much better socially integrated than their predecessors in the prose narratives, see both sides of a person.

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<sup>817</sup> Ibid., p.558, l.11.

<sup>818</sup> Ibid., p.500, ll.26-8.

<sup>819</sup> Ibid., l.26 [emphasis in original].

<sup>820</sup> See: Maleta, pp.14-15: 'Seine [Maleta gives the pseudonym 'Enrico' to protect the identity of Cesare Zacchi] aufgeschlossene Art, verpackt in freundlich römische Elegance, hat Euch [Dir und Deinen Freunden] beeindruckt.' For more information about Bernhard's friendship with Zacchi, see pp.15-24 of Maleta's epistolary tribute.

Their desire not to overlook the real person, not to mythologize, leads to gentle criticism even of beloved figures like the grandfather and Podlaha and to self-criticism by the narrator-protagonist, most notably in *Wittgensteins Neffe* and *Holzfällen*. Yet, against this grain, Zacchi is depicted relatively superficially: he is described as ‘den Menschenvermittler, den philosophierenden Eigenbrötler, Weitgereisten, Weltmann’;<sup>821</sup> he is spoken of in the same exalted terms as Spadolini,<sup>822</sup> and he is unequivocally ‘mein Freund’.<sup>823</sup> The tribute to Cesare Zacchi is simple and dignified; moreover, it is entirely in keeping with Murau’s relaxed coexistence with his Rome circle of friends.

Murau’s Rome circle is completed by Maria and Eisenberg. As is extensively documented, Maria is inspired principally by Ingeborg Bachmann whom Bernhard greatly admired as writer and person.<sup>824</sup> Like Bachmann, Maria is an Austrian writer; she lives in Rome, as indeed did Bachmann, and Murau’s high opinion of her work reflects Bernhard’s great regard for Bachmann’s work. Indeed, the Rome setting might be seen, in part, as a tribute to Bachmann. Eisenberg, Höller’s research shows, could be based on either Bela Akiba Eisenberg, Chief Rabbi at the ‘Israelitische Kultusgemeinde’ in Vienna, or his son, Paul Chaim Eisenberg.<sup>825</sup> Bernhard was acquainted with neither father nor son.

When Maria appears in the text, she is linked with intellectual and creative prowess and an undercurrent of eroticism.<sup>826</sup> Apart from being Murau’s friend<sup>827</sup> and a woman whose abilities he greatly admires and respects,<sup>828</sup> Maria acts as a narrative prop which helps Bernhard to define certain aspects of Murau’s ‘Gegenwelt’ in Rome.<sup>829</sup> The

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<sup>821</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.231, ll.18-19.

<sup>822</sup> Ibid., p.281.

<sup>823</sup> Ibid., p.206, ll.11-12.

<sup>824</sup> See, for instance: Schlichtmann, p.73 (footnote 112); Mittermayer, “‘Die Meinigen abschaffen’”, p.124; Pfabigan, pp.260-4, and: Holger Gehle, ‘Maria: Ein Versuch. Überlegungen zur Chiffrierung Ingeborg Bachmanns im Werk Thomas Bernhards’, in Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.159-80 (pp.172-9). Höller reports that there are also elements to this figure which are drawn from Christine Lavant. See: Höller, ‘Menschen, Geschichte(n), Orte und Landschaften’, p.223.

<sup>825</sup> Ibid., p.220.

<sup>826</sup> For an analysis of these two topics, see: Schlichtmann, pp.71-4.

<sup>827</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.230.

<sup>828</sup> Ibid., pp.21 and 215.

<sup>829</sup> Schlichtmann., p.67.

two areas in which her contribution to Murau's life are of most relevance to the evolving discussion about Murau and his friends are her incorruptibility and the happiness Murau associates with being in her company.

When Murau describes Maria as 'die Unbestechliche', any reader unacquainted with Bernhard's other narrative prose of the 1980s would have to ask precisely what he means; however, use of this word in these earlier writings provides a useful clue.<sup>830</sup> In *Beton*, Rudolf's description of his friend, Paul Wittgenstein, is reminiscent of Maria: 'Niemand war so gescheit wie er, keiner war so poetisch, so unbestechlich in allem.'<sup>831</sup> Reger, in *Alte Meister*, becomes briefly indistinguishable from Murau when he says 'und ich verstehe unter einem guten Charakter ganz einfach einen unbestechlichen.'<sup>832</sup> It is no coincidence that incorruptibility is associated here with good 'Charakter'. The difference between Murau and these earlier characters, especially Rudolf and Paul (of *Wittgensteins Neffe*), is that to a large extent the protagonist in *Auslöschung* has consciously exchanged stringent perfectionism and high principle for a pragmatism which enables greater happiness. The semi-autobiographical narrator of *Wittgensteins Neffe* warns himself of the potentially fatal danger involved in high expectations of other people and oneself: 'denn wie der Paul an seiner krankhaften Selbst- und Weltüberschätzung zugrunde gegangen ist, werde ich auch über kurz oder lang an meiner eigenen krankhaften Selbst- und Weltüberschätzung zugrunde gehen.'<sup>833</sup> Rudolf, too, suffered from the debilitating side-effects of perfectionism (both *Beton* and *Wittgensteins Neffe* appeared in the same year, of course).<sup>834</sup>

In *Auslöschung*, Bernhard uses the figure of Maria to contrast high-principled intellectual consistency with Murau's emotional pragmatism. She is ruthlessly critical of Murau's work in progress, his manuscripts. Although he understands her high,

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<sup>830</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, pp.541-2 [word cut by page-break].

<sup>831</sup> Bernhard, *Beton*, p.99.

<sup>832</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, p.67.

<sup>833</sup> Bernhard, *Wittgensteins Neffe*, p.33.

<sup>834</sup> See: Bernhard, *Beton*, pp.116-17.

uncompromising standards, he is equally determined to produce a finished document despite the inevitable imperfections: 'ich habe es nicht aufgegeben, mich immer wieder an Niederschriften zu versuchen, mich sozusagen am Geist zu vergreifen.'<sup>835</sup>

The contrast or tension between perfectionism and pragmatism is embodied most effectively in the conflict between Spadolini and Maria. Spadolini is aware of Maria's utter contempt for him ('Maria hält ihre Verachtung Spadolinis aber nie zurück'): neither can tolerate the other with the result that they cancel each other out.<sup>836</sup> Murau stands between these two extremes: Spadolini, on the one hand, with his worldly, artificial sophistication, and Maria, on the other, with her natural, unspoilt, creative, and intellectual personality.<sup>837</sup> They hate each other, but Murau likes them both. Murau is like a judge evaluating the merits and demerits of each character type, and it is revealing that he pronounces Spadolini the stronger ('der Stärkere'); where Maria withdraws ('zurückziehen'), Spadolini triumphs by default.<sup>838</sup> She may occupy all the moral and intellectual high ground (if she were to write a book about a charlatan, Spadolini would without any doubt be the protagonist, she says), but Spadolini is an altogether socially and professionally more successful and self-confident person.<sup>839</sup> Although both these figures can be seen to represent integral elements of Murau's own character, living and being happy (Spadolini) ultimately provides a stronger pull for Murau than intellectual integrity and insight (Maria). The excessive expectations and predictions of self-destruction of the narrator in *Wittgensteins Neffe* have been avoided. Bernhard cleverly manipulates Murau's relationship with both these figures here in order to reveal to the reader more about Murau's pragmatic attitude to life and friends, an attitude which in every regard is more compromising than Rudolf's.

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<sup>835</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.541, ll.27-31.

<sup>836</sup> Ibid., p.227, ll.27-8.

<sup>837</sup> Ibid., p.229.

<sup>838</sup> Ibid., p.230, ll.2-8.

<sup>839</sup> Ibid.

Maria is, however, not just a faded relation of earlier Bernhard protagonists in her intellectual severity and idealism. She is also involved by Bernhard in many passages which attest to Murau's happiness in Rome. As with Spadolini, Murau uses Maria (not in any sinister sense) for his own ends, and his warm opinion of her is ultimately self-referential: 'Was wäre mir Rom wirklich ohne sie.'<sup>840</sup> Unlike Rudolf, he is not solely obsessed with his own intellectual pursuits to the extent that he cannot integrate into his social environment and accept the benefits that such an integration affords. Murau praises her stimulating conversation and considers himself lucky ('ein Glück') that she lives in Rome.<sup>841</sup> As with Spadolini, however, she is useful to his self-development, and he is acutely aware of this: 'Beide [Maria und Spadolini] haben mich zu dem geschult, der ich jetzt bin.'<sup>842</sup> It is significant that time with her is 'beglückend' and synonymous with a 'Glückszustand', for this new Bernhard protagonist places great importance on being happy and relaxed in company.<sup>843</sup> Yet, when Murau says that he never wants to lose Maria ('ich will sie [...] nicht verlieren, niemals'), he is harking back to some of the ideals shared by his predecessors in Bernhard's prose.<sup>844</sup> Although he is aware of her shortcomings (for all her intellectual sharpness and breadth, she simply cannot understand Murau's attachment to Spadolini),<sup>845</sup> equally he never wants to lose the intellectual rigour and clear-sightedness (her 'unbestechlichen Blick', as he calls it at one point) which typify her and which he has to a considerable extent compromised (in his relationship with Spadolini, for instance) in favour of happiness.<sup>846</sup> As well as being presented as an opposite of Spadolini, Maria is also a reminder of Murau's intellectual past and a counterweight to his new-found pragmatism.

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<sup>840</sup> Ibid., p.237, ll.6-7.

<sup>841</sup> Ibid, l.7.

<sup>842</sup> Ibid., ll.24-5.

<sup>843</sup> Ibid., l.13, and p.542, l.7.

<sup>844</sup> Ibid., p.231, ll.1-2.

<sup>845</sup> Ibid., p.228.

<sup>846</sup> Ibid., p.581, l.12.

Maria's intellectual incorruptibility and her capacity to make Murau happy are the mainspring of her contribution to the protagonist's characterization; an important offshoot of her influence is her poetry. The clarity with which she sees the world — already established in the contrast with Spadolini — is reflected in her work: 'Marias Gedichte sind *antisentimental und klar*.'<sup>847</sup> For a man who places much emphasis on having a clear head, this evaluation of her work is clearly a compliment.<sup>848</sup> Murau's positive opinion of her poetry tells us more about him than about the poetry: 'Ich habe die Gedichte Marias immer geliebt, weil sie so österreichisch, gleichzeitig aber so von der ganzen Welt und von der Umwelt dieser Welt durchdrungen sind.'<sup>849</sup> No precise details, after all, are revealed about Maria's poetry. Murau's praise of her poetry's engagement with life ('der ganzen Welt'), and not theoretical ideas, suggests, quite in keeping with his conversations with Gambetti and Spadolini, that he demands from intellectual endeavour pertinence to life, both his own life and the world around him. Of particular note is his appreciation of the inherent Austrianness of Maria's poetry. Over five hundred pages into his account, here, the reader witnesses an act of self-acceptance by Murau, and it has been brought about by Maria. Murau is at ease with, even values, the Austrian element of Maria's poems, and this marks another step forward in both his self-development and presentation to the reader. Murau's acceptance of and respect for Maria — Andrea Reiter calls her 'the only truly positive female figure in all of Bernhard's work' — is more proof of the hopeful and less severely critical attitude towards friends in *Auslöschung*.<sup>850</sup>

Eisenberg, like Zacchi, is a marginal figure.<sup>851</sup> Bernhard makes no attempt to portray either of these characters as individuals. Like all the Rome circle, only more so, they act as a supporting cast to Murau's main role. Unlike Zacchi, Eisenberg is, even if

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<sup>847</sup> Ibid., p.512, ll.7-8 [emphasis in original].

<sup>848</sup> Murau uses 'klarer Kopf' and variants ('mit klarem Kopf' etc.) at important junctures in the narrative, such as when he reads the telegram (ibid., p.7, l.19), is about to depart for Wolfsegg accompanied by strong feelings of loneliness (p.306, l.7), and just before he sees the dead bodies in the orangery (ibid., p.387, ll.17-18).

<sup>849</sup> Ibid., p.511, ll.28-31.

<sup>850</sup> Andrea Reiter, 'Austrophobia as it is: Charles Sealsfield, Thomas Bernhard, and the Art of Exaggeration', *Austrian Studies* 7 (1996), ed. by Ritchie Robertson and Edward Timms, 166-77 (p.170).

<sup>851</sup> For a general analysis of Eisenberg, see: Schlichtmann, pp.74-6.

only symbolically, of brief but substantial moment to the external story, as the acceptor of Murau's bequest to the Jewish community in Vienna. Mittermayer, perhaps rather optimistically, calls him the 'Repräsentant eines besseren Österreich'.<sup>852</sup> Schlichtmann is more modest with her perceptive claim, 'daß er [Eisenberg] sogar für eine Freude am Leben steht'.<sup>853</sup>

From an inner, psychological point of view, Eisenberg's contribution to the narrative is as an accomplice of Maria with whom he is described by Murau as having '*ein philosophisches Verhältnis*'.<sup>854</sup> Like Maria and Spadolini, he is a positive influence in Murau's Rome existence: 'Mit Eisenberg ist uns nie langweilig und sind wir immer glücklich gewesen.'<sup>855</sup> Although he is a man whom Murau respects and likes, Eisenberg is not a character with whom Murau feels great empathy: 'Eisenberg ist ein härterer Mensch mit einem noch viel klareren Kopf als Maria und ich.'<sup>856</sup> Rudolf might well have been more drawn to Eisenberg, in his relentless desire to attain mental clarity, but Murau remains a little aloof from him. Eisenberg is clearly not the kind of man to eat fish and drink wine leisurely in Trastevere. Like all the other friends discussed here, he is, first and foremost, part of Murau's quest for self-knowledge and happiness through friendship. Both Eisenberg and Maria contribute in equal measure to this search: 'Von beiden [Eisenberg und Maria] habe ich gleichviel gelernt.'<sup>857</sup>

Away from Rome, Murau is also concerned with people and their relationships with him. On his way to Wolfsegg, he considers what awaits him when he eventually arrives, and his thoughts are once again preoccupied by people: 'Diese Menschen [...] hast du ja immer geliebt, die einfachen, die einfachsten, die Bauern und Bergleute, die Handwerker, die Gastwirtefamilien im Gegensatz zu den Deinigen in Wolfsegg.'<sup>858</sup>

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<sup>852</sup> Mittermayer, "Die Meinigen abschaffen", p.125.

<sup>853</sup> Schlichtmann, p.75.

<sup>854</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.232, ll.14-15 [emphasis in original].

<sup>855</sup> *Ibid.*, ll.12-13.

<sup>856</sup> *Ibid.*, p.234, ll.9-11.

<sup>857</sup> *Ibid.*, p.220, l.31.

<sup>858</sup> *Ibid.*, p.312, ll.14-18.

Murau's obvious affection for them aside, the descriptions of these humble people are notable for essentially human qualities to which Bernhard draws the reader's attention: 'Während hier im Dorf alles auf die natürlichste Weise vor sich geht und tatsächlich menschlich [...], geht oben in Wolfsegg alles künstlich vor sich.'<sup>859</sup> The reader is reminded of the natural and irresistible bond of friendship and love which runs throughout the text. As in the pentalogy, the people closest to the narrator are natural and human. The opposition between 'menschlich' and 'künstlich' (set up here by 'während') reminds the reader about the values which really matter to Murau. The important aspect of the so-called 'simple' people's influence is that they have an effect on Murau's emotional state; his liking for them is not primarily intended as intellectual material for a sketch-book – a theoretical statement about how they are or about the superiority of simple villagers to devious townsfolk. Their human traits and actions directly affect his feelings: 'Und die Heiterkeit der Köchinnen [...] garantierten mir die eigene Heiterkeit.'<sup>860</sup> Rudolf, too, was affected by his sister, the old man in Niederkreut, and Frau Kienesberger, but not in the same manner. In their different ways, these characters helped him to clarify certain issues (his academic project, whether to travel to Majorca, how to bring up children) in his mind; for Murau, on the other hand, the cheerfulness of the cooks here has a positive and immediate effect on his own mood and emotional state.

Of the people in Wolfsegg, Murau's friends are largely confined to the gardeners and Schermaier. The stark contrast between his miserable family, on the one hand, and his inspiring friends in Rome, on the other, is reflected in a duality within the estate: 'In Wolfsegg hatten sich immer zwei Lager gegenübergestanden, die der Jäger und die der Gärtner.'<sup>861</sup> These are two different human types: the huntsmen are rowdy, aggressive and insensitive; the gardeners are peace-loving, warm, and discerning about whom they accept into their confidence. It is principally their emotional, human qualities, and, in

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<sup>859</sup> Ibid., p.316, ll.5-8.

<sup>860</sup> Ibid., p.171, ll.25-8.

<sup>861</sup> Ibid., p.191, ll.17-19.

particular, their instinctive sense of people, which meets with Murau's approval: 'die Gärtner haben einen unglaublichen Instinkt, Menschen betreffend.'<sup>862</sup> This statement, made in relation to their coldness towards the brother-in-law, is not substantiated by any incident. It need not be, because, again, Bernhard is revealing to the reader Murau's, not the gardeners', state of mind. It is irrelevant whether they 'really' dislike the wine-cork manufacturer; any reader pursuing such a path of enquiry will come up against a dead end. Bernhard's aim here is clearly to explore, and encourage the reader to explore, Murau's state of mind through the narrative. The cleavage between the two types is, at any rate, rather oversimplified for an objective, serious appraisal. By using certain types of people (the peaceable gardeners, the boisterous huntsmen, the boorish South German businessman) known to his readers, Bernhard resists the danger of Murau merely projecting his feelings onto the other characters.

From this example, three primary levels of analysis — more generally applicable throughout the text — result: first, Bernhard exploring himself via the protagonist; second, the reader analysing Murau, and third, the reader analysing himself and asking questions about his own life as a result of the narrative experience of reading and thinking about the text. In this example from the text, Bernhard has manipulated the protagonist's observations to communicate to the reader Murau's attitude in respect of humanity. It becomes increasingly clear that Murau knows whom he likes; the undercurrent of human and humane qualities which Bernhard places, almost like a trail of clues, is there for the reader to discover for himself. But *Auslöschung* is not an obscure code waiting to be deciphered by the reader; it is more subtle than that, and Murau's observations about human nature are qualified and sharpened by countercurrents in the narrative. Ultimately, Murau has enough intellectual acumen and critical distance to

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<sup>862</sup> Ibid., p.437, ll.26-7.

these figures to avoid a rather simplistic notion of poor, humble, good people versus affluent, middle-class, bad people, represented here by his family:

Wenn ich die Meinigen als die sogenannten Oberen als verlogen bezeichne und die sogenannten Unteren nicht, ist das irrtümlich, denn die Unteren sind genauso verlogen auf ihre Weise, wie die Meinigen auf die ihrige. [...] Aber ich darf sagen, daß ich mich unter und mit den Einfachen immer wohler gefühlt habe, als unter den Meinigen.<sup>863</sup>

The decisive statement here is that he feels more comfortable with the villagers than with his own family. There is no intellectual answer to the question of which of the two groups is less mendacious or 'besser'.<sup>864</sup> The most important factor is his feeling of warmth and friendship, culminating in his simply feeling more at home ('wohler') with them. Murau's dealings in Rome have shown that he places greater weight on feelings, friendship and happiness than on being right, occupying the moral high ground or fulfilling personal, *a priori* notions of perfectionism.

The underdog, Schermaier — treated shoddily by authorities prepared to let him live in poverty while supporting former war criminals with lavish pensions, after having incarcerated him during the war for listening to foreign news broadcasts<sup>865</sup> — is another character who allows an insight into Murau's way of perceiving people and, thereby, his personal standards and way of regarding the world. It is telling that after trying, and failing, to open his mother's coffin for one final look at the mutilated body, Murau is rescued by thoughts of the poor Schermaier and his wife: 'An die Schermaier erinnert, habe ich die Ungeheuerlichkeit, den Sarg mit der Mutter öffnen zu lassen, vergessen.'<sup>866</sup> It could be argued that someone else's misfortune puts into perspective Murau's own — but he has lost his mother. The Schermaiens, on the other hand, are both still alive. The fact that thoughts of a friend distract him from his own pain illustrates how people can

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<sup>863</sup> Ibid., p.336, ll.6-16.

<sup>864</sup> Ibid., ll.21-2.

<sup>865</sup> The story of the incarceration is a variant of Freumbichler's experiences as told by the grandson in the first volume of the autobiographical pentalogy (see: *Die Ursache*, pp.71-2).

<sup>866</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.458, ll.17-19.

help to lessen the burden of emotional distress. Rudolf had no friends who could do this – nor did Wertheimer, Atzbacher or the narrator of *Holzfällen*.

Despite the horrific story of Schermaier's internment by the Nazis and his subsequent humiliation by the authorities, it is his wife's and his own personal qualities which interest Murau most. Having commented on the fact that Schermaier is neither Nazi nor Catholic, Murau adds: 'Es gibt nicht viele solche Schermaier [...] aber es gibt sie. Es gibt nicht viele solche Frauen wie die Schermaier, aber es gibt sie.'<sup>867</sup> There may not be many people in the world whom Murau can claim to like or love, but there are some, and they make a positive difference and contribution to his life. As the comment here shows, Murau also realizes that there are others, too ('es gibt sie'). This single piece of self-knowledge marks the most important personal discovery for Murau in *Auslöschung*, and it accounts in large measure for his openness to friendship and company.

### 3. WRITING AGAINST DEATH<sup>868</sup>

#### (a) Wolfsegg and Rome

Near the beginning of his account, Murau outlines in a sentence his failed attempt at describing to Gambetti his recent visit to Wolfsegg for Caecilia's wedding:

Ich hatte versucht, ihm gegenüber einen Vergleich anzustellen zwischen unseren beiden Familien, das deutsche Element der meinigen dem italienischen der seinigen entgegensetzen, aber ich spielte letzten Endes doch nur die meinige gegen die seinige aus, was meinen Bericht verzerren und Gambetti, anstatt aufklärend belehren, auf unangenehme Weise stören mußte.<sup>869</sup>

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<sup>867</sup> Ibid., p.449, ll.7-9.

<sup>868</sup> Note the chapter entitled 'Gegen den Tod schreiben' in: Höller, *Thomas Bernhard*, pp.128-34. Höller's closing chapter of his monograph, subtitled 'Krankheit und Sterben', summarizes Bernhard's achievement and is not about *Auslöschung*.

<sup>869</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.10, ll.5-12.

This attempted explanation by Murau here can be equated, in microcosm, with his own literary project: Rome and Wolfsegg, respectively, are after all the contrasting and contrasted settings for the two separate sections of the book, and Murau even uses the same word ('Bericht') as he later employs for his own written project.<sup>870</sup> His failure to communicate with Gambetti here is a warning to the reader; the work of *Auslöschung* simply cannot be undertaken by Murau in a straightforward, shortened, prosaic form since this would distort ('verzerren') the facts. That he chooses to talk of the 'German' rather than Austrian element of his family, when comparing it to the Italian aspects of Gambetti's background, is probably a reference to the two languages which he discusses before this comment. Murau's aim of instructing and enlightening Gambetti can be regarded as a parallel or clue to the narrative's desired effect on the reader. The common title shared by Murau's project and Bernhard's text provides a link between Bernhard's book and Murau's aims of enlightenment and instruction; they even merge into one at the end of the narrative as Murau comments ('wo ich diese *Auslöschung* geschrieben habe').<sup>871</sup> It is worth noting the early strong hint from Bernhard, via Murau and his failed 'Vergleich', about the purpose of his work; it forms the basis of the relationship between Murau's text and the reader. It acts as another reminder from author to reader: in order to find coherence and consistent meaning in the text, close inspection and rereading of the text is required if narratorial and stylistic clues, forming hidden links, are to be unearthed.

The 'Vergleich' to which Murau refers in this report of his failed description finds narrative expression in repeated reference to and contrast between Wolfsegg and Rome. It is no surprise, given the human-centred bias of Murau's observations, that the narrative locates the central difference between these two places in the people: 'Die

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<sup>870</sup> Ibid., p.199, l.5. For pictures of (the real) Wolfsegg with a short accompanying essay pinpointing references from the text, see: Hans Höller and Erich Hinterholzer, 'Poetik eines Schauplatzes: Texte und Fotos zu Muraus "Wolfsegg"', in Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.235-50. For a more general, contextualizing essay about Wolfsegg, see: Renate Langer, 'Die Schwierigkeit, mit Wolfsegg fertig zu werden: Thomas Bernhards *Auslöschung* im Kontext der österreichischen Schloßromane nach 1945', in Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.197-214.

<sup>871</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.651, ll.4-5.

Mitteleuropäer treten wie Puppen auf, nicht wie Menschen, alles ist verkrampft [...] sie bewegen sich niemals natürlich, alles ist steif an ihnen und letzten Endes lächerlich.<sup>872</sup>

The establishment of opposites is an old Bernhard ploy dating back to his earliest works, but the use of ‘Menschen’ here to contrast with ‘Puppen’, and the Northerners’ absence of naturalness already situates this passage in the more people-friendly later work. This early lesson from Onkel Georg to the young Franz-Josef is part of a broader education which is aimed at securing his mental and physical independence from Wolfsegg and, in particular, the family: ‘In erster Linie hast du dich von den Deinigen vollkommen freizumachen [...] dich vollkommen selbständig zu machen, zuerst innerlich, dann auch äußerlich.’<sup>873</sup> It is a measure of how far Murau has come that this liberation has, to a large extent, already taken place. The first-person narrator of *Der Untergeher* prefigures Murau’s thoughts in a work whose genesis coincided largely with that of *Auslöschung*: ‘Wir können uns unseren Geburtsort nicht aussuchen, dachte ich. Wir können aber aus diesem Geburtsort weggehen, wenn er uns zu erdrücken droht.’<sup>874</sup> The narrator-protagonists of the autobiographical pentalogy, and to a lesser degree, Rudolf in *Beton*, all employ their narratives in order to arrive at knowledge about their past and themselves. The end of their tales marks a beginning. In *Beton*, Rudolf’s liberation takes the form of unencumbered description and sleep (albeit induced by drugs); Murau’s liberation, on the other hand, is more complete and penetrates into his everyday life in Rome: for instance in the form of friendships, pleasant walks with Gambetti and enjoyable excursions to beauty spots. Moreover, Murau lives in Rome; Rudolf went to Palma on holiday only. Murau’s liberation from his past is all the more complete.

The continued negative impact that Wolfsegg has on Murau’s life is not paralysing in the way that Peiskam — another family house with involved associations and long memories — was for Rudolf. Not only does Murau finish his book

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<sup>872</sup> Ibid., pp.41-2 [last line on p.41 to l.4 on p.42].

<sup>873</sup> Ibid., p.138, ll.6-10.

<sup>874</sup> Bernhard, *Der Untergeher*, p.184.

unassumingly and reasonably quickly (it takes him about a year),<sup>875</sup> he has something positive with which to contrast thoughts about his depressing home life. Bernhard uses this counterpart to Wolfsegg to inform the reader about Murau's priorities and to focus further the evolving definition of people and happiness: 'In der ganzen Welt war ich immer wenigstens zeitweise übergücklich gewesen, an vielen Orten der zufriedenste Mensch und der glücklichste, ja sogar der dankbarste, da, wo ich es sein sollte, nicht und niemals.'<sup>876</sup> These are strong words. In articulating his disappointment in Wolfsegg and its people, Murau obliquely tells the reader a little more about his life. The carefully qualified formulation ('wenigstens zeitweise' and 'an vielen Orten') attests to a writer behind the narrative who is not exaggerating for effect, but decelerating his reader, asking him to slow down and examine the text closely. It is no wonder that Murau's earlier attempt at describing satisfactorily to Gambetti his relationship with Wolfsegg failed because it distorted the facts and could not enlighten the recipient. The implication is that subtle narrative nuances are only possible in Bernhard's longer version – the narrative itself. Bernhard also uses a favourite narrative ploy here, that of negative definition. In informing the reader how unhappy Wolfsegg has made him over the years, Murau slips in the information that elsewhere ('an vielen Orten') he has been the most happy, content, and grateful person imaginable. It is precisely such clues which subvert the received notion of *Auslöschung* as a negative diatribe centring upon obliteration and self-destruction. The provocative, often teasing statements about Wolfsegg's history not infrequently disguise an understated, unfettered optimism for the future.

Murau wants to obliterate his past, but he aims to remain true to it, too. When Bernhard's narrators carefully qualify a statement — in sober yet striking contrast to the playful hyperbole so often employed to provoke the reader — then it is almost always a sign of serious heartfelt intent. Murau's qualifying and careful formulations about his

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<sup>875</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.542.

<sup>876</sup> *Ibid.*, p.305, ll.23-7.

childhood in Wolfsegg mark the boundary between mischievous taunting of his readers and serious narrative expression and analysis: ‘Zwischen den Blumen in der Orangerie auf der einen, und den Mehlspeisen in der Küche auf der anderen Seite, hatte ich alles in allem eine glückliche Kindheit gehabt.’<sup>877</sup> The comparison or ‘Vergleich’, as Murau calls it, between Rome and Wolfsegg is clearly not black-and-white. It is a true mark of his contentment in Rome that he conducts this self-dissection from a position of strength: unlike Rudolf, he writes about past unhappiness: ‘Da ich mich im großen und ganzen, vor allem mit der Möglichkeit, in Rom zu leben, als einen durchaus glücklichen Menschen bezeichnen kann, [...] habe ich keinerlei Ursache, fortwährend über Wolfsegg als über eine Katastrophe zu reden.’<sup>878</sup> The important word here is the causal conjunction ‘da’: it is ‘because’ of his being a happy person in Rome that he can qualify his negative memories of Wolfsegg and inspect them more carefully, without sweeping generalizations. Adverbs of qualification (‘im großen und ganzen’, ‘vor allem’ ‘durchaus’, and ‘fortwährend’) suggest a writer meticulously moulding his protagonist’s words in order to create signposts for the reader in what is otherwise a long narrative which fully tests reading stamina. The narrative can be seen here not only to warn the reader (and protagonist) not to exaggerate the duality between Rome and Wolfsegg, but also to differentiate between Murau and previous protagonists, none of whom would have considered describing themselves as ‘durchaus glücklich’. The fact that Murau’s happiness here is connected with his residence in Rome is not coincidental.

Rome is, of course, a place with positive connotations for Murau. He is not the first character in literature in German to find the voluptuous South a stark and welcoming contrast with the more ascetic North. The enthusiastic subject in Goethe’s seventh Roman elegy declares: ‘O wie fühl’ ich in Rom mich so froh!’<sup>879</sup> Goethe’s descriptions in the Venetian Epigrams are sometimes close in spirit to those of Murau’s Onkel Georg:

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<sup>877</sup> Ibid., p.172, ll.1-4.

<sup>878</sup> Ibid., p.105, ll.6-11.

<sup>879</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Werke*, ed. by Erich Trunz (Frankfurt: Beck, 1981), I: *Gedichte und Epen 1*, p.162.

‘Leben und Weben ist hier, aber nicht Ordnung und Zucht.’<sup>880</sup> Like Bernhard’s narrator, Goethe’s visitor is attracted by the essentially human (‘Menschlichen’) in the South.<sup>881</sup> For Murau, Rome is the place where he has all his friends. Throughout *Auslöschung*, it is the one place closely associated, in Murau’s mind, with people and the high value of life, as he recalls Onkel Georg telling him years ago: ‘In den mediterranen Ländern ist das Leben hundertmal mehr wert als hier.’<sup>882</sup> Rome provides Murau with the human contact for which he yearns; equally importantly, he is aware of this fact: ‘Ich interessierte mich auf einmal wieder für alles und jedes [...] Für die Menschen [...] denn in Wahrheit habe ich mich viele Jahre nicht einmal mehr für die Menschen interessiert.’<sup>883</sup> People and life are closely connected with each other for Murau, and it is significant that Rome allows him to breathe again: ‘Plötzlich habe ich aufgeatmet.’<sup>884</sup> Breathing is a symbol of life here. Bernhard links a metaphor for the rejuvenation of Murau’s life with a literal pointer to the importance of the process of living, both indicated by the verb ‘aufatmen’. The words Bernhard employs to describe Murau’s revival after the dark years of puberty and adolescence in Wolfsegg are important because it is apparent that in Rome Murau has regained what he once had: ‘Ich hatte ganz vergessen, daß es außer der meinigen entsetzlichen auch noch eine andere Welt gibt, die nicht nur entsetzlich ist.’<sup>885</sup> The telling word here is ‘vergessen’; Rome reminds him; it teaches him what he already knew from his childhood and from Onkel Georg but had forgotten in the intervening years.

Ultimately, as with his friends, the Rome of the narrative is an extension of Murau’s personal quest, his search for self-knowledge. When Murau compares Wolfsegg with Rome and derides it because it is so small and parochial compared to the

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<sup>880</sup> Ibid., p.175.

<sup>881</sup> Ibid., p.180.

<sup>882</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.41, ll.29-30.

<sup>883</sup> Ibid., p.203, ll.25-31.

<sup>884</sup> Ibid., l.16.

<sup>885</sup> Ibid., p.206, ll.1-3.

cosmopolitan city, he is, of course, not comparing like with like.<sup>886</sup> But, again, this is not the point of the comparison; in this highly personal narrative, the aim is to explore Murau's feelings and thoughts, not to assess the accuracy and fairness of geographical and demographic differences. Shaken, even threatened, by his impending departure to Wolfsegg for the funeral, Murau takes stock of how far he has come on his journey of self-realization and self-development:

Hier in deiner Wohnung [in Rom] ist dein Mittelpunkt und er wird es bleiben. Du wirst diesen Mittelpunkt deiner selbst nicht mehr aufgeben, alles tun, ihn niemals aufgeben zu müssen. Nichts wird dich von Rom ab und weg und nach Wolfsegg zurückbringen.<sup>887</sup>

As with so many moments of self-awareness, the formulation here takes on a careful tone. 'Mittelpunkt' is qualified in the second sentence to 'Mittelpunkt deiner selbst'; the near-tautologous 'ab und weg' emphasize Murau's reluctance to leave Rome. It is as if the meticulous writer behind the narrative has temporarily withdrawn and the protagonist expresses the immediacy and urgency of his feeling. Murau is under threat here, and although he knows that he is secure in his new life in Rome ('Rom hat mir Wolfsegg unmöglich gemacht'), the shadow of Wolfsegg lingers, and it is, in part, for the obliteration of this shadow that he returns to Austria.<sup>888</sup>

#### (b) Obliteration

It is important to understand the term 'Auslöschung' in this Bernhard's last major prose work as part of an ongoing process. While Schlichtmann is right to talk of the 'Mehrdeutigkeit des Begriffs', it is equally clear that there emerges a major or principal use of the word which sharpens the narrative definition of Murau's self-development.<sup>889</sup>

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<sup>886</sup> Ibid., p.111.

<sup>887</sup> Ibid., p.300, ll.23-7.

<sup>888</sup> Ibid., p.110, ll.14-15.

<sup>889</sup> Schlichtmann, p.14.

Eun-Hee Ryu, in a study of the academic and literary projects undertaken by Bernhard's protagonists, ascribes to the word and the concept a wide and ambitious scope of meaning, referring to Murau's 'Intention, die ganze Geschichte von Wolfsegg und zugleich seine eigene Geschichte auszulöschen.'<sup>890</sup> For the purposes of the investigation here, 'Auslöschung', or obliteration, will be taken principally to point to Murau's attitude to his past and Wolfsegg in particular.

For a man who retains his composure upon hearing the shocking news about his parents' and brother's deaths, who hates Austria and its people and who reserves particular venom for the family seat, Wolfsegg, Murau is suspiciously keen to return to Wolfsegg in time for the funeral: 'Streiken die Eisenbahnen, fliege ich, [...] streiken die Fluggesellschaften, fahre ich mit dem Zug, aber mit dem Zug muß ich noch heute nacht fahren, mit dem Flugzeug muß es morgen um fünf Uhr früh sein.'<sup>891</sup> Since there is no indication anywhere in the text that he wants to attend the funeral *per se* or to pay his respects to the dead as the dutiful, grieving son and brother, there must be another reason. The answer lies in his attitude to his family. Despite his withering criticisms of them throughout the narrative, Murau loves his family; in fact, he cannot help loving them.

Just after acknowledging to himself his own power in being able to preside over the fate of Wolfsegg, in his role as sole heir, he is taken aback by Caecilia's comment that she sent a telegram to Spadolini at the same time ('gleichzeitig') as to him.<sup>892</sup> He is so hurt that his sister considers him to be on an emotional par with Spadolini that, in frustration and disbelief, he repeats to himself the fact that she simultaneously sent Spadolini a telegram. As if that is not enough, it dawns on him that Caecilia must have known about his mother's affair with Spadolini all along. The way he expresses this

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<sup>890</sup> Eun-Hee Ryu, *Auflösung und Auslöschung: Genese von Thomas Bernhards Prosa im Hinblick auf die 'Studie'*, Europäische Hochschulschriften I, Deutsche Sprache und Literatur, 1647 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998), p.267.

<sup>891</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.303, ll.9-13.

<sup>892</sup> *Ibid.*, p.389, ll.15-16.

realization suggests that he is jealous; it is as if his little secret group of three has been exposed, his position of privilege undermined: 'Die Schwestern sind immer schon Eingeweihte gewesen, dachte ich.'<sup>893</sup>

His jealousy is also apparent when dealing with his ineffectual brother-in-law; Murau tries to marginalize him (repeatedly contrasting him with his sisters and himself by using 'wir' in opposition to him), insisting that he is not up to the task of dealing with the catastrophe of the deaths, and ending by declaring to Amalia and Caecilia: '*der Schwager paßt nicht zu uns*.'<sup>894</sup> Again, as in the example with Spadolini and the telegram, he creates a family clique in his mind, implied in his expression, which is intended to shut out someone else and make him feel a privileged member of a small, exclusive group – here, together with his two sisters. When Caecilia finally admits that her new husband is getting on her nerves ('*Er geht mir die ganze Zeit auf die Nerven*'), Murau is thrilled and arrives somewhat prematurely at the conclusion that she cannot love him and can only have married him to spite their mother.<sup>895</sup> He blows her comment out of all proportion here in order to make himself feel better by once again aligning himself with his sister at the cost of her husband: 'Die Fassade, den Weinflaschenstöpsel­fabrikanten betreffend, war nicht mehr aufrechtzuhalten, dahinter war bereits nichts als nur eine unablässig sich vertiefende Abneigung sichtbar geworden.'<sup>896</sup> Murau shows in these scenes that his love for his sisters and their loyalty to him is important, however scornful he might be about them elsewhere in the narrative.

When he enters the orangery, the simplicity with which he expresses his desire to see his mother's mutilated body is uncharacteristic and all the more powerful as a result:

Wenn es mir möglich gewesen wäre, hätte ich den Deckel des Sarges aufgemacht, in welchem meine Mutter lag [...] doch ich hatte diesen Gedanken, immer wieder tauchte der Gedanke in meinem Kopf auf, daß ich in den Sarg

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<sup>893</sup> Ibid., ll.22-3.

<sup>894</sup> Ibid., p.422, ll.3-4 [emphasis in original].

<sup>895</sup> Ibid., p.424, l.1 [emphasis in original].

<sup>896</sup> Ibid., ll.3-6.

hineinschauen will, in welchem meine Mutter liegt, das Wort *liegt* war mir dabei ein groteskes.<sup>897</sup>

If there is any doubt whether Murau really loved his mother — especially in the light of the earlier aggressive comments about her vulgar, lower-middle class background — then they are dispelled here.<sup>898</sup> There are similarities between Murau and Camus's Meursault, both of whom receive telegrams informing them of their mother's death on the first page of their stories; both characters seem unconcerned by the news: 'Cela ne veut rien dire. C'était peut-être hier.'<sup>899</sup> Meursault even comments cynically on his boss's apparent reluctance to let him have a couple of days leave but comforts himself that he is obliged to let him go given that he has a watertight excuse, 'une excuse pareille'.<sup>900</sup> These are hardly the words of a grief-stricken son. The similarities between these characters stop here, however. In the above carefully-constructed sentence about the coffin lid, Murau shows his hand: he exceptionally uses the possessive 'meine' for his mother (which otherwise, even when professing his love for her, is usually replaced with 'die');<sup>901</sup> he repeats in successive relative clauses his desire to see her, almost like a spoiled and insistent child; his desire to see her ('daß ich in den Sarg hineinschauen will') is superseded in strength only by his revulsion at his own description of her lying in the coffin ('grotesk'). The isolation of the word 'liegt' accentuates the fact of her death, his mother reduced to a lifeless corpse, supine and without breath, almost like a piece of meat. He becomes obsessed ('besessen') with the thought of opening the coffin, almost as if to make sure that she is, indeed, dead.<sup>902</sup> The embarrassing failed attempt to prise open the riveted-down coffin lid is, of course, the ultimate, visible proof of the strength of his feelings and desire to see his mother.<sup>903</sup> Considered from this perspective, it is,

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<sup>897</sup> Ibid., p.449, ll.15-22 [emphasis in original].

<sup>898</sup> See: *ibid.*, p.49.

<sup>899</sup> Albert Camus, *L'étranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942), p.9.

<sup>900</sup> Ibid.

<sup>901</sup> See: Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.265, l.15.

<sup>902</sup> Ibid., p.454, l.27.

<sup>903</sup> Ibid., p.452.

therefore, hard to justify the ever-present theme of obliteration ('Auslöschung') in this text as an attempt by Murau to obliterate his family in any physical sense; it is mental, emotional obliteration which he seeks in order to be less burdened by his past, not physical extinction of Wolfsegg, his family or himself.

In many ways, fate has already delivered the blow of extinction. After all, over half of Murau's immediate family is destroyed or 'obliterated' in a car crash at the beginning of the narrative; if physical extinction really were his goal, there would be no need for his project. It transpires, as Murau casually informs the reader in an inconspicuous relative clause towards the end of his story, that the idea of writing something called '*Auslöschung*' has been in his mind for some years.<sup>904</sup> The question is: why write it now then? What has changed? The only plausible answer can be that he no longer has his family there, and he is now the head of what remains. Fear provides a clue to understanding his motivation: his project ('Geistesarbeit') scares him ('Ich [...] habe [...] Angst davor');<sup>905</sup> yet, as his parents are finally buried, and he contemplates his oppressive Catholic upbringing, it is thoughts of relief and release from fear which come to the fore: 'Du hast sie [die Kindheit und die Jugend] nicht mehr zu fürchten. [...] Und von den Eltern und von deinem Bruder hast du ja schon Abschied genommen, [...] wie du das Telegramm bekommen hast.'<sup>906</sup> The self-address ('du') attests to the urgency of this thought. His fears about his past are obliterated by the telegram; since the first sentence of *Auslöschung* contains the news of the telegram, the beginning of Bernhard's book coincides with the beginning of his new-found freedom from the psychological shackles of his brother and parents, the three members of his immediate family who have a certain power over him by dint of their close emotional attachment and his ultimate dependence on his parents' financial support. He admits as much, early in his account: 'Der

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<sup>904</sup> Ibid., p.615, ll.4-11.

<sup>905</sup> Ibid., p.614, l.5 and ll.16-18.

<sup>906</sup> Ibid., pp.633-4 [last line on p.633 to l.7 on p.634].

Verfolgungswahn ist zuende [...]. Sie sind tot. Du bist frei.’<sup>907</sup> The uncharacteristically short, dramatic sentences attest to the momentousness of the event. It is as if he knows that his ‘persecution complex’ represents a paranoia and fear of authority on his part which, however irrational, he can best overcome once they are dead. His sisters, as survivors, are powerless to control him; unlike Rudolf’s sister, they are not written into the father’s will in any significant way. The literary project proposed by Murau is an antidote to the despair he feels at his own ability to respond to the challenge of his new role, not at his parents’ deaths:

Die Eltern tot, endgültig tot, mein Bruder Johannes tot. Zur Auseinandersetzung mit dieser Tatsache und deren Auswirkungen war ich noch nicht imstande. Ich schob sie hinaus. [...] Ich hatte keinen [Beistand].<sup>908</sup>

The relief at the parents’ death (‘endgültig’), and his desire to come to terms with the fact and the effects of the deaths — not explicitly any grief — are accompanied by a (failed) attempt simply to cope with the entire situation. Thoughts of loneliness and lack of obvious, immediate support (‘Beistand’), in the absence of the late Onkel Georg, mean that he can, at best, only defer any decision about a course of action. His literary project (‘*Auslöschung*’), which has been brewing in his mind for some years, provides the obvious answer, and it is this which comes to his rescue.

The use of the word ‘*Auslöschung*’ throughout the narrative provides important insights into Murau’s project and its underlying purpose and overt aims.<sup>909</sup> Apart from an early example associated with the pseudo-socialism of hypocritical politicians in Austria, the first use of the word is significant because it introduces Murau’s project to the reader:

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<sup>907</sup> Ibid., p.26, ll.13-14.

<sup>908</sup> Ibid., p.54, ll.1-6.

<sup>909</sup> The noun ‘*Auslöschung*’ appears on the following pages of the text: 113 (l.22), 199 (l.15), 201 (l.22), 202 (l.5), 296 (l.16), 457 (ll.21-2 and 28), 458 (l.12 and ll.14-15), 542 (ll.16, 18, 26-7, 29, and 31), 543 (ll.1 and 3 [twice]), 612 (ll.30-1), 613 (l.6), 615 (ll.4-5), 621 (l.20), and 651 (l.4).

Das einzige, das ich schon endgültig im Kopf habe, [...] ist der Titel *Auslöschung*, denn mein Bericht ist nur dazu da, das in ihm Beschriebene auszulöschen, alles auszulöschen, das ich unter Wolfsegg verstehe, und alles, das Wolfsegg ist [...]. Mein Bericht ist nichts anderes als eine Auslöschung.<sup>910</sup>

Murau's avowed desire here to destroy Wolfsegg ('alles, das Wolfsegg ist') can be read in one of two ways: first, as an intensification of his desire to destroy what Wolfsegg means to him ('alles [...], das ich unter Wolfsegg verstehe'), that is to say an actual destruction in addition to the mental and emotional obliteration; or second, these two phrases ('alles [...], das ich unter Wolfsegg verstehe' and 'alles, das Wolfsegg ist') can be read in apposition; after all, in this deeply subjective narrative, it can come as no surprise to the reader that, in his mind, what Wolfsegg means to Murau and what Wolfsegg is, are one and the same thing. Since Murau has no wish to raze Wolfsegg to the ground, or see his family wiped out for that matter, the second interpretation would seem to be more consistent with the rest of his goals and therefore more plausible overall. The narrative technique of subtle apposition is, after all, also used elsewhere at critical points in the narrative to guide the reader where there is potential ambiguity. The principal concern for Murau here is that Wolfsegg ceases to exert the terrifying psychological weight and constant pressure on his thoughts. The donation to the Jewish community is the perfect answer because Wolfsegg can no longer have an impact on him, especially since he has given it away absolutely and irrevocably – here synonymous with the personal definition of obliteration ('alles [...], das ich unter Wolfsegg verstehe') outlined in his description of his project. Further inspection of Murau's formulation in this passage describing his goals confirms the nature of his project. He wants to obliterate the object of his description ('das in ihm [dem Bericht] Beschriebene'); the emphasis is on obliterating what Wolfsegg represents in his mind via an intellectual exercise (or literary narrative). Ironically, writing a 650-page book preserves Wolfsegg, as well as obliterating it.

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<sup>910</sup> Ibid., p.199, ll.13-21.

Bernhard dispels any doubt that the destruction of Wolfsegg is meant as an inner, psychological, emotional obliteration by making the all-important link to the reader: 'Wir tragen alle ein Wolfsegg mit uns herum und haben den Willen, es auszulöschen zu unserer Errettung, es, indem wir es aufschreiben wollen, vernichten wollen, auslöschen.'<sup>911</sup> He is, of course, not suggesting here that all people should burn down their family homes.<sup>912</sup> The will to overcome the problems and personal complexes or 'Herkunftskomplex' of childhood and youth clearly represents a response to a universal problem, and not just one specific to Murau.

This universalization of the protagonist's dilemma is an extremely important narrative statement because it normalizes Murau; he is neither a madman nor an obsessively anxious and neurotic person in the way that some previous, and especially the pre-1975, Bernhard characters were. The author presumes here that he has problems with which the reader can identify. He is a man trying to overcome typically negative and debilitating family influences and complexes. The inclusion of the reader ('alle') at this juncture is important because it creates a connection in the narrative between the reader's concerns and Murau's project and, of course at one remove, Bernhard's book. This overt communication from text to reader is not coincidentally inserted at the place where Murau is explaining his project. Clearly, Murau's project relates to Bernhard's work; in that respect, this quasi-address to the reader can be interpreted as not only a signal from Bernhard about the potentially universal relevance of the statement, but also from Murau about the clear importance of it for his project. The most important word in the above aside to the reader is the verb 'wollen'. The strong implication here is that everyone wants to overcome by obliterating that which holds them back and burdens them from their past, but everyone does not try actively to achieve this personal victory – Murau's

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<sup>911</sup> Ibid., II.25-9.

<sup>912</sup> The source of this thought in Bernhard's writings could be traced back to *Die Kälte* where the narrator reports that his real father burned down his parents' house before leaving his home town. As he looked back at the burning flames, the narrator comments: 'Mit diesem Blick auf das brennende Elternhaus hatte er nicht nur die Heimat, sondern überhaupt den Heimatbegriff (für sich) ausgelöscht': Bernhard, *Die Kälte*, p.115.

obliteration. It is only through this obliteration that the first, most important step can be taken towards achieving the goal of real happiness, self-knowledge, and being at one with oneself ('Errettung'). This is what Murau actively undertakes through his 'Bericht', and herein lies much of his achievement: 'Ich habe [...] zu mir selbst gefunden.'<sup>913</sup>

Murau gradually reveals more and more about his project, and the line between his own account and the narrative itself becomes ever finer. Murau's description reads at times like an analysis of the process of creative writing, whether it be the importance of forming sketches and notes into a flowing, continuous narrative or the difficulty of getting started.<sup>914</sup> It is as if Bernhard is using his protagonist to clarify and order his own understanding of creative, literary production. Murau makes it clear to the reader that his own project must be understood on his terms: 'Wolfsegg wird ausgelöscht in meinem Bericht auf meine Weise.'<sup>915</sup> As he admits, Rome is the right place for his 'Bericht', now is the right time, but the leading impulse behind this project is human and imprecise: 'ich kann es [that he must write his report now in Rome] nicht beweisen, jedenfalls nicht im Augenblick und jedenfalls auch nicht mit meinen Wörtern, aber ich fühle es. [...] ich bin auf der Piazza Minerva ein neuer Mensch geworden.'<sup>916</sup> Where words fail, feelings triumph. He can convey the fact that the time is now ripe for his work, but he cannot dissect the feeling that informs his judgement. Language has reached its limits as a tool of communication (to the reader) or of self-analysis, and Murau is reduced to articulating the purpose of his project indirectly here, by telling the reader how he told Gambetti that he has become a new person in Rome. The reader must piece together the rest.

Like Peter Handke's Gregor Keuschnig, who also seeks a new identity in a foreign city, Murau wants a new life. The difference between these two characters, however, is that where Keuschnig is aware, and, by comparison, not too uncomfortably

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<sup>913</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.202, ll.18-19.

<sup>914</sup> See: *ibid.*, pp.200-1.

<sup>915</sup> *Ibid.*, p.201, ll.27-8.

<sup>916</sup> *Ibid.*, p.202, ll.14-18.

either, of leading a 'Doppelleben' in Paris which combines the identities he inherits from his own past and from the 'awakening' which suddenly occurs one morning (he literally awakes to find himself a new man), Murau's goals are less immediate because Murau's change has already occurred.<sup>917</sup> The emphasis in his tale is on his dissection of what came before the change. The storyline, consisting of a telegram on the first page enabling Murau to muse on the subject of his family background for the best part of six hundred and fifty pages, provides the ideal backdrop. Unlike Handke's third-person narrator who describes from a distance Keuschnig's changes and looks forward on the last page of his account to Keuschnig's new life, Bernhard's more urgent first-person narration is concerned with exploring the deeply personal influences of the past through Murau's 'Geistesarbeit'.<sup>918</sup> In this sense, *Auslöschung* is a continuation of the autobiographical project and *Beton*; the major difference, however, is that Murau is more secure in himself than any of the autobiographical narrators or Rudolf. Where Salzburg and family life brought moments of happiness for the autobiographical narrators and Rudolf respectively, Rome and the narrative represent a comfortable life and unqualified hope for Murau: 'Und ich hatte so viele Jahre nicht mehr an eine Rettung geglaubt, nur immer meinen Untergang gesehen.'<sup>919</sup>

As Murau's account unfolds further and he reveals more to the reader about his project, the obliteration he wants to effect approaches a self-analysis akin to the self-searching autobiographies: 'Tatsächlich bin ich dabei, Wolfsegg und die Meinigen auseinanderzunehmen und zu zersetzen, sie zu vernichten, auszulöschen und nehme mich dabei selbst auseinander, zersetze mich, vernichte mich, lösche mich aus.'<sup>920</sup> In the light of his statement about being a 'new' human being, this comment here indicates an apparent paradox: he wants to destroy himself and yet in this self-extinction lies a rebirth.

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<sup>917</sup> Peter Handke, *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), p.13.

<sup>918</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.614, l.5.

<sup>919</sup> *Ibid.*, p.202, ll.21-3.

<sup>920</sup> *Ibid.*, p.296, ll.3-7.

Unlike death, the thought of obliterating part of the past appeals to him ('ein angenehmer Gedanke') precisely because it is life-giving: it points to a renewal, an affirmation of a new self ('ein neuer Mensch').<sup>921</sup> Further proof of this rebirth was given emphatically by Bernhard himself in an interview shortly after the publication of *Auslöschung*: 'Aber was heißt Auslöschung? *Wiederbeginn des Neuen*.'<sup>922</sup>

Like the autobiographical narrators and Rudolf, Murau finds out painfully that there is an all-important difference between thinking about life and being involved in it, living it: once he is in Wolfsegg, Murau's elaborately expressed resolve to overcome his past demons is weakened by being in and actually experiencing the place of all his defeats and unhappinesses. His account is now only 'möglichlicherweise' going to be called *Auslöschung*;<sup>923</sup> from the two or three years he felt he needed to complete it thoroughly, he now plans a quicker, presumably less ambitious and thorough version taking only a year.<sup>924</sup> Escaping Wolfsegg and returning to Rome temporarily becomes his sole priority,<sup>925</sup> but he has not given up the original project ('aber ich habe es nicht aufgegeben').<sup>926</sup> In fact, thoughts about his project, returning to Rome and being with Gambetti lead Murau to an essentially creative act: 'Ich stellte ihn [Gambetti] mir in seinem Arbeitszimmer vor, wie er von seinen Eltern abgeschirmt sich ganz seiner Neigung, der deutschen Literatur also, hingeben kann, völlig in Ruhe gelassen.'<sup>927</sup>

The two most important features of this thought are both what he thinks, and the fact that he thinks it. He imagines Gambetti able to do just as he pleases ('sich ganz seiner Neigung [...] hingeben kann') in peace ('Ruhe'); furthermore, the thought itself represents an inventive jump, a moment of creativity where he 'creates' in his mind a picture which is not the product of observation but of thought and, principally,

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<sup>921</sup> Ibid., 1.8 and p.202, 1.18.

<sup>922</sup> Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard - Eine Begegnung*, p.257 [emphasis in original].

<sup>923</sup> Bernhard. *Auslöschung*, p.542, 1.16.

<sup>924</sup> Ibid., p.542.

<sup>925</sup> Ibid., p.543.

<sup>926</sup> Ibid. p.541, ll.28-9.

<sup>927</sup> Ibid., p.543, ll.23-7.

imagination ('ich stellte ihn mir [...] vor'). The reader of *Beton* will remember that Rudolf's moments of greatest ease with himself, contentment, and imagination were accompanied by the word 'Ruhe' or one of its compounds. Murau is no different: 'Rom beruhigt mich, Wolfsegg bringt mich auf.'<sup>928</sup> The extended moment of weakness in Wolfsegg is counteracted by a more constructive moment of creativity which ensures what Murau earlier calls his 'Errettung' when describing his project.<sup>929</sup> This salvation is not defined in much detail, but it is clear that it is not just physical salvation or survival since he is going to die soon anyway (his internist in Rome has already informed him that he does not have long to live).<sup>930</sup> Murau's mission is more personal than this. It is revealing that Bernhard punctures the first-person narration here, and Murau describes himself in the third person when imagining how he will conduct himself the following day in Rome: 'Der morgige Römer wird stark sein.'<sup>931</sup> Here, he detaches himself sufficiently from his identity in Wolfsegg to refer to himself as if he is another person; the switch back from depressed Austrian to the 'neuer Mensch' of Rome is taking place in the narrative. The major development here, however, is that tomorrow's Roman will be strong by dint of having left Wolfsegg behind him or, to put it in Murau's idiom, having 'obliterated' it. Like Reger, Murau has learned that the absolute standards reminiscent of his natural disposition ('Veranlagung') to be perfectionist must be left behind if he is to have a happy life, to survive or continue to live: 'Jetzt weiß ich aber, daß ich nicht total lesen und nicht total hören und nicht total betrachten und anschauen darf, will ich weiter leben.'<sup>932</sup> Reger, like all of Bernhard's protagonists of the '80s, seeks happiness in everyday life – before completion of an intellectual project or fulfilment of a theoretical notion.

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<sup>928</sup> Ibid., p.533, l.28.

<sup>929</sup> Ibid., p.199, l.27.

<sup>930</sup> Ibid., p.620. Compare also the forbidding prefatory quotation: 'Ich fühle, wie der Tod mich beständig in seinen Klauen hat. Wie ich mich auch verhalte, er ist überall da. Montaigne' (ibid., p.5).

<sup>931</sup> Ibid., p.487, ll.6-7.

<sup>932</sup> Both references: Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, p.69.

Later on, after contemplating whether to renovate the 'Kindervilla' and before returning to Rome, Murau warns himself about the importance of assigning to the past the influence in his life of Wolfsegg: 'du darfst dich, schon aus Selbstschonungsgrund, nicht mehr umdrehen.'<sup>933</sup> He realizes that it is pure sentimentality and a misplaced desire to recreate his childhood which fires his initial desire to renovate the 'Kindervilla', the place of so many happy memories. He rejects this dream for a more realistic and enduring goal of self-preservation ('aus Selbstschonungsgrund'). It becomes clear to the reader that the project of obliteration serves the purpose of self-preservation. As in the case of the autobiographical narrators analysed in the first chapter, Murau has 'worked through' (in Freud's sense) his past in order to look forward to a more positive, hopeful future life. Murau cannot go back to Wolfsegg without feeling trapped; once there is no Wolfsegg to go back to, he will be able to live his life unburdened by its overbearing presence in his mind.

### (c) Social Criticism

It is difficult to consider *Auslöschung* without taking into account the social and political dimensions of the narrative. Critical opinion splits into two camps: on the one hand, those who consider the text a principally political statement; and on the other, critics who think of the political content as provocative bluster which, if inspected closely, serves to disclose Murau's or Bernhard's personal motivations. This section will focus its argument on a point between these two positions.

The question of Bernhard and politics is a vexed one, especially in Austria where his disagreements with the authorities were well documented in the press in the '70s and '80s (and even in the '90s from beyond the grave in the matter of his controversial will). As far as his prose narratives before *Auslöschung* are concerned, Bernhard presents

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<sup>933</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.600, ll.20-1.

himself as an unpolitical writer who makes gleefully provocative, often gratuitous political statements. Huguet, in his first biography of 1991, confirms this view by concluding that Bernhard's real contribution is not as a commentator on his political and social environment but as a subjective writer concerned with his own feelings:

Replié dans une excessive subjectivité qui le conduit à se désintéresser totalement des évolutions en cours dans son environnement pour ne se préoccuper que de ses sensations propres, Bernhard ne peut pas ne pas éveiller le soupçon qu'il n'est pas en mesure d'articuler les vrais problèmes qui ressortissent à la réalité autrichienne objective d'aujourd'hui.<sup>934</sup>

Huguet's thesis here is reflected in part by Franz Schuh who also locates elsewhere the deeper meaning of the writings: 'Bernhards Polemiken sind immer ungenau, sie sind immer eine faule Frucht um den wahren Kern.'<sup>935</sup> This is certainly true of the autobiographies and *Beton*; the plays, however, provide a more willing political polemic, but even there the political debate and analysis are often overshadowed by provocative invective which serves the purpose of heightening the dramatic effect.<sup>936</sup>

Some critics have included *Auslöschung* in this continuum of provocative, essentially non-political prose. Andreas Herzog says of Muraus's narrative monologue: 'Sie [Muraus Rede] dient nicht politischen Zielen, sondern kann als Form der Selbstbehauptung verstanden werden.'<sup>937</sup> As is evident from the section outlining the critical reception of *Auslöschung*, a number of critics took Bernhard to be a profoundly dissatisfied political commentator hiding behind his protagonist and repeating what he had always said about Austria; however, some more recent academic critics — especially those whose approach to Bernhard's writings is text-centred — have discovered from within the text that *Auslöschung* is not a political or social document wrapped in a

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<sup>934</sup> Huguet, *Thomas Bernhard ou le silence du sphinx*, pp.228-9.

<sup>935</sup> Franz Schuh, 'Vranitzky, Bernhard und ich', in Schmidt-Dengler and Huber, pp.183-90 (p.187).

<sup>936</sup> See: Dowden, p.79: 'The vitriolic rage that Bernhard pours into his plays is not that of a liberal intellectual committed to a politics based on the application of critical reason.'

<sup>937</sup> Andreas Herzog, 'Auslöschung als Selbstausslöschung oder Der [sic] Erzähler als theatralische Figur', in *Thomas Bernhard: Die Zurichtung des Menschen*, ed. by Alexander Honold and Markus Joch (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999), pp.123-31 (p.129).

literary narrative. It is not, for instance, like Heinrich Böll's *Das Brot der frühen Jahre* (1955) or Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (1959), each of which can be regarded, at least in part, as a creative and literary dissection of the aftermath of the Second World War. Sylvia Kaufman, in her account of *Auslöschung*, says of Bernhard's writings: 'Although he often touches on the most sensitive topics, he never argues politically. All his invective lacks precise political and sociological description and remains vague in terminology.'<sup>938</sup> More specifically and stridently, she adds: 'the book [*Auslöschung*] displays a sovereign indifference to social and historical problems.'<sup>939</sup> Alfred Pfabigan, whose analysis of the book favours historical, philosophical, and political perspectives, guardedly states: 'Muraus Bericht ist [...] ein wenig unpolitisch, er ist weder der historischen Forschung noch der politischen Theorie verpflichtet.'<sup>940</sup> Bernhard himself, in conversation with Karin Kathrein in 1984, pulls no punches on the subject of social function in his writings: 'Die gesellschaftliche Aufgabe interessiert mich überhaupt nicht.'<sup>941</sup>

Provocation is certainly part of Bernhard's purpose in his social and political commentary. Schlichtmann is right to link the references to Nazism in the narrative with 'Familie, Gesellschaft, reales Österreich'.<sup>942</sup> When Muraus brings up the subject, he seems intent on provoking the reader: 'In Österreich herrschen uneingeschränkt nationalsozialistisch-katholische Erziehungsmethoden, wer etwas anderes behauptet, ist ein Lügner und ein Ignorant.'<sup>943</sup> The somewhat unidiomatic sentence-extending comma here links the two ideas of Nazi crime and subsequent refusal to acknowledge it; the reader is being addressed indirectly ('wer etwas anderes behauptet'). This tactic of provoking the public had paid dividends for Bernhard over the years in the form of

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<sup>938</sup> Sylvia Kaufman, *The Importance of Romantic Aesthetics for the Interpretation of Thomas Bernhard's 'Auslöschung: Ein Zerfall' and 'Alte Meister: Komödie'*, *Stuttgarter Arbeiten zur Germanistik*, 360 (Stuttgart: Heinz, 1998), p.43.

<sup>939</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>940</sup> Pfabigan, p.235.

<sup>941</sup> Kathrein, 'Es ist eh alles positiv', p.188.

<sup>942</sup> Schlichtmann, p.49. Schlichtmann provides a useful extended analysis of Nazi criticism in *Auslöschung*: *ibid.*, pp.49-65.

<sup>943</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, pp.291-2 [last two lines on p.291 to l.2 of p.292].

increased publicity and revenue. The *Holzfällen* scandal, for instance, made him a household name since news bulletins reported the melodramatic armed confiscation of his book. With *Heldenplatz* (1989), too, the constant leaking of passages from the play, mixed with media hysteria, made for a volatile reaction which gave Claus Peymann's production maximum coverage in the media.<sup>944</sup> Bernhard himself was happy to admit that his writing contained an essentially provocative function, as he stated in the 1984 Kathrein interview: “Ich wollte immer etwas bewegen. Schon als Kind war ich ein Anreger.”<sup>945</sup>

The main character in *Der Italiener* (1964) — a short story widely regarded as a precursor to *Auslöschung* — comments: “Das Politische [...] interessiert mich tatsächlich nur insofern, als es meinen Geschäften nützt.”<sup>946</sup> This might be seen, to a large extent, as a motto for Murau. Personal reports about Bernhard's life also point to a man who was comfortable in selected company and whose interests included food, drink, and travelling rather than political engagement. In conversation about Thomas Bernhard and his memories of him, Hermann Beil, the actor, confirms this tendency when he reveals a deeply personal slant on the matter of Bernhard's unconventional ‘political’ awareness: ‘Wenn er [...] in irgendeiner alltäglichen Handlung einen faschistischen Kern gesehen hat, dann konnte er sehr erregt darüber reden.’<sup>947</sup> This essentially *a posteriori* method — proceeding from particular, everyday observation to broader, general statement — is the basis of the narratives under discussion here, and *Auslöschung* is no exception.

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<sup>944</sup> For a detailed record of the furore surrounding this play, see: Burgtheater [no author given], *Heldenplatz: Eine Dokumentation* (Vienna: Burgtheater, 1989).

<sup>945</sup> Kathrein, ‘Es ist eh alles positiv’, p.188.

<sup>946</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Der Italiener*, in Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.21-8 (p.28). The story was first published in: *Insel-Almanach auf das Jahr 1965* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1964), pp.83-93. This story should not be confused with *Der Italiener: Ein Film* (Salzburg: Residenz, 1971) which is the script from a film directed by Ferry Radax. Hans Höller provides an extremely useful introduction to the ‘Vorgeschichte’ of *Auslöschung* with specific reference to this and other primary texts. See: Hans Höller, ‘Politische Philologie des Wolfsegg-Themas’, in Höller and Heidelberger-Leonard, pp.38-49.

<sup>947</sup> Kai Luchrs-Kaiser, ‘Schauspieler und Theatermacher über Thomas Bernhard’, in Hoell, Honold, and Luchrs-Kaiser, pp.50-76 (p.53).

While the above accounts of the non-political nature of *Auslöschung* are persuasive, they are not entirely convincing since they leave some important questions unanswered. There are, for instance, too many elements of the narrative which suggest a narratorial desire to bring specific political ideas to the reader's attention: the Nazi past of Wolfsegg; the guilt of Murau's parents; the shameless pride of ex-Nazis in modern-day Austria, to give a few examples. Weinzierl detects these overtly political elements in describing the narrative as breaking with the rest of Bernhard's prose output: '*Auslöschung* [ist] sein einziges dezidiert politisches Buch'.<sup>948</sup> Andrea Reiter's slightly more cautious view is convincing; she calls *Auslöschung* 'a social novel with strong political overtones'.<sup>949</sup> Alfred Pfabigan adds a specifically moral dimension to the political content. He contends that Schermaier's abject poverty resulting from lack of State compensation ('ein durchaus repräsentatives Nachkriegsschicksal'), if contrasted with the luxury enjoyed by the flourishing ex-Nazis, is a clever authorial ploy containing moral intentions ('geschickt gewählt und moralisch aussagekräftig'); his view is, indeed, tenable, but it rather neglects Murau's ever-present personal motivation — (here, his friendship with Schermaier) behind social or political accusations — in favour of the symbolic representation of a character whose fate is hardly at the centre of the narrative's concerns.<sup>950</sup>

Charles Martin perceives in the text a strong criticism of the 'Austrians' failure to address and come to terms with their Nazi past', but this textual provocation, clearly intended to achieve maximum publicity, cannot be equated with 'the detailed nature of many of his [Murau's] accusations and their plausibility'.<sup>951</sup> There are many examples of social criticism pointing to Austria's guilty part in the Second World War. Specific instances include the reappearance of smug ex-Gauleiter at the funeral,<sup>952</sup> Murau's family

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<sup>948</sup> Weinzierl, p.459.

<sup>949</sup> Reiter, 'Austrophobia as it is', p.171.

<sup>950</sup> Pfabigan, p.238 and p.239, respectively.

<sup>951</sup> Martin, p.197 (both quotations).

<sup>952</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.632.

sheltering Nazis,<sup>953</sup> and his parents' continued adherence to National Socialist ways after the war.<sup>954</sup> These criticisms are, more often than not, launch-pads for mischievous provocation which, in turn, incorporates a gleeful tilt at modern-day Austria: 'Der österreichische Mensch ist durch und durch ein nationalsozialistisch-katholischer.'<sup>955</sup> Murau provides the by now customary Bernhard invectives against Catholicism, Nazism, the Austrian people and the professions. Political statements pervade all sections of the text: Murau accuses both his parents of full Nazi membership and collaboration, citing financial profit as a major factor;<sup>956</sup> his mother insisted at that time upon calling herself 'eine *Deutsche Frau*';<sup>957</sup> Austrians are charged with lying about their collaborative past and about their true Nazi leanings even today ('was sie getan haben und was sie vorhaben');<sup>958</sup> and Austria is criticized as a nation perfectly suited to Nazism, with its 'katholisch-nationalistische Lebensweise' which applies both to his family and the State.<sup>959</sup>

Although the presentation of Nazism is closely connected with the portrayal of Catholicism in *Auslöschung* — early in his account, Murau refers to the Austrians' 'niederträchtige katholisch-nationalsozialistische Gesinnung'<sup>960</sup> — they serve different functions. This connection between the two is sustained throughout the text.<sup>961</sup> Precisely what Murau says about the Church is, as with the political commentary, hardly new in Bernhard's writings. As a sober and critical analysis of the pernicious influence of Catholicism in post-War Austria, Murau's account is a little laboured, but there is no indication that this is its purpose. Catholicism provides an important backdrop for the

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<sup>953</sup> Ibid., p.193.

<sup>954</sup> Ibid., p.291.

<sup>955</sup> Ibid., p.292, ll.7-8.

<sup>956</sup> Ibid., pp.193 and 194.

<sup>957</sup> Ibid., p.193, l.8 [emphasis in original]. In *Ein Kind*, the younger sister of Bernhard's Aunt Rosina — a possible model for Murau's mother — speaks of herself as a '*deutschen Frau*' and, like Murau's mother, she enthusiastically espouses National Socialism. See: Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p.165.

<sup>958</sup> Ibid., pp.292 and 304, l.10.

<sup>959</sup> Ibid., p.304, l.12 and p.460.

<sup>960</sup> Ibid., p.20, ll.3-4.

<sup>961</sup> For an analysis, see: Schlichtmann, pp.56-62.

action of the text: Rome, the city where Murau lives, is the headquarters of the Catholic Church; Spadolini, one of its senior figures, is a father-figure to him by dint not only of being Murau's mentor but also because of his sexual relations with Murau's mother. For the first time in a Bernhard story, the influence of the Catholic Church is not entirely negative or skin-deep – although some critics have taken Bernhard's criticisms of Catholicism to reflect his own personal failings.<sup>962</sup> Murau's admiration for the figure of Spadolini, his residence in Rome near the Vatican, and his failure to take Spadolini to task for his religious hypocrisy all give evidence of a surreptitious olive branch which is in keeping with the more conciliatory nature of Bernhard's later prose. Despite this conciliatory gesture, many criticisms of Catholicism prevail.

The principal attack on Catholicism in *Auslöschung* pertains specifically to human values. The main charge is that of destroying humanity: 'Die katholische Kirche hat den zerstörten Menschen auf dem Gewissen.'<sup>963</sup> Catholicism is 'eine Naturverfälschung'<sup>964</sup> and 'gegen die Menschennatur'.<sup>965</sup> It is set in opposition to the positive, human impulses carefully charted by the narrative through stylistic or thematic devices, such as the use of 'naturgemäß' or the description of Murau's close friends. The criticism of Catholicism centres upon its destruction of these positive impulses. Yet, as is typical of this narrative, where all roads lead to Murau, the general criticisms of a person or an institution always find their way to more specific relevance to Murau's life:

Die katholische Kirche hätte viel an mir gut zu machen, sagte ich mir, wenn ich aufrechnete, was sie durch ihre Lehre in mir als Kind angerichtet und zerstört und ruiniert hat, sie würde, ist sie noch so kaltblütig, erschrecken müssen, dachte ich.<sup>966</sup>

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<sup>962</sup> See: Peter Horwath, *Der Kampf gegen die religiöse Tradition: Die Kulturkampfliteratur Österreichs 1780-1918*, German Studies in America, 28 (Berne: Peter Lang, 1978), p.254: 'Für den egoistisch veranlagten Skeptiker und Paranoiker [Bernhard in *Die Ursache*] wird das Heilige zur Posse oder zum Alptraum, weil die Wirklichkeit seines Daseins ihn belästigt und ihm seine Ichbezogenheit unbequem werden lässt [*sic*]. Um es sich leicht zu machen, macht dieser Menschentyp wahllos-unreif alles und alle, nur nicht sich selbst verantwortlich für die eigene Misere.'

<sup>963</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.141, ll.29-30.

<sup>964</sup> *Ibid.*, p.142, l.26.

<sup>965</sup> *Ibid.*, p.143, l.7.

<sup>966</sup> *Ibid.*, p.365, ll.3-7.

In this most specific instance of the Catholic Church's ills, Murau varies the earlier criticism of its destruction of people to a destruction of certain unspecified elements within himself as a child. The repetition of 'und' creates maximum effect, and the personification of the Church as cold-blooded and ruthless is ultimately rather vague and, therefore, unconvincing since it is not reinforced with specific examples or sustained logical reasoning.<sup>967</sup> It is the effect on him as a child upon which Murau's description concentrates: 'In die Kapelle bin ich immer zitternd hineingegangen, um wie erschlagen wieder aus ihr herauszugehen.'<sup>968</sup> Unlike the invigorating descriptions of his friends and their shared experiences, these passages are rather repetitive, even dull by comparison. However, the passages (such as the Schermaier story) containing social and political criticism or comment — while they stand independently as Murau's views about the cruelty and life-stifling nature of Nazism and Catholicism — are more fulfilling for the reader, as already witnessed, when they are allied to Murau's comments about himself, his state of mind and his literary project, itself central to his identity and Bernhard's narrative.

All these well-rehearsed social and political criticisms will be known to the seasoned Bernhard reader. However, in *Auslöschung*, there is an extra dimension to the political content which raises the potentially tired criticisms in Bernhard's prose out of their usual context of provocation. Weinzierl suggests that Bernhard amended sections of the text (which was otherwise largely complete around 1980) in order to take into account topical political developments, such as the Waldheim Affair — which was a raging political issue in the Autumn of 1986 when the book came out.<sup>969</sup> Weinzierl's suggestion is not fully substantiated, but it would seem to be borne out by the text. While

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<sup>967</sup> In a section with the subheading 'Fiktion und Realität', Schlichtmann looks closely at Bernhard's claims about the collusion between the Catholic Church and the Nazi organs during the Second World War. See: Schlichtmann, pp.56-62.

<sup>968</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.365, ll.11-13.

<sup>969</sup> Harald Hartung, in his review of the book, even went as far as to describe it as 'Bernhards Beitrag zur Waldheim-Affäre'. See: Hartung, 'Wolfsegg oder Die [sic] hohe Schule der Übertreibung'. For a short, clear, and very useful synopsis of the Waldheim affair, see: Melanie A. Sully, 'The Waldheim Connection', in *Conquering the Past: Austrian Nazism Yesterday & Today*, ed. by F. Parkinson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), pp.294-312.

it would be overstated to describe the book as a political novel, there are simply too many references to Nazism, the war, and the decadent Catholic Church to overlook. In this sense, *Auslöschung* is different from *Beton*: Murau is not just a private individual, like Rudolf: his Christian name alone conjures up Austrian history.<sup>970</sup> Moreover, his exploration of the past brings to light not only his own experiences but also the historical guilt of his family about which he talks at length.<sup>971</sup> Austrian Nazism is thus integrated into the action of the story and interwoven with Murau's personal history: in fact, the theme anticipates *Heldenplatz*. Murau's memories of his parents are steeped in their Nazi collaboration. It is only if seen in this light that Murau's final gesture of giving Wolfsegg to the Jewish community in Vienna makes sense as an act of expiation. Weinzierl's theory about last-minute changes to the text seems all the more plausible since the obvious political content of the work comes in and out of the text; it appears with particular focus towards the end of Murau's narrative as Bernhard prepares the reader for his protagonist's final, dramatic gesture. Murau's disposal of Wolfsegg is relevant to the argument here in as much as it reveals a certain optimism about the future: in presenting Wolfsegg to the Jewish community, he therefore commits a personal act not merely of obliteration, as shown earlier, but of expiation; moreover, he undertakes an act of political redress and apology. There is, of course, no sense in which this act can be seen to make up for past atrocities, but the present here acknowledges and retrospectively attempts to compensate for the past.

At the point in Wolfsegg after trying to open his mother's coffin and feeling greatly embarrassed in front of the onlooking gardeners, Murau tries to divert his mind away from this painful defeat. He thinks simultaneously of Schermaier's injustice at the hands not only of the Nazis but of mean-spirited informers, and of his own literary project. The way in which he proposes to include Schermaier's horror story in his own

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<sup>970</sup> See also: Reiter, 'Austrophobia as it is', p.168. Reiter traces Murau's Christian name to Franz Josef Altenburg, a friend of Bernhard, who was a descendant of Emperor Franz Josef.

<sup>971</sup> See, for instance: Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, pp.440-2.

account reveals much about the inclusion and function of political and social elements in Bernhard's *Auslöschung*.

In Schermaier's story, personal and political themes come together. Murau starts by referring to the injustice meted out to Schermaier who now lives with his wife in poverty: 'Deshalb ist es meine Pflicht, in der *Auslöschung* von ihnen zu reden und auf die aufmerksam zu machen stellvertretend für so viele, die über ihre Leiden während der nationalsozialistischen Zeit nicht sprechen.'<sup>972</sup> The Schermaier theme is a personal one since Schermaier is a good friend of his and someone to whom he feels close ('dem ich wie keinem andern in der Nähe von Wolfsegg verbunden bin noch heute').<sup>973</sup> Schermaier represents other 'silent' victims, and at the same time he is a symbol of the Nazis' cruelty and post-war hypocrisy and injustice. The criticism of the authorities is personal and related to their neglect of the high value of human life since they could have completely destroyed Schermaier's life ('sein Leben [hat] zerstören [können]');<sup>974</sup> the criticism neither presents an argument nor encourages debate of the political implications involved in Schermaier's mistreatment. It is revealing that the Schermaier story is important enough for Murau to make a promise to himself to include it in his account ('Dieses Versprechen habe ich mir [...] gegeben').<sup>975</sup>

Murau's reflection in Wolfsegg about including the Schermaier story in his 'report' serves three functions in the narrative of *Auslöschung*: first and foremost, it has the effect of making Murau forget about the painful episode with the coffin lid ('An die Schermaier erinnert, habe ich die Ungeheuerlichkeit, den Sarg mit der Mutter öffnen zu lassen, vergessen');<sup>976</sup> second, it exhorts the reader not to forget the Nazi past, unlike people who have covered it up and thereby have committed a crime worse than the horrors of war itself ('[...] dieses Schweigen ist noch entsetzlicher als die Verbrechen

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<sup>972</sup> Ibid., p.457, ll.27-31.

<sup>973</sup> Ibid., p.446, ll.25-7.

<sup>974</sup> Ibid., p.458, ll.8-10.

<sup>975</sup> Ibid., ll.10-11.

<sup>976</sup> Ibid., ll.17-19.

selbst');<sup>977</sup> and, third, it highlights the plight of the forgotten underdog. Schermaier and his wife ('[Menschen wie die Schermaier haben] die Rolle der Vergessenen zu spielen').<sup>978</sup>

In the first of the three reasons for Schermaier's story here, the inclusion of a major war injustice is used by Murau to counteract his own deeply personal insecurities about his mother and the gardeners. The second reason given here is provocative. The refusal to admit guilt has been linked directly to the Austrian nation's convenient amnesia in the case of Kurt Waldheim.<sup>979</sup> Bernhard uses Murau here to manipulate the reader's response by inviting anger and outrage; the Austrian public and press took the bait. Murau, here, also indirectly ascribes freedom of speech to the literary work by bestowing upon it the function of expressing what is otherwise suppressed. The third and final function of the inclusion of the story in Murau's book also has a social and political function: social injustice expressed via Murau's friendship with Schermaier. Murau's friendships and personal warmth are important to him; they are the basis of his 'new' life in Rome. The fact that he admits that there are many families like the Schermaiens not only attests to his human warmth but also expresses his outrage at the injustice meted out to such poor, powerless individuals.

The political and social diatribes of *Auslöschung* raise one further serious question: how can the elements of hope and optimism described and adduced above (the olive branch to Catholicism, the expiation of war guilt) sit comfortably with characteristically scathing diatribes about Austria, Nazism, Catholicism, and human weakness? The answer lies in the question and returns the Bernhard reader to the concept of 'Durcharbeiten' detected in the autobiographies. In *Auslöschung*, Murau's aggression is rendered harmless by taking the form of only semi-serious diatribes. These diatribes are principally outlets for his aggression. Murau does not take himself as seriously as his

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<sup>977</sup> Ibid., p.459, ll.7-9.

<sup>978</sup> Ibid., p.460, l.1.

<sup>979</sup> See: Weinzierl, p.459.

predecessors. He is aware that his story, his perceptions and, ultimately, his account is subjective, merely one viewpoint: 'Jeder kann nur beschreiben, was *er* sieht, wie es *ihm* erscheint, nicht anders.'<sup>980</sup> In her account of the similarities and differences between Charles Sealsfield and Bernhard, Andrea Reiter cites Bernhard's ability to abstract his views from himself as the major difference between the two writers: 'Bernhard knew how to channel his rage into literary forms such as that of the "Erregung", that is to say he instrumentalised it aesthetically.'<sup>981</sup> The constructive channelling of this aggression (Freud's 'Durcharbeiten' of past unhappiness and bitterness) did not begin properly in Bernhard's prose until the autobiographies and reaches its climax in *Auslöschung* with its gleeful provocation of the reader, leaving Bernhard freer to develop a more hopeful view of the world. In *Auslöschung*, the thematic version of this climax is the political and personal expiation inherent in giving Wolfsegg away. In this instance, a dramatic gesture is more than provocation or exaggeration: it is the culmination of Murau's personal quest for identity. The protagonists of the 1980s in Bernhard's prose bury their heads in the sand: Rudolf runs away to Palma; the narrator of *Der Untergeher* sees writing reviews as a safe haven away from the rough waters of artistic creativity; the narrator of *Holzfällen* withdraws into his chair only to observe others before being reminded briefly at the end that he is part of society, and Atzbacher in *Alte Meister* reveals little of himself preferring to concentrate on Reger. Murau, on the other hand, faces his responsibilities; it is no coincidence that he is the only one of Bernhard's protagonists who succeeds in executing his task of completing a book within a realistic and expected time-scale.

## CONCLUSION

The repeated negative observations about human nature, political and social structures, and individual characters have prevented the majority of critical commentators from

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<sup>980</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.197, ll.11-12 [emphasis in original].

<sup>981</sup> Reiter, 'Austrophobia as it is', p.174.

appreciating the vast potential for happiness evident in Bernhard's late prose narratives. The sensitive perfectionists of the prose in the '80s are often miserable and perpetually thwarted. But, as the unhappy Wertheimer points out in *Der Untergeher*: 'unser Unglück ist die Voraussetzung dafür, daß wir auch glücklich sein können, nur über den Umweg des Unglücks können wir glücklich sein.'<sup>982</sup> Wertheimer cannot live up to the wisdom of his mental realization, and he kills himself. In contrast to the earlier works, the narrator-protagonist, however, does not. Reger, too, comes to the same insight as Wertheimer but survives, even if he is not the happiest person: 'Der denkende Mensch ist von Natur aus ein unglücklicher Mensch [...] Aber selbst dieser unglückliche Mensch kann glücklich sein.'<sup>983</sup>

In *Auslöschung*, Murau learns at an early age about the endless beauty and possibilities inherent in life: 'Die ganze Menschheit ist eine unendliche mit allen Schönheiten und Möglichkeiten, sagte mein Onkel Georg.'<sup>984</sup> Despite these encouraging signs, some critics have regarded Murau's entire project as a failure, most notably Bernhard Sorg. In his monograph, Sorg condemns all of Bernhard's protagonists, including Murau, to eternal unhappiness: 'Aus dem Gefängnis der Vergangenheit gibt es für Bernhards Protagonisten keinen Ausweg.'<sup>985</sup> One or two other critics have given credence to the other side of the coin; Schlichtmann uses a noun of which Bernhard himself would have been proud to describe this other side in *Auslöschung*: 'ein durch Geist, Menschlichkeit und Streben nach Weiterentwicklung im positiven Sinn geprägtes Gegenbild.'<sup>986</sup> Ulrich Horn, in his review of *Auslöschung*, also locates the problem of oversight in critical accounts too slow to reassess Bernhard's established image and reputation: 'Bernhard wurde oft vorgeworfen, seine Protagonisten seien reine Kopfmenschen, hätten zu viel Verstand und zu wenig Gefühl. Diesen Kritikern ist

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<sup>982</sup> Bernhard, *Der Untergeher*, p.93.

<sup>983</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, p.108.

<sup>984</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.34, ll.9-11.

<sup>985</sup> Sorg, *Thomas Bernhard*, p.124.

<sup>986</sup> Schlichtmann, p.136.

entgangen, daß hinter der Verstandesattitüde eine tiefe Verletzlichkeit und Sensibilität [...] steckte.<sup>987</sup> This vulnerability and sensitivity can be profitably traced through a close inspection of the texts, and, once established, it casts a different light upon the interpretation of the work: Murau can be seen as the culmination of a development, in Bernhard's prose from 1975, from introversion to engagement with the world, including in *Auslöschung* positive engagement with Austrian culture (Maria's poems) and history (Wolfsegg and its disposal).

The exposition of this chapter has shown that through a literary evaluation of a consistent set of personal values (human warmth, character, love), close friends, his literary project, and history, Franz-Josef Murau learns to live with himself and his circumstances. He integrates socially into his Rome environment long before the narrative begins; it is Wolfsegg and his family with which he has to deal. The telegram hastens Murau's ultimate solution to the Wolfsegg 'Herkunftskomplex' because it forces him to face his responsibilities about his inheritance, in his role as sole heir: 'In dem Wort *Zweiterbe* witterte ich meine Chance.'<sup>988</sup> Murau does not discuss this chance or opportunity anywhere else in the narrative. Reger, too, uses the same word to express hope, and it is clearly no coincidence that the genesis of *Alte Meister* coincides with *Auslöschung*:

Wir hassen die Menschen und wollen doch mit ihnen zusammensein, weil wir nur mit den Menschen und unter ihnen eine Chance haben [...] [wir] bilden uns ja auch ein, wir haben nur eine Chance, wenn wir nur mit uns selbst allein sind, aber das ist ein Hirngespinnst. Ohne Menschen haben wir nicht die geringste Überlebenschance.<sup>989</sup>

The qualification or closer definition of 'Chance' to 'Überlebenschance' is important here; it is precisely the opportunity of self-preservation or survival which fundamentally

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<sup>987</sup> Ulrich Horn, 'Überleben durch Übertreiben: Ich-Erzähler beschimpft auch sich selbst', *Kölner-Stadt-Anzeiger*, 8 January 1987.

<sup>988</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.507, ll.8-9 [emphasis in original].

<sup>989</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, p.291.

motivates Murau, too. Like the ailing character of *Der Atem* or *Die Kälte*, Murau is desperate to live. Yet, from the beginning of his narrative, he knows that his days are numbered because of ill-health. This means that the purpose of the project is not solely or even principally physical survival; it is, above all, psychological and emotional survival, be it rebirth in Rome by becoming a ‘new person’ or through rejuvenating, humanizing experiences with his friends, or by a reassessment of the national past in the form of his disposal of Wolfsegg.

Murau, unlike Rudolf, makes use of the past in order to overcome its influence by freeing himself of its constant negative presence which reminds him of how unhappy he is, under the yoke of close relatives who have their own complexes and personal agendas. This is why in the past he has had to escape to achieve his states of extreme happiness or paradise, such as his self-protection under the refuge of literature (*‘das Paradies ohne Ende’*)<sup>990</sup> or his idyllic childhood in the libraries of Wolfsegg alone with his books and without the burdens of adult life (*‘das Paradies [Wolfsegg]’*).<sup>991</sup>

Murau is Bernhard’s only protagonist to complete successfully the project of personal ‘Durcharbeiten’ begun by the autobiographical narrators. Where Murau’s obliteration of the ill-effects of the past takes on a positive value is in his life now as an adult, and the connection is made once again by a word-link (*‘Paradies’*): *‘Wir waren aus dem Hassler herausgegangen, eine dieser herrlichen römischen Nächte [...] in welchen man tatsächlich an das Paradies glaubt.’*<sup>992</sup> Only Rome presents such possibilities to Murau in his adult life (*‘die Erneuerung meiner Existenz’*),<sup>993</sup> and when it comes to deciding about Wolfsegg’s fate, people — his friends in Rome, Schermaier, and the victims of the war — determine the decision.<sup>994</sup> It is true that Murau clings on to his life in a physical sense (*‘denn wir wollen ja leben, wenn wir das Leben auch noch so*

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<sup>990</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.34, l.15 [emphasis in original].

<sup>991</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137, ll.12,14-15, and 15.

<sup>992</sup> *Ibid.*, p.271, ll.1-3.

<sup>993</sup> *Ibid.*, p.203, ll.14-15.

<sup>994</sup> *Ibid.*, p.482.

heruntermachen [...] wir klammern uns doch an ihm [dem Leben] fest und wollen es tatsächlich ewig haben'), but it is the completion of his project which is most important.<sup>995</sup> Regarded in this way, the ending, with its disposal of Wolfsegg, is decisive for him. Although the reader is informed that Murau dies, he has completed his project, returned to the place in which he wants to be ('und wo ich bleiben werde'), and he has added to the ostensible obliteration or disintegration (hence the qualifying 'Zerfall' of the subtitle) of his past by giving the family estate away to the Jewish community, the very group of people brutally persecuted by the Nazis who themselves had benefited from Wolfsegg under his parents' regime.<sup>996</sup> As part of Murau's search for self-knowledge, self-preservation and happiness, the ending of *Auslöschung* can be seen as essentially positive. Death is not a statement about his failure or a symbol of futility or the ultimate extinction of his life. On the contrary, the ending affirms Murau's positive belief in addressing his own, his family's, and his nation's past; they are all connected with each other, and Murau is the first Bernhard protagonist who is able to see this connection and 'work through' it successfully in his intellectual project.

Murau's biggest achievement is self-preservation where previous protagonists are frustrated – in the domain of their everyday life. Reger prefigures this development when he says: 'die logische Folge wäre immer die totale Verzweiflung *über alles*. Aber gegen diese totale Verzweiflung über alles wehre ich mich.'<sup>997</sup> Reger refers here to action which counteracts the insights and logical conclusions of the mind. Murau's rearguard action goes one stage further because, unlike the clear-thinking but frustrated Reger, he has a well-balanced, comfortable existence (in Rome). As he says to himself defiantly when his identity is under threat in Wolfsegg: '*ich* habe mich nicht geändert, *ich* ändere mich nicht.'<sup>998</sup> The emphatic, italicized 'ich' stands firm where even Rudolf and the

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<sup>995</sup> Ibid., p.621, ll.10-14.

<sup>996</sup> Ibid., p.651, l.5.

<sup>997</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister*, p.224 [emphasis in original].

<sup>998</sup> Bernhard, *Auslöschung*, p.388, ll.2-3 [emphasis in original].

autobiographies' narrators despaired. In this statement, Murau makes his final stand; his critical sharpness towards the world around him never leaves him, but he is accepting of himself. In this regard, he is related to his creator in a way which has often been overlooked. In an interview of 1985, Bernhard reacted to the question whether he had declared war on all creation with the words: 'Im Gegenteil, ich höre nicht auf, die Welt zu bewundern, so wie sie ist.'<sup>999</sup> *Auslöschung*, in attesting to this realization, provides Murau with answers which none of his predecessors could find.

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<sup>999</sup> Jean-Louis de Rambures, 'Ich bin kein Skandalautor', trans. by Monika Natter and Isabelle Pignal, in Dreissinger, *Von einer Katastrophe*, pp.119-23 (p.122). This interview was originally published in *Le Monde*, 2 February 1985.

## CONCLUSION

Textual investigation and interpretation inform the reappraisal of the seven prose works under discussion in this thesis. By adducing evidence from these texts, the critic can replace many of the stock criticisms of negativity, nihilism, and bludgeoning repetitiveness with a more positive assessment. The works, if read closely, can be interpreted as the products of a writer seeking self-development and happiness. In such a text-based interpretation, reputedly turgid, impenetrable prose is transformed into a literary challenge for the reader: seemingly unremitting gloominess can be re-evaluated as the camouflage for a writer striving to articulate positive personal ideals, and many points of literary interest and merit can be uncovered in the content and structure of the narratives. The sections on critical reception in each chapter have revealed that Bernhard's reviewers and academic critics have more often than not read his work from philosophical, social, polemical and essentially extra-literary standpoints, with the effect that the literary, creative aspects of his prose fiction have frequently been neglected. It is one of the principal intentions of this study to show that the textual analysis can help the

Bernhard critic and reader to reconsider the importance of Bernhard's narrative subtleties.

The subjects of communication and hope provide important points of entry into the texts discussed here because they help to unearth textual clues: communication in the form of the writer's desire to reach out to his reader in order to 'work through' his traumatic experiences, in the sense of Freud's concept, and validate his own identity; and hope in the shape of protagonists whose desires and ideals have always been life-affirmative, but whose circumstances increasingly allow them to find peace with themselves and their environment, most notably in the case of Murau in *Auslöschung*.

There are two principal definitions of 'communication' as presented in the preceding chapters: first, the interaction between reader and text; and second, the interrelationships between the protagonists and other characters. The complex and deliberately elusive richness of Bernhard's style makes it impossible to schematize his interaction with the reader. None the less, it has been possible to trace some lines in the confusion of Bernhard's intensely subjective prose: use of tense and specific words (in Chapter I); the unreliable and often disingenuous presentation of the narrator (Chapter II), and the subtle relation between long-established Bernhard themes and their expression – be it by means of careful grammatical apposition, the strategic use of certain words and their compounds, or the subtle linguistic interaction between characters in the narrative (Chapter III). All these stylistic, literary devices have indicated an authorial desire to communicate with the reader willing to make an effort to engage with the text by piecing together the clues or 'tesserae' (the 'Bruchstücke' of *Der Atem*). The result is the emergence in the narratives of warmth, friendship, and positive narratorial prospects for the future. These prospects gain in intensity after 1975: they are near-tacit in the pentalogy (the memory of a gleaming coin); they are more apparent in *Beton*, with Rudolf's eventual calm self-examination, symbolized by his restful, long sleep, and they

are most explicit and complete in *Auslöschung* where Murau achieves his avowed goals (completing the book, disposing of Wolfsegg).

As the sections on critical reception have shown, little attention has been devoted by academic critics specifically to Bernhard's style. The notion of successful communication between Bernhard's characters has also been given little credence, even in Bernhard's later prose fiction. Most critics until recently have implicitly echoed Eva Marquardt's unequivocal assertion: 'Die Nicht-Identität von Tatsächlichem und Vorgestelltem [u.a. im *Kalkwerk*] macht Kommunikation unmöglich.'<sup>1000</sup> Marquardt is referring here mainly to the prose before 1975 (up to *Korrektur*). In the prose after 1975 (including the pentalogy), there is a noticeable shift in emphasis. However, as we have seen, critics intent upon interpreting the later works in the shadow of the earlier prose have overlooked the possibilities of communication announced in the pentalogy. Other critical commentators perceive the same fundamental impasse, especially where they approach the prose texts from an extra-literary perspective, such as philosophy or cultural politics:

These novels [*Korrektur*, *Der Untergeher*, *Holzfällen*, *Alte Meister*, and *Auslöschung*] suggest communicative interaction as an alternative to the monologic search for truth and for self-realization that characterized most of Bernhard's earlier novels, but once again his protagonists are unable to escape from their subjective universes. Communication remains impossible.<sup>1001</sup>

The absoluteness of Joseph Federico's last sentence here is undeniably consistent with what he terms 'postmodern philosophical thinking';<sup>1002</sup> it could easily be deemed an appropriate description of the dilemma faced by Bernhard's protagonists prior to 1975. However, the withdrawal into 'neurotic isolation' is superseded by the time Bernhard embarks on the pentalogy and in the prose of the 1980s, especially with Rudolf and

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<sup>1000</sup> Eva Marquardt, 'Thomas Bernhard - ein Meister des Gegensatzes: Entwicklungstendenzen der Erzählprosa', *Frankfurter Hefte*, 36 (1989), 1139-44 (p.1144).

<sup>1001</sup> Joseph Federico, *Confronting Modernity: Rationality, Science, and Communication in German Literature of the 1980s* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1992), p.60.

<sup>1002</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

Murau.<sup>1003</sup> In *Auslöschung*, Murau's circumstances and his actions almost unanimously point to a protagonist finally at ease with interpersonal communication: his friends in Rome (Spadolini, Maria, and others), Austria (Schermaier, the gardeners), and elsewhere in Europe (his beloved cousin, Alexander); his desire to write his own *Auslöschung*, thereby confronting his personal past; his courage in writing down his thoughts about and facing his parents' and brother's deaths. Above all, Murau's narrative gives answers to dilemmas rather than bemoaning the deadlock created by the unanswerable questions, such as death (*Amras*), imperfection (*Korrektur*), and coldness (*Frost*), which haunted previous protagonists. The pain of the past is no longer insurmountable, unlike in *Amras*, *Das Kalkwerk* or *Korrektur*, nor is it the object of repeated frustration, since Murau is able to act decisively both in disposing of Wolfsegg and in completing his written project; Spadolini is not just an insuperable, thwarting enemy but a figure whose potentially pernicious influence Murau turns to his own advantage. The personal pain detailed in the narrative is confronted and then recast as a source of self-improvement – a process of 'Durcharbeiten' which began in the pentalogy and which culminates in *Auslöschung*. Steffen Vogt comments that Murau's reported conversations with Gambetti are nothing but self-exploration in the form of an articulation of his suffering: 'Und das schließlich erscheint als das eigentliche Ziel von Bernhards Sprachexperimenten: die Möglichkeit von Kommunikation in einer kommunikationsfeindlichen Welt auszuloten.'<sup>1004</sup>

Murau's development can be seen as the culmination in a process of social integration, or regarded within the context of Bernhard's prose output as a whole, social reintegration: this process began with the protagonists of the pentalogy who took stock of their lives in order to make sense of their past and developed in the form of Rudolf's emerging positive outlook in Palma. All the protagonists of the '80s learn to survive by

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<sup>1003</sup> Ibid., p.13.

<sup>1004</sup> Vogt, p.16.

embracing in one form or another their fellow men. Murau's integration is the most complete: he has reliable friends in Rome; he overcomes his near-phobia of Wolfsegg, and he even comes to terms with his national past by an act of expiation in giving away his parents' blood-tainted estate.

In fact, it is the increasing importance of people — dare one use the term 'close friends' in relation to Bernhard's highly demanding protagonists? — which links the multi-faceted idea of communication in the narratives under discussion with the presence of positive human values and hope. Like the protagonists of the pentalogy, Rudolf and Murau learn to communicate with friends and detect hope and self-fulfilment in human warmth, not in intellectual observation and projects.

The evidence pointing to the importance of people and friends in Bernhard's private life and his works is overwhelming. In the volume of conversations dedicated to memories of Bernhard, almost all of Krista Fleischmann's interviewees remember him as a warm and loving man who needed people: 'Ihm hat Freundschaft ungeheuer viel bedeutet' (Wieland Schmied); 'Thomas hat ja sehr gern Menschen gehabt' (Lieselotte Uxküll); 'Ich glaub', daß Thomas Bernhard überhaupt einer der liebenswertesten Menschen war, die ich je gekannt hab'' (Hilde Spiel), and 'Er [hat] Menschen um sich gebraucht [...], Freunde gebraucht [...]' (Peter Fabjan).<sup>1005</sup> It is not exclusively in the prose fiction during and after the autobiographical pentalogy that Bernhard's narrators express their yearning for human contact and warmth. The anonymous young man in the page-long story entitled 'Der junge Mann' in *Ereignisse* (1969) tries to convince an old man that he is alone, bereft of true human warmth. He goes to the city to find just one person with whom he can communicate, but his search is fruitless because he cannot convey his need for their confidence and love: 'Sie [die Menschen] ließen ihn zwar ausreden und hörten ihm auch zu, aber sie wollten ihn nicht *verstehen*.'<sup>1006</sup> This story,

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<sup>1005</sup> Fleischmann, 'Thomas Bernhard - Eine Erinnerung', pp.11 [Schmied], 80 [Uxküll], 143 [Spiel], and 153 [Fabjan].

<sup>1006</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Ereignisse* (Berlin: Literarisches Colloquium, 1969), p.24 [emphasis in original].

however, is fragmentary and very short; it is not until the prose after 1975 that Bernhard confronts this problem with a view to a solution.

In all of Bernhard's major prose works after 1975, questions of communication and hope are closely interlinked. The narrators of the pentalogy 'work through' their past by forging a communicative, narrative link with their childhood and adolescent experiences and by engaging the reader. Communication underpins hope for the future by enabling a happier life. In working through perfectionist expectations and idealism, the narrators of these works bolster their fight for survival and even begin to formulate an affirmative attitude towards their lives. *Ein Kind* expresses most directly the joy and hope that life can bring; *Beton* qualifies this definition of hope.

People are still very much part of the definition in *Beton*. Bare physical and emotional survival — Rudolf's sarcoidosis notwithstanding — is superseded by a positive pragmatism: Rudolf begins to accept (initially by remembering the Mendelssohn performance and then more completely by interacting with Anna) that imperfection need not be a source of frustration and unhappiness. He uses his intellectual, theoretical knowledge of music to share in Anna's plight; he applies what he has previously learnt to a real-life situation and thereby attains a more positive view of himself and his circumstances. The clues announcing a more hopeful attitude towards the protagonist's future are present in the way the text is written and, therefore, in the way that it is read.

In *Auslöschung*, Bernhard's narrator concentrates on the past. His personal situation is comfortable until he is forced to confront the past by sudden death in the family. Instead of ruining his present life, as was the case for Walter and Konrad, the protagonist's memories and present circumstances bolster his attempts to overcome the pernicious influence of the past. There is even sufficient space left in Murau's account for him to integrate social and political dilemmas pertaining to Austria's past into his ultimate solution for Wolfsegg. The hope of a better life is fulfilled in the end. 'Paradies'

is no longer a word associated with the childhood years spent under the protection of doting grandparents; at times in Murau's account, it becomes a reality.

Up to 1975, Bernhard's narrators write in the overbearing, menacing shadow of death; in the autobiography, there is an irony: in writing about death, the narrators of *Der Atem* and *Die Kälte* put behind them the debilitating effect of their own illnesses and deaths in the family. Rudolf writes despite the prospect of his own death and finds solace in Anna, a fellow sufferer. In Murau, Bernhard's prose has found a protagonist who writes against death. Again, Bernhard calls on irony: Murau's account is about obliteration; his family has almost been wiped out by a freak accident; he is very ill himself. Despite all these pitfalls, Murau is happy. More importantly, he fulfils his goals before he dies. Without the intervening works — starting with the pentalogy and continuing with *Beton* — to provide a trail of explanation and a hint of the development, it would be harder to understand his happiness and to see just how far Murau has come in relation to his predecessors in Bernhard's prose writings.

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