

Matthias Konzett

Introduction

National Iconoclasm: Thomas Bernhard and the Austrian Avant-garde

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS on Thomas Bernhard takes a fresh look at the author following the recent tenth anniversary of his death. Although Bernhard may have left in the eyes of some readers a rather embittered final will, prohibiting his plays to be performed in Austria for years to come, the positive reception of his works has steadily grown internationally. Bernhard's final act of self-annihilation, histrionic and ambivalent as it may be, did little to decrease or increase his already significant status as one of the most important German speaking post-war authors. Like Kafka or Becket, Bernhard has become a thoroughly canonical figure in modern literature with a bold new style that defies imitation. In Kierkegaard's sense, he may even be called a classic author, one who meets up with the defining moments of history, creating a unique and unrepeatable expression of an era. As a writer inheriting the dubious legacy of Austria's fascist past and its complicity with genocidal crimes, Bernhard has examined the violence that constitutes fascism more thoroughly and more relentlessly than most of his Austrian contemporaries. His unique style captures the xenophobic and claustrophobic atmosphere of Austria's postwar cultural homogeneity, marking the descent from an imperial transnational cultural order into the terror of a petty-bourgeois national one. Naturally, Bernhard overstates his case, idealizing at once the imperial past while denying the significant political changes that have marked Austria's democratic postwar culture. However, Bernhard's critical prose and drama serve as a steady reminder of the unease that surrounds the country's desired return to a state of normality.

The criticism of Bernhard, which this volume assembles, has also grown with the author and reached a more acute stance of self-criticism. Bernhard is no longer uncritically worshipped, as was the case when he entered the literary scene in the 1960s and 1970s. Critics have become increasingly wary of Bernhard's seductive iconoclasm, suspecting beneath it remaining symptoms of the disease the author purports

to cure. Ria Endres's pathbreaking feminist study on Bernhard, *Am Ende angekommen* published in 1980, no longer comes as a shock to today's readers as it did to the many Bernhard devotees of that time. Instead, we have grown quite used to reading Bernhard against the grain while acknowledging the continuing benefit that is derived from reading his works. This volume finds its tension precisely in its balance between critical and reconstructive readings. Bernhard's work, we have gradually come to understand, embodies, expresses, dissects and celebrates the symptoms of his society. He is both a product of and a reflective agent from within his culture. Akin to Niklas Luhmann's term, he offers us "society's society," a mirror reflection of society from within itself and from no privileged vantage point. One comes to meet in Bernhard everything that he rejects in society and everything in which he is inevitably complicit and implicated. The strength of Bernhard's work is not its claim to any superior morality but its ability to reflect upon its own social pathology.

While aesthetic and ethical questions continue to preoccupy the critics of Bernhard, they have of late relaxed in applying their insights too dogmatically. After decades in which theoretical models of one kind or another have come to dominate most literary discussions, the literary text is once again at the center of focus, strangely new and reinvigorated by having traversed through various theories of signs and culture. It is only fitting therefore to include in this volume alongside the critical essays two literary pieces by the contemporary Austrian writer Marlene Streeruwitz. Her two diametrically opposed evaluations of Bernhard, spanning the time from his death and his recent anniversary, capture the tone for the entire volume, one marked by critical appreciation. The collected essays display in all their critical acuity and complexity a refreshing sense of pleasure that makes reading and literature such a vital activity in cultural communication. All essays in this volume rely heavily on the hybrid genre of literary criticism, combining both its subjective aesthetic and objective analytic tools to convey the intellectual and literary impact of Bernhard's writings. The volume also gathers an international group of scholars, thereby doing justice to the transnational significance of the author. Rather than summarizing the essays of the various contributors, I refer readers to the table of contents as the starting point of their inquiry. I hope that in doing so readers will select the essays according to their own preferences and create their own map in understanding Bernhard.

National Iconoclasm and the Austrian Avant-garde

Introducing Bernhard to readers in the new millennium requires more than a conventional summary of his work and accomplishment. These are well documented in a variety of handbooks and encyclopedia entries and shall not be repeated here. Almost unanimously they refer to Bernhard's iconoclasm, yet struggle to define the exact nature of this iconoclasm. In the following introductory essay, I would like to explore this question from a new angle, without claiming to provide final answers. Rather, I would like to focus on a somewhat overlooked relation between Thomas Bernhard and the Austrian avant-garde. Since Bernhard openly ridiculed the avant-garde in his novel *Holzfällen* (1984) and in various remarks, it is readily assumed that Bernhard cannot be located within this tradition. Contrary to the author's own claims, I would like to discuss the proximity of his work to that of the Austrian avant-garde. In doing so, a new entry into Bernhard's work will emerge, hopefully clarifying better the historical context that shapes the writer's provocative style and his sustained animosity towards the state of Austria. In fact, it will help to illustrate the political commitment of an author who despised poses of political correctness. In order to awaken postwar Austria from its historical amnesia, Bernhard made it his vocation to disturb the convenient compromise struck between art, culture and politics. In this sense, he fulfills a similar political function like that of Heinrich Böll or Günter Grass in Germany; however, Bernhard does so with an unconventional mix of avant-garde and mainstream narrative techniques that likewise disturb the literary landscape and its solidly held notions of high and low style. Bernhard's iconoclasm is in this sense extremely important from an aesthetic and political point of view, one that not only cancels the subsidiary function of art in society but also challenges its aesthetic norms from within.

In his exile memoirs *Die Welt von Gestern* (1942), Stefan Zweig describes an all-too-familiar Austria, already clichéd at the turn-of-the-century, in which political conflicts are defused and suspended in an atmosphere of harmonization and consensus:

Man bekämpfte sich im alten Österreich chevaleresk, man beschimpfte sich zwar in den Zeitungen, im Parlament, aber dann saßen nach ihren ciceronianischen Tiraden dieselben Abgeordneten freundschaftlich beisammen beim Bier oder Kaffee und duzten einander; selbst als Lueger als Führer der antisemitischen Partei Bürgermeister der Stadt wurde, änderte sich im privaten Verkehr nicht das mindeste.¹

The rise to power of the anti-Semitic mayor Karl Lueger, Zweig states, had no impact on the private relations between opposing political party

members. Political opposition, he claims, was only practiced in parliament and suspended after hours over a beer or some coffee. Zweig has been duly questioned about his benign depiction of Vienna, one attributed to blind spots of class privilege, and the mutilations of exile. This clichéd topos of Austria's harmonized society interestingly re-appears again in Ingeborg Bachmann's postwar short story "Unter Mördern und Irren," published in 1961 but set in the mid-1950s. Once again, victims and perpetrators of racism convene over beer and have made convenient arrangements so that painful historical memories can be laid to rest through rituals of domestic conviviality. While Zweig's clichéd portrait of turn-of-the-century Austria glosses over cultural differences in an era of the imminent demise of the empire, Bachmann's clichés stand at the very beginning, the zero hour, of Austria's newly regained sovereignty.² Bachmann's story focuses particularly on the silent and ineffective dissent of the three Austrian Jews present at the weekly *Stammtisch*. Her sinister portrayal of Austria's postwar Jewish survivors shows them in complicit collaboration with the status quo of cultural and historical amnesia. Jewish ancestry is dismissed or belittled,³ dissent is mostly expressed through silent glances, problematic topics are politely avoided,⁴ and Nazi Austrians are even helped in their postwar social re-instatement.⁵ While Bachmann's provocative depiction of the historical amnesia of the 1950s may accurately reflect the moral dilemma of Austria's Jewish community living among its murderers, it also places undue burden on the Jewish minority to force a decisive breach of the tacitly enforced consensus between victims and victimizers. The clichés of the return to civic democracy turn Bachmann's Jews into exemplary citizens who uphold the democratic institution of the public sphere just as they had done so vitally at the turn-of-the-century. This exemplary citizenship, however, is achieved only through over-assimilation and complete self-erasure, their willingness to let bygones be bygones in an era of reconstruction. Jews, it falsely appears, continue to be the problem of Austria by preserving the status quo and preventing change in their outmoded adherence to civility.

Bachmann's story eventually brings this consensus to an impasse on the very night when only three (Mahler, Friedl, and narrator) rather than the usual five Jews (Steckel, Herz) are present, when they are outnumbered by their four non-Jewish counterparts (Haderer, Bertoni, Hutter, Ranitzky): "An diesem Freitag wendete sich das Gespräch, vielleicht weil Herz und Steckel fehlten und weil Friedl, Mahler und ich keinem als Hemmnis erschienen" (UM, 81). The topic of war is openly discussed, while in an adjoining room a war veterans' meeting takes place with its members glorying in their heroic feats. A mad self-

proclaimed murderer, who, as it turns out, is incapable of any military or organized violence, joins the *Stammtisch* to tell his tale and proceeds on his exit to insult the adjoining war veterans' meeting. Upon leaving the restaurant, the Jewish narrator and Mahler stumble upon the murdered murderer, who has become a victim of the insulted veterans. With the final epiphany of "Nie wieder. Nie mehr," it is surprisingly the Jewish narrator rather than the non-Jewish Austrians who is subjected to the moral lesson of war, violence and history (UM, 105). In a curious displacement of responsibility, Bachmann shows Jews rather than Austrians having to confront history.

In spite of this displaced burden of responsibility, the story nevertheless suggests the need for a social implosion in which repressed memory and crimes are brought to the surface. Originally published in 1961, the story anticipates the implosion of Austria's conspiracy of silence that was shortly to find its challenge in the works of Thomas Bernhard and the iconoclastic provocations of the Wiener Aktionismus. The story, as an example of failed accountability, a failure given not only within the story but also on the part of the writer, will serve in this essay as the measure by which I attempt to evaluate and understand the breakthroughs in Bernhard and the Austrian avant-garde's iconoclasm. To what extent was their national iconoclasm productive in challenging, suspending and canceling out convenient stereotypes of an imagined cultural consensus that obliged victims and victimizers to ongoing civic collaboration, to the myth of symbiotic co-dependence? Where did their iconoclasm fail to achieve accountability and instead rivaled with victims over the status of victimization? And finally, how do contemporary Austrian Jewish writers view their iconoclastic legacy in their own effort to secure a climate of increased historical accountability?

Bachmann is by no means a historical revisionist and is highly critical of patriarchal cults of military comradeship and the belittled crimes of the *Wehrmacht*. As I have suggested, however, she has difficulties raising the question of Austrian postwar identity and accountability in a balanced and historically objective manner. To be sure, her story exposes the war enterprise and Austria's postwar society as one of murderers and madmen. However, Jews unfairly bear the brunt of this historical responsibility and maintain an imagined over-representation in a post-genocidal Austria. Bachmann, it appears, cannot imagine Austrian postwar culture at its zero hour without its Jews. Indeed, Jewish culture and Viennese society are so fundamentally linked that an Austrian identity is posited as co-original with that of Jewish culture in Austria. In doing so, Bachmann is historically justified, as the height of Viennese culture at the turn-of-the-century is marked by the predomi-

nance of Austrian Jewish culture. Indeed, the association of culture and Jewishness in turn of-the-century Vienna, which saw all modern and progressive cultural production as Jewish, is so strong that even a non-Jewish painter like Gustav Klimt is accused of possessing a “gout juif” [Jewish taste] upon presenting his radical ceiling murals for the University of Vienna.⁶ In his study *Vienna and the Jews*, Steven Beller argues that

the Jewishness of the cultural elite in Vienna gave the capital of the Habsburg Monarchy a cultural and intellectual importance for that time which it had never known before and certainly no longer possesses. The awkward but inescapable conclusion seems to be that it was indeed the Jews which made Vienna what it was in the realm of modern culture.⁷

Similarly, Brigitte Hamann’s account of Hitler’s apprenticeship in Vienna attests to the city’s thoroughly Jewish character. Hitler’s decision to turn Berlin into the unchallenged capital of the Reich, Hamann claims, was motivated by his plans to demote Vienna, a city he detested as being the metropolis of European Jewish culture.⁸

In Bernhard’s early writings and the works of the Austrian avant-garde (Wiener Gruppe, Wiener Aktionismus), Jews are absent and no longer vividly remembered as in the case of Bachmann who felt compelled to preserve their postwar presence in Austria as an anachronism. This absence may be interpreted as an example of historical amnesia on the part of a younger generation of artists raised in the era of fascism. However, Bachmann who was born in 1926 is only five years older than Bernhard, born in 1931, and was like Bernhard a teenager during the Nazi era, much like the other artists of the Austrian postwar avant-garde. One suspects therefore a change of strategy in Bernhard and the avant-garde who are more bent on confronting the Nazi legacy, bracketing the question of Jewish culture and Jewish identity in Austria altogether. Their imagined zero hour reflects more properly a post-Shoah timeline, acknowledging the absence and destruction of Jewish culture in Austria. And more importantly, Jews are no longer present to take the blame of Austria’s ills as they had done so throughout history. This radical refocusing of Austria’s parasitic identity, one built on envy and resentment towards its so-called exemplary Jewish citizens, now prohibits the transfer and displacement of racism onto an imagined other. Instead, the re-constituted national community is forced to confront itself as the perpetrator of genocidal crimes. Yet, as we shall see, this is a lesson that can be suppressed or forgotten, and more conveniently so, when Jews are no longer alive in the cultural memory and thus too readily imagined as dead. While Bernhard and the avant-garde were

thus successful in setting out to provoke a self-recognition of the nation as a nation of murderers, they increasingly risked standing in for the victims themselves. As Robert Schindel remarks in his novel *Gebürtig* (1992): “Die Väter haben die Unsern in die Öfen geschoben, die Mütter haben den Rosenkranz gebetet, und die Söhne wollen uns großzügig eingemeinden, setzen sich darüber hinweg, wollen unbefangenen selber die Opfer sein.”⁹ The mono-ethnic conversation among Austrians about their fascist past becomes strangely a communicative ritual in which critical dissent allows for solidarity with victims, thereby blurring the boundary of victims and victimizers beyond recognition.

This mono-ethnic scenario of confronting national guilt leads to a schizophrenic situation in which writers and artists must portray themselves in their works simultaneously as victims and victimizers. The Wiener Gruppe (1954–1960), usually seen as one of Austria’s early attempts to articulate a postwar avant-garde, can also be seen as an instance of a cathartic national iconoclasm in which a second born-generation directly and indirectly purges itself of the legacy of their parents. The offensive nature of their artwork, not unlike that of its models in earlier avant-gardes such as Dadaism and Surrealism, deliberately challenges the cult of high art, one that has apparently failed to prevent a descent into barbarism. Like the emulated avant-gardes of the 1920s, the Wiener Gruppe performs mostly in a hermetic circle of insiders at various café locations (e.g. Loos Bar, on the Graben near the former cabaret Fledermaus) and ends up entertaining those who are already sympathetic to their efforts in a self-congratulatory attitude of political correctness.¹⁰ In his late work *Holzfällen*, Bernhard parodies this self-laudatory narcissism of the Austrian avant-garde in the figure of Auersberg, an all-too-predictable enfant terrible throwing periodically his goulash around restaurants while producing compositions that last merely seconds in a radicalized post-Weberian dodecaphonic manner.¹¹ The circle of Bernhard’s assembled characters also includes a Viennese version of Virginia Woolf and Bernhard himself who received his introduction to the avant-garde at Maria Saal where he met up with H. C. Artmann and premiered his first plays under the tutelage of Gerhard Lampersberg, the real-life Auersberg of *Holzfällen*. The cliquish self-referential narcissism parodied by Bernhard is curiously paralleled in the frequently distorted reception of the Wiener Gruppe. In the case of H. C. Artmann’s bestselling volume of poetry *med ana schwoazzn dintn* (*In Black Ink*), for example, its success is ironically due to a misunderstanding, one in which subversive dialect poetry is welcomed as a new folkloric Viennese poetry, replacing earlier fascist versions of dialect poetry such as those by the widely popular Josef

Weinheber.¹² A poem like “was na ge” mocking an inbred folkloric culture marked by provincialism and its implied slow comprehension, instead was seen as a modern celebration of the Viennese idiom, an updated Weinheber so to speak.

Sensitive to fascist propaganda, many of the experiments of the Wiener Gruppe put in the foreground structural codes of language to stress arbitrariness of signification as well as visual iconographies reflecting ironically uses and abuses of mass media. The entire semantics of culture is thereby put into question and the permissive range of public utterance is provocatively expanded. Their iconoclasm targets specifically the family as a stronghold of Austria’s Catholic heritage. In a poem such as “scheissen und brunzen” this seat of authority is ridiculed through conscious verbal contamination reducing the authority of parents to biologically eliminatory and excremental functions:

scheissen und brunzen
sind kunsten.
scheissvater.
scheissmutter
scheissbruder
scheisschwester
scheisskind
scheissonkel
scheisstante
scheissgrossvater
scheissgrossmutter
...¹³

The poem, deliberately a provocation to good taste, reveals a profound hatred towards the family as an unquestioned institution. Moreover, it reflects the difficulty of upholding family values in an ambience where families all too often sanctioned the murder of other families. Many of Bernhard’s novels similarly play out grotesque gothic family scenarios, undermining this traditional source of cultural identity. Austria’s post-war generation literally must commit parricide first in order to distance itself from their parents’ crimes and to define itself beyond this onerous legacy.

Amras (1964), an early novella of Bernhard, can be read as a paradigmatic stock scenario for many of Bernhard’s works up until his mid-career. The novella grimly opens with the failed attempt of a collective suicide by a desperate family succumbing to inherited diseases (epilepsy) and financial disaster. Of the two children that are saved by acci-

dent, the older brother eventually dies of epilepsy, leaving the younger brother, the story's narrator, in total abandonment and isolation. This imagined scenario of orphanage re-appears again and again in Bernhard's novels, producing a tale of the zero hour in which the hero has to re-invent himself along with his newly elected cultural affinities for the lack of not possessing a tradition. This gruesome scenario works to liberate the hero from unwanted dependence, sending him on the lonely path of artistic and intellectual self-discovery. Along this path, the hero often destroys the entire remaining legacy of the family, squanders the inherited estate, and sometimes even kills himself in a final act of self-cancellation. In early tales and novels of Bernhard, the inherited legacy is often construed in the biological terms of disease and madness. In *Amras*, for example, the epilepsy of the mother is depicted as a widespread disease, afflicting the entire region and therefore seen as an inescapable symptom of biological-cultural decline: "Es schien, als hätte diese jederzeit überall in Tirol entstehende Krankheit sich nach dem Tod unserer Mutter zur Gänze auf Walter geworfen."¹⁴ This Spenglerian and de-evolutionary scenario, apart from its cancellation of parental authority, is curiously rooted in nineteenth century discourses of racial and biological determinism that had constituted the foundation of Nazi ideology. In difference to Nazi ideology, Bernhard not so much bemoans but welcomes the cultural decline of a people he has come to hate as his own kind. While Bernhard's early tales reflect the dilemma of the second-born generation and the cultural vacuum this generation inherits, they still do not clearly identify the cultural and historical reasons that have led to this decline in Austrian culture. Bernhard's early narrations remain trapped in a circular logic of self-hatred, occupying at once the role of victims and victimizers.

A growing awareness of the futility of killing off one's ancestry marks the development of Bernhard's works. For what must be overcome is not so much the ancestral generation than the already internalized and inherited ancestral ideology, turning the new postwar generation into petty bourgeois replicas of the old fascists. Enslavement to consensus on the political left or right quickly reinstates in Austria a climate of silence and conformity seemingly overcome by postwar reforms. In response to this coercive climate of consensus, Bernhard's prose increasingly aligns itself with outsiders and marginalized voices in society. Bernhard consciously stages social, cultural and intellectual difference in a hyperbolic, irritating and provocative manner. While many of his early characters succumb to their double curse of bearing a dark legacy and a marginal position in society, they also resist convenient re-integration into the postwar scenario of successful reconstruction.

Here Bernhard's work bears resemblance to the iconoclastic aesthetics of the Wiener Aktionismus that deliberately provoked the sensibility of the petty bourgeois yes-men and taunted citizens to reveal their authoritarian personalities when wishing to censor unsavory art.

Just as the Aktionisten destroy the sacrosanct confines of the painterly canvas and embark on scandalous performances that resist the demands of the bourgeois cultural sphere, Bernhard launches in his writings into a serialization of mentally diseased and socially estranged characters who are no longer compatible with Austria's regained economic and cultural confidence. In the face of increasing postwar normalization, Bernhard and the Aktionisten take on the role of reflecting society's symptoms, by staging in their works its isolated and repressed pathology. Given the different media, the methods are not identical but amount to a similar provocative gesture. In the case of the Aktionisten, society's pathology is made visible on the body through rituals of physical mutilations, mummification and staged sacrifice. "Castration (Schwarzkogler, Nitsch) and injury, wounding, crucifixion and death (Nitsch), stifling situations of helplessness, and situations where the person is reduced to the status of mere material"¹⁵ are preferred stock scenarios in the group's performances. Frequently, these *Malaktionen* are often directly or indirectly linked to the authorities of state and church to enhance their shock impact of national iconoclasm. Hermann Nitsch's collage "the first holy communion," consisting of sanitary napkins and religious symbols, resulted in a six-month suspended sentence for offending religious sensibilities. Günter Brus likewise earned a six-month sentence and was forced to leave Austria after being indicted on charges of degrading national symbols. Allegedly he publicly defecated and urinated while singing the national anthem during one of his performances.¹⁶ Bernhard's infamous *Staatspreisrede* of 1968 amounts to a similar verbal offense, causing the minister of education to leave the ceremony.

Apart from the superficial offense that these public scandals may have caused, they significantly altered the symbolic landscape of Austria's postwar culture. They erected a critical ambience in which the negotiation of national identity could no longer be seen apart from a pathological desire to impose a hegemonic symbolic structure as the nation's lingua franca. Bernhard's characters and the performances of the Aktionisten resist canonization in the sense of a venerable *Leitkultur* or conservative educational ideal. Granted, their works have been commercially co-opted over time and may have lost some of their vital elements of resistance. It is interesting that in both oeuvres, resistance is most often staged in a form of consciously staged self-victimization.

Breaking through the historical amnesia, they re-enact burdensome memories of the body's total disposability as in torture, mummification and physical decay. Evocations of Nazi crimes may not be intentional but always resonate in the iconography of the Aktionisten. Similarly, in Bernhard's novels outsiders are pushed to the brink of their existence in a fashion reminiscent of a well-rehearsed *Ausgrenzung* of others during the Nazi era.

In this early phase of a de-sublimation of public memory, both Bernhard and the Aktionisten return us to the scene of the forgotten crime. They intentionally inflict upon their viewers and readers an experience of suffering and disgust that surpasses conventional understanding and forms of humanistic pathos and empathy. Instead, one comes face to face with a type of dehumanization that falls outside the convenient patterns of re-integration and normalization that make up Austria's postwar history. Bernhard's novel *Frost*, published in 1963 around the time the performances of the Aktionisten came to be known, shares a similar iconographic repertoire with this group of artists. During his medical internship, the novel's narrator takes on the additional task of observing the chief surgeon's estranged brother, the painter Strauch, in a remote Alpine village. He spends twenty-six days with him and witnesses the total psychic disintegration of an individual, who shortly after his departure is missing and presumed dead. The novel opens with shocking anatomical images not unlike those evoked in Otto Muehl's performance "Versumpfung des Körpers" or Rudolf Schwarkogler's staged mutilations:

Eine Famulatur besteht ja nicht nur aus dem Zuschauen bei komplizierten Darmoperationen, aus Bauchfellaufschneiden, Lungenflügelzunklammern und Fußabsägen, sie besteht nicht nur aus Totenagenzudrücken und aus Kinderherausziehen in die Welt. Eine Famulatur ist nicht nur das: abgesägte und halbe Beine und Arme über die Schulter in den Emailkübel werfen.¹⁷

In this very opening paragraph of the novel, Bernhard presents the body in its clinical and absolutely dehumanized form as plain material to be anatomically dissected. The outrageous claim that a medical internship does not merely consist of opening up body cavities, sawing off limbs and bones and throwing them over one's shoulders into a waste bucket underscores the utterly desensitized treatment of the body in this paragraph. As the narrator eventually takes on the task of observing the surgeon's brother, one expects more human insight to be gained from this type of psychological apprenticeship. However, Bernhard's intern is instead confronted with a hopeless case of psychic disintegration.

The shock experience of cinema as described by Walter Benjamin derives from its radical change of our field of perception. Through motion, cuts and close-ups cinema fragments the human body and renders it in its most dehumanized form. Dadaism, as the most extreme expression of the avant-garde, according to Benjamin, fulfilled a similar disorienting function and prepared viewers for the shock experience of cinema: “Aus einem lockenden Augenschein oder einem überredenden Klanggebilde wurde das Kunstwerk bei den Dadaisten zu einem Geschoß. Es gewann eine taktile Qualität. Damit hat es die Nachfrage nach dem Film begünstigt.”¹⁸ The Nazi death camps had turned this simulated shock experience of physical fragmentation into a literal reality. Film footage of the horrific crimes, the camps and its mountains of dead and disposable bodies, exceed comprehension and cause a shock by far greater than cinema or Dada. For the postwar generation of visual artists, it leaves visceral and haunting images that demand to be confronted and yet defy our concepts of humanism and conventional powers of representation. As Geoffrey Hartman points out, in the post-Shoah era art “becomes suspicious of itself,” particularly “of its aestheticizing drive.”¹⁹ Arguably, this legacy of an utterly destroyed confidence in the visual and the power of representation informs to a considerable degree the works of the Aktionisten and Bernhard’s novel *Frost*.

In a crucial scene in *Frost*, Strauch confides in the narrator about a horrific scene of poaching that he has witnessed, evoking images of the initial anatomical setting of the novel. At this point, the initial setting of the dissecting lab has spread to the entire Alpine landscape, bearing the mark of criminal and bloody deeds. Amidst a river drenched with blood, Strauch spies the severed heads and limbs of slaughtered animals. He suspects the bloodstained river to be the source of a crime of humanity, “der Ausläufer eines Verbrechens, wie ich ganz klar erkannte, eines Menschenverbrechens” (F, 274). The blood orgy described by Strauch also calls forth associations with Hermann Nitsch’s work in which the blood of slaughtered sheep is poured onto a canvas. In the novel’s setting, blood similarly covers the white snow canvases (“weiße Leinwand des Schnees”) of the mountain region. Strauch at one point forms red snowballs soaked with blood. In another graphic depiction, he describes the visceral impact of this grotesque spectacle:

Köpfe, Schwänze, Gerippebrocken von Kühen. 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. (F, 275)

Bernhard's text cannot address the Holocaust directly since its description renders the reader into a passive witness facing an incomprehensible event or risks becoming an aestheticizing reduction on the author's part. The challenge for Bernhard, however, lies in evoking a visceral and moral response on the part of the reader/viewer to overcome the position of the bystander.

In her discussion of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, a film documentary about the Holocaust that consciously avoids graphic depiction and original footage of the camps, Shoshana Felman shows that its structure is based instead on the performance of witnessing:

Lanzmann's film is an exploration of the differences between heterogeneous points of view, testimonial stances. . . . Victims, bystanders and perpetrators are here differentiated not so much by what they actually see . . . as by what and how they *do not* see, by what and how they *fail to witness*.²⁰

This "relation between art and witnessing"²¹ similarly constitutes the core of Bernhard's works and the Aktionisten. While they may never directly address and only indirectly evoke the civilizational crime or *Zivilisationsbruch* that marks the zero hour for postwar Austria, they are very much engaged in raising civic awareness in the form of witnessing. In this sense, the act of seeing takes on an ethical dimension of accurate vision. Carol Reed's *The Third Man* (1949), a re-education film set in postwar Vienna, demonstrates in the two major protagonists that one must be able to turn in the perpetrator even if he happens to be a close friend and national compatriot. Much of the film dwells on the necessity to see and acknowledge victimization so as to become aware of a committed crime.

Bernhard, in pursuing an aesthetics of witnessing, projects the non-witnessed and overlooked crime back onto the beloved landscape of the perpetrators, soiling their cherished Alpine region that is about to be marketed for the Winter Olympic Games of 1964 in scenic Innsbruck. Following this international event, the Alps of Austria would once again appear sanitized in the musical *Sound of Music* (1965). Bernhard's anti-*Heimatsroman* clearly opposes this tendency of rehabilitating Austria too quickly. It is interesting to note that Strauch refers to the witnessed scene as an unrepeatable image, "ein unwiederholbares Bild" as if referring to that other singularly unique event of barbarism. And like an action painter, Strauch no longer confines himself to the painterly canvas. Like Arnulf Rainer, a consociate of the Aktionisten, he practices a "Malerei, um die Malerei zu verlassen."²² Stepping in front of the landscape and assuming responsibility for the act of witnessing, he pronounces the scene of the crime a ready-made painting: "Ich will

das Bild ‘Abschlachtung’ nennen” (F, 276). As with Dadaism and the avant-garde, the aura of art is destroyed to provoke action rather than passive contemplation. In Bernhard’s text, the act of witnessing is presented as a learning process, an internship, in which the narrator has to acquire the skill of observation in the active and interventionist sense. Naturally he fails but leaves instead a written record of Strauch’s psychic disintegration. Strauch remains equally ambivalent about his lesson in the art of witnessing, telling the narrator to remain silent about the entire incident: “Eine kopflos publik gemachte Zeugenschaft,” Strauch claims, “führt in den unglaublichen Ekel gestrenger Gerichtsmeierei” (F, 278–79). This statement betrays at once justified skepticism about appropriate justice where crime exceeds the scope of justice as well as resignation and withdrawal into silence.

As a writer, Bernhard adopts both the persona of the demented painter Strauch, contaminated by what he witnesses, and that of the medical intern who scrupulously records, dissects and analyses the pathology under investigation. Hartman’s statement that in post-Shoah art “the reflective and the creative . . . mingle conspicuously”²³ could be well applied to Bernhard’s own suspicious aesthetics, one forever tracking its own conspiracy of silence. In subsequent works, Bernhard no longer represents the act of seeing and witnessing in its immediate visual sense and interconnectedness. Instead, many of his narrators come across abandoned manuscripts from which they reconstruct the demise of the protagonist. Painting reappears one more time prominently in Bernhard’s *Alte Meister* where the main protagonist is entranced by a self-portrait of the Venetian master Tintoretto. It can be argued that the visual violence depicted in Bernhard’s *Frost* is increasingly imported into the medium of writing, following the rise of structuralism as mediated through the experiments of the Grazer Literaturforum and its Wittgensteinian variation of linguistic determinism. Bernhard’s *Korrektur*, for example, finds in architecture an appropriate correlate for the syntactic violence that the author wishes to convey. The novel’s abstract and cold narration echoes the actual designs of Wittgenstein’s sterile building dedicated to his sister in the narcissistic fashion of the self-aggrandized genius. The Wittgensteinian turn in Bernhard’s prose, one characterized by obsessive syntactical qualification, pushes his art further down the path of dehumanization. In spite of this aesthetic change in Bernhard’s work, his social and cultural iconoclasm remains constant to the point of turning into a mannerism. As is the case with the avant-garde, Bernhard’s work eventually becomes reabsorbed by the mainstream and thereby loses the edge of its iconoclastic function. Also, the topos of social victimization, as Bern-

hard realizes, becomes increasingly facile and needs ironic complication. By the mid-1970s, Bernhard, as is generally acknowledged, takes on a lighter tone, ironizing his self-destructive characters and their self-serving use of social marginalization. A change less frequently noted, is the cautious return of Jewish characters as in *Wittgenstein's Neffe*, *Der Untergeher*, and *Heldenplatz*. Although Bernhard no longer witnesses the rise of a new generation of Jewish voices in Austria in the 1990s, he anticipates their imminent return. With Bernhard's death, the self-revolving discourse of national iconoclasm and confrontation comes to an end. Austria's recent history, it becomes clear, cannot be entirely told from the point-of-view of the perpetrators or their dissenting children. *Heldenplatz*, *Auslöschung* and Bernhard's final will, prohibiting the performance of his plays in Austria, can be understood as the author's ironic acknowledgement of this imminent change in Austria's cultural landscape in which a new dissenting force, namely the living and present Jewish community of Austria, would occupy center stage.

At the present, we witness a return of Bachmann's zero hour scenario discussed earlier in this essay, however, with a markedly different negotiation of its position of victims and victimizers. In a critical rethinking of the issues of Nazi legacy and its confrontation, Austrian Jewish writers take a decidedly different stance from the previous generation of non-Jewish dissenters. What was once seen as the authentic outcry of moral outrage is now more soberly questioned as revealing residual self-serving and narcissistic features. After all, the staged victimization and protest of the second-generation, often earned the children of the perpetrators public recognition and rewards. Meanwhile, the return of Austrian exiles was consistently aborted and only facilitated in a few cases. Bernhard's suspicious and quasi-Foucaultian stance, in which power and violence characterize all institutions and above all language, the tool by which institutional power is maintained, may have well made him an early postmodernist in postwar Austrian literature. His ironic treatment of his perspective of suspicion added a further postmodern touch to the author who not only identifies but also celebrates his pathology. Enjoy your symptom, Lacan's catchword, becomes the motto of Bernhard's later works and its aesthetics of post-humanism. This confidence in resurrecting a negative theology of power in a posthumanist society ultimately undermines the iconoclastic impulse of Bernhard and makes him a commodity for cultural skeptics of any political conviction (left and right, and even far right). A lack of historical specificity facilitates at once his transnational appeal but also restricts his relevance for the developing discourse about Austria's past.

Doron Rabinovici's novel *Suche nach M.* (1997) restores this local specificity that is absent in Bernhard's prose. An ironic detective story, the novel narrates the destinies of a variety of interwoven biographies and generations and of crimes past and present. To complicate matters, the story provides us with a number of professional decoders such as the detective Siebert, the art historian Sina Mohn, the psychoanalyst Caro Sandner and the avant-garde painter Otto Toot, each tracking down in their own manner histories of obscured and overlooked criminal acts. The novel's entire scenario ironically plays upon films like *M.* and *The Third Man* in which elusive killers must be brought to trial with the help of the entire population. In contrast to these films, this novel's search is conducted for the most part by the victims themselves to the point where even new crimes fall under their investigation. This overcompensation on the part of the victims lends the work a dark humor. Austria's dubious past that everybody wishes to forget resurfaces with comical revenge in unexpected turns in the lives of subsequent generations as persistent symptoms that defy repression.

Dani and Arieh, the sons of Gitta and Mosche Morgenthau and Jakob and Ruth Scheinowiz, are the children of survivors from Cracow. Their youth in Vienna is both burdened by the denial of the perpetrators and the silence of the victims whose memories only erupt after decades. Dani and Arieh respond to this dilemma with mysterious symptomatic abilities. Dani always takes on the guilt incurred by other people, compulsively confessing to crimes he did not commit. He appears everywhere at scenes of crimes where confessions can be made and keeps the entire country in suspense with his revelations, becoming the elusive phantom M. Arieh boasts of a similar intuitive power and is capable of finding guilty people without knowing their identity by slowly transforming into their appearance and adopting their mannerism. This peculiar skill allows him to track down neo-Nazis and, as an agent recruited by the Mossad, enemies of the state of Israel. Not unlike Bernhard's works, the novel is wary of an obsessive preoccupation with guilt, although it proceeds from the opposite direction. For the most part, survivors and their descendants become involved in acts of denial, confession and accusation, while the remainder of the population remains untouched by its historical legacy.

In a crucial chapter, Rabinovici's novel also addresses the legacy of the Austrian avant-garde personified by the painter Otto Toot, a comical caricature of the Viennese action painters. His new show attracts the kleptomaniac art critic Sina Mohn who had an earlier run-in with Dani who confesses in her stead an act of shoplifting and becomes her temporary lover. Dani, developing skin rashes due to his sensitive response

to unconfessed crimes, is covered all over his body with large bandages. He is referred to as “Mullemann” or bandage man and resembles the artwork of the Aktionist Rudolf Schwarzkogler or of the fictionalized counterpart Otto Toot who produces artwork along the lines of Schwarzkogler and his bandage performances:

Dennoch lockte sie [Sina Mohn] zunächst, was sie von Otto Toots Bildern gehört hatte, daß er Vermummte und Einbandagierte, Schmerzensmänner in Mull malte. Sina Mohn wußte verschiedene, insbesondere heimische Traditionen der Avantgarde zu nennen, die sich ebenfalls mit der Übermalung von Potraitierten, mit der Auslöschung im Schmerz, mit Verletzungen, Wundmalen und Blutorgien, mit Verbänden und Verhüllungen beschäftigt hatten.²⁴

In a humorous comedy of errors and misrecognitions, Sina Mohn comes across another painting in the gallery that appears to be a portrait of her recent lover Dani/Mullemann. It is entitled “Ahasver,” provocatively referring to the legend of “the eternal wandering Jew.” Another spectator, Navah Bein, a Holocaust historian from Israel and the wife of Arieh, joins Sina in front of the canvas. She claims that the painting is rather a portrait of her husband (who in his effort to track down M. has transformed into the appearance of Mulleman) and the two women soon become involved in a debate over the private and public identity of the depicted bandaged man. Navah instructs Sina that Ahasver is an anti-Semitic legend and therefore offensive as a subject matter. In a later conversation, Sina Mohn confronts the painter with this recently acquired knowledge but he claims that the painting is a self-portrait and that he was unaware of the political import of the legend of Ahasver. Toot resembles here to some degree the Viennese sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka who has been attacked for his Holocaust monument and its stereotypical representation of the Jew as victim.²⁵

Rabinovici’s slapstick comedy repeatedly shows its characters tripping up over a shared history of crime and violence, often due to ignorance, corrective stereotypes of philo-Semitism and awkward and self-conscious reaction towards Jews. His novel humorously qualifies the legacy of the Austrian avant-garde, pointing to its own blind spots of overlegitimation. As Navah Bein observes:

Da stand sie, Navah Bein, eine Historikerin aus Tel-Aviv, die seit Jahren die Geschichte der jüdischen Gemeinde in Czernowitz und ihrer hunderttausendfachen Ausmordung erforschte, die durch einen Zufall in eine Bank dieses Landes, der Heimat Luegers und Schoenerers, Hitlers und Eichmanns geraten war, um Geld zu wechseln und nun stolperte sie über die Darstellung jener Mullfigur, eines Ahasver, eines ewigen Juden, einer Ghettogestalt. Gewiß hatte der Künstler mit diesem Ge-

mälde keine böse Karikatur beabsichtigt; womöglich das Gegenteil. Irgendwo dachte es aber in ihr: “So wollten und so wollen sie uns seit jeher sehen; in Fetzen, von Wunden umkränzt, zerschlagen, eingeschnürt und verletzt. Der ewige Jude war und ist ihnen eine Ausstellung wert. Die Väter haben ihn als Untermenschen hingerichtet, die Söhne richten ihn als Heiligen her.” (Rabinovici, 203)

In Rabinovici, the politics of iconoclasm has been complicated by an insistence on differentiated positions between victims and victimizers that haunt subsequent generations of descendants. In doing so, the consensus of Austrian society is challenged along different fault lines, marking the dissymmetry between its Jewish and non-Jewish history. The novel differs from Bernhard and the Aktionisten by insisting that guilt cannot be negotiated in national and ethnic isolation. Bachmann’s Jews are back at the table and no longer exchange silent glances of disapproval but demand to become a part of a real discourse of agreements and disagreements. At the same time, they still appear to carry the entire burden of the country’s history, as seen in the humorous parody of symptoms of compulsive confessions (Mullemann) and an equally obsessive search for culprits (Arieh). The novel ends with Arieh tracking down Dani/Mulleman; it thus rejoins the divided Jewish identity, granting it a well-deserved normalization and a rest from history.

Rabinovici’s novel allows us to look at the legacy of Bernhard in a new light. While Bernhard was immensely important in extending the freedom of what can be said in Austria’s public and cultural sphere, he should not be seen as the paradigmatic representative of all its cultural participants. Historically, Bernhard’s role remains limited to voicing Austria’s postwar dissent and its dissatisfaction with the country’s rapid normalization. He does so from within a critical margin imagined from within mainstream culture. Bernhard provides a unique critical mirror to a culture of resentment that made possible enormous acts of administrative violence through a conspiracy of silence. This violence, skillfully maneuvered in the evasive mode of passive aggression, is finally brought to surface in Bernhard. Bernhard’s tirades, his staging of hatred and resentment, are not so much expressions of the author’s own frustration but depict the concealed language of petty-bourgeois Austria and its postwar adjustment to its new and drastically curtailed historical role. This final stage of the implosion of the Habsburg Empire represents in its last pathetic stage the ultimate deconstruction of power.

Bernhard’s entire oeuvre engages history and culture in a confrontational and relentless iconoclastic manner, deserving the label avant-garde to the extent that it calls the institution of art itself into question. Bernhard’s art offers no redemptive vision of society, betraying the

critical stoicism of post-Shoah art. Like the avant-garde, his work is marked by a strong sense of victimization, either staged or suffered in simulation. It is here where Bernhard betrays a remaining sentimentality of the artist as society's martyr. Rabinovici's novel, as we have seen, shows us that the status of victimization can itself become an obsessive form of self-legitimation, thereby creating a rivalry between the actual victims and their self-appointed representatives in the artists of the avant-garde. Bernhard ultimately parts with the avant-garde on this matter, distrusting the iconoclasm of the son who slays the father only to become like him. In Bernhard's case, this parricide is aborted as the author increasingly turns against himself and his age in the manner Brecht once attributed to Karl Kraus: "Als das Zeitalter Hand an sich legte, war er diese Hand."²⁶

Bernhard's later and more ironic works express the realization that the critical dissent of the avant-garde had become a commodity and had turned into a mannerism in his own work. By placing his art under erasure, bringing about its own extinction (*Auslöschung*), he resembles Arnulf Rainer and his ironic qualification of avant-garde iconoclasm through the gesture of *Übermalungen*. Much like Rainer's doubled portraits consisting of photographs depicting the artist in grotesque poses and of finger paints at once exposing and erasing these poses, Bernhard's later works approach the artist's narcissism in a similar self-revealing and subversive fashion. Like Karl Kraus, Bernhard increasingly comes to view nationalism as a chauvinism built on excessive love for one's own culture, a narcissism that in turn requires xenophobia to sustain itself. The cautious return of Jewish characters (Wittgenstein, Gould, the Schuster brothers) and an intensifying cosmopolitanism in Bernhard's late work can be seen as an attempt at reopening cultural borders, indicating that the era of Austria's national insularity is coming to an end. The insertion of other Austrian voices opposes nationalism's monologic and hegemonic nature, anticipating the concern with multiculturalism in the present Europe. It is in this significant gesture of clearing a space (*Holzfällen* and *Auslöschung*) for other suppressed voices to emerge that Bernhard's legacy can be remembered in both constructive and critical fashion.

Notes

¹ Stefan Zweig, *Die Welt von gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998), 41.

² “Wir sind in Wien, mehr als zehn Jahre nach dem Krieg.” Ingeborg Bachmann, “Unter Mördern und Irren,” *Das dreißigste Jahr. Erzählungen* (Munich: dtv, 1995), 79; hereafter quoted in text as UM.

³ “Friedl starrte ihn verständnislos mit seinen kugeligen wäßrigen Augen an und preßte seine Hände ineinander, wohl weil er dachte, daß er doch gar kein Jude sei, und Mahler war es auch nicht, sein Vater vielleicht, sein Großvater — Friedl wußte es nicht genau” (UM, 81).

⁴ “Haderer legte eine kurze Pause ein, verwarnte erst Hutter, tadelte darauf Friedl und sprach dann überraschend vom ersten Weltkrieg, um dem zweiten auszuweichen. . . . Bertoni benutzte den Augenblick, in dem Haderer durstig sein Glas an den Mund setzte, und fing unerbittlich an, eine unglaubliche und verwickelte Geschichte aus dem zweiten Weltkrieg zu erzählen. . . . So gar Friedl schüttelte sich plötzlich vor Lachen, es wunderte mich und wunderte mich noch mehr, als er plötzlich sich bemühte, auch eingeweiht zu erscheinen in die Operationen, Chargen, Daten” (UM, 89–90). “Jetzt mußte man befürchten, daß Haderer Friedl und mir unsere mangelhaften Griechisch- und Lateinkenntnisse vorhalten würde, ungeachtet dessen, daß seinesgleichen uns daran gehindert hatte, diese Kenntnisse rechtzeitig zu erwerben. Aber ich [Jewish narrator] war nicht in der Stimmung, auf eines der von Haderer bevorzugten Themen einzugehen oder gar ihn herauszufordern, sondern beugte mich zu Mahler hinüber, als hätte ich nichts gehört” (UM, 99).

⁵ “Er [Bertoni] hatte Steckel, bevor Steckel emigrieren mußte, gut gekannt, war wieder Steckels bester Freund, nicht nur weil der bald nach 1945 für ihn gebürgt und ihn ans ‘Tagblatt’ zurückgeholt hatte” (UM, 85).

⁶ See Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1980), 239–40.

⁷ Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews 1867–1938: A Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1993), 244.

⁸ Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler’s Vienna: A Dictator’s Apprenticeship* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999), 6, 80.

⁹ Robert Schindel, *Gebürtig* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), 15.

¹⁰ “der gesellig exclusive ‘strohkoffer’ — so hieß das neue ‘artclub’ — lokal unter der kärntnerbar von adolf loos, weil der fassungsraum sehr beschränkt und die wände mit schilf austapeziert waren — zog, nicht zuletzt durch einige turbulente feste, neue besucher an, fast ausschließlich jugendliche.” *die*

wiener gruppe: a moment of modernity 1954–1960, ed. Peter Weibel (Vienna: Bundesverlag, 1997), 17.

¹¹ Thomas Bernhard, *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984).

¹² Hans Carl Artmann, *med ana schwoaazzn dintn* (Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1958).

¹³ Konrad Bayer and Gerhard Rühm, “scheissen und brunzen,” in *die wiener gruppe: a moment of modernity 1954–1960*, 251

¹⁴ Thomas Bernhard, *Amras, Die Erzählungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 12.

¹⁵ Malcolm Greene, “Introduction,” *Writings of the Vienna Actionists* (London: Atlas Press, 1999), 17.

¹⁶ *Writings of the Vienna Actionists*, 60.

¹⁷ Thomas Bernhard, *Frost* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 7.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften 1* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 164.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Hartman, “Introduction: Darkness Visible,” *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994): 1–22; here 20.

²⁰ Shoshana Felman, “Film as Witness: Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah*,” *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994), 90–103; here 93.

²¹ Felman, 91.

²² Arnulf Rainer, “Malerei, um die Malerei zu verlassen,” originally written in 1952; reprinted in exhibition catalogue *Arnulf Rainer*, ed. Rudi Fuchs (Vienna: Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, 1987).

²³ Hartman, 22.

²⁴ Doron Rabinovici, *Suche nach M.* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 198.

²⁵ See James E. Young’s *Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 104–12. Young discusses here the controversial sculpture of the “streetwashing Jew” at the Albertina Square in Vienna. Hrdlicka’s depiction of the Jews in the image of their humiliation is recalled in Otto Toot’s portrait of Ahasver.

²⁶ Bertold Brecht quoted in Walter Benjamin, “Karl Kraus,” *Illuminationen*, 366.

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