

Living with Art:
Repositioning the late works of Thomas Bernhard

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SHORT ABSTRACT

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This study re-evaluates and repositions the late writings of the Austrian author Thomas Bernhard (1931-89). Over thirty years after his death, Bernhard is widely considered to be a writer of international relevance. He is renowned for his bleak portrayals of modern society, his scandalous critiques of his homeland, and his infectious and much-imitated linguistic style. But there is another side to Bernhard—one which existing analyses of his domestic controversies and foreign fanbases are yet to examine fully. In this study, I argue that Bernhard's late prose and dramatic works are centrally concerned with the relationship between art and social living. He explores forms of learning from art, and how engaging with art can affect ways of behaving towards others and oneself.

This study resituates Bernhard's late works outside of their more conventional domestic contexts to bring these aspects of his writings more clearly into focus. Starting from a reconsideration of what it means to read Bernhard as world literature, I reposition the author alongside three Anglophone points of comparison: Angela Carter, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and J. M. Coetzee. These authors, who are yet to be compared with Bernhard in scholarship, allow me to re-evaluate his late prose and dramatic works beyond their local controversies in 1980s Austria; they help me to illuminate the humanity and self-awareness of a writer more commonly associated with unremitting negativity; and they enable me to investigate what Bernhard's late works still have to say about art, decades on from his cultural moment. Reimagining Bernhard beyond his familiar intertexts, his existing international reception, and his own self-staging, this study will be of interest to scholars of Bernhard, late twentieth-century literature, and comparative literature more generally.

LONG ABSTRACT

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This study re-evaluates and repositions the late writings of the Austrian author Thomas Bernhard (1931-89). Over thirty years after his death, Bernhard is widely considered to be a writer of international relevance, renowned for his bleak portrayals of modern society, his sweeping diatribes, and his much-imitated linguistic style. Recent critical volumes—examples include Sandra Richter’s *Weltgeschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (2017), the J. B. Metzler *Bernhard-Handbuch* (2018), edited by Manfred Mittermayer and Martin Huber, and *Thomas Bernhard’s Afterlives* (2020), edited by Stephen Dowden, Olaf Berwald and Gregor Thuswaldner—have offered valuable insights into Bernhard’s popular reception and his influence on an ever-expanding network of international artists. Yet a common view of Bernhard still predominates in scholarship on the author. He is seen as a literary *enfant terrible*, a misanthropic scandal-maker, or a cultural pessimist sceptical towards the potentials of art. This study seeks to build on recent contributions to our understanding of Bernhard’s works as world literature by bringing a different side of Bernhard’s late writings into focus.

I argue that, by the 1980s, Bernhard is centrally concerned with what it means to engage with art, and the consequences of such cultural pursuits for everyday relationships with others outside of the work. This is an important reflection in Bernhard’s late texts, many of which portray ageing academics or artists confronted by the shortcomings of their own ways of living. To examine this concern further, I resituate Bernhard outside of his domestic literary contexts, his foreign fanbases, and his literary imitators, comparing him instead with three Anglophone authors who each help me to think further about the kinds

of participation that Bernhard's works make available: Angela Carter, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and J. M. Coetzee. I select these authors, who are yet to be drawn into dialogue with Bernhard in academic criticism, based on a set of common concerns they share with him: the uses of fiction, the potentials of dramatic performance, and questions of narrative authority in the late twentieth century. Carter, Wertenbaker, and Coetzee are by no means the only authors with whom Bernhard can be productively compared but, together, they help me to reimagine the significance of Bernhard's late writings beyond 1980s Austria. They assist an appreciation of Bernhard's attention to human relationships and vulnerability alongside the negativity, misanthropy, and controversy with which he is commonly associated. They also offer new intellectual contexts for showing how, in his later prose and dramatic writings, Bernhard explores ways of moving beyond the ills of the modern societies that he depicts.

My introductory chapter sets out the comparative methodology underlying this re-interpretation of Bernhard's late works. I start at a modern visitors' sign outside Bernhard's residence in Ohlsdorf, Upper Austria, which lauds his works as 'Weltliteratur' while portraying a common impression of Bernhard as a solitary cultural critic calling out the ills of his nation. The sign offers various reasons for thinking of Bernhard as world literature: his broad international reception; his appearances in translation; the allusiveness of his works; and his afterlives in international literature. I argue, however, that these approaches to Bernhard as world literature in practice rarely move beyond the orthodox impressions of the author that I have detailed above. In this study, I use a different approach to Bernhard as world literature to reconsider the author's literary significance beyond the German and Austrian contexts in which he is conventionally positioned.

A re-reading of Bernhard's play *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh. Ein deutscher Dichtertag um 1980* (1981), a scathing satire of the German culture industry, helps me to

set out my own position on Bernhard's late writings. I argue that Bernhard does not simply hollow out the pretensions of the society that he caricatures in this play, but he also urges his audience to consider their own participation in this society. Informed by Pheng Cheah's reading of Martin Heidegger in *What is a World?* (2016), I argue that Bernhard uses his staging and allusions to common cultural reference points to open a world, beyond his fictional world on stage, that is shared by his characters and audience: a world in which his audiences are able to see the shortcomings of how his characters approach art but in which his protagonist, a bestselling author trapped in his own narrow worldview and an echo chamber of sycophants, cannot. I propose, furthermore, that there is a self-awareness to Bernhard's evident self-staging via this comically flawed surrogate: an admission that, to some extent, we are all trapped within the frameworks of our own cultural reference points. In *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, Bernhard allows his audience to see the shortcomings of his protagonist's self-understanding. This is not the only work in the 1980s in which Bernhard does so.

A recent reading of Bernhard's prose fictions by Rita Felski in *Character: Three Enquiries in Literary Studies* (2019) helps me to consider this further. Felski notes the infectiousness of the hyperbolic diatribes which appear across Bernhard's fictions but, at the same time, acknowledges how an enjoyment of Bernhard's vitriolic spleen can take place against our better judgement. She suggests that, if we see the world through the eyes of Bernhard's ranting subjectivities, then to some extent we become the butt of his joke. My comparative re-reading of Bernhard in this study builds on this perception. I argue that, in his late prose and dramatic works, Bernhard prompts his readers and audiences to look past the tirades of his protagonists to see their fallibility. It is easy to become stuck in the pervasive venom and eloquent tirades of Bernhard's characters but to do so, I argue, is to miss his self-awareness and his eye for human vulnerability. Scholarly discussions of

Bernhard in his domestic literary contexts as a bleak misanthrope, a solitary critic of his nation, or a nihilist, tend to leave these aspects of Bernhard's works unacknowledged. This is why, in the present study, I move away from analysing Bernhard within his familiar domestic contexts and his existing foreign fanbases. De-familiarising Bernhard from such contexts enables me to bring the humanity of his later works more clearly into view.

The first chapter of this study takes this de-familiarising step. In this chapter, I use Peter Bürger's writings on avant-garde art as a theoretical backdrop to assess how three of Bernhard's German-speaking contemporaries consider the relationship between art and society: Peter Weiss, Christa Wolf, and Elfriede Jelinek. Despite the many affinities between Bernhard and these contemporary German-speaking writers, I argue, Bernhard's treatments of the potentials of art in his prose fictions *Beton* (1982), *Der Untergeher* (1983), and *Alte Meister* (1985) stand apart from them. Weiss, Wolf, and Jelinek together form a constructed contextual framework to illuminate what Bernhard does differently. Bernhard, I argue, examines an idea of art as part of, or contingent on, ordinary ways of living with others outside of art. In each of the examples of Bernhard's prose writing under discussion, there are more positive ways of living that are realisable within the modern societies that his protagonists inhabit. To bring out these possibilities in Bernhard's late works more clearly, I argue, they need to be situated alongside a new set of literary interlocutors.

The contextual authors discussed in subsequent chapters of this study—Angela Carter, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and J. M. Coetzee—each help me to develop lines of enquiry from the central argument of this thesis that, in Bernhard's later writings, he is centrally concerned with what we can learn from art. I examine Bernhard's prose fictions, his theatre, and his late self-writing in turn to offer new perspectives on Bernhard's uses of fiction in the 1980s, the forms of learning that his works make available for readers and audiences, and his awareness of human vulnerability and failure amid the negativity,

hyperbole, and irreverence for which he is known. These new points of intertextual reference help me to reimagine the literary qualities that are quintessentially ‘Bernhardian’, as well as the significance of his works beyond the local scandals and controversies that still precede them in academic criticism.

My comparative reinterpretation of Bernhard’s *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung* (1984) in Chapter Two offers a practical example of this literary repositioning. Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* (1984), a reconstructed *Bildungsroman* reincarnating the character of Mignon from Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Lehrjahre* (1795-6), helps me to examine Bernhard’s uses of the genre in his debut novel *Frost* (1963) and his fictive return, over twenty years later, to the scene of his own artistic education in *Holzfällen*. I argue that, in *Holzfällen*, a text frequently read as the author’s scandalous settling of scores with certain contemporary Viennese artists, Bernhard also portrays a narrator learning to behave more positively towards himself and others. Situating this comparison within the contemporary intellectual backdrop of Jürgen Habermas’ philosophical re-thinking of modernity, I reflect on the accessibility of Bernhard’s human exploration of personal failure beyond those of the Viennese society that he caricatures.

This re-reading of *Holzfällen* enables me to show how Carter and Bernhard each explore possibilities of learning from fiction in the 1980s. Where Carter remains committed to fiction as a unique form of readerly experience, I argue that Bernhard breaks from the framework of his fiction altogether, using common points of reference to invite his readers to share in the development of his narrator. Toril Moi’s theory of reading as a practice of acknowledgement in *Revolution of the Ordinary* (2017) helps me to think further about this process. I argue that Bernhard conditions an accessible reading experience in which a reader not only acknowledges the shortcomings of Bernhard’s narrator but can also reassess their own forms of cultural participation. This reading, in turn, enables me to reinterpret the

controversial critiques of Bernhard's extra-textual targets in *Holzfällen* on which much criticism has concentrated. Such allusions, I argue, are part of the common referential network that Bernhard builds in the text, but a reader does not need to identify his targets specifically to participate in his lessons. Indeed, the scandal around the text enabled it to become part of wider cultural conversations in a way that could not have been more appropriate to what I see as one of Bernhard's fundamental concerns in this text: the way in which art can impact how we live outside of it.

This concern is present in Bernhard's contemporary theatrical writings, which I examine in Chapter Three. In this chapter, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*, a play first performed in London's Royal Court Theatre in 1988, provides an original case study to highlight how Bernhard approaches the potentials of the theatre as a cultural habit at this time. By comparing Bernhard's *Der Theatermacher* (1985) and *Am Ziel* (1981) with Wertenbaker's play, I explore a side to Bernhard's theatre beyond the bleak tirades and sweeping social critiques for which his writings are known. I argue that Bernhard engages with a wider theoretical framework to consider possibilities of learning from dramatic performance, using various staging techniques to enable his audiences to perceive the shortcomings of his protagonists' ways of living. This comparison then enables me to offer an alternative reading of Bernhard's most controversial play, *Heldenplatz* (1988). The play is commonly interpreted via the sensational polemics of the protagonist Robert Schuster on the legacy of the Nazi past in 1980s Vienna. Through analysing Bernhard's subtle stagecraft, his casting techniques, and the interactions of his characters on stage, however, I propose that Bernhard also uses this play to think further about the potentials of theatre. I argue that Bernhard approaches the theatre as an institution in which participants can reposition themselves in history and culture—even if his protagonists do not quite come to that realisation. My choice of the contemporary context of London's Royal Court Theatre offers

an intellectual backdrop for this more positive reading of Bernhard's theatre, which also makes a case for the wider relevance of Bernhard as a playwright for Anglophone audiences.

My analysis of Bernhard's stage protagonists in Chapter Three shows how he exposes the shortcomings of his characters behind their tirades. I expand on this reading in Chapter Four, focusing on Bernhard's late prose writings *Ein Kind* (1982), *Wittgensteins Neffe. Eine Freundschaft* (1982), and *Auslöschung. Ein Zerfall* (1986). This chapter reassesses Bernhard's uses of his unique and much-imitated prose style in his later writings and re-evaluates an epithet frequently applied by academic critics to the exaggerated rants and comic caricatures in Bernhard's works: 'der Übertreibungskünstler'. Through comparing these works with J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), I argue that Bernhard self-consciously stages the alluring performance of a recognisably hypertrophic style while simultaneously exposing the blind spots beneath the overt authority of his narrators. Coetzee's writings provide a comparative backdrop for reading Bernhard beyond the cultural moment of 1980s Austria, highlighting the humanity behind the polemics of his characters and enabling us to see Bernhard's contribution to a common question of post-war literary aesthetics: how to write the self with authority. In this chapter, I argue that Bernhard cultivates a recognisable voice in the public arena through his style of ornate exaggeration and, in his late prose fictions, stages such voices to expose the fallibility of his speakers. This reassessment helps me to read the tirades in Bernhard's late prose as more than the final bravura performances of an exaggeration artist, or the final condemnations of an incorrigible cultural pessimist. As the hyperbolic diatribes of Bernhard's narrators are increasingly extracted and republished in compendia of his ire such as *Bernhard für Boshafte* (2014) and *Städtebeschimpfungen* (2016), this reassessment of the humanity behind Bernhard's hyperbole is particularly urgent.

My conclusion discusses the ramifications of these comparisons for Bernhard studies, literature in the 1980s, and the practice of comparative literature more generally. I return to Toril Moi's understanding of reading as a practice of acknowledgement to think further about how one might acknowledge the concerns and the ongoing significance of Bernhard decades beyond his immediate time and place. While Bernhard's engagement with the Austrian public sphere, his negative worldview, and his contemporary notoriety are all undeniably important for understanding the author, the constructed intertextual connections in this thesis enable me to reimagine Bernhard as more self-aware: a writer concerned with interpersonal relationships and human fallibility, and conscious of how others can frequently understand us better than we understand ourselves. The comparative methodology of this study acknowledges this too, exploring Bernhard's works beyond habitual ways of reading them, his public image as an irreverent social critic, the signposting of his estate, and even Bernhard's own statements on his works. This study, therefore, will be of interest to scholars of Austrian literature, twentieth-century literature, and comparative literature more generally. By repositioning the late works of Thomas Bernhard in new literary contexts, this study explores the lessons that they still have to offer.

CONTENTS

SHORT ABSTRACT	2
LONG ABSTRACT	3
CONTENTS	11
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	14
ABBREVIATIONS	16

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Bernhard and world literature	17
Summary.....	17
i. <i>Weltliteratur</i> in Ohlsdorf	18
ii. Reading Bernhard as world literature	22
iii. Bernhard in translation	31
iv. Bernhard's literary universe.....	35
v. Repositioning Bernhard	43
vi. Bernhard's worlds.....	46
vii. The comparisons in this study	51

CHAPTER ONE

Thomas Bernhard and the institution of art in the 1980s.....	56
Summary.....	56
1.1. Repositioning Bernhard	57
1.2. Art and society at the turn of the 1980s	60
1.2.1. Peter Weiss' aesthetics of resistance	61
1.2.2. Christa Wolf's Romantic project.....	65
1.2.3. The discourse of art in <i>Die Klavierspielerin</i>	70
1.3. Art in Bernhard's late prose fiction	74
1.3.1. Human connections in <i>Beton</i>	75
1.3.2. Art as a social practice in <i>Der Untergeher</i>	84
1.3.3. Meaning in art in <i>Alte Meister</i>	93
1.4. Bernhard's wider worlds.....	101

CHAPTER TWO

Thomas Bernhard, Angela Carter, and the uses of fiction	104
Summary	104
2.1. Bernhard and modernity	105
2.2. Angela Carter's confidence in modernity	110
2.3. Bernhard's early fictions	124
2.4. Breaking with fiction in <i>Holzfällen</i>	137

CHAPTER THREE

Theatre as a cultural habit in Thomas Bernhard and Timberlake Wertenbaker	153
Summary	153
3.1. Repositioning Bernhard's plays	154
3.2. The potentials of performance in <i>Our Country's Good</i>	161
3.3. Playmaking in <i>Der Theatermacher</i>	170
3.4. Changing society in <i>Am Ziel</i>	182
3.5. Going to the theatre in <i>Heldenplatz</i>	190

CHAPTER FOUR

Speaking with authority: Thomas Bernhard and J. M. Coetzee from memoir to metafiction	205
Summary	205
4.1. Bernhard's strong opinions	206
4.2. Narrative authority after Beckett	210
4.2.1. Failing and failing again in <i>Boyhood</i> and <i>Youth</i>	211
4.2.2. Speaking without authority in <i>Diary of a Bad Year</i>	222
4.3. Self-staging in Bernhard's <i>Leserbriefe</i>	225
4.4. Figures of authority in <i>Ein Kind</i>	229
4.5. Failing a friendship in <i>Wittgensteins Neffe</i>	234
4.6. Laughing with Gambetti in <i>Auslöschung</i>	240

CONCLUSION:

Bernhard's lessons	255
i. Re-reading Bernhard	256
ii. Re-reading the 1980s	259

iii. Revisiting world literature	263
BIBLIOGRAPHY	266
PRIMARY TEXTS	266
SECONDARY LITERATURE	267

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Ästhetik</i>	Peter Weiss, <i>Die Ästhetik des Widerstands</i> , 3rd edn (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, 2016)
<i>Diary</i>	J. M. Coetzee, <i>Diary of a Bad Year</i> (London: Vintage, 2008)
<i>FA</i>	Johann Wolfgang Goethe, <i>Sämtliche Werke: Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche</i> , ed. by Friedmar Apel and others, 40 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1986-2000)
<i>Kein Ort</i>	Christa Wolf, <i>Kein Ort Nirgends</i> , in <i>Werke</i> , ed. by Sonja Hilzinger, 13 vols (München: Luchterhand, 1999-), vi: <i>Kein Ort. Nirgends; Der Schatten eines Traumes; Nun ja! Das nächste Leben geht aber heute an</i> (2000)
<i>Klavierspielerin</i>	Elfriede Jelinek, <i>Die Klavierspielerin</i> , 48th edn (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2019)
<i>Nights</i>	Angela Carter, <i>Nights at the Circus</i> (London: Vintage, 2006)
<i>Plays</i>	Timberlake Wertenbaker, <i>Plays One</i> (London: Faber and Faber, 1996)
<i>Scenes</i>	J. M. Coetzee, <i>Scenes from a Provincial Life</i> (London: Vintage, 2011)
<i>W1-22</i>	Thomas Bernhard, <i>Werke</i> , ed. by Martin Huber, Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler and others, 22 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Bernhard and world literature

Summary

This introductory chapter sets out the comparative methodology for my re-evaluation of Thomas Bernhard's late works. I first analyse existing ways in which Bernhard has been considered as world literature. While many such readings have illuminated the breadth of Bernhard's appeal and the transferability of his works beyond his cultural moment, I argue that these studies frequently arrive at a commonplace view of the author. Bernhard is often seen as a literary *enfant terrible* who attacked his homeland and approached post-war life and culture with relentless negativity. This study will advance another view of him.

I argue that Bernhard's late works are centrally concerned with the relationship between art and social living, and that this concern is of importance beyond the local backdrop of 1980s Austria against which he is commonly read. In many of his later prose and theatrical works, I argue, Bernhard urges his readers and audiences to look past the hyperbolic venom of his characters and to acknowledge their own participation in the flawed societies and structures that he depicts. My analysis of *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh. Ein deutscher Dichtertag um 1980* (1981) will provide a starting point for this study. The play will help me explain the necessity of repositioning Bernhard outside of his more conventional German-speaking contexts, his international fanbases, and the intertextual references that Bernhard himself provides, to appreciate the significance of his late works beyond their immediate time and place.



i. Weltliteratur in Ohlsdorf

In 2020, visitors approaching the *Thomas-Bernhard-Haus* at Obernathal 2 in Ohlsdorf, Upper Austria, a set of fourteenth-century farmhouses purchased and renovated by the Austrian author in the 1960s, will be met by a modern sign. This property, the sign reads, was the main residence of Thomas Bernhard, a renowned writer of novels, ‘Erzählungen’, autobiographies, and plays. The sign describes Bernhard’s notoriety in Austria during his lifetime for attacks on his homeland and his literary scandals. It then reads as follows:

Heute ist sein Werk Teil der Weltliteratur. Thomas Bernhards Bücher sind in alle Welt Sprachen übersetzt worden, kein anderer österreichischer Autor hat auf die zeitgenössische Literatur derart großen Einfluss ausgeübt wie er.

‘Nathal’ is neither Bernhard’s only residence nor his sole place of writing, but it plays a prominent role in Bernhard’s published work.¹ He expressly associated this property with the eerie and empty architectures, ‘kahl und kalt’, of his fictions (W22.2, 60). In his film monologue *Drei Tage* (1970), Bernhard states: ‘Die Bücher, oder was ich schreib’, *sind wie das, worin ich hause*’ (*ibid.*). ‘Nathal’ reappears as the place of writing in many of the open

¹ Dietmar Steiner, ‘Inszenierte Welten: Häuser, Räume, Einrichtungen’, in *Thomas Bernhard. Hab & Gut. Das Refugium des Dichters*, ed. by André Heller (Wien: Brandstätter, 2019), pp. 8-23 (p. 14).

letters with which Bernhard courted controversy in the public arena, the author's reflections on his friendships, and his accounts of his literary prizes. To encounter this property is to step into the world of his writing, the rural fortress of the scandalous social critic portrayed on the visitors' sign. Yet the sign also stages the author in another way. It presents Bernhard, an unmistakable voice in Austria's post-war literary landscape, as part of world literature.

Scholarship has offered various ways of thinking of Bernhard as world literature. One is to consider this epithet as a marker of literary quality; the sign confirms to visitors travelling to Ohlsdorf that Bernhard is a literary great whose works warrant close attention. But it also reveals another sense of the term; it describes Bernhard's works as world literature since they are so widely read and translated beyond his homeland. Wolfram Bayer has this sense of world literature in mind in his discussion of Bernhard's European reception. He states: 'die Tendenz [ist] unverkennbar, Bernhard nicht als Bestandteil einer österreichischen Nationalliteratur, sondern umstandslos als Weltliteratur aufzunehmen und zu lesen'.² One room in the *Thomas Bernhard-Haus* is devoted to this international reach, showcasing translations of his works around a central display of one of his typewriters.³ Further approaches to Bernhard's works as world literature include tracing the canon of predominantly European writers and philosophers to which Bernhard refers, or exploring Bernhard's continued influence on an ever-expanding network of authors and artists. The latter line of enquiry is a frequent focus of recent scholarship. Uwe Betz and Manfred Mittermayer call Bernhard 'der vielleicht am meisten stilprägende Autor nach dem zweiten

² Wolfram Bayer, 'Vorwort', in *Kontinent Bernhard: Zur Thomas-Bernhard-Rezeption in Europa*, ed. by Wolfram Bayer (Wien: Böhlau, 1995), pp. 9-12 (p. 11).

³ Catherine Marten describes how this room in Obernathal is presented as the scene of Bernhard's writing, acknowledging that the author conducted a considerable proportion of his writing elsewhere. Catherine Marten, *Bernhards Baukasten: Schrift und Sequenzielle Poetik in Thomas Bernhards Prosa* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), p. 15.

Weltkrieg’.⁴ In a conference held at the Goethe-Institut in Düsseldorf in 2019, scholars examined the reception of Bernhard’s works in international fiction, graphic novels, opera, and classical music, mapping the artistic universe that has emerged from Bernhard’s literary worlds thirty years after the author’s death.⁵

This introduction will first examine the various ways of thinking of Bernhard as world literature that are signposted in Ohlsdorf. Scholarship on Bernhard’s international reception, translations of his works, and his influence on certain authors and artists has greatly enhanced understandings of the ongoing relevance and transferability of Bernhard’s writings. Yet existing interpretive avenues frequently arrive at certain common orthodoxies regarding the author, traces of which are also evident on the Ohlsdorf sign. Bernhard is often portrayed as a bleak social critic calling out the ills of his homeland, a literary provocateur ruffling the feathers of the political establishment through controversial utterances and public scandals, or a cultural pessimist seeing little potential in art. Furthermore, studies of Bernhard’s translations and his literary afterlives risk focusing on only part of his output. Bernhard’s prose writings, as I will show, have enjoyed a far wider circulation in translation than his dramatic works, letters, and speeches. This study will re-evaluate Bernhard’s late prose and dramatic works—from his late autobiographical project at the turn of the 1980s to the last play to be produced in his lifetime, *Heldenplatz* (1988)—to reimagine the author and his literary significance. To do so, I will take a different approach to Bernhard’s works as world literature.

⁴ Uwe Betz and Manfred Mittermayer, ‘Wirkung auf andere Autoren und Autorinnen’, in *Bernhard-Handbuch: Leben—Werk—Wirkung*, ed. by Manfred Mittermayer and Martin Huber (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2018), pp. 512-9 (p. 515).

⁵ The conference was entitled “‘Wo wir hinschauen Ideenausschlachter’: Die internationale und intermediale Thomas Bernhard-Rezeption”, and was convened by Florian Trabert and Robin Aust at the Heinrich-Heine-Universität in Düsseldorf. A publication from the conference is due to be published by Transcript Verlag in Bielefeld in 2021.

Instead of understanding Bernhard's writings via his domestic contemporaries, foreign fanbases, authors he may have read, or writers who read him, this thesis will reposition the author's late works by using a different conception of world literature. Stepping outside of Bernhard's more conventional German-speaking contexts and the parameters of his international reception will enable me to re-evaluate the author's late literary project and reconsider the aesthetic company in which his later works can be read. Departing from a common set of core concerns, I will juxtapose Bernhard's late works in this thesis with three Anglophone case studies, focusing on texts by Angela Carter, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and J. M. Coetzee. Each of these writers will provide contemporary points of reference for understanding how Bernhard treats the relationship between engaging with art and living with others outside of the work, and how readers and audience members learn from works of literature more generally. They will assist an appreciation of Bernhard's uses of fiction, metadrama, and self-writing, respectively, helping me to arrive at a more precise understanding of the relevance of Bernhard's late writings beyond his homeland. These writers are not the only international company, nor even the only Anglophone company, in which Bernhard can be productively situated.⁶ Nor have any of them engaged with Bernhard expressly in their writings. In this thesis, however, they will help me to look at Bernhard anew.

This study will argue that, by the 1980s, Bernhard is centrally concerned with the relationship between art and social living. I will look at how the experiences of Bernhard's prose and theatrical works can make available different ways of behaving towards others and oneself. This is a concern most prevalent in Bernhard's late works. The case studies of the reception of Bernhard's writing detailed in the following analysis will support my

⁶ I have examined another Anglophone context for Bernhard. See Byron Spring, 'The Stains of Cultural Inheritance: Thomas Bernhard and Philip Roth', in *Thomas Bernhard's Afterlives*, ed. by Stephen Dowden, Olaf Berwald and Gregor Thuswaldner (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 97-116.

finding of a tonal shift in Bernhard's works by the early 1980s, from the bleak worlds of his early fiction of the 1960s to the humanity and self-awareness I read in his later *oeuvre*. To bring my reading of Bernhard's late works more clearly into focus, I will take the author—a figure whom many regard as a solitary and misanthropic social critic—out of the battlements of his Ohlsdorf farmhouses. This introductory chapter will set out my rationale for adopting this comparative methodology. I will use a re-reading of Bernhard's play *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh. Ein deutscher Dichtertag um 1980* (1981) to propose another way of thinking about the idea of 'world' in Bernhard's works, and to explain why we need to look beyond Bernhard's own terms of reference and his conventional German-speaking contexts to understand the ongoing relevance of his late writings. But I will first examine the limitations of established approaches to Bernhard's works as world literature, and his own scathing treatment of the term in this play.

ii. Reading Bernhard as world literature

By the 1980s, Bernhard's texts were being published and translated far beyond his homeland. He plays on this late fame in his portrayal of the bestselling German author Moritz Meister in *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh. Ein deutscher Dichtertag um 1980* (1981), a scathing excoriation of the contemporary culture industry in which Meister has risen from humble beginnings as a 'Dachdeckerlehrling' to his recent election to the German *Akademie der Sprache und Dichtung* (W18, 144). I will begin with an analysis of Bernhard's treatment of *Weltliteratur* in this play to highlight a common reservation about using the epithet: the term's associations with the conformity of taste and desire of a globalised literature industry. I will then return to a central intertextual referent in this play, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, to consider more positive models of reading Bernhard as world literature. Existing approaches to the Austrian author's world status have greatly advanced understandings of his international followings; yet there is still a predominant impression of Bernhard in such

studies as a bleak and irreverent critic of contemporary society. To take Bernhard beyond his importance in 1980s Austria and to illuminate another side to the author's later works, I will argue, a new frame of reference is required.

In *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, Moritz Meister lives with his wife in a state-funded *Herrschaftsvilla* in the foothills of the Alps. He is surrounded by sycophantic representatives of contemporary German *Bildungsbürgertum*: a privileged live-in doctoral student named Fräulein Werdenfels, the daughter of a Heidelberg professor; a journalist from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; and a rapacious publisher based on Bernhard's own Frankfurt publisher, Siegfried Unseld. Meister overtly models himself on Goethe's writings, reading *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* every day at breakfast (159), conducting scientific experiments on bees (*ibid.*), and taking his wife on an annual 'klassische Bildungsreise' (139). Yet he does not live up to his idol. The bathetic presentation of Bernhard's protagonist becomes more sinister as his pseudo-intellectual monologues digress into anti-Semitic tirades (193-4). His recently-completed masterwork, a prose tetralogy, is revealed as the fictive biography of a Jewish businessman named Stieglitz who owned Meister's Alpine residence before its appropriation by the Austrian state during the *Nazizeit*. The pastoral idyll of Goethe's poem 'Wanderers Nachtlied' evoked by the play's title becomes the remote hideout from which Meister publishes his prejudice within the shroud of bestselling fiction.

Meister's publisher, keen to profit from this world-famous author, remains undeterred:

Wir werden ein bedeutendes Echo haben
auf Ihr Buch
wir werden es in einer großen Auflage herausbringen
weltweit
sagen wir in hunderttausend Exemplaren
vielleicht auch in hundertfünfzigtausend

soviele Nachfragen
niemals vorher hat es soviele Nachfragen gegeben (234-5)

Bernhard's line lengths encourage an actor to dwell on the adverbial 'weltweit', as the publisher's first-person pronoun desperately tries to affirm his close relationship with the author. The repetitions of 'soviele Nachfragen' mimic the 'bedeutendes Echo' that the publisher imagines for Meister's work; yet these words also contain another echo. An audience member may recognise the final lines of Bertolt Brecht's 'Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters'—'So viele Berichte | So viele Fragen'—and consider the history of the Jewish businessman that this tetralogy has also silenced.⁷ Modifying the 'Fragen' of Brecht's poem into 'Nachfragen' exemplifies the publisher's obsession with commercial success. Meister is unusually silent. After the publisher's statement of commercial intent, Meister briefly leaves him on stage without reply (235), signalling the fate of his work at the hands of his publisher's commercial machinations. The publisher then desperately vies for Meister's masterwork, convinced of his potential profits and flaunting the internationalism of his existing clientele: 'Wir haben jetzt einige großartige lateinamerikanische | Autoren im Programm | Alles Weltliteratur das Beste das es heute gibt' (239).

The publisher's use of the term *Weltliteratur* in *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* paints a bleak picture of the literature industry of the 1980s. He evokes the modern globalised print culture industry, the lucrative acquisition of translation rights and the conformity of taste and desire in international bestsellers. The publisher's Latin American authors are not referred to by name, but simply referenced as a literary vogue. It is this sense of the term with which Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler engages in his own essay on Bernhard and *Weltliteratur*. Schmidt-Dengler associates the term with Bernhard as a marker of his literary

⁷ Bertolt Brecht, 'Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters', in *Ausgewählte Werke in sechs Bänden* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), III: *Gedichte I*, p. 293.

quality, dismissing any possibility that Bernhard could belong to such a catalogue of global fiction: ‘Damit wird eindeutig einer Rezeption einer sublimen Literatur das Wort geredet, weniger einer massenhaften Verbreitung von Texten, die überall gelesen und verstanden werden können’.⁸ He considers the latter a peculiarly Anglo-Saxon way of thinking, stating that it is the relatively limited coterie of Bernhard’s Anglophone admirers who argue most vociferously for his place in global canons.⁹ To Schmidt-Dengler, Bernhard’s texts are too complex to foster universal appeal, but that is by no means a bad thing:

[Bernhards] Texte erweisen sich dort als konvertibel, wo auch die Möglichkeit der Antwort gibt. Es sind die kleinen Erlebnisse, denen ich hier eher trauen möchte als den großen Rufen, die den Autor für die Weltliteratur reklamieren wollen.¹⁰

Schmidt-Dengler explores examples of such responses across various European countries, emphasising how such individual accounts of cultural exchange can enrich an impression of Bernhard’s local significance. This is a more positive model of reading Bernhard as world literature, looking at the specific cross-cultural conversations that Bernhard’s works have inspired. Moritz Meister’s literary idol can assist me to consider this approach further.

The term *Weltliteratur* is frequently traced back to its appearance in the record of a conversation between Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and his secretary Johann Peter Eckermann over dinner on 31 January 1827. Goethe is reported to have said: ‘National-Literatur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit’.¹¹ Even if Goethe did not actually use the term in this conversation, retrospectively reconstructed in

⁸ Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, ‘Thomas Bernhards Weltliteratur. Was ist die Welt in Bernhards Literatur?’, *Cultura tedesca*, 32 (2007), 191-203 (p. 200).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹¹ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *FA*, xxxix, ed. by Christoph Michel (1999), pp. 224-5.

Eckermann's memory, he does so elsewhere.¹² Writing on Alexander Duval's historical drama *Le Tasse* in 1827, a work modelled on Goethe's *Torquato Tasso* (1790), he states: 'es bilde sich eine allgemeine Weltliteratur, worin uns Deutschen eine ehrenvolle Rolle vorbehalten ist'.¹³ In both examples, the existence of *Weltliteratur* does not diminish the significance of national traditions. While Goethe's references during the conversation with Eckermann range widely from Chinese verse romance to the comparatively indecent songs of Pierre-Jean de Béranger, he considers all these works in their national contexts. None of his examples, Goethe states, should be raised to 'etwas Musterhaftem': ancient Greek literature is his standard of perfection.¹⁴ The project of *Weltliteratur* does not homogenise, but instead thrives on the interaction of national differences. David Damrosch's reflections on Goethe can help us consider the application of this term to Bernhard.

In *How to Read World Literature* (2018), Damrosch associates Goethe with two ways of thinking about world literature.¹⁵ The first consists in Goethe's production of his works. Goethe, Damrosch states, was a cosmopolitan writer, infusing his work 'with ideas and strategies drawn from a host of classical and modern European authors'.¹⁶ Schmidt-Dengler reflects on Bernhard's own references to modern European authors and philosophers as evidence of his world status: 'Denn aus [Bernhards] Werken kann sehr wohl ein anspruchsvoller Kanon konstruiert werden, der es nahe legt, dass er sich mit ihnen auf gleicher Augenhöhe befindet'.¹⁷ Yet as he and other critics recognise, and as I will discuss

¹² Ritchie Robertson, 'Weltliteratur from Voltaire to Goethe', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 12.2 (2015), 163-81 (p. 163).

¹³ Goethe, 'Le Tasse', in *FA*, xxii: *Ästhetische Schriften 1824-1832: Über Kunst und Altertum V-VI*, ed. by Anne Bohnenkamp (1999), pp. 353-7 (p. 356).

¹⁴ Goethe, *FA*, xxxix, p. 225.

¹⁵ David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature*, 2nd edn (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Schmidt-Dengler, p. 201.

further in section (iv) below, the extent to which Bernhard's literary production engages in detail with such intertextual references is debatable. Where the conversations recorded by Johann Peter Eckermann detail Goethe's reading of Chinese verse romance and the works of de Béranger, among many other examples of Goethe's extensive reading, I will discuss various instances in this thesis where Bernhard's interpretations of writers are not to be taken at face value.

The second way in which Goethe can help us approach world literature is through his eagerness to be read abroad and to read reviews of his works by foreign as well as local reviewers. Damrosch's earlier volume, *What is World Literature?* (2003), examines this process of circulation beyond a text's linguistic and cultural point of origin. He defines world literature not as a finite canon of texts but instead as 'a mode of circulation and reading', his case studies exemplifying how works take on a new life in new cultural contexts.¹⁸ As Goethe acknowledged in his review of *Le Tasse*, too, misappropriation by a foreign culture can be just as instructive, revealing how a culture's norms and needs shape the selection of works that enter it as world literature, as well as the processes of translation, marketing, and reading that condition the relationships between such works and existing national canons. This theoretical backdrop, a far cry from the exploitative cultural machinery that Bernhard caricatures in *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, will help me to consider one approach to Bernhard's international status.

Scholarship has already explored the international circulation of Bernhard's works. Wolfram Bayer's volume *Kontinent Bernhard* (1995) examines various ways in which European readers have made Bernhard their own. Carlos Fortea, for example, discusses the Austrian author's reputation in Spain following the publication of his autobiographical

¹⁸ Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 3.

accounts of his Catholic upbringing under a right-wing dictatorship.¹⁹ After the bleakness of earlier texts, such as Miguel Sáenz' Spanish translation of Bernhard's novel *Verstörung* (1967), Bernhard's autobiographical writings are considered a turning point. Fortea cites Spanish reviewers who note Bernhard's honesty and integrity in these works: 'das Setzen auf die Moral und die Wahrhaftigkeit'.²⁰ He finds a different atmosphere in Bernhard's later prose, in which his diatribes and dissent do not overtly adhere to any distinct political direction: 'er transzendiert alle Ideologien in einer Aussage, die, obwohl anklagend, keine Anklage ist'.²¹ Accounts of the reception of Bernhard's prose texts in France evidence the same turning point in his *oeuvre*. Claude Porcell describes the Bernhard of the 1960s as a 'Schriftsteller der Hoffnungslosigkeit' but, following the breakthrough of Bernhard's accounts of his childhood, published in French in the early 1980s, he was seen as far more human: 'der Nörgler als Humanist'.²² In France in the late 1980s, Bernhard was better known for his plays. Indeed, there were more performances of Bernhard's plays in France from 1985 to 1991 than of those of any of his German-speaking contemporaries.²³ Yet critical assessments of his theatre rarely acknowledge the same human turn, noting instead the author's rage against his countrymen, and the constant sense of revolt through which Bernhard apparently confronted the vanity of his existence.²⁴

Sandra Richter's *Weltgeschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (2017) has furthered scholarship on Bernhard's international reception, analysing critical responses to

¹⁹ Carlos Fortea, 'Das beste Schriftsteller des spanischen Realismus: Thomas Bernhard in Spanien', in *Kontinent Bernhard*, ed. by Bayer, pp. 319-37 (pp. 325-7).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 327.

²² Claude Porcell, 'Die Verklärung des heiligen Bernhard: Zur Rezeption der Erzählprosa in Frankreich', in *Kontinent-Bernhard*, ed. by Bayer, pp. 241-68 (p. 258).

²³ Ute Weinmann, *Thomas Bernhard, L'Autriche et La France: Histoire d'une réception littéraire* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), pp. 203-4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

Bernhard in Europe and the Anglophone world. Availing herself of correspondence between Bernhard and his Frankfurt publisher Siegfried Unseld made available since Bayer's study, she also highlights the author's exacting attention to his success and the pressure he put on his beleaguered publisher to foster this international image.²⁵ Her study elucidates Bernhard's role in creating the predominant impression of the author in these volumes as an irreverent social critic calling out the ills of his post-war society, a voice of national dissent and public impudence. She looks at the cult reception of Bernhard in France as a case in point: 'seine literarische Lebenseinstellung, seine Misogynie und seinen Nihilismus, seine Freude an schnellen Autos und am momentanen Genuss', which inspired a cult of devotees to live with the same public irreverence—or, as they called it, '*en bernhardie*'.²⁶

Despite acknowledging an apparent shift to a lighter humour in Bernhard's later prose, these studies return to familiar impressions of the Austrian author. He frequently appears as an irreverent pessimist aware of his controversies in the public arena and seeing little hope for his fallen Austrian culture. This study will bring out another side of his later writings. I will explore the humanity and self-awareness of Bernhard's prose and dramatic works in the 1980s, his interest in interpersonal relationships, and his treatment of human vulnerability—elements of his *oeuvre* rarely visible in reception histories charting the international echoes of his misanthropic spleen. By moving beyond more conventional German-speaking contexts for understanding the author and resituating him instead within a constructed framework of contemporary Anglophone writers, I aim to show the broader relevance of his late literary project.

²⁵ Sandra Richter, *Eine Weltgeschichte der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (München: C. Bertelsmann, 2017), p. 426.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 427.

The Anglophone world, as the above studies acknowledge, is a significant exception to Bernhard's international popularity. Richter evidences enthusiasm for Bernhard in the United States, while in the United Kingdom Bernhard remains 'ein Geheimtipp einer marginalisierten Kaste von *academics*'.²⁷ In a contribution to Bayer's volume focusing on Bernhard's dramas, Della Couling advances two explanations for this.²⁸ The first is the purported unfamiliarity of Anglophone readers with foreign texts, although, as J. J. Long has stated, the comparative popularity of writers such as Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett in the Anglophone world somewhat undermines this assertion.²⁹ Her second reason is the relative unavailability of Bernhard's works in translation.³⁰ At the time of Couling's article, few of Bernhard's works existed in translation beyond his autobiographical writings, his major prose fictions, and three plays.³¹ While more of Bernhard's works are now available in English, Couling raises the question of whether translation practices can explain the popularity of Bernhard in some countries instead of others. I will now turn to the question of translation, which is undoubtedly a valuable line of enquiry for appreciating Bernhard's linguistic subtlety. A brief example from Bernhard's prose text *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung* (1984), however, will show how comparisons of translations of his works are yet to offer the understanding of Bernhard I am advancing in this thesis.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 428. See also Donald G Daviau, 'The Reception of Thomas Bernhard in the United States', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 21 (1988), 243-76.

²⁸ Della Couling, 'Champagner mit einer Prise Strychnin : Bernhards Theaterstücke in England', in *Kontinent Bernhard*, ed. by Bayer, pp. 423-9 (p. 429)

²⁹ J. J. Long, 'Rezeption in den englisch-sprachigen Ländern', *Bernhard-Handbuch*, ed. by Mittermayer and Huber, pp. 500-4 (p. 502).

³⁰ Couling, p. 427.

³¹ *Ibid.*

iii. Bernhard in translation

Translation is central to the cosmopolitan project of intercultural exchange envisaged by Goethe. In his letter to Thomas Carlyle of 20 July 1827, Goethe employs an extended metaphor of the marketplace to describe a vision of international literary interaction with the German language at its centre, heralding the vocation of the translator as ‘eins der wichtigsten und würdigsten Geschäfte in dem allgemeinen Weltwesen’.³² In the first edition of *West-östliche Divan* (1819), Goethe discusses three ‘Epochen’ of translation.³³ The first involves acquainting the translator with the foreign text in their own terms. In the second, the translator engages with foreign ideas via the author’s terms of reference. In the third, which Goethe considers optimal, the translator creates a text that is as close to the original in form and content as possible. But even this translation cannot replace the original. Goethe’s play on the German ‘anstelle’ makes this clear: ‘so daß eins nicht anstelle des andern, sondern *an der Stelle* des andern gelten solle’.³⁴ Goethe imagines these three modes of translation working together to facilitate forms of mutual understanding and intellectual dialogue across nations: ‘so ist den zuletzt der ganze Zirkel abgeschlossen, in welchem sich die Annäherung des Fremden und Einheimischen, des Bekannten und Unbekannten bewegt’.³⁵

In this project of translation, Bernhard’s style offers a fascinating challenge. The late works discussed in this thesis evidence a highly distinctive style of comic exaggerations, circling repetitions, hypotactic digressions, and a mini-lexicon of familiar locutions. Gitta Honegger, the Austrian-born translator of Bernhard’s dramas into English, has examined

³² Goethe, letter to Thomas Carlyle, 20 July 1827, in *FA*, XXXVII.1: *Die letzten Jahre: Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche von 1823 bis zu Goethes Tod*, ed. by Horst Fleig (1993), pp. 496-9 (p. 498).

³³ Goethe, *FA*, III.1: *West-östliche Divan*, ed. by Hendrik Birus (1994), p. 280.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

examples of such formulations. These include ‘Lebensmensch’, a term referring to his supportive formative bond with his companion Hedwig Stavianiček, and ‘naturgemäß’, an archaic term revived by Bernhard that, Honegger explains, ‘puts the stylist’s ironic spin on our understanding and usage of the terms “nature” and “naturally”’.³⁶ There are many others—‘widerwärtig’, ‘ekelerregend’, ‘abstoßend’, ‘fortwährend’—that acquire particular force in their repetitions through Bernhard’s rants on his homeland and political and cultural institutions in published fictions, memoirs, open letters, interviews, and public speeches. His works are a prime example of a core ‘problem’ that the British author and longstanding admirer of Bernhard, Tim Parks, sees in translating literary style.³⁷ Using the classroom example of translating D. H. Lawrence into Italian, Parks states that ‘the intention of a work of literature, we might say, is to be found in the nature of difference between itself and other literary texts’.³⁸ Such texts may seem linguistically anomalous from the ways in which they deviate from other texts; yet this adds to the benefit of translation as a form of close reading. His practical examples from D. H. Lawrence’s novels reveal how such ‘problems’ frequently heighten our appreciation of the richness of the original, opening networks of meaning that can lead to an expansive transformation of what is translated.³⁹

Honegger offers an instructive example of this from Bernhard’s prose text *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung* (1984). She compares McIntock’s translation of *Woodcutters* favourably to Ewald Osers’ earlier translation, *Cutting Wood*; however, the contrast between these translators’ renderings of a three-word refrain at the climax to *Holzfällen*—

³⁶ Gitta Honegger, ‘Language Speaks. Anglo-Bernhard: Thomas Bernhard in Translation’, in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. by Matthias Konzett (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001), pp. 169-85 (pp. 180-1).

³⁷ Tim Parks, *Translating Style: The English Modernists and their Italian Translations* (London: Cassell, 1998), p. 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12. See Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature*, p. 84.

‘Wald, Hochwald, Holzfällen’—opens several layers of meaning in the text. Having arrived late to an artistic dinner held in Vienna’s *Gentzgasse*, a *Burgtheater* actor repeats this refrain throughout the evening, but its meaning only becomes apparent to the narrator later in the meal. For Honegger, Ewald Osers’ translation of ‘forest, tall forest, cutting timber’ is literally correct, capturing the senses of growth and the creative transformation of the old in Bernhard’s original, but is ultimately ‘tone-deaf’.⁴⁰ McLintock’s ‘forest, virgin forest, the life of a woodcutter’ sounds better, but exchanges the titular allusion to cutting timber for the actor’s idealisation of the simple life. ‘The book itself can be considered a product of cutting timber’, Honegger states: ‘Cutting down his generation of artists, they yield the stuff for Bernhard’s narrative’.⁴¹ McLintock, however, emphasises another aspect of the text: the protagonist’s desire to escape the stifling sociality of the artistic dinner in Vienna’s *Gentzgasse*. Honegger’s comparison does not bemoan what is lost in translation but instead shows how language transforms his narrators: ‘All of them painfully experience themselves as strangers in their country. That sense of alienation takes on a different meaning in translation’.⁴²

The last point in Honegger’s perceptive comparison suggests that the alienation of Bernhard’s protagonists will always seem different outside of the author’s native register. This sense of difference has been considered in comparative theory and is one reservation to certain approaches to world literature as a field of study. In *Against World Literature. On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013), Emily Apter states that the expansive aspirations of certain world literary projects tend to ignore so-called ‘untranslatables’, a term coined by the philosopher Barbara Cassin to describe concepts that resist straightforward equivalence

⁴⁰ Honegger, p. 176.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

from one linguistic setting to another.⁴³ These ‘untranslatables’ in the original language of a literary work prevent such works from being subsumed into what she terms ‘a relatively intractable literary monoculture that travels through the world absorbing difference’.⁴⁴ This is precisely the literary monoculture that the entrepreneurial publisher in *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* is actively involved in creating, convinced that Moritz Meister’s tetralogy will sell just as well as his Latin American authors. However, misunderstanding and misinterpretation can take place in the same language as well as across languages and, as Goethe acknowledges in his discussion of *Le Tasse*, differing readings can also be productive.

The differing translations in Honegger’s comparison are certainly productive, highlighting two ways of understanding *Holzfällen*. In Osers’ translation, the narrator is hollowing out the pretensions of his extra-textual targets in exaggerated acts of social critique; in McLintock’s translation, the refrain resonates with the narrator’s desire to shun the superficial artistic dinner in which he reluctantly finds himself and to retreat to rustic simplicity. Later, in Chapter Two, my comparative analysis of *Holzfällen* will propose another reading of the text and this refrain. I will argue that Bernhard’s narrator in *Holzfällen*, for all of his social critiques and his desire to escape the artistic dinner, learns to acknowledge the tragedy of an innocent life taken too soon and, before it is too late, manages to see the wood for the trees in respect of his own flawed behaviours. Focusing on differences between translations of Bernhard’s text valuably enhances an appreciation of the stylistic subtlety with which the author criticises the society of his time and place, but it has not furthered an insight into the humanity and self-awareness of Bernhard’s later works

⁴³ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

on which this thesis will concentrate. Much like the refrain in *Holzfällen*, these elements in Bernhard's writings have been available all along; but a different methodology is needed to draw attention to their importance.

Translation practices are undeniably an important topic in considering Bernhard's works as world literature. Decisions to translate some of Bernhard's works instead of others can certainly influence the impressions of Bernhard circulating beyond his native country. *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* is a case in point: Bernhard's biting caricature of the literature industry and contemporary academia—whether the intrusive flash photographs taken by the doctoral student Fräulein Werdenfels that suggest the superficiality of her scholarly enquiry, or the journalist's modish yet ungrounded comparisons between Meister's masterwork and the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard (W18, 230)—is still unavailable to Anglophone audiences. This thesis, however, seeks to understand a different side of Bernhard's late works: a concern with how individuals live with one another, and how art in his later works can make available different ways of doing so. Discussions of translations of Bernhard's prose have not brought me closer to this understanding. Pursuing the path of reading Bernhard as world literature signposted outside his house at Ohlsdorf has instead led me back to common critical impressions of the author as a bleak misanthrope using his literary platform to cut the political establishment and his extra-textual targets down to size. I will therefore turn to other ways of considering Bernhard's status as a world author: the allusiveness of his works themselves, and their influence on subsequent writers.

iv. Bernhard's literary universe

Earlier in this introduction, I cited David Damrosch's assessment of Goethe as a world author who includes ideas and strategies in his writings from a range of international artists. Bernhard is known for nominal references to various canonical authors and philosophers; yet the degree of attention warranted by such allusions is contested. It is questionable

whether they can be taken as evidence of Bernhard's extensive engagement with the figures he cites. J. J. Long, furthermore, has warned against the critical practice of taking decontextualised references in Bernhard's works to show how his writings 'correspond or, occasionally, fail to correspond to the thought of an eclectic range of thinkers'.⁴⁵ In *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, Bernhard even satirises this practice of namedropping:

Eluard Mallarmé Baudelaire Rimbaud
Goethe Novalis in gewissem Sinne Heine natürlich
Hermann Hesse als unbedingt notwendige Lektüre
Vielleicht darf ich auch noch Mörike erwähnen
die Droste mit Sicherheit die Droste sagt Stieglitz (204)

This passage highlights the naivety of Meister's dotting on-stage audience in pursuing such leads. His doctoral student Fräulein Werdenfels and the journalist from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* listen to the writer's statements attentively, but an audience can see that this is a parody of intellectual discourse. These references do not confirm the breadth of Moritz Meister's reading, nor do such allusions themselves provide a reliable indication of what Bernhard himself read.

Bernhard's literary treatment of his own reading is characteristically playful. In his third volume of autobiography, *Der Atem. Eine Entscheidung* (1978), Bernhard stages the reading of his youth during his convalescence from lung disease in Großmain:

In der ersten ein noch mit keinerlei, dann nach den ersten Tagen mit aus Salzburg mitgebrachter, gewünschter Lektüre, wie ich mich erinnere, habe ich in Großmain angefangen, mir die mir bis dahin verschlossene sogenannte Weltliteratur zu öffnen, ich [...] hatte von den Meinigen nur gewünscht, daß sie mir jene Bücher aus dem Bücherkasten meines Großvaters nach Großmain herausbringen sollten, von welchen ich wußte, daß sie im Leben meines Großvaters von allererster Bedeutung gewesen waren (W10, 298-9).

⁴⁵ J. J. Long, *The Novels of Thomas Bernhard: Form and its Function* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), p. 6.

Bernhard's 'sogenannt' epitomises his distaste towards ascriptions of literary value such as *Weltliteratur*. It is much more important to the young Bernhard in this autobiographical volume that he reads the same works as his beloved late grandfather, the Viennese author Johannes Freumbichler. I will discuss this relationship further in Chapter Four, but the importance of Bernhard's staging of his first encounter with world literature is notable for its lack of specificity. It does not mention the books he read as an adolescent, but simply namedrops various authors: Shakespeare, Stifter, Cervantes, and Lenau (299). The clause 'wie ich mich erinnere' signals doubt over this memory, retrospectively constructed in his autobiography. At the same time, these references are hardly a detailed key to Bernhard's ideas. He is sceptical towards the authority of anyone other than his grandfather. While Bernhard is known to have engaged with certain writers in detail, a reader may be duly sceptical of the author's overt namedropping in his published works.

Existing scholarship on Bernhard contains numerous accounts of the author's library, which was held at the *Thomas Bernhard-Archiv* in Gmunden until its closure for digitisation of the author's manuscripts in 2015. Bernhard's bibliographic inventory contains various authors whose names reappear in his works: Montaigne, Stifter, and even the left-wing Russian writer and activist Peter Kropotkin, much admired by his anarchist grandfather.⁴⁶ However, accounts of the library do not portray Bernhard as the same voracious reader that appears in his caricature of Moritz Meister. Roland Pohl describes the author as a 'bibliomane[r] Nicht-Leser', highlighting that much of his library is comprised of 'Belegexemplare', or 'die Schwarten des Landwirts Bernhard'.⁴⁷ He reveals Bernhard as a reader of monographs on certain authors, taking ideas and motifs for his own purposes, such

⁴⁶ Roland Pohl, 'Der Realitätssturz von Oberrathal: Über einen bibliomanen Nicht-Leser als Verweigerer symbolischer Ordnungen', in *Thomas Bernhard. Hab & Gut*, ed. by Heller, pp. 68-75 (p. 71)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

as the references to towers that Bernhard annotates in an illustrated *Rowohlt* monograph on Montaigne.⁴⁸ Bernhard's *Wittgensteins Neffe* (1982), which I discuss in Chapter Four, has been read to play on Denis Diderot's *Le neveu de Rameau* (1805); yet Bernhard is not known to have engaged in detail with Diderot's text. Instead, scholars have found an annotated excerpt from Goethe's translation of the text cited in a copy of Georg Holmsten's *Rowohlt* introduction to Voltaire.⁴⁹ Fatima Naqvi's scholarship on Bernhard's reading of Novalis uncovers a slim 1956 volume in Bernhard's library in which the Germanist Walter Rehm collates excerpts from Novalis' writings, with Bernhard's ballpoint pen marking what Naqvi describes as 'the less noteworthy reflections in the compendium'.⁵⁰ While Bernhard's overt laconism towards 'sogenannte Weltliteratur' in *Der Atem* above appears exaggerated, these critical enquiries hardly confirm whether Bernhard engaged extensively with the writings of the artists that he cites. In deciding the intertextual parameters for a reading of Bernhard's works, we can do better than to take Bernhard at his word.

Readers seeking to grasp Bernhard's importance as world literature can also look to the writers who read him, taking his bleak depictions of modern society and his unmistakable style as a model for their own creative production. This is the final understanding of world literature to which the sign in Ohlsdorf refers, and it is also a well-trodden path in recent criticism. Manfred Mittermayer's research has comprehensively charted writers whose works bear traces of Bernhard in the German-speaking world, Europe, the United States, and Latin America.⁵¹ The *Bernhard-Handbuch* (2018) edited by

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Thomas Bernhard, *W13*, p. 350. The excerpt annotated by Bernhard is in Georg Holmsten, *Voltaire* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1974), p. 135.

⁵⁰ Fatima Naqvi, *How We Learn Where We Live: Thomas Bernhard, Architecture, and Bildung* (Illinois, Northwestern University Press), Kindle edition. Loc. 2150.

⁵¹ Manfred Mittermayer, 'Antworten auf Thomas Bernhard aus der internationalen Literatur', *Cultura tedesca*, 32 (Gennaio-Giugno 2007), 159-79.

Mittermayer and Martin Huber discusses Bernhard's reception and influence by region. The recent volume *Thomas Bernhard's Afterlives* (2020), edited by Stephen Dowden, Olaf Berwald and Gregor Thuswaldner, also provides a valuable discussion of an array of writers in Europe and the Anglophone world inspired to engage with Bernhard's works in their own literary outputs. In his introduction to the volume, Stephen Dowden describes the Austrian author as part of a tradition of cosmopolitan modern writers whose foremost European figures are Franz Kafka, Flannery O'Connor, and Samuel Beckett. These writers are linked, on the one hand, by 'the international impact of their seemingly small ambition' and, on the other, a common renunciation of all hope while committing themselves to keep on writing until the bitter end.⁵² Dowden characterises Bernhard convincingly as a writer who 'intended to give offense'.⁵³ He asserts that Bernhard's spirit of destruction and ruin is at the heart of his literary afterlives, as is the 'powerful, relentless and compelling relationship of his fiction and drama to the true truth'.⁵⁴ The volume is a significant contribution to understanding the intertextual conversations sparked by Bernhard's spirit. Yet he also recognises that Bernhard's pessimism and spite are not universal.

Dowden states that Bernhard is not cynical about kindness and love. In fact, these are recurrent themes in his later works. Discussing Walter Benjamin's reflections on civilisation and barbarism, he states: 'Bernhard's writing recognises itself as being embedded in the unresolved and unresolvable struggle to reconcile the two, and it implicates the reader in that struggle too'.⁵⁵ The present thesis aims to build on this insight, drawing out Bernhard's attention in his later works—his dramas as well as his prose writings—to

⁵² Stephen Dowden, 'Introduction: The Master of Understatement, or Remembering Schermaier', in *Thomas Bernhard's Afterlives*, ed. by Dowden, Berwald, and Thuswaldner, pp. 1-21 (p. 2).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

ways of living together within the desolate societies that he depicts, as well as the devices across his genres of writing through which he implicates his readers and audiences in this ‘struggle’. Bernhard can undoubtedly be bleak, but there is a further awareness of human relationships and vulnerability in his later works that warrants critical attention. Only by stepping beyond Bernhard’s more conventional intertextual reference points, though, can this side of his writings be brought more clearly into view.

There are instructive examples of readings of Bernhard’s works that have ventured beyond such points of reference. One is the creative response to Bernhard by Geoff Dyer, whose 1997 novel *Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D. H. Lawrence* is at once an imitation of Bernhard, a reading of his works, and a comparative engagement with his writings alongside the eponymous English author. The work presents a situation that, as I will show in this thesis, is quintessentially Bernhardian: a male academic failing to write a study. Dyer’s narrator fails to write on D. H. Lawrence, visiting in vain the landmarks and residences of the author’s life to research his subject. The text contains various affinities with Bernhard’s looping and repetitive tirades, and his irreverence towards academic enquiry, but Dyer also finds unexpected affinities between Bernhard and Lawrence. For Dyer, Bernhard’s implacable ire resonates with the tone of D. H. Lawrence’s letters, which he states are less about book-writing than book-keeping:

Lawrence’s letters—and Larkin’s too, perhaps—place him in the European tradition of the literature of neurasthenia, of anxiety, fretting, complaint. This tradition—more accurately, this *strain*—culminates in Thomas Bernhard, the Austrian writer who dedicated book after book to an exhaustive and exhausting catalogue of what Lawrence, writing (appropriately enough) from Austria, termed ‘the life-exhaustion feeling’.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage. In the Shadow of D. H. Lawrence* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), p. 162.

Had Bernhard's correspondence with his Frankfurt publisher Siegfried Unseld, in which Bernhard complains frequently regarding the sales of his works and the level of his stipends, been available in the 1990s, it would only have affirmed Dyer's connection.⁵⁷ Dyer's relevance to my approach to Bernhard is that he goes beyond the referential markers of Bernhard's own writings and of those who read him. Discussing John Carey's analysis of Nietzsche's influence on Lawrence, which the narrator calls an 'appalling travesty', he states: 'this, if you like, is first order influence and I'm not concerned with it here'.⁵⁸ Nor, for that matter, am I.

This thesis will argue for a more positive model of literary interrelation, using a set of concerns that Bernhard shares with three contemporary Anglophone writers to illuminate his relevance beyond the German-speaking cultural contexts in which he is most commonly situated. The constructed juxtapositions of this thesis are each intended to offer ways of rethinking the literary worlds to which Bernhard's late works belong. My intertextual frameworks will each bring out ways in which Bernhard implicates his readers and audiences in thinking about the potentials of art, and the relationship between experiencing his prose and theatrical works and living with others in the societies he depicts. Bernhard's exaggerated and incendiary tirades on his homeland and its cultural institutions are a key part of his writings, but there is more to understanding his late works than an exclusive focus on his literary scandals. His works return to consider more positive ways of behaving towards others and oneself within his portrayals of stifling modern sociality—whether or not his ranting and raging protagonists are in a position to see it. Indeed, my reading of Bernhard's late works in this thesis partly aims to help readers to see how Bernhard

⁵⁷ *Thomas Bernhard und Siegfried Unseld: Der Briefwechsel*, ed. by Raimund Fellingner, Martin Huber and Julia Ketterer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2011).

⁵⁸ Dyer, p. 170.

encourages his readers and audiences to step back from his pervasive pessimistic ranting and perceive broader frameworks of interpersonal interaction in which they are also implicated. Before explaining the common set of themes that provides the basis for my comparisons in more detail, I will first examine a recent reading of Bernhard that draws out elements of the self-awareness in Bernhard's writings that I am proposing.

Within a broader reflection on what creates the 'tug of connection' with a character in a novel or a film, Rita Felski discusses the unique experience of an encounter with the prose of Thomas Bernhard as a case study for rethinking modes of identification.⁵⁹ She comments on Bernhard's techniques in his prose writings of repetitive digressions, his obsessive and exaggerated diatribes on a variety of subjects and figures: 'sound takes precedence over sense; selfhood sags and sways under the torrential force of words gone wild; the reader is bludgeoned by repetition heaped on repetition, by a flood of verbal tics and manic twitches'.⁶⁰ Even for a reader who is not predisposed to such negativity, she states, this temperament can still bring a kind of cathartic relief. Felski then makes a central observation that perhaps a reader is not meant to take these sweeping criticisms at face value:

To rave about the stupidity and self-righteousness of others is inevitably to drive home one's own stupidity and self-righteousness. The manic energy of Bernhard's prose is exhilarating yet also estranging; the mirror it offers does not flatter. In recognising my rage against idiocy, I am confronted by the idiocy of my own rage.⁶¹

In many of the critical readings discussed in this thesis, the biting invectives of Bernhard's speakers are taken at their word as scathing critiques of a homeland beyond all hope. In

⁵⁹ Rita Felski, 'Identifying with Characters', in *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2019), ed. by Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski and Toril Moi, pp. 77-126 (p. 77).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Felski's analysis, the experience of such tirades opens an awareness of one's own shortcomings. Identification with Bernhard's writings can take place against one's better judgement. She perceives a self-awareness to Bernhard's prose that, if one is trapped in the cognitive grip of the tirades voiced by the characters of his fictional works and infected by their familiar formulae, it is entirely possible to miss.

I read Felski's engagement with Bernhard as an illuminating case study of how Bernhard's texts do not simply infect his readers and audiences through his well-expressed negativity but also prompt reflection on one's own way of living. In this thesis, I will advance an understanding of Bernhard's late works as centrally concerned with what cultural acts such as reading fiction or going to the theatre can do for living with others outside of the work. In Bernhard's prose and dramatic works of the 1980s, many of which stage the author's most scandalous diatribes, I will argue, Bernhard also examines interpersonal relationships and human shortcomings to explore ways of using and learning from art. Understanding these elements of Bernhard's late writings can help to offer a new perspective on the wider questions I am considering in this thesis: the literary worlds in which Bernhard's later works can be read, and what it means to read Bernhard outside of 1980s Vienna and the German-speaking literary company with whom he is commonly associated. Existing conceptions of Bernhard as world literature, signposted outside the author's farmhouses in Ohlsdorf, have provided limited assistance in approaching these questions. I will take a different path. I will return to and re-purpose a familiar concept of comparative theory established by Erich Auerbach, the 'Ansatzpunkt', to reposition Bernhard's late prose and dramatic works in a broader intertextual network.

v. Repositioning Bernhard

Auerbach's essay 'Philologie der Weltliteratur' (1952) approaches the question of how adequately to present the material that constitutes *Weltliteratur* in a world which is no longer

narrowly defined by the Western canon. The task of the scholar, for Auerbach, involves more and more specialisation to learn the conditions under which this material developed; at the same time, however, Auerbach acknowledges that limiting oneself to a single field of specialisation is increasingly unsatisfactory. Auerbach responds to the question of how to synthesise such material via his concept of the ‘Ansatzpunkt’. He states that there always needs to be a point of departure for a comparative project, but this point of departure can start as personal intuition: ‘Schon die Auffindung des Ansatzpunktes [...] ist Intuition; die Ausführung ist Gestaltung, sie muß einheitlich und suggestiv sein, wenn sie erzielen soll, was hier von ihr erwartet wird’.⁶² This ‘Ansatzpunkt’ should be a concrete and comprehensible set of phenomena with ramifications beyond the defined area that they occupy.⁶³ There can be various potential points of departure, whether a semantic interpretation or a rhetorical trope, but a good point of departure is ‘genau und gegenständlich’.⁶⁴ When found, such scholarly projects can facilitate Auerbach’s ideal to make individuals conscious of themselves in a shared history beyond the bounds of the nation.⁶⁵

This study analyses Bernhard beyond the bounds of his national context, common German-speaking points of comparison, and conventional critical orthodoxies by situating him alongside Anglophone authors sharing a common concern: the relationship between their art and ways of living with others in the modern world. This will be my ‘Ansatzpunkt’. These intertexts, furthermore, offer specific generic and stylistic parallels with Bernhard’s works that will help to resituate his late writings within novel frames of reference. These

⁶² Erich Auerbach, ‘Philologie der Weltliteratur’, in *Philologie der Weltliteratur. Sechs Versuche über Wirklichkeitswahrnehmung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992), pp. 83-96 (p. 91).

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

texts are Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984); Timberlake Wertenbaker's play *Our Country's Good* (1988); and J. M. Coetzee's memoirs and metafiction *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). They will illuminate how Bernhard approaches the uses of his fictions, the potentials of his theatrical writings, and the authority of his narrating voices, respectively. Together, these authors will enable me to articulate the kinds of participation that Bernhard's later works make available for his readers and audiences, and his reflections on the consequences of such participation for living with others in society outside of art. This is an important theme for the examples of Bernhard's late *oeuvre* discussed in this thesis, all of which examine ways of participating in culture. Bernhard frequently presents the archetype of an ageing academic or artist confronting a life-defining academic undertaking, or going to Viennese theatres, art galleries, or concert halls. Reading these characters alongside Carter, Wertenbaker, and Coetzee will help to take these aesthetic reflections beyond 1980s Vienna, disclosing what Bernhard's late works still have to say about art and modern living.

The theme of participating in culture is also central to the play to which I have referred repeatedly in this introductory chapter, *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*. I will now turn back to the play for the last time to offer a new reading of its final scene. This interpretation will set out my intuition, to use Auerbach's term, of how readers and audiences can participate in and learn from Bernhard's late works. I will argue that the staging of the final scene to this play can reveal the plurality of worlds in Bernhard's works: possibilities of living differently in modern culture beyond the flawed fictional cosmos that Bernhard creates on stage, as well as beyond the social realities of his audiences outside of the theatre. This reading will lead to an alternative understanding of what it could mean to read Bernhard as world literature, and the concept of 'world' in Bernhard more generally, before I set out how the intertextual comparisons of this chapter build on this interpretation.

vi. Bernhard's worlds

A contemporary audience may have been all too familiar with the career of the fictional character Moritz Meister. In November 1979, Bernhard had resigned from the German *Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung* following the election of Walter Scheel, the former president of West Germany whose membership of the Nazi party during the years of the Third Reich was well-known. Bernhard attacked this election in a *Leserbrief* of the same year. After denouncing the hypocrisy of the institution, he uses the letter to lampoon the senseless waste of money of the Darmstadt academy's biennial 'Eigenbeweihräucherung' (W22.1, 663):

Das Schriftstellergeschwätz in den Hotelhallen Kleindeutschlands ist ja wohl das Widerwärtigste, das sich denken läßt. Es stinkt aber doch noch viel stinkender, wenn es vom Staat subventioniert wird (*ibid.*).

This letter does not simply bolster the vehemence of the social criticism that Bernhard translates into his drama, but it also creates a recognisable tone of disdain. His letter contains his typical formulations and splenetic compound nouns, showcasing the writer's craft even amid his apparently spontaneous bile. I will discuss Bernhard's *Leserbriefe* further in Chapter Four, but this example can be read as a form of authorial self-staging, in which Bernhard's condemnations of cultural hypocrisy extrapolate from his subject and present the author himself in his residence in Ohlsdorf: 'Schade, daß dieses Jahrbuch auf einem derartig kostbaren Papier gedruckt ist, daß es zur Beheizung meines Ofens in Ohlsdorf denkbar ungeeignet ist' (664).

There are various further hints at the presence of the artist in the character of Moritz Meister. The working title of the play, *Später Ruhm*, is a play on Bernhard's own career, while the boasts of Moritz and his wife that he has been published by *Gallimard* in France coincide with the French publication of Bernhard's own works in the early 1980s (W18,

167). These details constantly prompt an audience to associate the fictional subjectivity of Moritz Meister with his creator as a tongue-in-cheek authorial surrogate. As I will show in Chapter Three, Moritz Meister is neither the first nor the last of these in Bernhard's dramas. In this play, though, the author is the epicentre of the problem. Bernhard is present within a caricature of an artist living cut off from society, surrounded by an echo chamber of representatives from the media, publishing, and academia, and firmly believing in the autonomy of fiction to express his rebarbative views. Bernhard's play on recognisable and controversial public statements outside of the text, his own public resignation from a German cultural institution, and details from his own career, does not simply turn his play into a creative expression of his social criticism; it also implicates the author himself within the cultural malaise that he criticises.

Bernhard's audience is part of the problem too, and this becomes apparent in the staging to the climax to *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*. In a play within a play, the protagonist reads from his tetralogy to his guests in a literary salon. When the curtain rises on this scene, Meister looks nervous, taking a long pause and turning over the pages of his manuscript repeatedly (249). His lines form a montage of references to two main characters, Robert and Edgar, in various locations in Germany, England, New Zealand, Mexico, Central Europe, and China, interrupted by flash photographs taken by his doctoral student that further obstruct an audience's ability to draw a coherent narrative from Meister's reading (251). The piece appears a nonsense, a bathetic compilation of references and disparate narrative strands. Towards the end of the reading, the text offers a glimpse of Meister's prejudices.

Die einsame Frau die an Lungenentzündung krankte
wartete auf Edgar in einem Hotel in Lausanne
das
welch merkwürdiger Zufall
Professor Stieglitz gehörte
So schloß sich endlich der Kreis der Geschwister

Schließt das Manuskript
Alle applaudieren
VERLEGER *mitten in den Applaus hinein*
Das ist ja groß
wendet den hochehobenen Kopf
artig (252)

The definite article ‘das’, occupying an entire line, invites an actor to pause and build suspense for the resolution of the tetralogy. The following line then becomes an uncomfortable aside, affirming Meister’s continued prejudice in his reference to Stieglitz as a rich landowner. In the world of the play on stage, these prejudices are validated as Meister’s stage audience applaud him.

Bernhard’s sparse stage directions, however, permit this scene to be staged more subtly. The direction ‘*alle applaudieren*’ offers an opportunity to play on the reactions of the audience. A director may choose to raise the lights in the auditorium early, before the publisher’s final line, inviting the theatre audience to join the approval of this masterwork in applause or, alternatively, to refuse to condone the objectionable climax of the protagonist’s final reading. The publisher’s line could interrupt this applause, turning from the audience on stage to the stalls to make clear that they, too, are part of this machinery. This way of staging the climax to the play illuminates a key aspect of Bernhard’s theatre more generally: how an audience’s experience of this play is not limited to the duration of its performance in the theatre. Such a staging prompts an audience to reflect on their own cultural habits, their role in the seemingly inescapable structures of literary production portrayed in the play.

My reading of *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* shows that the concept of ‘world’ in Bernhard’s drama may be more complex than first thought. There is the fictional ‘world’ that Bernhard creates on stage of a novelist and his wife in the foothills of the Alps, but this dramatic framework plays on numerous contexts in the real world outside of the theatre

shared between Bernhard's characters and his audiences. This, as I will show, is a frequent feature of Bernhard's late works, in which the author uses contemporary reference points, extra-textual altercations, and recognisable figures to complicate the bounds between his fictions and the outside world. In the staging described above, though, the device of the play within the play prompts an audience to consider their own ways of living in culture. An audience may consider ways of approaching art and the modern literature industry more responsibly but, crucially, Bernhard's protagonist, mired in his prejudices and the bathos of his performance, does not accompany an audience on this journey. At the end of *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, an audience can contemplate possibilities for living differently that the protagonist cannot. Bernhard implicates his audience within his playworld to open another world, beyond his protagonist's horizons. Recent theory on the concept of 'world' by Pheng Cheah will help me consider this further.

In *What is a World?* (2016) Pheng Cheah argues that existing ideas of world literature—for example, the discussions of the circulations and translations of Bernhard's works discussed in earlier sections of this introduction—conceive of the world spatially. Such arguments, though, fail to account for what he terms as 'the normative force that literature can exert in the world, the ethicopolitical horizon it opens up for the existing world'.⁶⁶ Using the concept of worlding ('welten') from Heideggerian phenomenology, Cheah reflects on how a world is held together and given unity by the force of time. As Cheah explains, Heidegger rejects understandings of the world as objective, as something that individuals create in their interactions with each other. The ability of the rational subject to ascribe normative value is instead premised on temporal processes that both precede and exceed the individual. Since time brings all beings into relation, individuals can only create

⁶⁶ Pheng Cheah, *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 5.

normative value by existing in a world with other beings and having access to them. Cheah describes the ‘curious ontological status’ of literature in similar terms. Literature, for Cheah, is both a meaningful whole prior to the subject and exceeds the subject’s powers of interpretation.⁶⁷ Literature does not simply help to map the spatialised world, nor does it create things in spiritual or material reality. Instead, literature ‘uncovers the world and opens up other possible worlds’.⁶⁸ Literature presents a world—the desultory *Dichtertag* of Bernhard’s play, for example—to prompt its readers and audiences to ‘remake the world according to newly disclosed possibilities’.⁶⁹

Cheah’s study has a specific form of literature in mind, namely the novels of the postcolonial South, and he frames his understanding of world in opposition to the forces of global capitalism. Reservations have been voiced regarding Cheah’s thesis. David Damrosch has questioned whether it is too straightforward to say that a spatial or physical cartography of world literature is just descriptive and that Cheah’s temporal remapping is changing the world in a different way.⁷⁰ He also expresses the reservation that Cheah’s focus on global capitalism means that his version of world literature concentrates unduly on very recent literature.⁷¹ Yet Cheah’s reading of Heidegger is particularly helpful in this thesis for reassessing Bernhard in a way that studies of his reception and international fanbases are yet to do. My reading of *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, and its critique of the globalised literature industry as presented in Germany in 1980, offers an insight into the plurality of worlds in the experience of Bernhard’s writings: his fictional playworlds, the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Pheng Cheah and David Damrosch, ‘What is a World (Literature)? A Conversation’, in *Journal of World Literature* 4 (2019), 305-29 (p. 310).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

worlds represented or referenced outside of the theatre and another world, situated in both the experiences of actors and audience but lying beyond the restricted self-understanding of Bernhard's protagonist. Bernhard opens possibilities for readers and audiences to see a world that his characters, many of whom exhibiting similarities with the author, are unable to see for themselves.

This re-reading exemplifies the novel version of Bernhard's concerns that I aim to advance in this thesis. I am using the intertextual network of Angela Carter, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and J. M. Coetzee to open a new way of seeing Bernhard's later works, beyond existing understandings of the author, existing contexts in which he has been situated, and perhaps even beyond the self-understanding of Bernhard himself. Each of these Anglophone points of reference will assist an appreciation of the kinds of participation that Bernhard's late works encourage from his readers and audiences. Together, they will help me to define another side to the author beyond his controversies and scandals. I will now present the specific comparisons and arguments in the following chapters of this thesis. In bringing these intertexts into dialogue with Bernhard's late writings, though, I also aim to think about the practice of comparative literature more generally. Bernhard, I argue, provides a test case for showing how taking an author out of conventional referential networks and the signposting of their estate can offer a new way of acknowledging their relevance within and beyond their cultural moment.

vii. The comparisons in this study

My first chapter will explore the limitations of reading Bernhard's works in more familiar contexts. I will examine a selection of established literary points of reference for Bernhard's works in the German-speaking canon, and the limitations of such comparisons for arriving at readings of Bernhard beyond the more orthodox impressions of the author I have detailed in this introduction. Peter Bürger's writings on avant-garde art in the 1970s and 1980s will

provide a conceptual framework for analysing how each of Peter Weiss, Christa Wolf, and Elfriede Jelinek approach the relationship between art and social existence in their prose fictions at this time. Together, they help me to show what Bernhard does differently. In *Beton* (1982), *Der Untergeher* (1983), and *Alte Meister* (1985), I argue, Bernhard develops a conception of art as inseparable from ways of living with others in the world outside of the work. Understanding this aspect of Bernhard's late prose fictions is significant for appreciating the author's treatment of human relationships, the questions that his characters ask of works of art, and the limitations to how his fictional artists and academics understand themselves.

The second chapter will then move beyond such German-speaking points of reference to examine more precisely the development of Bernhard's uses of fiction by the 1980s. I will resituate Bernhard's prose works *Frost* (1963), *Amras* (1964), and *Holzfällen* (1984) against the intellectual backdrop of Jürgen Habermas' philosophical re-thinking of modernity in the 1980s and Angela Carter's magical realist novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984). This constructed context will enable me first to advance a new perspective on *Holzfällen*, a text frequently read as the author's scandalous settling of scores with certain contemporary Viennese artists. Carter's treatment of the *Bildungsroman* in *Nights at the Circus* will help me to show how, in Bernhard's fictive return to the scene of his own artistic education in *Holzfällen*, he presents the beginnings of a more positive way for his narrator to live with others in modern society. This, I argue, is a significant step in Bernhard's writings. Carter's novel allows me to move beyond more conventional ways of approaching Bernhard in his national contexts to appreciate elements of his works that do not quite fit with common understandings of him. The comparison, furthermore, assists me to reconsider how Bernhard and Carter, in different ways, explore possibilities of learning from fiction in the 1980s. Drawing on recent theories of reading by Toril Moi among others, I will conclude

the chapter by showing how Bernhard, in *Holzfällen*, breaks with fiction altogether to invite his reader to share in the lessons of the text.

The theme of learning from art is central to Bernhard's dramas of the 1980s, which I discuss in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I re-evaluate Bernhard's treatment of the theatre as an institution in three of his plays of the 1980s: *Am Ziel* (1981), *Der Theatermacher* (1984), and *Heldenplatz* (1988). Bernhard's theatrical writings are known for the bleak tirades of solitary protagonists attacking their homeland and its cultural institutions. However, by resituating these plays alongside a case study from London's Royal Court Theatre also from the 1980s, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988), this chapter will examine the dramatic strategies through which Bernhard permits his audiences to see past the negativity of such figures. This comparison will highlight how, in *Der Theatermacher* and *Am Ziel*, Bernhard explores instances of mutual human care and more positive ways of living that, frequently, his characters are unable to see for themselves. This comparison will then facilitate a re-evaluation of the uses of staging, casting, and non-verbal communication in Bernhard's final and most controversial play, *Heldenplatz*. The play is Bernhard's supreme staging of polemic; but *Heldenplatz* also offers an important reflection on ways of participating in and learning from dramatic performance.

In Chapter Four, I will engage in more detail with what, for many readers of Bernhard, is the most distinctive feature of his works: his linguistic style. J. M. Coetzee's mid-career turn to memoir will help me to resituate Bernhard's prose style within a wider question of late Modernist aesthetics: how, in the wake of the writings of Samuel Beckett and twentieth-century critical theory, to write the self with authority. To examine the relevance of Bernhard's works to this question, I will first read his memoir *Ein Kind* (1982) as a threshold text in his *oeuvre*. The work exemplifies how Bernhard cultivates his unmistakable style through interactions with and imitations of others, just as the author

develops his notorious persona through altercations and scandals in the public arena. Coetzee's memoirs *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002), as well as his metafictional text *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), will assist me to illuminate how Bernhard stages this style in his later prose. In *Wittgensteins Neffe. Eine Freundschaft* (1982) and *Auslöschung. Ein Zerfall* (1986), I argue, Bernhard uses the recognisably hypertrophic style of his speaking voices to expose the limitations to their authority. Earlier in this introductory chapter, I discussed Rita Felski's argument that identifying with the ranting negativity of Bernhard's narrators can take place against one's better judgement. My comparison of Bernhard with Coetzee in this chapter will build on these findings, showing how the Austrian author prompts his readers in these works to look beyond the familiar voice of his narrators to see the human failures behind their hyperbole.

My conclusion will discuss the ramifications of these comparisons for Bernhard studies, for re-evaluating understandings of art in the 1980s, and for the practice of comparative literature more generally. I will consider how understanding a work of art may involve going beyond an author's own terms of reference—even, in Bernhard's case, going beyond the experience of his infectious eloquence that first engages us—and how Bernhard's works themselves offer spaces for a reader or audience member to see past the self-understandings of his characters. I will explore Bernhard's faith in his readers to see the failings and shortcomings that many of his characters do not and, in turn, how the intertextual relationships constructed by this thesis make visible a side to Bernhard seldom seen in secondary literature. Repositioning the late works of Thomas Bernhard, I argue, reveals the lessons that his works can still offer his readers and audiences.

Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh can be read as a warning to doctoral students, showing the perils of becoming trapped, like Fräulein Werdenfels, in the self-understandings and self-stagings of their subjects. The wider conception of world literature proposed in this

thesis aims to clear another interpretative direction in Bernhard studies beyond his self-staging, common critical orthodoxies on the writer, and existing understandings of his world status signposted in Ohlsdorf. This thesis is also intended to be of interest more generally to scholars of world literature, resituating an author who is at once local and cosmopolitan through the worlds that his works open. This comparative re-reading aims to reimagine a writer who was more self-aware than is often believed, who assiduously curated his public persona through exacting pressure on his publishers but, in his late works, openly aired the shortcomings of his own authority. Engaging with art, for Bernhard, offers possibilities for moving past such shortcomings. Bernhard, by the 1980s, makes use of his highly cultivated art of living to reimagine ways of living with art.

CHAPTER ONE

Thomas Bernhard and the institution of art in the 1980s

Summary

To reconsider the literary worlds in which Bernhard's later works can be read, I will need to de-familiarise them from the German and Austrian critical contexts in which they are commonly situated. This chapter is the first step in this process. In this chapter, I re-evaluate how Bernhard approaches art as an institution in modern society in three of his later prose fictions: *Beton* (1982), *Der Untergeher* (1983), and *Alte Meister* (1985). I argue that, in these texts, Bernhard develops a conception of art as inseparable from ways of living with others in the world outside of the work. This will provide a point of departure for my comparative repositioning of Bernhard in this study.

In this chapter, I explore how Bernhard's approach to art sets him apart from many of his German-speaking contemporaries. Peter Bürger's writings about art and society at the turn of the 1980s, and fictional works by Elfriede Jelinek, Christa Wolf, and Peter Weiss, will offer a contextualising framework to bring into focus what Bernhard does differently. Bernhard is frequently read in his domestic contexts as a writer sceptical towards the potential of art to offer meaning, consolation, or redemption in his bleak portrayals of modern society; yet my comparisons in this chapter will offer another perspective on his late prose. In these texts, I argue, Bernhard understands art as in dialogue with other forms of social practice, and his works are themselves engaged in this dialogue.

1.1. Repositioning Bernhard

Sitting in the *Bordone-Saal* of Vienna's *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in *Alte Meister* (1985), the *Times* music critic Reger contemplates what the greats of art and literature are still for:

Shakespeare und Kant und alle andern, die wir im Laufe unseres Lebens als die von uns sogenannten Großen aufgebaut haben, lassen uns genau in dem Augenblick im Stich, in welchem wir sie so notwendig gehabt hätten, so Reger, sie sind uns keine Lösung und sie sind uns kein Trost (W8, 177).

Reger appears unable to find meaning in art. Denigrating canonical figures of art and philosophy and diagnosing a pervasive cultural decline in modern Austria, Reger's negativity is common among the protagonists in Bernhard's late prose fictions. These characters are exclusively ageing male scholars, Bernhard's so-called *Geistesmenschen*, depicted in Austria's cultural institutions or engaging with Western art and artists: Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy in *Beton* (1982); Glenn Gould's recording of Bach's *Goldbergvariationen* in *Der Untergeher* (1983); Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* at the *Burgtheater* in *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung* (1984); and Tintoretto's *Weißbärtiger Mann* in *Alte Meister*.⁷² Various critics have associated the disillusionment of characters such as Reger with the worldview of an author apparently seeing little redemption for modern society in art.⁷³ Yet Bernhard does not deny art its place in life.⁷⁴ The recurrence of such *Geistesmenschen* devoting their lives to artistic projects in Bernhard's late works suggests that there may be

⁷² Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler examines the 'Palladium des österreichischen Kunst- und Geschichtsverständnisses' in Bernhard's late writings. Schmidt-Dengler, 'Der Verrammelungsfanatiker', in *Der "Heimatsdichter" Thomas Bernhard*, ed. by Ilija Dürhammer and Pia Janke (Wien: Holzhausen, 1999), pp. 157-68 (p. 167).

⁷³ Matthias Konzett asserts that Bernhard shares with Peter Handke and Elfriede Jelinek a 'nonredemptive vision of the function of art'. See Matthias Konzett, *The Rhetoric of National Dissent in Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke and Elfriede Jelinek* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), p. 21. Alfred Pfabigan interprets *Alte Meister* as 'eine Absage an den Glauben, dass sich mittels Kunst die Negativität der Existenz im Sinne Schopenhauers überwinden lasse'. Alfred Pfabigan, 'Alte Meister. Komödie', in *Bernhard-Handbuch*, ed. by Mittermayer and Huber, pp. 80-87 (p. 86).

⁷⁴ Stephen Dowden, *Understanding Thomas Bernhard* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press), p. 63.

more value in their pursuits. This chapter will reconsider the functions of art in Bernhard's late fictions as a point of departure for my re-evaluation of the author in this thesis. By distinguishing Bernhard's conception of art in the 1980s from those of the contemporary German and Austrian writers with whom he is commonly compared, I will show why it is necessary to resituate Bernhard in a wider literary world.

My central argument in this chapter is that Bernhard, in his later fiction, conceives of art as inseparable from other forms of social practice. Focusing on *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Alte Meister*, I will examine how encountering art is fundamental to the ways in which Bernhard's characters interact with others. This approach to art in his late works will enable me to distinguish Bernhard from three of his German-speaking contemporaries: Peter Weiss, Christa Wolf, and Elfriede Jelinek. These authors are familiar points of comparison for Bernhard in secondary literature, frequently contextualising his approaches to collective cultural history and post-war Austrian society. Comparing how they treat the function of art in society at the turn of the 1980s, however, will help to illuminate what Bernhard does differently.

The contextual authors discussed in this chapter each reflect on the relationship between art and society at the turn of the 1980s. In *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (1975-81), Peter Weiss imagines an ideal working-class milieu whose encounters with works of art facilitate their commitment to the cause of anti-fascist resistance. In the German Democratic Republic of the late 1970s, Christa Wolf's academic engagement with the Romantics examined what art can do for reimagining modes of human interaction in the present. In *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (1979), Wolf presents a fictional meeting between Karoline von Günderode and Heinrich von Kleist against her constructed backdrop of a bourgeois 'Teegesellschaft' at pains to uphold the separation of art from life. In *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983), the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek examined art as a discourse facilitating the

subjugation of women within the capitalist patriarchy. Her novel reflects on the contribution of the institution of art to economic inequality, patriarchal oppression, and human suffering.

These texts share various affinities with Bernhard's later prose: they all stage acts of interpreting Western art; they depict the suffering of isolated individuals; and they explore the consequences of art in society and politics. In this chapter, however, they will together build a contemporary aesthetic context from which Bernhard can be distinguished. In Bernhard's prose fictions of the 1980s, I will argue, art does not exist in separation from everyday connections with others. Engaging with art can prompt ways of acknowledging human connections that Bernhard's characters are otherwise unable to see. Furthermore, the artistic pursuits to which Bernhard's characters devote themselves are frequently presented as part of, or contingent on, ordinary interpersonal relationships outside of them. In each of *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Alte Meister*, Bernhard portrays, to varying degrees, protagonists moving beyond their habitual ways of approaching art. This chapter, similarly, aims to move beyond habitual ways of approaching Bernhard, using the author's treatments of art in his prose works of the 1980s as a point of departure for reimagining the ongoing relevance of his late works beyond their immediate time and place.

The academic writings of Peter Bürger on avant-garde art in the 1970s and 1980s will provide a conceptual framework for this argument. Bürger belongs to the context of this chapter as a central voice in both German-speaking and Anglophone discussions of art and its consequences at the turn of the 1980s. His reflections on art as an institution in *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974) and *Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik* (1983) will offer an influential model for analysing the ways in which Weiss, Wolf, and Jelinek each examine the relationship between art and social living. However, Bürger's theory on art and society does not quite align with what, I argue, Bernhard is doing in *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Alte Meister*. My re-reading of these works will show how Bernhard explores moments of

interplay between the spheres of art and everyday social existence, playing on common cultural contexts in his later fictions to stage art as a part of ordinary human interactions. Bürger's reading of the aesthetic avant-garde, by contrast, reflects on the failure to integrate art into social praxis within the bourgeois social structures that many of Bernhard's protagonists inhabit.

1.2. Art and society at the turn of the 1980s

Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde* reconsiders the relationship between art and society. Bürger examines art as an institution, which he defines as encompassing both the modes of producing and distributing art and the prevailing ideas that govern the reception of artworks.⁷⁵ In bourgeois society, Bürger states, the normative doctrine of this institution is the separation between social existence and autonomous works of art.⁷⁶ Avant-garde art is significant for Bürger not simply as a reaction to previous art forms but as a critique of this separation. He sees the reintegration of art into social praxis as fundamental to the Dadaist project: a project doomed to fail within bourgeois social structures that, in his view, reinforced the autonomy of art. Yet this failure nevertheless proves to Bürger that the normative doctrine of the institution of art is *itself* socially mediated: 'Die mit der Institution Kunst gesetzte Dichotomie Kunst versus Gesellschaft (im Sinne von Lebenspraxis)', he states, 'ist jedoch nichts Primäres, sondern determiniert von der Gesamtgesellschaft'.⁷⁷ Art, from this perspective, is one institution among others, in constant dialogue with other forms of social praxis.

To Bürger, this understanding of art as an institution has implications for approaching works of art themselves. In *Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik*, Bürger

⁷⁵ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2017), p. 32.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

argues that, despite the achievements of avant-garde art, the value of artworks in modern society is still seen to inhere in the alignment of form and content: ‘Die Schwierigkeit, die wir trotz der Erfahrung der modernen und der avantgardistischen Kunst haben, das Kunstwerk als Auseinandertreten von Form und Inhalt zu denken, sagt etwas über die Geltung der idealistischen Ästhetik’.⁷⁸ He states that the failure of the avant-garde project provides a new opportunity for criticism that does not assume that art is separate from social living: ‘es geht darum, den durch die Avantgarde möglich gemachten neuen Umgang mit Kunst zu denken und praktisch zu verwirklichen’.⁷⁹ Alongside the experimental artworks of Josef Beuys and Klaus Kröger, which resist being subsumed into this framework of idealist aesthetics, Bürger also refers to literary texts such as Weiss’ *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*.⁸⁰ Weiss’ trilogy, published between 1975 and 1981, both thematises and performs ways of approaching art. In a montage of fictional narrative and documentary chronicle, Weiss combines an extensive history of the German left-wing movement in the early twentieth century with numerous instances of collective artistic interpretation via an idealised working-class milieu. These acts of interpretation engage with the central theme of this chapter: the relationship between art and social existence outside of it. They provide a key point of comparison for Bernhard’s fictions of the 1980s.

1.2.1. Peter Weiss’ aesthetics of resistance

Weiss’ epic historical novel has featured in various discussions of Bernhard. Hans Höller, for example, compares how Bernhard and Weiss each portray figures confronting the topographies and works of shared cultural inheritance.⁸¹ Michael Jopling focuses on the

⁷⁸ Bürger, *Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016), p. 10.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁸¹ Hans Höller, ““Ortschaft” bei Thomas Bernhard und Peter Weiss”, in *Thomas Bernhard: Traditionen und Trabanten*, ed. by Joachim Hoell and Karl Luehrs-Kaiser (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1999), pp. 19-28 (p. 23).

scale of Weiss' historiographical undertaking, finding parallels with Bernhard's apparent desire in his works to "write out" the void that threatens his existence'.⁸² In this chapter, Weiss' authorial self-projection into a working-class protagonist engaging with a constructed Western canon will provide a point of contrast with Reger in *Alte Meister*, who vainly searches for meaning in Tintoretto's painting at the *Kunsthistorisches Museum*. In *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, the act of interpreting art provides a call to action, bolstering the political convictions of the narrator and his peers.

Like Bürger, Weiss considers the relationship between aesthetic experience and society via a reflection on the avant-garde project. As the narrator discusses the formation of the Dada movement with the Communist activist Willi Münzenberg in Paris following the fall of the Spanish Republic, the latter characterises the avant-garde as a sudden artistic sea change, combining the desire for material revolution with intellectual radicalism: 'Die Spiegelgasse wurde zum Sinnbild der gewaltsamen, doppelten, der wachen und der geträumten Revolution' (*Ästhetik*, 518-9). The juxtaposition of waking and dreaming suggests the convergence of the real and the imaginary. This is echoed as the narrator evokes the desire to reintegrate art into a reality that he derides as 'fadenscheinig' (522). However, these aspirations are circumscribed in Weiss' text. As Michael Hofmann has argued, the tragic death of Münzenberg later in the novel serves as the death of this desired integration of the aesthetic with socio-political experience.⁸³ Indeed, the emancipatory potential of art in Weiss' novel, and its importance for the narrator's political understanding, stems from its necessary separation from existing social structures. For the avant-garde artists, art can

⁸² Michael Jopling, *Re-Placing the Self: Fictional and Autobiographical Interplay in Modern German Narrative (Elias Canetti, Thomas Bernhard, Peter Weiss, Christa Wolf)* (Stuttgart: Hans-Dieter Heinz, 2001), p. 234.

⁸³ Michael Hofmann, 'Ästhetische Erziehung und Ästhetik des Widerstands. Kunstautonomie und Engagement des Kunstwerks bei Schiller, Marcuse und Peter Weiss', *Weimarer Beiträge*, 37 (1991), 819-38 (p. 832).

open visions of an alternative world. Münzenberg, via Lenin, advocates for this reading: ‘daß der Revolutionär die Fähigkeit zum Träumen besitzen müsse’ (523).

This underpins the performative project of *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, as Weiss stages numerous instances of ekphrasis before a realigned Western canon by an audience denied formal aesthetic training. Standing in front of the *Pergamonfries* in Berlin, the narrator and his friends Coppi and Heilmann perceive how the depictions of the Greek gods reinforce the superiority of the privileged. Their separation from such social strata is reinforced by Weiss’ punctuation: ‘Gewiß vermittelte das Werk den Privilegierten, ein Abgetrenntsein unter strengem hierarchischem Gesetz ahnten die andern’ (12). It does not surprise them, therefore, that Heracles, as the only mortal in this myth, is missing from the frieze. It is left to the young men to reinstate this presence excluded from history:

Herakles aber zog Linos, dem Lehrer, der seinem Schüler weismachen wollte, die einzige Freiheit, die es gäbe, sei die Freiheit der Kunst, den Hut so hart über die Augen, daß ihm das Nasenbein brach, und als der Magister weiterhin behauptete, die Kunst sei zu allen Zeiten unabhängig von den jeweiligen Wirrnissen zu genießen, steckte er ihn kopfüber in die Jauchegrube und ertränkte ihn (25).

The imagined Heracles frames the aesthetic doctrine expounded by his teacher Linus, reported in the subjunctive, within the physicality of his real-world action. In a bourgeois society reinforcing the separation of art from social praxis, the narrator and his friends embody an ideal approach to art from the working class. Excluded from existing narratives of cultural history, Weiss’ protagonists appropriate art directly in the development of their own political understanding.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ See Irene Heidelberger-Leonard, ‘Die Kunst zu erben’, in *Hinter jedem Wort die Gefahr des Verstummens. Sprachproblematik und literarische Tradition in der Ästhetik des Widerstands von Peter Weiss* (1998), pp. 21-38 (p. 23).

The narrator and his friends approach literature in the same way. They are unable to purchase a library for themselves; yet, as the narrator states: ‘die Bände, die uns gehörten, waren sorgfältig ausgewählt, sie waren zum Bestandteil unseres Lebens geworden’ (43). Their engagement with literature involves reading ‘gegen den Strich’, imposing their own demands on texts away from the orthodoxies of elite critics (51). This is evident in their encounter with Kafka’s *Das Schloß* (1926), which they read as an expression of their own plight: a ‘Proletarierroman’ (221). They see themselves reflected in the work: ‘doch empfanden wir die gleiche Beengung, in der sich der Landvermesser befand’. (219). As with the *Pergamonfries*, the work is imbued with the suffering through which it was created, and reflects their own sense of suffering.⁸⁵ The repetition of Weiss’ recurrent trope of the dream reveals the power of this artistic encounter, enabling the youths to imagine a world outside of their daily experience: ‘auch das, was sich auf unsrer eigenen Ebene abspielte, besaß eine Kraft von jener Art, in der real Erlebtes übergeht in die Bilder des Traums’ (223).

This statement is applicable to Weiss’ epic historiographic undertaking in *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* more generally. Weiss’ staged interpretations of art provide a contrast to his meticulous attention to documenting the names and locations of political uprisings and workers’ movements up to and during the Second World War. These interpretations show the consequences of art for the political convictions of Weiss’ protagonists, as the author actively realigns the Western canon from the perspective of an imagined working-class subjectivity. As I will argue, it is questionable whether Bernhard’s characters see art in the same way—despite Bernhard’s reputation for incendiary diatribes against his homeland and its politicians. While Russell T. Harrison has read *Alte Meister* as ‘shot through with socio-political meaning’, arguing that Bernhard engages in a Socialist

⁸⁵ D. G. Bond, ‘Aesthetics and Politics: Peter Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* as a Chronicle of Horror’, *European Studies*, 19 (1989), 223-44 (p. 225).

de-classification of Western high art through Reger's programmatic critique of its reception,⁸⁶ Reger's encounter with Tintoretto in the opening quotation hardly provides him with the kind of political inspiration seen in Weiss' text. *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* instead reveals an earnest faith in the power of art to facilitate a renewed relationship between self and world. It is this power that connects Weiss with Christa Wolf.

1.2.2. Christa Wolf's Romantic project

Wolf's conversations with Hans Kaufmann evidence her faith in the power of literature. She describes writing as a process that runs alongside life: 'einen Vorgang, der das Leben unaufhörlich begleitet, es mit bestimmt, zu deuten sucht'.⁸⁷ Books, for Wolf, are the material evidence of a productivity oriented towards 'die Hervorbringung neuer Strukturen menschlicher Beziehungen in unserer Zeit'.⁸⁸ This faith is central to *Kein Ort. Nirgends*, a work published shortly after the second volume of Weiss' *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*. Like Weiss' text, *Kein Ort. Nirgends* is a montage of fiction, documentary material, passages from Günderrode's work, and staged interpretations of works of art. Building on her academic enquiry into the Romantics in the late 1970s, Wolf's fictive meeting between Heinrich von Kleist and Karoline von Günderrode explores desires for alternative forms of human relations within a constructed nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. The relationship between art and society idealised by Wolf's Romantic writers provides a key contextual reference point in this chapter. As I will argue, however, the connection between Kleist and Günderrode in *Kein Ort. Nirgends* can only exist in the utopia imagined in Wolf's text. Like the avant-garde ideal to reintegrate art into social praxis in Bürger's analysis, Wolf's vision

⁸⁶ Russell T. Harrison, *Thomas Bernhard's Comic Materialism: Class, Art and "Socialism" in post-war Austria* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 138-9.

⁸⁷ Hans Kaufmann, 'Gespräch mit Christa Wolf', *Weimarer Beiträge*, 20.6 (1974), 90-112 (p. 95).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

of human reciprocity in the fictional world of *Kein Ort. Nirgends* is acknowledged as unrealisable in contemporary society.

The normative approach to art in Wolf's bourgeois nineteenth-century 'Teegesellschaft', her analogue of the contemporary German Democratic Republic, is to uphold its separation from social reality. 'Sei es nicht überhaupt unstatthaft', states Wolf's 'Hofrat', responding to the argument over Hamlet that caused Kleist to fall out with his friend Pfuel in Paris, 'jene Wand zu durchbrechen, die zwischen die Phantasien der Literaten und die Realitäten der Welt gesetzt ist?' (*Kein Ort*, 18). Both Kleist and Günderrode are portrayed at the margins of Wolf's constructed reality. This is evident as Günderrode's feeling of pressure on her breast is transformed into her dream of a natural landscape in which a deer is shot by an arrow, suggesting her innermost drives of sexuality and death. The vivid wound she imagines on her neck disappears as she reawakens and contemplates her unrequited love of Savigny. She refers to this love, citing the title of Wolf's Romantic project, as 'de[n] Schatten eines Traums' (14). Günderrode longs for a mode of living beyond the world to which she must conform.⁸⁹ Just as Wolf's text blurs the boundary between documentary material and the framework of her fiction in the character of Günderrode, the poet in Wolf's text yearns to overlay the present with the vivid passions of her dreamscape.

Wolf stages Kleist as an exaggerated embodiment of a similarly suffering artist. Having failed in his literary project *Robert Guiscard*, Kleist, not unlike Bernhard's artist protagonists discussed later in this chapter, is trapped in the frenzy of his thoughts:

Wenn es ein Mittel gäbe, den Apparat in seinem Kopf abzdrehn, den man ihm anstelle eines normalen Gedächtnisses eingesetzt hat und der zu nichts

⁸⁹ Brigitte Rossbacher, *Illusions of Progress: Christa Wolf and the Critique of Science in GDR Women's Literature* (Ph.D thesis, University of California, 1992), p. 123.

anderm imstande ist, als ihm die immer gleiche Gedankenreihe, das immer gleiche, ewigdauernde, marternde Selbstgespräch zu wiederholen [...] (41).

The repetitions and participles of this passage connote the circling of the artist's 'Selbstgespräch'. Kleist's reference to his mind as an 'Apparat' adopts the language of the constructed society around him to express his self-estrangement. His hyperbole would not be out of place in Bernhard:

Ein Staat kennt keinen andern Vorteil, als den er nach Prozenten berechnen kann. Die Wahrheit will er nur insoweit kennen, als er sie gebrauchen kann. Er will sie anwenden. Und worauf? Auf Künste und Gewerbe. Aber die Künste lassen sich nicht wie die militärischen Handgriffe erzwingen (64).

To Kleist, art expresses truths beyond those put to tangible use in service of the state. The tirade distances him from his company: Merten laughs, Brentano is shocked, and Savigny accuses him of exaggerating his suffering (64-5). Only the performance of Günderrode's poem, published under her pseudonym Tian, prompts him to break from his malaise:

Doch bin ich treu! Erfüllt vom Gegenstande,
Dem ich mich gebe in der Liebe Bande,
Wird alles, wird mein ganzes Wesen sein (68).

Günderrode's vision of mutual constancy in love renders Kleist 'hellwach'. Her rhyme accentuates this sense of reciprocity, playing on both the verb and the possessive pronoun 'sein' to suggest the unity of poet and lover. Her lines imagine possibilities of human understanding beyond the structures that Kleist sees in the present. They prompt Kleist to break from the habits of his circling thoughts and, in Günderrode's future tense, to see her hope of a life to come.

The relationship between Kleist and Günderrode epitomises this hope. As Brentano reveals to the gathering a dream of Goethe dying that drove him to tears, the ensuing tumult provokes jealousy in Kleist for not having dreamt of Goethe himself (75). Yet Günderrode takes him out of such jealousy through their discussion of Goethe's *Torquato Tasso* (1790).

In the reading of *Tasso* advanced by Wolf's Kleist, Goethe unduly splits the world into binaries of good and evil, which Kleist reads as an attack on his own outlook on the world (76). The final image of Goethe's tragedy, in which the diplomat Antonio takes the hand of the miserable poet Tasso in a gesture of human understanding, somewhat contradicts Kleist's interpretation; yet this reading of Goethe enables Kleist to set himself and G nderrode apart.⁹⁰ Kleist offers his own blueprint of a tragedy to G nderrode by drawing his own 'absurd geometrische Konstruktion', which G nderrode understands immediately (76). Wolf does not reproduce the diagram in the text; instead, the identification between these characters remains unspoken: 'Sie gehn schweigend. Einmal nimmt Kleist h flich Karolinens Arm. M uerchen aus Naturstein, dahinter Apfelplantagen nach der Bl te, schmale Weing rten, eine Welt ohne falschen Ton' (80). Their union becomes an idealised expression of a utopian vision.

Wolf nevertheless suggests that Kleist is not completely cut off from this society. His reverence for art, for example, is not a replacement for the study of the sciences: 'Man m sse schon durch die Wissenschaften hindurchgegangen sein, ehe man sich erlauben d rfe, sie zu schm hen' (71). Furthermore, he perpetuates the restrictive expectations of women that G nderrode transgresses. This is evident as G nderrode questions Kleist over his own private wound: his relationship with his sister. Kleist questions whether a woman should speak to him as G nderrode does (84), but her interest in Kleist's affection towards his sister is more than salacious gossip. Her questions enquire earnestly into how the lives of women require more courage than the lives of men, and the impetuosity of Kleist's response reveals an immaturity that Wolf accentuates through her recurrent motifs of daggers and wounds: 'Wo ein Messer einmal tief ins Fleisch geschnitten hat, tut die Ber hrung durch eine Feder

⁹⁰ Goethe, *FA*, v: *Dramen 1776-1790*, ed. by Dieter Borchmeyer (1988), pp. 731-834 (p. 833).

weh' (83). Günderrode is instead interested in forms of love—the one thing that she believes can unite the divergent forces within her.

The possibility of love, for Günderrode, is part of her design for a future age:

Begreifen, daß wir ein Entwurf sind—vielleicht, um verworfen, vielleicht, um wieder aufgegriffen zu werden. Das zu belachen ist menschenwürdig. Gezeichnet zeichnend. Auf ein Werk verwiesen, das offen bleibt, offen wie eine Wunde (105).

The juxtaposition of past and present participles and the repetition of 'offen' present an earnest hope that the structure of human relationships in this text will be taken up in a future society. This vision, though, is unrealisable at present: 'unlebbares Leben. Kein Ort. Nirgends' (96). This will be the key difference between Bernhard's artistic project and that of Wolf at the turn of the 1980s. Whereas Bernhard's protagonists in *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Alte Meister* undeniably share the bleakness of Wolf's Kleist, they live in a world in which genuine reciprocal understanding is possible. In contrast to Wolf's fictive engagement with the Romantics, the more positive forms of living portrayed in Bernhard's works are realisable in modern society.

Wolf was not alone in investigating the potentials of art through an academic engagement with Romantic artists. In her theatrical text *Clara S. musikalische Tragödie* (1982), Elfriede Jelinek presents the pianist Clara Schumann, coerced into the roles of wife and mother amid androcentric ideals of genius.⁹¹ Overlaying the Romantic era with 1920s Germany, Jelinek's play presents a system of artistic patronage enforced by the author and paramilitary leader Gabriele D'Annunzio, who embodies both bourgeois art and fascist violence. Jelinek's playtext produces Clara Schumann and her husband Robert from a montage of documentary material and correspondence, staging the ritual oppression of her

⁹¹ Elfriede Jelinek, *Theaterstücke*, ed. by Ute Nyssen and Regine Friedrich (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2015).

female protagonist. Against a backdrop of female objectification, though, Clara's musical composition serves as an act of agency. At the play's climax, Clara strangles her husband Robert Schumann, her fingers conditioned through her piano training.⁹² Clara is unable to escape the system of language that produces her on stage, but her final act at least momentarily claims male artistic discourse for herself.⁹³ This step is important for understanding Jelinek's 1983 novel, which will provide a third and final intertext in the comparative framework of this chapter: *Die Klavierspielerin*.

1.2.3. The discourse of art in *Die Klavierspielerin*

Jelinek is frequently compared with Bernhard in scholarship. Both authors engage critically with Austria's response to the Nazi past, hollowing out Alpine idylls and reflecting on collective cultural inheritance. Both have been stigmatised as 'Nestbeschmutzer', artists who foul their own nests, on account of their critiques of their homeland and its institutions.⁹⁴ To Matthias Konzett, Bernhard, like Jelinek, attacked Austria and Germany's cultural establishments from within, engaging in a 'histrionic exposure of art as a practice that serves purposes of cultural edification and emancipation'.⁹⁵ This is true of Jelinek's 1983 novel *Die Klavierspielerin*, which offers a bleak vision of art as an institution facilitating the subjugation and suffering of her isolated protagonist. This novel will add to the contextual backdrop of this chapter through exposing negative potentials of art as a discourse that, I will argue, do not go unacknowledged in Bernhard's writings. My central argument in this chapter, however, is that Bernhard approaches art more positively,

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 122.

⁹³ Rebecca S. Thomas, 'Subjectivity in Elfriede Jelinek's *Clara S.*: Resisting the Vanishing Point', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 32.1 (1999), pp. 141-57 (p. 151-2).

⁹⁴ Manfred Jurgensen, 'Sprachgewalt und "Nestbeschmutzung" bei Bernhard und Jelinek', in *Elfriede Jelinek und Thomas Bernhard: Intertextualität—Korrelationen—Korrespondenzen*, ed. by Bastian Reinert and Clemens Götz (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 57-70.

⁹⁵ Konzett, *The Rhetoric of National Dissent*, p. 21.

exploring the interpersonal connections established or maintained through acts of engaging with art. In Jelinek's desolate portrayal of contemporary Vienna in *Die Klavierspielerin*, art is one discourse among many eliminating any such possibility for connection.

The opening scene of *Die Klavierspielerin* exemplifies Jelinek's treatment of art in this work. Consigned to economic responsibility for her family following the madness of her father, Erika Kohut is punished by her mother for returning home late from teaching and purchasing a dress. Art provides little solace from her oppression:

Dabei wird die ganze Kunst SIE nicht trösten können, obwohl der Kunst vieles nachgesagt wird, vor allem, daß sie eine Trösterin sei. Manchmal schafft sie allerdings das Leid erst herbei (*Klavierspielerin*, 29).

Erika is unable to find any consolation in art. Jelinek turns on its head the notion of salon piano-playing providing solace to the bourgeois family. In this case, art paves Erika's path to the matriarch's 'Schneidbrenner' (*ibid.*).⁹⁶ As Jelinek's orthography reinforces Erika's representative role as a woman in contemporary discourse, her subjunctive emphasises the character's distance from the domain of art, the verb 'sei' instead assonating with her mother's instrument of violence. By contrast, the bourgeois male concertgoers in Jelinek's novel can appropriate artistic suffering for themselves: 'Beethovens Schmerz, Mozarts Schmerz, Schumanns Schmerz' (24). The visitor to the Vienna Philharmonic explains this pain, without any invitation to do so, to the male concert-goer sitting next to him: 'Diese Schmerzen sind nun sein alleiniger Besitz, und er wieder ist der Besitzer der Schuhfabrik Pöschl oder der Baustoffgroßhandlung Kotzler' (24-5). The references to possession link the concert-goer's understanding of art to his status in the capitalist economy, Jelinek's

⁹⁶ Brenda Bethman, "*Obscene Fantasies*": *Elfriede Jelinek's Generic Perversions* (PhD thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2009), p. 156.

sudden shift in register in the final play of 'kotzen' deconstructing his high cultural rhetoric within a single word.

Erika's private acts of self-harm within the novel's domestic setting may be read as isolated attempts to exercise control over her own suffering. Key to such scenes is their allusiveness:

Auf dem Fußboden und auch schon auf dem Bettzeug vereinigen sich die vier kleinen Bächlein zum reißenden Strom. Folge nach nur meinen Tränen, nimmt dich bald das Bächlein auf. Eine kleine Lache bildet sich. Und es rinnt immer weiter. Es rinnt und rinnt und rinnt und rinnt (53).

Jelinek's use of lines from Wilhelm Müller's texts for Schubert's *Winterreise* (1828) first appears parodic. Her parallel between physical and linguistic violence, however, suggests how the narrator wrests pillars of cultural discourse into new contexts, overloading source material to find an individual form of expression.⁹⁷ Jelinek's violence to the source text parallels Erika's own self-harm as acts defying the boundaries of the character's own linguistic limits, the razor blade and blood symbolising Erika's stylus and ink. This simultaneous deformation of physical and artistic corpora parallels another act of writing in the novel, namely the letter addressed to Walter Klemmer that expresses her sado-masochistic desire:

Erika zieht sich Klemmer als Strafe zu. Und zwar in der Art, daß er sie mit Genuß so derart fest, stramm, gründlich, ausgiebig, kunstgerecht, grausam, qualvoll, raffiniert mit den Stricken, die ich gesammelt habe, und auch den Lederriemen und sogar Ketten!, die ich ebenfalls habe, fesselt, ver- und zusammenschnürt und zusammenschnallt, wie er es nur kann. Er soll ihr seine Knie dabei in den Leib bohren, bitte sei so gut (256).

⁹⁷ Hannes Fricke, 'Selbstverletzendes Verhalten: Über die Ausweglosigkeit, Kontrollversuche, Sprache und das Scheitern der Erika Kohut in Elfriede Jelineks *Die Klavierspielerin*', *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik*, 119 (2000), 50-81 (p. 74).

The litany of adverbs oscillates between rhyming expressions of desire and assurances of artistic decorum, between fantasies of restriction and polite Viennese discourse. Yet within the overt desire for subordination is the glimpse of a subject position, the first-person pronoun that has prepared this scene. Despite Walter's refusal to read the letter and his reassertion of dominance when he rapes Erika at her home, the letter is still a significant step. The failure of Erika's self-expression is inevitable in the social structures of the novel; yet this act of epistolary expression shows Jelinek's subject momentarily employing discourse for herself.

Jelinek's violence to canonical authority in her narrator's presentation of Erika provides a blueprint for the potential of the novel amidst the ideological structures facilitating Erika's subjugation. Jelinek relies on her readers to appreciate her allusiveness, her mix of registers, and humour as central to her own aesthetics. If art is one discourse of many reinforcing the human suffering in this novel, *Die Klavierspielerin* postulates ways of finding expression within it. Yet the climax to the novel stymies any possibility of escape from Erika's plight. Jelinek has described the scene as a 'Paraphrase' of Kafka's *Der Prozeß* (1925).⁹⁸ Where, in Kafka's text, two men arrive at the apartment of Josef K. to kill him, Erika Kohut, after the humiliation of seeing Klemmer laughing with his friends, is denied a position of either perpetrator or victim, stabbing herself in the shoulder (335). She does not die; the narrator instead describes blood seeping from her as she returns home to her mother in an echo of the novel's opening (*ibid.*). The bleak end to Jelinek's novel will provide a foil to Bernhard's *Der Untergeher*—a text in which, I will argue, Bernhard explores the role of art within more positive human interactions.

⁹⁸ Cited in Christa Gürtler, *Gegen den schönen Schein: Texte zu Elfriede Jelinek* (Frankfurt: Neue Kritik, 1990), p. 80.

My argument in this chapter is that Bernhard sees more potential in art. Each of Peter Weiss, Christa Wolf, and Elfriede Jelinek have enabled me to construct a contemporary backdrop of approaches to art at the turn of the 1980s from which Bernhard will now be distinguished. Where works of Weiss' predominantly European canon in *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* facilitate the political development of the narrator and his friends, Bernhard treats art differently. *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Alte Meister*, I will argue, each approach art as inseparable from forms of everyday human interaction outside of it, and works of art in these texts also play a central role in how their protagonists acknowledge their human connections. Unlike *Kein Ort. Nirgends*, Bernhard's texts present forms of human understanding that are available outside of art and in the present. Bernhard certainly acknowledges more negative forms of interpersonal interaction. Unlike in Jelinek's *Die Klavierspielerin*, though, engaging with art in Bernhard's storyworlds can have a more positive effect on how his characters live with others and themselves. Despite various affinities with the contextual works under discussion, Bernhard's *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Alte Meister* will each show how Bernhard progresses beyond the conceptions of art advanced by these German-speaking contemporaries at the turn of the 1980s. A wider and more international network of interlocutors, I will argue, is needed to appreciate the significance of Bernhard's treatment of art in his late works.

1.3. Art in Bernhard's late prose fiction

To Peter Bürger in *Theorie der Avantgarde*, the failure of the avant-garde project to reintegrate art into social praxis was inevitable within bourgeois social structures upholding the separation between autonomous art and living. Yet Bernhard, I will argue, seems to bridge this separation in a different way. For all his characters' criticisms of contemporary Austria, its politics, and its cultural institutions, Bernhard appears more concerned with how his characters live together on a human level. Against the constructed intertextual

framework of this chapter, I will argue that, in *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Alte Meister*, engaging with art has positive consequences for living with others. Examining these works within the literary contexts I have constructed in this chapter thus far will show how Bernhard variously explores moments of interplay between the spheres of art and everyday social interaction. Furthermore, Bernhard facilitates a similar kind of interplay between his works themselves. His echoes from one work to the next and his dialogues with cultural events and personalities outside of his storyworlds develop an aesthetic that itself blurs the separation between art and social practice. Investigating these aspects of Bernhard's late prose will shed light on the functions of art in Bernhard's late fictions: what Reger gains from his visits to the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* in *Alte Meister*, and what a reader can learn from engaging with Bernhard's treatments of art and human relationships.

1.3.1. Human connections in *Beton*

Beton provides the first conceptual step in setting out this reading, but it is important to note first of all how this text develops familiar tropes from an earlier work. In *Korrektur* (1975), Bernhard's narrator visits the attic room of the 'Tierpräparator' Höller to conduct a curatorial project on the estate of his late friend Roithamer. Alone in this attic room, Roithamer had meticulously planned the construction of a so-called 'Wohnkegel', a unique work of art in the centre of the Kobernauserwald, where he intended to house his sister away from the rapacity and philistinism of their other siblings and hunting family (W4, 87). Similar to the artists in *Kein Ort. Nirgends*, Roithamer pursues this artistic ideal in an age against such ideas: 'in einer solchen, *gegen* solche Vorstellungen und Verwirklichungen eingestellten Zeit' (16-7). Reviewing the 'Zettel' left behind by his friend regarding the construction of the cone and its associated academic project, entitled 'Über Altensam und alles, was mit Altensam zusammenhängt', the narrator explains how this project fails in its aim to protect Roithamer's sister, who dies shortly after moving in. On the way to her

funeral, Roithamer repeatedly corrects his academic project until it is nearly destroyed: ‘zutode korrigiert und damit vernichtet’ (76), before he commits suicide in the same clearing in the forest.

In *Beton*, Bernhard re-thinks this constellation of themes and motifs. In the novel, Bernhard presents an account of a solitary academic living with his sister and consumed by an academic project on the Romantic composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Instead of a recuperated account of a deceased *Geistesmensch*, Bernhard takes the overwhelming artistic project at the centre of *Korrektur* and situates it within the lives of the protagonist Rudolf and his sister Elisabeth. *Beton*, I will propose, forms part of a wider reflection in Bernhard’s writings on what the integration of art and social practice might look like on a human level, exploring a central undertaking that is contingent on interactions with others. This reading will distance *Beton* from the contextual framework constructed so far in this chapter. Unlike Wolf’s *Kein Ort. Nirgends*, as I will show, the central characters of *Beton* are not caught in the double-bind of only being able to express themselves in art.

Despite planning his opus on Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy for ten years, Rudolf is unable to start it. He blames this on his sister, his so-called ‘Vernichterin’ who prevents him from writing (W5, 17). Save for his loyal housekeeper, the wealthy Rudolf lives in isolation, suffering from the *morbus boeck* that affected Bernhard himself and consumed by a pervasive fear of death (7). After resolving to leave Peiskam for Palma de Mallorca, he sits on the Borne and remembers a young mother, Anna Härdtl, whom he had met on his previous visit nearly two years before (108-9). Anna’s tragedy is the focus of the final part of the text. Rudolf reports how, during her visit with her husband to Mallorca to escape their financial difficulties, her husband died by falling from the balcony of their hotel room in a suspected suicide (117). After remembering Anna’s story, he travels to the site of her husband’s grave to discover that Anna has since committed suicide as well (131). This shift

provides an important insight into Bernhard's approach to art in *Beton*. The memory suddenly modifies the course of the narrative. Rudolf's solitary undertaking is thrown off course via the intensity of a chance human connection. This is significant for illuminating the interaction between human relationships and artistic commitment that Bernhard investigates in *Beton* and beyond.

Although Rudolf characterises his sister as his brutal and calculating tormentor, Bernhard's narrative reveals the human connection between two siblings who simply approach art in different ways.⁹⁹ As Rudolf portrays his sister's disapproval of his academic project and her coldness towards the deaths of their parents and sister, her words suggest the apparent contrast between them:

Du sitzt hier in deinem Haus, das nichts anderes als eine Gruft ist und pflegst den Umgang mit den Toten, mit Mutter und Vater und unserer unglücklichen Schwester und mit allen deinen sogenannten Geistesgrößen! Es ist erschreckend! (19)

The parallel prepositions here indicate that Rudolf's obsessions with the greats of art are a form of replacement for human loss. His sister professes to remain within the world of the living. In her life of commerce, the experience of art is tied to her business interests. The opera, she states, is 'das Allerwichtigste' for her commercial success (42). However, Bernhard's 'einerseits/andererseits' construction complicates any apparent opposition between the two characters, implying that Rudolf does not entirely disapprove of her approach to art: 'Andererseits schlägt jede meiner auf sie gerichteten Betrachtungen irgendwann und zwar von einem Augenblick auf den andern, in Bewunderung um' (41).

⁹⁹ Michael P. Olson explores the more positive feelings that Rudolf has for his sister despite his accusations. Michael P. Olson, 'Misogynist Exposed? The Sister's Role in Thomas Bernhard's *Beton* and *Der Untergeher*', *New German Review*, 3 (1987), 30-40, p. 34.

He even admires her social ease, indicating that her approach to art, grounded in her social and economic reality, is just as valid as his.

Despite her apparent coldness, Elisabeth is the only person able to pull him from the ‘Hölle des Alleinseins’ (26). Rudolf admits sending a telegram to his sister while in Peiskam and even questions the basis of his own negative assumptions:

Ich liebe dich, weil du so phantastisch bist, sagt sie öfter, aber es ist mehr Verachtung in dieser Bemerkung als das Gegenteil. Bei einem Menschen wie sie, ist es doch nur die Verlogenheit, wenn sie sagt, ich liebe dich. Oder bin ich der Schauerliche? (34)

Rudolf’s self-questioning following his sister’s simple expression of love prompts a reader in turn to question whether to take his view at face value. Elisabeth encourages him to seek alternative forms of connection: ‘Aber mit der Philosophie kannst du dich nicht ins Bett legen, mein kleiner Bruder, sagte sie oft’ (36). He responds by accusing her of promiscuity: ‘selbstverständlich kann ich das, ich beschmutze mich dabei wenigstens nicht’ (*ibid*). It is suggested that his sister may not be victimising Rudolf to the extent that he alleges. The choice of the verb ‘beschmutzen’ implies a further significance to this response. It echoes the frequent epithet for Bernhard following the publications of his controversial tirades on his homeland: ‘Nestbeschmutzer’. Bernhard overlays his fictional persona in *Beton* with a reminder of his own public image, and his interventions outside of *Beton* in social and political discourse. This self-reference reveals how, in *Beton*, as in many of the other texts by Bernhard discussed in this thesis, the author does not remove himself from the malaises he diagnoses.

There are echoes of Bernhard’s characteristically splenetic tirades later in Rudolf’s monologue:

Die Kunst ist in dieser Stadt nurmehr noch eine ekelerregende Farce, die Musik ein abgeleierter Leierkasten, die Literatur ein Alptraum und von der

Philosophie will ich gar nicht reden, da fehlen selbst mir, der ich nicht zu den allerphantasielosesten gehöre, die Wörter (63).

This is both a diagnosis of cultural degradation and a response to it. Rudolf's hypotaxis, the ornate flourish of 'abgeleierter Leierkasten' and his apophasis are all familiar rhetorical techniques that a reader may recognise from Bernhard's other works. Even if not, the staging of this rant in *Beton* reveals Elisabeth's understanding of her brother. She sees through Rudolf's tirades. 'Du bezichtigst alle aller Verbrechen', she tells him (23). She is conscious of how, as the narrator reveals in *Beton*, personal grief provides the basis of this negativity. Rudolf refers to the deaths of his friend Paul Wittgenstein and his 'Malerfreundin Joana' as the origin of his despondence (65). Yet these references, too, refer out of the text to Bernhard's wider *oeuvre*: Wittgenstein as the eponymous friend of Bernhard's narrator in a text published months before *Beton*, and Joana as the *nom de plume* of the deceased artist Elfriede Slukal in *Holzfällen*. These texts will be the subjects of subsequent chapters. Here, however, these names exemplify how, just as Rudolf's tirades are inspired by real-world loss, the text *Beton* itself is not cut off from either the literary or the real-world experience of the author.

This highlights a key contrast between *Beton* and my discussion of *Kein Ort. Nirgends* in the previous section. While Wolf's Kleist and Günderrode envision a mode of living with art in which genuine understanding is possible, this remains a utopian vision, albeit a vision closely aligned with Wolf's own utopian thinking. In Bernhard's *Beton*, human sincerity is available both between Rudolf and his sister in the text's fictional framework, and outside of Rudolf's 'Notizen' in the real-world relationships to which Bernhard alludes. This is exemplified by a very conventional phrase during a telephone call:

Ich bin neugierig, was aus deinem Mendelssohn-Bartholdy wird, hat sie noch gesagt und *naturgemäß* von mir keine Antwort erwarten können. Andererseits hatte sie sich mit einer ganz einfachen Bemerkung, daß ich

nämlich auf mich aufpassen solle, von mir verabschiedet, die mich wiederum rührte. Ich wollte aber keinerlei Sentimentalität aufkommen lassen und unterdrückte einen plötzlichen Weinkrampf, als ich den Hörer aufgelegt hatte (69).

Rudolf does not respond to his sister's expression of interest in his study, and his use of the adverb 'naturgemäß' suggests that, in his opinion, his silence is reasonable. Yet Bernhard's 'andererseits' reveals the puncturing of this silence by the most simple of phrases: 'pass auf dich auf!'. It occasions an embodied response that Rudolf is at pains to stifle, a 'Weinkrampf' that pierces through Rudolf's narrative framing (*ibid.*). This scene typifies how, in *Beton*, there are possibilities for sincerity beyond Rudolf's solitary obsessions.

This sincerity is evident in Rudolf's interactions with his housekeeper.¹⁰⁰ Rudolf presents Frau Kienesberger as the only person to whom he still speaks (78). Rudolf respects how she raises her own children and considers her the one person he can trust: 'Und oft denke ich, ich habe ja nur diesen einzigen verlässlichen Menschen, sonst niemanden' (*ibid.*). Rudolf's genuine bond with his housekeeper contrasts his presentation of an eccentric cavalry officer in Niederkreut, who refers to his housekeeper as '*dumm wie die Nacht*' (59). Rudolf visits him out of a need for others (58), but finds a figure resigned to antipathy towards society, its institutions, and everyone in it. Reliving the same story about the First World War, the cavalry officer has decided to bequeath his sizeable estate not to his daughter but to the first person he finds at random in the telephone directory (61). The identity of the recipient, Sarah Slother in Knightsbridge, suggests a material comfort that would make this inheritance insignificant. Yet the officer stands by the decision: 'Wenn wir es genau überlegen, können wir doch *nicht einem einzigen Menschen, den wir kennen*, etwas vermachen, sagte er' (*ibid.*). Rudolf initially appears to agree with the cavalry officer's

¹⁰⁰ To Olson, 'the ideal relationship for Bernhard's protagonists is identical to that between Rudolf and Frau Kienesberger, one, according to Rudolf, of compatibility and nonexploitative reflexiveness'. Olson, p. 35.

statement. It is only after travelling to Palma de Mallorca and remembering the story of Anna Härdtl that Rudolf is shaken from such an attitude.

The final section of *Beton*, which reveals Anna Härdtl's ordeal following the death of her husband and her suicide, has been described as a tale of mistreatment by an impersonal and ineffectual bureaucracy.¹⁰¹ My analysis, though, will focus on the consequences of this tragedy on Rudolf's narrative. For Rudolf, the ordinariness of Anna's husband makes her loss all the more tragic: 'ein Jüngling wie Millionen andere auch, ohne irgendetwas Außerordentliches, mager, mit traurigen Gesichtszügen' (120). He realises that Anna Härdtl's tragedy could have befallen anyone. This does not stop him from lapsing into comedy. As they return to the Hotel Zenith in Calamayor, Rudolf begins to satirise the hotel, joking that this is the type of establishment where elderly German widows are sent by their relatives. His assumptions, though, are suddenly punctured by Anna's irrepressible show of emotion: 'ein heftig aus ihr herausquellender Weinkrampf' (123). Just as Elisabeth's ordinary statement provokes Rudolf's 'Weinkrampf' earlier (69), Bernhard shows how the intensity of this experience punctures the habitual thought patterns of the protagonist:

Ich hätte alle meine Energien auf meinen Mendelssohn-Bartholdy konzentrieren sollen, und der Gedanke an diese meine Arbeit war mir auf einmal durch die Tragödie der Härdtl, die, ja, wie ich gleich wieder denken mußte, schon über eineinhalb Jahre zurückliegt, sie liegt in Wirklichkeit schon über zwei Jahre zurück, und vielleicht trifft mich jetzt diese Tragödie erst richtig, während sie von der jungen Härdtl, dem eigentlichen Opfer und ihrem Sohn möglicherweise zu diesem Zeitpunkt längst überstanden, ja, auch das wäre möglich, dachte ich folgerichtig, bereits vergessen ist, entsetzlich (125).

Rudolf can no longer concentrate on his study; the tragedy of Anna Härdtl shifts his focus. The intrusions of the particle 'ja', the desperate repetitions of temporal distance, and the

¹⁰¹ Uwe Schütte also reads this part of the text as a social tragedy, drawing attention to the class difference between Rudolf and Anna. See Uwe Schütte, 'Beton', in *Bernhard-Handbuch*, ed. by Mittermayer and Huber, pp. 64-8 (p. 65).

delay and qualifications before the final ‘entsetzlich’ reveal how his plans for his academic project are breaking down. After the narrator returns to the cemetery ‘mit einer entsetzlichen Entschiedenheit’, the revelation of her suicide does not provide any closure to the story (131).¹⁰² Instead, the final act of this text mirrors the first: Rudolf’s swallowing of medication, albeit sleeping pills instead of *Prednisolon* (*ibid.*).

The significance of this encounter is typified by Rudolf’s reflection on his academic undertaking. As the final line of the text echoes the clause ‘schreibt Rudolf’ from the first, Bernhard signals that, instead of his academic project, Rudolf is composing an account of this sudden and chance human connection (*ibid.*). In Karl E. Webb’s reading of the text, the moment in which Rudolf leaves Upper Austria for Mallorca signals his sudden physical energy and his new ability to write an ‘account of his own inner journey’.¹⁰³ Yet the act of remembering Anna Härdtl’s tragedy also prompts him to consider another human connection:

Anstatt über Mendelssohn, schreibe ich diese Notizen, denke ich und: ich muß Elisabeth, meine Schwester, in Wien anrufen (130).

The colon suggests a shift from Rudolf’s solitary academic pursuit in Peiskam. It is one of the few times in the text that Rudolf names his sister, indicating that the real-world tragedy of Anna Härdtl prompts Rudolf to express concern for the family figure closest to him. At the end of *Beton*, Rudolf acknowledges the sibling connection central to his existence. The ‘Notizen’ composed in Mallorca, furthermore, consist of his reflections on both

¹⁰² Anne Thill reads the narrative differently, as a therapeutic act in which Rudolf writes himself free of this traumatic history. Anne Thill, *Die Kunst, die Komik und das Erzählen im Werk Thomas Bernhards: Textinterpretationen und die Entwicklung des Gesamtwerks* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2011), p. 370.

¹⁰³ Karl E. Webb, ‘First Sentences, Autobiography, and Self-Irony: Thomas Bernhard’s *Beton*’, in *Modern Austrian Prose: Interpretations and Insights*, ed. by Paul F. Dvorak (Riverside, CA: Ariadne, 2001), pp. 218-46 (p. 240).

Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and Anna Härdtl. His artistic project is inseparable from his relationship with others, and vice versa.

This interpretation of *Beton* has ramifications for understanding Bernhard's aesthetics more widely. Unlike Bernhard's *Korrektur. Roman* (1975), Bernhard never refers to *Beton*, nor any of his prose works post-1980, as a novel. Rudolf's term 'Notizen' appears frequently in Bernhard's late prose, as does 'Bericht'. Furthermore, this first-person narrative frequently digresses into the kinds of tirades recognisable from Bernhard's other modes of writing, and alludes to the real-life connections of Bernhard outside the text. The work is not isolated from other emanations of Bernhard's authorship. Wolf's ideal, expressed to Hans Kaufmann, of a mode of writing that runs alongside life, seems apt for describing the aesthetic of *Beton*, which returns to settings and motifs from earlier works, and re-thinks the relationship between committing to art and living in the world. The text is most commonly read as a study of artistic failure before an insurmountable project, and various authors have taken this theme from *Beton* as inspiration for their own creative responses to Bernhard.¹⁰⁴ By examining this work against the constructed intellectual backdrop of this chapter, though, I have proposed that it also portrays both the interpersonal relationships that make Rudolf's study possible and the contingency of this study on his relationships. Rudolf's academic commitment to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy in *Beton* does not exist separately from human connections outside of it and, moreover, the focus of his project radically shifts as Rudolf responds to those around him. This is significant for understanding the treatments of art in Bernhard's prose fictions of the 1980s.

For Bernhard in *Beton*, therefore, engaging with art does not open a heightened political understanding, nor does art open a world of human relations unavailable in the

¹⁰⁴ Geoff Dyer plays on *Beton* in his portrayal of the central unfinished academic project in *Out of Sheer Rage* (see Introduction). See also Mittermayer, *Biographie*, p. 355.

present. In *Beton*, art is a part of the social world in which his protagonist forms connections with others. As I have proposed, the narrative construction of *Beton* reflects this approach to art through its own connections with Bernhard's wider fictional and non-fictional *oeuvre*. *Der Untergeher*, I will argue, builds on this project and highlights precisely how Bernhard's prose fictions of the 1980s depart from the German-speaking comparative context constructed earlier in this chapter. Exploring ideas of artistic genius in an age of technological reproducibility, *Der Untergeher* advances a conception of art as a practice integrated within human relations. The following section will argue that Bernhard not only thematises this conception of art via the central friendship between three bourgeois male characters in this text, but the narrative structure, linguistic style, and referential framework of this text also stage it.

1.3.2. Art as a social practice in *Der Untergeher*

Human relationships are at the heart of *Der Untergeher*. In the first two-thirds of the text, the unnamed narrator enters an inn in Wankham, Upper Austria, as he returns from the funeral of his friend Wertheimer. Waiting for the innkeeper to arrive, he reflects on his time studying alongside Wertheimer and the renowned Canadian pianist Glenn Gould under Vladimir Horowitz at Salzburg's *Mozarteum*. Both he and Wertheimer gave up their musical careers after hearing Gould's inimitable virtuoso performance of Bach's *Goldbergvariationen*, the narrator moving to Madrid to write a study on the Canadian pianist, while Wertheimer withdrew into philosophical study. Only the title of Wertheimer's academic project remains: 'Der Untergeher', an epithet that Gould had given to him when they studied together. The narrator speaks with the innkeeper and learns of her intimate relationship with Wertheimer, before travelling to Traich to recover the papers left in his friend's estate. On arriving, though, the narrator is informed by Wertheimer's housekeeper Franz that the papers have been burned.

Having argued that, in *Beton*, Bernhard approaches art as contingent on his protagonist's relationships with others, I will now propose that, in *Der Untergeher*, Bernhard *stages* the experience of art as a practice in dialogue with forms of human interaction beyond the world of his fiction. Whereas Jelinek's novel of the same year presents art as a discourse complicit in the plight of her pianist, Bernhard approaches art differently. In *Der Untergeher*, engaging with art facilitates the acknowledgement of a human relationship and, at the same time, Bernhard provides an opportunity for his reader to share in the cultural context of the work. This shared context becomes apparent in the narrator's first sentence:

Auch Glenn Gould, unser Freund und der wichtigste Klaviervirtuose des Jahrhunderts, ist nur einundfünfzig geworden, dachte ich beim Eintreten in das Gasthaus (W6, 7).

Like Weiss and Wolf, Bernhard portrays a renowned cultural figure in his fiction—here, the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould who had died in October 1982, months before the publication of *Der Untergeher*. In addition, he alludes to a recording that would have been readily available to his readers: Gould's new interpretation of the *Goldbergvariationen* by Johann Sebastian Bach, released in 1981. The recording, I will argue, is central to understanding both the relationship between the three bourgeois male friends in *Der Untergeher* and the conception of art that the text stages. In contrast to the contextual backdrop constructed earlier in this chapter, art in *Der Untergeher* is a practice that assists the acknowledgement of connections that his characters otherwise do not perceive until it is too late.

The first-person narrator portrays Gould as a genius who, like many of Bernhard's *Geistesmenschen*, has withdrawn from the world to create in private: 'Er war der einzige weltbedeutende Klaviervirtuose, der sein Publikum verabscheute und sich auch von diesem

verabscheuten Publikum tatsächlich und endgültig zurückgezogen hat' (24). This is a quality that the friends share. Using Gould's own term, the narrator refers to this tendency as 'Verrammelungsfanatismus' (19). But Gould also withdraws from his friends, refusing Wertheimer's invitations to Traich and only interacting with them via gifts of his recordings:

[W]ir bedankten uns dafür, das war alles. Im Grunde verband uns das vollkommen Nichtsentimentale unserer Freundschaft, auch Wertheimer war ja völlig unsentimental, wenn's auch oft den Anschein hatte vom Gegenteil. Wenn er jammerte, war es nicht Sentimentalität, sondern Berechnung, Kalkül (33).

Their reaction to these gifts appears unnecessarily cold.¹⁰⁵ The narrator's presentation of these gifts as distinctly unsentimental invites a reader's scepticism, since it does not seem proportionate to Glenn's gesture. Despite the apparent lack of sentiment in their relationship, the narrator still listens to a recording of the *Goldbergvariationen* prior to travelling to Wertheimer's funeral:

Ich stellte keinen Unterschied fest. Glenn hatte schon vor achtundzwanzig Jahren die Goldbergvariationen so gespielt wie auf diesen Platten, die er mir übrigens zu meinem fünfzigsten Geburtstag geschickt hatte (56).

The aside introduces an important detail. The fact that the narrator received this recording for his fiftieth birthday implies that he is listening to the 1981 recording of Bach's *Goldbergvariationen*. Despite the passage of time since Gould's performance of the piece, the narrator reveres this recording as much as the original live performance. Glenn's art loses no trace of its former genius in an age of technological reproducibility. However, the fact that the narrator plays this recording before the funeral of his friend also suggests the intimacy of a relationship for which he can only find expression through the recording.

¹⁰⁵ Francis Michael Sharp argues that Bernhard captures Gould's dispassionate focus on the musical experience via the coldness typical of Bernhard's characters. Francis Michael Sharp, 'Thomas Bernhard: Literary Cryogenics or Art on Ice', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 21 (1988), 201-15 (p. 209).

Although the narrator and his friends have each in various ways withdrawn from social contact, art offers a way of acknowledging their mutual bond.

From the narrator's perspective, the suffering of Wertheimer originates from his desperation to live up to the talent of Glenn Gould.¹⁰⁶ He characterises Wertheimer as 'ein ununterbrochener *Nacheiferer*' (84). Whether via Glenn Gould, Gustav Mahler or Alban Berg, Wertheimer strove to escape his own self (83). Glenn Gould's epithet for Wertheimer, 'der Untergeher', is thus particularly scathing, confirming his inability to reach the same level of genius as the Canadian virtuoso, and forewarning Wertheimer's suicide. To the narrator, Wertheimer's practice of imitation stems from his failure to perceive his own uniqueness:

Jeder Mensch ist ein einmaliger Mensch und tatsächlich, für sich gesehen, das größte Kunstwerk aller Zeiten, so habe ich immer gedacht und denken dürfen, dachte ich [...] Wir müssen kein Genie sein, um einmalig zu sein und das auch erkennen zu können, dachte ich (83-4).

As suggested by his response to the recording of Gould's *Goldbergvariationen*, the narrator associates great works of art with their uniqueness. However, he dissociates this from his idea of genius. To use a word coined by Wertheimer in this text in his reverence for the Canadian pianist, an individual need not be 'glenngenial' to be unique (39).

The characters in *Der Untergeher* do not consider genius in the same way. Wertheimer, for example, sees the greats of literature and philosophy as anything but unique. He instead reads great figures of literature and philosophy as evidence of the same helplessness:

Wir studieren ein ungeheuerliches Werk, beispielsweise das Werk Kants und es schrumpft mit der Zeit auf den kleinen Ostpreußenkopf Kants und auf

¹⁰⁶ Carl Niekerk argues that the narrator projects his own insecurities onto Wertheimer. Carl Niekerk, 'Der Umgang mit dem Untergang: Projektion als erzählerisches Prinzip in Thomas Bernhards *Untergeher*', *Monatshefte*, 85 (1993), 464-77 (p. 468).

eine ganz und gar vage Welt aus Nacht und Nebel zusammen, die in der gleichen Hilflosigkeit endet wie alle andern, sagte er, dachte ich [...] Auch Shakespeare schrumpft uns zur Lächerlichkeit zusammen, wenn wir einen hellsichtigen Augenblick haben, sagte er, dachte ich (61).

Like Reger in the passage from *Alte Meister* cited at the outset of this chapter, Wertheimer directs his tirade at Shakespeare and Kant. The comedic caricaturing in this tirade, reducing Kant to his ‘Ostpreußenkopf’ and shrinking Shakespeare to the point of ridicule, deconstructs the aura around any such ‘ungeheuerliches Werk’. They belong alongside Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Pascal, and various other namedropped philosophers locked away in his bookcase (62). Wertheimer’s levelling gaze associates their helplessness with his own. Their crowning achievement, to Wertheimer, is nonsense: ‘es ist in dieser Welt nur Unsinn gesagt worden bis jetzt und, sagte er, tatsächlich und naturgemäß, nur Unsinn geschrieben worden’ (*ibid.*).

It is possible to read this passage as a deconstruction of the idea of genius in art. There have been various interpretations of *Der Untergeher* along these lines. Reinhild Steingröver, for example, argues that *Der Untergeher* plays on theories of genius by Kant and Schopenhauer to ironise them, uncovering the arbitrariness of the concept.¹⁰⁷ Fatima Naqvi interprets the fact that the friends rehearse in the former studio of a world-famous Nazi sculptor as evidence that ideas of artistic genius are always relative, a ‘Kollaboration mit der herrschenden Gruppe und deren Meinung’.¹⁰⁸ Florian Trabert suggests the relevance to *Der Untergeher* of Wagner’s *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1850), discussing how

¹⁰⁷ Reinhild Steingröver, *Einerseits und Andererseits: Essays zur Prosa Thomas Bernhards* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 66-7.

¹⁰⁸ Fatima Naqvi, ‘Von Türhütern, Meistern und Untergängern: Dilettantismus in Thomas Bernhards *Der Untergeher*’, in *Österreichische Literatur ohne Grenzen: Gedenkschrift für Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler*, ed. by Attila Bombitz (Wien: Praesens, 2009), pp. 317-34 (p. 322).

Bernhard exposes anti-Semitism as the shadow side of the Romantic discourse of genius.¹⁰⁹ However, Wertheimer's habit of imitation also suggests further nuance to the idea of genius in *Der Untergeher*. Through Wertheimer, Bernhard advances a conception of genius that relies on interaction instead of uniqueness. Wertheimer's philosophical project perceives a common helplessness in the greats of literature and philosophy and imitates those with whom he shares this condition. Where the narrator and Glenn Gould withdraw into solitude, Wertheimer still tries to engage with these artistic models and, as becomes clear, needs human company.

As the narrator speaks with the innkeeper in Wankham, the reader receives a different impression of Wertheimer than has been constructed thus far. The innkeeper describes him as 'leutselig', having given artists and musicians the keys to his hunting lodge in Traich even though they abused his trust (103). This surprises the narrator, who had never associated this term with Wertheimer (*ibid.*). The intimacy between the innkeeper and Wertheimer is underscored through her repetitions of his common turns of phrase: 'das Wort *eigenartig* war auch nicht von ihr, sondern von Wertheimer, der eine Vorliebe für das Wort *eigenartig* gehabt hat, wie ich dachte' (104). The narrator appears distanced from such mutual understanding. He immediately judges the innkeeper through referring to her open blouse and her 'abstoßende, widerwärtige, gleichzeitig anziehende Natur' (102). The social difference between the narrator and the innkeeper becomes clear as he reveals that his uncle built the factories that employ ninety percent of the men in the area, including her late husband (116). The narrator reports that he and Wertheimer share both the desire and the inability to sit with the 'sogenannten einfachen Leuten' (127). But only Wertheimer can

¹⁰⁹ Florian Trabert, "'Wertheimer wäre gern Glenn Gould gewesen': Der Diskurs über Judentum und Musik in Thomas Bernhards Roman *Der Untergeher* und seine Vorgeschichte bei Richard Wagner, Otto Weininger und Thomas Mann', *Symposium*, 63 (2009), 162-77 (p. 165).

establish a relationship with the innkeeper. Despite her disapproval of Wertheimer's suicide, the discussion reveals their mutual care.

Wertheimer's personal relationships are not uniformly positive. The subjugation of Erika Kohut in the space of the family home in *Die Klavierspielerin* finds an uncomfortable parallel in Wertheimer's treatment of his sister, confined in their apartment with the curtains drawn in Vienna's *Kohlmarkt* (43). Franz Kohlroser, the woodcutter whom the narrator meets outside Wertheimer's hunting lodge in Traich, reports how their relationship would fluctuate between dependency and abuse (142). Wertheimer listened to her performances of works by Handel to fall asleep and ordered her to act as his page-turner. The narrator indicates that Wertheimer's greatest fear was to be alone:

[E]r war kein *Alleinmensch*, dachte ich, und so hat er seine Schwester, die er im übrigen, obwohl er sie gehaßt hat, auch wie keinen anderen Menschen sonst auf der Welt, geliebt hat, immer nach Traich mitgenommen, um sie auf seine Weise zu *mißbrauchen* (142-3).

On the one hand, Wertheimer's decision to commit suicide one hundred steps from her house is described as his final act of violence, plunging her in 'ein lebenslängliches Schuldgefühl' (48). The nominal play of Wertheimer on Goethe's Werther suggests the ardent desire that impels his final act. Yet the narrator acknowledges that this act, too, is part of Wertheimer's practice of imitation. Ashamed to have outlived a virtuoso of such talent, Wertheimer imitates his death: 'Wertheimer hatte Glenn nacheifern wollen, dachte ich, es gleichzeitig der Schwester zeigen wollen, ihr alles *heimzahlen* wollen' (*ibid.*).

Bernhard overtly parallels Wertheimer's dependency on his artistic project with his need for his sister. After his sister escapes to Chur, Wertheimer invites his former classmates back to Traich for a performance. In deliberately ordering an out-of-tune piano, a so-called 'Dilettanteninstrument' (149), though, Wertheimer abandons the pursuit of high art he used to value. The resulting gesture suggests his conflicting impulses: a desire to establish a

connection with his audience through his art, and the simultaneous abuse of his audience through his obsessive and incessant playing:

Vielleicht hat er sie mit dem Klavierspiel alle wahnsinnig machen wollen, sagte der Franz, den kaum waren sie da, hat er ihnen Bach und Händel vorgespielt, solange bis sie davongelaufen sind, ins Freie und wenn sie zurückgekommen waren, hatten sie wieder sein Klavierspiel in Kauf nehmen müssen (147).

This scene has been interpreted as Wertheimer's artistic breakdown.¹¹⁰ It could be another form of payback, following the innkeeper's report of how his acquaintances used Wertheimer's hunting lodge in the past. Yet his choices of composers in the above passage also suggests a desire for connection. The reference to Handel is reminiscent of the pieces played by Wertheimer's sister, while Bach is a reminder of the central male relationship in this novel and his devastation by the death of Glenn Gould.

The reappearance of Bach's *Goldbergvariationen* at the climax of *Der Untergeher* is central to understanding this connection. On entering the hunting lodge in Traich, the narrator learns that the dutiful 'Holzknecht' Franz Kohlroser has burned all of Wertheimer's notes (149). After asking Franz to leave him for some time in Wertheimer's room, however, the narrator sees the recording of Glenn's *Goldbergvariationen* on a 'Plattenspieler, der noch offen war' (150). The text ends on the image of the recording that unites the three characters, and the same piece of music that the narrator plays before the funeral of Glenn Gould. The reproduced recording has lost none of its uniqueness since their years in the *Mozarteum*. The recording of a piece of music that initiated the divergent careers of the three male characters still establishes a connection between them. Despite their overt lack

¹¹⁰ Trabert, p. 170. To Micaela Latini, this is Wertheimer's attempt to radicalise his own nature as the 'Untergeher' and destroy his own art. Micaela Latini, 'Die Gewalt der Musik. Zu Thomas Bernhards *Der Untergeher*', in *Intermedialität – Multimedialität: Literatur und Musik in Deutschland von 1900 bis heute*, ed. by Raul Calzoni, Peter Kofler, and Valentina Savietto (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2015), pp. 137-50 (p. 150).

of sentiment and their estrangement, the reappearance of this recording at the text's climax appears an acknowledgement of their shared bond by both Wertheimer and the narrator. The narrator, whose recurrent clause 'dachte ich' signals to a reader throughout this text that he is reflecting on his experience at the inn in retrospect, is confronted by a recording that encapsulates the continued importance of their friendship, decades later. But this final image can also be read as an acknowledgement by the text, which can help to guide our understanding of the treatment of art in *Der Untergeher* more generally.

Despite sharing its title with Wertheimer's academic project and the nickname that Glenn gave him, the text is not a biography of Wertheimer. There is no single interpretation available of why Wertheimer committed suicide. The burning of Wertheimer's papers suggests that the narrator will never know. However, attention to the significance of the recording of Gould's *Goldbergvariationen* permits a further reading. The work is a testament to a relationship that the three bourgeois male protagonists can only acknowledge through the shared experience of art. But this experience is not exclusive to the fictional characters. By invoking a recently-released recording of Bach's *Goldbergvariationen*, available in the public domain, Bernhard invites his reader too to share in this connection. Even now, the availability of the recording still enables Bernhard's reader to share in the final scene of the text and, in so doing, to be part of the human connection facilitated by this work of art. Whereas, in Jelinek's contemporary deconstruction of art as a discourse, the potential of art inheres in committing violence to the bourgeois male canon, art in *Der Untergeher* still has its place in social living.

The text of *Der Untergeher* becomes a testament to the friendship of the three male characters. This is underscored by the terms used by the characters and recorded in the narrative: Glenn's references to 'Selbstdisziplin' and 'Verrammelungsfanatismus' (19), as well as Wertheimer's novel compounds 'glenngenial' (39), 'schweizerreich' (43), and

‘Weltanschauungskünstler’ (64). Each of the characters approach the world via the shared terms developed in their interactions. Just as the innkeeper’s wife continues to use Wertheimer’s common sayings, the central narrative act of reporting the statements of his late friend Wertheimer enables the narrator to maintain the key terms of their bond. Yet it is significant that the narrative ends on the image of the open gramophone. The reappearance of Gould’s interpretation of the *Goldbergvariationen* suggests that this work of art can acknowledge the human relationships in this narrative beyond the friends’ own terms of understanding. The recording forms an expression of the friendship that was not articulated during Gould or Wertheimer’s lifetimes.

In *Der Untergeher*, a work of art facilitates a human relationship and forms part of that relationship. The question arises, however, of whether this conception of art in *Der Untergeher* is generalisable beyond the expert culture that Bernhard portrays. The characters of *Der Untergeher* are archetypal Bernhardian artists or academics, retiring into isolation to pursue their ideal artistic performance or aesthetic project. In *Beton*, too, the protagonist is an academic researching Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. Both texts raise the problem of whether such an experience of art is only available to experts on Romantic composers or those lucky enough to have attended the *Mozarteum* with Glenn Gould. Moreover, it is questionable whether such art needs to be a cultural masterpiece, or whether it can be flawed. Bernhard examines these questions in his last-written prose text, *Alte Meister*. In this text, I argue, Bernhard re-works his trope of an isolated male *Geistesmensch* encountering art in an Austrian cultural institution to offer a down-to-earth portrayal of ways of living with art.

1.3.3. Meaning in art in *Alte Meister*

Alte Meister is premised on the kind of artistic encounter that takes place frequently in Weiss’ *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*. The music philosopher, Reger, sits in front of a

canonical painting, Tintoretto's *Weißbärtiger Mann*. He has visited this painting in the *Bordone-Saal* of Vienna's *Kunsthistorisches Museum* every other day for over thirty years. However, Reger's bleak tirades, reported by his friend Atzbacher, appear anything but positive about art. In his reflections on Kant and Shakespeare cited at the outset of this chapter, he claims that art no longer provides any answers or consolation for him. In the following re-reading of *Alte Meister*, I will advance a new perspective on the development of Reger's conception of art. I will argue that, in *Alte Meister*, Reger progresses from looking to art for answers to an appreciation of his cultural pursuits as inseparable from ordinary ways of living with others in the outside world. Furthermore, through re-reading Reger's sweeping invectives in the text on cultural figures from Adalbert Stifter to Martin Heidegger, I will make a case for the relevance of Bernhard's treatment of art beyond the domestic contexts in which his works are most frequently situated.

Reger's visit to the museum on a Saturday is a break from habit (W8, 7). The narrator, Atzbacher, is confused as to why Reger has asked to meet him on this day, in full knowledge that Atzbacher never attends the museum on consecutive days. Before meeting him, Atzbacher stands at a distance and observes Reger. To Atzbacher, Reger is a genius: '*ein wissenschaftliches Genie, ja sogar ein menschliches Genie*' (15). Yet both characters share a sense of isolation: Atzbacher as the quintessential Bernhardian *Geistesmensch* devoting himself to philosophical writings; and Reger sitting in the *Bordone-Saal* in the solitude facilitated by the 'Saalwart', Irrsieglar. Tintoretto's *Weißbärtiger Mann* has a personal significance for Reger. He remembers with delight how his late wife did not like it. Since the death of his wife, Reger's view of art, and life in general, has changed. He turns against art as a source of meaning in his existence:

Und Sie erkennen, nicht diese großen Geister und nicht diese Alten Meister sind es, die Sie Jahrzehnte am Leben erhalten haben, sondern daß es nur

dieser eine einzige Mensch, den Sie wie keinen zweiten geliebt haben, gewesen ist (179).

Looking to the Old Masters for solace, Reger feels abandoned.

As Atzbacher reports on their conversation, he portrays Reger's idiosyncratic method of looking at art. Like Wertheimer as he pores over Shakespeare and Kant in *Der Untergeher*, Reger sees art as an expression of failure.

Um sie ertragen zu können, suche ich in und an jedem einzelnen einen sogenannten *gravierenden Fehler*, eine Vorgangsweise, die bis jetzt immer zum Ziel geführt hat, nämlich aus jedem dieser sogenannten vollendeten Kunstwerke ein Fragment zu machen, sagte er (28).

Reger breaks down the apparent totality of an artwork into something not yet realised. He searches for a 'gravierenden Fehler' that betrays the humanity and helplessness of its creator, deriving comfort from this flaw. This is not a negation of art's value, but provides his protagonist with a means of accessing the situation out of which, he believes, such art developed. Reger describes this as 'Hilflosigkeit':

Wir lieben ja Pascal nicht, weil er so vollendet ist, sondern weil er im Grunde so hilflos ist, wie wir Montaigne wegen seiner lebenslänglich suchenden und nicht findenden Hilflosigkeit lieben, Voltaire wegen seiner Hilflosigkeit. Wir lieben die Philosophie und die ganze Geisteswissenschaft insgesamt ja nur, weil sie absolut hilflos ist (29).

Reger's namedropping does not appear to evidence any substantive engagement with Pascal, Montaigne, or Voltaire. The style of this passage, with Bernhard's parade of subordinate clauses and repetitions, instead has the effect of homogenising them. In Reger's view, all of these writers can be grouped together as expressing a common helplessness: a condition that inspires art and yet guarantees its imperfection, and with which each of them has to cope.

Reger describes this helplessness in contradistinction to two other kinds of aesthetic response in Bernhard's text. Firstly, Reger expresses his qualms with the unqualified worship of an artwork as a sacrosanct totality. He claims that this approach renders the beholder blind, shielding them from engaging with the work.

Die Leute schleppen schwer an ihrer Bewunderung, sie haben nicht den Mut, ihre Bewunderung genauso an der Garderobe unten abzugeben wie ihren Mantel (78).

He explains that this burden promotes an incorrigible bow of deference to such artworks, a sense of fixity in judging art and the world that Reger contrasts with the openness of 'Achtung' (*ibid.*).¹¹¹ Art requires an engagement with failure as much as totality. His reference to the 'Garderobe' questions the difference between how visitors approach art inside the institution of the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* and how they act outside of this setting. Failure is just as possible in art as outside of it.

Secondly, Bernhard introduces an Anglophone *Doppelgänger* to question the relation between such engagement and artistic originality. The Englishman from Wales firstly unsettles Reger by asking why he is sitting there at all:

Ja, sagte ich, ich weiß es selbst nicht, was ich hier suche, habe ich zu dem Engländer aus Wales gesagt, es ist mir nichts anderes eingefallen (93).

Reger cannot justify why he is in the museum; only *that* he is there. The nervous curiosity of the Englishman from Wales draws attention to Reger's difficulty to articulate the reason why he is viewing this painting in solitude. By contrast, the Englishman from Wales has a defined mission. Claiming to possess an identical *Weißbärtiger Mann* at home, he is

¹¹¹ Brett Sterling argues: 'The inability of most people to make high art into something ridiculous is in turn a root cause of what Reger sees as the unwarranted, even idiotic, veneration of art by uncritical observers'. Brett Sterling, 'The Perfection of Imperfection: Nicolas Mahler's *Alte Meister*', in *New Perspectives on German-Language Comics Studies: History, Pedagogy, Theory*, ed. by Lynn Marie Kutch (London: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 237-58 (p. 251).

determined to find out which painting is the original. As Reger's thoughts drift onto whether Tintoretto in fact created a second version of the same painting, Bernhard indicates the irrelevance of this question through Reger's curt dismissal: 'Wie die Sache ausgegangen ist, weiß ich nicht, sagte Reger, ich habe mich nicht mehr darum gekümmert' (100). Unlike this *Doppelgänger*, Reger resists regarding one work as a more valuable product of original genius. Both original and copy enable him to locate helplessness in everything he analyses.

These frameworks for approaching art are relevant to the text's digressions on three cultural figures in particular: Anton Bruckner, Adalbert Stifter, and Martin Heidegger. Reger's tirades on each exhibit the kind of comic exaggerations common to the Bernhardian 'Bezeichnungen' in *Beton*. Reger's statement that he is related to all of these greats has also prompted interpretations that Bernhard uses this comic tirade to confront his own literary inheritance from his maternal grandfather, Johannes Freumbichler.¹¹² Yet these tirades are not to be taken at face value as the views of the author.¹¹³ By staging such vitriol via his ageing protagonist, Bernhard offers an insight into the approaches to art explored in the text, drawing parallels among the kinds of helplessness that Reger perceives in each of these figures. The initial shock of allegations of the 'kitsch' Stifter's 'stümperhaftes Deutsch oder Österreichisch' (47), for example, may distract from his subtler observations about Stifter's art. Reger first declares the falsity of Stifter's pronouncements on nature: 'Niemals ist die Natur so falsch konstruiert, wie sie Stifter beschreibt und ebensowenig ist sie so langweilig, wie er uns auf seinem geduldigen Papier glauben macht, sagte Reger' (51). The transferred epithet, 'geduldig', implies that Stifter distils nature into a placid backdrop that bears no relation to its essence. He dismisses Stifter's popularity as a sign of a time in which concepts

¹¹² Mittermayer, *Biografie*, p. 379.

¹¹³ For example, Bernhard recalled to Krista Fleischmann a performance of Bruckner's *Ave Maria* in the church at St. Veit im Pongau: 'so was Schönes habe ich wirklich in meinem Leben nie gehört'. See Bernhard, *W22.2*, p. 322.

such as ‘Wald’ and ‘Waldsterben’ are widespread in everyday discourse. In these conditions, academics have turned Stifter’s writings into ‘totes Germanistenpapier’ (54). This preface to Reger’s rant dismisses such academic vogues as deadening.¹¹⁴

At times, however, Reger seems to redeem him. He depicts Stifter’s response to nature as unapologetically individual, and against the grain of contemporary expectations: ‘Eine Seite vom Stifter von einem seiner Schüler Stifter vorgelegt, wäre von Stifter total mit dem Rotstift zerkrizelt worden, sagte er, das ist die Wahrheit’ (49). Even if, according to Reger, Stifter’s efforts were apparently unsuccessful—‘er hat die Natur nur verkitscht’ (54)—Stifter appears as an artist finding his own way of responding to his environment. This unites Stifter with his fellow Upper Austrian, Anton Bruckner. Reger dismisses Bruckner as ‘kein Genie’ and accuses him of compositional ‘Schlampigkeit’ (49). The repetitions of such accusations as ‘kitsch’ and ‘schlampig’ in Reger’s tirade, though, indicate their lack of substance. Reger instead homogenises these figures: ‘diese oberösterreichische Schlampigkeit haben die beiden gemeinsam’ (*ibid.*). Both Stifter and Bruckner exemplify a common condition.

This condition becomes clearer as Reger turns to Heidegger, a figure guilty of the same crime: ‘[er hat] die Philosophie und Literatur heillos verkitscht’ (55). In Reger’s comic caricature of the German philosopher, Heidegger obsessively weaves from his own materials in rural seclusion:

Heidegger [...] sehe ich immer auf seiner Schwarzwaldhausbank sitzen neben seiner Frau, die ihm in ihrem perversen Strickenthusiasmus ununterbrochen Winterstrümpfe strickt mit der von ihr selbst von den eigenen Heideggerschaften heruntergeschorenen Wolle (56).

¹¹⁴ Alfred Doppler has also related this section on Stifter to Bernhard’s wider concerns with art in the novel: ‘Nicht der fürchterliche Ernst der gängigen Stifter-Rezeption, sondern die Methode des Karikierens dient dem Autor und der Kunstbetrachtung und verhindert es, an Bewunderung zu erkranken’. Alfred Doppler, ‘Thomas Bernhards *Alte Meister*. Stifterexperiment und Stifterprobe’, in *Thomas Bernhard: Traditionen und Trabanten*, ed. by Hoell and Luehrs-Kaiser, pp. 71-4 (p. 74).

Heidegger and his wife construct their existence out of self-made tools and with a perverse enthusiasm. This trope of retreating into the Schwarzwald reprises a familiar trope from Bernhard's fictions. It is as if, like Rudolf and Glenn Gould, Heidegger's commitment to a personal project has necessitated his retreat into isolation. Heidegger's existence, for all of Reger's satire, also resonates with the public image of Bernhard in bucolic isolation in Ohlsdorf. These resonances suggest that the rant is more than a bravura broadside on the German philosopher; it is a rhetorical set piece acknowledging the commonality of the creative condition experienced by Heidegger. Its delivery within the narrative in *Alte Meister* is also anything but an expression of isolation; Reger's ranting takes place in the coffee house of the Hotel Ambassador as a means of establishing a connection with another.

The hallmark of these tirades, as in *Beton* and *Der Untergeher*, is the protagonist's distinctive linguistic style. Bernhard's novel compounds and comic polyptoton are evident in his descriptions of 'Heideggerwolle', 'Heideggerschafe', and 'Heideggermilch' (56). There is a parallel here between Bernhard's own idiosyncratic formulations and the materials from which Heidegger is weaving—his 'selbstgebacken' formulae. At these points of narrative stasis in the text, such tirades become a standalone set-piece performance, but one recognisable to those familiar with Bernhard's tirades in his other modes of writing. Bernhard develops a shared style across these texts, not unlike the distinctive formulations that bind the three male friends in *Der Untergeher*. Such connections between the tirades across Bernhard's texts not only suggest the common presence of a unifying authorial project but they also connect Reger's tirades on the Upper Austrians Bruckner and Stifter with another artist staging himself in Upper Austrian seclusion: Bernhard himself. If Heidegger copes with existence by weaving his own socks, so (figuratively) does Bernhard. I will return to Bernhard's associations of himself with his narrators in my discussion of *Holzfällen* in the next chapter.

The climax to *Alte Meister* confirms the kinds of connection that art makes available. Reger reveals that he has invited Atzbacher to the museum so that he could accompany him to a performance of Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug* (1808) (192). Instead of using art as a vehicle to escape from existence, or as an answer to his personal melancholy, art here facilitates the acknowledgement of concern for another human being. The break from habit, comic tirades and digressions of the novel have all led to a final, commonplace act of inviting another person to the theatre. It turns out that the performance is a disappointment, which Atzbacher describes using one of Bernhard's familiar adjectives: 'Die Vorstellung war entsetzlich' (193). But it is questionable whether that matters. J. J. Long reads these final words as laying bare the triviality of the text's hermeneutic sequence as a pretext for its reflections on the personal and collective past.¹¹⁵ Fatima Naqvi reads the statement as Atzbacher's expression of intellectual independence from his genius mentor.¹¹⁶ Yet this is also a significant step for Reger: his progression from isolation to the recognition that identifying with art is part of his existence within a social world. Whether or not the production of *Der zerbrochene Krug* is flawed, or exhibits a 'gravierenden Fehler', the experience of art has nevertheless prompted Reger to engage with others.

This climax distinguishes Bernhard's text from the contextual backdrop of the 1980s constructed in this chapter. The instances of ekphrasis in *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, in which the narrator, Coppi, and Heilmann interpreted canonical works of art as part of their own developing political self-understanding, are a far cry from the treatment of Tintoretto's painting in *Alte Meister*. Art does not contain ways of living that are unavailable to Reger in the world outside of it, in contrast to *Kein Ort. Nirgends*. Unlike *Die Klavierspielerin*,

¹¹⁵ Long, p. 156.

¹¹⁶ Fatima Naqvi, 'Of Dilettantes and Men of Taste: Thomas Bernhard's Pedagogical Project in *Alte Meister*', *Monatshefte*, 96 (2004), 252-72 (p. 269).

Alte Meister moves beyond the inconsolability of the protagonist to show how art, even when ‘entsetzlich’ and flawed, is part of how his characters live with each other. Far from questioning the value of art, or bleakly dismissing the redemptive potential of artistic engagement, Bernhard’s later works provide a down-to-earth vision of art as in dialogue with other forms of social practice.

These texts themselves can be thought of as being engaged in the same dialogue. Bernhard’s cultural references, intertextual echoes, and use of his own biography all blur the distinctions between his fictions and the social worlds outside of them. As with Bernhard’s allusions to Glenn Gould’s interpretation of Bach’s *Goldbergvariationen*, the experience of Reger in the *Bordone-Saal*, sitting and viewing Tintoretto’s *Weißbärtiger Mann*, is reproducible for local readers. Bernhard appears to play on shared contexts for the receptions of these works, which are reinforced by the high degree of cross-pollination between the works themselves: the recurrence of sibling relationships; obsessive artistic undertakings; and references to the local villages surrounding Bernhard’s ‘Nathal’ residence. Bernhard returns to isolated *Geistesmenschen* launching into diatribes on art and artists, but a common theme across these works is the necessity of art as a part of everyday social practice. Across the Austrian locales and cultural institutions depicted in these texts. Bernhard examines how engaging with art as an institution impacts on ways of living with others outside of the work. My comparisons in the next chapters will explore the ramifications of this question beyond the author’s immediate time and place.

1.4. Bernhard’s wider worlds

By examining how Bernhard’s characters evolve to new relationships with art beyond the limits of their initial self-understandings in *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Alte Meister*, this chapter has sought to reposition Bernhard’s literary treatment of art beyond the understandings of existing scholarship and intertextual comparisons. It has aimed to show

the plurality of worlds in the experience of Bernhard's fictions: both the experiences of his characters in his storyworlds and the contextual dialogues that Bernhard's works establish with other writings in his *oeuvre*, other institutions, and other works of art. To better understand these aspects of his late fictions, this thesis will situate Bernhard's texts within wider literary dialogues. Reger's questioning of the function of art is not unique among the examples of contemporary German and Austrian fiction discussed in this chapter. Because Bernhard's examination of art and society at this time moves beyond the terms of Bürger, Weiss, Wolf, and Jelinek, however, it is necessary to have new interlocutors to situate and frame Bernhard's endeavour more precisely. The contextual authors discussed in subsequent chapters of this thesis—Angela Carter, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and J. M. Coetzee—will each allow me to develop lines of enquiry from the central argument of this chapter: that in Bernhard's later writings, he posits and interrogates a conception of art as inseparable from forms of social living outside of it.

Bernhard is highly unlikely to have read any of these writers in depth. However, as I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, an examination of what Bernhard himself read can only take an enquiry into his works so far. To understand the wider aesthetic relevance of Bernhard's late works, it is necessary to take Bernhard, like his characters, beyond his own self-understanding. In this chapter, I have aimed to reframe Bernhard's late aesthetics as testing the apparent separation between an experience of art and living in the world with others. Yet this understanding of Bernhard itself raises questions. The first is whether this is specifically a feature of Bernhard's late works, or whether Bernhard's earlier writings gesture towards such a reading. Furthermore, if Bernhard's works are concerned with living with others, what do such relationships look like? Relationships in Bernhard's writings can be sinister as well as positive, but in each of the texts in this chapter, the protagonists have undergone processes of learning.

My next chapter will look further at the forms of learning that Bernhard's prose fictions make available for his readers. By the 1980s, I will argue, Bernhard is centrally concerned with how the experience of his fiction can prompt more positive ways of behaving towards others and oneself. This experience, furthermore, is available to readers beyond the academic experts and artistic coteries on which his fictions frequently focus. Key to this argument is a re-reading of Bernhard's *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung*, a text preceded in scholarship by accounts of its scandals and court-sanctioned confiscation following defamation proceedings initiated by the Viennese composer Gerhard Lampersberg. I will use the theme of *Bildung* as a basis of my analysis of *Holzfällen*, examining how the text plays on Bernhard's own aesthetic education in the 1960s to examine the shortcomings of the narrator's behaviour. Through comparing *Holzfällen* with an Anglophone novel of the same year similarly engaging with the question of *Bildung*, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984), I will examine how Bernhard uses his fictional prose to reposition his readers in relation to their cultural habits and to prompt reflection on their own ways of living in modernity. Doing so will open a new perspective on how Bernhard uses fiction in the 1980s.

CHAPTER TWO

Thomas Bernhard, Angela Carter, and the uses of fiction

Summary

I will now resituate Bernhard's prose work *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung* (1984) within a new intellectual context, moving beyond common German-speaking points of reference for the author to understand more precisely how his approach to fiction develops by the 1980s. Jürgen Habermas' philosophical writings of the early 1980s will first raise a central question for my analysis: how reading fiction can facilitate more positive ways of living with others in the modern world. Habermas' treatment of modernity will then form a contextual backdrop for my comparison between Bernhard's prose fiction and Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984): a text in which Carter, like Habermas, engages with European philosophy of the subject to consider ways of living together in modernity.

My point of departure for this comparison is Carter and Bernhard's respective engagements with the *Bildungsroman*. In his early uses of the genre in *Frost* (1963) and *Amras* (1964), I argue, Bernhard presents desolate visions of human suffering and social malaise in modern Austria. By *Holzfällen*, however, Bernhard's outlook is not quite so bleak. I argue that, in *Holzfällen*, a text frequently read as the author's scandalous settling of scores with certain contemporary Viennese artists, Bernhard also portrays a narrator learning to behave more positively towards himself and others. This comparison will help me to show how both Carter and Bernhard, in different ways, explore possibilities of learning from fiction in the 1980s. Furthermore, I argue, they each push beyond the model of communicative rationality central to Habermas' re-thinking of modernity. Drawing on recent theories of reading by Toril Moi among others, I will conclude this chapter by showing how Bernhard breaks with fiction altogether in *Holzfällen* to invite his reader to share in the lessons of the text.

2.1. Bernhard and modernity

Analysing *Beton*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Alte Meister* against the backdrop of Bernhard's German-speaking contemporaries has shown how his approach to art stands apart. Encountering art in these works is inseparable from how his characters live and form connections with others. Yet the question arises of how Bernhard's fictions themselves put this understanding of artistic potential into practice: whether his prose texts make available more positive ways of living for his readers beyond the frequently flawed forms of modern living that he depicts; and whether readers need to be experts in the works of artists such as Mendelssohn-Bartholdy or Tintoretto to learn from his fictions. In this chapter, I will examine these questions through a comparative re-interpretation of Bernhard's *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung* (1984). Scholarly discussions of *Holzfällen* are often preceded by accounts of the literary scandal and court-ordered confiscation of the text in its year of publication following the defamation claim of the Viennese composer Gerhard Lampersberg.¹¹⁷ By resituating *Holzfällen* beyond the text's contemporary controversies, this chapter will open a different perspective on Bernhard's uses of fiction in his late career.

This new contextualising backdrop will start with Jürgen Habermas' reflections on the role of art in modern social living in the early 1980s. In 'Modernität—ein unvollendetes Projekt' (1980), Habermas' acceptance speech for the 1980 *Adorno-Preis*, he reflects on Peter Bürger's analysis of the failure of the avant-garde project, which I discussed in Chapter One. Habermas considers the separation between art and social praxis as one aspect of the progressive specialisation of knowledge since the Enlightenment into separate domains of aesthetic, moral, and scientific expertise. He locates this estrangement of

¹¹⁷ Eva Schindlechter, 'Thomas Bernhard, *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung*: Dokumentation eines österreichischen Literaturskandals', in *Statt Bernhard: Über Misanthropie im Werk Thomas Bernhards*, ed. by Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler and Martin Huber (Wien: Edition S., 1987), pp. 13-39. I will discuss the *Holzfällen* scandal further when setting out my re-reading of the text later in this chapter.

domains of knowledge from modern social living at the heart of what he sees as a modern cultural aporia giving rise to various trends of contemporary conservatism. Turning to Bürger, Habermas considers whether the failure of avant-garde artists to reintegrate art into social praxis in fact signalled the end of modernity altogether:

Wir erleben das Ende der Idee der modernen Kunst. Im Anschluß an die Untersuchungen von Peter Bürger sprechen wir inzwischen von der postavantgardistischen Kunst, die das Scheitern der surrealistischen Revolte nicht länger verhehlt. Aber was bedeutet dieses Scheitern? Signalisiert es den Abschied von der Moderne?¹¹⁸

Habermas believes that modernity has more to offer if seen neither as a defined period nor as a failed artistic movement, but instead as an ongoing project with unrealised potential to reconnect the domains of scientific, moral, and aesthetic expertise within individual experience. The reception of art, Habermas claims, offers one opportunity for doing so.¹¹⁹ He refers to acts of artistic interpretation staged in Peter Weiss' *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* as an ideal instance of the appropriation of expert culture by individuals.¹²⁰ However, as discussed in Chapter One, Weiss re-enacts these instances of artistic reception through a projection of his own expert position in culture. Habermas' speech leaves open the question of how individual non-experts can learn to perform the kind of reading he idealises.

This question remains open in Habermas' more fully developed theoretical model. In *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981), Habermas offers a theory of mutual learning via interpersonal communication, but without going any further into his brief reference to Weiss in the above speech. His concept of communicative rationality in this

¹¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, 'Die Moderne—ein unvollendetes Projekt', in *Kleine politische Schriften I-IV* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), pp. 444-64 (p. 448).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 460.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 462.

work provides for individuals interacting in language with the aim of reaching mutual agreement: ‘ein unter Beteiligten erzielt rational motiviertes Einverständnis, das sich an kritisierbaren Geltungsansprüchen bemißt’.¹²¹ By re-thinking European philosophy of the subject via this communicative paradigm, Habermas finds a way of realising the potential he sees in the project of modernity and reintegrating specialist domains of knowledge within ordinary social living. He acknowledges that such agreement is difficult in reality; yet, when pursued, purposive linguistic interaction provides for Habermas a basis for moving beyond philosophical approaches to reason that focus exclusively on the individual subject.¹²² This informs his reading of Hegel, whom he considers the first philosopher to develop a clear concept of modernity.¹²³ In *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (1984), Habermas finds in Hegel’s early writings the potential to move beyond self-enclosed subjectivity and make good the communicative potential of modern rationality—or, as he puts it: ‘den in der Subjektphilosophie entwickelten Reflexionsbegriff der Vernunft kommunikationstheoretisch einzuholen und umzuformen’.¹²⁴ But Hegel did not take this path.¹²⁵ By tracing Hegel and other European philosophers to such crossroads, Habermas offers intersubjective communication as a response to the cultural aporias he sees in the modern age.

Habermas does not feature among the modern philosophers referenced in Bernhard’s fictions. These figures are known to have met at the *soirées* of their mutual publisher Siegfried Unseld in the Klettenbergstraße in Frankfurt, and Habermas is even

¹²¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 11th edn, 2 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019), I, p. 114.

¹²² Fred Dallmayr, ‘The Discourse of Modernity’, in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, ed. by Maurizio Passerin D’Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 59-96 (p. 83).

¹²³ Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. Zwölf Vorlesungen*, 12th edn (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016), p. 13.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

understood to have attended a screening of Bernhard's *Der Italiener* in 1970.¹²⁶ Yet there are few grounds for claiming that one influenced the other. In this chapter, I have another aim in mind. Habermas' theoretical model of communicative action will enable me to ask new questions of two texts spanning twenty years of Bernhard's literary output: *Frost* (1963) and *Holzfällen* (1984). Both texts engage with the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, a genre conventionally associated with the education and acculturation of the reason-centred subject.¹²⁷ *Frost* is typically read as a bleak depiction of post-war Austrian society offering little scope for individual edification,¹²⁸ while *Holzfällen*, Bernhard's fictive return to the scene of his aesthetic *Bildung* in the Viennese artistic circle of the composer Gerhard Lampersberg, is commonly understood as an act of settling scores with certain identifiable members of the Viennese cultural scene.¹²⁹ Against the constructed intellectual backdrop of this chapter, I will pursue a new critical path for understanding these works. I will argue that, in *Frost*, Bernhard offers avenues for living differently in the desolate Alpine society of the novel, but these paths ultimately remain unpursued. By *Holzfällen*, however, Bernhard takes a significant step. In *Holzfällen*, I will argue, Bernhard stages the development of a narrator who acknowledges the truth of his earlier behaviour and sees the beginnings of a more positive way of behaving towards himself and others.

This reading is a departure from approaches to *Holzfällen* that focus on Bernhard's critiques of certain identifiable figures in the contemporary Viennese art scene. I will engage with such readings in detail later in this chapter. *Holzfällen* is centrally concerned

¹²⁶ Luigi Reitani, 'Der Italiener', in *Bernhard-Handbuch*, ed. by Mittermayer and Huber, pp. 156-60 (p. 159). Stefan Müller-Dooch, *Habermas: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity Press), p. 185.

¹²⁷ Fatima Naqvi, *How We Learn Where We Live*, loc. 417. I will discuss Naqvi's interpretation of *Amras* later in this chapter.

¹²⁸ Timothy B. Malchow, 'Thomas Bernhard's *Frost* and Adalbert Stifter: Literature, Legacy and National Identity in the Early Austrian Second Republic', *German Studies Review*, 28.1 (2005), 65-84 (p. 79).

¹²⁹ Alfred Pfabigan, 'Der Platz von *Holzfällen* innerhalb der Ordnung des Gesamtwerks von Thomas Bernhard', *Études Germaniques*, 50.2 (1995), 161-73 (p. 171).

with communicating the truths underlying the superficiality of the pretentious coterie of avant-garde artists depicted in the text; however, I will argue that *Holzfällen* also shows that there are conditions for speaking the truth beyond those detailed in Habermas' model of communicative rationality. Telling the truth, in *Holzfällen*, requires a shared framework of mutual understanding. Furthermore, I will propose that, in *Holzfällen*, Bernhard's narrator constructs his own shared framework of understanding—not with the Viennese artists whom he critiques, but with his reader. In my comparative re-reading of *Holzfällen*, Bernhard's narrator progresses to acknowledge the truths of his own prior behaviour and invites his reader to share in this act of self-acknowledgement. This invitation, I will argue, is accessible even to those readers unfamiliar with Bernhard's specific extra-textual targets or all of his cultural references. It is possible for a reader of *Holzfällen* to perform the kind of non-expert appropriation that Habermas has in mind when considering the reintegration of aesthetic experience into individual existence. Taking the text out of 1980s Vienna via this comparative juxtaposition will illuminate the accessibility of its lessons.

In this chapter, I will resituate Bernhard's *Frost* and *Holzfällen* alongside a less familiar intertext in studies of Bernhard: an Anglophone novel, which engages with the *Bildungsroman* tradition and post-Enlightenment philosophy of the subject to reimagine forms of living together in modernity—Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). At first, Carter's magical realist mode and shifting topographies would seem a far cry from Bernhard's fictions. Yet their respective treatments of the *Bildungsroman* will provide a point of departure for understanding how both authors conceptualise living with and learning from art in the 1980s. *Nights at the Circus* reflects on what *Bildung* can mean in the modern age and can be read productively alongside Habermas—even if Carter, as I will show, advances a more embodied model of intersubjective understanding than Habermas' focus on communicative rationality. Comparing Carter with Bernhard in this chapter will

open a wider intellectual landscape of responses to modernity and a more pluralistic account of the uses of fiction in the 1980s.

Indeed, acts of reading are central to the texts under discussion. *Nights at the Circus* is premised on an American journalist's suspicious reading of a fairy-tale trapeze artist existing at the threshold between fact and fiction. In *Frost*, a junior doctor commissioned to observe a reclusive artist exchanges his medical textbook for a volume of Henry James. In *Holzfällen*, Bernhard's narrator breaks with fiction altogether, recognising the shortcomings of his uses of literary knowledge in the presence of Viennese avant-garde artists. In different ways, both Bernhard and Carter use their erudition, hyperbole, and playful referentiality to reposition their readers in relation to their cultural habits. Carter's treatment of the *Bildungsroman* in *Nights at the Circus* will provide a first step in re-evaluating Bernhard's late literary project. Her magical realist staging of the advent of modernity, reimagining an age of reciprocal empathy and confidence, will help me in turn to reimagine Bernhard's approach to fiction in the 1980s.

2.2. Angela Carter's confidence in modernity

In *Nights at the Circus*, the young reporter Jack Walser is commissioned to interview a famous *aerialiste* named Fevvers for an exposé tentatively entitled 'Great Humbugs of the World' (*Nights*, 8). Enraptured by Fevvers and desperate to learn the truth of her artistry, he pursues the performer from her dressing room in London to a circus in pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg. For Walser, this quest is also a journey of self-discovery. In the structural centrepiece of the novel, Walser rescues and wins the devotion of a fragile young woman named Mignon, a German-speaking reincarnation of Goethe's vulnerable exile in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (146). The appearance of Mignon in *Nights at the Circus* has been read as part of Carter's critique of the optimism of the classical *Bildungsroman* by exploring

how self-realisation is predicated upon the occurrence of social change.¹³⁰ The intellectual backdrop of this chapter, however, will enable me to advance how Carter uses the interactions and performances of Mignon to offer an alternative vision of modernity based on embodied reciprocity, employing hyperbole and humour to portray ways of living with each other beyond her depiction of greed and brutality in the modern age. Carter's picaresque metafiction will open a new path for approaching the human relationships in Bernhard's fictions.

As Mignon bathes in Fevvers' hotel suite after her rescue, Carter reveals the young woman's travels thus far, which have involved posing as the deceased in photographs sold by the mysterious Herr M. to grieving parents (149). Where, in *Der Untergeher*, Bernhard uses a recording of Glenn Gould's interpretation of the *Goldbergvariationen* to create a space for mutual connection between the narrator and his friends, Carter presents Herr M.'s investment in 'systems of mechanical reproduction' as a means of using Mignon to exploit his consumers (157). The photographs supposedly preserve the deceased, affirming how 'in whatever world they now inhabited, they flourished still'; yet Carter's play on the polysemy of 'still' and its tension with the verb 'flourish' undermine the pretences of Herr M.'s enterprise (159). Carter contrasts Herr M.'s art with the beauty and innocence of Mignon's singing, which interrupts the narrative when it is overheard through the wall. Singing Byron's 'So we'll go no more a-roving' in English, a language that she does not understand, her song appears intimately connected with the human hearts that Herr M. strives to exploit (165). For Fevvers and Walser, it provokes a bodily response:

When he saw that, Walser felt an extraordinary sensation within his breast: his heart dissolved. He reached out his hand towards the woman and sparked off a sharp pain in his mauled shoulder; exclaimed; discovered he, too, was

¹³⁰ Georgia Christinidis, 'Radical transformation: Angela Carter's adaptation of the *Bildungsroman*', *Textual Practice*, 26.3 (2012), 467-87 (p. 467).

crying. She looked towards him, her night-dark eyes brimming, and for once, there was no irony, malice, or suspicion within them (*ibid.*).

Walser's journey thus far has been predicated on suspicion. He aims to resolve the question, emblazoned in French on a poster in Fevvers' dressing room, of whether Fevvers is fact or fiction (3). At this point, too, Fevvers is jealously trying to understand the relationship between Walser and Mignon. As Mignon pours away the bath water, though, these questions melt away into an embodied mutual concern only restrained by Walser's physical pain from his earlier chivalry (165).

This is not the only recognition scene initiated by Mignon's music. When Fevvers and Lizzie take the young woman to the 'Princess of Abyssinia' to perform in a tigers' dance, Mignon sparks another form of human connection: 'When the song was over, the tranced cats sighed and shifted a little on their haunches but the cue for the dance never came; the Princess was kissing Mignon' (181). Terence Cave reads this scene as a moment of ethical anagnorisis, in which 'the possibility of harmony and peace is glimpsed amid the crazed, anguished and grotesque events the novel narrates' as Mignon is delivered from the 'cruel sex' that has abused her throughout her history.¹³¹ Yet this is more than a 'feminist point' by Carter.¹³² The beauty of Mignon's song opens a new world of interpersonal understanding. Moreover, Mignon inspires others to modify their own behaviour. Her former abuser, the Strong Man, undergoes a transformation when he sees Mignon and the Princess together: 'Stark lust for lost Mignon slowly resolved itself, out of sheer propinquity, into an awed veneration for those beings who seemed, as a pair, to transcend their

¹³¹ Terence Cave, *Mignon's Afterlives: Crossing Cultures from Goethe to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 188.

¹³² *Ibid.*

individualities' (238). In *Nights at the Circus*, the lovers' mutual concern is transformative for the spectator as well as the lovers themselves.

Existing forms of education in *Nights at the Circus* do not provide the same scope for transformation. From the outset of the novel, Walser seems to have derived little more than overt social grace from his *Wanderjahre*: 'none of this had altered to any great degree the invisible child inside the man, who indeed remained the same dauntless lad who used to haunt Fisherman's Wharf hungrily eyeing the tangled sails upon the water' (7). His education makes him no less vulnerable to the overpowering 'lasso' of Fevvers' narrative (67). As Walser transcribes Fevvers' story in her dressing room, she seizes her interlocutor in a kind of disembodied trance: his hand 'no longer felt as if it belonged to him. It flapped at the hinge of the wrist' (89). Symbolising Fevvers' control over the narrative and the thrall of her passive amanuensis, this act epitomises the dynamic of mastery and subjugation between the two figures. Narrative history, at this point in the text, is a struggle for authority. Carter's vision of change in *Nights at the Circus* requires more constructive interpersonal relationships as the grounds for the form of learning her novel envisages.

Change in Carter's novel also exists outside of the mode of magical realist transformation. Carter uses Walser's comic inability to fit in with a Shamanic tribe to articulate a metafictional commentary on the limits to the genre. She satirises Walser's well-travelled ignorance as he awkwardly tries to appropriate the Shaman's language in his delusion of cultural *rapprochement*. At the same time, the Shaman listens to Walser's English with uncritical gullibility, believing that it is an 'astral discourse':

He made no categorical distinction between seeing and believing. It could be said that, for all the peoples of this region, there existed no difference between fact and fiction; instead, a sort of magic realism (308).

This metafictional moment provides an insight into the forms of change explored in *Nights at the Circus*. Although Carter's novel stages a fantastical storyworld of dancing tigers, winged aerialists, and Shamanic tribes in a setting transforming from London to St. Petersburg and Siberia, her treatment of human transformation is far more pragmatic. Carter draws a distinction between the changes that can be achieved in fact and fiction. In this chapter, Carter's metafictional engagement with magical realism will form a point of contrast with Bernhard who, by the 1980s, breaks with his fictional frameworks. Instead, Carter uses the imaginative scope of her fiction to explore how some forms of acculturation are more successful than others. Carter contrasts Walser's failure to learn the Shaman's language despite his overt cultural competence with Mignon's quiet establishment of an empathic connection with the Princess of Abyssinia. Such interpersonal connections, I will argue, provide a tangible way out of the aporias of modernity in Carter's novel.

This is evident following the flight of the circus troupe from St. Petersburg in the third part of *Nights at the Circus*, as a sudden explosion derails the Trans-Siberian Express and strands them in the snow. In Siberia, Fevvers and Lizzie encounter a panoptic House of Correction, in which women convicted of mariticide are expected to acknowledge their responsibility via endless solitary reflection. The background chimes of Big Ben in Fevvers' dressing room described in the first part of the novel become the regular bell tolls calling the inmates to food and exercise under the strict regime of the institution. Books, too, are forbidden 'because they helped time pass' (249). However, not one inmate acknowledges their responsibility. The wit of Carter's narrator downplays the murderess' actions just as they do: 'there are many reasons, most of them good ones, why a woman would want to murder her husband' (247). The physical touch of two inmates and an exchange of messages written in bodily fluids leads to the communal overthrow of this order into an apparent *tabula rasa* of possibility (256-7). But Carter portrays this band of women with bathos.

Later, Fevvers and Lizzie encounter a young man commissioned to deliver sperm to them, whose commitment to this ‘shining morrow of peace and love’ has motivated him to an act of terrorism (285). Carter’s vision of change in *Nights at the Circus* is far less incendiary.

Fevvers’ foster-mother Lizzie sets out this model of change, relativising the escapee’s motivations via an extended grammatical analogy. She states that the future perfect can only be defined by the present imperfect: ‘and the present in which, inevitably, we all live, always seems imperfect to somebody’ (252). Her use of the first-person plural contrasts the escapee’s individual rebellion in the service of the future with a commonality of experience in the present tense. Projections of the future, Lizzie suggests, are always circumscribed by present experience. From these grammatical foundations, Lizzie advances a more mature vision of change:

It’s not the human “soul” that must be forged on the anvil of history but the anvil itself must be changed in order to change humanity. Then we might see, if not “perfection” then something a little better, or, not to raise too many false hopes, a little less bad (283).

Lizzie exchanges utopia for a place that exists in the present. She retains the first-person plural to suggest that this change cannot be forged by individuals alone, while her double negative opposes the novel’s presentation of transformations with a far more gradual vision of social progress. This pronouncement of Fevvers’ foster-mother contains resonances of the notion of the ordinary devoted or ‘good-enough’ mother advanced by the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, who advocated for ordinary parenthood against the intrusions of expert ideals of family structures.¹³³ Lizzie expands this analogy into a wider social vision: instead of a revolutionary universal conception of history, Lizzie envisages the gradual progress of ordinary modes of human coexistence in the present into something ‘less bad’ (283). This

¹³³ D. W. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family and the Outside World* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 190.

vision, as I will argue, forms part of Carter's reflection in *Nights at the Circus* on aesthetic experience. It is significant that the Countess P.'s failed House of Correction excludes the reading of books. Throughout *Nights at the Circus*, Carter thematises the possibilities afforded by fiction to envision different forms of living with others in the present.

There is scepticism in *Nights at the Circus* towards transforming the self in art. The aesthetic realm of the circus appears at first to provide Walser with uninhibited freedom to experiment with identity: 'he experienced the freedom that lies behind the mask, with dissimulation, the freedom to juggle with being and, indeed, with the language that is vital to our being' (119). Yet juggling connotes isolated play, in which Walser changes the appearance of his being instead of the mode of his 'being with others'. The double-sense of 'lies' suggests that this is a false escape from personality. Carter implies that any such change needs to be grounded in a shared context. Her creation of the nihilist leader of Clown Alley, Buffo the Great, exemplifies this. As Buffo introduces himself to Walser, his clown troupe overtly exhibiting the patience of 'inmates in closed institutions' (136), Carter investigates the freedom to remake oneself in an autonomous sphere of art. Buffo explains the burden of being hired to seem 'perpetually at play' despite the tragedies befalling his co-performers (138). His one solace is the ability to invent his own face: 'a fingerprint of authentic dissimilarity, a genuine expression of my own autonomy' (141). However, his sphere of influence remains confined to the aesthetic realm of the circus.¹³⁴ Behind this spectacle, the clowns are unable to transform themselves beyond their artistic roles. To Buffo, there is simply 'an absence, a vacancy' (142).

¹³⁴ Carter's construction of Buffo here establishes another connection with Bernhard. His play *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* (1974) stages a circus director Caribaldi asserting his autonomy via the backstage rehearsals of Schubert's *Forellenquintet*. I will discuss *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* in more detail in the next chapter.

The need for such a shared context of understanding is evident as Fevvers and Lizzie are held captive in Siberia. To negotiate with their captors, Lizzie commissions the clown troupe to perform a show for them, but the performance only occasions a miserable chaos: ‘the cheerless arabesques of the damned [...] the deadly dance of the *past* perfect which fixed everything fast so it can’t move again’ (287). The extension of Lizzie’s linguistic metaphor typifies how their performance falls flat outside of the circus, unable to prompt any change to their future. Fevvers refuses to discuss why the spectacle failed, instead merely stating that she is not in the mood for literary criticism (289). Her diction parallels the clown masque described in this narrative commentary with the practice of reading itself. Both, Fevvers implies, require the pre-understandings of a common set of signs. She confirms this through an explicit nod to the key intertext for her picaresque narrative: ‘Young as I am, it’s been a picaresque life; will there be no end to it? Is my fate to be a female Quixote, with Liz my Sancho Panza?’ (289). In the absence of a common context for the performances of chivalry by Cervantes’ Quixote, which are derived from his reading of Romance, he appears comically to inhabit a world apart from his society. Performance, in *Nights at the Circus*, does not bring about change by itself either. Carter’s vision of modernity instead relies on a shared framework of understanding for performance to take place. Without this common framework, the performance of the circus troupe in *Nights at the Circus* remains trapped in the sphere of art, cut off from everyday interactions in the world outside of it.

Carter’s novel stages another scene of artistic performance that bridges this separation. Mignon performs a well-known piece of music available to Carter’s reader: the last song of Schubert’s *Die Winterreise* (1828). The song invites a reader into a vision of what change in the novel could look like:

Now she seized hold of the song in the supple lasso of her voice and mated it with her new-found soul, so the song was utterly transformed and its essence did not change, the same way a familiar face changes and then stays the same when it is freshly visited by love (292).

Carter echoes the domineering ‘lasso’ of Fevvers’ narrative of *Bildung* in the first part of the novel with Mignon’s ‘supple lasso’ here (67, 292). The echo amplifies the development at this point in the text from the social dynamics of dominance and subservience to a more redemptive vision of mutual understanding. Unlike the transformations of magical realism, Mignon’s song does not initiate a radical change. Love is at the centre of a vision of reciprocity in which these characters realign their behaviour towards other people. Cave reads this as the novel’s key epiphanic moment, in which Mignon has come of age as a woman.¹³⁵ Mignon’s performance, in which she takes command of the song with the grasp of her voice, certainly affirms her progress from the vulnerable waif-like figure whom Walser first meets. Yet Mignon does not undergo this development alone. The writings of Toril Moi can help us consider the models of development in *Nights at the Circus* further.

In *What is a Woman?* (1999), Moi re-examines Simone de Beauvoir’s idea in *The Second Sex* (1949) of the body as a situation. In Moi’s re-reading of Beauvoir, the body is simultaneously a perspective on the world and a material presence in constant dialogue with its surroundings: ‘a historical sedimentation of our own way of living in the world and of the world’s way of living with us’.¹³⁶ For Beauvoir, Moi states, ‘a woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in the world, or in other words, through the way in which she makes something of what the world makes of her’.¹³⁷ This approach to gender presentation as a way of interacting with the world offers for Moi an approach to

¹³⁵ Cave, p. 189.

¹³⁶ Toril Moi, *Sex, Gender, and the Body: The Student Edition of What is a Woman?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 68.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

feminism beyond essentialist notions of sex and gender, but it is also helpful for understanding the development of both Fevvers and Mignon in Carter's novel. In *Nights at the Circus*, identity is formed via embodied interaction with others—whether in the commune of convicts in the Siberian House of Correction or in the affectionate relationship of Mignon and the Princess. What distinguishes Mignon's final song in *Nights at the Circus* is her bodily negotiation of her art, the 'supple lasso' that transforms her own way of relating to the world. The body is also central to Fevvers' journey in the novel. As I will show, the final union between the protagonists of Carter's magical realist love story is founded on Fevvers' development of confidence in her own embodied selfhood.

Carter, moreover, situates this development within her own playful reconstruction of European philosophy of the subject. In the first part of the novel, Fevvers presents her engagement in sex work within an intellectual framework of enlightened judgement. Ma Nelson is portrayed as a seer, envisioning ideals of women's suffrage and seeing in Fevvers 'the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground' (25). She equips Fevvers with a dagger for her protection and provides a safe context for this enterprise.

You could not look at Mother Nelson's house without the thought, how the Age of Reason built it; and then you almost cried, to think the age of reason was over before it properly begun. It was a place in which rational desires might be rationally gratified; it was an old-fashioned house, so much so that, in those years, it had a way of seeming almost too modern for its own good (26).

Fevvers presents the rationalism of Ma Nelson's tutelage as part of an optimistic vision of *Bildung*. It is only the advent of capitalism that transforms this rational enterprise into the individual greed that inserts Fevvers' body within modes of exchange in pre-Revolutionary St. Petersburg. This greed takes Fevvers to a dangerous liaison with Russia's Grand Duke. Distracted by her reflection in the ice and choking on 'balked greed', the Grand Duke disables the dagger that Fevvers is given by Ma Nelson to defend herself (218). Fevvers'

Bildung in this text is historically and socially contingent: outside of the controlled environs of Ma Nelson's house, Fevvers' greed results in her near-fatal endangerment. The transition into modernity in Carter's novel thus requires changes to modes of *Bildung* in the modern age, from Ma Nelson's 'Age of Reason' to a revised understanding of the modern subject. Mignon's song ushers in a space for imagining this change. The song, too, elicits an embodied response, not of self-absorbed greed but of a visceral and reflexive concern for others.

This embodiment is central to how Carter's engagement with philosophy of the subject in *Nights at the Circus* pushes beyond the philosophical model of communicative rationality advanced by Habermas. This is most evident in Carter's final 'Envoi' scene, in which her depiction of the union of Fevvers and Walser envisages a more explicitly embodied form of coexistence:

Her released feathers brushed against the walls; he recalled how nature had equipped her only for the 'woman on top' position and rustled on his straw mattress. He was as much himself again as he ever would be, and yet that self would never be the same again for now he knew the meaning of fear as it defines itself in its most violent form, that is, fear of the death of the beloved, fear of the loss of the beloved, of the loss of love (347).

Her scene resonates with Hegel's treatment of 'Herrschaft und Knechtschaft' in *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1817), in which the philosopher describes the mutual recognition of self-consciousness by a struggle to the death between two self-enclosed subjectivities. Each individual is the means for the other's self-recognition, but their struggle results in an asymmetrical relationship in which the victor is independent and the defeated dependent.¹³⁸ The terms with which Hegel describes this struggle assists an appreciation of Carter's allusion:

¹³⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 14th edn (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2017), p. 147.

[...] denn es hat die Furcht des Todes, des absoluten Herrn, empfunden. Es ist darin innerlich aufgelöst worden, hat durchaus in sich selbst erzittert, und alles Fixe hat in ihm gebebt. Diese reine allgemeine Bewegung, das absolute Flüssigwerden alles Bestehens ist aber das einfache Wesen des Selbstbewußtseins, die absolute Negativität, *das reine Fürsichsein*, das hiermit *an* diesem Bewußtsein ist.¹³⁹

In Carter's novel, the dynamics of domination and subservience that have governed Fevvers' interactions with men evolve in this climax to mutual human concern for another. Carter's hypotaxis, in which Walser's fear of losing his beloved develops to losing love in general, charts a process of recognition in which his own identity is formed via his reciprocal relationship with others. Yet Carter's re-working of Hegel situates this reciprocity in the characters' bodily connection at the climax of their love story. Habermas' own engagement with the earlier writings of Hegel advances a less embodied version of intersubjectivity:

Hegel bietet gegen die autoritären Verkörperungen der subjektzentrierten Vernunft die vereinigende Macht einer Intersubjektivität auf, die unter den Titeln 'Liebe' und 'Leben' auftritt. [...] Der lebendige Geist ist das Medium, welches eine Gemeinsamkeit von der Art stiftet, daß sich ein Subjekt mit dem anderen Subjekt eins wissen und dabei doch es selber bleiben kann.¹⁴⁰

A reader may perceive the resonances between Habermas' terminology above and the form of love ushered into this novel by Mignon's redemptive song: a love that visits a familiar face and simultaneously changes and stays the same (292). However, Carter's portrayal of Walser's awkward negotiation of Fevvers' feathers in the 'Envoi' scene affirms how her own re-reading of Hegel in the 1980s places far greater emphasis on the body. Carter's novel uses the central love story to envision possibilities of living practically with others in a shared world, and physical relationships are at the centre of this vision. The statement that Walser 'took himself apart and put himself together again' (349) epitomises both the

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁴⁰ Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*, p. 42.

reconstitution of his subjectivity via love and the potential to learn this alternative form of coexistence in the modern world.

Fevvers' own development is exemplified by the idea of confidence with which the novel ends. In the 'Envoi' scene, Fevvers first reveals the tricks she and her foster-mother have played on Walser and, when asked why she went to such lengths to fool him, she begins to laugh infectiously. The entire cast of characters cannot help but laugh in sympathy, even though Walser is unsure whether he is in fact the butt of the joke (349). Fevvers' final words suggest that there is more to this laughter: 'It just goes to show', she states, 'there's nothing like confidence' (350). The term 'confidence' plays on Fevvers' trickery, however the ambit of the 'spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter', which provides a 'refreshing breeze' in the republic of free women, connects the term with the vision of female development on which her *Bildungsroman* ends (*ibid.*). Aidan Day's reading of the text interprets Fevvers' symbolic significance, representing 'that gathering of confidence among women in the late nineteenth century which led to the gains in self-possession and autonomy made by women in the twentieth'.¹⁴¹ At the same time, though, Day cautions against reducing Fevvers to a symbol due to the 'gloriously vulgar earthiness' that makes her a 'real, material woman'.¹⁴² Carter's climactic reference to 'confidence' reveals the significance of this materiality. Pamela Sue Anderson's feminist reading of confidence can help us understand how.

Anderson argues that confidence, as a gendered term, is situated within ways of living as an individual in history and culture, as well as within 'our bodily experiences of

¹⁴¹ Aidan Day, *Angela Carter: The Rational Glass* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 176.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

living together'.¹⁴³ It is '(mutual) trust in oneself, or faith in oneself as much as another'.¹⁴⁴ Her discussion of traditional myths of Eve considers the grounds for the female subject's loss of confidence in her own embodied capabilities. Against the conceptual framework of transcendence incarnate from French phenomenological thought, which approaches the lived body as the *a priori* unifying or synthesising form of self-perception and knowledge, Anderson examines Eve's mythical awakening to the possibilities of her body to show that such confidence is socially contingent.¹⁴⁵ Anderson's treatment of confidence can help us to appreciate the development of Carter's protagonists. In the 'Envoi' scene, trust in oneself and trust in another replaces certainty. Where, in Habermas' theory of communicative action, it is assumed that the act of communication can lead to a situation of mutual agreement, the modern age presented in *Nights at the Circus* contains cruelty and coercion. Walser is perfectly aware at the novel's climax that he could be the butt of the joke, but he still decides to trust in Fevvers. Their mutual embodied trust is the precondition of the dawn of the modern age that the novel envisages, as well as of the ability of Fevvers to have confidence in the potentialities of her own body.

In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter progresses beyond an association of *Bildung* with subject-centred reason to a vision of embodied mutuality. Where Habermas re-reads Hegel to posit communicative praxis as his response to the malaises he sees in the modern world, Carter's departure from Hegel reimagines a modern world in which individuals can trust in themselves and each other. The intertextual intervention of Mignon opens a framework for this vision, prompting a visceral connection between the protagonists through which they

¹⁴³ Pamela Sue Anderson, 'The Lived Body, Gender and Confidence', in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*, ed. by Pamela Sue Anderson (Heidelberg and Oxford: Springer, 2010), pp. 163-80 (p. 170).

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

transcend their individualities. The experience of fiction, for Carter, can similarly prompt such connections, engaging readers through her erudition and humour, and daring them to reimagine what modernity could look like.

My point of departure for comparing Carter with Bernhard is their respective engagement with the *Bildungsroman* tradition. Where *Nights at the Circus* reconstructs Goethe's Mignon at the threshold of the twentieth century, *Frost* engages with another German-language *Bildungsroman*: Adalbert Stifter's *Der Nachsommer* (1848). Carter's vision of reciprocal understanding will help me to highlight opportunities for human connection in *Frost*—even though, in Bernhard's bleak vision of society, such opportunities remain unpursued. Later, in *Holzfällen*, I will use Carter's embodied version of modern coexistence to illuminate how Bernhard signals the progress of his narrator from his former behaviour both in language and in his bodily actions. In *Holzfällen*, I argue, the narrator realises the shortcomings of his actions before it is too late. There is little such hope in *Frost*. Instead of envisioning a life less bad, the tragedy of *Frost* consists in what might have been.

2.3. Bernhard's early fictions

Frost, like *Nights at the Circus*, portrays a young apprentice's encounters with an artist in an unfamiliar landscape. Bernhard's narrator is a *Famulant*, an apprentice doctor, commissioned to observe a reclusive painter named Strauch, the brother of his supervisor. Over twenty-seven diary entries, the apprentice charts his interactions with Strauch and a gallery of inhabitants of the desolate Alpine village of Weng. Where, in *Nights at the Circus*, the snowy expanse of Siberia offers what at first seems a *tabula rasa* for personal transformation, the frost in Bernhard's debut novel covers an inescapable environment of threat. This landscape is frequently read as a reversal of the restorative idyll of the

contemporary *Heimatroman*, a microcosm of modern suffering and post-war isolation.¹⁴⁶ It is also read as a reversal of the serenity traditionally associated with Stifter.¹⁴⁷ In *Der Nachsommer*, Herr von Risach initiates the young narrator Heinrich Drendorf into his apparently harmonious estate and the edifying minutiae of its upkeep.¹⁴⁸ In *Frost*, the painter Strauch assumes this role as pedagogue, sensitised to every signal in this landscape of social disintegration and post-war suffering (W1, 56). Carter's vision of *Bildung*, rooted in embodied reciprocity, will enable me in the following analysis to reassess *Frost*. I will examine crossroads in the novel at which possibilities for interpersonal understanding provide a brief glimpse of a more positive form of living. Amid the interpersonal brutality of rural Austria in *Frost*, however, these potentials remain unrealised.

Strauch connects the traumas of this nightmarish landscape with contemporary forms of education. The narrator's diary entries report that Strauch was once employed as a substitute teacher in the Austrian school system. He was victimised by his students: 'Kinder sind Ungeheuer', he states, 'wie Ungeheuer mächtig und grausam' (181). But Strauch learns to his horror that he is just as prone to such brutality in this environment: 'Ich schlug sie auch...aber es tat mir weh. Es schmerzte mich so tief, daß ich vor mir selbst Angst bekam' (*ibid.*). The transfer of knowledge in *Frost* is anything but positive for teacher or student. For Strauch, the humanities only reinforce this destruction:

Man sollte die Lehre von den Menschen und von den Unmenschen und von den Menschenansichten und von der großen Menschenverschweigung, die

¹⁴⁶ Katya Krylova, *Walking Through History: Topography and Identity in the Works of Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 132.

¹⁴⁷ John Pizer has noted that there are less fulsome elements of *Der Nachsommer*—the transience of artistic beauty and threats to the natural realm, for example—that undermine the salubrity of Stifter's narrative. John Pizer, 'Turning to and away from the Highest Canonical authority: A Re-examination of Thomas Bernhard's *Frost*', *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 46.2 (2013), 1-22 (p. 14).

¹⁴⁸ Martin and Erika Swales, *Adalbert Stifter: A Critical Study* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge), pp. 100-2.

Lehre von den großen Gedächtnisprotokollen der Großexistenz, an Hand der Schlachthäuser anfangen! (270).

Strauch's reversals associate human progress with entropy and inhumanity. He exchanges the edification of the classroom for the brutal edifice of the slaughterhouse.¹⁴⁹ The apprentice's walks dismantle any secure foundations in nature and knowledge. There is little scope for solace in Bernhard's fictional landscape—the narrator even sees the word 'schützlos' inscribed in the snow (293). In Carter's novel, Walser's encounter with Fevvers deconstructs and transforms him in a vision of hope. In *Frost*, Bernhard stifles any possibility of such transformation.

Strauch's return to the image of the slaughterhouse mirrors the fate of the individual in this landscape, but it also provides an insight into the functions of Bernhard's linguistic style in the monologues of his fictional painter:

Das Weiche und Warme des frisch Geschlachteten lag noch in der Luft, der Gegensatz zwischen Kälte und Nichts und Wärme und Nichts; der Brechreiz des Grauens auf der weißen Leinwand des Schnees, ein unwiederholbares Bild: die von Himmel und Hölle zerbissene und zerschlagene und zerschnittene Anatomie der Entmenschung (292-3).

This passage highlights common features of the painter's style: his association of seemingly discrete impressions with commas and semi-colons, his morbid imagery, and his alliterations. The painter's 'unwiederholbares Bild' comprises a system of phonic and imagistic repetitions. As Long points out in his analysis of this novel, the twenty-seven diary entries of *Frost* follow an associative logic, linking motifs across episodes analogically despite the narrative linearity promised by the diary form.¹⁵⁰ In doing so, Bernhard couples the pervasive brutality of his depiction of Weng with a style that infects

¹⁴⁹ Charles W. Martin analyses this scene as a travesty of the Creation story that 'tentatively proposes a quasi-Nietzschean renewal of mankind'. Charles W. Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard: The Portrayal of Existential and Social Problems in his Prose Works* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 39-40.

¹⁵⁰ Long, *The Novels of Thomas Bernhard*, p. 41.

the thought patterns of the *Famulant*. In *Nights at the Circus*, the power of Fevvers' story makes her scribe Walser lose control of his limbs in a world in which time appears to stand still. The narrator's account of the effect of Strauch's monologues on him reflects a similar degree of mastery:

Auf dem ganzen Weg hatte ich nichts anderes gedacht und überhaupt nichts gesehen, immer nur gedacht, daß der Maler von mir Besitz ergriffen hat. Mich in seine Bilder, mich in seine Vorstellungswelt hineingezwängt hat. Mich, seinen einfach schwachen Beobachter. Ich empfand eine plötzliche Kerkerhaft. Aber auch diese Vorstellung, dachte ich, ist eine Vorstellung des Malers. Ich bin nicht mehr ich. Nein, nein, ich bin nicht mehr ich, dachte ich (298-9).

The narrator reflects on the painter's images of nothingness before Strauch's 'Vorstellungswelt' deprives him of his agency.¹⁵¹ This journey of individual *Bildung* to observe the painter Strauch results in his enslavement to the intoxicating eloquence of his subject. The paragraphless monologues of Bernhard's central painter position the *Famulant*, his implied reader, in this same 'Kerkerhaft'.

Art provides no redemption from this bleak world. The painter describes how he burns his own works, considering them ulcerous: 'wie Geschwüre hätten sie sich ihm tagtäglich geöffnet und verstummen lassen' (35). The echoes of ulcers and illnesses across Strauch's references to his art reflect a wider cultural pathology. In *Frost*, art cannot provide the unity idealised by Herr von Risach on his estate in *Der Nachsommer*. Standing before a gorge, Bernhard's painter imagines staging his own Baroque masque, in which the trees and clouds speak over the accompaniment of celestial music. He quickly awakens to the insubstantiality of his vision:

Ich klatsche in meine Hände und stoße mit meinem Kopf an die wichtigste Stelle des Universums, und alles war nur ein Spuk, alles war nur ein

¹⁵¹ Bernhard Sorg comments on how the narrator is drawn into 'den Strudel der Wahnsinnsmonologe'. Bernhard Sorg, *Thomas Bernhard* (München: C. H. Beck, 1977), p. 54.

Gespenst des Spuks, ein Spukgespenst, verstehen Sie, nichts als ein Spukgespenst (202).

To Krylova, this mourning play emphasises how nature cannot function in the desolate environment of Weng, in which there is no place for Strauch's stage.¹⁵² This is, the narrator states, 'die Natur ohne Einfachheit', playing on the resonances of the term with Stifterian harmony (*ibid.*). Earlier, I discussed the futile clown masque in *Nights at the Circus*, in which the inability of the performers to awaken the sympathies of their audience reinforced the absence of any context for mutual understanding. The insubstantiality of this masque in *Frost* likewise suggests the absence of a common cultural framework. Within Strauch's dramaturgical ambition is an unreciprocated desire to communicate.

Strauch is not the only artist lacking a shared context. In a sub-narrative in the diary entitled 'Die Geschichte von dem Landstreicher', the painter describes his encounter with a man lying in the snow of the larchwood pretending to be dead. The figure wears 'eine gestreifte Hose [...] wie sie Zirkusleute zu tragen belieben' (249). The 'Landstreicher' introduces the painter to his own theatre of illusion, in which he can make his head and legs disappear, an act that has stunned international audiences. Yet he imagines a purer form of theatrical art beyond artifice, the pinnacle of which he sees in *King Lear*: 'Theater' as opposed to what he terms merely 'Kunststücke' (253). His pursuit of art, however, cannot lead him back into reality. Like Carter's Buffo, he is merely caught in the abyss of his own performance. Whereas the performance of the circus figure in *Frost* tends only towards his own extinction, the framing of this anecdote in the narrator's diary is far more constructive:

'Ein Mensch wie dieser, der vorgibt, der Besitzer eines „beweglichen Theaters“ zu sein, ist mir noch nie untergekommen. Oder glauben Sie gar, ich habe diese Geschichte erfunden?' Ich glaube schon, daß sie wahr ist (255).

¹⁵² Krylova, p. 128.

The 'Landstreicher' is trapped in his own artifice, unable to move beyond his act, but the apprentice's act of noting the story down in his diary implies his engagement with the anecdote as significant in his life away from the painter. His belief in the painter's monologue as truth foregrounds the role of the *Famulant* as the recipient of the narrative. This introduces a much wider theme in Bernhard's debut novel of how to use and learn from the narratives that one encounters.

There are several references in the novel to the *Famulant*'s reading. Instead of taking his textbook on cerebral conditions when he travels to Weng to observe the painter, he takes a volume of Henry James (13). Bernhard withholds any specific information on which text the narrator is reading and why. James is also an unusual reference for Bernhard. Save for the epigraph to *Vor dem Ruhestand* (1979), James does not appear again in Bernhard's works (W18, 9). There have been various attempts to decipher the reference. Tobias Heyl, for example, links the narrative of *Frost* with James' portrayal of a failed painter in *Madonna of the Future* (1875).¹⁵³ Others have applied this reference to the narratological structure of *Frost*, the novel's narrative perspective, as well as questions around the narrator's reliability.¹⁵⁴ These comparisons have productively highlighted Bernhard's narrative strategies, but it is significant that the author withholds the specificity of his allusion to Henry James. The reading of James in lieu of a medical textbook seems to contemplate the consequences of reading fiction more generally. At this point in *Frost*, the narrator's reading of James initiates a discussion between the two characters. Prior to Strauch's failed masque in front of the gorge, the narrator reads aloud an excerpt of his novel that he is struggling to interpret. The painter's interpretation forms a rare act of shared

¹⁵³ Tobias Heyl, *Zeichen und Dinge, Kunst und Natur. Intertextuelle Bezugnahmen in der Prosa Thomas Bernhards* (Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1995), p. 201.

¹⁵⁴ Eva Marquardt, *Gegenrichtung. Entwicklungstendenzen in der Erzählprosa Thomas Bernhards* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1990), p. 32; Andreas Gößling, 'Frost' in *Bernhard-Handbuch*, ed. by Mittermayer and Huber, pp. 37-46 (p. 41).

aesthetic engagement between these two figures: '[der Maler] interpretierte ihn auf wunderbare Weise, diesen unverständlichen, mir unverständlichen Satz, der mich die ganze Nacht nicht zur Ruhe hat kommen lassen' (W1, 200). It is a sentence from his volume of James, and not the apprentice's medical learning, that enables the two characters to communicate.

It is significant that, in Bernhard's debut novel of the early 1960s, Henry James of all writers should stimulate this shared moment. The early writings of Philip Roth at this time attest to James' contemporary currency as an exemplar of moral realism in American academia.¹⁵⁵ James also provides fertile ground for later theoretical engagements with the consequences of fiction. Martha Nussbaum uses James to explore how the novel takes readers beyond subject-centered rationality, stimulating ethical education and building readers as more sensitive interpreters of others through a consciousness of 'concrete universals'.¹⁵⁶ Although *Frost* far pre-dates the 'ethical turn' in literary studies, the narrator's frequent act of reading James is not cut off from his own quest to understanding another human being. This is not the only time that Henry James proves difficult for the *Famulant*:

Oft lese ich ganze Seiten und weiß gar nicht, was ich gelesen habe. Ich fange dann noch einmal von vorn und entdecke, daß das schön ist, was ich gelesen habe. Es handelt von Menschen, die unglücklich sind. Ich schlage das Buch zu und gehe zum Fenster und mache mir Notizen, schreibe in das Heft, was mir einfällt, wie es mir einfällt [...] (238-9).

Even though the characters in these pages of his volume of James are miserable, the narrator's act of reading nevertheless brings him into contact with 'Menschen'. He notes these readings down in an act of committed internalisation and reflection alongside the

¹⁵⁵ I have compared Bernhard with Roth in 'The Stains of Cultural Inheritance: Thomas Bernhard and Philip Roth', in *Thomas Bernhard's Afterlives*, ed. by Dowden, Berwald, and Thuswaldner, pp. 97-116.

¹⁵⁶ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 38.

recollections that inform the diary entries of *Frost*. There is little difference for this apprentice between understanding the figures in his volume of James and engaging with the pessimism of this painter.

Bernhard presents further moments of shared reading in this text. The painter's reading of Pascal, a tome that he repeatedly moves from pocket to pocket, is portrayed as a private act. The gesture resonates with the eponymous character's well-known act in Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951), moving stones from one pocket to another.¹⁵⁷ Unlike Beckett's isolated subject, though, Strauch reads together with another. The narrator's twenty-fifth diary entry describes how the painter would crouch and read Pascal to him (296). Even though the *Famulant* is unable to understand the phrases quoted by Strauch, they appear to infect his own reading:

Ich blätterte in meinem Henry James, ohne einen Gedanken an diesen Dichter. Stand auf. Ging hin und her. Legte mich wieder hin. Ich verabscheute die Schamlosigkeit eines Satzes, der vor mir mitten in diesem Buch stand. Ich warf das Buch auf den Boden. Alles ist übelriechend, dachte ich (297).

The juxtaposition of these experiences reveals the overpowering experience of his meetings with the painter. But it also shows how the narrator's reading of James is a cultural act that is centrally connected with experiences outside of it. His reading is not a form of escape from Strauch and the destructive human relationships recounted in his diary—quite the contrary. The reappearance of Henry James at the end of the novel is juxtaposed with a glimpse of human connection. The narrator's final diary entry describes that he has written to the hospital to request both his winter jacket and the volume by Kolch, as he does not envisage leaving soon (332). Despite the bleakness of this landscape, the *Famulant* decides

¹⁵⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, ed. by Shane Weller (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 93. I will discuss scholarly comparisons between the works of Beckett and Bernhard further in the next chapter.

to stay and commit to his project of observing a painter otherwise so commonly misunderstood. A passing reference to the volume of James, now finished, on his desk alongside an unfinished letter to his brother suggests that the act of reading is central to this commitment (*ibid.*).

Just as the *Famulant*'s engagement with James reveals on closer inspection unexpected traces of human connection, Strauch's interactions with others are not devoid of humanity, either. At first, his 'Haushälterin' is described in derogatory terms: the painter only keeps her to satisfy his 'Körperansprüche', exchanging overpayment for greater care in her domestic duties (70). She nevertheless appears to understand Strauch's condition, preserving his solitude through making excuses to his visitors (71). The painter holds his illness responsible for changing their relationship, causing him to exclude everyone from his life; yet Strauch still recognises her importance: 'außer ihr bin ich in allem längst tot' (*ibid.*). One of the ways in which they are able to communicate is through art, even though the painter believes her to have little understanding of it: 'Weil sie keine Ahnung von Kunst hatte: von ihr habe ich die besten Urteile gehört' (70). The diary entries also make reference to Strauch's sister who, it is revealed, was a victim of the crazed, barking dogs that pervade this setting: 'Meiner Schwester, müssen Sie wissen, hat einmal ein Gasthaushund ein Stück aus dem Oberschenkel herausgerissen. Und der Wirt hat sich nicht einmal entschuldigt' (331). The significance of Strauch's sister is made clear in the third of six letters from the *Famulant* to his supervisor, reproduced in Bernhard's narrative before the final diary entry. The narrator describes how, even though his sister lives in Mexico, Strauch still feels an affectionate bond with her. This connection seems 'merkwürdig zusammenhanglos' to the narrator (323), but it also reveals a side to Strauch beyond the unremitting bleakness of his isolated monologues. The revelation of Strauch's connection with his sister prompts the

narrator to close the letter to his supervisor with a plea: ‘Ich möchte sagen: *erhören* Sie Ihren Bruder’ (*ibid.*).

This highlights the structural importance of the letters in this text. Although reproduced before the final diary entry of *Frost*, it is unclear when each letter was composed. In dialogue with the preceding diary entries in this fiction, however, they expose another side to the painter. Bernhard’s reprise of his motif of the circus in the fourth letter exemplifies this:

Dann eine Vorliebe für Zirkus, für Revuen, für alles Abwegige. Er spricht von “seinem Königtum der Spaßmacherei”. Haben Sie denn niemals versucht, an Ihren Bruder heranzukommen? Durch Schliche? Weil Sie doch Arzt sind, denke ich, wäre für Sie ein Kontakt zu ihm immer wichtiger gewesen (324).

If, in *Nights at the Circus*, the aesthetic realm of the circus provides a shared space for performance, this reference to the circus in *Frost* suggests the imaginative freedom and community that the painter is denied. The narrator’s conditional perfect encapsulates the possibilities for human connection that might have been. The letter here reveals a gesture towards the need for mutual understanding, and the possibility of aesthetic experience to provide a shared context between individuals. The rapacious environment of Weng, however, prevents any such possibilities from being pursued. The letters provide a plaintive portrayal of missed connections. Opportunities for play, similarly, are infected by Bernhard’s desolate storyworld: ‘Wir haben heute ein Spiel miteinander gemacht’, the apprentice writes in the fifth letter, ‘wem von uns beiden es gelingt, den anderen zum Weinen zu bringen!’ (327).

The novel’s climax provides little possibility for mutual understanding. Unlike *Nights at the Circus*, *Frost* does not end with a redemptive vision of union or embodied capability. Instead, the narrator’s final diary entry presents the solipsistic painter

pathetically observing his declining body: ‘So komme ich jetzt oft auf lange Partien bloßen Schauens. Das ist die einzige Befriedigung, die ich habe; sie lindert den Schmerz’ (336). Strauch’s body appears a microcosm of the pain and suffering that course through the topography of this Alpine landscape. In a coda to the final entry, the narrator, having returned to Schwarzach, reads of the disappearance of Strauch into the snowy landscape of Weng in a newspaper report. The newspaper connects the narrator to the circulation of knowledge and understanding in a community from which Strauch has been excluded. In *Nights at the Circus*, Mignon’s rendition of the final song of *Die Winterreise*, as I have argued, opens a space for mutual recognition in art and initiates Fevvers’ own journey to mutual empathy and embodied confidence. The climax to *Frost* builds a dystopian vision of failed development via the decaying body of the painter, his winter’s journey culminating in his absorption into Weng’s ulcerous landscape. The potentials for human connection postulated in the letters and in the shared reading of Henry James are not fulfilled.

Within Bernhard’s novel of failed development in the post-war topography of Weng, therefore, is the implication that life does not need to be this way. The constructed backdrop of Carter’s vision of modernity in *Nights at the Circus* helps to illuminate junctures at which human connection would have been possible in *Frost*. Acts of reading make available possibilities for mutual understanding between the apprentice and painter in *Frost* that this environment seems constantly to deny. Where Carter’s fictional engagement with *Bildung* achieves a subtle vision of change founded on intersubjective understanding, however, the solitary narrator of *Frost* can only gesture toward such forms of human connection beyond the aporias of post-war Weng. In the next part of this chapter, I will argue that Bernhard’s return to the scene of his own *Bildung* in *Holzfällen* goes beyond such gestures to find practical possibilities of living differently in modern culture. There is little such scope, though, in Bernhard’s early fictions. I will explore this further through a brief analysis of

Bernhard's short fictional text, *Amras* (1964). This work has also been read as centrally concerned with *Bildung*, but *Amras* also reveals common motifs and themes in Bernhard's treatments of *Bildung* to which he returns in his later engagements with the genre in the 1980s.

In *Amras* (1964), Bernhard portrays two brothers housed by their uncle in a secluded tower following the deaths of their parents in a suicide pact in which the brothers were also meant to die. The brothers devote themselves in isolation to separate, specialist spheres of knowledge. The narrator, K., devotes himself to natural sciences while his brother Walter, suffering from the epilepsy inherited from his mother, inhabits a sphere of aesthetics. The inclusion of Adalbert Stifter among the authors featuring in Walter's reading plays on associations between solitary learning and individual *Bildung* (W11, 118), but the climax to *Amras* is anything but positive: Walter commits suicide by jumping from the tower and K, it is suggested, is taken to a psychiatric institution (179). Bernhard's treatment of *Bildung* in this text has been analysed in detail by Fatima Naqvi, who interprets *Amras* as a narrative of failed individuation that reflects seriously on 'what learning could achieve, when undertaken in the spirit of open-ended inquiry and interdisciplinary experimentation'.¹⁵⁸ My brief inclusion of *Amras* here details two recurrent motifs to which Bernhard refers in his examination of *Bildung* twenty years later in *Holzfällen*: the fairy-tale tower in which both brothers engage in their isolated pursuits; and, outside of the tower, at the end of the apple garden in the distance, a circus.

The tower in *Amras* provides protection to the young men away from society and the family.¹⁵⁹ It is both a sanctuary and a prison, a prerequisite for their learning and a

¹⁵⁸ Naqvi, *How We Learn Where We Live*, Loc. 2258.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1667.

metonym for the separation of their academic pursuits from human interaction. As in *Frost*, Bernhard uses the fate of the individual to exemplify the conditions of a regime and an empire, but he also uses the suicide of the aesthete Walter in *Amras* to reflect on how solitary self-cultivation ill-prepares these characters for modern survival. The fragmentary and elliptical nature of this text impedes straightforward interpretation; yet the repeated references to the distant spectre of a circus provides an immediate contrast to the tower and an alternative version of communal culture. The circus features significantly in Walter's demise. K. discovers his body following his visit to the circus to speak with the local inhabitants. Although the twenty-seven visits of a doctor are unable to provide grounds for Walter's actions, the reading of his fragmentary extant papers provide an insight into his suffering mind:

Die Vorstellung des brennenden Zirkuszeltes im Menschen lässt in den meisten das Geheul der Löwen und das Reißen der Tigernagel erheiternd erscheinen, die Fähigkeit, die Höhepunkte eines Zirkusprogramms in dem menschlichen Gehirn einfach auszuwechseln (147).

For Walter, the circus is a site of both exhilaration and destruction. His imagined scene of the circus burning typifies his isolation from this site of shared performance; his inability to share in the fascination of the circus beyond his fixation on human suffering. Where his brother can communicate with those living near the circus, K. remains cut off in his solitary aesthetic pursuits.

These themes recur twenty years later in *Holzfällen*. In this later prose text, Bernhard returns to the individual pursuit of expert knowledge, a fairy-tale tower, and the motif of the circus to portray a stifling version of modern social living. As I will argue, however, his depiction of a fictional dinner casting personae from his own *Bildung* in the Viennese artistic circle of Gerhard Lampersberg opens opportunities for living differently, towards which his earlier works only gesture. Like *Nights at the Circus*, I will argue, *Holzfällen*

envisions the beginnings of more positive ways of living with others in modernity. But Bernhard does not do so through picaresque fictions or magical transformations. He instead breaks with fiction to invite his readers into a world of recognisable caricatures and cultural references. My comparison of the text with Carter's *Bildungsroman* will help me to reimagine Bernhard's concerns in a text widely read as a public settling of scores, as well as his relevance to understandings of the uses of fiction in the 1980s.

2.4. Breaking with fiction in *Holzfällen*

In *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung*, Bernhard's narrator accepts an invitation from his former mentor Auersberger and his wife to a 'künstlerisches Abendessen' following a chance meeting on Vienna's *Graben*. That morning, both he and Auersberger had learned of the suicide of their mutual friend, Joana. The narrator immediately regrets his sentimentality in agreeing to attend the dinner, which takes place directly after Joana's funeral in the Lower Austrian town of Kilb. While the dinner guests await the arrival of a *Burgtheater* actor from his performance of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1885) that evening, the narrator sits apart in an 'Ohrensessel' (W7, 7). He critiques the artistic stasis and superficial behaviour of his hosts while reflecting on his friendship with Joana. This friendship played a fundamental role in his own pursuit of art. In an echo of Bernhard's motif of the tower in *Amras*, Joana lived in a tower in the *Simmeringer Hauptstraße* where, following her abandonment by her husband Fritz, she and the narrator would act out and record scenes of implied intimacy:

Natürlich eine nackte Prinzessin, hatte ich zu der auf ihrem Bett liegenden Joana gesagt. Du als nackter König, hatte sie geantwortet und hatte lachen wollen, es gelang ihr nicht (46).

This dialogue suggests the establishment of a human connection through their shared pursuit of art. The narrator is quick to dismiss any hint of sentimentality, although their relationship, he acknowledges, helped him to survive as a young artist in Vienna. My

analysis of *Holzfällen* will focus on the narrator's retrospective reflections on his relationships. Against the comparative context of this chapter, I will analyse how Bernhard both reveals the narrator's recognition of his past failure and invites his reader into a shared vision of change.

Joana is presented as a figure occupying a space between fact and fiction. As the *nom de plume* of the Viennese artist Elfriede Slukal, Joana is the only figure in the text whose name has not been changed. Yet she constructs a fairy-tale world for herself, transforming her tower and wearing self-made clothes and jewellery. The narrator remembers her desire to spend time with others who shared her youthful fancy:

Daß sie sich vor allem immer mit jungen Menschen umgeben hat, dachte ich, am liebsten mit ganz jungen, die noch traumwandlerisch sind, wie sie selbst es bezeichnet hat, die noch nicht durch Kultur und Bildung verdorben und ruiniert sind (170).

Her constructed surroundings provide an escape from the modern world, as well as a modern culture that has only exacerbated her misery. Following Joana's failure as a dancer and her appearances in 'Märchenspiele' on minor Austrian stages, she tried to synthesise her art and life. Her most recent vocation exemplifies this ambition: teaching workshops for *Burgtheater* actors on how to walk (83). Like Carter's reconstruction of Mignon in *Nights at the Circus*, Joana appears a figure from another realm, embodying a commitment to aesthetic experience despite her recurrent victimisation by a selfish society. Her memory ushers in a space in *Holzfällen* not only for the sentimentalism that the narrator repeatedly denies, but also for Bernhard's reader to acknowledge the flawed behaviours of the protagonist.

Existing approaches of *Bildung* have led to the suffocating scene of the 'künstlerisches Abendessen'. The narrator's tirades undermine the claims of the Auersbergers to cultured nobility, his paratactic participial phrases ridiculing his mentor's

self-image and denigrating his artistic output as outmoded and derivative: ‘ein verkommener, vom Vermögen seiner Frau stumpfsinnig gewordener Gesellschafts-Kopist als Webern-Nachfolger’ (96). Imitation also characterises the Auersbergers’ intellectual interests. When the narrator meets the Auersbergers on the *Graben*, he notices the volumes of Wittgenstein they have purchased (14). He states that, just as they had bought copies of Ferdinand Ebner thirty years before without reading them, these copies of Wittgenstein are only likely to inform their pseudo-cultural chatter. The superficial displays of knowledge at this artistic dinner—Auersberger’s references to his own learning and Jeannie Billroth’s vague remarks as to the depths of Ibsen’s works—caricature the pretensions to knowledge of Bernhard’s constructed *Bildungsbürgertum*. There is a darker side to this public performance of education. Where alcohol used to accompany the interactions between the narrator and Joana in her tower in the *Simmeringer Hauptstraße*, it prompts violence in Vienna’s *Gentzgasse*:

Meistens endeten solche Abende damit, daß der Auersberger sein Weinglas an eine der auersbergerischen Wände geworfen und dazu auch noch an einer dieser Wände einen jener zierlichen und unbezahlbaren Empiresessel zertrümmert hat (174).

The passage exemplifies Bernhard’s comic style, attributing Auersberger’s name as an epithet to the walls in a setting carefully curated to demonstrate the host’s cultural superiority. However, the alliterative association between ‘zierlich’ and ‘zertrümmert’ encapsulates the sense of threat behind the Auersbergers’ façade.

The narrator is no different. He admits his intention to read *The Wild Duck* to keep up with the dinner conversation, but he does not own a copy (43). He remembers enough details about the play to prompt Auersberger’s wife, who struggles to remember Ekdal’s name during the funeral reception. The narrator then calls out her lack of knowledge:

Da mir die Auersberger so widerlich gewesen war in dem Augenblick, in welchem sie *Ekdal, Ekdal*, geschrien hatte, fragte ich ganz gemein: was für ein Ekdal? (*ibid.*)

The inclusion of the adverbial ‘ganz gemein’ indicates that the narrator retrospectively recognises the cruelty of his action, and his own participation in the Auersbergers’ performance of learning. The narrator then reveals that he is just as capable of violence towards women as his host. Bernhard juxtaposes a reference to Auersberger’s violent act of throwing Gulasch at the wall with his narrator’s intellectual impatience: ‘ich hätte sie ohrfeigen können’ (74). This scene reveals the importance of the retrospective narrative act in *Holzfällen*. The narrator does not exonerate himself from the social ills he clear-sightedly diagnoses. In his vitriol, the narrator exposes his own faults.

This is most evident in the narrator’s treatment of John, the one friend who did not abandon Joana in her darkest period. Having professed earlier in the text that he does not judge people on their outward appearance—‘[n]atürlich können wir Menschen nicht nur nach ihrer Kleidung beurteilen, dachte ich, diesen Fehler habe ich nie gemacht’ (35)—this is precisely what he does when judging John as a seedy travelling salesman. He mocks John’s accent, which reveals John’s upbringing in the same Schwarzach environs as the *Famulant* in *Frost*, as well as John’s table manners: ‘[Seine] mit Gulasch bespritzter gestärkte Hemdbrust bestätigt mehr oder weniger den Eindruck, daß es sich bei dem Lebensgefährten der Joana um einen total verkommenen Menschen handelt’ (70). However, the narrator now recognises his own prejudice. John describes the treatment of Joana’s body with refreshing honesty, explaining his financial and moral support for Joana at the end of her life, her rehabilitation from alcohol addiction seven times, and even his participation in her workshops (77-8). The opening words of the narrator’s realisation indicate his more nuanced perspective:

[B]ei eingehender Betrachtung sah ich auf einmal so viele Vorzüge an diesem Menschen, daß ich bald der Meinung gewesen war, er sei, obwohl sie sich letztenendes doch umgebracht hat, für die Joana die Rettung gewesen, ein tatsächlicher *Zufluchtsmensch* (80).

The subjunctive ‘sei’ suggests the narrator’s own distance from such genuine care. Unlike John, the narrator abandoned Joana when she needed him. John both embodies a form of care for others absent at the ‘künstlerisches Abendessen’ and highlights what the narrator and the dinner party guests have in common. The narrator suggests this realisation through a silent physical gesture. Where, in *Nights at the Circus*, the loving union between Fevvers and Walser provides a final scene of embodied mutual care, the narrator in *Holzfällen*, recognising the artificiality of the so-called ‘Auersbergzirkus’, expresses his disapproval via a bodily gesture. He stands up and sits next to John (92).

At the artistic dinner, Jeannie Billroth, whom the narrator caricatures as a self-styled Viennese Virginia Woolf, proposes collecting money for John. The narrator regards this gesture as tasteless, but his overwrought defence of John indicates that Jeannie Billroth is not the only person posturing:

Die Virginia Woolf von Wien, habe ich damals gedacht, die den John damals benutzt hat, sich wieder einmal in soziale Szene zu setzen und die diesen John damit in eine der größten Verlegenheiten seines Lebens gestürzt hat (144).

This hyperbole illuminates how the narrator is just as prone to performance as those around the table. As the narrator acknowledges, his relationship with Jeannie Billroth was not always as tense. He remembers the evenings they used to spend together reading and acting out dramatic parts, as well as her literary gatherings: ‘Und ich bin von der Jeannie auch immer erst gegen zwei Uhr früh nachhause gegangen, den Kopf voller Weltliteratur durch die Radetzkystraße am Donaukanal entlang bis nach Währing’ (136). The narrator, having returned to Vienna from twenty years in England, stages his own hypocritical treatment of

a figure who once set the foundations for his own cosmopolitan self-perception. Reflecting on her loveless marriage to the head of a chemical company, Bernhard reveals how the narrator and Jeannie share a common sense of isolation. The narrator realises his own culpability in abandoning her: ‘*Du hast die Jeannie verraten, nicht sie dich*’ (146).

This does not stop the narrator from enjoying her comeuppance. Jeannie’s questions to the actor form part of what the narrator perceives as her performance of superiority: ‘ihre den ganzen Abend lang auf der Lauer gelegene Bosheit’ (174). When, at the end of the dinner, she asks the actor whether he has found fulfilment in his art, he at first ignores the question. It takes several repetitions of the question before the actor finally takes his cue and launches into a tirade: ‘Wörter wie *niederträchtig, gemein, unbotmäßig, verlogen, infam, Größenwahnsinnig, dumm* prasselten plötzlich auf die Gentzgassengesellschaft und insbesondere auf die Jeannie nieder’ (183). Jeannie’s muted reaction, save for the reddening of her face behind her layers of make-up (*ibid.*), suggests that this performance is somewhat expected. Less expected, though, is how this exaggerated tirade improves the *Burgschauspieler* in the narrator’s eyes. The public scolding of Jeannie inspires his ‘Hochachtung’ (184). This realisation is a turning point in the text. But it also exposes one of the clearest contrasts between this artistic dinner of 1984 and Carter’s magical realist retelling of the advent of modernity: the treatment of female characters by Bernhard’s narrators.

Despite Carter’s comic scepticism in *Nights at the Circus* towards the all-female utopia on the Taiga to which a male escapee assiduously provides his sperm, the modulation of the anvil of history envisaged in the novel has female political, economic, and bodily emancipation at its core. Walser recalls on his final union with Fevvers ‘how nature had equipped her only for the “woman on top” position’ (*Nights*, 347). By contrast, Bernhard’s prose fictions and plays frequently return to victimisations of predominantly silent women.

Ria Endres' doctoral dissertation *Am Ende angekommen* (1980), in which she alleged Bernhard's intellectual hostility towards women, caused controversy in the 1980s. It even provided one of the discourses cited in Elfriede Jelinek's portrayal of female subjugation in *Clara S.* (1982).¹⁶⁰ Andrea Reiter has argued against Endres' thesis, emphasising that Bernhard is rarely behind moments in his texts where women are treated abominably.¹⁶¹ Stephen Dowden, similarly, has argued that the oppression of women in Bernhard's fiction always reveals the self-destructive nature of masculine pride.¹⁶² In *Holzfällen*, the narrator reflects on his actions at the artistic dinner with sufficient distance to call his conduct into question. His account of his enjoyment of the *Burgschauspieler*'s tirade towards Jeannie Billroth at the dinner, a torrent of invectives hardly proportionate to her question, provides uncomfortable evidence of his prejudices. The scene shows how models of communication in this contemporary cultural scene are not uniformly positive or cooperative. Communication in *Holzfällen* involves chauvinistic expressions of superiority, barbed ridicule, and cruelty. Yet the staging of such treatment of female characters in *Holzfällen* is part of the narrator's act of self-acknowledgement. The narrator reveals an awareness of his cruel behaviour and the potential for change.

The cue for his change is provided in a curious refrain, in which the *Burgschauspieler* reacts to the artificiality of his society by envisioning the authentic simplicity of the rural woodcutter. The narrator recalls how the meaning of this phrase only disclosed itself to him in retrospect:

¹⁶⁰ Ria Endres, *Am Ende angekommen: dargestellt am wahnhaften Dunkel der Männerporträts des Thomas Bernhard* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1980).

¹⁶¹ Andrea Reiter, "'Die Bachmann hab' ich sehr gern mögen, die war halt eine gescheite Frau. Eine seltsame Verbindung, nicht?': Women in Thomas Bernhard's Prose Writings', in *From High Priests to Desecrators: Contemporary Austrian Writers*, ed. by Ricarda Schmidt and Moray McGowan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 155-74 (p. 166).

¹⁶² Dowden, *Understanding Thomas Bernhard*, p. 35.

[D]aß der Burgschauspieler schon im Verlauf des Fogoschessens und dann auch noch immer wieder einmal im Musikzimmer, diese drei Wörter, *Wald*, *Hochwald*, *Holzfällen* gesagt hatte, ohne daß ich zuerst schon gewußt hätte, was er damit meinte (189).

In the introduction to this thesis, I analysed translations of this refrain which bring into focus Bernhard's acts of score-settling in *Holzfällen*, cutting the pretensions of his former artistic coterie down to size, and the Burgschauspieler's idealisation of the simple life. There have been further interpretations.¹⁶³ The echo of Stifter's story of the same name in 'Hochwald' has prompted commentators to argue that Bernhard continues the project of *Frost*, investigating how Stifter's vision of serenity is not realisable in the Austrian city.¹⁶⁴ In *Holzfällen*, this refrain provides the narrator's cue to leave and, just as he left Jeannie Billroth's apartment brimming with *Weltliteratur* over twenty years before, he now has the impulse to write: 'gleich und sofort und gleich und gleich, bevor es zu spät ist' (199). The result of this impulse, it is implied, is the present text. The refrain occasions a change of direction, a moment of clarity. The contemporary context of this chapter will assist another perspective on this refrain as indicative of the text's vision of change. Central to this vision, though, is the intertext that Bernhard provides his reader. *Holzfällen* thematises the revelation of truth, but the text's many references to Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* emphasise that there are necessary conditions for this act of truth-telling.

In *The Wild Duck*, the character of Gregers Werle embodies an unwavering commitment to truth. After revealing the affair between his father and the servant-girl Gina, now the wife of Hjalmar Ekdal, he is unable to comprehend why the couple are so miserable. Their daughter, Hedvig, like Joana in *Holzfällen*, constructs a fantasy world for herself,

¹⁶³ Manfred Mittermayer reads the refrain to suggest the actor's wish to retire to the imaginative natural world of Ekdal's loft. Manfred Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1995), p. 127.

¹⁶⁴ Dean Krouk, 'Forest Fictions: Thomas Bernhard's *Holzfällen* and Henrik Ibsen's *Vildanden*', *Scandinavian Studies*, 86(2) (2014), 133-47 (p. 142).

represented spatially by a mystical forest in the Ekdals' loft containing her beloved wild duck. This world of fairy tales first enables Gregers to establish a connection with Hedvig. Together, they discuss the Norwegian term *havsens bund*, the briny deep, from Hedvig's reading. But the young woman's encounters with Gregers prove fatal. Looking to her father Hjalmar for confirmation of his love in words, she simply finds bleak exaggerations and unkept promises, and so she trusts in Gregers' truth-telling. When Gregers encourages her to show her love for her distant and disillusioned father by sacrificing something precious to her, though, she takes his statement literally and commits suicide. In Toril Moi's reading of the play, both Hjalmar's life-lie and Gregers' commitment to truth deprive Hedvig's life of meaning.¹⁶⁵ But instead of lecturing an audience on the fallacies of both Hjalmar and Gregers' behaviours, Moi argues, Ibsen prompts his audience to look at the child: 'At the centre of *The Wild Duck* there is a frightened and loving child, struggling and failing to make sense of words and the world'.¹⁶⁶ Bernhard, in *Holzfällen*, does the same.

Hedvig's tragedy has a clear parallel in *Holzfällen*. Joana is also unable to reconcile her artistic persona with the outside world. Joana's tragedy is encapsulated in a poignant moment in which the narrator takes part in a collective act of remembrance with the other dinner guests. Hearing Ravel's *Bolero*, Joana's favourite piece of music, the narrator changes his tone:

Wir sollten uns von Zeit zu Zeit nicht scheuen, uns von einer Sentimentalität beherrschen zu lassen, dachte ich, und ich ließ mich jetzt von dem Bolero beherrschen (167).

As in *Der Untergeher*, discussed in Chapter One, the experience of a recording creates a space for remembering a lost friendship. The *Bolero* in *Holzfällen* prompts the narrator to

¹⁶⁵ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 268.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

acknowledge the tragedy of his vulnerable former friend. As the narrator loses himself in the moment, a reader can see past his hyperbolic social criticisms in this text into his own failures to live up to his former friendship. In *Nights at the Circus*, it is the live song by Mignon that opens possibilities for her coming of age and a more positive form of social living; in *Holzfällen*, the narrator's acknowledgement of the sentimentality he previously scorned suggests the beginnings of a different way of living as well. But this scene highlights the contrasts between Bernhard and Carter's uses of fiction. In *Nights at the Circus*, Mignon's song takes place within the framework of the fiction, enabling a reader to share in the visceral response to the performance experienced by Fevvers and Walser. When revealing Joana's truth in *Holzfällen*, Bernhard breaks with fiction altogether.

In the narrator's moment of sentimentality listening to Ravel's *Bolero*, he refers to the real artist Elfriede Slukal behind the *nom de plume* of Joana (167). A reader may recognise Ravel's *Bolero*, but the name would be obscure to most. Elfriede Slukal was an artist who had died in 1976 but, in *Holzfällen*, it is questionable whether a reader needs to know anything about Elfriede Slukal to understand what Bernhard is doing. It suffices to suspect that she is most probably a real person. There is a move beyond the fictional framework of the text in which a reader is included, and a reader does not need to be part of the expert culture of the text, a 'Webern-Nachfolger', nor steeped in volumes of Wittgenstein to participate in this move. Where Lizzie in *Nights at the Circus* embodies a vision of a good-enough mother, the world opened by Bernhard beyond his fiction calls on a non-expert reader, a reader who is simply good enough to appreciate what Bernhard is doing. Bernhard includes a further contemporary cultural allusion shortly afterwards to amplify this break from fiction: a reference by Jeannie Billroth to the move of the so-called 'Theaterberserker' Claus Peymann from Bochum to Vienna's *Burgtheater* (176). Bernhard situates the narrative of *Holzfällen* within wider cultural conversations outside of the text,

and a reader's engagement with the text actively contributes to such conversations. This is key to Bernhard's contribution to ideas of fiction in the 1980s, but first it will offer another way of considering the well-known cultural conversation initiated by the publication of this controversial text in 1984.

Discussions of *Holzfällen* are preceded by the media furore following the defamation claim by the Viennese composer Gerhard Lampersberg and the court-ordered confiscation of the text in August 1984. Bernhard and Unseld were cast in a media drama as defenders of the freedom of art against a first-instance court ruling that Bernhard's literary treatment of the composer was not in the public interest.¹⁶⁷ The controversy around the publication of *Holzfällen*, which only stimulated Bernhard's notoriety and the text's sales figures once back in commercial circulation in Austria,¹⁶⁸ has led to numerous interpretations of the work as a *roman à clef* attacking representatives of the Austrian avant-garde and identifiable figures from Viennese cultural life.¹⁶⁹ While some critics have argued that acts of decoding Bernhard's extra-textual targets reduce the complexity of his work,¹⁷⁰ the text is still considered a bravura performance of Bernhardian bile: 'the lengthy rambling speech of a critic whose role is defined by unswerving hate'.¹⁷¹ These responses to *Holzfällen* are important for confirming the engaging erudition and humour of Bernhard's venom. The intellectual backdrop of Habermas' responses to modernity and Carter's treatments of *Bildung* in this chapter, though, has enabled me to build on such readings by highlighting how Bernhard exposes the narrator's regretful reflections on his prior conduct

¹⁶⁷ Schindlecker, p. 13.

¹⁶⁸ Karl Wagner, 'Holzfällen. Eine Erregung', in *Bernhard-Handbuch*, ed. by Mittermayer and Huber, pp. 74-9 (p. 74).

¹⁶⁹ Martin, p. 176. See also Mittermayer, *Biografie*, p. 375.

¹⁷⁰ Barbara Mariacher, "Umspringbilder": Erzählen—Beobachten—Erinnern (Peter Lang: Frankfurt, 1999), p. 111.

¹⁷¹ Kata Gellen and Jakob Norberg, 'The Unconscionable Critic: Thomas Bernhard's *Holzfällen*', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 44.1/2 (2011), 57-76 (p. 70).

alongside his eloquent diatribes. Bernhard's break from fiction in naming Elfriede Slukal invites his reader into this act of acknowledgement. Where, in *The Wild Duck*, Hedvig's tragedy emerges from the lack of a shared framework to acknowledge the truth of a family's mutual affection beneath overt life-lies, Bernhard's text constructs a common cultural framework with his reader. From this perspective, the media furore around *Holzfällen* exemplifies Bernhard's approach to fiction in the novel more generally. In *Holzfällen*, art does not exist in an expert sphere separate from everyday culture. Bernhard invites his reader to move past the forms of sociality at the 'künstlerisches Abendessen' and to reconsider their own cultural behaviours.

This assists an understanding of the climax to the text. Leaving the dinner, the narrator kisses Auersberger's wife, immediately regretting having done so, and embarrasses himself with a passing remark about Joana (194-5). For all his anti-social diatribes, he adheres to the conventions of Viennese politesse and is ashamed of his actions. This leads to an acknowledgement:

Wir sind überhaupt um nichts besser als diese Leute, die wir andauernd nur als unerträgliche und widerliche Leute empfinden, als abstoßende Menschen, mit welchen wir möglichst wenig zu tun haben wollen, während wir doch, wenn wir ehrlich sind, andauernd mit ihnen zu tun haben und genauso sind wie sie (196).

There is another way of living within this social environment, which his reflections on the death of Joana help him to recognise. This does not entail deviating from everyday Viennese politesse, nor voicing the hyperbolic insults of the narrator's private monologue to his hosts. The experiences of Joana's funeral and the artistic dinner have prompted him to acknowledge his contribution to the malaise he criticises. Gitta Honegger's biography of Bernhard sensitively analyses *Holzfällen* as a text in which Bernhard 'cast himself as the narrator among the *faux artistes* of his generation', examining his attacks as ultimately

‘directed against himself’.¹⁷² In my reading, Bernhard is similarly self-aware; yet alongside such self-awareness is his presentation of the former fallacies and potential for change in his narrator’s behaviour. Resolving to write about the dinner before it is too late, the narrator intimates the beginnings of this change. His account, *Holzfällen*, looks back on the tirades of a figure ranting from the ‘Ohrensessel’ outside of the artistic dinner. His repeated clauses ‘sagte ich im Ohrensessel’ provide a central symbol of this reflection. The *Ohrensessel*, a chair obscuring the narrator’s peripheral vision, typifies his former blindness to the consequences of his negativity and self-absorption. He now sees more clearly.

Toril Moi can help me to articulate the narrator’s development and the experience of reading Bernhard’s *Holzfällen* more precisely. In *Revolution of the Ordinary* (2017), Moi uses ordinary language philosophy—the volumes of Wittgenstein that the Auersbergers carry on the *Graben*—to develop an understanding of reading in literary studies as a practice of acknowledgement. Following Stanley Cavell, Moi discusses acknowledgement not simply as a form of knowledge but as an act involving the revelation of one’s position in relation to the other: ‘King Lear’, for example, ‘can’t acknowledge Cordelia’s love unless he manages to acknowledge—reveal—his own failure of love’.¹⁷³ Such a revelation can also surprise us, revealing ‘knowledge we didn’t even know we possessed’.¹⁷⁴ Moi applies this idea to the act of reading. Acknowledgement in reading, to Moi, is more than accounting for the work’s concepts: ‘it also requires us to understand our own position in relation to the work’s concerns. To articulate a just response, we must do justice both to the work and ourselves’.¹⁷⁵ In *Holzfällen*, the narrator is reading his former self, the limitations of the

¹⁷² Gitta Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 242.

¹⁷³ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 208.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

solitary tirades from his *Ohrensessel*, acknowledging the failure of love in his treatments of Joana, John, and Jeannie Billroth. Through Bernhard's break with fiction, however, he invites his reader to participate in this practice as well. The narrative of *Holzfällen* is itself a response to the narrator's failure to love, in which Bernhard's readers are implicated in a call to live more positively.

In the introduction to this thesis, I analysed Rita Felski's response to Bernhard's prose works in the context of her discussion on identification with literary characters. Felski describes a response to the vitriolic tirades in Bernhard's works as initiating a linguistic-aesthetic relationship that can draw a reader into sympathy, even if the reader does not usually share such a temperament.¹⁷⁶ She describes how a response to Bernhard's tirades can confound a sense of self as well as confirm it.¹⁷⁷ These insights are highly pertinent to the reading of *Holzfällen* advanced in this chapter. Bernhard stages the circling rants and rebarbative prejudices of his narrator with erudition and humour to engage a reader in acts of cultural condemnation; yet his break from the artifice of fiction creates a shared framework for a more searching acknowledgement of personal flaws as well. Through references to his former acquaintances and mentors and his allusions to common cultural contexts, Bernhard conditions a reading experience in which a reader can acknowledge the author and themselves. The scandal around *Holzfällen* enabled the text to become part of cultural conversations in a way that could not have been more apt to Bernhard's approach to fiction at this time. The 'Erregung' of the text inheres in its engagement with a reader's own ways of living in culture beyond the local framework of Bernhard's score-settling with a little-known Viennese composer.

¹⁷⁶ Felski, 'Identifying with Characters', p. 104.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Holzfällen also assists us to reconsider the 1980s context constructed in this chapter. In Habermas' re-reading of Enlightenment reason, he responds to the modern world via a theory of communicative action, in which individuals learn by interacting purposively and reaching agreement. Carter's reconstructed *Bildungsroman* advances a more embodied form of interaction between individuals, moving away from ideas of agreement and certainty, and instead basing a vision of modernity on embodied trust. This trust involves taking a risk. Walser, at the end of *Nights of the Circus*, is still not sure whether it is all a joke. Yet the embodied reciprocity explored in the text moves away from the more negative instances of sociality within the circus and towards a more gradual vision of positive change. Bernhard embeds his reflection on human relationships in modernity within the social norms of 1980s Vienna, staging cultural interactions in which individuals can be cruel as well as collaborative. In *Holzfällen*, as in *Frost*, relationships are broken, friends are lost, and recognition can come too late. Yet the climax of *Holzfällen* indicates the possibility of learning to change one's ways of interacting with others. The act of writing the narrative of *Holzfällen* is an act of starting over, acknowledging the limitations of one's own conduct and embarking on a life in modernity that, even if it does not transform the social norms of 1980s Vienna, is a little less bad.

Fiction is part of these ways of living. In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter maintains the shroud of fiction around her magical realist plot. Like Bernhard, Carter engages her readers with her erudition and exaggeration, but such aspects of her writing suggest a commitment to the potential of fiction to transform a reader, repositioning them in relation to cultural understandings outside of the text. Carter's playful citationality situates her narrative of *Bildung* within discourses of European philosophy of the subject to open a path for imagining a 'less bad' version of modernity; yet her text wears such learning lightly, situating her vision of embodied relationality in the modern age via comedy and a love story.

Bernhard's references to specialist domains of aesthetic knowledge are similarly playful. He uses common cultural reference points beyond the sphere of avant-garde art he satirises to invite his reader to participate within a more human account of individual fallibility and vulnerability. Both Carter and Bernhard position their narrators firmly within the social ills of their texts and, in different ways, dare their readers to reimagine what modernity could look like.

Resituating Bernhard with Habermas and Carter thus opens a more pluralistic account of his uses of fiction in the 1980s. The constructed intellectual backdrop in this chapter has made visible how and why Bernhard breaks with his fiction, opening a world in which he and his reader can imagine different ways of living in modern culture. This world is accessible without specialist knowledge of Webern or Berg, Lampersberg or Slukal. Instead, *Holzfällen* offers an opportunity to learn from the narrator's candid retrospective self-judgement, to move beyond the ills he satirises and, in a work playing on common cultural references, to appropriate Bernhard's narrative act of acknowledgement into their own ways of living in modernity. Reading *Holzfällen* alongside Carter's *Bildungsroman* illuminates the embeddedness of Bernhard's late fiction in processes of learning to live differently with art, with others, and with oneself. However, this comparison also raises questions: first, whether it is simply Bernhard's prose that evidences such embeddedness; and, secondly, how such models of learning transfer to the events of dramatic performance to which both *Frost* and *Holzfällen* refer. These questions are the subject of my next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

Theatre as a cultural habit in Thomas Bernhard and Timberlake Wertenbaker

Summary

This chapter will re-evaluate Bernhard's treatment of the theatre as an institution in three of his plays of the 1980s: *Am Ziel* (1981), *Der Theatermacher* (1984), and *Heldenplatz* (1988). Bernhard's theatrical writings are known for the bleak tirades of solitary protagonists attacking their homeland and its cultural institutions. By resituating these plays alongside a case study from London's Royal Court Theatre also from the 1980s, Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988), this chapter will examine the dramatic strategies through which Bernhard permits his audiences to see past the negativity of such figures. One of the benefits of reading Bernhard's dramas alongside Wertenbaker (as with my juxtaposition of Bernhard with Angela Carter in the previous chapter) is that it enables us to reimagine alternatives to the prevalent ways of interpreting Bernhard in his national contexts, and to be more attuned to nuances that do not quite fit with common impressions of the author in secondary literature. This chapter will focus on such nuances in Bernhard's later theatrical writings.

My comparison with Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* will highlight how, in *Der Theatermacher* and *Am Ziel*, Bernhard presents instances of human care and interpersonal commitment that, frequently, his protagonists are unable to see for themselves. My reading of these plays will then facilitate a re-evaluation of Bernhard's final and most controversial play, *Heldenplatz*. The play is Bernhard's supreme staging of polemic, but Bernhard also offers an important reflection in *Heldenplatz* on ways of participating in and learning from dramatic performance.

3.1. Repositioning Bernhard's plays

Lebenslängliche Theaterkerkerhaft
Ohne die geringste Begnadigungsmöglichkeit
Und doch niemals aufgegeben
Strafanstalt als Theater
Zehntausende Insassen
die alle keine Aussicht
auf Begnadigung haben
Nur die Todesstrafe ist ihnen allen sicher
es donnert

(W19, 202)

This tirade by the dramatist Bruscon in *Der Theatermacher* (1984) typifies the bleak hyperbole of Bernhard's stage artists. Backstage at the *Schwarzer Hirsch* inn in the village of Utzbach, where he and his family are to perform his historical comedy *Das Rad der Geschichte*, the domineering stage manager turns on an audience he believes incapable of appreciating his art. His attack on the theatre as a prison, comically imagining tens of thousands crammed into a dance hall in Utzbach, reveals his delusory self-regard as a suffering genius. His reference to a 'Strafanstalt' may even call to an audience's mind the idea of the stage as a 'moralische Anstalt', a public medium for cultivating morals and practical wisdom as extolled by Friedrich Schiller two centuries earlier.¹⁷⁸ Bruscon's conception of art appears far more sinister.¹⁷⁹ As the repeated rolls of thunder foreshadow the inevitable failure of his so-called 'Menschheitskomödie' (103), this rant characterises the institution of theatre as a prison from which neither Bruscon, his family, nor his audience can escape.

¹⁷⁸ Friedrich Schiller, 'Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet', in Friedrich Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Gerhard Fricke and Herbert G. Göpfert, 5 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1984), v: *Erzählungen. Theoretische Schriften*, pp. 818-31.

¹⁷⁹ Bernhard Judex comments on this conception of theatre in *Der Theatermacher*: 'Dem Theater in der Moderne bleibt nur noch ein fragwürdiger Rest jenes aufklärerischen Potenzials, den es als moralische Bildungsanstalt im Sinne Lessings oder Schillers beanspruchte'. Bernhard Judex, *Thomas Bernhard: Epoche—Werk—Wirkung* (München: C. H. Beck, 2010), p. 94.

The monologues of the disillusioned intellectuals who populate Bernhard's plays of the 1980s repeatedly return to such reflections on theatre as an institution: its cultural value, its social functions, and its educative potentials. Various commentators have analysed the negativity of such figures. To Gitta Honegger, for example, Bernhard's works exclude any possibility of cultural redemption in art. His stage characters are 'the last representatives of a humanist patriarchy that extinguished itself in two world wars'.¹⁸⁰ Some associate the tirades in Bernhard's plays with the author himself, interpreting such works as part of a wider dramatic project of political and cultural critique.¹⁸¹ These readings have assisted an understanding of the force and urgency of the diatribes staged in Bernhard's plays. Yet Bruscon remains unwaveringly committed to the theatre.¹⁸² His pursuit can be read as an existential need, his own form of coping with existence. The play raises the question of what Bruscon derives from his art, and whether his uses of cultural learning necessarily align with Bernhard's wider treatment of the theatre in the play. Appreciating the dramatic strategies through which Bernhard stages Bruscon's querulous rants will help to illuminate the author's approach to participating in and learning from theatrical performance in the 1980s.

Thus far in this thesis I have argued that, by the 1980s, Bernhard explores the experience of his art as inseparable from ways of living with others. The theatre, itself embedded in socio-cultural practice from its presumption of shared receptivity to its dependence on state funding, is a key part of this concern. This chapter will examine how

¹⁸⁰ Gitta Honegger, 'The Stranger Inside the Word: From Thomas Bernhard's Plays to the Anatomical Theater of Elfriede Jelinek', in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. by Konzett, pp. 137-48 (p. 140).

¹⁸¹ Matthias Konzett, 'Publikumsbeschimpfung: Thomas Bernhard's Provocations of the Austrian Public Sphere', *The German Quarterly*, 68.3 (1995), 251-70 (p. 251).

¹⁸² Nicholas Meyerhofer notes the ambivalence in Bernhard's creation of Bruscon as a tragi-heroic figure 'vainly in quest of perfection'. Nicholas J. Meyerhofer, 'The Laughing Sisyphus: Reflections on Bernhard as (Self-) Dramatist in Light of his *Der Theatermacher*', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 21 (1988), 107-15 (p. 113).

three of Bernhard's plays of the 1980s, *Am Ziel* (1981), *Der Theatermacher* (1984), and *Heldenplatz* (1988), provide an insight into Bernhard's conception of dramatic performance in the 1980s. I will examine how Bernhard's stagecraft, the verbal and non-verbal interactions between his characters, his exaggerations, allusions, and attention to casting all contribute to a playgoing experience in which an audience learns to see beyond the flawed self-conceptions of monomaniacal figures such as Bruscon. Beneath the tirades of his characters, I will argue, Bernhard offers more profound reflections on human relationships and suffering, suggesting potentials to participating in dramatic performance that his jaded protagonists are often unable to see. To bring this reading of Bernhard's late theatrical writings into focus, though, I will need to step outside of conventional contexts for responding to them.

Existing scholarship has established various European points of reference for Bernhard's theatre.¹⁸³ One figure frequently brought into discussions of Bernhard is Samuel Beckett, another author considered to create 'a universe of characters caught up in the prison house of their own consciousness'.¹⁸⁴ Martin Esslin has examined these authors' 'deep similarity in temperament and attitude, highly symptomatic of the position of the individual in an alienated and ideologically vacuous society'.¹⁸⁵ Both authors were published in German by Siegfried Unseld's *Suhrkamp Verlag* in Frankfurt, and Unseld's epistolary correspondence with Bernhard brings the two artists not infrequently into comparison. When Bernhard complained to his publisher regarding his sales figures in the 1960s, for

¹⁸³ Bernhard's late plays have also been compared with the character-based comedy of Molière, as well as the dolorous humour of Chekhov. Manfred Mittermayer, 'Rezeption der Dramen durch die deutschsprachige Theaterkritik', in *Bernhard-Handbuch*, ed. by Mittermayer and Huber, pp. 484-90 (p. 489).

¹⁸⁴ Martin Esslin, 'Beckett and Bernhard: A Comparison', in *Modern Austrian Literature*, 18 (1985), 67-78 (p. 68).

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

example, Unseld used Beckett as a point of reference to appease him.¹⁸⁶ There are resonances of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) in Bernhard's later plays: whether the central character listening to his own voice in solitude in *Einfach Kompliziert* (1986) (W20, 59), or Herrenstein's act of eating a banana from his wheelchair in *Elisabeth II* (1987) (162). However, despite such resonances between them—reviewers have referred to the Austrian author as 'Alpen-Beckett und Menschenfeind' and 'Beckett in Teutonensauce'—there is little evidence of sustained influence between the two authors.¹⁸⁷ Scholarly juxtapositions of Beckett and Bernhard have offered productive readings of both figures;¹⁸⁸ yet the attacks on the theatre and contemporary playmaking in the works under discussion are areas where Bernhard's *oeuvre* diverges from that of Beckett.¹⁸⁹

These attacks draw comparisons with another contemporary critic of Austria, Elfriede Jelinek. As discussed in Chapter One, Bernhard and Jelinek have much in common. The following analysis will refer to Jelinek's treatment of the institution of theatre in her controversial play *Burgtheater* (1984). In this play, Jelinek constructs a biting critique of art as a discourse and the unproblematic post-war rehabilitation of Austria's culture industry, using her playful allusiveness, wordplay, and slapstick violence to suggest similarly violent structures underlying her audience's own positions in culture. She does so through conceiving of characters as 'Sprachflächen' produced by their positions in discourse, prioritising their language over psychological acuity or dramatic action: 'Ich weiß auch

¹⁸⁶ Thomas Bernhard und Siegfried Unseld: *Der Briefwechsel*, ed. by Fellingner et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2011), p. 79.

¹⁸⁷ Jean-Marie Winkler, 'Todesengel, Nihilist und Prophet. Die Rezeption der Bühnenwerke in Frankreich 1986-1991', in *Kontinent Bernhard*, ed. by Bayer, pp. 269-96 (p. 281).

¹⁸⁸ For example, Catharina Wulf examines how the monologues of Bernhard and Beckett's characters evidence their desires for an audience. This idea will be pertinent to my analysis of *Der Theatermacher*. Catharina Wulf, *The Imperative of Narration: Beckett, Bernhard, Schopenhauer, Lacan* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1997), p. 97.

¹⁸⁹ Tine Koch analyses the two authors approach the topos of *theatrum mundi* to advance an idea of 'Leben als Spiel'. Tine Koch, *Das Leben ein Spiel, die Welt ein Theater? Spielformen des Welttheaters in den dramatischen Werken Samuel Becketts und Thomas Bernhards* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2012), p. 265.

nicht', she states in an essay of 1983, 'ich will keinen sakralen Geschmack von göttlichem auf der Bühne haben. Ich will kein Theater'.¹⁹⁰ For all the linguistic exaggeration, wordplay, and attacks on the theatre in Bernhard's works, however, I will propose in this chapter that Bernhard approaches the institution of theatre more positively. Working with certain actors who had risen to fame during the years of the Third Reich (Marianne Hoppe, who had starred in roles for the *Preußisches Staatstheater* during the war years, for example, performed in the premières of two of the plays under discussion in this chapter), dramatic theatre still has a role to fulfil in Bernhard's world. To better understand this role, I will construct an alternative cultural context for Bernhard's plays.

This chapter will interpret Bernhard's late theatrical writings alongside a contemporary British play, first performed in London's Royal Court Theatre in 1988 and exploring similar themes of theatrical tradition, the legacy of nationalism, and the theatre as a cultural habit: Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* (1988). Based on Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker* (1987), *Our Country's Good* explored the potential of theatre at a time when funding cuts threatened the Royal Court's independence and reputation for innovation.¹⁹¹ The play, which stages the first antipodean performance of an English comedy by a group of eighteenth-century transported convicts, was not performed in the German-speaking world during Bernhard's lifetime, and there are various differences between *Our Country's Good* and Bernhard's plays of the 1980s. Wertenbaker's work not only ends with the successful performance of the play within the play, unlike *Der Theatermacher*, but its positive vision of theatrical redemption is also reported to have been confirmed in practice through performances to audiences in institutionalised

¹⁹⁰ Elfriede Jelinek, 'Ich möchte seicht sein' (1983), in *Gegen den schönen Schein. Texte zu Elfriede Jelinek*, ed. by Gürtler, pp. 157-61 (p. 157).

¹⁹¹ Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 222.

confinement.¹⁹² The outlooks of Bernhard's figures are significantly bleaker. Robert Schuster in *Heldenplatz*, for example, dismisses the performance of literature in prisons as hypocritical piety:

Ausgefressene Schriftsteller
gehen in die Gefängnisse
und lesen den Gefangenen
ihren verlogenen Dreck als Kunstwerke vor
eine zynische Welt
eine durch und durch verkommene Welt
mit der ich nichts mehr zu tun haben will (W20, 290)

Despite their tonal differences, the juxtaposition of these texts will illuminate a conception of the theatre in Bernhard's plays as a shared cultural experience inherently involved in living with others outside of the institution. In different ways, I will argue, both writers explore forms of learning via participation in dramatic performance. Comparing them will add Bernhard's voice to a wider framework of contemporary reflections on dramatic potential.

This re-evaluation of Bernhard's dramas is necessary since these works feature so rarely in surveys of the author's international afterlives. Studies of Bernhard's European reception have highlighted his popularity in France as a playwright in the late 1980s,¹⁹³ while early translations of Bernhard's theatrical works into Polish furthered his renown as a dramatist outside of his homeland.¹⁹⁴ Even so, Bernhard's plays are frequently treated as minor or ephemeral diversions in his literary output, and particularly among Anglophone scholars. 'They are not intended to be masterpieces', states Stephen Dowden, 'they lack the

¹⁹² Naomi Rokotnitz analyses the successful performance of *Our Country's Good* at Blundeston Prison in London in *Trusting Performance: A Cognitive Approach to Embodiment in Drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 83.

¹⁹³ See Richter, p. 425.

¹⁹⁴ Stefan H. Kaszyński, 'Seit drei Jahrzehnten präsent. Zur Rezeption in Polen', in Bayer, *Kontinent Bernhard*, pp. 430-44 (p. 436).

concentrated intellectual energy that he lavished on his novels'.¹⁹⁵ This is echoed by the lukewarm receptions of Bernhard's plays in Anglophone productions in the twentieth century, variously attributed to the relative unavailability at that time of Bernhard's works in translation, as well as the unfamiliarity of English-speaking audiences with foreign theatrical traditions.¹⁹⁶ Yet this assessment is perhaps unduly negative. Jonathan Kent's production of *The Showman* at London's *Almeida Theatre* in 1993, for example, was praised for a bravura performance of Bruscon by Alan Bates. Michael Billington claimed that Bates took the role beyond portraying a 'run-down Lear' to present a more mercurial figure attacking others to conceal his own inadequacy, reviewing the play as Bernhard's long-awaited establishment of 'a foothold in British theatre'.¹⁹⁷ Productions of Bernhard in the United Kingdom remain few and far between, but this does not diminish the significance of his works. To highlight this significance, the comparison in this chapter aims to offer a new critical foothold in Bernhard's theatrical aesthetics.

Bernhard and Wertenbaker were writing at a time of cuts to arts budgets and, in Bernhard's case, public debate over whether the socially critical diatribes in his plays were worthy of state funding at all.¹⁹⁸ My analysis of *Our Country's Good*, though, will show how Wertenbaker never deviates from her intuition of the cultural value of theatre. Her play will offer a positive account of living within and learning from a shared cultural tradition, associating theatrical participation with the cultivation of individual legitimacy and interpersonal responsibility. Drawing on Enlightenment conceptions of the uses of theatre, *Our Country's Good* will assist an understanding of Bernhard's approach to theatre as an 'Anstalt'. My discussion of *Der Theatermacher* will show how the tyrannical Bruscon

¹⁹⁵ Dowden, *Understanding Thomas Bernhard*, p. 71.

¹⁹⁶ Couling, p. 429.

¹⁹⁷ Michael Billington, 'Savage Style: *The Showman* at The Almeida', *The Guardian*, 19 May 1993, p. 6.

¹⁹⁸ Judex, p. 89.

appropriates cultural traditions in the service of his abuse and self-absorbed obsessions; yet Bernhard's stagecraft lets an audience see potentials to the pursuit of art that Bruscon himself is unable to appreciate. Analysing *Der Theatermacher* and *Am Ziel* alongside *Our Country's Good* will reveal modes of learning in dramatic performance that lie beyond the grasp of Bernhard's *Geistesmenschen*. This comparison will lead to a re-evaluation of *Heldenplatz*, Bernhard's final and most controversial play of the 1980s. Frequently considered Bernhard's supreme staging of provocative polemic, I will argue that Bernhard reflects in this play on the models of pedagogy available when participating in drama as a viewer, and the consequences of engaging with dramatic action for living with others after the curtain call. These concerns are central to Wertenbaker's play of the same year.

3.2. The potentials of performance in *Our Country's Good*

In *Our Country's Good*, a troupe of convicts transported to New South Wales prepare to perform in a production of George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), a spectacle commissioned by the imperial Governor in Chief of New South Wales, Captain Arthur Phillip. He appoints his Second Lieutenant Ralph Clark to produce a different kind of spectacle from the public hangings that, Phillip believes, have numbed the prisoners to the fear of corporal punishment. Wertenbaker situates this belief in the theatre alongside various instances of individual change. In *Our Country's Good*, I will argue, Wertenbaker explores the medium of theatre both as a practice rooted in wider social structures and a cultural habit that can transform ways of living with one another. Wertenbaker's treatment of the development of her eighteenth-century characters in *Our Country's Good* through participating in drama will provide a case study to re-evaluate the way in which Bernhard stages processes of learning in his theatre of the 1980s.

Set in 1787, *Our Country's Good* engages expressly with positive accounts of the theatre as an instrument of moral edification and practical wisdom. Phillip and Captain

Tench even debate the virtues of the play with ‘the passion of discourse of eighteenth-century men’ (*Plays*, 203). Citing Rousseau, Phillip explains that the convicts’ propensity for violence stems from an aberration in their cultural development. The linguistic and intellectual refinement of the theatre will restore order:

The convicts will be speaking a refined, literate language and expressing sentiments of a delicacy they are not used to. It will remind them that there is more to life than crime, punishment. And we, this colony of a few hundred, will be watching this together, for a few hours we will no longer be despised prisoners and hated gaolers. We will laugh, we may be moved, we may even think a little (206).

Phillip’s tricolon culminates in an ideal of the transformation of the convicts into a community of rational subjects. The shift from the third- to first-person plural reflects his ideal that the experience of watching theatre will prompt acknowledgement of their shared humanity and a more peaceable coexistence. Theatre, for Phillip, has the power to change how they all live. Elsewhere, Wertenbaker advocated for the potential of the theatre to effect change: ‘I do think you can make people change’, she states, ‘just a little, by forcing them to question something just by intriguing them, or giving them an image that remains with them’.¹⁹⁹ Yet Phillip is not simply a mouthpiece for the positive view of theatre articulated by Wertenbaker here. His reference to the colony exemplifies his appropriation of the medium in a vision of rule over his subjects.²⁰⁰

This is evident as Phillip’s verbal allusions move from Rousseau to another Enlightenment thinker, John Locke. Phillip states that both the prisoners and gaolers are parties to a social contract, and the transmission of Farquhar’s play will reinforce its virtues.

¹⁹⁹ Cited in Rokotnitz, pp. 95-6.

²⁰⁰ Ann Wilson, ‘*Our Country’s Good*: Theatre, Colony and Nation in Wertenbaker’s Adaptation of *The Playmaker*’, *Modern Drama*, 34 (1991), 23-34 (p. 33).

Within the framework of this social contract, however, he envisions a more humane model of ruling: 'I want to rule over responsible human beings, not tyrannise over a group of animals' (246). The performance of *The Recruiting Officer* is more than a diversion; it necessitates an active form of engagement that modifies the self-understandings of its participants outside of it. Phillip repeats his reference to questions of responsibility:

A play is a world in itself, a tiny colony we could almost say.

Pause.

And you are in charge of it. That is a great responsibility (247).

Phillip's apposition and the falsely tentative 'we could almost say' lightly impresses on his junior that he expects the play to uphold the values of his rule. The pause allows for Ralph to understand these implications and his own responsibility for the play's efficacy. Yet Phillip's reference to 'a great responsibility' prompts reflection on who is responsible for this shared spectacle: its director, its actors, or its audience. Wertenbaker plays on the root of the term: just as Phillip demands Ralph to answer his commission of a successful première, he expects the play's viewers to respond to what they see in their conduct after the play. Phillip's second-person pronoun is directed at Ralph but need not be in performance. The pause enables an actor to turn away from the Socratic duologue in this scene to Wertenbaker's own audience. This amplifies the significance of his reference to the play as a world. Phillip assumes that the microcosm of state comedy will uphold the structures of his tiny colony, but also implies that both the performers and audience share responsibility for the world in which the comedy takes place.

Playgoing is a cultural habit that unites the cast of characters in this play. Various characters share insights from their past on how the theatre made an impression on them. While the convicts supposedly consume hangings as their 'favourite form of entertainment' (187), the former gentleman Sideway reflects on his own experiences of Drury Lane before

turning to crime: ‘The coaches, the actors scuttling, the gentlemen watching, the ladies tittering, the perfumes, the clothes, the handkerchiefs’ (196). In an aside, he refers to Mr. Garrick’s treatment of his lover, ‘the lovely Peg Woffington’ (*ibid.*), overlaying his own audition with the play’s Georgian context through an allusion to the actor who played Sylvia in *The Recruiting Officer* at Covent Garden in 1740. Sideway is fascinated by the institution of theatre for what happens off-stage as well as on. Memories of the theatre unite characters past and present, and across national boundaries. Freeman Ketch, too, aspires to be one of the players who once visited his Irish village since ‘they were loved like the angels’ (224). Playmaking not only provides a common cultural reference point but the ideal of a social status beyond their current state of confinement.

Participation in playmaking in *Our Country’s Good* prompts various instances of change. For the director Ralph, acting in *The Recruiting Officer* enables him to progress beyond his overtly refined sentimentality. Wertenbaker comically stages Ralph Clark’s weekly ritual of reading Proverbs and, at midnight on the Sabbath, kissing a picture of his ‘beloved Betsy’, an idol of female saintliness at odds with his perception of the female convicts (220).²⁰¹ This desire, however, seems disconnected from his body: ‘Felt ill with the toothache my dear wife my God what pain’ (221). Freeman Ketch’s comic interruption in this scene to request his involvement in the play symbolises how the play intervenes in Ralph’s conception of love. Once Ralph commits to directing the play, his rehearsals with the convict Mary Brenham prompt him to move beyond his repressed romantic ideal—he admits to never having ‘looked at the body of a woman before’ (267)—to experience his bodily attraction to another. Rehearsing a love scene between Farquhar’s characters Plume

²⁰¹ Max Stafford-Clark and Maeve McKeown, *Timberlake Wertenbaker’s Our Country’s Good* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2012), p. 47.

and Silvia, the act of articulating Plume's desire impacts on Ralph's own forms of interaction:

‘What you please as to that. Will you lodge at my quarters in the meantime?
You shall have part of my bed’. Silvia. Mary (266).

Ralph's sudden reference to the convict's name after kissing her exemplifies the intrusion of this desire from his dramatic part to his encounter with Mary. Rehearsing the drama releases him from the ideological imprisonment that estranges him from his own body. It enables them to acknowledge their mutual desire on an equal footing.²⁰² When Mary lowers her head in recognition of her relative social standing outside of the play and the impropriety of their relationship, Ralph invokes Farquhar's play to create a shared context for them to act on their affection: ‘Don't lower your head’, Ralph states, ‘Silvia wouldn't’ (267).

However, the Chief Constable of the colony, Major Robbie Ross, violently enforces Mary's subjugation. Wertenbaker caricatures Ross' puritanical objections to theatrical performance through the character's comically excessive complaints of the seditious import of plays and their ‘willy-wally wobbly words’:

The theatre leads to threatening theory and you, Governor, you have His Majesty's commission to build castles, raise armies, administer a military colony, not fandangle about with a lewdy play! (210)

The contrast of the verb ‘fandangle about’ with His Majesty's strict orders to ‘build’, ‘raise’ and ‘administer’ exemplifies the perceived foreignness of this play from the interests of this military colony. His treatment of the convict Mary Brenham reveals the cruelty beneath his words. He jealously orders Mary on all fours, compelling her to act like a dog and deliberately violating her ‘modesty’, interrupting Ralph's rehearsal with a show of military power (252). Sideway's sudden intervention, however, uses the dramatic performance to

²⁰² Wilson, pp. 25-6.

counter Ross' expression of authority with an alternative vision of togetherness. In response to Ross' use of erudition to impose his social and physical mastery over the convicts on stage, Sideway employs Farquhar's lines to portray a scene of conciliation between two prisoners from very different backgrounds. Sideway's performance opens the possibility of imagining a world apart from such abuse of power. It earns the approbation of Ross' predominantly monosyllabic sidekick and even prompts Sideway himself to consider modes of human interrelation beyond the arbitrary confines of nationhood: '[T]his I am sure of, I shall meet with less cruelty among the most barbarous nations than I have found at home' (*ibid.*).

It is significant that the character of Liz Morden should participate in this duologue. Wertenbaker uses her canting monologue at the opening of the play's second act to present a tragic story of an individual turned to petty crime after public betrayal by her own father. Her eighteenth-century colloquialisms present a world of isolation, poverty, and petty thievery: 'But one time, I stir my stumps too slow, the swell squeaks beef, the snoozie hears. I'm nibbed' (240). These lines, though, suggest Liz' natural eloquence and intelligence despite her illiteracy. When sentenced to hanging for an alleged assisted theft, she responds to her charge with silence, which is taken immediately as an admission of guilt. It is only through the experience of acting with the other convicts that she develops the trust in herself and others to voice her innocence. The authority figures struggle to determine why she kept silent:

Phillip:	Why wouldn't you say any of this before?
Ross:	Because she didn't have time to invent a lie.
Collins:	Major, you are demeaning the process of law.
Phillip:	Why, Liz?
Liz:	Because it wouldn't have mattered.
Phillip:	Speaking the truth?
Liz:	Speaking. (271)

Where Phillip believes that Liz has simply lost faith in the system of justice, Liz' response indicates that she had instead seen no value in self-expression at all. The act of speaking and being heard by another in the dialogue of *The Recruiting Officer* gives Liz confidence in her own legitimacy.²⁰³ Liz' final statement of commitment to performing Farquhar's play exemplifies her transition to belief in her own eloquence: 'Your Excellency, I will endeavour to speak Mr. Farquhar's lines with the elegance and clarity their own worth commands' (272). Performing in the play transforms Liz from an existence of deception and individualism to belief in her participation in the common language and mores of a community.

This sense of community is exemplified by the eloquent prologue written and delivered by the convict John Wisehammer in the final scene of the play:

No private views disgraced our generous zeal
What urg'd our travels was our country's weal,
And none will doubt but that our emigration
Has prov'd most useful to the British nation (279)

A character obsessed with the materiality of words, he ruminates earlier on the word 'country' both as a source of renewal and as a power that crushes the individual: 'you die for your country, your country doesn't want you' (224). The experience of dramatic performance has not resulted in simplistic devotion to the nation. The substitution of the phrase 'public weal' with 'country's weal' suggests his subjugation to the whims of the state, while his rhyme of 'emigration' with 'nation' encapsulates his critique of the expressions of nationhood that have forced their expulsion. The rhymes of these heroic couplets and Wisehammer's repeated first-person pronouns instead indicate that the collective act of performing in Farquhar's play has produced an understanding of what

²⁰³ Rokotnitz, p. 88.

unites them beyond boundaries of the nation and perceived social difference. The co-production of drama has facilitated understandings and expressions of mutual generosity. In this sense, they are ‘true patriots, all’ (279).

Wertenbaker’s use of doubling amplifies the significance of this speech. Earlier in the play, Ralph and Wisehammer discuss the needs for certain roles to be doubled due to the unavailability of the prisoners, the former insisting that an audience will be able to pay attention and differentiate between the characters (261). Wertenbaker reflects this practice in *Our Country’s Good*. In the 1988 Royal Court production of the play, the actor Ron Cook assumed the roles of both Wisehammer and Phillip. The decision to cast the same actor to produce these roles serves as more than a meta-theatrical reflection on the practicalities of playmaking. It allows an audience to associate Wisehammer’s prologue with earlier musings on the potential of theatre by the actor’s alternate role. The prologue does not unthinkingly acquiesce in the machinery of nationhood that forced his expulsion; the shared act of performance has instead impelled him to articulate what unites those on stage instead of what divides them. An audience’s association between the two figures also reinforces the role of chance in their fates. As Midshipman Harry Brewer states early in the play: ‘Sometimes I look at the convicts and I think, one of those could be you’ (191). Wertenbaker’s doubling prompts an audience to find the common ground between prisoners and convicts that these characters, too, perceive through the co-production of *The Recruiting Officer*.

However, the production of *The Recruiting Officer* in Wertenbaker’s play is also subject to state structures of power. Wertenbaker plays on the genre of backstage comedy in the final scene to portray Ralph’s concerns that the new prologue will cause Major Ross to ‘have an apoplectic fit’ (279). His censorship of the prologue is reminiscent of Captain Phillip’s earlier reference to the play as a tiny colony: ‘The theatre is like a small republic’,

Ralph states, ‘it requires private sacrifices for the good of the whole’ (280).²⁰⁴ The contrast between Ralph’s republic and the consensual community portrayed in the prologue reveals dramatic performance as a site of institutional negotiation. As laughter from the First Fleet audience from the 1789 production of *The Recruiting Officer* signals the start of the play, accompanied by Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* (composed later in 1808), Wertenbaker reinforces how her audience is part of the cultural conditioning of dramatic production. Just as those participating in the drama on stage influence and are changed by this shared act of production, Wertenbaker implies, the experience of watching drama can modify relations to oneself and others outside of the work. Her curtain call is, at the same time, a beginning: not simply the beginning of *The Recruiting Officer* but the beginning, for those involved in this theatrical event as performer or spectator in the present, of an acknowledgement of individual legitimacy and interpersonal responsibility beyond the play.

The performance history of *Our Country’s Good* in the English-speaking world attests to its success in portraying the power of collective creation and the redemptive potentials of art.²⁰⁵ Such positivity would be quite out of place in Bernhard’s theatre. Bruscon in *Der Theatermacher* does not even get to stage his play; his audience instead flocks to a nearby parsonage that has caught fire in the storm. Bruscon’s apoplectic fits mix artistic disillusion with rebarbative misogyny but, as I will argue, this apparent bleakness is part of Bernhard’s own investigation of dramatic potential. The next section will analyse how, in *Der Theatermacher*, Bernhard’s stagecraft enables his audience to see what his protagonist does not: the limitations to his dramatic artistry, the interpersonal

²⁰⁴ This has been read as a bathetic allusion to the subversion of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, inserting his own lines into the play within the play *The Murder of Gonzago*. Stephen Weeks, ‘The Question of Liz: Staging the Prisoner in *Our Country’s Good*’, *Modern Drama*, 43 (2000), 147-56 (p. 152).

²⁰⁵ Sophie Bush surveys a variety of perspectives on *Our Country’s Good* and the redemptive power of theatre in London, Australia and Canada. See Sophie Bush, *The Theatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

understandings of his family members, and the consequences of playmaking beyond the prison of his own worldview. Bruscon's monomaniacal tirades are part of how Bernhard provokes his audiences; yet Bernhard's staging and his character interactions assist them to see beyond such provocations. Comparing *Der Theatermacher* with *Our Country's Good* will bring to light how Bernhard conceives of the role of theatre in social living in the 1980s.

3.3. Playmaking in *Der Theatermacher*

Where the English historical comedy of *The Recruiting Officer* is commissioned by Colonel Phillip for the moral edification of his audiences, Bruscon envisages his art differently:

Auf die Irritation
kommt es an
wir sind nicht dazu da
den Leuten
eine Gefälligkeit zu erweisen
Das Theater
ist keine Gefälligkeitsanstalt (W19, 191)

Sitting alongside the costumes of Nero, Napoleon, Churchill, and Hitler for his family's production of *Das Rad der Geschichte*, Bruscon declares his dramatic intent to make his audience uncomfortable. The awkwardness of his compound 'Gefälligkeitsanstalt' undermines his artistic pretensions, but there is much in *Der Theatermacher* to cause discomfort. Bernhard combines his satirical caricature of the stage dramatist with the rebarbative prejudices of a tyrannical figure who intimidates the family members employed as his stagehands.²⁰⁶ Alongside the more positive vision of collective dramatic creation in *Our Country's Good*, however, it is possible to see further complexity in these interactions. This analysis will build on the case study of Wertenbaker's play to illuminate how Bernhard stages his familiar archetype of the isolated intellectual, revealing the limitations of his

²⁰⁶ Dirk Jürgens refers to Bruscon's approach to art in *Der Theatermacher* as an 'imitatio Hitlers'. Dirk Jürgens, *Das Theater Thomas Bernhards* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 154.

artistic project and his dependence on those around him. Like *Our Country's Good*, *Der Theatermacher* uses the genre of backstage comedy to examine the consequences of participation in drama for social living. This comparison will reveal the mechanisms through which Bernhard relativises the polemical ranting of his protagonist, bringing into view a more nuanced version of the potentials of theatre than Bruscon is able to see.

While the performance of an English comedy in *Our Country's Good* is connected with an Enlightened vision of liberating the convicts from a life of violence, Bruscon has composed *Das Rad der Geschichte* to escape from his sense of imprisonment in a country he calls 'die Eiterbeule Europas' (140). The play enables Bruscon to imagine a world beyond the oppressive locales where he stages his dramas. On arriving at the *Schwarzer Hirsch* inn in Utzbach, Bruscon immediately derides its stifling atmosphere (106). He dwells on the provincialism of the setting, mocking the local tradition of 'Blutwursttag' and reflexively associating the population of this locale with the Nazi past: 'alle sind hier Hitler' (116). Bruscon's pretensions to cosmopolitanism are a form of rebellion against this setting. From the outset of the play, Bruscon is at pains to emphasise the international translatability of his work: '*Das Rad der Geschichte* eignet sich | für Italien genauso wie für Frankreich | es ist hauptsächlich für die Franzosen geschrieben' (113). The unchanging backdrop of an oppressive village inn nevertheless affirms the character's stasis. Despite Bruscon's repeated assertions of his canonicity, *Der Theatermacher* provides no indication that the central character can attain the international renown for which he strives.

This idealised freedom from Austrian provincialism also has more personal connotations. He describes how he conceived of the idea for *Das Rad der Geschichte* in Le Havre, where he also met his wife. The compound nouns 'Küstenbekanntschaft | Atlantikküstenbekanntschaft' (113-4) provide space for the artist to dwell on the memory of their meeting, linking his all-encompassing commitment to his play with his family.

Bruscon's treatment of his wife, however, contradicts any such implications of care. In the company of the Utzbach innkeeper, Bruscon characterises all women as intellectually inferior, denigrating their impact on his art with the neologism 'Theaterhemmschuh' (120). Like Major Ross in *Our Country's Good*, Bruscon accompanies the exaggeration and ornateness of his diction with appalling abuse. The repeated coughing of Bruscon's wife suggests the failure of her body under her exacting schedule as a wandering player, yet Bruscon shows little empathy. He tells her: 'Der einzige Reiz an dir ist der Hustenreiz' (208). While his wife sacrifices her body for his artistic achievement, the authoritarian Bruscon can only respond to her via the 'Hemmschuh' of his own prejudice.

Bruscon's treatment of his family exemplifies his uses of his own learning. Bernhard uses the physical actions of Ferruccio and Sarah when bringing in a costume chest to reveal the protagonist's tyranny. Bruscon points with his staff to make his familial stagehands move the chest and then castigates his son for his inability to open the box with one arm in plaster: 'Jetzt ist der Dummkopf | auch noch ein Krüppel' (144). Following his misogynistic ranting on the inability of women to discuss Schopenhauer and Montaigne (182), he orders his son Ferruccio from his ladder to reinforce his own standards of *Bildung*: 'Erst ein gebildeter Mensch | ist ein Mensch' (183). This is far from positive paternal guidance:

Schwörst du es
Schwöre
Schopenhauer
Spinoza
plötzlich verärgert
Ach geh weg
es ist alles umsonst (*ibid.*)

Bernhard's line lengths may prompt an actor playing Bruscon to dominate his son physically on stage, forcing the performance of a promise from his son to educate himself in Bruscon's image. His father demands a certain model of *Bildung* in reading

Schopenhauer and Spinoza, but uses this learning to bully his son. Bruscon's tyrannical dominance allows an audience to see past the mode of education on which he insists.

Bernhard also stages limitations to Bruscon's own education, evidenced as his wife appears dressed for her performance as Madame Curie. He casually refers to his aversion to 'das polnische Volk' (212), before erroneously characterising Marie Curie as an exemplar of the 'Atomzeitalter' (213). For an audience watching Bruscon, it becomes clear that his pursuit of education has only resulted in informing his prejudice. His uses of his knowledge are amplified by Bernhard's physical staging as Bruscon covers the face of his wife with make-up, literally erasing this embodiment of female intellectual achievement from history (*ibid.*). Save for the repetitive coughs of his wife's physical suffering, Bruscon has aggressively blotted out his wife's presence in the play and this erasure becomes visible to the audience as Bruscon takes over the make-up box. Yet Bruscon's language also implies that his family members do not always unthinkingly comply with his orders: 'Ich verstehe nicht | daß du mein Befehl nicht befolgst' (*ibid.*). This revelation recontextualises the coughs which progressively interrupt Bruscon's monologue in this scene. In Bruscon's painstaking attention to the details of his production, the coughs are one bodily variable that the despotic stage artist cannot control.

Whereas, in *Our Country's Good*, Liz Morden breaks her silence in an expression of trust in herself and others, Bruscon's wife breaks her silence to reject any such trust. She first waves away her husband when he denounces her as a 'Schande für das Theater | eine Schande für das weibliche Geschlecht' (218). During one of Bruscon's ritual derisions of her social status, however, his subtle signal of affection for his wife prompts her sudden laughter:

BRUSCON:
Maurerpolierstochter

Meine Proletarierin
meine Lieblingsproletarierin
FRAU BRUSCON *lacht plötzlich laut aus sich heraus* (218-9)

This response has been read as the moment when Bruscon's wife reveals the ridiculousness of Bruscon's entire theatrical enterprise as a male fantasy.²⁰⁷ It is significant, however, that her laughter follows the modulation of the protagonist's insult to what Bruscon would consider as a more intimate epithet. The term encapsulates Bruscon's ideas of his wife as both the condition of his creativity and, he believes, its curse. The absurd laugh rejects this expression of fondness in the context of his ritual insults, the toll of her performances on her body, and their rehearsed form of interaction in which she must remain silent. The laugh connects the failure of Bruscon's dramatic production, the just desserts for his delusory self-adulation, with a more human failure in his treatment of his family.

The interactions between Bruscon and his daughter Sarah initially appear to reinforce such distance between the family members. Bruscon treats her as his dutiful stagehand, first asking her to verify whether her mother has learned her lines (148-9), and engaging her in what appear to be ritualistic interactions. Sarah has evidently heard the story of Bruscon meeting her mother before, completing the story of their meeting on the Atlantic coast at Bruscon's prompt (150-1). When Sarah deviates from such established interchanges, though, the stage manager reacts angrily:

SARAH *gibt ihm die Hand*
BRUSCON
Was ist dein Vater
was ist dein Vater
SARAH
Herr Bruscon
BRUSCON *stößt sie weg*
Unverschämtes Mädchen

²⁰⁷ Stefan Krammer, 'Figurationen der Macht. Rhetorische Strategien in Thomas Bernhards Dramen', in *Rhetorik und Sprachkunst bei Thomas Bernhard*, ed. by Joachim Knape and Olaf Kramer (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2011), pp. 91-103 (p. 95).

was erlaubst du dir (160-1)

Bruscon punishes her for this infraction bodily, holding her hand so tightly that it hurts, and compelling her to produce the correct response: ‘Der größte Schauspieler | aller Zeiten’ (161). In the despotic patriarchy of *Der Theatermacher*, the eponymous character’s pursuit of art depends on the subjugation of his family members. Where, in *Our Country’s Good*, the act of rehearsal breaks down the social boundaries between the director and actors, Bruscon uses his art to reinforce his dominance.

However, further exchanges between Bruscon and his daughter signal a degree of mutual understanding that complicates an audience’s reaction to their relationship. Alone on stage, Bruscon takes Sarah’s hand:

Wenn wir erst in Rouen sind
Bekommst du auch das Ballkleid
Das du dir wünschst
Rouen
ein Höhepunkt (173)

Bruscon refers here to a promise that, it can be assumed, was made before the play. Bernhard stages the ambition of a father to provide for his daughter; yet the gesture of stroking Sarah’s hand can be both fond and sinister, reminding an audience of his abusive actions. He suggests that his obsessive concern with artistic success is rooted in a commitment to his family. Again, Bruscon refers to the Atlantic coast as a place where he is able to establish this familial connection. The position of ‘Rouen’, granted a line to itself, directs an actor to dwell on its full significance as an artistic goal: an escape from the stifling atmosphere of provincial Utzbach and a vision of artistic success in which his family is included.

It is another dress in the play, however, that undermines the gestures of Bernhard’s stage dramatist. At the beginning of the third act, the costumes set out for the production of

Das Rad der Geschichte include that of Madame de Staël (191). Little explanation is given of her relevance to Bruscon's play. A prominent cosmopolitan intellectual at the centre of early nineteenth-century romanticism and liberalism, and once a resident of Rouen, her usually flamboyant attire provides a silent reminder of the intellectual renown of which Bruscon can only dream. Her writings on literature and society examined the legitimization of male authority by reducing women to the most absurd mediocrity, and the physical allure of her costume frames Bruscon's treatment of his wife and daughter within this relationship paradigm.²⁰⁸ As Bruscon repeatedly canonises himself alongside figures such as Shakespeare, Goethe, and Voltaire, the costume of one of the most influential European women authors of the nineteenth century affirms the baselessness of these pretensions. This encapsulates the techniques of Bernhard's staging in *Der Theatermacher*, in which Bernhard relies on such physical prompts to recontextualise the overt authority of the protagonist's rants.

Bernhard's use of sound furthers this project. The repeated thunder in the play accompanies Bruscon's expressions of misogyny and xenophobia, building to suggest the inevitability of the character's failure. Bernhard also uses the carnivalesque grunting of pigs in the so-called 'Schweinemastanstalt' of Utzbach to undermine the pretensions of the protagonist even further (106). This intervention may be read as a social critique voiced by Bruscon in the play. Denigrating the dilettantism of modern state theatre, he states: 'In den berühmtesten Theatern von Deutschland | wird heute gesprochen | daß einer Sau graust' (160). Yet Bernhard's inclusion of such grunting also deconstructs the central character's pretensions to educated refinement. In *Our Country's Good*, an audience learns alongside characters who use the cultural tradition of the theatre to develop a more positive

²⁰⁸ Madame de Staël, *De la littérature, considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, 2 vols (Paris: Colburn, 1812), p. 152.

understanding of each other and their own legitimacy, but the process of learning in *Der Theatermacher* takes place in spite of Bruscon's haughty pronouncements. Bernhard's dramatic mechanisms underscore the flaws in the protagonist's comic self-belief.

Yet Bernhard does not reprise the grunting of the pigs at the end of the play. Bruscon's loss of his audience following the fire fulfils the constant premonitions of the storm, as the natural event prevails over the prospect of experiencing Bruscon's theatrical production. Instead of undermining the central character further, though, the climax to *Der Theatermacher* simply leaves Bruscon to confront the scene of his failure. Bruscon's reaction to the fire is notable in its unadorned simplicity: 'der Saal ist leer | leer ist der Saal | vollkommen leer' (220). Sarah appears to recognise this vulnerability:

SARAH	<i>ihren Vater umarmend, ihn auf die Stirn küssend, sehr zärtlich</i> Mein lieber Vater <i>Bringt ihm einen Sessel, auf dem er zusammensinkt</i>
BRUSCON	<i>nach einer Weile, in welcher sich Donnergrollen und Regen bis zum Äußersten verstärkt haben</i> Als ob ich es geahnt hätte (220-1)

Sarah's actions by no means exculpate Bruscon from his abuse of his family members. However, this final action, seemingly spontaneous and unscripted by her father, suggests a more profound empathy with Bruscon. The final statement above, echoing the opening as Bruscon arrives in the village of Utzbach (103), may be read to signal Bruscon's own stasis, the repetition of Bruscon's failure in another province. Sarah's actions, though, indicate that something has changed. Her reference to Bruscon neither as 'Herr Bruscon', nor as 'der beste Schauspieler | aller Zeiten', but as her father suggests her recognition of his humanity. In *Our Country's Good*, the performance of a duologue between the characters of Plume and Silvia opens the possibility for an embodied trust between Ralph and Mary, who begin to see each other beyond social difference and the limitations of Ralph's former experience of love. For Sarah, engaging in the backstage preparations for *Das Rad der Geschichte* has

facilitated her acknowledgement of the humanity of her father behind his rants and constant self-stagings. Without diminishing the satire of Bernhard's caricature, the ending of *Der Theatermacher* leaves open the possibility of empathy for the plight of Bernhard's protagonist. The only person who is not able to appreciate this gesture is Bruscon who, repeating his statement from the opening of the play, appears oblivious to his daughter's care.

The significance of this gesture becomes apparent when compared with Bernhard's earlier portrayal of an obsessive artist in *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* (1974). In this play, Bernhard stages the bombastic circus director Caribaldi, who has strived for twenty-two years to achieve a perfect performance of Schubert's *Forellenquintet* (1819). The performance itself is an expression of autonomy over his audience: 'sie kommen | in eine Zirkusvorstellung | und hören das Forellenquintett' (W16, 70). Like Bruscon, Caribaldi oppresses his co-performers—here a juggler, a lion-tamer, a clown, and his granddaughter, the trapeze artist—in pursuit of this artistic goal. Caribaldi even exerts his dominance, like Bruscon, over his young female family member, compelling her to perform warm-up exercises like a marionette while he keeps time with the bow of his cello (74).²⁰⁹ Where Bruscon imagines the Atlantic coast in his ideal of artistic achievement, Caribaldi clings to the repeated refrain 'Morgen in Augsburg' to signal both his artistic ambition and, in his futile and ironic repetitions of the birthplace of Bertolt Brecht, his inevitable failure.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ Like Bruscon, too, Caribaldi has been interpreted as an authoritarian figure. Dirk Jürgens reads the play as a parable of the susceptibility of the bourgeoisie to totalitarianism. See Jürgens, pp. 189-96. J. J. Long examines alternative readings of this comedy in scholarship. J. J. Long, 'Bernhard, *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*', in *Landmarks in German Comedy*, ed. by Peter Hutchinson (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), pp. 211-27 (p. 212).

²¹⁰ Clemens Götze discusses alternative readings of the refrain in '*Die Macht der Gewohnheit. Komödie*', in *Bernhard-Handbuch*, ed. by Mittermayer and Huber, pp. 209-13 (p. 211).

At the rehearsal of the *Forellenquintett* in the final scene of this play, though, the repeated insubordinations of the clown letting his hood fall, the granddaughter picking her nose, and the repeated coughs of his juggler prompt Caribaldi to dismiss his co-performers from the stage (124). He clears the instruments and music stands away and, slumping on a chair, listens to the first five bars of the *Forellenquintett* on the radio (*ibid.*). This climax has been read as the comic confirmation that his tyranny over his co-performers has come to nothing. To J. J. Long, ‘the fact that technical media allow instant access to a perfect performance shows Caribaldi’s strivings to be doubly pointless because they are anachronistic’.²¹¹ Yet this final scene, a shared encounter with a recording of Schubert’s *Forellenquintett* between artist and audience, also suggests the pathos of an individual striving for artistic perfection. As in *Der Untergeher* (see Chapter One), Bernhard plays on a wider cultural framework. Shortly before the Salzburg première of *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, the renowned cellist Pablo Casals, to whom Caribaldi repeatedly refers in his monologues in the play, had died.²¹² Alongside the comedy of Caribaldi’s unerring commitment to his rehearsals, Bernhard’s open ending also suggests the humanity of the protagonist’s ambitions to live up to the musical achievement of his late idol.

Die Macht der Gewohnheit has much in common with *Der Theatermacher*. The role of Bruscon is even reported to have been written for the same German actor, Bernhard Minetti, who was prevented from performing in the 1984 Salzburg première due to illness.²¹³ The key difference at the climax to *Der Theatermacher*, though, is that another figure on stage appears to acknowledge the pathos of the protagonist’s continued artistic

²¹¹ Long, ‘Bernhard, *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*’, in *Landmarks in German Comedy*, ed. by Hutchinson, p. 218.

²¹² The twenty-two years in which this troupe has been rehearsing would connect the 1974 première of the play with the release of Pablo Casals’ recording of Schubert’s *Streichquintett in C* in 1952.

²¹³ Judex, p. 89.

commitment. Sarah's seemingly spontaneous final act of comforting her father recognises his need for an audience. The final tableau of *Der Theatermacher* reveals the daughter supporting a figure who hides his insecurity and need for acknowledgement via his rebarbative provocations.²¹⁴ Participation in his play *Das Rad der Geschichte* enables Sarah—and the audience of Bernhard's play—to see beyond Bruscon's offensive rants. This opens another avenue for interpreting the tirade with which this chapter opened:

Lebenslängliche Theaterkerkerhaft
Ohne die geringste Begnadigungsmöglichkeit
Und doch niemals aufgegeben
Strafanstalt als Theater
Zehntausende Insassen
die alle keine Aussicht
auf Begnadigung haben
Nur die Todesstrafe ist ihnen allen sicher (191)

Bruscon's grandiloquent condemnation of his audience stages his own suffering as an artist imprisoned by his all-encompassing avocation. His plight, though, is echoed by an audience present in the same 'Strafanstalt'. If Bruscon is trapped in an existential prison, he is not alone there. In Peter Handke's *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (1966), the Frankfurt première of which was also directed by Claus Peymann, four actors use their words to offend an audience, but these actors also rely on the energies of their audiences to respond to such provocations.²¹⁵ Bruscon similarly acknowledges his need for an audience, but Bernhard's staging also reveals more than this. Bernhard prompts an audience to look beyond the protagonist's diatribes and see a figure imprisoned in his own flawed engagement with culture. Bruscon's tirade against the theatre as a 'Strafanstalt' thus reveals the potentials of theatre as an 'Anstalt', with the apparently educated Bruscon acting as a countermodel to

²¹⁴ Billington, p. 6.

²¹⁵ Peter Handke, *Publikumsbeschimpfung und andere Sprechstücke*, 11th edn (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973).

the form of education that the institution offers. An audience is not trapped in the same constricted self-understanding as Bruscon; they are able to acknowledge the human connections between family members at the end of the play.

As well as helping us move beyond the confines of Bruscon's self-understanding, this interpretation illuminates the functions of Bernhard's self-reference in *Der Theatermacher*. Unlike Wertenbaker in *Our Country's Good*, Bernhard overlays his world of dramatic action in *Der Theatermacher* with allusions to his own public altercations. Bruscon's request to have the head of the fire service in Utzbach extinguish the emergency light in the inn for a few minutes at the end of his play may remind an audience of a real-life event (115): the author's public ire following the refusal of such a request for the Salzburg première of *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige* (1972).²¹⁶ In *Der Theatermacher*, the emergency light epitomises both the bleakness of Bruscon's history play, which can only end in complete darkness, and the perfection that he is unable to attain. Yet this reference also links Bruscon's project of insulting his audience with that of Bernhard, an author reputedly scathing of his paying spectators.²¹⁷ In 'Ein eigenwilliger Autor' (1978), for example, Bernhard portrays a playwright who shoots members of his audience who laugh in the wrong place (W14, 310). His public letters denigrate his audience as a 'Feind des Geistes' (W22.1, 642). The deliberate parallels between Bruscon and Bernhard in *Der Theatermacher* assist another approach to these provocations. There appears an acknowledgement in the play that Bruscon reflects an affliction that is, to some extent, common: the potential to be so caught up in one's limited worldview that one cannot see possibilities of living more positively. Bernhard's techniques of staging in *Der*

²¹⁶ Bernhard's public exchange with Josef Kaut and the authorities at the Salzburg Festival is documented in Bernhard, W22.1, p. 632.

²¹⁷ *Thomas Bernhard—eine Einschärfung*, ed. by Joachim Hoell, Alexander Honold and Kai Luehrs-Kaiser, (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 1999), p. 50.

Theatermacher, however, allow an audience to move beyond the protagonist's bleak outlook. My comparison with *Our Country's Good* has helped to bring these aspects of Bernhard's stagecraft into view.

Bernhard is frequently considered a playwright for actors instead of audiences.²¹⁸ I will return to this idea later in this chapter, but my comparative reading of *Der Theatermacher* has highlighted how Bernhard considers the experience of his audience, using various stage techniques to prompt them to question the overt authority of his domineering stage artists. Bernhard does not advance a redemptive vision of community as in Wertenbaker's play; yet he still presents the theatre as a distinct form of intervention in culture, the experience of which can change the ways in which its participants engage with others and the world around them. Unlike in Wertenbaker's play, though, this change is at odds with the development of the protagonist. The play calls on an audience to use their cultural learning more positively. As I will show, Bernhard explores the relationship between encounters with performers inside the theatre and human encounters outside of the 'Anstalt'. In fact, as the following analysis of *Am Ziel* will highlight, theatre can even make such encounters happen.

3.4. Changing society in *Am Ziel*

Discussing the prospect of staging Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, Captain Tench in *Our Country's Good* dismisses the play as a passing diversion (*Plays*, 204):

My dear Ralph, a bunch of convicts making fools of themselves, mouthing words written no doubt by some London ass, will hardly change our society (205).

²¹⁸ Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian*, p. 128.

This is a central theme of Bernhard's 1981 play *Am Ziel*. The play stages discussions of the potential of theatre to change society between an unnamed bourgeois mother and a young writer bearing various biographical similarities with Bernhard.²¹⁹ The mother has invited the young writer along to her holiday home in Katwijk in a sudden break from her habit of spending each summer listening to the Atlantic Ocean in wearisome solitude. Like Bruscon in *Der Theatermacher*, the mother, played in the 1981 première of *Am Ziel* by Marianne Hoppe, voices various hyperbolic attacks on the theatre, dismissing its educative potentials and any influence of the theatre on society. In the context of the foregoing comparison between *Our Country's Good* and *Der Theatermacher*, however, I will show how Bernhard examines the motivations for this invitation behind the mother's exaggerations and posturing, and the importance of her experience of another play within a play for her sudden break from solitude.

In *Our Country's Good*, as I have shown, Wertenbaker unites her cast of characters through their positive portrayals of playgoing as a common cultural habit that influences their lives outside of the theatre. In *Am Ziel*, Bernhard comically presents his protagonist as a tired consumer of culture attending performances simply to make use of her annual subscription:

[E]s ist nur noch eine Gewohnheit
wir lieben ja das Theater schon lange nicht mehr
wir geben nur vor es zu lieben
wir hassen es
weil es uns zur Gewohnheit geworden ist (W18, 260)

The mother's anaphora underscores the monotony of her routine participation in culture as her daughter silently and repeatedly serves her with tea. Her first-person plural pronouns

²¹⁹ Karl Hupperetz, 'Ein holländischer Bernhard. Einige Notizen zu dem Stück *Am Ziel*', in *Thomas Bernhard—eine Einschärfung*, ed. by Hoell et al., pp. 88-92 (p. 88).

indicate her comic assumption that both her daughter and audience off-stage share these views. She trails off into comic hyperbole: ‘Aber wir hassen auch Shakespeare | und wir hassen uns selbst | wenn wir hineingehen’ (*ibid.*). The mother’s exaggerations are undoubtedly ironic, yet her constant references to habitual actions accentuate the significance of her sudden decision to break from her customary solitude. Her experience of watching the play *Rette sich wer kann*, the title of which is reminiscent of the plays within plays in Shakespearean comedies (351), has undermined this show of laconism, initiating an encounter at the heart of *Am Ziel*.

Her invitation of the dramatist to Katwijk appears out of character for someone who, staging her own past in the first scene of the play, exercises such control over her relationships. Bernhard presents this maternal figure ambivalently, both explaining the modest and difficult upbringing that prompts her calculating social ascent and associating her with disproportionately extreme assertions of authority.²²⁰ Having inherited the foundry and her seaside home from her late husband, the mother dwells on his faults almost as a strategy for justifying her actions:²²¹ his loud sneezing, his bad breath, and the way he used to sit down (270-1). She deplores his reflexive statement of optimism ‘Ende gut alles gut’, to which her responses are comically extreme:

er sagte zu dem Tier immer Ende gut alles gut
das hielt ich nicht mehr aus
ich vergiftete das Tier (272)

The mother’s treatment of her daughter reveals the same contradictions. Following the deaths of her husband and disabled son, her expressions of devotion reveal both her cruel dominance and a more human fear of being alone:

²²⁰ Anton Reininger, ‘Thomas Bernhard, *Am Ziel*: Eine Handreichung für Schauspieler’, *Studia austriaca*, 9 (2001), pp. 79-99 (p. 81).

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

Die Mutter will ihr Kind nicht hergeben
sie kettet es an sich
und läßt es nicht mehr los
und wenn es sich wegriß
wird es mit dem Tode bestraft
auf das Wegreißen folgt die Todesstrafe (312)

The repetition of this punishment frames the mother's desire to maintain her closeness with her grown-up daughter within the tyrannical threats common to Bernhard's raging protagonists, her passive voice and use of the verb 'folgen auf' suggesting the unquestioned inevitability of her daughter's fate should she leave her mother's side.²²² The extreme nature of such statements, though, mask her need for others.

The mother's reflections on her decision to invite the dramatist to Katwijk reveal the same contradictions. She initially treats the decision as a loss of self-control before blaming her daughter (279), staging herself as the matchmaker in a social comedy. However, her references to her 'merkwürdiges Gefühl' (280) suggest her own struggle to articulate what motivated her desire to meet the dramatist after the curtain call. She denies that it was the enthusiasm of the audience's applause that prompted this gesture; in fact, like Bruscon in *Der Theatermacher*, the mother disdains the tastes of theatre audiences more generally:

Ein Erfolg was sagt das
Dann gehen die Leute hinaus auf die Straße
Und alles ist vergessen (281)

Her statement epitomises a conception of theatre as cut off from life outside of it. Despite having enjoyed performances of Kleist's *Der zerbrochene Krug* twenty years ago, as well as works of Shakespeare and operettas, she now sees such performances as ultimately 'sinnlos' (292), an experience set apart from everyday living in the world outside of the

²²² Mittermayer reads the play as an engagement with Bernhard's own family history and his ambivalent relationship with his own mother. Mittermayer, *Biografie*, p. 347.

theatrical space. For an audience at the play's 1981 première directed by Claus Peymann and starring the accomplished actress of stage and screen Marianne Hoppe, these lines may have appeared particularly ironic. Such sweeping statements raise the question of why she and her daughter went to see *Rette sich wer kann* in the first place.

The mother's tirades suggest that the act of participating in theatre is itself a search for meaning. In her typically hyperbolic dismissal of artistic redemption, she states that dramatists are no different from anyone else:

Das ist so wie dein Vater Ende gut alles gut gesagt hat
hier spricht der dramatische Schriftsteller
hier spricht der Anarchist
hier spricht der Wegweiser
Aber weiß denn dein dramatischer Schriftsteller den Weg
gibt es einen einzigen Menschen der den Weg weiß
das ist alles abgeschmackt alles Betrug
alles Selbstbetrug (291-2)

Her comments dismantle the idea that the dramatic artist has a privileged perspective on society. She associates the theatre with the mindless optimism of her husband's repeated refrain in order to attack its foundations. However, her question in the sixth line above acknowledges that neither she nor the dramatist nor anyone else can provide this meaning. Her apparent attack on the medium as 'Selbstbetrug' intimates that drama is an expression of a common helplessness. The mother's lines characterise the act of playmaking not as a means of changing the world but as one way among many of finding meaning in it. Bernhard amplifies this approach to the theatre as, at the end of the first act, the mother states to the dramatist before their departure: 'Das Theater ist eine von vielen Möglichkeiten | es auszuhalten nicht wahr' (329). This is central to the treatment of theatre in *Am Ziel*. The interactions between Bernhard's dramatist and the mother in this play progress beyond associations of theatre with revolution to a more measured vision of dramatic potential.

In *Our Country's Good*, Major Ross fears that the language and deceptions of theatre will bring anarchy to the colony, and a threat to his iron rule. This association of the theatre with anarchic destruction seems to entice the mother in *Am Ziel*. She repeatedly refers to the young artist's description of himself as an anarchist: 'Sie bilden sich ein sie sind weltbewegend | Er behauptet er sei Anarchist | ein dramatischer Schriftsteller sei ein Anarchist' (259).²²³ As the mother continues to drink and discuss the dramatist's art, she is increasingly fascinated by the prospect of breaking her veneer of bourgeois gentility, repeatedly impressing on the dramatist that he should be driven by one thought alone: 'wie jage ich die ganze Welt in die Luft' (368). Associating the act of dramatic creation with gestating a baby (*ibid.*), she imagines a form of artistic conception that will change structures of social existence. Yet she recognises that the play *Rette sich wer kann* does not provide for any such revolutionary change:

MUTTER

[...]

Das sagen Sie selbst in Ihrem Stück

daß es vielleicht zu spät ist

Aber Sie sagen es nur

Sie sagen es nur und beobachten wie man auf das was Sie sagen reagiert

aber Sie tun nichts Sie schauen zu aber Sie tun nichts

Das ist der Fluch des dramatischen Schriftstellers

SCHRIFTSTELLER

Aber es ist doch etwas (365-6)

The limitation of drama, for the mother, is that the playwright sits idly and simply watches the reaction of his audiences without acting in the present. The writer's short response, though, suggests the significance of this interaction. The cultural value of the medium, for Bernhard's dramatist, is the opportunity to provoke a response. The dramatist does not set out the blueprint for a revolution in *Rette sich wer kann*; yet the act of provoking an audience

²²³ This is another reference to the early years of Bernhard's grandfather in his fictional writings. I will discuss this further in Chapter Four.

to react to what they see is already of value. In the mother's case, it has modified her behaviour outside of the theatre. Tantalised by possibilities of anarchic renewal, playgoing in fact prompts her to break with her solitary habits. Where Phillip's spectacle in *Our Country's Good* is to prompt his convicts to 'think a little', the effects of this spectacle on the mother in *Am Ziel* cannot be rationalised as easily. The mother's patterns of thought have not changed, but she is now open to sharing her world with another. Alone for twenty years following the death of her husband, and obsessively clinging to her adult daughter, her seemingly minor gesture is 'etwas Revolutionäres' (336).

The final scene of *Am Ziel* affirms that the experience of the play has prompted the mother to break with her former solipsism; yet Bernhard creates comedy from her failure to acknowledge this step. She initially appears in control of the interactions on stage. Directing her daughter to carry and unpack her cases, she then holds out her hand to the dramatist in a prompt to kiss it. When he does, though, she ridicules his performance of polite convention: 'Wo haben Sie das gesehen | in Österreich | mein Gott' (372). She then reveals that the writer is staying in a room full of her late husband's possessions. In *Am Ziel*, the mother's twenty-year hiatus from visiting the theatre aligns with the timing of her husband's death. By revisiting the theatre, she appears to acknowledge that she does not need to suffer alone. However, she does not confirm this, choosing instead to try and move beyond the question of why she invited him. She overtly conveys that the writer's presence is a burden:

MUTTER *nach einer Pause, nachdem sie getrunken hat*

Die Frage ist gar nicht
ob es klug war ihn einzuladen
er ist da
plötzlich erregt
Jetzt brauche ich frische Luft
sie geht vor die Terrassentür

DIE TOCHTER *mit dem Sessel, auf dem der Schriftsteller gesessen ist, zu ihr*

MUTTER *nachdem sie sich auf den Sessel gesetzt hat*
Ich fürchte
er wird länger als nur ein paar Tage bleiben (373)

Her final statement has been read to emanate from the fear that the writer will now use their family relationship as the basis of his next work.²²⁴ The daughter's act of moving the seat for her mother to sit down, though, suggests her understanding of the significance of her mother's step. The mother's interactions with the dramatist in Katwijk are the beginnings of a relationship with another person arising directly from their shared participation in culture.

Am Ziel thus provides an insight into Bernhard's approach to the theatre as a cultural habit in the 1980s. Despite his overt antipathy for his audiences in public pronouncements, both *Am Ziel* and *Der Theatermacher* examine the significance of theatre precisely in its capacity for shared engagement between performers and audiences. However, where in *Our Country's Good* the characters on stage are fully aware of the kinds of participation in which they and the audience are involved, an audience's awareness of their participation in Bernhard's plays emerges despite the flawed self-understandings of his central characters. Bernhard presents characters voicing incendiary polemics, but he uses the staging techniques and non-verbal interactions in his plays to enable an audience to see beyond them. Participating as an audience in *Am Ziel* and *Der Theatermacher* involves learning to look past the overt performances of education and the spiteful invectives of his protagonists. These findings will now enable me to re-evaluate a play frequently considered as Bernhard's most controversial performance of polemic ranting: *Heldenplatz*. I will argue that, alongside the critiques of his homeland that provoked the scandal of the play in November 1988, *Heldenplatz* also examines the cultural value of going to the theatre. Two

²²⁴ Reininger, pp. 98-9.

months after Wertenbaker played on Enlightenment thought and dramatic tradition in a paean to the potential of theatre in London, Bernhard in *Heldenplatz* uses the contexts of national commemoration, Vienna's *Burgtheater*, and an Enlightenment comedy (not to mention various references to England) for his own reflection on what theatre can still do.

3.5. Going to the theatre in *Heldenplatz*

Critical accounts of *Heldenplatz* are preceded by the scandal of its first performance in November 1988.²²⁵ The advance publication of passages from the play alleging the persistence of Nazism in Austria created public furore during a national 'Bedenkjahr' marking fifty years since the annexation of Austria to Nazi Germany.²²⁶ A common reading applied to this scandal is that the *enfants terribles* Bernhard and Peymann turned Austria into a stage, provoking the kinds of exaggeratedly extreme discourse outside the *Burgtheater* that Bernhard was known for staging inside of it.²²⁷ This polemical discourse is a central aspect of the play, yet the play is more than a call for social change. The foregoing comparison will assist me to explore the techniques with which Bernhard, in *Heldenplatz*, invites an audience to perceive ways of living beyond the constricted subjectivities presented on stage and the hypocritical world that they diagnose. I will argue that the author's stagecraft, frameworks of allusion, and casting choices reveal a central concern in the play with how participation in drama can modify the ways in which audiences understand themselves and others beyond the curtain call.

The action of *Heldenplatz* follows the suicide of a former émigré to England, the mathematics professor Josef Schuster. His suicide is explained as the result of the anti-

²²⁵ Fatima Naqvi has argued that the play's scandal has to some extent inhibited close analysis of the text. Fatima Naqvi, 'Dialectic at a Standstill. The Discourse of Victimhood in Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*', *The German Quarterly*, 75 (2002), 408-21.

²²⁶ Pfabigan, *Thomas Bernhard: Ein österreichisches Weltexperiment*, p. 419.

²²⁷ Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian*, p. 271.

Semitism he encountered on returning to Austria, while his wife is haunted by the clamours of Hitler's supporters on *Heldenplatz* in 1938. The controversial passages leaked to the press in the run-up to the play's première were taken from its second act, in which Josef's brother Robert and daughter Anna voice vitriolic invectives on their homeland.²²⁸ Yet these tirades are the centrepiece of a metadrama in which Bernhard's characters repeat each other's statements and common motifs, extrapolating from the political ills of Bernhard's homeland to a wider excoriation of modern culture and literary legacy. A frequent target of their ire is Lessing's Enlightenment comedy *Minna von Barnhelm* (1767). By situating Bernhard's treatment of literary tradition and national legacy alongside Wertenbaker's own engagement with Enlightenment thought in *Our Country's Good*, however, I will make a case for reading *Heldenplatz* as Bernhard's reflection on the role of theatre as an institution.

Bernhard's first scene does not present Robert Schuster's rants, but instead an interchange between the deceased's housekeeper Frau Zittel and a young woman named Herta. Their exchange adopts a familiar dynamic in Bernhard's dramas between a verbally dominant older figure and a younger interlocutor. Frau Zittel's exposition, however, presents Josef Schuster as the kind of demanding intellectual frequently satirised in Bernhard's plays: a so-called 'Genauigkeitsfanatiker' exercising control over his housekeeper, while criticising his wife and his homeland:²²⁹

Franzose wäre ich gern gewesen
 hat er gesagt
 nicht Engländer nicht Russe
 Franzose
 daß ich Österreicher bin
 ist mein größtes Unglück (W20, 230)

²²⁸ Judex, p. 138.

²²⁹ This portrayal of Josef has also been historicised as an embodiment of the lifestyle and cosmopolitan aspirations of Vienna's turn-of-the-century haute bourgeoisie. Naqvi, 'Dialectic at a Standstill', p. 413.

Like Bruscon, Josef Schuster harbours cultural prejudices beneath this cosmopolitan veneer: Frau Zittel reveals his casual derisions of ‘jugoslawische Hausbesitzer’ in Vienna and Persian businessmen renovating Viennese apartments (223, 254). He is also highly egotistical, planning to return to the environment of his forced exile despite knowing that the move will be detrimental to his wife (227). Frau Zittel recounts how he abused those closest to him, quoting his disdain for his own children in terms reminiscent of Bruscon: ‘wir glauben wir erzeugen Menschen | und es sind dann nur fleischfressende Dummköpfe’ (239). However, Frau Zittel’s fastidious curation of his wardrobe, attending to his high sartorial standards even in death, reveals her continued care for him. The opening presents a scene of remembrance of a figure who, for all his flaws, is still cared for.

By playing on a network of familiar references from his other texts, Bernhard creates parallels between the deceased in *Heldenplatz* and the typical *Geistesmenschen* of his late fictions. This is evident as Frau Zittel reflects on the professor’s fondness for Glenn Gould: ‘Das sind fürchterliche Menschen wissen Sie Frau Zittel | die Glenn Gould nicht mögen’ (225). Whether or not an audience is familiar with Bernhard’s fictive incarnation of Glenn Gould in *Der Untergeher*, this allusion connects the death of Josef with a well-known and recently deceased figure in the common cultural consciousness. Frau Zittel’s act of curating the deceased’s garments echoes the position of an audience, piecing together details from her exposition of a character bearing familiar traits from Bernhard’s previous dramatic intellectuals. Bernhard’s references to his own biography and his previous works in this opening scene play on this familiarity to indicate how Frau Zittel, Herta, and the audience share in this loss. As Frau Zittel acknowledges, the tragedy of this scene is for those who knew the professor:

Die Tragödie ist es ja nicht für ihn
er ist ja schon tot
die Tragödie ist es für die Frau Professor

und für den Herrn Professor Robert
und für dich (241)

Herta's act of wiping dust off of the windowsill from which Josef fell is emblematic of the preservation of his memory. Frau Zittel recognises the flaws of the deceased, but the final image of the scene provides a gesture of comfort in their suffering. Placing a hand on Herta's hair, they look out of the window onto *Heldenplatz* below, framing the following scene as a play within the play. The first scene frames a collective act of mourning, the loss of a familiar figure, conditioning an audience's experience of how the family responds to this loss.

Frau Zittel and Herta first watch Josef Schuster's daughters, Anna and Olga, debating the cultural habits of the professor and his wife. Earlier, Frau Zittel had expressed her belief that Josef's widow would stay in the city on account of her habit of visiting the *Theater an der Josefstadt* (230). For the late professor, she states, theatre was a way of life: 'und wer einmal Blut geleck't hat im Theater | der kann ohne Theater nicht mehr existieren' (*ibid.*). Josef's religious symbolism likens theatregoing to a ritual participation in a communal and embodied experience. In the second scene, however, Anna decries this addiction to theatre. Whereas the intellectual Anna habitually visits Austria's National Library, situated on *Heldenplatz* and the scene of Hitler's address in 1938, her mother flees to the *Theater an der Josefstadt*:

Die Josefstadtgeherei ist ja nur eine Marotte
In die Krankheit geflüchtet
Ich gehe in Minna von Barnhelm
Das ist ja keine Geistesbeschäftigung
Diesen Leuten regelt das Theater ja nur die Verdauung (263)

Anna denigrates her mother's habit of watching *Minna von Barnhelm* as the root of her illness, distracting her from the horrors of Nazism in Austria through the nourishment of German comedy. But the reference to Lessing's play is more subtle than this. The inclusion

of this intertext also plays on another cultural anniversary. Fifty years before the première of *Heldenplatz*, Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* opened at the *Theater an der Josefstadt*, starring the Austrian actress Paula Wessely as the eponymous lead and, in the role of Tellheim, her husband Attila Hörbiger.²³⁰ While Hörbiger had died in 1987, Paula Wessely was still acting on stage and screen in the 1980s, and another theatrical work of this period had already confronted their cultural legacy.

Both of these prominent actors are targets of Jelinek's 1984 play *Burgtheater*, which stages fictionalised embodiments of Wessely and Hörbiger as Austrian actors desperate to appropriate the Nazis' *Hochdeutsch* in 1940 and, after the end of the war, using the autonomy of art to exculpate themselves from responsibility for the so-called 'Nazibagasch'.²³¹ In the play's allegorical *intermezzo*, Jelinek stages the character of the Alpine King from Ferdinand Raimund's nineteenth-century Austrian comedy *Der Alpenkönig und der Menschenfeind* (1828) as a figure wrapped in bandages collecting for the Austrian resistance.²³² The actors' violent attack on this figure typifies a wider social brutality, patched over by superficial reverence for Austria's comic traditions. Bernhard engages with the same cultural legacy, yet without slapstick violence or denunciation of the actors. Despite Anna's castigations of her mother in *Heldenplatz* for distracting herself with a comedy by Lessing, Bernhard does not criticise this habit. Indeed, as Anna's brother Lukas shows, their derogatory opinions of the play are repeated verbatim from their father:

Übrigens hat er Stücke wie Minna von Barnhelm gehaßt
 Lessing ist der typische deutsche Zeigefinger als Dichter
pathetisch sentimental humorlos hat er gesagt
 An Lessing klammern sich die Deutschen
 die von Goethe genug haben

²³⁰ <https://www.josefstadt.org/programm/stuecke/archiv-19231924-19971998/stueck/minna-von-barnhelm-2.html>. [accessed November 2020]

²³¹ Jelinek, *Theaterstücke*, p. 180.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 147.

wie an einen Rettungsanker für ihre Verlogenheit (334)

The term ‘Rettungsanker’ suggests that the Germans use Lessing as a cultural cornerstone to distract them from the discomfort of their collective history. Lukas repeats the term from his father to deride the cultural habits of Frau Schuster, but it is questionable whether an audience should share the same perspective. I will argue that Bernhard presents Frau Schuster’s activity of watching Lessing as one of the many pursuits by characters in the text to cope with existence. Comparing this scene with *Our Country’s Good* will assist an understanding of the kind of ‘Rettung’ that *Minna von Barnhelm* provides.

In Wertenbaker’s play, the performance of *The Recruiting Officer* enables some of its participants to develop confidence in their own legitimacy and to consider more responsible ways of behaving in the world beyond the play. *Our Country’s Good* does not unequivocally affirm the virtues of nationhood but, for many of its participants, participation in this play opens their eyes to a common humanity beyond prescriptions of national belonging or social status. Wertenbaker’s use of Enlightenment discourse in her positive treatment of theatrical potential can assist an appreciation of the function of Lessing’s play in *Heldenplatz*.²³³ While Anna and Lukas belittle Frau Schuster’s ‘Rettungsanker’, they each have their own, whether Anna’s pursuit of knowledge in the Austrian National Library or Lukas’ liaison with a *Burgtheater* actress. Furthermore, Frau Schuster’s act of watching Lessing need not be seen as a distraction, although she may not be fully aware of the potentials of her engagement with theatre. When, in *Alte Meister*, Reger and Atzbacher leave the *Kunsthistorisches Museum* to watch *Der zerbrochene Krug*, a significant step has been taken in their lives whether or not the production is ‘entsetzlich’

²³³ Peter Höyng, ‘Lessing’s Drama Theory: Discursive Writings on Drama, Performance and Theatre’, in *A Companion to the Works of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, ed. by Barbara Fischer and Thomas Fox, (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), pp. 211-29 (p. 220).

(see Chapter One). Bernhard presents the theatre in these works as having an institutional potential beyond what these characters can put into words. In *Heldenplatz*, Bernhard's stagecraft reinforces the fact that his characters may not be authorities on positive ways of living.

This is evident in the interactions of this scene, in which Anna informs her frail uncle of plans for the construction of a road through their apple garden in Neuhaus. The names of Anna and Olga, who sit with their uncle in the second scene, have been associated with characters from the plays of Anton Chekhov.²³⁴ In *Heldenplatz*, the destruction of an orchard draws Robert back from his hyperbolic polemic and into dialogue with his nieces:²³⁵

[D]ie Wiener sind Judenhasser
und sie werden Judenhasser bleiben
in alle Ewigkeit
das weiß ich auch
aber du glaubst doch nicht
daß ich mir deswegen mein Leben vergräuse
das kannst du von mir nicht verlangen
ich lebe in Neuhaus und fahre wöchentlich in den Musikverein in die Stadt
ich will meine Ruhe haben (275)

Robert uses art to escape from life. He denounces widespread prejudices in Austrian society and political life using the repetitive invectives of Bernhard's protagonists; yet he has resigned to this state of affairs. Despite his awareness of public anti-Semitism, he confronts his society with apathy. The climax of his tirades in the second act is a sweeping pronouncement that one day Austria will no longer be a 'musikalisches Volk' (301); however his wish for 'Ruhe' casts him as a spectator watching the this cultural decline.

²³⁴ Antonina Levkina, *Thomas Bernhard und die Tradition der russischen Literatur* (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2016), p. 69.

²³⁵ Honegger, p. 275.

Robert's tirade on the Austrian state, one of his most controversial and cited polemics, also thematises the act of watching:

Was diesem armen unmündigen Volk geblieben ist
Ist nichts als das Theater
Österreich selbst ist nichts als eine Bühne
Auf der alles verlottert und vermodert und verkommen ist
Eine in sich selber verhaßte Statisterie
Von sechseinhalb Millionen Alleingelassenen (279)

This speech is frequently used as evidence of how Bernhard and Peymann turned Vienna into a stage in the weeks leading up to the first performance of *Heldenplatz*.²³⁶ However, the artfulness of this speech, with its rich sibilants and polyptoton, creates beauty from the 'Statisterie' of the society that Robert denigrates. If all that is left for the Austrians is theatre, the play is centrally concerned with what this engagement with performance can provide for a population of 'Alleingelassenen'. This Austrian 'All the world's a stage' speech suggests a wider reflection on theatrical potential in *Heldenplatz* beyond the play's polemics on the legacy of Nazism.

Bernhard's use of the silent interactions between his characters during Robert's invectives has a similar effect. These tirades have been interpreted as acts of offending the audience, an attack on Bernhard's homeland for its failed engagement with national legacy.²³⁷ Fatima Naqvi has read this staging differently, asserting that Bernhard's play on juridical discourse in Robert's tirades situates the audience within the contradictory subject position as judges in an Austrian show trial.²³⁸ For Naqvi, the staging of the Schusters' polemics in *Heldenplatz* reveals how 'self-identifications as "victims" or categorisations as

²³⁶ Judex, p. 144.

²³⁷ Gail Finney, 'Performing Vienna: Theatricality in Jelinek's *Burgtheater* and Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*', *German Politics and Society*, 23 (2005), 24-39.

²³⁸ Naqvi, 'Dialectic at a Standstill', p. 411.

“perpetrators” occlude an analysis of the rhetoric these positions engender’.²³⁹ Her reading perceptively shows the complexity of the play’s polemics, but further attention to the family’s physical actions helps to build on this reading of the second scene. The sisters Anna and Olga assist their uncle to sit down due to his frailty, Olga counsels Robert not to become aggravated (283), and Anna offers her sister her shawl to protect her from the cold (293). Within the dramatic action of the play, Bernhard offers an insight into the family members’ care for one another, providing a counterpoint to the habitual tirades of the disillusioned professor, and suggesting a way out from his otherwise all-encompassing depiction of cultural decline.

In *Heldenplatz*, Bernhard prompts his audience to respond both to the silent movements they see and the invectives they hear. This is evident in the treatment of Lukas in the play’s own bourgeois social comedy. Robert breaks from his cultural condemnations to express his disapproval of his nephew Lukas’ relationship with an actress below his station, Fräulein Niederreiter (284). He, Anna and Olga discuss the fact that the actress has been married twice before, ‘mit einem türkischen Bei | und mit einem Mineralwasserfabrikanten’ (*ibid.*). This comment is a repetition of his brother’s disapproval, delivered by Frau Zittel earlier in the text (250), and Bernhard uses such repetitions to reveal the entrenched social snobbery among these representatives of Viennese *Großbürgertum*. Robert denounces their loss of social status through typical hyperbole: ‘das Fräulein Niederreiter | bringt alles um’ (314). Such overstatement undermines the authority of his assertions, prompting a critical distance from the insularity of these figures, which is most evident in their treatment of the maid Herta. When Herta enters carrying a basket of bread, Robert turns to her and insensitively asks about her grandfather’s imprisonment in a concentration camp (313). This backstory, of which Josef has already informed Robert,

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

simply prompts Herta to confirm the story and leave the room as the family gossips about her absent parents (*ibid.*). The movements of the silent Herta provide a context of human suffering behind the distant and insular posturing of these cultural critics. Such scenes reinforce how the physical stage action in Bernhard's plays allows his audience to reconsider the behaviour of those dominating the dialogue.

This is most apparent at the climax to the play. In the 1988 production of *Heldenplatz* at the *Burgtheater*, Peymann and Bernhard cast Marianne Hoppe in the role of Frau Schuster. Scholars have noted the pertinence of casting an actress known for her involvement in the Nazis' cultural production in the role of a character haunted by the clamours on *Heldenplatz* in 1938.²⁴⁰ Yet there is more to this casting decision. In her examination of casting on stage and screen, Amy Cook argues that 'the body of the actor and his/her history is always on-stage with the character'.²⁴¹ Wertenbaker acknowledges this in *Our Country's Good* when Sideway refers to the name of the actress, Peg Woffington, who played Silvia in *The Recruiting Officer* in 1740 (*Plays*, 196). Cook's analysis of the interaction of stimuli that takes place when a viewer encounters an actor playing a role is instructive for a viewer's encounter with Marianne Hoppe in *Heldenplatz*. This is not simply the experience of seeing a figure play both perpetrator and victim. In the play, Frau Schuster enters accompanied by Lukas and she confirms that she needs to stay in Vienna instead of facing the 'Ruhe' back in Neuhaus (W20, 332). During the meal, however, the peace is disturbed by a crescendo of screams representing the clamours on *Heldenplatz* in 1938, to which the other characters on stage are oblivious (335-6). An audience will approach the play with their pre-existing understanding of Marianne Hoppe; yet experiencing her in this

²⁴⁰ See Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian*, p. 284.

²⁴¹ Amy Cook, *Building Character: The Art and Science of Casting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), p. 14.

vulnerable role, distanced from the group on stage pointedly putting the world to rights, may change their approach to the actor as well as the character of Frau Schuster. An audience, too, is privy to these screams, listening along with Frau Schuster to a collective cultural legacy from which all others are distracted by their polemics.

Cook explores the consequences of such casting decisions for an audience, looking at how moments of surprise, discomfort or confusion in the theatre might open up a space ‘where we can be something different, where we can shift our attention away from who we are as individuals and toward the purpose we serve in the group’.²⁴² The moment of listening to the clamours from the *Anschluss* along with Frau Schuster offers an opportunity for audience members to modify how they relate to what they see. The audience engages with both an actor and a character, seeing the human consequences of a collective cultural burden: a vision of pathos at odds with the comfortable cultural critique exercised by Robert and his acquaintances. The revelation of Frau Schuster’s name as Hedwig, which resonates with the name of the innocent young dreamer in Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*, reinforces the portrayal of Frau Schuster’s suffering. Bernhard and Peymann’s casting in the 1988 production of this play is an example of how the experience of Bernhard’s drama is embedded in human experience beyond the fictional playworld of his text. The physical movement, interpersonal interactions, networks of common cultural reference points, and casting decisions in Bernhard’s *première* of *Heldenplatz* enable his audience to respond to the cultural conditions of his plays in a way in which his main characters are unable to. In *Our Country’s Good*, Wertenbaker uses the applause from the First Fleet performance of *The Recruiting Officer* to blend the experience of the play within a play into the experience of her audience watching *Our Country’s Good* in 1988, revealing how her characters and audience share in a common process of development through dramatic participation. By

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

contrast, Bernhard uses the shared experience of the screams from the *Anschluss* in 1938 to permit his audience to see the vulnerability of a figure that her co-actors only acknowledge when it is too late. This shared moment illuminates Bernhard's indictment of a society in which figures chide artists for presenting their works in prisons but are themselves imprisoned in the blinkered insouciance of their polemics. The play ends by affirming that responsibility for the failings of a shared culture falls on them all: characters, actors, and audience.

Unlike *Our Country's Good*, none of the texts by Bernhard under discussion in this chapter contain visions of personal transformation. In *Heldenplatz*, Robert's entrenchment in his received rhetoric only intensifies with the recollected clamours on *Heldenplatz* from 1938. Bernhard leaves open whether Hedwig Schuster's tragedy prompts any kind of change in Robert's actions. But the shared act of going to the theatre is still significant in his plays. Despite the open disdain of Josef's son Lukas for *Minna von Barnhelm* and the *Theater an der Josefstadt*, he acknowledges at the end of the play that he will go with his mother to the theatre: 'Das ist das Wienerische', he states, 'daß wir am Vormittag auf das Begräbnis des Vaters und Bruders gehen | und am Abend im Minna von Barnhelm' (330). This statement can be read as the son's laconic approach to living in Vienna (he describes the city simply as 'amüsan' (*ibid.*)). Yet this statement may also be of greater relevance than Lukas can perceive. Lukas presents the institution as part of everyday living, a forum in which a community can come into contact with contemporary polemics, common cultural events, and the legacies of cultural tradition. Instead of idealising the potential of theatre to transform its participants from an 'unmündiges Volk', Bernhard instead offers a more subtle conception of the theatre as a shared cultural habit, in which an audience is entertained by Bernhard's eloquent tirades but invited to see into a world beyond it, beyond the flawed behaviours of Bernhard's *Geistesmenschen* and into other ways of living with others.

Bernhard refrains from the same kind of grandiloquent statements of theatrical potential as his dramatic characters. However, in the three examples of Bernhard's theatre discussed in this chapter, the experience of drama can change an audience's relationships with his characters, his actors, and each other. The theatre is an institution for understanding oneself and watching the reactions of others. As the dramatist states in *Am Ziel*, 'das ist doch etwas' (W18, 366).

Bernhard facilitates such understandings through his recurrent stage techniques: silent interactions, common cultural contexts, plays within plays, and casting decisions. Such mechanisms prompt Bernhard's audiences to perceive his dramatic irony, the shortcomings of his protagonists, and the vulnerability behind their domineering rants. Understanding these aspects of Bernhard's dramas offers another perspective on various common orthodoxies on Bernhard's plays. Bernhard, first, is conventionally considered a writer for actors instead of audiences, but the casting in *Heldenplatz* offers further insight into why Bernhard and Peymann chose specific actors for certain roles and retained them from one work to the next. Bernhard's plays are sometimes considered as variations on a theme, but this effect, too, is deliberate. The familiarity of the formulae of the Bernhardian *Geistesmensch* is part of how Bernhard blurs the experience of his fictional playworlds and life outside of the theatre. Bernhard plays on his scandals and the conditions of contemporary playmaking, situating his dramatic fictions as an extension of the social world outside of the institution rather than a privileged institution cut off from its concerns. At the same time, however, Bernhard does not leave dramatic illusion behind for the performative openness characteristic of post-dramatic theatre. As I have argued, the interactions between figures in Bernhard's playworlds provide a commentary on the pretensions to authority of his tyrannical *Geistesmenschen*, exposing the blind spots, fears of inadequacy, and need for others behind their delusions of grandeur.

This chapter has also shown how Bernhard can be fittingly framed alongside Wertenbaker's Royal Court production. *Heldenplatz* answers a question posed by the comparative context of this chapter of how an audience learns through the experience of participating in theatre. *Heldenplatz*, too, is a play about casting a play, calling on an Enlightenment context to question the significance of participating in theatre as an 'Anstalt', and the relationship between this 'Anstalt' and living in the outside world. Unlike in *Holzfällen*, characters in *Heldenplatz* do not appear to realise the errors of their ways before it is too late; yet Bernhard's techniques of staging in this play enable his audiences to perceive the shortcomings of such characters. Bernhard stages acts of 'Publikumsbeschimpfung' to undermine the authority of stage provocateurs who, time and again, bear resemblances to the author himself. For all the rebarbative prejudices and hyperbolic extremes of these characters, an audience can also recognise the limited self-understandings of his figures as a common condition. The shared experience of art is necessary to offer ways of living beyond these shortcomings, and the pedagogical potentialities of dramatic performance allow Bernhard to explore this experience.

Our Country's Good has helped to bring this reading of Bernhard's dramas into focus. My comparisons thus far have shown how Bernhard portrays his fictional artists with a greater degree of self-awareness than is commonly associated with him. Bernhard does not distance himself in his works from his portrayals of figures who are trapped by their own limited self-understandings. As this comparison with Wertenbaker has highlighted, Bernhard variously encourages his audiences to perceive their blind spots, to move beyond his speakers' terms of reference, and to relativise their claims. This idea is pertinent beyond Bernhard's dramatic works. His late prose fiction and autobiographical writings similarly reflect on whether the speaking voices in his works are to be taken at their word, and this theme will be central to my next chapter. In Chapter Four, I will examine how Bernhard

cultivates an unmistakable linguistic style across his various genres of prose writing but exposes the human failures behind the apparent authority of his characters' sweeping diatribes. I will bring this reading into focus by situating Bernhard's late prose alongside the writings of another Anglophone author, J. M. Coetzee, a writer similarly considering how to speak with authority in memoir and metafiction in the late twentieth century. My comparison will help us to reconsider the linguistic style so central to discussions of Bernhard and his artistic afterlives, his so-called 'Übertreibungskunst', as well as the significance of Bernhard's treatment of narrative authority beyond his cultural moment in 1980s Austria.

CHAPTER FOUR

Speaking with authority:

Thomas Bernhard and J. M. Coetzee from memoir to metafiction

Summary

In this chapter, J. M. Coetzee's treatment of narrative authority will enable me to re-evaluate how Bernhard uses his distinctive style of exaggeration, his so-called 'Übertreibungskunst', in his late prose. Coetzee's memoirs *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002) and his later work of metafiction *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) will first bring into focus how Bernhard stages his unmistakable authorial voice in his open letters and his late autobiographical project. I will examine Bernhard's prose text *Ein Kind* (1982), in which he presents both the cultivation of his linguistic style through interaction and imitation and, I argue, the limitations to the authority of this voice. I will then analyse how Bernhard pursues this theme of authority in his subsequent fictional texts *Wittgensteins Neffe. Eine Freundschaft* (1982) and *Auslöschung. Ein Zerfall* (1986), each of which stage the author's well-known hyperbolic tirades in fictive dialogues with others.

Coetzee's writings will provide a further comparative backdrop for reading Bernhard outside of his cultural moment in 1980s Austria. My comparison will highlight how Bernhard encourages his readers to look beyond the voices of his narrators in his late fictions to perceive the humanity and fallibility behind their polemics. Coetzee will help me to re-read Bernhard within a wider concern in post-war literary aesthetics: how to write the self with authority.

4.1. Bernhard's strong opinions

In the novel, the voice that speaks the first sentence, then the second, and so onward – call it the voice of the narrator – has, to begin with, no authority at all. Authority must be earned; on the novelist author lies the onus to build up, out of nothing, such authority. No one is better at building up authority than Tolstoy (*Diary*, 149).

Writing for an essay collection by his German publisher entitled 'Strong Opinions', the ageing Australian author J. C. in J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) contemplates what gives speaking subjects in fiction the authority to tell their stories. J. C. returns to theories of the death of the author and authorship by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault a quarter of a century before, claiming that such theories 'came down to the claim that the authority of the author has never amounted to anything more than a bagful of rhetorical tricks' (*ibid.*). Like Barthes and Foucault, J. C. admired the rhetorical tricks, the so-called 'impostures of authorship', of writers such as Denis Diderot and Laurence Sterne (150). But rhetorical tricks do not account for why J. C. is so absorbed by the literary worlds of Leo Tolstoy. Nor do they explain why so many readers turn to this Russian author who, during his lifetime, was simply 'an ordinary man with ordinary, fallible opinions' (151). J. C. wonders what makes Tolstoy's narratives speak so sagely to the lives of their readers. In this chapter, his question will help me to explore the treatment of narrative authority in Thomas Bernhard's late prose.

Bernhard was well-known by the 1980s for his strong opinions: whether his scandalous tirades in his prose works, his ire in public *Leserbriefe*, or his bleak prize acceptance speeches. Across these genres of writing, Bernhard returns to distinctive tirades, comic exaggerations, and familiar linguistic formulations (see Introduction). In *Auslöschung. Ein Zerfall* (1986), Bernhard's protagonist Franz-Josef Murau calls this style his 'Übertreibungskunst':

Meine Übertreibungskunst habe ich so weit geschult, daß ich mich ohne weiteres den größten Übertreibungskünstler, der mir bekannt ist, nennen kann. Ich kenne keinen andern (W9, 477-8).

In *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno examine the works of bourgeois writers who do not try to pretend that Enlightenment reason is more closely related to morality than immorality. They look at writers who exaggerate in their depictions of cruel worlds where the fortunate life is an exceptional case, claiming ‘nur die Übertreibung ist wahr’.²⁴³ This association of exaggeration with truth-telling resonates with various interpretations of Bernhard’s style. For Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, Bernhard’s ‘Übertreibungskunst’ is integral to his bleak view of the world, ‘denn nur in der Übertreibung wird sichtbar, wie notwendig es ist, die Welt zu entstellen, um sie kenntlich zu machen’.²⁴⁴ For Stephen Dowden, the term ‘Übertreibungskunst’ does not go far enough: it ‘downplays the authentically destructive force of his anarchic comedy and his no-holds-barred relationship to the truth’.²⁴⁵ Such readings have highlighted the venom of Bernhard’s tirades in both his fiction and non-fictional writings, the fact that he means to offend. Yet in *Auslöschung*, Murau’s reference to his linguistic style is itself an exaggeration.²⁴⁶ Critics have also highlighted how such exaggerations can be employed ironically, complicating or even contradicting the ire of Bernhard’s speakers.²⁴⁷ These discussions have opened a productive conversation in Bernhard scholarship on how, over thirty years after the Austrian

²⁴³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2019), p. 126.

²⁴⁴ Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Der Übertreibungskünstler. Zu Thomas Bernhard* (Wien: Sonderzahl, 1986), p. 104.

²⁴⁵ Dowden, ‘The Master of Understatement’, in *Thomas Bernhard’s Afterlives*, ed. by Dowden et al, p. 9.

²⁴⁶ Judex, p. 131.

²⁴⁷ Gregor Thuswaldner associates Bernhard’s irony with how he withholds meaning in his late works. Gregor Thuswaldner, *“Morbus austriacus”: Thomas Bernhards Österreichkritik* (Wien: Braumüller, 2011), p. 127.

cultural moment of *Auslöschung*, such tirades are to be read. The comparison of this chapter will add a new perspective to this discussion.

In this chapter, J. M. Coetzee's treatments of narrative authority in his memoirs *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002) and his metafictional text *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) will enable me to move beyond Bernhard's own terminology for his style, making visible a common concern in the works of both authors with the authority of their speaking subjects. Coetzee, like J. C. in the passage from *Diary of a Bad Year* quoted above, returns to the late Modernist question of how to write the self with authority, using the perspectives of his memoirs and fictive opinion pieces to explore the lack of authority of his personae behind their cultural presence as public intellectuals. Coetzee's engagements with narrative authority in these texts will help me to articulate the subtlety of Bernhard's prose of the 1980s. By his late autobiographical volume *Ein Kind* (1982) and his subsequent fictional works *Wittgensteins Neffe. Eine Freundschaft* (1982) and *Auslöschung. Ein Zerfall* (1986), I will argue, Bernhard stages the recognisable rhetorical tricks of his earlier works and public utterances to disclose the limits to his narrators' self-understandings and the fallibility of their strong opinions. Coetzee's writings will bring into focus how Bernhard goes beyond the stories that his speakers set out to tell, exposing wider reflections in his narratives on human relationships within contemporary culture and collective history. The comparison will highlight the self-awareness with which Bernhard stages the unmistakable style cultivated across his career.

Coetzee's depictions of rural South Africa may appear far removed from Bernhard's writings. Coetzee has written on W. G. Sebald, examining the German writer's mixture of fictive biography, storytelling, travelogue and philosophical rumination, as well as his essays on Austrian literature; yet Bernhard, a significant influence on the writings of Sebald,

does not feature in Coetzee's writings.²⁴⁸ In this chapter, Coetzee's *Youth* (2002), a text written in the same year as his essay on Sebald and portraying an aspiring artist exiled in England in the 1960s (resonating with both Sebald's biography and the fictive backstories of many a Bernhardian *Geistesmensch*), will nevertheless enable me to reassess Bernhard's 'Übertreibungskunst' within a wider aesthetic backdrop. This juxtaposition will show how Bernhard uses the distinctive style cultivated across his career across various genres of his late prose writings, as well as illuminating the relevance of Bernhard's works to discussions of narrative authority beyond his time and place.

I will first analyse a selection of Bernhard's open letters to German-speaking publications at the turn of the 1980s to illustrate how, by this time, Bernhard stages a style and public persona cultivated in the public arena through his acrimonious altercations. These letters, I will argue, reveal how Bernhard consciously assumes the splenetic styles of his ranting characters within his biting social critiques. The backdrop of Coetzee's memoirs will then enable me to advance a reading of *Ein Kind* as a threshold text in Bernhard's *oeuvre*, both staging the author's cultivation of his linguistic style and progressing beyond the story of his own childhood to examine the authority of his beloved grandfather. In the final sections of this chapter, I will use this interpretation to explore how Bernhard relativises the authority of his speaking voices in subsequent metafiction, exposing a meta-narrative beyond the stories his speakers set out to tell. This is the case in *Beton* (1982), which I analysed in Chapter One of this thesis, in which the tragic narrative of Anna Härdtl overtakes the academic project on Mendelssohn-Bartholdy with which the narrator is consumed at the outset. In both *Wittgensteins Neffe* and *Auslöschung*—texts playing on Bernhard's early authorship in the 1960s, the works of Diderot, and the death of the

²⁴⁸ J. M. Coetzee, 'W. G. Sebald, *After Nature*', in *Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005* (London: Vintage, 2008), 145-54 (p. 145).

author—Bernhard also prompts his readers to see beyond the self-understandings of his flawed post-war subjectivities.

Both Coetzee and Bernhard examine the authority of their speaking subjects by returning to scenes of boyhood, familial relationships, literary inheritances, and public polemic. In Coetzee's writings, I will argue, the author progresses past questions of the bounds between fact and fiction to examine his speaking subjects' lack of authority and the fallacies in their uses of cultural knowledge. This analysis will bring to light the humbler side of an Austrian writer who, by the 1980s, was known internationally for his irreverent antagonisms of the public sphere.²⁴⁹ I will examine how, by the 1980s, Bernhard relativises the authority of his own 'Übertreibungskunst'. For both Bernhard and Coetzee, mid-career turns to memoir are a key step in understanding their engagements with narrative authority. The next section will show how Coetzee makes this shared concern legible.

4.2. Narrative authority after Beckett

A common critical question in discussions of Coetzee's memoirs is whether they are to be read as fact or fiction.²⁵⁰ Coetzee's early essays discuss the 'endless regression' of trying to find the truth of the self in autobiography.²⁵¹ 'All autobiography is storytelling', Coetzee states in *Doubling the Point* (1987), 'all writing is autobiography'.²⁵² Against the backdrop of hearings of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on crimes committed during the years of apartheid, scholars have discussed Coetzee's memoirs in the context of his engagement with the truth claims of confessional narrative.²⁵³ The following section

²⁴⁹ See Richter, p. 428.

²⁵⁰ Margaret Lenta, 'Autobiography: J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*', *English in Africa*, 30.1 (2003), 157-69 (p. 158).

²⁵¹ Coetzee, *Truth in Autobiography* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1984), p. 1.

²⁵² Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 391.

²⁵³ Derek Attridge, 'J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*, Confession and Truth', *Critical Survey*, 11.2 (1999), 77-93 (p. 81).

aims to open a different reading of Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*. Key to my analysis of Coetzee's memoirs at the turn of the twenty-first century—and what they will help bring to light in Bernhard's earlier writings—is how Coetzee calls the authority of his narrators into question. He presents a young man named John in the third person to expose the shortcomings in his approaches to art and others. This is most apparent as Coetzee presents young John's encounter with a Modernist author who had a seminal influence on his own writings: Samuel Beckett.

4.2.1. Failing and failing again in *Boyhood* and *Youth*

While living in London in the 1960s, writing a Masters' thesis on Ford Madox Ford and pursuing his ambition to become a writer, John in *Youth* discovers a copy of Samuel Beckett's *Watt* (1953):

From the first page he knows he has hit on something. *Watt* is unlike Beckett's plays. There is no clash, no conflict, just the flow of a voice telling a story, a flow continually checked by doubts and scruples, its pace fitted exactly to the pace of his own mind. *Watt* is also funny, so funny that he rolls about laughing (*Scenes*, 273).

This is a unique experience for young John. The repetitions of 'flow,' 'pace' and 'funny' suggest the parallel paces of Beckett's narrative voice and his reader's mind as John grasps for words to describe Beckett's work. His act of rolling about laughing typifies this imaginative sympathy with the voice of Beckett's prose. The choice of *Watt*, as I will show, is apt for Coetzee's portrayal of John. Coetzee's essays describe Beckett's lyricism in this text, depicting the title character's 'dogged metaphysical quest to know the unknowable, think the unthinkable, express the inexpressible, in the face of failure after failure'.²⁵⁴ It is notable, however, that the narrative of *Youth* uses neither the applications of rational deduction of Beckett in *Watt*, nor the anti-illusionary first-person consciousness that

²⁵⁴ Coetzee 'Samuel Beckett, *Watt*', *Late Essays 2006-2017* (London: Vintage, 2018), pp. 185-91 (p. 190).

Beckett employs in his prose from *Molloy* onwards.²⁵⁵ Coetzee's earlier fictions show this influence more clearly.²⁵⁶ *Youth* stages a young author's discovery of Beckett but, by this memoir, Coetzee no longer uses the narrative techniques he associates with the author.

Beckett's fictional prose has been variously read as processes of writing the self. H. Porter Abbott steps away from terms such as 'autobiography' and 'self-writing', though, describing Beckett's works instead as engaged in a process of what he calls 'autographical action'.²⁵⁷ Beckett's writing, for Abbott, is not a mode of recovery or reconstruction or even fictionalising of the past but is instead a kind of action taken in the moment of writing: an 'unformed intensity of being in the present which at every point in the text seeks to approach itself'.²⁵⁸ Furthermore, Beckett earnestly pursues this endeavour from work to work, repeating names, images and motifs in an earnest aim to find a way of writing the self: 'Instead of an artist above his work, paring his fingernails, we have an artist seeking to approach unmediated contact'.²⁵⁹ In Coetzee's memoirs, by contrast, a narrating voice presents John in discrete scenes in the third person. Using John's idiolect, these episodes portray the pathos of an individual trying to make sense of his environment, but also the less honourable aspects of the young John's conduct: his cruelty to others and his prejudice. The constant irony of Coetzee's memoirs is that the South African writer did not turn out the same way.²⁶⁰ But this is not simply a means of emphasising the distance of Coetzee's

²⁵⁵ Coetzee describes this voice in his essay on *Molloy*. Coetzee, *Late Essays*, pp. 192-201 (p. 196).

²⁵⁶ Coetzee's portrayal of Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), for example, evidences the influence of Beckett's works on Coetzee. Patrick Hayes discusses the text as a response to the Beckettian novel in Patrick Hayes, *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 53-60.

²⁵⁷ H. Porter Abbott, *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 2.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁶⁰ Carrol Clarkson examines how the centres of consciousness in Coetzee's texts are not easy to locate. She asks: 'on whose authority are views expressed, and to what extent can we trust them?'. Carrol Clarkson, 'Inner Worlds', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 58 (2016), 422-34 (p. 424).

adult self from his childhood self. The following analysis of *Boyhood* and *Youth* will show how the moral force of young John's provincial life derives from withholding a narrator's authoritative interventions. Coetzee presents John's voice at a narrative distance to expose its blind spots, both John's innocent misunderstandings and the flaws in his behaviour.

John's relationship with his mother is at the centre of *Boyhood*. The opening of the text portrays his mother heroically picking at the tongues of hens with a paring knife, and her expression of independence from her domestic servitude by embracing the freedom of riding a bicycle (4). This earns her husband's chauvinistic ridicule, which John reflexively echoes (5). Young John blames his mother for his perceived difference at school, his sensitivity, his blistering feet, and his constant sense of not being 'normal' (8). Despite her unwavering love, and her defense of her son from her husband's 'blue-eyed rages' (ibid.), John refuses to reciprocate her love. When his mother tries to connect with him by playing cricket, he simply finds her acts 'shameful' (26), and when John's grandmother Aunt Annie encourages him to support his mother, his refusal exemplifies his youthful self-absorption:

A support for his mother? What nonsense. His mother is like a rock, like a stone column. It is not he who must be a support for her, it is she who must be a support for him! (98)

John turns similes commonly associated with reliability and trust into condemnations of his mother as a dull burden. He is convinced of his need to assert his independence, and his mother's devotion only makes him uncomfortable: 'Should he choose (but he would never do so), he could relax into her care and for the rest of his life be borne by her' (103). Coetzee's narrative distance prevents a reader from seeing this relationship in the same way, exposing the pathos of a mother's reflexive and unanswered love for her son.

Coetzee uses the immediacy of John's thoughts in the third person and present tense to depict the distance of John's mother from her husband's side of the family. John

encounters photographs of his mother's travels through Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, finding out that she is a descendant from the Pomeranian du Biel family, information that John does not know how to interpret: 'Is it good to be from Pomerania? He is not sure' (35). He hears his mother's support for a German people corrupted by Hitler in opposition to the nationalist pride of John's uncle and a father who participated in the South African war effort (*ibid.*). These tensions compound John's sense of difference in rural Worcester. Raised in English, young John fears the 'hulking, barefoot Afrikaans boys' at school, as well as the day in which he is expelled from his class as a 'false English boy' (58). He divulges to his parents that Rob Hart, another English-speaking boy and the son of a United Party town councillor, was flogged by his Nationalist teacher Miss Oosthuizen, and John lives in fear of being called out as different in the same fashion (56). In the exaggerations of an infant, he tells his mother that if he is taken from his Afrikaans peers he will not go back to the school, and that 'if she betrays him he will kill himself' (58). His reactions form a series of impressions of South Africa's intensifying nationalism from the perspective of a child.

Yet John is not entirely innocent. *Boyhood* exposes John's propensity for cruelty. When John takes part in a game with his classmates Greenberg and Goldstein in which they share their earliest memories, John invents a story of an innocent dog's physical suffering (26). Later, when he and his six-year-old brother play with a mealie-grinding machine, John contemplates what prevents them hurting one another and proceeds to crush his brother's fingers (101). Coetzee does not intervene in this event to critique or mitigate John's actions. John, in fact, 'has never apologized to his brother, nor has he ever been reproached with what he did' (*ibid.*). Coetzee instead leaves this gruesome act, the 'soft resistance of flesh

and bone, and then the grinding’, to weigh on the reader (*ibid.*),²⁶¹ letting his reader perceive the boy’s lack of empathy beyond his own sphere of self-interest.

The text offers some glimpses of positivity beyond such self-focus. John’s silent sense of belonging on the Voëlfontein farm is a turning point:

He tells no one because the word is misunderstood so easily, turned so easily into its inverse: the farm belongs to me [...]. But in his secret heart he knows what the farm in its way knows too: that Voëlfontein belongs to no one. The farm is greater than any of them. The farm exists from eternity to eternity (81).

John assumes that his love for the farm’s pastoral beauty is not ‘normal’, and that such love would be a betrayal of his mother who, due to her German descent, has never been welcomed on the farm by his father’s side of the family. He is also a guest there, unable to participate in the ‘lighter’ and ‘airier’ Afrikaans he hears on the farm from the workmen (69). But young John feels that he belongs on the farm, even though he is reticent to appropriate the space for himself. The final repetition of ‘eternity’ suggests a sublime experience that lies beyond the limits of Coetzee’s free indirect discourse to capture. The silence of the earth, too, is ‘so deep that it could almost be a hum’ (82).²⁶² This experience reveals John’s acknowledgement of the limits to his understanding of the world, and a world beyond his self-interest.

The experience precipitates an increasingly mature approach to his family. He progresses from understanding his parents not as burdens on his shoulders, ‘but as a man

²⁶¹ Xiaoran Hu interprets this scene to explore Coetzee’s withholding of the authority of his adult self to judge his younger actions. Xiaoran Hu, ‘J. M. Coetzee: Politics of the Child, Politics of Nonposition’, *Textual Practice*, 34.6 (2020), 975-93 (p. 982).

²⁶² Eckard Smuts, “‘The Country of his Heart’: J. M. Coetzee, Wordsworth and the Karoo Farm”, *English in Africa*, 42 (2015), 7-24.

and a woman living dull and trouble-filled lives of their own' (136).²⁶³ John is still capable of cruel provocation, petulantly refusing to go to the funeral of his Aunt Annie to test the limits of his mother's patience (138), but *Boyhood* ends with the beginnings of an understanding of John's calling. When his mother shows him his great-grandfather's book *Ewige Genesing*, originally written in German but translated by Aunt Annie into Afrikaans, he initially rejects it as 'too boring' (100). He and his father even mock the intonation of its Afrikaans title (*ibid.*). After the death of Aunt Annie, though, he reflects on it again, as well as how his grandmother, a former schoolteacher, thought of him as 'special' (139). Even though John questions whether her comments on his precociousness were exclusively complimentary (*ibid.*), he remembers his great-grandfather's book. The narrator's final line can be read as John's recognition of his artistic task, his responsibility to the books and familial heritage that constitute him as a subject: 'How will he keep them all in his head', the narrator asks, 'all the books, all the people, all the stories?' (140).²⁶⁴ Yet the line is also ambivalent. It leaves open the questions of how the young persona in this memoir will become the world author who writes it, and how to live with familial and cultural legacy. These questions will occupy Bernhard, too, in the texts discussed later in this chapter. The tragedy of Coetzee's next volume of memoir, though, is that John, for all his learning, turns away from such responsibility.

In *Youth*, John has left the intensifying nationalism in South Africa for London in the 1960s, where he doggedly pursues his ambitions of becoming an artist. Coetzee portrays the persona's profound self-interest, ignoring his mother and prioritising his artistry over a concern for others (158). This is exemplified at the text's opening, when John meets an

²⁶³ Anthony Uhlmann refers to Coetzee's notebooks to examine this understanding as a flash of insight, signifying his increasing awareness of his own selfishness. Anthony Uhlmann, *J. M. Coetzee: Truth, Meaning, Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 198.

²⁶⁴ Derek Parker, 'Ethicism and the Aesthetics of Autobiography: The Relational Aesthetic of J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood*', *Life Writing*, 1 (2004), pp. 3-20.

older nurse named Jacqueline via his best friend and quickly sleeps with her. Any significance of this act is stifled by the youth's obsessive questioning of whether she sees 'the flame that marks him as an artist' (147). He fails to 'resist' her moving in with him but, returning from work one day, he finds her packing her bags after she reads in his diary that she is an 'unspeakable burden' (148-9). John's first impulse is to extrapolate from this situation to examine his authorial intentions: why he wrote it, whether he in fact left the diary open intentionally, and whether the written account truly reflects what he felt (150). He struggles to answer these questions:

He does not know what he believes. Sometimes he thinks he does not believe anything. But when all is said and done, the fact remains that his first try at living with a woman has ended in failure, in ignominy (151).

This rumination on facts, opinion and belief reveals John's hollowness, his estrangement from all values apart from his commitment to becoming an artist. His reference to ignominy recurs repeatedly in *Youth*, epitomising the degradation that John feels he needs to experience to become an artist. After the deferrals of 'when all is said and done' and 'the fact remains', he bathetically affirms his failure, failing to perceive the self-absorption that causes it.

Coetzee signals this failure later in this narrative via a letter from John's cousin Ilse. After watching a film with Ilse and her friend Marianne starring Anna Karina, a woman with whom John is very much in love (251), John sleeps with Marianne. He quickly realises that Marianne had not had sex before as her blood soaks the bedclothes, 'leaving a huge, uneven stain' (252). This symbol of guilt, however, simply amplifies John's lack of contrition as he calls a taxi for Marianne (253). A letter from Ilse provides a third-party commentary on his actions:

I hope you don't treat all your girls like that, even in London. Marianne is a special person, she doesn't deserve that kind of treatment. You should think about the life you lead (254).

John dwells on the comment 'even in London' but, instead of reflecting on his actions, cites Henry James. In Chapter Two, I examined the act of reading Henry James in Bernhard's *Frost* in the context of more positive models of reading. John's reference to James in *Youth* turns such associations on their head, simply invoking the author as proof that he understands 'how easy it is to be bad' (254). His attempts to keep all the books he reads in his head has not resulted in responsibility in his use of such knowledge. The exhortation that closes the letter condemns the uncaring self-absorption that has arisen from his artistic desire. This behaviour exemplifies Coetzee's engagement with the *Entwicklungsroman* genre in *Youth*. Whereas Coetzee charts the texts and literary inheritances that contribute to the young artist's development, the distance of his narratorial voice exposes the fallacies of how John uses such learning.

Yet there is still pathos in John's pursuit of art. Alongside Anna Karina, John professes his other love to be the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann. This love—which will connect young John with Bernhard's Franz-Josef Murau in *Auslöschung* later in this chapter—is at the centre of his aspirations, 'telling him of what poetry can be and therefore of what he can be' (221). John's attempts to live according to such poetic beauty, though, result in comic bathos. He goes to Hampstead Heath where, he is convinced, he will meet like-minded people: 'there must be thousands of people steeped in German literature [...] poets in exile, men with long hair and horn-rimmed glasses, women with sharp foreign faces and full, passionate lips' (207). He is disappointed as the likely-looking couple that he follows are simply discussing the price of furniture (*ibid.*). Later, he returns to Hampstead Heath, hoping to feel a lost sense of unity in a reprise of his sublime experience on the Karoo farm in *Boyhood*. Although it only lasts a few seconds, the narrator states that 'at

least he has been blessed with a hint that he belongs on this earth' (242). This scene provides a glimpse of hope, his verb 'belong' encapsulating the same underlying innocent desire for belonging as his boyhood self.

In *Youth*, John couples this desire for belonging with his need for others. John takes employment at IBM since its status as a company 'unrelentingly committed to thinking' chimes with his self-belief (181), but he is numbed by the role's stultifying normativity. He takes heart in the fact that Kafka worked as a bureaucrat, but is unable to follow in the footsteps of Kafka, Wallace Stevens, and T. S. Eliot. John's resignation from IBM on the grounds that he 'was hoping for friendships' underscores his isolation (233). He finds a companion later in his expatriate co-worker Ganapathy when, in defiance of his boyish sympathies with the Russians, he works as a programmer in the American Cold War effort in suburban Aldermaston. Hoping to find connection beyond the philistinism he sees among the English middle classes, though, it turns out that 'Ganapathy is no better' (268). Ganapathy becomes a foil for John's solipsism, having turned away from his mother and his homeland, and unable to nourish himself beyond cold meats and frozen peas (267). Ganapathy embodies John's inertia as the young artist sits alone, electronically rearranging lines from Pablo Neruda's poetry (277).²⁶⁵ Despite his relative success at this pastime, this play on the composition of Surrealist poetry does not enable him to break from his isolation; it only reinforces his estrangement from love and his family home.

John is reunited with the landscape of his childhood when, in a metafictional moment, he discovers a travelogue by the eighteenth-century British naturalist William

²⁶⁵ Coetzee describes his own play with this Surrealist practice in *Doubling the Point*, inspired by his investigations into Beckett's stylistics. It turns out to be a 'dead end'. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, p. 22.

Burchell in the Reading Room of the British Museum. Burchell's description of the Karoo landscape reminds John that he has not simply imagined its pastoral beauty:

He pores over Burchell as a reminder of a place, as an authority of a place that takes him back there. Burchell may not be a master like Flaubert or James, but what Burchell writes really happened (259).

John resolves to write a book that is as convincing as Burchell's. Yet he questions how to give his portrayal the 'aura of truth' (*ibid.*). This is not simply a level of exacting detail to convince a reader of its plausibility, the verisimilitude of 'a grease-pot swinging under the bed of the wagon as it bumps across the Karoo' (*ibid.*). He strives for an aliveness in his response to the world beyond that of Burchell, who is held back by his status of being an Englishman in a foreign country. He, a South African in England, seeks to speak his experience with a different kind of knowledge: 'the common knowledge of a bygone world, a knowledge too humble to know it is knowledge' (260). John contemplates what it means to write his experience as an outsider and without complete authority to tell his story. This thought assists an understanding of the climax to *Youth*.

Even after the discovery of Samuel Beckett, John faces the artistic aporia so common to Bernhard's intellectuals, simply 'squirring in front of the blank page' (282). Beckett only seems to assist John's expressions of his own isolation, his sense of being locked in an 'attenuating endgame' (284). Nevertheless, John remains convinced of the way in which he thinks the world works, the necessity for 'a kind of stupid, insensitive doggedness, as lover, as writer, together with a readiness to fail and fail again' (283). John's engagement with Beckett reveals himself not only as wedded to his self-absorption, but also stuck in the late Modernist moment of the text. Coetzee, as narrator, presents John within this moment, but does not assume the authority to intervene in the text expressly to condemn the figure's self-focus. He instead lets John speak as a moving countervoice to the form of

development that the text promises. A reader experiences the blind spots and shortcomings of the young aspiring artist, but also the vulnerability of young John's failure behind his dogged aspirations. By relinquishing the authority to moralise expressly over the blind spots of the young artist, Coetzee permits a reader the experience of being trapped within this Modernist moment in the 1960s, as well as to see the flaws that have caused his entrapment. The author J. M. Coetzee does not turn out the same way as young John. He instead presents John with a humbler form of knowledge, exposing the traits that prevent the young man's progress towards his artistic aspirations.

The readerly experience that Coetzee creates in *Youth* will help me to examine the ways in which he stages the opinions of the ageing Australian author J. C. in *Diary of a Bad Year*. This later work of metafiction complements the contextual backdrop I am constructing in this chapter by showing how, in his later fictions, Coetzee explores the human fallibility behind the cultural positions assumed by a public intellectual. Like the examples of Bernhard's later prose works discussed in this chapter, *Diary of a Bad Year* is centrally concerned with the expression of strong opinions by an authorial narrator. My analysis of *Diary of a Bad Year* will reveal Coetzee's treatment of the human need underlying a narrator's performances of verbal dominance. In this work of metafiction, Coetzee stages the views of his authorial protagonist J. C. in dialogue with another voice, a typist named Anya, who qualifies J. C.'s outlook and exposes a wider meta-narrative beyond his blind spots. In doing so, Coetzee allows his readers both to participate in the cultural commentary of a recognisable male authorial figure and a wider reflection on the relationships fundamental to the cultural authority he seeks. These concerns in *Diary of a Bad Year* will inform my analysis of Bernhard's turn from memoir to metafiction in the 1980s.

4.2.2. Speaking without authority in *Diary of a Bad Year*

Reflecting further on narrative authority in *Diary of a Bad Year*, J. C. turns to Søren Kierkegaard:

Learn to speak without authority, says Kierkegaard. By copying Kierkegaard's words here, I make Kierkegaard into an authority. Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned. The paradox is a true one (*Diary*, 151).

This allusion invites a wider philosophical framework into J. C.'s opinion piece, playing on Kierkegaard's concept of indirect communication. Coetzee's authorial persona J. C. may even reference Johannes Climacus, the pseudonymous voice used by Kierkegaard in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), in which his concept of indirect communication is explored most fully.²⁶⁶ Climacus presents a form of communication suited to understandings that bear on an individual's way of living, requiring the recipient of knowledge actively to reflect on their position in relation to such information. He considers indirect communication first and foremost within the religious domain: 'if the communicator is not God himself or does not presume to appeal to the miraculous authority of an apostle but is just a human being and also cares to have meaning in what he says and what he does'.²⁶⁷ J. C.'s essay, too, withholds communicating a direct answer to the question of how to attain authority, ending with a paradox. J. C. seems to imagine a form of authority that, for all of the speaking voice's rhetorical tricks, earns its sagacity and power precisely through refusing to claim a position of rightness. This idea will help me to analyse how Coetzee presents J. C.'s strong opinions in *Diary of a Bad Year*, as well as the staging of polemics in Bernhard's later metafiction.

²⁶⁶ Scholars have viewed Kierkegaard's pseudonyms alongside the modern conception of the death of the author and his refusal to represent positions of authority. See Jon Stewart, 'Søren Kierkegaard and the Problem of Pseudonymity', *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 32.2 (2012), 407-34 (p. 408).

²⁶⁷ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), I, p. 74.

J. C.'s opinion piece on narrative authority appears as part of a Jeremiad of acts of cultural criticism juxtaposed on the page with two other sparse parallel narratives: J. C.'s pursuit of a sexual relationship with a younger woman named Anya whom he employs as his typist; and her interactions with her boyfriend, Alan. The ageing intellectual expresses his opinions from a position of privilege at the top of each page, and Coetzee offers his reader the opportunity either to read these narratives together in cryptic juxtaposition or to read the three narratives separately.²⁶⁸ The dialogues between these narratives, however, lament the solitude of the ageing author's performances of criticism. This is most evident as J. C. discusses a sport which we have also come across in Coetzee's *Boyhood*, cricket:

As a young man, I never for a moment allowed myself to doubt that only from a self disengaged from the mass and critical of the mass could true art emerge [...] But what sort of art has that been, in the end? Art that is not great-souled, as the Russians would say, that lacks generosity, fails to celebrate life, lacks love (170).

This can be read as an indictment of young John in *Youth*.²⁶⁹ J. C. makes Tolstoy and the great Russian authors into authorities for his way of writing, but this statement also suggests the limits to J. C.'s self-understanding as author of his works. The love story between Anya and J. C. beneath his strong opinions reveals his human need for others and isolated decay. Alan acknowledges to J. C. on the same page: 'unbeknown to you, she has saved you' (*ibid.*).²⁷⁰ In *Youth*, John shows the same signs of isolation as J. C. as he sits in his apartment cutting up lines of Neruda. Whereas a reader can perceive the redemptive narrative intervention of the typist Anya for J. C., John in *Youth* is not saved.

²⁶⁸ David Attwell, 'Mastering Authority in J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*', *Social Dynamics*, 36.1 (2010), 214-21 (p. 220).

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ Michael O'Sullivan describes how Coetzee allows the reader to see J. C. crawl out from 'beneath the shackles of an authority built on "strong opinions"', in Michael O'Sullivan, 'Giving Up Control: Narrative Authority and Animal Experience in Coetzee and Kafka', *Mosaic*, 44.2 (2011), 119-35 (p. 134).

A turning point occurs as, in J. C.'s later set of so-called 'Soft Opinions', he tells Anya of his dream of a young woman who tends to him on his deathbed: 'She was doing her best to soften the impact of death while shielding me from other people' (157). J. C.'s immediate impulse on waking up from the dream is to write a novel from the perspective of a man who has died, a ghost privy to the sense of his life's ending to speak about his impulse to live, removed from social obligations towards others (158). J. C. suggests that the novel will be entitled 'Desolation', using the story of Orpheus and Eurydice to examine how 'as of the moment of death we lose all power to elect our companions' (159). The apparent authority of his reading of his dream and the myth is relativised later by Anya, who appears to understand J. C. better than he does himself. Reading his dream she wonders 'if it doesn't contain a secret message about needing help [...] We can all do with someone by our side, to help us' (197). By the end of *Diary of a Bad Year*, Anya appears to adopt a position of moral authority as a perceptive reader who sees past the isolated intellectual's blind spots.²⁷¹

By staging the opinions of his authorial intellectual in dialogue with the narrative of Anya, Coetzee discloses the vulnerability behind the protagonist's dominance. Anya is positioned as a reader of J. C.'s strong opinions and manages to see what he does not: the human need for others behind his creative search for the authority of Tolstoy. Coetzee stages the intellectual presence of his narrator in relation to others who reframe his strong opinions. Understanding this aspect of *Diary of a Bad Year* is key to my analysis of Bernhard's late metafiction. In Bernhard's later texts, as I will show, it is possible to be swept away by the implacable venom of his speakers' strong opinions, the apparent authority of figures whose narrative voices have been cultivated through Bernhard's own utterances and altercations

²⁷¹ Attwell, p. 221.

in the public arena. However, Coetzee's treatment of narrative authority helps to appreciate how Bernhard also relativises the posturing of his speaking subjects. *Wittgensteins Neffe* and *Auslöschung*, I will argue, contain comparable relativising gestures. In these works, Bernhard progresses from the stories that his narrators set out to tell to invite his readers to see the human vulnerability underneath.

Where J. C. in *Diary of a Bad Year* saves his strong views for opinion pieces in his German publisher's essay collection, Bernhard expressed his ire in various open letters to German and Austrian press outlets. I discussed one example of such letters, Bernhard's response to the election of Walter Scheel to the German *Akademie der Sprache und Dichtung*, in the introduction to this thesis. In the context of this chapter, though, such letters will reveal Bernhard's awareness of his own rhetorical posturing. Analysing Bernhard's *Leserbriefe* will show the rhetorical tricks with which Bernhard creates his cultural authority and, at the same time, the author's awareness of the potential to become a caricature of himself, much like the isolated *Geistesmenschen* in his works. Seeing how Bernhard stages his own public persona in these epistolary interchanges will provide a formative step for understanding how Bernhard qualifies the authority of his hypertrophic prose style in his later writings.

4.3. Self-staging in Bernhard's *Leserbriefe*

Criticism on Bernhard has explored the stylistic echoes between his prose fiction and his epistolary invectives. Wolfram Bayer, for example, analyses how these letters project the implacable ire of Bernhard's literary works beyond the worlds of his fictions to create reactions beyond his texts: 'Seine öffentlichen Äußerungen sind, könnte man sagen, die

gesellschaftliche Praxis einer praxisfeindlichen Ästhetik'.²⁷² Bayer explores the interplay between the diatribes in Bernhard's fictions and his public statements, arguing that Bernhard blurs the bounds of fiction and reality in a public 'Reiz-Reaktionsspiel'.²⁷³ The intellectual backdrop of Coetzee's treatment of narrative authority, however, will offer another way of looking at Bernhard's open letters. I will argue that Bernhard uses this medium to build the authority of his cultural voice through altercations with various real-life targets. Bernhard has been described as a writer uniquely energised by his acrimonious interchanges in the public sphere.²⁷⁴ Bernhard's letters at the turn of the 1980s reveal a writer critical of Austria's political and cultural machinery, but also using his letters to build the presence of an identifiable voice that Bernhard variously stages in the works discussed in this chapter.

Bernhard's response in January 1979 to a threat of legal action exemplifies his posturing. Bernhard had used the name of a judge, the recently deceased Rainulf Zamponi, in a short story published in *Der Stimmenimitator* (1978). In the story, 'Exempel', the experienced judge sentences a meat exporter to twelve years' imprisonment for blackmail and then suddenly sets an example by shooting himself in the cheek (W14, 248). Replying to allegations of defamation raised by the daughter of the judge, Annelore Lucan-Stood, Bernhard states:

Aufgrund dieses Tatbestandes kann ich weder Ihren Gedanken noch Ihren Empfindungen folgen und ich will Sie in aller Höflichkeit und naturgemäß auch mit dem größten Respekt bitten, das Prosastück Exempel [...] noch einmal genau zu lesen und aufmerksam zu studieren (W21, 653).

²⁷² Wolfram Bayer, 'Das Gedruckte und das Tatsächliche: Realität und Fiktion in Bernhards Leserbriefen', in *Thomas Bernhard: Beiträge zur Fiktion der Postmoderne. Londoner Symposion*, ed. by Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, Adrian Stevens and Fred Wagner (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 1-24 (p. 2).

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁷⁴ Geoff Dyer, 'Afterword', in Thomas Bernhard, *Extinction*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), p. 333.

The politeness of the letter contrasts his barbed assertion of the failure of the judge's daughter to understand the passage. He then perfunctorily offers two alternative names for the judge in his story: 'Ferrari' or 'Machiavelli' (*ibid.*). But the letter does not entertain Ms. Lucan-Stood's argument for long, proceeding instead to boast of the text's success. Bernhard refers to the publication of the text by *Gallimard* in Paris and *A. Knopf* in America to show 'wie groß die Wirkung eines Buches aus dem oberösterreichischen Ohlsdorf sein kann' (654). The altercation enables him to cement his reputation for public venom and his international status. He uses 'Exempel' to make an example of his reader, adopting the superior tone of one of his dramatic *Geistesmenschen* to deride his target as an inattentive critic.

Later in 1979, Bernhard would take his self-staging to an extreme. In an open letter published in *Die Zeit*, Bernhard responds to an imitation of his own style submitted by a reader in his name. He opens his letter as follows:

[N]aturgemäß handelt es sich hier um die Parodie eines sogenannten falschen Herrn Bernhard des sogenannten richtigen Herrn Bernhard, die der sogenannte falsche Herr Bernhard an die sogenannte richtige ZEIT geschickt hat, was in diesem sogenannten langweiligen verregneten Sommer ganz und gar naturgemäß ist (657).

The parody is itself confirmation of the currency of Bernhard's voice in the public arena. Bernhard's acknowledgement and playful continuation of the parody, though, reveals the self-awareness with which he employs his prose style. The letter presents Bernhard caricaturing his own public posturing to respond to the imitation charitably, while affirming his propensity for self-imitation. This is Bernhard caricaturing Bernhard.

When employing this linguistic style in his vitriolic tirades, however, Bernhard's voice loses none of its venom. The following statement is from a contemporary letter addressed to the Austrian author Gerhard Ruiss in an exchange in which Bernhard refuses

to take part in a conference involving the trade unions of art and the media. His refusal of the invitation follows what he describes as the ‘endlose[n] Reihe von Brüskierungen’ he has received from the media (866):

Ich frage mich allerdings, was Schriftsteller zu tun haben in einem Staat wie dem unsrigen, in dem nichts niedriger eingeschätzt ist als die Schriftstellerei, ganz zu schweigen von Denken und Dichten und in dem wir eine schon auf die tödlichste Länge an der Macht befindliche Regierung haben, die nur aus Dummköpfen, Banausen und brutalen Bossen besteht (668).

The alliterative excess of this hyperbolic tirade exemplifies Bernhard’s staging of his stylistic talent in opposition to the perceived ignorance of representatives of the state. Bernhard caricatures his targets as a group of ‘größenwahnsinnige alte Männer’ in the political establishment (*ibid.*), employing his eloquence to lament the loss of a country of thinkers and poets in a cultural backdrop of stifling philistinism. This is the splenetic voice often associated with Bernhard, revealing his pessimistic outlook on Austria’s post-war culture. Yet Bernhard’s voice is also a response to the cultural degradation he diagnoses. Bernhard takes his cue from his negative prognostications to stage his common rhetorical tricks in a voice that resurfaces in a reflected form in the texts I will discuss in this chapter.

Coetzee did not engage in such calculated altercations in the public arena. His portrayals of young John and J. C.’s strong opinions in the constructed intellectual backdrop that I have used to situate Bernhard’s rhetoric in this chapter, though, will illuminate how Bernhard imitates the recognisable voice of his *Leserbriefe* in later works. Analysing Bernhard’s published letters has revealed a linguistic style cultivated via interactions outside of his works. In *Ein Kind*, Bernhard presents his interactions and imitations as a child as fundamental to his cultivation of his authorial voice. Yet the text also reinforces the self-awareness in Bernhard’s self-staging that is evident in his *Leserbriefe*, exploring the limitations to the apparent authority of this voice. Central to Bernhard’s treatment of this

voice in *Ein Kind* is how the text progresses from an account of childhood to an encounter with the outlook and opinions of the young Bernhard's primary voice of authority, his maternal grandfather.

4.4. Figures of authority in *Ein Kind*

Ein Kind is a pivotal text for understanding Bernhard's later metafiction.²⁷⁵ Unlike Coetzee's memoirs, Bernhard recalls his boyhood years in the first person and past tense. Yet, having read Coetzee, we can see that the authority of the narratorial voice is also a central concern in *Ein Kind*. In this text, Bernhard presents his grandfather as his primary authority figure: 'die Autorität, der sich jeder beugte, der schlichtete, was zu schlichten war, dessen Machtwort das erste und einzige war. Der Richter. Der Urteilssprecher' (W10, 415). My comparison with Coetzee will make available a reading of this text as, on the one hand, staging the formation of Bernhard's voice through interactions with and imitation of his grandfather and, on the other, qualifying the authority of a figure presented as Bernhard's archetypal *Geistesmensch*. *Ein Kind* reveals how Bernhard initiates his reader into the characteristic foibles of a recognisable voice to open a different narrative to the one that the narrator sets out to tell.

Where John's mother rides a bicycle at the beginning of *Boyhood* as an escape from her domestic oppression, *Ein Kind* starts with a similar assertion of freedom. Having never ridden a bicycle before, the young Bernhard takes his stepfather's 'Waffenrad' and rides from Traunstein to his Aunt Fanny's house in Salzburg (408). Basking in the success of his first voyage on a bicycle too large for him even to sit on the saddle, he only wishes that he could be seen by his 'wie nichts auf der Welt geliebter Großvater' (*ibid.*). When he is thrown

²⁷⁵ Various scholars have noted a tonal shift in Bernhard's *Ein Kind* from his earlier volumes of autobiography. Thomas Parth, "Verwickelte Hierarchien": *Die Wege des Erzählens in den Jugenderinnerungen Thomas Bernhards* (Tübingen: Francke, 1995), p. 145.

from the bicycle into a ditch in the dark, however, this scene of his excitement turns into hellish torment, an ‘Inferno’ (410). The young Bernhard fears the punishment that awaits him at the hands of his elders. The threat of this inferno is accentuated by echoes of his grandfather’s pessimism: ‘die Welt ist widerwärtig, unerbittlich, tödlich’ (412). The fact that these terms are neither expressed in the subjunctive as reported speech nor italicised suggests the presence of his grandfather in Bernhard’s self-expression. Freumbichler’s words already define how Bernhard sees his world. Bernhard responds to this danger by a childish yearning for the comfort of his mother. He imagines being at home with his mother reading the author who for J. C. is the sage voice of narrative authority, Tolstoy (412).

Bernhard reflects on his relationship with his mother explicitly in *Ein Kind*. The rages of Bernhard’s mother towards her son—‘*Du bist an allem schuld! Du bist mein Tod!*’ (426)—are frequently read as the origin of the domineering mother figures in Bernhard’s fiction.²⁷⁶ Bernhard’s hindsight, however, acknowledges more nuance to this relationship: ‘diese gegenseitige Liebe’, he states, ‘war, solange meine Mutter lebte, von dem für mich unsichtbaren Unhold an ihrer Entfaltung gehindert’ (*ibid.*). Bernhard recognises the love that he could not perceive in the limited perspective of his youth. While the narrative perspective of *Boyhood* allows his reader to see the pathos of John’s mother in her treatment by the male family members, Bernhard expressly acknowledges with hindsight the love and human struggle of his mother. In this respect, *Ein Kind* reveals the self-awareness that is an increasing feature of Bernhard’s prose fictions of the 1980s, a recognition of the limited perspective of his childhood self. His treatment of his grandfather, too, benefits from such hindsight.

²⁷⁶ Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard*, p. 200.

Johannes Freumbichler is portrayed as pivotal to Bernhard's intellectual development. In *Ein Kind*, Bernhard describes their walks, in which his grandfather would speak on topics such as nature, Schopenhauer, and his former political leanings as a young anarchist, while the young Bernhard listened attentively. Frequently in *Ein Kind*, terms used by his grandfather seep into Bernhard's way of seeing the world. One example is the word 'untätig': 'dieses großväterliche Wort hatte ich immer im Ohr, auch heute noch bestimmt es meinen Tagesablauf' (419). The grandfather's compound nouns, such as 'Artikulierungs dilettantismus', resonate with Bernhard's own erudition (*ibid.*). The term plays on a frequent accusation in his works, 'Dilettant'. It recurs in Bernhard's own acts of destruction as he and his friends play at the *Weinleite*, placing stones and wood on the tracks for oncoming trains: 'dem Dilettanten sprang die Münze weg, und er fand sie im Geröll und im Gestrüpp der Weinleite nicht wieder' (416). The game of 'Münzenquetschung' is symbolic of the minting of Bernhard's style and terms for responding to the world via his relationship with his grandfather.

Bernhard juxtaposes this account of his linguistic development with a scene of youthful storytelling. In *Boyhood*, young John invents the suffering of an animal as part of a competitive game of storytelling with his peers, withholding a memory that is much more personal to him: a paper bag in the breeze (*Scenes*, 27). In *Ein Kind*, Bernhard describes the performance of his story as the adoption of another persona, using 'würzende Übertreibungen' to enhance the plausibility of his account. He first performs the story to his friend Schorschi:

Ich selbst genoß meinen Bericht so, als würde er von einem ganz andern erzählt, und ich steigerte mich von Wort zu Wort und gab dem Ganzen, von meiner Leidenschaft über das Berichtete selbst angefeuert, eine Reihe von Akzenten, die entweder den ganzen Bericht würzende Übertreibungen oder sogar zusätzliche Erfindungen waren, um nicht sagen zu müssen: Lügen (*W10*, 425).

Bernhard's alliterations convey his enjoyment of his embellishment (424). This scene has been considered a point of origin for Bernhard's prose style, an 'Urszene von Bernhards dichterische Existenz'.²⁷⁷ Yet the foregoing analysis of Coetzee's treatment of narrative authority in his memoir can help to pursue this thought further. Just as Coetzee uses the distance of his third-person narration to enable a reader to see through young John's exaggerations and the game of his self-presentation, Bernhard also qualifies the exaggerations of his younger self.²⁷⁸ Bernhard's reader in *Ein Kind* is aware of the truth, and his grandfather does not comment on this story, simply making a gesture to the child that confirms his forgiveness (426). Bernhard stages the rhetorical tricks central to his distinctive voice, but both his grandfather and his reader can see beyond this eloquent performance.

Ein Kind is also the story of Bernhard's grandfather.²⁷⁹ It portrays the anarchist leanings of his youth, his relationships with his siblings, and familial inheritance, as well as his own literary legacy. Where, in Coetzee's memoirs, young John learns of the German text written by his great grandfather and translated into Afrikaans as *Evige Genesing*, Bernhard in *Ein Kind* recounts how his grandfather had the novel *Ulla Winblatt* published at his own cost before it was eaten by a goat. This comic revelation is part of a hyperbolic assertion of distaste for the contemporary culture industry, epitomised as Bernhard describes his grandfather's views on publishing houses: 'weil es ihm widerwärtig war, fortwährend bei irgendeinem skrupellosen Verleger zu antichambrieren' (445). This use of the author's familiar lexis and the register of the verb 'antichambrieren' reveals how, in

²⁷⁷ Manfred Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard: Leben—Werk—Wirkung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), p. 96.

²⁷⁸ Leo Truchlar, 'Thomas Bernhard: *Ein Kind*, Sprache und Selbstfindung', in Truchlar, *Identität, polymorph. Zur zeitgenössischen Autobiographik und Bewußtseinskultur* (Wien: Böhlau, 2002), pp. 29-32 (p. 32).

²⁷⁹ Völker C. Dörr, 'Leben und Wahrheit. Eine Lesart. Zu den autobiographischen Büchern Thomas Bernhards', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 32.2 (1999), 39-57 (p. 55).

Ein Kind, he stages his grandfather with the kind of willed independence common to his fictional artists. His grandfather is portrayed not only as the boy's formative influence, but he manifests traits of the *Geistesmenschen* common to Bernhard's fictional writings. This is key to understanding Bernhard's treatment of his grandfather's authority as, it turns out, Johannes Freumbichler's own view of what is best for Bernhard is limited.

Bernhard states how his grandfather encouraged him to join the Hitler Youth, but Bernhard could not abide by the institution's forced conformity. His description of his independence reads as an artistic credo: 'Ich war es gewohnt, selbständig, die meiste Zeit allein zu sein, ich haßte die Herde, ich verabscheute die Masse, das hundert- und tausendfache Brüllen aus einem Maul' (483-4). Another formative experience in Bernhard's development follows one of his grandfather's suggestions. At the end of *Ein Kind*, Bernhard travels with his grandfather to Passau to visit a 'Handelsakademie', but Freumbichler insists that the grey town is no place for his grandson. He instead recommends that Bernhard goes to school in Salzburg. The sense of hope for Bernhard at the climax of *Ein Kind* is replete with irony for readers familiar with Bernhard's earlier volumes of autobiography, or aware of the scandal of *Die Ursache. Eine Andeutung* (1975), a text in which Bernhard's vehement critique of Salzburg's Nazi and Catholic state institutions resulted in the successful libel claim by his former teacher Franz Wesenauer and censorship of excerpts from the first edition. Each of these decisions in *Ein Kind* ironises Bernhard's impression of his grandfather as an unimpeachable authority. Bernhard presents Johannes Freumbichler as a *Geistesmensch* who does not quite live up to the independence of thought and nonconformism that Bernhard ascribes to him.

Like Coetzee's memoirs, Bernhard's account of boyhood presents an infant's encounter with intensifying nationalism, a difficult maternal relationship, and the literary inheritance of a German-speaking grandparent. Bernhard's choice to deliver this 'Bericht'

in the first person, though, is not to provide a heightened claim to truth but to stage the child's perception of the authority of his grandfather, as well as the reflection of his grandfather's terms in his own idiolect. What begins as the journey of a child's self-discovery becomes the story of a formative bond with an ageing male intellectual not unlike the protagonists of Bernhard's fictions. *Ein Kind* sets a horizon of expectation as an account of the formation of Bernhard's authorial voice, but becomes an expression of the contingency of that voice, and the fallibility of his grandfather's opinions. What starts as Bernhard's boyhood bicycle journey strays from that path to reveal a wider reflection on the authority of Bernhard's unmistakable style. This is a recurring narrative pattern in Bernhard's late works. It is evident in *Wittgensteins Neffe*, in which Bernhard stages the hypertrophic authority of his polemics to acknowledge a far more personal failure.

4.5. Failing a friendship in *Wittgensteins Neffe*

In *Wittgensteins Neffe. Eine Freundschaft*, Bernhard presents his coincidental stay with Paul Wittgenstein in the late 1960s, shortly after the publication of *Verstörung* (1967), in two separate wards of Vienna's Wilhelminenberg hospital: Bernhard in the *Lungenheilanstalt* and Wittgenstein in the Steinhof psychological institution. The text is often read as an autobiographical account of the young author's friendship, alluding to the author's controversial prize acceptance speeches of the 1960s and 1970s and reflecting on the debut performance of his 1974 play *Die Jagdgesellschaft*.²⁸⁰ In the context of Coetzee's reflections on narrative authority in 1960s London in *Youth*, however, this analysis will examine how Bernhard reflects on telling Paul Wittgenstein's story.²⁸¹ In the text,

²⁸⁰ See Uwe Betz, 'Wittgensteins Neffe. Eine Freundschaft', in *Bernhard-Handbuch*, ed. by Mittermayer and Huber, pp. 120-124 (p. 120).

²⁸¹ J. J. Long also discusses Bernhard's treatment of narrative authority in the text, reading *Wittgensteins Neffe* as an 'attempt to make good Paul's failure to write his own life story, to bring to light a tale whose narration has been obstructed by insanity and curtailed by death'. Long, *The Novels of Thomas Bernhard*, pp. 99-100.

Wittgenstein, like J. C. in *Diary of a Bad Year*, hires a secretary to write for him, but he ends up destroying his biographical manuscript after only being able to write ten or fifteen pages (W13, 264). My reading of Coetzee in this chapter will help bring into focus the rhetorical tricks with which Bernhard presents this figure. Bernhard, I will argue, explores the human shortcomings beyond the hyperbole of a cultural critic recognisable from the events and literary scandals acknowledged in this text. Where Coetzee's writings relativise the authority of their subject in dialogue with co-characters and narrating figures, Bernhard presents a solitary vision of personal vulnerability behind the overt authority of his own opinions.

Bernhard stages this hyperbolic style at the opening to *Wittgensteins Neffe*. The narrator's rhetoric opposes the obfuscation that Bernhard attributes to the doctors, who hide behind Latin 'zu dem alleinigen Zweck der Vertuschung ihrer Inkompetenz und der Vernebelung ihres Scharlatanismus' (213). Bernhard's repetitions develop from specific critiques of the doctors into generalised barbs against the medical profession. He thinks that psychiatrists are even worse: 'die tatsächlichen Teufel unserer Zeit [...] unangreifbar, gesetz- und gewissenlos' (*ibid.*). His alliterative tricolon confronts the medical professionals with the purported superior integrity of his own erudition. Even at this stage in the text's opening, though, Bernhard signals that this position is unfounded. Despite his long experience as a hospital inpatient, Bernhard states, he made the mistake of attempting to stand and walk from one end of the Pavillon to the other, a decision that slows his recovery considerably. His invectives turn inward, acknowledging his failure to live up to the standards he idealises with a term that could have emanated from his grandfather in *Ein Kind*: 'Krankheitsdilettantismus' (215).

Bernhard states that this text is not a description of the so-called 'Geisteskranken' in the clinic—he will leave that for another text (224). Nor is it a portrayal of his closest

friendship.²⁸² ‘Die Eingeweihten’, he states, would be aware of his most important source of support, who visited him regularly during his years in the Baumgartnerhöhe: his so-called ‘Lebensmensch’, Hedwig Stavianiček (223). Instead, this text is a series of what he calls ‘Notizen’ or ‘Erinnerungsfetzen’ on Paul: ‘mein damals mit mir auf dem Wilhelminenberg stationierter, isolierter, abgeschobener und abgeschriebener Freund’ (224). The rhyme and rhythm of these epithets, however, indicate that this figure is part of a more ornate fictional design. His status as a pedigreed patrician from an artistic Austrian family connects him with the moneyed male *Geistesmenschen* in Bernhard’s literary works, while Bernhard’s titular allusion in this text to *Le neveu de Rameau* by Denis Diderot, J. C.’s doyen of rhetorical tricks in *Diary of a Bad Year*, offers a wider fictional framework. Whether or not Bernhard engaged with this intertext in detail,²⁸³ *Wittgensteins Neffe* plays on many of its themes: the discussions of a first-person narrator and his artistic interlocutor on the nature of genius and their critiques of wider contemporary culture from the comfort of a café (Bernhard and Paul meet in the café of the Hotel Sacher, the so-called ‘Arsch der Oper’ (252)). Unlike this precedent, though, Bernhard does not stage their conversations as a dialogue. He instead filters the biography of Paul through the recognisable rhetorical tricks of Bernhard’s first-person narrative voice. Paul is part of an authorial self-staging that Coetzee will assist to consider further.

Coetzee’s distance in *Youth* between his narrative voice and young John creates space for the reader to judge the self-absorption of John’s relentless pursuit of artistry. The authority of Coetzee’s portrait of the artist as a young man instead reveals the inadequacy of his way of living. In his portrayal of Paul in *Wittgensteins Neffe*, Bernhard dwells on the

²⁸² Honegger states that Bernhard and Paul were not as close as the text suggests. Honegger, p. 201.

²⁸³ I discuss the evidence used by scholars for connecting *Wittgensteins Neffe* with Goethe’s translation of *Le neveu de Rameau* in the Introduction to this thesis.

details of his artistic discernment known to the so-called initiated: ‘Er war der leidenschaftlichste Opernbesucher, den Wien je gehabt hat, das wissen die Eingeweihten’ (233). Bernhard valorises Paul’s exuberant pleasure at successful operatic performances and his impeccable dress sense. Even on subjects where they disagree—Paul, for example, is not a fan of Herbert von Karajan—Bernhard ventriloquises Paul’s criticisms through his common locutions: ‘Paul [...] bezeichnete ihn aus gewohnheitsmäßigem Haß nur als Scharlatan’ (235). Paul manifests the unwavering commitment common to the subjects of Bernhard’s fictions, but his acts of accosting passers-by to ask them about Klemperer are replete with the pathos and isolation of Paul’s illness (248-9). At various junctures in the text, it is evident that Paul is merely looking for Bernhard’s companionship. He travels over 400 kilometres from Vienna to Bernhard’s Ohlsdorf residence and back, just to visit him (247). Yet Bernhard’s digressive effusions regarding Wittgenstein’s artistic preferences occlude Paul’s genuine wish for their friendship.

Through Paul, too, Bernhard stages a figure prone to exaggerated rants on his countrymen, a so-called ‘ununterbrochener Bezichtigter’:

Die Leute, die ihm unter die Augen kamen, waren niemals länger als nur die aller kürzeste Zeit ungeschoren, schon hatten sie einen Verdacht auf sich gezogen und sich eines Verbrechens oder wenigstens eines Vergehens schuldig gemacht und sie wurden von ihm gezeißelt mit jenen Wörtern, die auch die meinigen sind, wenn ich mich auflehne oder wehre, wenn ich gegen die Unverschämtheit der Welt vorzugehen habe (266).

Bernhard acknowledges the proximity between the formulae with which he and Paul chastise the world. Yet Paul does not express broadsides on art or the people of Vienna from the café; Wittgenstein saves this for his family, the aunt Irmina who was a ‘Reichsbauernführerin’ during the *Nazizeit* and his brothers, ‘[s]eine Peiniger’ (268). Like Strauch and Roithamer in his fictions, Paul goes ‘einen eigenen

familienentgegengesetzten Weg', only speaking of his sister with fondness (*ibid.*). It is Bernhard instead who launches into such 'Bezichtungen'.

In *Wittgensteins Neffe*, Bernhard describes an episode from his acceptance of the *Grillparzerpreis* for his debut play *Ein Fest für Boris* (1970) in 1971. He describes his purchase of a suit for his ceremonial role at the *Akademie der Wissenschaften* in Vienna that evening, the fact that no one at the ceremony recognises him until he is asked to move from the middle of the hall to the front row to receive the prize, and his departure after the then *Wissenschaftsministerin* Hertha Firnberg fails to recognise him (274). Bernhard presents this episode, as well as his acceptance of the Austrian State Prize for Literature in 1968, as proof of Paul's strength of character (276). This strength appears to lie in Paul's agreement with Bernhard's actions. Reflecting on the *Grillparzerpreis* ceremony, Bernhard states:

Eine Akademie, die mir ihren Preis gibt und mich überhaupt nicht kennt und die mich, weil ich mich ihr nicht zu erkennen gegeben habe, gleich mit strafenden und durchbohrenden Blicken überfällt, hätte noch etwas viel Perfideres verdient, dachte ich (274).

Bernhard uses the events of the ceremony in 1971 to critique the ignorance of Austria's politicians and cultural figureheads, comically reflecting on his act of exchanging his suit at Sir Anthony on Vienna's *Kohlmarkt* after the event. As he, Hedwig Stavianiček and Paul leave for the Sacher café in *Wittgensteins Neffe*, though, Paul's assessment of the prize ceremony echoes the formulations of Bernhard's ire: '*Du hast dich mißbrauchen lassen! Die haben dir auf den Kopf gemacht!*' (275). As J. J. Long states, Paul seems superfluous to this set piece, simply confirming Bernhard's condemnation of the literary establishment.²⁸⁴ Bernhard's posthumously-published account of his literary prize

²⁸⁴ Long, *The Novels of Thomas Bernhard*, p. 95.

ceremonies, *Meine Preise* (2009), exemplifies this since, in Bernhard's episodic memoir, Paul's comments on the prize ceremony are not mentioned.

This difference between the two accounts reveals Bernhard's project in *Wittgensteins Neffe*. Alongside his critique of the Austrian establishment and his reflection on a friendship, Bernhard creates an affluent *Geistesmensch* in his own image. Bernhard seems to realise in the text that he does not live up to the friendships that he professes. He indicates this in his treatment of Irina, a friend introduced in the narrative as the host of the party at which Bernhard and Paul first bonded over a recording of Mozart's *Haffnersinfonie* (1782) (222). When she moves from Vienna to the country, exchanging her musical discussions for isolated woodcutting with her husband, Bernhard satirises her: she is a 'bäuerlich-bieder, Selchfleisch in den Rauchfang hängenden und Gemüse ziehenden niederösterreichischen Provinzlerin' (281). She fails to live up to Bernhard's cultivated cosmopolitan standards, and so he lets the friendship die. The comedy of Bernhard's adjectival phrases draw a reader into the allure of his disdain, but there is an alarming callousness in how the narrator only rues the loss of a 'Schauplatz für unsere Gespräche' (280).

As in *Youth*, Bernhard's pursuit of art is at the expense of living up to his human relationships, and this is evident when Paul dies. He recounts Paul Wittgenstein's desire for Bernhard to speak at a funeral in which he envisages two hundred attendees, echoing the epigraph to *Wittgensteins Neffe*. In the final twist of the text, though, Bernhard does not fulfil this promise:

An seinem Begräbnis hatten aber nur acht oder neun Leute teilgenommen, wie ich weiß und ich selbst war zu diesem Zeitpunkt auf Kreta gewesen, ein Theaterstück schreibend, das ich, als es fertig gewesen war, gleich wieder vernichtet habe (307).

He learns that Paul died in a hospital in Linz, but offers no further explanation for his decision to concentrate on a play that he eventually destroys. The climax to *Wittgensteins Neffe* reveals a human failing comparable with that of young John in *Youth*. This text commences as the story of Paul Wittgenstein that, due to his illness, Paul could not write himself; but it becomes a different narrative altogether. It portrays the pathos of Paul's desire for companionship with Bernhard, his trips to 'Nathal', and his support at literary prize ceremonies, but also the ultimate failure of Bernhard to live up to this friendship due to his dogged pursuit of his art.

In *Wittgensteins Neffe*, Bernhard stages the invectives and cultural critiques of the author's cultivated public persona, but exposes the speaker's own shortcomings beneath the overt authority of such opinions. Bernhard's treatments of Irina and, later, Paul, suggest to the reader that the hypertrophic vitriol of Bernhard's 'Übertreibungen', as cathartic as it seems, is not always to be taken at face value. Where Coetzee uses the scaffolding of third-person authorial personae and pseudonymous public intellectuals to explore the human failures and suffering of his characters beyond their self-knowledge, Bernhard foregoes such interventions, using the flow of a familiar voice to reveal his failures. This comparison will facilitate a re-reading of Bernhard's last-published work of prose fiction, composed for the most part alongside *Ein Kind* and *Wittgensteins Neffe* in 1981-2:²⁸⁵ *Auslöschung. Ein Zerfall*.

4.6. Laughing with Gambetti in *Auslöschung*

Auslöschung. Ein Zerfall is widely read as Bernhard's most extensive engagement with collective post-war history.²⁸⁶ Published shortly after the presidential election of Kurt

²⁸⁵ Andreas Gößling, *Bernhard-Handbuch*, p. 88.

²⁸⁶ Hans Höller, 'Thomas Bernhards *Auslöschung* als *comédie humaine* der österreichische Geschichte', in *Thomas Bernhard: Beiträge zur Fiktion der Moderne*, ed. by Schmidt-Dengler et al., pp. 47-60 (p. 48).

Waldheim in August 1986, *Auslöschung* formed a timely indictment of the problematic treatment of Austria's Nazi past. The alternative contextual backdrop constructed in this chapter, though, will enable me to offer a further perspective on Bernhard's approach to collective history in *Auslöschung*. I will argue that Bernhard stages his distinctive style of polemic via the protagonist Franz-Josef Murau to explore the limitations of the character's engagement with his family history and national past. My previous discussion of Coetzee's treatment of the authority of his intellectual protagonists will enable me to read *Auslöschung* as a self-aware reflection beyond the central character's engaging hyperbole and strong opinions. Bernhard, I will argue, enables his reader both to experience the cultural critiques of his central character and to perceive the human fallibility behind his hypertrophic authority. In doing so, Bernhard reprises a recurring structure in his late works, familiar from *Wittgensteins Neffe* and *Beton*, in which his text turns out to be a different account than his narrator sets out to write. Examining Bernhard's treatment of narrative authority in *Auslöschung* will help me to read the text as a testament to the human relationships fundamental to Franz-Josef Murau's coming to terms with the legacy of his family's Nazi past, and an *opus magnum* that constantly questions the authority of the narrator's account.

Central to this reading is Bernhard's final trick: his staging of the death of the narrator. The interjection of 'schreibt Murau' in the first and final sentences of this work present the text as Murau's act of self-writing. At the outset of this narrative, Murau is informed of the deaths of his parents and brother in a car accident and his unexpected inheritance of *Schloss Wolfsegg*. Preparing to return to Upper Austria for the funeral, Murau explains to his student Gambetti his family history and that of the estate, a centre of artistic life that turned into 'eine Hochburg des Nationalsozialismus' (W9, 154). He resolves to write about this estate and everything it means to him in the hope of extinguishing his inheritance: 'das in ihm Beschriebene auszulöschen, alles auszulöschen, das ich unter

Wolfsegg verstehe, und alles, das Wolfsegg ist' (156-7). After the funeral in Wolfsegg, Murau deliberates over what to do with this estate. He even temporarily considers staying to restore it to its former artistic glory. At the climax to *Auslöschung*, however, an extra-diegetic narrator signals the death of Murau in Rome in 1983, having left Wolfsegg and transferred the estate as an unconditional gift to his friend Rabbi Eisenberg, who accepts it on behalf of Vienna's *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde*. This narrative, *Auslöschung*, is the 'Bericht' that Murau leaves behind.

The final gift of this estate to Rabbi Eisenberg has stimulated various interpretations. It has been read positively as a final act of atonement for Austria's past, as an insincere gesture simply confirming Murau's refusal to engage with his historical burden,²⁸⁷ and as an expression of Murau's impasse before the insurmountable task of coming to terms.²⁸⁸ As Bernhard's last-published prose work during his lifetime, referring to the recurrent theme of literary estates from his short fiction of the 1960s, the gift has also been considered a literary bequest.²⁸⁹ Bernhard returns to the question, voiced by John in *Boyhood*, of the obligations of the artist towards the literary authorities passed down from generation to generation. In the following analysis, I will read Bernhard's final staging of the death of the narrator as a rhetorical trick through which he moves beyond this question. *Auslöschung*, a narrative inspired by a wish to extinguish his family's past, does not end up doing so. Instead, as I will show, the text uses Murau's 'Übertreibungskunst' both to expose the limitations of Murau's own perspectives and the familial relationships fundamental to his coming to terms.

²⁸⁷ Irene Heidelberger-Leonard, 'Auschwitz als Pflichtfach für Schriftsteller', in *Anti-autobiografie: Thomas Bernhards 'Auslöschung'*, ed. by Irene Heidelberger-Leonard and Hans Höller (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 181-97 (p. 192).

²⁸⁸ Katya Krylova, *Walking Through History*, p. 240.

²⁸⁹ Hans Höller, *Thomas Bernhard* (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993), p. 93.

Murau's way of living is heavily influenced by his relationship with his uncle Georg. Like the grandfather of Bernhard's *Ein Kind*, Georg introduced Murau to art, encouraging him to experience artists 'wie lebendige Menschen auf einer lebendigen Bühne' (37). Murau's first act on leaving Wolfsegg for Vienna is to follow in his uncle's footsteps and establish what he terms a 'Bibliothek des bösen Geistes' (118). Georg, like Bernhard's grandfather, was an anarchist in his youth, and the inclusion of Kropotkin and Bakunin in this library provides both an homage to Georg's politics and a testament to the influence of this ideology on Murau. The narrative does not explore Georg's politics in detail, yet these passing references form an incendiary non-conformism that Murau passes on to Gambetti: 'den ich möglicherweise zum Anarchisten erzogen habe gegen seine Eltern, gegen seine Umwelt, gegen sich selbst, dachte ich' (401).²⁹⁰ They also inform Murau's central narrative project, which resonates with the former anarchism of his grandfather: 'alles zu zerstören, zum Einsturz zu bringen, auszulöschen' (W10, 417). This connection with his uncle's politics reveals the significance of Murau's central narrative project in *Auslöschung*.

Uncle Georg is said to have treasured Kropotkin and Bakunin as writers of 'Memoirenliteratur', and was himself engaged in writing a memoir: an 'Anti-autobiografie' amounting to several hundred pages in which he reportedly wrote everything of interest to him (W9, 148). While, in *Boyhood*, the text of John's great grandfather provides a connection to the German family of the boy's mother, Murau suspects in *Auslöschung* that his mother has destroyed the text after reading it: 'Alle Augenblicke hat er gesagt, deine Mutter ist Wolfseggs Unglück. Es ist anzunehmen, daß er diesen Satz auch in seine Antiautobiografie geschrieben hat' (149). This passage has been read to signal the genre of *Auslöschung* as a continuation and completion of a project that Bernhard's autobiographies

²⁹⁰ Rainer Barbey connects the treatments of anarchism in Bernhard's works to the author's own extreme form of non-conformism. Rainer Barbey, 'Spielarten des Anarchismus im Werk Thomas Bernhards', *Literatur für Leser*, 30.3 (2007), 147-59 (p. 156).

only achieved inadequately.²⁹¹ At no point does Murau clarify what he considers an ‘anti-autobiography’ to be, but the influence of Georg on the protagonist suggests that his literary project, too, is to follow in his uncle’s footsteps. While the narrator echoes Onkel Georg’s critiques of his family and his homeland, this text is not the straightforward polemic that such citations would imply. As in Coetzee’s writings, Bernhard uses a fictive surrogate to stage the limitations of his worldviews in dialogue with others.

This is evident as Murau reflects on his parents as the antithesis of his artistic existence in Wolfsegg. He describes his father’s mercenary obsession with his ‘Bilanzbuch’ and the ‘Landwirtschaftszeitung’, while his description of his parents’ cultural habits resonates with the exhaustion of the mother in *Am Ziel*:

Und dann fahren sie, weil sie das Abonnement auszunützen haben, nach Linz ins Theater und gehen in eine scheußliche Komödie und schämen sich nicht, und gehen in diese lächerlichen Konzerte im sogenannten Brucknerhaus, in welchem mit der größten Lautstärke die falschen Töne herrschen (46-7).

The adjectives ‘scheußlich’ and ‘lächerlich’ comically reveal the protagonist’s cultural snobbery, denigrating the habitual pursuits of his parents as compared with his artistic existence in Rome. Yet the extremity of these generalisations raises the question of whether a reader should take Murau at his word. Murau’s parents are still participating in culture together, even if such productions are ‘scheußlich’. In *Alte Meister*, discussed in Chapter One, I argued that the fact that the production of *Der zerbrochene Krug* is ‘entsetzlich’ does not diminish the positive step in this text of Reger breaking from habit and participating in culture with others. In *Auslöschung*, Murau’s overt condemnations of his parents—which, as the clause ‘sagte er’ later suggests, are repeated from his uncle (47)—still involve his family going to concerts. Their car accident takes place while returning from the

²⁹¹ Martin, p. 202.

Brucknerhaus in Linz (316). Murau's uncle even acknowledges the limitations of his views: 'wer sagt, daß wir selbst den richtigen Weg gegangen sind? Wir selbst sind auch nicht die Glücklichen' (47). This recognition is central to understanding how, in *Auslöschung*, Murau reflects on the shortcomings of his own perspective.

In *Der Theatermacher*, Bruscon's condemnations of his son for not reading Schopenhauer and Spinoza make clear to an audience how he uses his learning to victimise his family members. In *Auslöschung*, Bernhard uses different techniques to distance his reader from Murau's way of seeing the world. Murau initially portrays himself as victimised for his intellectual pursuits. He describes to Gambetti how he once neglected to assist his mother with sorting the mail because he was in his uncle's library reading Jean Paul's *Siebenkäs* (1796) (209). His mother scolds him and does not feed him for three days, while his sisters torment him by repeating the title *Siebenkäs* through the door, 'ununterbrochen in höchster Schadenfreude' (210). When discussing the episode with his mother, though, she admits that she had no idea that Jean Paul was a writer. Murau finds this information very funny, but he is the only one laughing: 'Während ich über diese ganze Enthüllung aber auf dem Weg vom Hassler zur österreichischen Botschaft laut aufgelacht hatte, wozu aller Grund gewesen war, hatte meine Mutter nurmehr noch geschwiegen' (212). His mother's silence signals to a reader that Murau's version of culture is not the only valid one.

Earlier, Murau presents his mother and family to his student Gambetti via a set of photographs that he preserves in his desk drawer in Rome. The photographs depict Murau's parents, brother and sisters, respectively, travelling outside of the Wolfsegg estate. They have variously been read as evidence of a need to mourn, or to signify Murau's distance from the horrors of the past.²⁹² Yet they are also central to Murau's narrative self-

²⁹² J. J. Long, "'Die Teufelskunst unserer Zeit'?: Photographic Negotiations in Thomas Bernhard's *Auslöschung*", *Modern Austrian Literature*, 35.3/4 (2002), 79-96.

construction. The photographs are not reproduced in the text, but Murau uses an explanation of the photos to contrast his family members from his cosmopolitan life in the present. For example, Bernhard describes a photograph of his sisters posing in front of his uncle's villa in Cannes and looking mockingly at Murau behind the camera, both to stage his sisters as out of place outside of provincial Wolfsegg and their antipathy towards him.²⁹³ Having preserved these images to bolster his own self-understanding, though, Murau's photographs lead his student Gambetti to a different reading: that his family is in fact very rich (23). Whereas Murau presents himself as having escaped the decay and diseases of his family, his narrative acknowledges a different side to the story: that the post-war difficulties of the estate and its poor upkeep are at least in part due to Murau's life of cosmopolitan largesse in Rome.

Having enlisted three photos as the basis of his self-construction, it is somewhat ironic that Murau then denigrates the medium of photography as an art of 'Verzerrung' (100). To Murau, photography falsifies the real world, which is 'traurig und gemein' (101), to force an ideal self-image on others. This is further signalled to a reader familiar with Bernhard's other writings through an echo of Bernhard's critiques of the medical professionals in *Wittgensteins Neffe*. Contemplating whether his sisters really did have the mocking expression portrayed in the photo from Cannes, Murau refers to photography as 'die Teufelskunst unserer Zeit' (191). Murau's rant does not extricate him from the practices of embellishment and 'Verzerrung' that he condemns. His digression on photography instead provokes a reaction:

Die Fotografie ist ihre Rettung, Gambetti, hatte ich gesagt, worauf Gambetti gelacht und mich einen *Vormittagsphantasten* genannt hat, einen Ausdruck also verwendet hatte, den ich noch niemals gehört hatte, was meinerseits ein

²⁹³ Krylova examines the topographical references in Murau's description of these photographs. Krylova, p. 208.

Gelächter zur Folge hatte, in welches Gambetti selbstverständlich einstimmen mußte (101).

Murau's narrative does not simply take up an art of tirade from Bernhard's other works, but stages the interactions that such tirades provoke. Gambetti appears as Murau's ideal reader, responding with a compound neologism and prompting their shared laughter. Just as, in *Ein Kind*, Bernhard's style is presented as the product of interaction and imitation, Murau's narrative in *Auslöschung* reveals his self-styled art of exaggeration as inseparable from interactions with others.

Auslöschung is centrally concerned with ways of participating in modern culture. This is evident in Murau's account of a dream in which he and his friends Rabbi Eisenberg and Zacchi meet to discuss the works of the poet Maria (who is not given a surname in the text) in *Zur Klause*, an inn in an isolated Alpine valley. Maria arrives late after attending a performance of *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Paris (173), her favourite opera. Murau first stands at the window watching Maria and Eisenberg and observes them trying on each other's shoes. Eisenberg hops around in Maria's ballet shoes before Maria kisses Eisenberg and escapes the confines of the inn, holding her ballet shoes and making new footprints in the snow (175). Yet the appearance of an innkeeper stymies any such sense of freedom. His references to Eisenberg's beard and use of the term 'ausgerottet' confront the friends with wider cultural anti-Semitism (177). The framing of this episode as Murau's recollected dream sequence suggests the character's inability, in dream or reality, to pursue his art away from the traumas of national legacy. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee stages Anya's counter-reading of the protagonist's dream, perceiving beyond J. C.'s bleak division of personal decay a need for others. Gambetti does not provide such a gloss on Murau's dream. A reader may interpret the dream as an allegory for the persistence of anti-Semitism, a cultural legacy that prevents the protagonist's engagement with Maria's poems and Schopenhauer; yet

Murau's act of retrospectively recounting this dream to Gambetti is also a way of participating in culture. The act of entrusting this dream to another reveals a step towards a more positive way of living.

Auslöschung returns to such scenes of shared participation in art. Murau's allusion to one of Maria's poems, the 'sogenannte böhmische', as 'eines der besten, gleichzeitig schönsten Gedichte unserer Literatur' (400) is one of many references that have prompted critics to read the character Maria as an homage to Bachmann.²⁹⁴ For John in *Youth*, Bachmann is a figure who can show him what a poet can achieve, inspiring his pursuit of art on Hampstead Heath. Maria in *Auslöschung* appears to embody everything that Murau likes in poetry. Her works are 'antisentimental und klar' and are a complete reflection of herself (400). Maria is presented as a figure occupying the boundaries between art and life, his 'große Lebenskünstlerin', and is the only person later in the text whom Murau trusts to tell him that his manuscripts are not worth anything (423). In one scene, Murau and Maria take part in a shared practice of destroying his manuscript, watching the papers burn in a physical act of extinction: 'das, was ich zu Papier bringe, ist das Ausgelöschte' (424). This portrayal of Maria has been read as ambivalent, in line with the other female figures—Roithamer's sister, and Wertheimer's sister, for example—who are both inspirations and scapegoats for the failures of the projects of Bernhard's *Geistesmenschen*.²⁹⁵ In this scene, though, while he and Maria watch the papers burn together, Murau is inspired to name his narrative *Auslöschung* (*ibid.*). The scene acknowledges how Murau does not find his impetus for his project, his response to the burden of collective history, alone.

²⁹⁴ Judex, p. 127.

²⁹⁵ Pfabigan, *Ein österreichisches Weltexperiment*, p. 236.

Bernhard contrasts this shared participation in culture with his exaggerated satire of practices of reading Goethe. Murau presents Goethe as the poetic pied piper leading the Germans back to their allotments to read him in isolation:

[D]en Biedermann Goethe, den Insekten und Aphorismensammler mit seinem philosophischen Vogerlsalat, so ich zu Gambetti, der natürlich das Wort Vogerlsalat nicht verstand, so hatte ich es ihm erklärt [...] Goethe, den Gesteinsnumerierer, den Sterndeuter, den philosophischen Daumenlutscher der Deutschen, der ihre Seelenmarmelade abgefüllt hat in ihre Haushaltsgläser für alle Fälle und alle Zwecke [...] (449-50).

The tirade does more than simply undermine Goethe as a cultural authority; it also engages with practices of consuming him. The Germans nourish themselves on Goethe like the ‘Seelenmarmelade’ they keep in their household jars. This is described as a peculiarly German pastime. For the Italian Gambetti, Goethe could turn his stomach (450). Bernhard uses these same ideas in Anna’s description of *Minna von Barnhelm* in *Heldenplatz*, as she criticises her mother’s pursuit of art. In Chapter Three, I argued that Bernhard’s cultural allusions relativise such critiques, revealing the potential of theatre to intervene in ways of understanding the self beyond Anna’s perspective on culture. In *Auslöschung*, Bernhard uses the comic excess of his rant to indicate that Murau need not be taken at his word in his cultural criticisms. This rant about the solipsistic reading of Goethe by Germans on their allotments discloses Murau’s own distance from his interlocutor, a distance that he attempts to bridge by translating words such as ‘Vogerlsalat’. The tirade is thus also a means of facilitating his connection with Gambetti.

A later rant in the text provides a model of their interaction. Murau turns from Goethe to satirise Thomas Mann’s novels as ‘Leitzordnerliteratur’ (474), chiding Mann’s style of writing as bureaucratic and contrasting him unfavourably with the literary achievement of Franz Kafka. He lauds Maria’s poems as the zenith of twentieth-century literary achievement before returning to his prognostications of cultural decline, admitting

as he does so that his exaggerations are not necessarily to be taken at their word: ‘Aber, habe ich zu Gambetti gesagt, mein Irrtum ist in dieser meiner Vision auch gleich mitgeliefert’ (477). This sudden statement prompts Gambetti to break into laughter:

Darauf ist Gambetti wieder in sein Gambettilachen ausgebrochen und hat mich mit seinem Gambettilachen angesteckt, so lachten wir beide auf dem Pincio an diesem Nachmittag, wie wir noch niemals vorher gelacht hatten (478).

This laughter can be read as a scene of recognition, a common understanding that Murau’s exaggerated diatribes do not claim a position of authority. Instead, they provoke the ‘Gambettilachen’, which in turn infects the speaker. Throughout *Auslöschung*, Murau’s dominant voice of comic exaggeration has prompted the text’s humour; but here, Murau joins in with *Gambetti’s* laughter. In this scene, a reader at once experiences the apparent authority of Murau’s tirades and the relativising laugh of his interlocutor. The laughter assists a reader to see beyond Murau’s performances of exaggeration as he confronts his familial inheritance and into the text’s meta-narrative. Where, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Anya’s reading of J. C. in Coetzee’s juxtaposed narratives qualifies the strong opinions of the authorial narrator, Bernhard uses a shared moment of laughter to illuminate his concern in the text with Murau’s ways of relating to others. Alongside the narrator’s outrage towards 1980s Austria, *Auslöschung* is also centrally concerned with the human relationships that facilitate Murau’s own coming to terms. Murau’s participation in the ‘Gambettilachen’ thus assists another understanding of the text’s final ‘Abschrenkung’.

After his vacillations over what to do with his inherited estate, Murau’s gift to his friend Rabbi Eisenberg comes as a surprise. Like his Onkel Georg, Murau disinherits his family, here deciding to pass on his estate via Rabbi Eisenberg to the ‘israelitische Kultusgemeinde’ in Vienna. It is significant that Rabbi Eisenberg facilitates Murau’s continued participation in culture. Earlier in the text, Murau comments on the letters he

receives at his apartment in the Piazza Minerva, electing to throw them all away apart from one from Eisenberg, inviting him to see Monteverdi's *Tancredi* (10). Eisenberg is also described as a figure on an intellectual par with Maria, with whom Murau sets out to read Schopenhauer and Maria's poems in his dream (172). As an extra-diegetic narrator intervenes to state that Murau died in 1983 in Rome, where he wrote this memoir (509), Murau's transmission of the estate to his friend intimates what his narrative becomes. It is an act of self-writing that not only reveals the truths of the Wolfsegg estate, its role in the Nazi war effort, and its accommodation to his parents' Nazi acquaintances after the war; it also provides a testament to the human relationships and cultural interactions central to facilitating Murau's own coming to terms, his decision to leave Wolfsegg and spend the end of his life in Rome—where, it is assumed, Murau accepts Rabbi Eisenberg's invitation to see *Tancredi*.

Like *Wittgensteins Neffe* and *Beton*, *Auslöschung* becomes a different text to the one that the narrator sets out to write. Presented and published as Bernhard's extensive reckoning with collective history, Bernhard explores the authority of the narrator, and this *opus magnum* in general, to atone for the atrocities in which Murau's family was complicit. The narrative stages Murau's 'Übertreibungskunst' not simply as a means of telling the uncomfortable truths of the Wolfsegg estate but as a recognisable voice central to Murau's cultural interactions. The intertextual comparison with Coetzee has enabled me to read *Auslöschung* beyond the immediate context of Austria in the 1980s, and to reflect on the terms of the participation that the text demands from its reader. A reader, on the one hand, is in the position of Gambetti as the listener to Murau's comic monologues and broadsides in a text engaging with the cultural habits and behavioural fallacies of his post-war society. On the other hand, a reader is invited into these shared moments to look beyond the hyperbole into the text's wider reflection on human relationships. Shared participation in

the ‘Gambettilachen’ exemplifies the participatory journey of this text from an act of destruction to a testament to Murau’s friendships.

The text is embedded in a network of Bernhard’s own friendships. Scholars have illuminated the presence of Bernhard’s own private acquaintances in this text, as well as elements of his mother and grandfather.²⁹⁶ The beneficiary of Murau’s final gift is also a real institution. This blurring of fiction and reality is not simply evidence of how, as Coetzee states in *Doubling the Point*, all storytelling is autobiography and vice versa. It is also part of the way in which Bernhard’s text invites his reader into a world beyond his fiction to consider how to live with others in a shared culture. Bernhard presents a compendium of strong opinions via Murau, yet the character’s interactions with his student Gambetti qualify the authority of his hypertrophic voice. Bernhard’s *opus magnum* opens a meta-narrative beyond its immediate cultural moment, relativising the protagonist’s own status as an authority on his culture and history to offer a humbler insight into his human need for others.

The intertextual comparison with Coetzee has brought this reading into focus, enabling me to step beyond Bernhard’s own terminology for his rhetorical tricks. Coetzee’s engagement with the question of how to write the self with authority, staging the strong opinions of isolated intellectuals in dialogue to examine and relativise the authority they claim, has offered another way of understanding how Bernhard stages his hyperbolic diatribes in his late prose. For J. C. in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Tolstoy is an example of an author who manages to speak sagely to his readers despite his rhetorical tricks. Bernhard, by contrast, *wants* a reader to perceive his recognizable rhetoric, returning to a familiar set of formulae and motifs from work to work and, in *Wittgensteins Neffe* and *Auslöschung*, revealing the human failures behind the cultural presence of his voice. Both authors’

²⁹⁶ Mittermayer, *Biografie*, pp. 411-2

depictions of the post-war subject are vulnerable and searching, looking to the authorities of the past and developing a distinctive style for their strong opinions in the present. For both, childhood memoir provides a formative step for metafictional works that prompt readers to see and reflect on the gaps in their figures' self-understandings.

Over thirty years after the author's death, a key concern of Bernhard scholars has been the fate of Bernhard's vitriolic condemnations, the 'Brisanz' of the insults of an increasingly canonised figure. Surveys of Bernhard's literary imitators have productively explored whether Bernhard's sharp bite has been defanged, attempting to do justice to the destructive spirit of a prose that means to offend. The comparison of this chapter has sought to contribute further to this conversation, bringing into focus the kinds of participation that the tirades of Bernhard's speaking subjects demand beyond their 1980s cultural moments. The comparison acknowledges the destructive voice of Bernhard's strong opinions while also highlighting the ways in which Bernhard qualifies the wrath of his speaking subjects. Whereas, in Bernhard's *Leserbriefe*, the author couples his diatribes of revulsion with a consciousness of the crafted nature of his cultural position, the staging of such tirades in his works open a humbler reflection on the humanity, flaws, and blind spots of his narrators—and of Bernhard himself.

This juxtaposition, furthermore, reveals another way in which the Austrian author's diatribes continue to speak to audiences beyond their original cultural moment. It positions Bernhard alongside Coetzee within the late Modernist question of how, after Beckett, to write the self with authority. Bernhard offers in these works the step of looking beyond the voice of his narrator, allowing us (if we wish to, or are ready to) to question the authority of his speakers. Reading Bernhard alongside Coetzee has highlighted how the Austrian author takes readers to meta-narrative reflections beyond the stories that his figures set out to write. The comparison has amplified a running theme in this thesis: how an experience

of Bernhard's art prompts reconsideration of ways of living with others in a shared culture. Coetzee has offered another way of understanding Bernhard's late prose as embedded in human relations beyond his hyperbole. My concluding chapter will reflect on the ramifications of this embeddedness for Bernhard, the authors juxtaposed with Bernhard in this thesis, and the approach to world literature that this thesis has taken.

CONCLUSION:

Bernhard's lessons

If there were one right place—the perfect, external vantage point—from which to look at the work, then we could simply search for it, find it, and then invite all future readers to go to that spot. (I suppose this would be a form of dogmatism). Luckily, this is not how reading works. Our task is far more difficult: we have to acknowledge the work and its concerns here and now, as they appear to this particular reader in this particular moment in history.²⁹⁷

In *Revolution of the Ordinary*, Toril Moi considers what it means to acknowledge a work of literature. Moi sets out a spirit of reading as an encounter with a text on its own terms: an encounter that makes a claim on the reader, calling for a response. Reading, for Moi, is a conversation in which readers learn from the work and, in turn, learn about themselves. Moi contrasts this experience with late Modernist academic defences of literature which prioritise literary forms and devices over identifying with a character or author.²⁹⁸ But for Moi, the practice of reading involves bringing one's own experience to the text, and this has the potential to change us: 'We aren't regularly transformed by reading, just as we aren't regularly transformed by ordinary experiences either. But sometimes reading becomes a genuine adventure. When it does, it can transform our understanding of ourselves, and the world'.²⁹⁹

The task of this thesis has been to reposition Bernhard's late works and their concerns in the here and now, beyond the author's cultural moment in 1980s Vienna. I started from the vantage point of Bernhard's house in Ohlsdorf, a shrine to his bleak and solitary public image and, in 2020, to his international status. Examining this international

²⁹⁷ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, p. 210.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

status has taken me on another adventure. Bernhard can be appreciated by the literary Modernists to whom Moi refers, his prose and dramatic writings offering productive juxtapositions with Modernists from Marcel Proust to Samuel Beckett. But this thesis has sought to bring into focus a different side to the author. Angela Carter, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and J. M. Coetzee have each helped to shed light on what it means to participate in Bernhard's prose and theatrical writings, and how this participation can impact on ordinary ways of living with others. They have made legible the shared contexts that Bernhard creates in his works with readers and audiences, the mechanisms of his dramas, and his approach to the authority of his voices across his genres of writing. Furthermore, they have illuminated the interactions and altercations through which Bernhard cultivates his unmistakable linguistic style and his ongoing conversations with readers and audience members beyond an encounter with his works.

My comparisons, in turn, have sought to broaden scholarly conversations around Bernhard's writings. In this concluding chapter, I will discuss the ramifications of this thesis for Bernhard studies in the here and now, for re-evaluating literary concerns of the 1980s, and for the practice of comparative literature more generally. Returning to the question I asked at the start of this study, I will reconsider what it means to approach Bernhard's works as world literature and, in doing so, I will think further about the practices of acknowledgement involved in many of the works discussed in this thesis.

i. Re-reading Bernhard

Over thirty years after Bernhard's death, scholars continue to map the full extent of the Austrian author's international reception, as well as the appropriations, transformations, and imitations of Bernhard's works within and beyond his homeland. These studies are building a valuable picture of the transferability of Bernhard's irreverence and venom beyond his cultural moment, the infectiousness of his style, and the appeal of Bernhard's recurrent

focus on the failures of isolated artists. My thesis has sought to build on such volumes, introducing new points of intertextual reference into Bernhard studies to make available a side to the author that seldom features in scholarly discussion. I have sought to pursue the relationships of readers and audiences with Bernhard's character archetypes and exaggerated voices: both the allure of Bernhard's eloquent hyperbole and his awareness of the shortcomings of his characters' vitriolic tirades; the bleakness of his social vision alongside his attention to human relationships. Carter, Wertenbaker, and Coetzee have each helped me to uncover a faith in the potential of art amid the social pathologies that his works decry—whether or not Bernhard's flawed protagonists are able to see it for themselves.

This thesis has also situated Bernhard's dramatic works more prominently within such conversations. Bernhard's dramas have, until now, been notably absent in discussions of Bernhard's literary afterlives, despite various accounts of their popularity in certain European countries in the twentieth century. These works have revealed the literary qualities that I have considered in this thesis as quintessentially Bernhardian: not simply the digressive and ranting monologues of isolated and pessimistic *Geistesmenschen*, but also the author's tongue-in-cheek self-awareness, his eye for the ways in which individuals hide their fallibilities, and the relationships that, frequently, his characters are too wrapped up in their own concerns to acknowledge. Bernhard is known to have written for certain actors, but at the centre of Bernhard's dramas is an awareness of the experiences of an audience. Bernhard's audience can engage with the rebarbative diatribes of his characters, while his stagecraft and referential networks prompt them at the same time to see past the constricted self-understandings of such figures. Bernhard's dramas implicate these protagonists, frequently satirical authorial surrogates, and his audiences within the malaises that his works highlight. Yet an audience need not be trapped in the same ways of behaving.

Openness to the physical interactions of Bernhard's dramas, his attention to casting, and his dramatic devices offers ways of moving past the negative behaviours staged in his works.

In Bernhard's later prose fictions, it is equally possible to become stuck in the pervasive venom of his speaking subjects. The Bernhard of *Frost* and *Amras* is undoubtedly bleak. *Frost*, as I have argued, offers glimpses of more positive relationships, but the epistolary laments of the *Famulant* in *Weng* provide poignant reflections on missed opportunities. It is possible to read Bernhard's autobiographical works and later fictions of the 1970s and 1980s as emanations from the same pessimistic mind. By the 2020s, many of the diatribes in these works have become anthologised as set pieces of public venom. Volumes such as *Bernhard für Boshafte* (2014) and *Städtebeschimpfungen* (2016) now offer miscellanies of Bernhardian ire.³⁰⁰ As Rita Felski rightly analyses, however, the experience of reading Bernhard both involves a linguistic-aesthetic relationship with the infectious and implacable spleen of his rants and an awareness that, by entering into the same humour, a reader becomes the butt of his comedy.³⁰¹ Some of the characters in Bernhard's works come to a new understanding of how they live with art. And so can Bernhard's readers.

It is not necessary to be an expert in the works of Anton Webern and Alban Berg, nor to read *Die Wahlverwandschaften* before breakfast like Moritz Meister, nor, like Franz-Josef Murau, to read Kierkegaard before bed to participate in these lessons. In Bernhard's works, for all the namedropping of his caricatured aesthetes, art is more accessible. A reader is privy to processes of development and, like some of Bernhard's protagonists, can take cues to live differently before it is too late. It is possible for Bernhard's figures to abuse others, to fail relationships, and to communicate disingenuously, but it is also possible in

³⁰⁰ *Bernhard für Boshafte*, ed. by Raimund Fellingner (Berlin: Insel, 2014); *Städtebeschimpfungen*, ed. by Raimund Fellingner (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2016).

³⁰¹ Felski, p. 104.

these works to live more positively. Bernhard's late works explore the embeddedness of interpersonal interactions in cultural habits, repositioning his readers and audiences in relation to those habits and inviting them to acknowledge their own behaviour within the experiences of reading fiction or watching a play. Each of Angela Carter, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and J. M. Coetzee have brought into focus the strategies through which Bernhard does so. They also assist a re-reading of the aesthetic concerns of the 1980s against which Bernhard is frequently positioned.

ii. Re-reading the 1980s

This re-evaluation of Bernhard has emerged within a reconstruction of the 1980s, from Jürgen Habermas' lectures on modernity in Frankfurt to Coetzee's lectures on self-writing in Cape Town via London's Royal Court Theatre. These points of reference have helped me to understand more precisely Bernhard's position within and contribution to literary aesthetics in the later years of his career. To re-read Bernhard in the 1980s is to re-read the 1980s, and this study opens various pathways for doing so.

Reading Bernhard's metafiction with Angela Carter and J. M. Coetzee has offered a more pluralistic conception of the novel in the 1980s. Bernhard does not refer to his works after *Korrektur* (1975) as novels. In many of the prose texts discussed in this thesis, he infuses his fictional storyworlds with common cultural reference points, recognisable biographical details, and targeted broadsides against identifiable figures in German-speaking culture. Yet this is more than an act of blurring the boundaries between truth and fiction. My analysis of *Nights at the Circus* has brought this into focus by showing how Carter remains committed to fiction as a unique form of readerly experience, a space to reimagine the self through a story of change. Carter's novel neither relies entirely on the transformations of magical realism nor the narrative reconstructions of historiographic metafiction in her literary reimagining of the modern subject. Her fiction is forward-looking,

using an accessible love story to portray a future based on mutual trust and embodied confidence, and a mode of gradual change in modernity with female self-realisation at its centre. Bernhard's works are similarly embedded in ways of living in modernity, but Bernhard breaks from the frameworks of his fiction, situating the development of his characters within shared cultural reference points and inviting his readers to see potentials for living differently.

Repositioning Bernhard alongside the tradition of London's Royal Court, too, assists a more nuanced understanding of the spectrum of theatrical production in the 1980s. While Bernhard's works were widely performed in Germany, Austria, France, and Poland during this decade,³⁰² German theatre in the 1980s is frequently associated in hindsight with formal experimentation.³⁰³ Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999) has offered a retrospective account of theatrical production at this time, charting experimental practices from the 1970s to the 1990s and a canon incorporating contemporaries of Bernhard such as Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller, and Elfriede Jelinek.³⁰⁴ Bernhard does not feature in Lehmann's analysis. Indeed, many of Bernhard's plays rely on a dramatic plot that obeys the Aristotelian unities of time, place and action. By situating Bernhard outside of his contemporary German-speaking context and usual European frames of reference, however, I have argued that it is not necessary to be practising the experimental strategies of post-dramatic theatre in the 1980s to be thinking about how audiences participate in theatrical spectacle. Comparing Bernhard with Timberlake Wertenbaker reveals a preoccupation with how an audience learns from engaging with his characters and

³⁰² Richard Weber describes a contemporary theatrical landscape that concentrated overwhelmingly on well-known directors and dramatists such as Bernhard, Franz Xaver Kroetz, or Botho Strauß. See *Deutsches Drama der 80er Jahre*, ed. by Richard Weber (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1992), pp. 9-14 (p. 10).

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁰⁴ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*, 6th edn (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 2015), p. 25.

the actors selected to play them, as well as the consequences of the theatrical institution as an 'Anstalt' for ordinary ways of living outside of it.

Comparing these writers has also enabled me to interrogate assumptions around Bernhard's relative absence from British theatres. There have been more successful performances of Bernhard outside of the British theatrical mainstream. Reviews of the 1993 production of *The Showman* at the Almeida in Islington, a theatre with a similar reputation to the Royal Court for challenge and internationalism, provide evidence of Bernhard's potentials even among audiences less familiar with his public notoriety.³⁰⁵ It is hoped that the analysis of Bernhard's late dramas in this thesis goes some way to reconsidering modes of reproducing Bernhard's dramatic mechanisms outside of his settings and preferred pool of actors. Peter Eyre's well-reviewed performance as the eponymous character of Bernhard's *Minetti* (1976) in Edinburgh in 2014 provides hope that Bernhard can attain the foothold in British theatre that Michael Billington predicted in 1993.³⁰⁶ Eyre is understood to have captured the plight of an actor committed to his craft, enabling an audience to perceive the bathos of a figure failing to live up to his perceived talent. As Kate Kellaway states in her review of the play for *The Observer*: 'There is an irony that so much talent should be needed to play a failing actor successfully'.³⁰⁷ Understanding the human vulnerability of characters frequently characterised as nihilistic social critics is a positive step towards realising how such works can speak beyond their local settings.

This vulnerability is present in Bernhard's self-writing. My juxtaposition with Coetzee has shown Bernhard's preoccupation in the 1980s with how to write the self with

³⁰⁵ Billington, 'Savage Style', p. 6.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/aug/24/minetti-edinburgh-festival-peter-eyre-observer-review>. [accessed November 2020].

authority, and the ways in which the techniques of his later metafictional versions constantly qualify the authority of his speaking voices. Bernhard builds the cultural presence of his unmistakable literary style through interactions and adversarial altercations in the world outside the work, yet the authority of his literary works lies elsewhere. By the 1980s, Bernhard relativises his own voice, staging hypertrophic versions of his own authority in his prose and dramas to show his characters' blind spots. The wisdom imparted by Bernhard's tirades lie behind his hyperbole in his depictions of failure: Bernhard's failure in his friendship with Paul Wittgenstein, or the tragic story of Anna Härdtl in *Beton*. What makes Bernhard's late prose fiction so lastingly poignant is the way in which his figures are, with few exceptions, left with the vulnerability of their own failures. Juxtaposing Bernhard's late prose writings with the treatments of narrative authority in Coetzee's memoirs and metafictional versions has brought this vulnerability more clearly into view.

It is hoped that the intertextual connections established in this thesis can stimulate further connections between Bernhard and authors of his time beyond the frameworks of influence studies. The juxtapositions of this thesis have revealed the scandals of Bernhard's writings in the 1980s as part of a wider aesthetic in which the experience of art is inseparable from living in culture outside of art. It has also shown an author cultivating and playing on his public celebrity before the various opportunities for public posturing in the internet age, brutally self-aware of his participation in the culture industry he critiques. These comparisons have made legible what Bernhard's late works have to say about living with art, and have contributed to a fuller picture of how the prose and dramatic works of this Austrian author can live on in the public imagination. In doing so, Bernhard has provided an apt test case for thinking about the practice of comparative literature more generally.

iii. Revisiting world literature

Bernhard can unquestionably be read as world literature given the circulation, translation, referentiality, and cultural afterlives of his works; but understandings of Bernhard as world literature do not need to stop there. In the introduction to this thesis, I discussed Pheng Cheah's understanding of 'world' as a temporal instead of a spatial concept. His reading of Heidegger helped me to approach Bernhard as a world author not simply by mapping his reception and literary echoes, but by focusing on the worlds that his works open. The comparative methodology of this thesis has aimed to bring these worlds more clearly into focus, from the vantage point of the 2020s and using a broader framework of intertextual reference than is conventionally applied to Bernhard's works. This framework was based on a common set of concerns—a preoccupation with the relationship between art and social existence, as well as the uses of fiction, the potentials of dramatic performance, and the authority of the narrator—but these constructed connections have together helped me to consider another facet to Bernhard's continued relevance today as a world author. By straying from established paths for considering Bernhard as world literature signposted in Ohlsdorf, I have advanced another way of thinking about him.

This approach is particularly apt for Bernhard's late works. The author's dramatic and prose works at this time repeatedly portray characters who only learn to live differently through human company or an engagement with other works of art. A recurrent theme in the works discussed in this thesis is that others can understand us better than ourselves. Reger's Heidegger rant, discussed in Chapter One, offers an admission that he, like Bernhard's other protagonists, is responding to his world by weaving from the finite set of materials that he has. Only by breaking from habit and going to the theatre with another can Reger break from the entrapment of his incessant negativity. The performance he sees is 'entsetzlich' (W8, 193), but his step in going to the theatre with Atzbacher is far more

significant. My comparative methodology in this thesis has aimed to take a similar step: to explore Bernhard beyond the conventional habits for reading him, to take him from his isolation and his self-made formulae, and to open new ways of understanding his works. I read this as emblematic of the comparative endeavour more generally. By engaging the works of my academic subject in a shared pursuit with others, I have been able to offer an understanding of him beyond those signposted by the author's estate—and possibly even beyond the author's own self-understanding.

This approach is also urgent for studies of Bernhard. Despite the undeniable importance of his engagement with the Austrian public sphere and his contemporary notoriety, there is a risk of seeing Bernhard as the sum of his rants, his controversies, and his appearances in the Austrian libel courts. Bernhard's *Leserbriefe* expressly play on the public image of a solitary misanthrope criticising the ills of his homeland from his Ohlsdorf farmhouses. Yet, as I have argued, Bernhard transcends such local contexts, exploring the fallibility of his protagonists as they confront questions of friendship and their position in collective history. The comparisons with Carter, Wertenbaker, and Coetzee in this thesis affirm that acknowledging the concerns of a text does not need to stop at the references presented to us by an author, their estate, or existing readings of them. Studies of Bernhard's afterlives have already shown how his works are engaged in ongoing conversations beyond his time and country of origin. The constructed comparative context of this thesis has aimed to expand such conversations.

In *Comparing the Literatures* (2020), David Damrosch sums up the practice of comparative literature as follows:

Along with the lessons that poems, plays and novels convey, they offer us unique and lasting pleasures of language at its richest, of haunting poetic voices of engrossing characters and plots, as they take us out of our immediate environment and concerns. Comparative literature intensifies this

process by setting our home tradition in a differential frame or by taking us out of our culture altogether, offering us the provisional freedom to imagine our world, and ourselves differently.³⁰⁸

Carter, Wertenbaker, and Coetzee have disclosed new pleasures in reading Bernhard. They have helped me to take Bernhard away from his home tradition and the public image curated by the author and his estate. They have enabled me to reimagine the significance of his late prose and dramatic works decades on from his local controversies. And they have allowed me to shed light on the practice of acknowledgement—to use Moi’s formulation—available to his readers. Bernhard’s late prose and dramatic works offer us the freedom to look beyond the cathartic pleasure of his tirades, to learn to see the humanity behind the bleakness of his characters, to acknowledge their shortcomings, and to reimagine our world, and ourselves, differently. Repositioning Bernhard in this study has revealed the lessons that his late works still have to offer, and what they still have to say about living with art.

³⁰⁸ Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), p. 341.

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