

# **Musical Dreams: Examining Musical Elements in Thomas Bernhard's "Reunion" and "Goethe Dies"**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis provides a reading of Thomas Bernhard's prose understood as prosaic music. Comparing Ludwig Wittgenstein's struggle to write philosophy with Bernhard's use of literary-musical elements, I shed light on how Bernhard's disturbing stories, inhabited by unlikable characters and composed in a fragmented, alienating, figurative style, create not only a joyful, but meaningful experience, because Bernhard's linguistic music-making illuminates the background of destructive and annihilated lives. Studies of Bernhard's work that only focus on direct structural similarities between music and literature, or only on the historical or biographical narrative, neglect the intrinsic importance of the aesthetic of his musical prose and its comic, mocking musical form. People, places and memories are foregrounded as musical leitmotifs. Exaggerations, repetitions and comic authorship result in skilfully designed, intimate musical dreaming. Bernhard's stories "Reunion" and "Goethe Dies" are examined with reference to other stories in Chapters entitled "Welcome to Bernhard's World", "Whereof One Cannot Speak: Catastrophes in Thomas Bernhard's 'Reunion'", "Whereof One Cannot Speak, Thereof One Must Make Music," "Goethe Dies: A Wittgenstein Ensemble," and conclude with "Composing Wittgenstein."

**Keywords:** Prosaic music, autobiographical catastrophes, leitmotif, figuration, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

*Dedicated to Paul McQueen*

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## Introduction: Welcome to Bernhard's World

There is after all quite another audience, Beckett's audience; those in every country who do not set up intellectual barriers, who do not try too hard to analyse the message. This audience laughs and cries out—and in the end celebrates with Beckett; this audience leaves his plays, his black plays, nourished and enriched, with a lighter heart, full of a strange irrational joy.

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*<sup>1</sup>

The reception of Bernhard's work varies, much like the reception of Beckett's. Some find in the world Beckett created the "irrational joy" Peter Brook describes. Others react negatively and violently. A woman abruptly left "Waiting for Godot" because she felt it was a disgusting display that caused her to "start to cry out and to vomit saying, 'I just can't stand this.'"<sup>2</sup> Bernhard was spat on and verbally abused in the streets of Vienna as an immediate reaction to his publications, but he was also heralded as having created for the German language "the greatest beauty, precision, art, soul, depth and truth."<sup>3</sup> This thesis represents a journey into the world in which Thomas Bernhard's prose exists, a journey that will examine the question how disturbing stories inhabited by unlikable characters and told in an alienating style can generate not only a meaningful, but a joyful reading experience.

When Peter Brook describes certain theatre goers, much of what he says about the unexpected positive effect Beckett's work has can easily be applied to the strong emotional reactions induced by reading Bernhard's novels. Brook goes on: "Poetry, nobility, beauty, magic—suddenly these suspect words are back in the theatre once more."<sup>4</sup>

In Bernhard's case, readers are "back" in the Austrian post-war novel "once more." And while Bernhard's prose, much like his plays, are filled with insults, unpopular opinions and

<sup>1</sup> Peter Brooke, *The Empty Space* (London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1968) 59.

<sup>2</sup> James and Elisabeth Knowlson, eds., *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett. A Centenary Celebration* (New York, Arcade Publishing: 2006) 118.

<sup>3</sup> Ingeborg Bergmann, *Werke. Essays/ Reden/ Vermischte Schriften/ Anhang/ Phonographie*. (Munich: Piper&Co Verlag, 1978) 363.

<sup>4</sup> Brooke 59.

alienating syntax, there is an underlying stream of “poetry, nobility, beauty, magic” flowing throughout. Those who are able to let go of “intellectual barriers” will be granted the gift of this strange “irrational joy.” Bernhard does not make it easy for his audience. If a reader is not discouraged by his page-long sentences, the confusing alternation between thoughts, perspectives, direct and indirect speech or the games played with memory and time, then there is the dark subject matter to contend with that may prevent further investigation by any readers who are not aware of the world within which Bernhard’s writing exists. That world is one in which the all-seeing author reigns benevolently over the misery-stricken narrators, which are but mock authors. The other characters are actors in a staged musical depiction. The joy experienced by the Bernhard audience has everything to do with an intimate understanding of this Bernhardian world and with the place that love holds for him. Some may actually feel that much of his work is about love. Bloemsaat-Voerknecht ends her book, which is a careful and detailed and rather scientific examination of musical elements in Bernhard’s writing, with the conclusion that “much of his language allows an exuberant love to shine through.”<sup>5</sup>

Others admire Bernhard for his ability to write “with impunity, fearlessly<sup>6</sup>.” In the article “Saint Bernhard” Gary Indiana explains that Bernhard’s opinions are not limited to appreciation in his own country. In Austria Bernhard was insulted and hated by some but applauded and encouraged by others. His many prizes alone attest to a high level of appreciation. Indiana points out that “the more intolerant of hypocrites and imbeciles” Bernhard became, the more his reputation grew.<sup>7</sup> Some of the praise Bernhard experienced was the side effect of having become fashionable. He was publicly insulted after having been in his opinion publicly shamed, when given a highly sought-after award by people who could not spell his name correctly. They obviously knew he was famous, but not what his proper name was or what he had written. These people, who knew of him only in the shallowest sense, were one part of what made up his success. The other part

<sup>5</sup> Lisbeth Bloemsaat-Voerknecht, *Thomas Bernhard und die Musik: Themenkomplex mit drei Fallstudien und einem Musikthematischen Register* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2006) 230. My translation. (All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.)

<sup>6</sup> Gary Indiana, Gary. “Saint Bernhard,” 2011, <https://theeveningrednessinthewest.wordpress.com> (accessed September 11, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Indiana.

was made up of the Bernhard audience that was pierced emotionally and moved to feel gratitude and relief by Bernhard's passionate, "exasperated orality."<sup>8</sup>

How could gratitude, relief and irrational joy be generated by literature that on the surface looks like complaining? As I examine this question, I will focus on the stories "Reunion" and "Goethe Dies" (*Goethe Dies*, 2010). "Reunion" is a story about a middle-aged, nameless narrator meeting a childhood friend in a chance encounter, going down memory lane into a number of detailed anecdotes, all negative, and finding out in the end that the childhood friend refuses to corroborate a single memory. "Goethe Dies" is set in the year 1832. Another nameless narrator describes Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's last days focusing especially on Goethe's adoration for a Ludwig Wittgenstein who, in the story, is alive and dying at the same time as Goethe is alive and dying.

I will touch on other works of Bernhard, but will be dealing with Bernhard's prose only. Bernhard's plays are from a different world and constructed in a different language that consists of short, concise sentences and a fast-moving plot that has a beginning and an end. The sentences in the novels and stories are pulled into unimaginable lengths with words that rain down with the force of a waterfall while the plot moves so slowly that it often feels as if it comes to a standstill. Sometimes it actually is at a standstill. In *Extinction* (1986), Bernhard's longest work, which describes the last months of Franz Murau, who finds himself dealing with more than an inheritance when his entire family suddenly dies leaving him as the sole heir to a fortune built on Nazi atrocities, Bernhard takes dozens of pages to have Murau's thoughts race at great speed covering decades worth of emotionally charged history, all the while standing in front of a closed kitchen door. He stands in front of the kitchen door for around a hundred pages.

In *The Loser* (1983), a story built around a fictionalized Glenn Gould and two of his friends whose lives were destroyed the moment they came face to face with Gould's greatness, Bernhard's narrator does something similar, taking dozens of pages to remain standing still in the middle of an empty restaurant while contemplating a number of topics to do with his deceased friends. In both novels Bernhard makes a point to keep interrupting

<sup>8</sup> Thomas J. Cousineau, *Three- Part Inventions: The Novels of Thomas Bernhard* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008) 27.

the barely existing plot to remind us that these men are still standing in front of the kitchen door and in the empty restaurant. These repeated reminders stand out in a way that reminds of a rondo form, where a recognizable motif is repeated at set intervals, or of a recurring bassline as found in a chaconne or passacaglia. In the Baroque, classical and romantic eras musical themes and basslines are repeated and used as structural basis for melodies. Memory and repetition are vital components found in most music, but especially the music of Mozart, Bach, Beethoven and Bruckner, composers who have influenced Bernhard's aesthetic. One of the characteristics of a chaconne or passacaglia is that the composers make it clear and obvious when the melody starts over. Bernhard uses this technique when he leads our attention back to the stationary narrators, whose thoughts and memories keep coming and going, as if moving in circles or propelled by a tide. What Bernhard does is often cause for comedic effect, because it is humorous to picture his narrators, always middle aged and angry men, staring into space as they stand frozen in place for long periods of time.

In addition to this device, Bernhard makes use of exaggeration and "categorical pronouncements for which he seldom offers a rationale", techniques which further confuse what little plot there is.<sup>9</sup> The novels begin quite differently, but all end up on familiar Bernhardian ground. No matter what a novel seems to be about, whether Glenn Gould's deadly genius in *The Loser*, a disgraced doctor in *Playing Watten* (1969), a family's unsuccessful suicide pact in *Amras* (1964), friendships that end deadly in *Wittgenstein's Nephew* (1982) and *Yes* (1978), a private tutor dealing with an unwanted inheritance in *Extinction*, or an intellectual couple moving into an abandoned factory in *The Limeworks* (1970), at some point the same topics and feelings appear regarding Austria's history, Austria's artists and doctors and Bernhard's childhood, surfacing sooner or later, usually only a few pages from the beginning. His themes are repeated, his feelings exaggerated, and this exaggeration is repeated as well. A sense of love, humour and beauty emerges from the kind of negative anti-literature I have described only when the reader understands that *how* Bernhard creates his stories is more important than *what* he is saying in them. His prose, then, is a kind of literary music and what he is saying makes up the notes, the

<sup>9</sup> Kata Gellen and Jakob Norberg, „The Unconscionable Critic: Thomas Bernhard's 'Holzfällen,'" *Modern Austrian Literature* Vol. 44, No. 1/2 (2011): 57-75.

themes, the motifs of his music. Within the *how he did it* is the often-unseen magic that I am seeking to unearth and examine in this thesis.

By doing so I am presupposing that there is something powerful enough that can overpower the apparent negative feelings and subjects. That something is music. Why else, for instance, can someone who does not pay attention to the lyrics listen to Nazi propaganda music, which has been specifically composed to celebrate and encourage war, and find it uplifting, if not for purifying qualities found in music? Nazi music was forceful, in major keys and designed to stimulate, even though the intent and subject matter are vile. A person not understanding German would surely think it is happy music. Bernhard's subject matter is often as painful, because even though he is on the opposite side of Nazi composers, he deals with the same horror of Austrian history. In Bernhard's case too, the subject matter is *purified* because his writing is infused with music. Bernhard comes out of a tradition where music has many faces. It can give a voice to the highest cultural celebration in the hands of the likes of Haydn, Bach and Mozart. Austrian folk music, on the other hand, is played for the sake of making music, but also to declare loyalty to one's homeland and all its cultural habits, from wearing certain clothes to being Catholic. Nazi propaganda music was designed to charm young or ignorant and uneducated listeners into a patriotic state of mind, while influencing their minds with hate. In many ways, Bernhard's music is designed to charm those readers who are able to hear it.

Other examples of musical purification that come to us from a brighter place can be found in the world of opera. Many a libretto is mundane, simple and even boring, but composers take the simple words and put them to beautiful music, creating a magic that the words alone could never have reached. Similarly, Bernhard's words taken by themselves give a particular impression, but when an ear for the music is developed, another world appears.

As Bloomsaat-Voerknecht emphasises, musical elements are not copied by Bernhard. We cannot find exact literary examples of a fugue or a sonata in Bernhard's prose. Instead, he takes musical elements and techniques, like modulation, variation, and ornamentation and weaves them into his prose. He is making use of them, not copying

them. In her book “*Thomas Bernhard und die Musik*,” Bloomsaat-Voerknecht warns about a too literal search for musical elements and musical form in literature. She takes up many pages to gently refute where others have tried to do so. She provides what I agree is a much more satisfying way of examining Bernhard’s music by pointing to intimations, hints and allusions of musical elements, the knowledge and recognition of which are not necessary to an appreciation of Bernhard’s prose in general, but which are very much needed for an irrational joy to be born out of the reading experience. This can be compared to how a person may recognize musical talent when hearing Bach’s music and think it pretty, but the same person, if oblivious to the perfect underlying mathematical structure, would miss something precious that elevates Bach’s achievement to a whole other dimension.<sup>10</sup> What is important for us is that Bernhard did use musical forms and structure, but he did not replicate or copy them. He handled them and they transformed under his literary touch. The story “Goethe Dies” is in some ways a prosaic opera or a *Singspiel* in the vein of Kurt Weil, with duets, arias, recitatives and choral numbers, with laughter, misunderstandings, comical characters, plot twists and general drama. “Reunion” can be understood as a passacaglia or chaconne, but again, not as an exact replica. It has a theme that is heard throughout with voices floating above it. The parents’ voices from the past and the narrators’ memories as they appear in the present day each have their own melody that is related to and built on the underlying and repeating baseline that is based on the hopeless child that the narrator used to be.

Unearthing the music in Bernhard explains how Bernhard can be appreciated on more levels than one. What I am proposing is similar to asking someone who drives to work daily, to walk for a change and give themselves the opportunity to see the route from a different angle and at a different speed. Suddenly, instead of racing through a grey, dirty world made only of cement and bricks and filled with skyscrapers, noise, pollution and the shapes of people seen through the windows of a car, the same stretch of the road now, if walked along slowly, offers faces of passersby, little flowers growing out of the cracks in the sidewalk and birds singing on rooftops. Bernhard’s musical components that I will examine are to thank for the fact that while many readers only recognize Bernhard’s writing

<sup>10</sup> Bloomsaat-Voerknecht 226.

as the work of an angry man spewing hatred and insults, others, myself, Samuel T. Adams, Ingeborg Bachmann, Liesbeth Bloemsaat-Voerknecht and Andreas Herzog, for example, recognize in the same writing wonder, humour, music, laughter and love.<sup>11</sup> It is as if one needs a special sensory system with which to see and hear Bernhard's world. Some of us have it. For those who do not have an ear for Bernhard's music, I will describe the effect.

In the First Chapter, I explain how Bernhard's writing is "prosaic music."<sup>12</sup> His musical digressions matter more than the plot because they invite the reader into a world beyond the plot. The facts, events and characters should be understood only within the context of his wordmusic. In the Second Chapter I introduce Ludwig Wittgenstein as a recurring musical *Leitmotif*. Throughout the thesis Wittgenstein's writing is applied to expose a connection between the two writers that goes beyond the already much-discussed fact that Bernhard had been intimately acquainted with Wittgenstein's work and was a friend to Wittgenstein's nephew Paul. The readers will find that by letting go of an emphasis on plot and traditional story-telling a new Bernhardian world, no less literary, but more musical, can be revealed.

I will take a moment here to define the kind of writer we are dealing with. Thomas Bernhard was a dedicated reader of philosophy, but not a philosopher, an angry observer of Austrian politics, but not a political activist, and, while he included his personal life in his writing, he was not a conventional autobiographer. Philosophical, autobiographical or historical standards are not the best way to get to a deeper understanding of Bernhard's musical prose, even though it has philosophical, autobiographical and historical elements. The reason why it is best to apply a different method when trying to get at the inner nature of Bernhard's prose is that what Bernhard offers is what Andreas Herzog calls "prosaic music" or wordmusic. Herzog's "*Thomas Bernhards Poetik der prosaischen Musik*" (1994)<sup>13</sup> is valuable for an understanding of Bernhard's world. Bernhard himself said that what mattered most in his writing was "the musical component," not the subject matter,

<sup>11</sup> Liesbeth Bloemsaat-Voerknecht and Andreas Herzog are scholars I am making use of, Samuel T. Adams is a present-day New York based artist.

<sup>12</sup> Andreas Herzog, "Thomas Bernhards *Poetik Der Prosaischen Musik*," *Zeitschrift für Germanistik* 4.1 (1994) 35.

<sup>13</sup> "The Poetics of Thomas Bernhard's Wordmusic" (my translation)

the topic or the material in the writing.<sup>14</sup> The aggressive repetition, exaggeration and the much-discussed contradictions that have led to lawsuits are not mere insults, mockery or political, philosophical or psychological declarations, but tools with which Bernhard makes his music.<sup>15</sup> We must accept the important position of the musical components in order to develop an intimate relationship with Bernhard's work. Then his writing becomes transformed and changes from what seems to be obsessive rants telling of petty grudges into the prosaic version of what Tom Waits means when he says he likes "beautiful music telling [him] of terrible things."<sup>16</sup> In this context Bernhard's inaccuracies and exaggerations are performance related variations.

Bernhard uses events and people as motifs, not to re-live his memories, but to use the memories as literary and musical tools for his prosaic music-making in worlds that he created and in which he is the conductor and director. What composer has not tried his hand at "theme and variation?" This is what Bernhard is doing with repetition. His own history is a *motif*, not repeated, but reinvented.<sup>17</sup> A new ending is given to a story that had begun somewhere in real life and then been picked up and chosen as a theme in a story: "Thinking back alone is pointless, because then you find yourself in a museum that is fixed, like all of history. That is not interesting. Exciting is that which lies ahead, not what was."<sup>18</sup> Bernhard is not his own historian putting down facts, not only a storyteller creating fiction or an autobiographer remembering a life that demands closure. He is not telling us something, he is showing and performing. Bernhard's is an art of performative musical depiction that is alive in the present, not in the past. It may have originated in the past, in fixed history, but it is not shackled to the past.

<sup>14</sup> Herzog 36.

<sup>15</sup> A good example of Bernhard's particular talent can be found in *Sehr Gescherte Redaktion: Leserbrief-Schlachten um Thomas Bernhard*. Verlag der Österreichischen Staatsdruckerei, 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Waits. "Tom Waits Speaks on Songwriting." <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4077216>. October 8, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> In classical music if a section is to be repeated, is it not repeated in the exact same way. Often volume and tempo are varied to create the effect of familiarity as well as the effect of something having been changed within the same melodies and harmonies.

<sup>18</sup> Krista Fleischmann, *Thomas Bernhard: Eine Begegnung, Gespräche mit Krista Fleischmann* (Suhrkamp, 2006) 126.

Bernhard's art of musical depiction is created through his narrators, because their personalities set the tone, or, musically speaking, the key of the composition. Bernhard's prose is always given to us through a narrator, and although they are not explicitly the same person and are given different backgrounds, histories and, on the surface, different problems and complaints, they are certainly the same kind of person, sharing enough similarities to consider them as one type. The narrators in "Reunion" and "Goethe Dies" are recognizable from other novels and stories. This is similar to using the same performer or interpreter for a number of compositions. One can think of a performer like Glenn Gould, with so much personality that whatever he plays, be it Mozart or Bach or Beethoven, three immensely different composers, he plays them all like Glenn Gould.

Bernhard's narrators are not presented as heroes. Because the narrators have so many characteristics in common with Bernhard, the showcasing of their questionable characteristics implies humility in their creator. Bernhard's narrators have their own voice and add to the polyphony of Bernhard's style, but there are many melodies in Bernhard's prose. In "Reunion," for instance, each set of parents as well as the two versions of the narrator, the child and the adult, have their own voice and rhythm. The narrator does not know of the other melodies; he only hears his own. But the author behind the narrator gives the other melodies permission to be there and pulls them together into something that ends up being much more than a story. The parents seem to have had their own private lives separate from the narrator. They seem to be fulfilled, ordinary people with satisfying careers and hobbies, respected by each other as well as their community. This not unattractive picture of the parents is presented throughout the story even though the narrator, who is our only link to the parents, does nothing but complain about them. The more complete depiction of the parents comes from the author behind the narrator who sympathizes with them as well as with the disturbed narrator.

The author behind the narrator conducts and directs the whole creation. He rules over the narrator's story with compassion. The narrator is a "mock author." We are given the impression that he is telling us about events for which he has a detached view. Yet he cannot see the big picture. The author behind the narrator knows more than the narrator. He knows all the parts, the way a conductor knows more than the violinists or the horns in an orchestra, who only play their own parts. Bernhard's narrators only think themselves to

be the conductors, but they are, without their knowing it, overruled. The understanding of this author/narrator relationship in Bernhard is indispensable for an intimate reading of his work. The mock author in "Reunion" is angry, hurt and aggressive. If a reader was not aware of the strings being pulled by the author behind the mock author's back, similar to a marionette, then the reading experience would be a dismal one. The Bernhard audience recognizes a complicated and passionate musical arrangement in which all the voices of the narrator and the other characters are given their turn and add to the overall tone of the performance.

The structural basis of "Reunion" presents in a repeated hopeless and heavy bassline that tells of the loneliness of the neglected, misunderstood child. The unhappy child in "Reunion" reminds of the hopelessly heavy bassline that carries the melody in Henry Purcell's "Dido's Lament." The narrator's voice, with the exaggerated ornamentations and flourishes of the narrator's digressions and diversions, and an obsession with petty grudges to do with knitwear, untalented music-making, rock collections and ham sandwiches, is the most prominent voice, but the others are just as important. One could say that "Reunion" is made up of: a monotone but nervously ornamented top melody that expresses the anger and pain of the adult narrator. Calm, confident melodies stand for the lives of the two sets of parents, and the quieter, heavy, underlying bassline repeats over and over again to show the never-ending unhappiness of the child the narrator used to be.

"Goethe Dies," on the other hand, is loud and has many voices talking on top of each other and interrupting each other. Each has their own tone and personality. The melody and rhythm can always be said to be of Bernhard, just like any melody in a Mozart opera, even though different characters sing different pieces, is recognizably Mozart. "Goethe Dies" is like a singspiel or an opera buffa, an exaggerated comic opera that is fun, exciting, fast-moving, that incorporates a tragedy that is not too sad, as well as slapstick and mockery concerning Goethe's entourage who each want to be Goethe's favorite confidant and fight for his attention and affection. Most of the plot centers around the fact that Goethe's dying wish is to meet Ludwig Wittgenstein. The story ends abruptly with Goethe's death. The author behind the narrator is deeply respectful to Ludwig Wittgenstein and his voice conveys a deep love for the real-life personality who never

actually appears in the story. Wittgenstein is spoken of in the story, but not given a role, as if respectfully left in the real world, rather than used for a comedic recreation in the story.

The Wittgenstein connection is important in a study of Bernhard's work, because Wittgenstein lives in Bernhard's world as a friendly, haunting, quiet roommate. "Whereof you cannot speak" and what cannot be written, because it is too painful, too disturbing or too emotionally complicated, can be expressed by finding an aesthetic form that does not depend on words alone. This is where Ludwig Wittgenstein comes into the picture. There are two schools of interpretation when it comes to Wittgenstein's famous sentence. One points towards deep, ineffable truths that cannot be expressed with words. Another interpretation understands his statement as a warning against the limits of language.<sup>19</sup> I will use Wittgenstein's thoughts on *Darstellung*, language games, certainty and doubt to illuminate his influence on Bernhard's world. Bernhard infused his writing, and the world he creates in his writing, with a Wittgenstein *feeling* that comes as much from having read and understood Wittgenstein as it does from loving Wittgenstein "dearly to the end of my days and beyond the borders of death."<sup>20</sup> Bernhard has written Wittgenstein into his world.

Bernhard's favorite subjects and themes are death, traumatic childhoods, great thinkers, great musicians, Austria's people, Austria's history, bad doctors, bad parents. But a theme is not all that matters in music. Music is interactive and made up of many elements that intertwine and mingle, creating a whole that is made up of many parts. If one does not want to create prosaic music, but simply to make a point about having survived terrible parenting, why have a story of one's bad childhood end with the only living witness denying knowing anything that the narrator is talking about, the way "Reunion" ends? And why allow a parallel, in-between-the-lines depiction of the parents as well-balanced and relatively happy people if the story is supposed to be about how awful they were? And why have another story, "Goethe Dies," lack logic or reason even though the main characters are essentially the gods of logic and reason, Goethe and Wittgenstein? Because Bernhard's principal aesthetic is to create prosaic music, not

<sup>19</sup> Marie McGinn, Ray Monk, "In Our Time," BBC Radio 4.

<sup>20</sup> Sepp Dreissinger, ed. *Von Einer Katastrophe in die andere: 13 Gespräche mit Thomas Bernhard* (Katsdorf: publication PN°1, 1992) 82.

traditional prose. We get stories from him that are playful and musical in spite of the heavy and much-repeated themes. The creation of worlds where a depressing childhood is used for its polyphonic qualities, as in “Reunion,” or where Goethe and Wittgenstein and Bernhard are alive at the same time, as in “Goethe Dies,” is an example of Bernhard rearranging what he has read, studied, lived, suffered and loved. In these kinds of worlds Bernhard shows a touching reverence for his mentors, but he also has the confidence to take charge as the director and conductor. In Bernhard’s own words: “What drives me to write is simply the passion for play. [...] The subject matter is secondary; it suffices to use what one finds in one’s surroundings.”<sup>21</sup>

The two stories I am focusing on appeared in *Goethe Dies*, a great little book which was never published in Bernhard’s lifetime, but eleven years after his death, in 2010. It is small in size, but touches on all the Bernhardian themes, including literature, music, family, homeland, and the accompanying emotions ranging from love to hatred. It suits a thesis in what has been called “a great book department,” the department of Humanities.<sup>22</sup> In addition to Andreas Herzog, whom I have already mentioned, I will also be leaning on scholarship by Perloff, Gargani, Bloemsaat-Voerknecht, Gibson, and Huemer.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Louis Rambures, “*Ich behaupte nicht, mit der Welt gehe es schlechter. Aus einem Gespräch mit dem Schriftsteller Thomas Bernhard*,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 46 (1983): 23.

<sup>22</sup> David Mirhady. Lecture for HUM 801, 2014.

# Chapter 1: Whereof One Cannot Speak: Catastrophes in Thomas Bernhard's "Reunion"

Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think.<sup>23</sup>

Ludwig Wittgenstein

"Music saves me every day. The fact that the music is alive in me, and it is alive in me, just as on the first day..."<sup>24</sup>

Thomas Bernhard

This chapter takes a close look at what musical elements accomplish for Bernhard's prose by focusing on the story "Reunion." Bernhard's personal catastrophes and how he dealt with them appear in this work as do the usual Bernhard narrator and silent listener. Wittgenstein's influence is present particularly in the way Bernhard circles around pain, leaving the worst unsaid and yet finding a way to give it expression. Whereof he cannot speak and write, thereof he remains silent, but this goes for his narrators. As for the author behind the narrator, whereof he cannot speak and write, thereof he makes music. Bernhard gently mocks his own ranting narrators who do not know when to stop talking, yet never get to the real issues. He exposes their inability to express their deepest feelings with words alone in a world that continues to misunderstand them.

The reader may also misunderstand. If one considers a person who reads and understands what he reads, as "having the experience of being guided by the words," then the reader of "Reunion," and in fact much of Bernhard's later writing, is guided by two different entities: the narrator, who has his reasons for telling his story, and the author, who has his reasons for allowing the narrator to expose himself by telling his story the way he does.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations* (Malden: Blackwell, 2001) 121.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 243.

<sup>25</sup> David Pole, *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, (London, Antholone Press, 1958) 22.

Bernhard's narrator in "Reunion," who is similar to some of his other narrators, especially in *Cutting Timber*, *Playing Watten* and *Extinction*, attacks "figures, behaviours and even whole societies, and yet he often withholds any supporting reasons or measured evaluations that might facilitate our acceptance of his statements."<sup>26</sup> This leads to a comical effect as the narrator becomes less trustworthy because of his lack of logical reasoning and his unsupported arguments. The author behind the narrator allows this to happen, allows us to question and laugh at the narrator; he encourages it. The narrator "repeatedly flouts the requirements of grounded, analytical judgement."<sup>27</sup> Why would the author, Bernhard, undermine his narrator, especially since it is common knowledge that the author, Bernhard, has many of the same grievances? Because, by doing so he shows how his narrators are blinded by their past and have not moved on, are prisoners of their memories and the language they use to keep the memories alive. The narrators are constantly voicing their memories and by doing so relive their past and their pain. Bernhard reveals his narrators' prisons and his pity for their plight as if he used to be one of them. By exposing the narrators in these ways, the author is also guiding the reader away from what is being told and towards *how* it is being told, something Bernhard emphasises as important in his writing. *How* it is told is, in spite of the subject matter, light, not weighed down by logic and reasoning, and infused with musical elements that I will get to shortly.

Bernhard's prose started out with a different feeling, one closer to his poetry. His dark, early poetry, with titles such as "On Earth and in Hell," is difficult to read, but not for the same reasons as the complicated syntax of his prose. These early poems are heavy with self-pity and grief. Bernhard moved from that art form to prose where he was able to embrace the position of the all-seeing, all-knowing and all-feeling author behind misguided narrators. The author guides his comical, distracted and self-obsessed narrators, who in the very early prose share some of the emotions created by the heavy poetry Bernhard had abandoned, down long and winding paths, all the while re-inventing and re-creating new worlds in his stories for himself. His narrators are doomed to relive their past and they are not even granted a fellow survivor to share their memories with. More often than not, the witnesses that Bernhard's narrators think they have, die, as in *The Loser* and *Amras*,

<sup>26</sup> Gellen 57.

<sup>27</sup> Gellen 59.

or refuse to acknowledge, as in *Playing Watten* and *Cutting Timber*, or deny outright, as in "Reunion."

In "Reunion" specifically, the doomed narrator runs into an old friend, seemingly a fellow survivor of a frightening and hopeless childhood. Instead of the adult the old friend has grown into, the narrator only sees the child the friend used to be and assumes the friend is still a prisoner of the past, while he, the narrator, is free from it. But the friend has grown from the child into a man, a man who walks away from the narrator taking with him any sense of belonging or solidarity and without acknowledging any of the narrator's memories, while the narrator gives away how much he still is attached to his old life, so much so that he seems completely consumed by it.<sup>28</sup>

All throughout "Reunion" the narrator uses "we" and "our" to remember the past. He describes his whole childhood experience as having been a part of a unit together with this long-lost friend: "we were incarcerated in two prison cells," "our childhood homes were always prisons," "do you remember," "we both wanted to break out."<sup>29</sup> A mean streak starts to appear and the narrator begins to focus on the friend, harshly analyzing his past as well as his present, even though he can have no knowledge of the friend's present: "Your parents' prison turned out to be lifelong for you. You sat apathetically in your room [...] you arranged things with your wardens [...] you read books with the same mindlessness and mindlessly listen to music [...] you listen to Mozart like them, in the most vulgar way."<sup>30</sup> He does not shy away from insulting the friend's posture and clothing. At the end the friend says, "I remember nothing whatsoever", as he walks away without another word, not even acknowledging the insults, much less the memories.<sup>31</sup> We are left wondering what the narrator knows at all. That is because the story provides something Bernhard often offers, namely *Scheinkommunikation*, mock-communication, given to us by mock-authors. Many of Bernhard's narrators pretend to communicate one thing to

<sup>28</sup> Scholarship about the "Jewish presence" and survivor denial is something that comes up often in examinations of Bernhard's prose and especially his plays, but I will not go down this road here. Suffice to say that it is an important consideration seeing how many times Bernhard addresses post-war issues in Austria.

<sup>29</sup> Bernhard, Thomas Bernhard, *Goethe Schtirbt. Erzählungen*. „Reunion“ (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010) 42, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Bernhard, "Reunion" 46-7.

<sup>31</sup> Bernhard, "Reunion" 66.

some person or other, but end up speaking of things altogether different from what had been stated at the outset of a work. Murau in *Extinction* is not extinguishing his past with one final piece of writing, as he informs us that he intends to do, but actually bringing it back to life. The doctor in *Playing Watten* is not taking care of formal business arrangements as he declares on the very first page, but opening the door to the inner and very disturbed workings of his troubled and isolated mind.

Bernhard's narrators, then, are too self-occupied to communicate properly. They miss out on the world and the people who have changed around them, and none so much as the narrator in "Reunion." He forces an elaborate, anger-fuelled and completely self-centered rant about the past and the present onto his silent listener, not discovering until the very end that the friend is no longer a friend, no longer wants any part of their shared life and, as far as the reader knows, may never have shared any of the feelings the narrator describes. As in *Murau's* case and the case of the doctor in *Playing Watten*, one gets the sense that Bernhard's narrator is experiencing what happens to Kafka's protagonist in "A Little Woman," an unsettling realisation that their perception of the world around them is painfully different from what other people see.<sup>32</sup> There is no evidence that Bernhard's narrators can join their listeners in another way of perceiving the world. They are doomed to be oblivious to other's experiences. They are doomed to be prisoners of their own experience.

The narrators are unable to change, while the world around them is unable to accept their rigidity. Bernhard was all too aware of people he used to admire, spend time with and trust, maybe even love, having turned out to be different people altogether a few years later. In the words of Wittgenstein, "I meet someone whom I have not seen for years; I see him clearly, but fail to know him. Suddenly I know him, I see the old face in the altered

<sup>32</sup> Kafka, Franz. "Die Kleine Frau." *Prager Tagblatt*, 1924. The story evolves around a narrator and a woman in his neighbourhood who he believes has become upset with him for reasons he does not understand. The story ends with his friend giving seemingly ill-fitting advice, suggesting the narrator move away, which is a drastic solution to a problem that can be safely considered a minor one. There seems to be more going on than the narrator is aware of. The feeling caused by the ill-fitting advice is similar to Bernhard's scenarios but in reverse, specifically in *Playing Watten*, where the listener gives the narrator surprisingly lighthearted advice to his grave problems, namely, the repeated, almost robotic invitation to just come play cards with the villagers again.

one. I believe that I should do a different portrait of him now if I could paint.”<sup>33</sup> The narrator in “Reunion” is too self-centered to notice how or when people he knew change. In his investigations Wittgenstein discusses a “special sort of seeing,” the kind that combines the past and the present and is both “seeing and thinking.”<sup>34</sup> Bernhard’s narrators are not able to do this. They are blind to much of reality.

Wittgenstein’s comment speaks to a sort of understanding of reality that accepts that reality can change over time with the help of a self-awareness that allows a picture of reality to come into being that is independent of personal history and pain. The narrator’s previous lives have become their present lives because they drag their past around with them. The author, Bernhard, does not drag his past into the present, even though he writes about it almost exclusively. He does something completely different. He treats people, places and events as musical *Leitmotifs*. The narrators are mock-authors who believe themselves to be the authors of the memoirs, letters, reveries, reports they construct for us. We know the author behind the narrator is *seeing and thinking*, looking forward and free to be able to create something new, while the narrator is *seeing and remembering*, meaning looking back. The narrator in “Reunion” is obsessed with freedom, but has not achieved it, the way he claims to after having left the parental home at a young age.<sup>35</sup> Listening to him, one feels he has never left. He removed himself physically from where he grew up, but his mind is consumed by his childhood and the people in it. There is little difference between the tone of “Reunion” and the tone of “Montaigne,” two stories in which the narrator is obsessed with his family, even though the narrator in “Montaigne” still lives at home, while the narrator of “Reunion” has not seen his family or his hated home for decades.<sup>36</sup> It is almost as if Bernhard mocks the narrator in “Reunion” with the narrator in “Montaigne,” heightening the parallels between the two narrators, showing that the

<sup>33</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 169.

<sup>34</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 169.

<sup>35</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 81.

<sup>36</sup> In “Montaigne” Bernhard’s narrator explains right from the start that he is forty-two years old and still living at home with a family that ruined him because they raised him badly. Even though the tone and the childhood discussed are exactly the same as in “Reunion,” “Montaigne” is interesting in that it has paragraph breaks, something very unusual for Bernhard. It also emulates perfectly Montaigne’s essay on child rearing, “On the Education of Children.”

runaway teenager in "Reunion" may as well have still been living at home in his forties, and there would have been no difference in the level of his obsession with his past.

Bernhard certainly did not tire of writing and talking about the same topics over and over again. But his intent must not be mistaken for his narrators' obsession. The plot of "Reunion" once again makes use of a painful childhood and of Austria and Austria's people. It is also the description of life as a catastrophe, Bernhard's way of dealing with unspeakable pain. A catastrophe is something so terrible that it becomes horrifying and comical at the same time. Much of Bernhard's humour from *Playing Watten* (1969) onward comes from a kind of comedic and theatrical approach to dealing with catastrophes that he lived through and writes about. Catastrophes can vary endlessly. Living in a world ravaged by war is a catastrophe and so is being given a death sentence, the way Bernhard was given one in his late teens when he fell ill. Witnessing something precious being violated, be it the health of his beloved grandfather that was ruined by incompetent doctors, or the death of a mother whom he never could get close to, those are catastrophes too. Having the only home a child knows turn into a place of suffering can be a catastrophe. In "Reunion" the narrator's childhood was one long nightmare, his home a "house of death," and music and art, things precious and magical to him, are deformed and abused by arrogance and lack of talent.<sup>37</sup> The narrator's reaction to his parents' often mundane actions is comical because he reacts as if to a catastrophe, when all they do is play music badly, rub each others' feet when they are cold, make a ham sandwich, or long for "peace and quiet." In *Extinction* Murau repeatedly returns to the painful memory of his mother disrespecting his favorite book by Jean Paul, *Siebenkaas*. The mother thought the name was too silly to be real and that the little boy Murau had made it up, where instead it was the beloved name of something which he thought to be sacred and that helped him survive lonely and misunderstood years. Murau reacts to this misunderstanding with the same venom that the fact that his parents were Nazi sympathizers elicits. Why the extreme outrage at such relatively mundane acts?

The sins committed by the parents are nothing compared to the horrors and the aftermath of the second world war that Bernhard experienced in his own neighbourhood,

<sup>37</sup> Bernhard, "Reunion" 65.

or the horrors of wasting away in a dirty hospital room and left to die without explanation or compassion or amends, which Bernhard had to endure in his late teens. And they are nothing compared to the horror of having to say good bye to his dying mother or grandfather or his life-long partner Hedwig Stavianick, subjects that Bernhard seldom wrote directly about. Bernhard experienced those catastrophes too, as well as the Austrian population generally sweeping war crimes under the rug. Some of these catastrophes are universally considered awful. But there are other ones, the catastrophes that must be endured quietly because only the victim knows how much suffering they cause. Being a neglected child is one of those and it is probably one of Bernhard's most prevalent themes that he picks up again in "Reunion."

At first it is almost difficult to garner pity for the narrator when he describes a childhood that provided food, shelter, education, hikes into the beautiful Austrian mountains and musical family gatherings. But the narrator is an overly sensitive, neglected, misunderstood and, something he brushes over: a mistreated child. Death is a catastrophe, but so is living without hope and in fear day after day after day, living as someone who is overlooked, in the best-case scenario, and misunderstood and punished in the worst. This is the life that the child in "Reunion" is sentenced to live. For a child left to fend for itself, even when it is not in imminent danger, the world is a scary place, devoid of warmth and of laughter with no one to turn to for advice or encouragement. The story uses the clinical and cold "procreators" in place of "parents" to describe parental figures who want to destroy their offspring. Bernhard describes how a newly formed baby is birthed as if from a litter and treated like an animal by the mother in "Reunion."<sup>38</sup> The planned and conscious destruction of children is an ongoing theme and one that he never takes time to disguise. He uses the same words every time in every one of his books in which a child is mentioned. In contrast, the love the child has for books and authors is deep, intimate and warm. Most often when a sad and abused child is mentioned in Bernhard's stories, that child is a dedicated reader. Childhood itself is depicted along with the child, and within childhood the birth of a deep love and a deep hatred. The child is hurt, confused and desperately seeks salvation from books, art and music. The adult has become emotionally crippled by hatred and, one can deduce from the way his mind is

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Die Autobiographie. Die Ursache. Ker Keller, Der Atem. Die Kalte. Ein Kind.* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 2009) 70.

occupied by the pain of the past, now has little time or energy left for the things that offered salvation when he was small.

Bernhard's writing is seen through the eyes of an angry adult who was once a sad child. The adult narrators reach back to their childhoods so often that it might be said that they never really grow up. The most extreme example is the forty-two-year-old narrator in "Montaigne" who still lives at home and is obsessed with hatred towards the family that has to put up with him. Bernhard cannot have been oblivious to the childlike quality of carrying a grudge. His well-known mood swings in his private life among friends is also a childish trait. He would often shut down a party or an interview because he got cranky like a tired toddler.<sup>39</sup>

In "Reunion" Bernhard makes another one of his "endless attempts to cope with a topic" dear to his heart.<sup>40</sup> In a way, his childhood can be considered his tragic muse. He tells of his childhood by inventing a narrator who shares certain similarities and then he transforms the loneliness and frustration of a neglected child into something that looks like a story but is more than an exact replica of the past, it is prosaic music that is performed on the page to the delight of the creator and those members of Bernhard's audience who have "an ear for music."<sup>41</sup> Bernhard's narrator is, as so often, featureless, and we are told nothing of his appearance. What we get is only a depiction of the inner world of the narrator, similar to Dostoevsky presenting the "self-consciousness" of a character, rather than the character himself.<sup>42</sup> We see not "who he is, but how he is conscious of himself."<sup>43</sup>

Describing "Reunion" as a piece constructed over a walking bass line, or a chaconne, is important, and so is understanding Bernhard's recurring themes, characters and opinions as musical Leitmotifs that he plays with like a child that picks up its favorite toy or an artist that keeps getting inspired by a favorite muse. Yes, Bernhard's muses are

<sup>39</sup> Krista Fleischmann's *Thomas Bernhard: Eine Erinnerung* (Wien, Edition S: 1992) is filled with interviews of friends and acquaintances who remember Bernhard's mood swings. On page 103 we find one instance where Gerda Maleta describes arguments with him.

<sup>40</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>41</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>42</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 48.

<sup>43</sup> Bakhtin 49.

sometimes repulsive, to him and others, but this adds a humorously morbid effect to his work and explains the contrasting reactions that emerge for different readers. A feeling of doom stems from the bassline consisting of the sad child's heartache and the contrasting, lighter voices are built over it and at times almost disguising it. This loneliness, which is never talked about directly in the story, makes up the bass line of what is essentially a prosaic chaconne, or a literary mirroring of music like "Dido's Lament" from Henry Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*. In "Dido's Lament" the bassline begins over and over again and is clearly and obviously recognizable. There was no need for Purcell to hide the repetition, because the repetition was used as the structural basis. The repeated bassline exemplified Dido's agony more than sad lyrics alone could have. In the case of "Reunion," the narrative does not need to be a sad one, and is instead often comical, because the underlying feeling of desperation exists beneath the adult narrator's nattering on about mundane resentments. Glimpses of even deeper sorrow when the boy's tear-stained face is mentioned, or the fact that his sister died, are used sparingly like a violin melody that breaks through a choral number to change the mood, but only for a few bars, before the nattering continues.

Bernhard's literary mood was not always morbid. His very first publications, the poem "My Piece of the World" (1952), and a few other early poems about Salzburg, are sentimental and idyllic. There the narrator has not yet experienced life as a catastrophe and he does not flee, shun or fear the world, but instead takes ownership of it. It is his world, he feels comfortable in it and curious about it. The poem is simple in style and rhythm and tells of a person looking, not unhappily, thousands of times into the same piece of the world through his window. He is not bored or bitter and annoyed with what he sees and overall the poem is cheerful. Soon after Bernhard's poetry almost immediately became dreary and filled with images of death and dying, something that is more than understandable as at the time he only barely escaped death as a young man in a sanatorium for tuberculosis. In "Reunion" the narrator is the adult version of the boy in "My Piece of the World" who has ended up betrayed by the world and blinded by his own bitterness and pain. A whole world of misery lies like an abyss beyond the borders of the world of that first innocent, trusting poem.

However, Bernhard's author behind "Reunion's" narrator, does not share his narrator's bitterness. Having arrived at a place where the acceptance of doom was inevitable, Bernhard chose to spend the energy and time left to him by entertaining himself with "life-saving amusement" as he followed his curiosity along the winding paths that make up his prose.<sup>44</sup> In his writing he dresses his likes and dislikes, his memories and experiences in theatrical garb and puts them to work as actors on a stage, the design of which was based on reality. The atmosphere is of the world of theatre, with all its dream-like qualities, its constant repetition and rehearsal and its insistence on entertainment. Bernhard's work incorporates suffering as one would a muse or a dear friend. He is not remembering, because remembering keeps the one who remembers hostage; the past cannot change. Bernhard is making prosaic music by *vorstellen*, *darstellen* and *schildern* (presenting, representing, and depicting) musically infused performances created from the seeds of his past experiences.

By making musical prose out of his past, Bernhard avoids the fate of the narrator in "Reunion" who is doomed to be a slave to his past. Bernhard is the creator of a musical depiction of his past. The pain has come and gone. This does not mean it has been forgotten, but it is not what drives Bernhard. The artistic act of re-inventing and staging the past and putting it to music drives him. He is making his own destiny, not just once, but many times over and "he does this the way he knows best," by staging himself, as Gitta Honegger puts it.<sup>45</sup> She speaks of two Bernhards when she analyses his writing, "the writer in the process of writing and the young man being written."<sup>46</sup> The "young man being written" about later, began staging himself early. He re-created, re-invented his world many times over, and not just in his writing.

The first time Bernhard re-invents himself and takes his destiny in his own hands is as a young boy when he embraces literature in a particularly intimate and rewarding way. Being an intensive reader is similar to inventing imaginary friends. All one has to do is choose temporarily to live in the book that those friends live in. This works for any

<sup>44</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>45</sup> Gitta Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian* (Yale University Press, 2001) 26.

<sup>46</sup> Honegger 26.

literature, children's books as well as philosophy. The urge to read and keep reading was strong and further encouraged by his beloved grandfather, the writer Johannes Freumbichler. The grandfather wrote, read and encouraged Bernhard to read. Young Bernhard devoured books and made them his own. When Bernhard in his writing or in interviews mentions Dostoevsky or Montaigne or Pascal, he speaks of them as if they were family members. The story "Montaigne" shows intimacy that only a certain kind of reader can understand, the kind of reader who has lived in books the way Bernhard does. In "Montaigne," the authors that the unhappy narrator has read since he was a small boy are described as his *real* family members. Many who read can say they are taken by, distracted by, educated by, entertained, enlightened, touched or moved by what they read. But not every reader will hold an intimate, lifelong bond with a dead writer they have never met, calling them lovingly *my* Henry James, *my* Dostoevsky, *my* Wittgenstein, *my* Montaigne.<sup>47</sup> "The dream of an intense, directly personal contact [with the dead] is...what drew us in the first place to the books we chose to read, the subjects we chose to study." For Bernhard, and his narrators, because the real world left so much to wish for and was so lacking, they found the passion, excitement, peace and companionship they craved there.<sup>48</sup>

Reading for this kind of reader is not a hobby, a way to pass time or education. It is a way of living. The reader who lives in a book reads it multiple times, because reading means visiting dear friends. He grieves when it ends and regrets having to return to the real world outside of the book. For him an intimate intellectual relationship is created that cannot happen with a more casual kind of appreciation. This reader becomes a specialist of his favorite books and authors.

Bernhard was a specialist. He was intimately familiar with the writers he loved, something that cannot happen through learning alone, but only through living in the books those loved writers have written. Who simply reads Wittgenstein will not be tempted to call him a brother, which Bernhard did.<sup>49</sup> But someone who lives in Wittgenstein's books will

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Goethe Schtirbt. Erzaehlungen*. "Montaigne" (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010) 46.

<sup>48</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, "The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England." *Critical Theory: A Critical Reader for Literary and Cultural Studies* (Oxford University Press, 1988) 24.

<sup>49</sup> Dreissinger 82.

feel the warmth, the softness of heart, the poetic brilliance, the emotional intelligence that goes beyond the highly developed and difficult to grasp philosophical and logical abilities Wittgenstein had. Deciding to embrace books this way was the first time Bernhard took control of his miserable life and created a world he could live in. This emotional tie to Wittgenstein is the musical foundation of much of his writing. More about that in Chapter Two.

Bernhard re-invented himself a second time. He was a teenager and suddenly left high school to begin a career as a grocer. Making money was not the incentive. After having been a brooding, reading, sad, sometimes bratty, often difficult child who felt like an unwanted outsider in his family, he staged himself as a personable, witty, helpful, popular teenager who was humble, hard-working and completely comfortable in a very social setting. Around the same time he started taking music lessons. He found a good music teacher, showed up for lessons, paid for them himself, and began to blossom and eventually thrive as an opera singer. He combined two worlds, that of the humble grocery store boy and that of the highly cultured artist. Both worlds were very social and he was comfortable in both. A few years later he became a theatre student, composer and performer at the Mozarteum, studying and socializing with other starving performers, composers, and poets, spending time with Vienna's avant-garde circle and participating in an all-around passionate period, intellectually, sexually and artistically.

Bernhard avoided the catastrophe of absolute failure that so many of his protagonists experience when they get stuck and see no way out and either remain a slave to their past or their unattainable dreams or die or kill themselves or others. The happy times as a grocery boy ended abruptly when Bernhard became seriously ill. This illness eventually ended his musical career as well, although his creative thread never stopped spinning, which saved him from ultimate failure. The possibility of failure was ever present in Bernhard's mind and writing. Failure became a musical trope in stories like *The Loser*, where the main characters experience musical failure, and *The Limeworks*, where the main character experiences literary failure, among other failures. Bernhard's protagonists often failed. In *Ja* and *Amras* the characters commit suicide, failing ultimately at everything one can possibly fail at, life itself. In *Amras* they fail even at that when two family members survive a planned group suicide pact. In *Playing Watten* and *Extinction*

and the story “Gone up in Flames...” the protagonists fail in slightly milder ways when it comes to writing letters and reports important to them.

In *The Loser*, Wertheimer tries to re-invent himself, much like Bernhard, but he fails where Bernhard succeeded. Bernhard transformed himself from neglected child to popular grocery boy to talented opera singer to paid journalist to published poet to celebrated novelist and author and infamous public figure. Every step of his path was made possible by his stubborn refusal to give up and his ability to change paths quickly and to wholeheartedly embrace each new twist and turn. Wertheimer, on the other hand, was trapped by a “musical resentment” that led to his “psuedo-philosophical embarrassment.”<sup>50</sup> Bernhard was humble and stubborn enough to do raise himself from the ashes of a failed career multiple times, while Wertheimer and many others of Bernhard’s protagonists are left with “the failing of mind and art projects”.<sup>51</sup>

There are a few reasons for Bernhard’s continuing on towards success, creative and otherwise, where others might have rolled over and blamed having been dealt a bad hand. First, Bernhard avoided forcing the creation of masterpieces and instead chose a fragmentary style that looks like it is thrown down onto the page casually without a real beginning, or end or point. Second, he thoroughly internalised the attitude that “everything is ridiculous when you think of death,” and from that point on a great amount of pressure was alleviated.<sup>52</sup> Someone who takes himself too seriously, the way almost all of Bernhard’s failed protagonists do, is in danger of having his artistic forces stifled. Bernhard wrote playfully because to him, compared to death and dying, everything else was a playful occupation. This does not mean he did not care about his writing or take the opinion of others about his writing seriously. My point is that he wrote playfully like a free man and that this gives his prose a lighthearted effect in spite of the morbid topics. And third, Bernhard avoided artistic failure because he did not use language to “understand and conquer” the world, but to create musical depictions and configurations.<sup>53</sup> He used language musically, not to convince and argue and prove a point, but to create a staged

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Bernhard. *Der Untergeher* (Suhrkamp, 1988) 155.

<sup>51</sup> Herzog 42.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Meine Preise* (Suhrkamp, 2009) 121.

<sup>53</sup> Herzog 40.

reality that differed from his lived reality because pain and horror were now themes and motifs for prosaic musical creations, no longer a nightmare to be endured. The audience that has an ear for music already shares Bernhard's points of view and understands the position language plays in his works: the musical component is what matters first and foremost.<sup>54</sup>

Bernhard's protagonists use language for another reason. They want to convince and impress and their plans for affecting the world with their writing are grandiose. Konrad in *The Limeworks*, Wertheimer in *The Loser* and Murau in *Extinction* all set out to write something great and are unable to follow through or, in Konrad's case, to begin at all. Words and the grandiose plans they have for their words failed them. Bernhard's writing plays with failure and alienation and the prison that not being able to get one's words to do as one wishes can create for a person. Besides alienating readers with his long sentences and complex grammar, he expects his readers to have an ear for music and to share his sense of humour and to put up with the same topics multiple times. No attempt is made by Bernhard to make his writing easy to love. He alienates his readers and he knows it, but what he does is done with a mischievous poker face. The Bernhard reader will see how Bernhard plays with alienation.

To make use of a musical comparison, one could say that Konrad, Wertheimer and Murau wanted to create symphonic masterworks in the style of Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerke*, while Bernhard created minuets and serenades and impromptus. Even Bernhard's longest work, *Extinction*, in spite of its length, feels closer to an impromptu than a symphony because the structure is loose and obviously works against narration, giving once again, as so often with Bernhard's prose, the impression that it consists of a bundle of casually jotted down notes and anecdotes.

Wertheimer and the unnamed narrator in *The Loser* are possibly Bernhard's most humble protagonists. Upon meeting Glenn Gould and recognizing what he is, they immediately sacrifice their own talents and give up what would have been successful careers as performers. Konrad in *The Limeworks* is Bernhard's most grandiose protagonist. He is seriously attempting to write the greatest book ever written on the sense

<sup>54</sup> Herzog 35.

of hearing. It is understandable that Konrad's creative juices freeze, and he fails to write more than a sentence. He forces his wife, who hates living in the factory and hates her husband's planned treatise, to partake in aural experiments that are supposed to provide the research needed for the creation of his book. The experiments consist of, among other things, listening to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* read aloud for hours on end, as well as listening to Mozart's Haffner Symphony in its entirety for hours on end. The story ends when the husband is found by the local police in a pool of manure behind the shed where he was hiding after having killed his wife. He is by far Bernhard's most humiliated failure, because of the added injury of having been found covered in manure. His exceptional grandiosity is punished with this additional insult. Bernhard comically reverses the love he has for Wittgenstein and Mozart and has his two silly, grandiose, misguided protagonists experience two things of the greatest beauty either as an empty experiment or a hated pastime.

Wittgenstein in his "Lecture on Ethics" talks about how devastatingly difficult it would be to set out to write the quintessential book on Ethics because "this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world."<sup>55</sup> To exemplify the impossibility of such an undertaking, Wittgenstein's lecture is also very short. This is the kind of pressure Konrad experiences until his shaky literary career explodes with a gunshot when he shoots his wife in a moment of desperation. The greatest book on the sense of hearing could not be written.

All of Bernhard's prose, even *Extinction* at over 600 pages, is fragmentary and feels unfinished. Andreas Herzog says that Bernhard's fragmented style "points towards the whole and the absolute and at the same time allows for completion within set boundaries."<sup>56</sup> Bernhard was able to finish, not in spite of so much being left unfinished and unsaid, but because of it. The pressure to say everything about a topic, a person would be not be possible. To accept the unfinished state beforehand is Bernhard's way of setting boundaries that he can adhere to. The boundaries of his stories are fluid, his stories seem to start and end when they feel like it. We are often joining a narrator mid sentence,

<sup>55</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lecture on Ethics*, (Chichester: Wiley and Sons, 2014) 3.

<sup>56</sup> Herzog 41.

mid thought and are kicked out of their worlds just as abruptly. I am not talking about what kinds of outline he had in mind before and during his writing, I am talking about how his writing feels in connection to the recurring topic of failure to complete.

Not every monumental book was designed as such. Thomas Mann said that *The Magic Mountain* was not supposed to be as long as it turned out to be. It just started growing under his hands. In *The Lime Works* Konrad sets out with the finished masterpiece in mind, and that was his dilemma and his reason for failure. Not everyone can write a masterpiece. Wittgenstein suffered from a similar dilemma, or so he thought, but not only was Wittgenstein a rare talent, which Konrad was not, but he did not let a dilemma stop him. In his introduction to *Philosophical Investigations* he states his dissatisfaction at how his thoughts are represented on the pages.<sup>57</sup> He wishes he could write something like a thesis, the way most philosophers usually put their ideas onto paper. Instead, we get point form and snapshots, scenes, dialogue and thought experiments that seem to be worked out in real time as they are written down. What ends up a unique and captivating and alive way to philosophize, was in Wittgenstein's mind less than ideal.

Let us return to Bernhard's reinventions. When the opportunity to become a novelist presented itself, Bernhard already knew he was a musician first and foremost and that only his bad health had prevented a career in his most natural field. As stated earlier, the pressure was off because "everything is ridiculous when you think of death."<sup>58</sup> He had already almost died. The striking sentence was designed as an insult to the guests at an Austrian award ceremony in 1968. In Bernhard's mind, they were unable to honour him properly in spite of giving him a highly coveted prize and money. His reaction also exemplifies the way he lived his life and worked his jobs. He played at being shop boy, court reporter and novelist. But his was not a casual game; he played with the intensity of a child completely absorbed in its game, or the way an actor is completely absorbed in his role. I do not mean to say there is something false about the way Bernhard lived, the same way there is nothing false about a great actor playing a part.

<sup>57</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Preface.

<sup>58</sup> Bernhard, *Meine Preise* 121.

Bernhard was a perfectionist the way he decorated his homes, the way he dressed himself, the way he cast his plays and the way he lived his life. What court reporter makes up stories instead of reporting the ones happening in the courtroom, and not in a way that garners him fame or respect, but more or less for fun? A court reporter who is *playing* court reporter, which is what Bernhard did in one of his first jobs after being released into post war Austria after having spent years in a hospital bed. When Bernhard did settle into a job, he did it properly, but at the same time he had a way of turning what he did into a game. Not out of disrespect towards whatever it was he was doing, but because he liked staging his life, rather than accepting his sad fate, much like a lonely and highly imaginative child who will invent imaginary friends rather than settling for none at all.

The narrator in "Reunion" seems to have invented too, invented a childhood other than the one he really had, including an imaginary friend, because the real person sitting in front of him many years later at the train station has no recollection of the detailed and numerous memories the narrator offers up as memories and expresses in the form of a theatrical monologue. But the narrator is not making something better out of his past. He is a slave to his past and re-lives memories. He is obsessed and alienated and alone. Bernhard was not obsessed, alienated and alone. He was not a "self-satisfied nihilistic misanthrope" and his stories were not dark, doomed and unfinished prose.<sup>59</sup> Bernhard was not the narrator in "Reunion." Bernhard is the author behind the narrator. The narrator is another comical, failed protagonist. The author is a creator, stager and director.

The quality the narrator has in common with Bernhard is the use of a "fascinatingly beautiful art-language" that was as self-aware as it was warm and alive.<sup>60</sup> That kind of artistic self-consciousness, if combined with talent and emotion, can sweep people away, and that is what Bernhard did for himself and also for the Bernhard audience. Bernhard's prose, then, is a musical depiction of an *art-language* turned into an *art-life*. He had staged his own life many times over before he became Bernhard, the author. As an author he continues what he had done since he first took charge of his life. He had long mastered

<sup>59</sup> Herzog 37.

<sup>60</sup> Herzog 35.

the art of staging his life, and now he started doing it musically in his prose, re-inventing himself as the understanding, but mischievously mocking figure behind the scenes.

Turning to the narrator in “Reunion” we see how he intended long before to get rid of his demons once and for all by running away from home. He left that home, but the demons came along on the journey. Bernhard did what the narrator could not, he made friends with his demons and gave them costumes, scripts and musical instruments. He takes that which he feared and creates the effect that Murau speaks about when looking at his dead parents’ photographs. Murau had long been repulsed by his parents while they were alive. After their death he sees a photograph of them and finds that they have been shrunken down and condensed to “ridiculous scraps of paper.”<sup>61</sup> Bernhard puts his demons onto paper by showing them as small, ridiculous, laughter-evoking creatures, sticking them into the pages of his books, and in the case of *The Limeworks*, into manure. They are based on something demonic, but have been magically turned into harmless scraps of paper. This cleansing process needs to be repeated over and over again, which results in the recurring Bernhardian themes we have come to know. In “Reunion” the repetition is presented in a particularly obvious musical form and this is why I consider it a folk music passacaglia. The narrator’s drive to keep returning to all the things he hates about his parents does not get him any closer to the freedom he craves and instead keeps him on a haunted merry-go-round he cannot abandon, but it also creates a formal structure, similar to a repeating bassline of a passacaglia. Handel’s “Passacaglia No.6.” is another good musical example of the structure I see in “Reunion.”<sup>62</sup> Something dark, heavy and enslaving has been turned into something controlled, cultured and sophisticated in the fact that it keeps recurring. This is what gives the piece its structure and mood, no matter what the other voices are doing.

Misunderstanding Bernhard’s aesthetic is easy. He made it easy himself. He dressed up and disguised the creative spirit that lives in his writing by using alienating

<sup>61</sup> Thomas Bernhard. *Ausloeschung. Ein Zerfall* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 29-30.

<sup>62</sup> A good example of a passacaglia is Jasha Heifetz and William Primrose playing Handel’s Passacaglia No.6, arranged for two violins by Johan Halvorsen: <https://youtu.be/HUF9neEN81I>. Here it is clear to hear the strictly enforced structural boundaries, as well as the range of emotion that such a formally controlled method can still entail.

tools like exaggeration and excessive repetition. “Essentially it is always the same prose,” Bernhard said.<sup>63</sup> He never tried to hide that fact. He also made sure the sentences were so long that even experienced Bernhard readers fluent in German sometimes lose track of where the sentences are going. Then he added comical exaggerations and alliteration that border on the non-sensical. But the “rationally enervating language constructions” and the “verbal spirals circling around their center” were created to entertain the Bernhard reader who understands them as purposefully distracting decorations and to weed out the other kind of readers who do not have an ear for music. These tools are not bad writing, but musical ornamentation.<sup>64</sup> Why are some readers driven to “enjoy without resistance” the same story that others are annoyed by?<sup>65</sup> The same way one can appreciate Mozart’s set of themes and variations on “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.” Some might find the repeated theme boring, others might understand the musical talent that it took for Mozart to create so much from so little.

Repetition does not need to be understood as boring or uninventive. In music one single theme can have many uses, can be the starting point for many different and varied pieces of music. Bernhard uses repetition, as a structural as well as an emotional tool. He uses a small number of themes. Repetition can offer a structural frame as well as intimacy. Certain feelings, opinions, places and character types keep appearing without shame, but with awareness. This repetition is not accidental, nor cruel. Instead, attempts to cope with a topic create “virtuoso musical variations” and make something new out of something already existing, which means that Bernhard is adhering to Theme and Variation.<sup>66</sup> He uses the same themes not for one work, but for most of them. Using the same old themes over and over again allows for an intimacy that only that with which one is “familiar and well-acquainted with” can bring.<sup>67</sup> We do not need to be surprised by something new every time, because the sense of intimacy coming from the repeated themes and characters and characteristics lead to a longed for security,” not boredom.<sup>68</sup> With a lesser writer this

<sup>63</sup> Dreissinger 77.

<sup>64</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>65</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>66</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>67</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>68</sup> Herzog 40.

may have become boring or annoying. But Bernhard pulls off a difficult task. He is like a designer who is restricted to a few types of fabric or colours only and still manages to create beautiful and intriguing collections. This is the Bernhard aesthetic: repetition, as well as exaggeration and elaborate syntax, are used as musical tools, while recurring memories, opinions, people and places have become musical *motifs*.

Bernhard does not use large scale musical forms. There is little evidence of sonata form or fugal structures in his works. Instead, Bernhard playfully takes events from “*der wirklichen Wirklichkeit*” (the real reality), as opposed to literary or poetic reality) and “transport[s] them into literary inventions” on a micro level.<sup>69</sup> He makes use of the smaller elements. He uses inversion, as in the example of Wittgenstein and Mozart, two of the most universally respected minds, who are hated by Konrad’s hopeless wife when her husband forces them on her. Bernhard makes use of repetition and adds words that he repeats, thereby ornamenting the repetition and escalating in the way a crescendo might. The sections about hiking and about knitting are examples of such escalation where a sense of rhythmical hysteria seems to add volume.<sup>70</sup> And the hiking and knitting theme is returned to at the very end, the way a composer would re-state a melody that had been introduced in the first few bars again to create a bookend effect.<sup>71</sup>

Bernhard also has one voice take over words that another voice throws in, as in the section of “Reunion” where the parents each take up the other’s statement about seeking “peace and quiet,” one voice taking another voice’s melody and repeating and expanding.<sup>72</sup> The effect caused by the parental voices from the past joining the narrator’s in the future creates duets and terzets. He modulates, develops, ornaments and works through a passage, ending up at another level, on another topic. The hiking passage leads into the knitting passage which leads to the dungeon passage. In music a heightening effect can be created without changing a melody by modulation, by moving the melody

<sup>69</sup> Bloemsaat-Voerknecht 76.

<sup>70</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 52 and 83.

<sup>71</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion,” 52-53, 83-84. The hiking theme leads directly into the knitting theme at the very beginning of the story and at the very end of the story both themes are stated again, but much shorter.

<sup>72</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 72-74.

into another key. Bernhard accomplishes this effect by slightly changing and rearranging the words that lead, guide a section, the *Leitwoerter*.<sup>73</sup> The German language lends itself perfectly for this maneuver, because new, very long words can be created by combining many short ones, almost randomly, sometimes. For instance, Bernhard takes the word *Hochebirge* and makes the word *Hochgebirgsleidenschaft* and many other similar words, all based on *Hochgebirge*. He is using the same word over and over again, but with this kind of variation the *Leitwort*, the musical theme, is able to move, therefore, modulate to another point. Bernhard's music is found within these subtle details, which, if misunderstood, can easily be mistaken for a strange and alienating writing style.<sup>74</sup> Exaggeration creates a crescendo-like effect as in music. And Bernhard's repetition is a musical tool. Without repetition music would not exist at all. A repeated harmonic progression or melody offers composers a foundation on which to develop a melody or ornamentation that "often represents, symbolically, the idea of life going on."<sup>75</sup> Bernhard's use of repetition is not hammering home a point, but creating familiar ground on which to build. Bernhard's prosaic music is based on a painful reality, but orchestrated and conducted and performed as something new. As is the case with Wittgenstein, the "weight" of Bernhard's thinking makes itself felt "in the detail, the accumulation and variation of examples in his own handling of the material he amasses."<sup>76</sup>

David Pole writes of Wittgenstein's style that "he comes to his problems equipped with the subtlety of a sophist, and confronts them with the naivety of a child. To this gift

<sup>73</sup> Bloemaat-Voerknecht 111.

<sup>74</sup> These musical elements are even more pronounced in Bernhard's plays and Liesbeth Bloemaat-Voerknecht's *Thomas Bernhard und die Musik* (2006), which is an excellent addition to any study of his musical aesthetic, elaborates on that.

<sup>75</sup> Marc Destrubé (Baroque specialist in theory and performance) has this to say about the difficult task of trying to define the chaconne and the passacaglia: "This is a slightly tricky question to answer. I can think of Chaconnes where the 'bas line' appears in another voice. I think they are basically interchangeable (and eg Couperin names some pieces '*Chaconne ou Passacaille*'), except that the French chaconne was used as a dance (eg at the end of an opera-ballet, and other composers used it as the final movement of a French suite of dances), in which case it invariably starts on the 2nd beat (of 3) and the first two bars have the rhythm: (rest)/dotted-quarter//quarter/dotted-quarter (as in the famous Bach Chaconne). But [one] can consider them as interchangeable, ie a repeating bass line (usually four bars long) with variations on that. More importantly, it often represents, symbolically, the idea of life going on." (email, March 2017)

<sup>76</sup> Pole 9.

his writings owe their freshness.”<sup>77</sup> Wittgenstein’s choice of words and examples, his way of tackling deeply rooted philosophical problems with the spirit of a child tackling building blocks is charming and, for some of us, filled with the freshness Pole speaks of. Similarly, musical elements allow Bernhard’s writing to have a freshness even though he deals with people long dead, with unbearable pain, with buildings that are described as monsters, childhoods that resemble the plot of a horror movie. Bernhard’s detailed descriptions create a bouncing rhythm that dances around the painful themes. I am especially thinking of the report-like style in *The Limeworks*, where seemingly mundane details are offered page after page in a detached, rhythmic manner and verbatim, not summarized. The descriptive account of the parents in “Reunion” making a ham sandwich, too, or the exact phrases that they use in different situations that are offered verbatim, are not summarized either. These sections act as emotionally charged rhythmic tools. If one can look beyond “Reunion’s” narrator’s glowing hatred for his parents, then the humorous, rhythmic playing with language can emerge. Wittgenstein needed exact detail to create a playful environment for his thoughts to travel from his mind, where he *felt* what he wanted to write, to the page, where he expressed it for others. To return to Pole, Bernhard’s handling of *the material he amassed* ended up as enabling the weight of the music to be *felt*. The repeated sections are often littered with repeated words that Bernhard pulled from what I call his “ugly word collection.” These words are thrown onto the page in a seemingly random way. Yes, they explain an emotional reaction of the narrator. But they are also used as a composer uses ornamentations, say, a certain type of trill, that does not vary from composition to composition.

“Reunion” is bursting with words that have negative connotations. The protagonist has much to complain about, so the words are useful for his purposes, but the words are also ornamental, as is Bernhard’s use of punctuation. The words dreadful, horrendous, gruesome, terrible, horrible, awful, disgusting, abhorrent can be said to be some of his favorites. “Reunion’s” particular repertoire consists also of: deadly, dungeon, hell, death, hate, cruelty, torture. His story also repeats positive words that have negative connotations only for the narrator, like the words “peace and quiet,” which the narrator’s parents repeat.

<sup>77</sup> Pole 9.

Some words, like “dungeon,” are at one point repeated eleven times in sequence within one page. Others, like the grouping “disgrace to the family,” are repeated three times in a row.<sup>78</sup> These repetitions appear as motifs that are developed, that modulate and get the narrator from one topic to the next. The word *Hochgebirge* (alpine mountains or high mountain range) is, as mentioned earlier, repeated in a special way.<sup>79</sup> The repetitions are used as alliteration to create a climactic effect. The narrator starts a segment with the original word “*Hochgebirge*” and modulates his way through the first of many passages that are supposed to describe how terrible his parents were, but only end up describing a relatively harmless hobby of theirs. Modulation works the same way in literature as it does in music. It takes a theme on a journey and ends up somewhere else.

In music “development” means that a theme is dissected, taken apart and put back together, sometimes starting out in a major key and in the end fitting seamlessly into a minor key. Bernhard develops the mountain theme as he dissects and manipulates the words, coining strange combinations and ending up in a knitting section that in turn is developed leading to yet another section. From *Hochgebirgsaufenthalt* to *Hochgebirgshabseligkeiten* to *Hochgebirgsabsicht* to *Hochgebirgswahnsinn* to *Hochgebirgsleidenschaft*.<sup>80</sup> None of these words themselves are non-sensical, but they become absurd as the narrator jumps from one to the next and lists them all within one sentence. The narrator’s intent is to express his hatred for his parents’ love for hiking, but instead we get a segment in which alliteration and comedic use of the word *Hochgebirge* create a playful mood. This section leads directly into the knitting section, where the words red and green and socks and caps are repeated.<sup>81</sup>

The passages that use a particular word repeatedly are certainly examples of how Bernhard works against narration. It hinders the flow of the story to repeat a word over and over again. But the flow is not Bernhard’s goal, or not a narrative flow, anyway. He is giving the unknowing narrator a rhythmic and musical monologue in which the artistic,

<sup>78</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 54-5, 57.

<sup>79</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 52.

<sup>80</sup> My translation: mountain-vacation to mountain-belongings to mountain-intentions to mountain-madness to mountain-passion.

<sup>81</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 53.

musical depiction of a childhood is the goal, not the memories themselves. The *Hochgebirge* and knitting passages are some of the most musical passages. The repeated words dominate the mood of the section the same way a composer changes the mood when a certain instrument is suddenly featured. The word “dungeon” could be the entrance of a sad bassoon theme that intertwines with the already existing melodies, and the repeated *Hochgebirge* is brighter, maybe a bouncy tuba part, because, as much as the narrator expresses his hatred for those trips, he is unable to describe them in a negative light and his camping and hiking memories are among the most comical parts of the story. There seems to be a lightness behind the angry ranting. To make the reader share the narrator’s hatred and sympathize with him, a whole other approach would have been chosen. This is one example of how it is important to be aware of the author behind the narrator and that the two have different goals.

The narrator harps on about mundane activities while confidently declaring them to be disturbing. The way the parents make a ham sandwich or give each other foot rubs when they are cold, or play their musical instruments elicits disgust in the narrator. His reaction is comical because it is so extreme. And the fact that the mothers enjoy knitting what he calls garishly red and green socks and caps is not hate-worthy either, no matter how confidently the narrator declares it to be so. The words “garishly red” and “garishly green” are repeated and in even quicker succession than in the case of the *Hochgebirge*.<sup>82</sup> The narrator tries to express hatred, but the author behind the narrator intervenes and allows the reader to instead get a glimpse into the lives of people who have hobbies like knitting and hiking, the way many Austrians do. These are not the worst parents. They give their children a home where food, education, exercise, discussions about Mozart, Goya and creativity are offered. And the rest of the world seems to like these parents, because there is mention made of the appreciated position they hold in their community.

The narrator is further undermined by his own exaggerations. There are “hundreds” of caps and socks, enough for “thousands of years’ worth of hikes.”<sup>83</sup> The exaggerations are often combined with sweeping and bizarre generalizations. The parents are accused

<sup>82</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 52-3, 83-4

<sup>83</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 83.

of always having blamed the children for “everything” and parents in general are accused of always killing their children, the way they “killed” the narrator’s sister when she was twenty-one.<sup>84</sup> It is implied by the author behind the narrator that the sister died and the narrator blames the parents, but without any evidence. What Bernhard is doing is equivalent to declaring a character as a villain at the beginning of an opera, but then giving him beautiful melodies to sing.

Topically “Reunion” is the opposite of Bernhard’s very first publication, but musically it is similar. “*Mein Weltenstuck*” is a short poem filled with sentimental longing expressed through simple language, simple rhymes and in short lines, but musically it is just as much a piece of prosaic folk music. The poem is a relatively optimistic, albeit serious, depiction of a small innocent boy’s view of the world he lives in. “Ten thousand times the same view into my little piece of the world” does not aggravate or irritate the narrator of the poem. He has a sense of wonder. He looks forward to the same old view day after day. He does notice and is sensitive to the sadness of the world when he addresses a “poor man” crying in the cellar “because he no longer can sing a song,”<sup>85</sup> but this sadness he encounters does not destroy his curiosity or make him bitter. But by the time we arrive at *Gargoyles* (1967), the first half of which describes a Austrian village in detail, the village has revealed itself to be a horrifying, decrepit place of suffering, the country folk are dumb, cruel creatures who wear masks and pretend to be humans, and by the time we arrive at “Reunion,” even family members are dangerous monsters who do not allow the innocent children to escape. It is interesting that in *Gargoyles*, “family” is not yet the enemy, the way it is in almost every later work of Bernhard.

What connects the first poem and “Reunion,” however, is that they both remind of literary folk music. That poem is the poetic equivalent of a simple folk melody, maybe a *Ländler* or a polka, a pretty and simple, short piece filled with a certain folksy charm for those who love Austrian folk music. Folk music is cringe-worthy for those who dislike its constant presence in rural areas and the simplicity, which can be mistaken as sentimental

<sup>84</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion 76.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Gesammelte Gedichte*, “*Mein Weltenstueck*” (Suhrkamp, 1991) 5. My translation.

kitsch, vulgar, banal or primitive. Austrian and German folk music tends to polarize its listeners and cause strong feelings. Czech folk music, on the other hand, does not have the same contrasting effect.<sup>86</sup> There is something unique about Austrian folk music that Bernhard takes advantage of.

Some Austrians past and present, myself and Bernhard included, grew up in the Austrian countryside where almost everybody plays a guitar, trumpet, violin or zither and almost everyone participates in amateur folk music gatherings. A zither is featured in “Reunion.” The parents in “Reunion” are typical Austrians. For them folk music is a predominant pastime and the soundtrack to every event and present in every home and establishment, ranging from pubs to proms to discotheques to television shows. One either loves it or hates it, and some simultaneously love it for its sweetness and abhor it for the stubborn arrogance with which it is highlighted in Austrian country and village life. Because of its characters that are deeply steeped in rural village life, “Reunion” can be likened to a *landler*, a dance for couples characterized by hopping, that can be instrumental or include vocal parts and yodeling.

In “Reunion” Bernhard plays with this love-hate relationship toward the kind of arrogance that allows untalented people to pull out the trumpe and the zither, two conveniently portable instruments, often in order to “be musical” together in public.<sup>87</sup> Bernhard does not hate folk music or people who play it, he hates the kind of people who think themselves to be natural musicians, while they are mediocre and only able to play self-complacent music. Music played badly by people who think they play it well insults the narrator. Bernhard was a natural musician with very high standards and he was unforgiving when he encountered any evidence of the vulgar arrogance that the parents in “Reunion” display. They take their bad music everywhere. They do not even go on treacherous mountain hikes without their instruments. Austrian folk music is like that, it literally is everywhere, easily leading to cultural oversaturation even in the best of times, even when it is not accompanied by unhappy events, as in in Bernhard’s story. Besides suffering from many other crimes, the narrator in “Reunion” also suffers from aesthetic

<sup>86</sup> Having been raised both in Austria and in the Czech Republic my sense is that there are different attitudes to folk music.

<sup>87</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 73.

terror every time his parents force their music on him. The instruments are repeatedly pulled out, to the delight of the parents and to the horror of the child.

Bernhard does not abhor folk music or the national pride that is expressed through folk music, only the arrogance that sometimes accompanies both, as in the case of the parents in "Reunion." Folk music sounds very much the same, and sometimes, so does Bernhard, but this is not a bad thing. Musical forms like rondo and variation, and theme and variation, both used in folk music in simplified versions, come equipped with special notation that signifies the performer to repeat whole sections. The listener is supposed to hear repeated sections because then the variation has more of an effect. Musical forms are not out to surprise the listener, but to create a familiar, recognizable background upon which variations can stand out. In the same way, Bernhard is not out to surprise readers with new themes that he has discovered and researched. Instead, his work banks on repetition and on being recognizable. For Bernhard repetition adds familiarity. It is possible for repetition not to feel "oppressive," but for an audience to find in it "longed for comfort" and the "safety of the familiar."<sup>88</sup>

Because of its beauty and simplicity and its potential to carry strong emotions, folk music is a good starting point for variations. This is one reason why it is present in many other types of music. The composers Bernhard respected and loved and used frequently, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Bruckner, to name a few, were part of the educated and cultured musical elite, but they used folk melodies or folk music forms in their intellectual compositions as themes or motives, thereby blending the two types of music the way a bilingual person would blend two languages.

Mozart's opera "The Magic Flute" begins with a sophisticated and dark overture that is soon followed by Papageno's aria, which is as simple as it is lovely. It could easily be played as a folk tune by a fiddle and a zither for a group of village dancers dressed in national garb. It has a melody that would not be amiss in folk music. Mozart composed sophisticated as well as simple music. Bernhard blended two languages, the simple Austrian dialect, which offers a comedic range all its own, and the high German spoken by educated people with the kinds of literary minds that read and love Wittgenstein,

<sup>88</sup> Herzog 40

Dostoevsky, Montaigne, Schopenhauer, not only understanding, but internalizing these readings. Much of Bernhard's writing can be likened to Papageno's aria, and some to highly cultured coloratura arias that would befit the Queen of the Night.

The previous sections explain Bernhard's statement: "[i]mportant is not what I write, but how I write it."<sup>89</sup> Bernhard's private life is there, in every book, but not for the sake of repeating or conjuring up the past. He is only "narcissistic" in the sense that his life and its pains are important enough to keep bringing them up. The prosaic music he creates is a combination of the prosaic reality of lonely separation from a misunderstanding world and the glow of a musical dream. The dreamlike quality that inhabits so much of Bernhard's work is able to transform hard and cold words into a busy and cheerful score on which painful memories co-exist with the new musical reality as happy little notes that come alive over and over again in order to perform.

For Herzog, Bernhard's use of the same old painful memories, events and opinions is an attempt to bridge the "insurmountable distance between the reality of prosaic isolation and the vision of a musical dream."<sup>90</sup> Bernhard's musical dreams are based on reality and just as a piece of music is based on a theme that is repeated and modulated and ornamented, Bernhard's dreams repeat, but only because they are a part of his aesthetic, not because of a refusal to let go of the past. This is why a story like "Reunion" can happily hop along while also dealing with tragic subject matter and why the reader is left not heavy-hearted, but entertained and amused.

When Bernhard takes yet another stab at the same old topics that is not just a literary way of making use of theme and variation, it also creates a kaleidoscopic effect. Kaleidoscopes function because of strict structure, because of the mirroring of a few pieces held against a light source and because of a continual spiraling motion. These elements define what Bernhard does with a story like "Reunion." Sad memories are held up to a new light source and transformed. The alternating of the green and red knitwear that both sets of parents talk about and wear is described to an almost dizzying degree. Scenes about red and green socks and caps and mittens are strung together creating a

<sup>89</sup> Dreissinger 57.

<sup>90</sup> Herzog 43.

polyphony of colour. The negative emotions of the narrator mingle and get mixed up with the humorous effect the section has on the reader, giving the impression of an angrily and abruptly handled green and red kaleidoscope. The effect is a positive one, because it is not the narrator's rage that drives this section, but the music.

But why is the knitting anecdote so upsetting to the narrator? One reason very mundane and harmless things are picked on so brutally by the narrator is that there is another kind of pain in the story, pain of an unspeakable nature. The irritation experienced by the narrator when remembering badly played music, the making of ham sandwiches or the knitwear is both a digression from and a transference of pain. "Reunion" is full of those crimes that are too terrible to forget, but at the same time too small to speak of. On the one hand, the narrator's childhood was a sheltered one where much was offered. But looked at from another angle, the childhood was hell. The neglect and continual disagreements followed by punishments caused by mutual misunderstandings between himself and the enemy parents created a hopeless loneliness for the boy the narrator used to be.

In some of Bernhard's works the enemies range from parents to artists and politicians, past and present, even to Goethe and Heidegger. In "Reunion" the enemies are the parents. For them, as far as the child can tell, the world is full of wonder and reasons to feel confident, content and safe. If only facts are taken into account, the parents have made and raised children, participate in the beautiful realm of art and music and their creations are respected by their community. They have satisfying hobbies consisting of drawing, writing poems, knitting and hiking, and are social creatures that experience friendship. They are enlightened enough to crave concepts like "peace and quiet."<sup>91</sup> The child hears all about how the world seems to the adults, but for him the world is cold and cruel and devoid of hope. He becomes especially infuriated when the parents speak of the peace they crave. The child cannot even feel safe and the parents, instead of caring for the child's needs, or even inquiring after the child's needs, are chasing their personal nirvana. The child is outraged because while he is struggling alone in a scary world, the adults have the luxury of searching for high philosophical ideals.

<sup>91</sup> Bernhard, "Reunion" 72-74.

Bernhard allows us to see a surprising amount of how the so-called evil parents in “Reunion” live their not-so-evil lives, because since the late 1960s Bernhard works with what Herzog calls a “self-ironic monolog.”<sup>92</sup> From *Playing Watten* (1969) on we find in Bernhard’s novels an author behind the narrator. Bernhard’s mock-authors are a tool in Bernhard’s playful musical depictions. The grudges they have are interchangeable. They seldom have names, or particular attributes. They are “dehumanized” in some ways by not having names, hair color, clothing, friends, or addresses.<sup>93</sup> Any novel could be listing another’s resentments. Yes, some resentments are specific to the protagonists, like the doctor in *Playing Watten* who is forbidden to practice, or Murau in *Extinction* dealing with his parents’ death and their past, or Wertheimer’s dealing with the fact that he witnessed greatness that ended up crushing him. But all of them soon start complaining about people and Austria in general, making use of the usual Bernhardian bag of tricks that he draws from for all his prose and plays. Some sections of *Playing Watten* and “Reunion” could be dropped into *Cutting Timber* or *Extinction* without interrupting the overall story lines. All have the same grudges and use the same vocabulary and speech rhythm.

By dehumanizing and ridiculing his narrators Bernhard reveals his sense of humor about himself. The grudges he gives his narrators stem from real pain he experienced and they are born from what Bernhard considers ethical dilemmas. Neglecting children, making fatal mistakes when practicing medicine, betraying friends and family, participating in genocide and not making appropriate amends afterwards are just a few crimes that have left Bernhard a changed man emotionally and physically. These grudges are no laughing matter. Composers do not use a theme repeatedly for no reason, only if it had an impact on them. The same goes for Bernhard’s themes. He did not choose them casually, but choosing them for emotional reasons is not equal to wanting to make a point or affect a change in the world or the people whom he felt had harmed him at one time or other. He had no intention to change the world. Instead, his drive is rooted in a desire to compose a new world.

<sup>92</sup> Herzog 38.

<sup>93</sup> Bloemsaat-Voerknecht 75.

Bernhard considered those people laughable and fake who profess to use their writing to make the world a better place. When asked if he wanted to induce change in the world he said no, “because the world goes its own path” and believing oneself to have the power to change the world was for him akin to having illusions of grandeur.<sup>94</sup> Bernhard said the most he can do is put down his impressions. Therefore, Bernhard is not the angry obsessed narrator, but a figure who is surrendered and laid back, a wiser man who quietly knows that the world cannot be changed by his opinions or feelings. He describes the sufferings and frustrations of a “stray isolated figure” that is left to its own devices, has no support group and has no hope to create change for even himself, let alone the world around him. But Bernhard does so playfully, not with clenched teeth. He uses language musically, rather than to convince, “understand or conquer.”<sup>95</sup> Had he used language to understand and conquer a subject, then what happens in his prose would be paradoxical, absurd and generally speaking, a failure.<sup>96</sup> But he is not using language for those ends. Bernhard’s heavy topics, the loneliness of his protagonists and the pain described between the lines are real and harsh, but the musical depiction they are subjected to creates something new that is exuberant and mischievous and just as far from a pure autobiography as it is from a treatise. He is in fact continuously deconstructing autobiography.

Something else that happens out of sight is that Bernhard often “exposes the perpetrators as victims and the victims as perpetrators.”<sup>97</sup> The narrator in “Reunion” sees the child that he was as a victim only and the parents as perpetrators only. Bernhard’s opinion of children is surprisingly opposite to what his adult narrator in “Reunion” would say. Bernhard said that “[c]hildren threaten the parents much more than the parents threaten the children, because the children are cleverer than the parents.”<sup>98</sup> Bernhard has the narrator in “Reunion” say that his parents only had children in order to destroy them, but Bernhard also allows the reader to see the parents from a different angle. They do not

<sup>94</sup> Fleischmann 131.

<sup>95</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>96</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>97</sup> Herzog 39.

<sup>98</sup> Fleischmann 79.

seem like people whose home it is fair to call a “house of death.”<sup>99</sup> The narrator is not a liar, but the way he understands the world around him is distorted.

Had Bernhard only wanted to point out the faults of the enemies, he could have chosen simpler plotlines, instead of ones where the victims and the enemies are so closely intertwined and more often than not actually related. The parents in “Reunion” are described as perpetrators, but they lived good lives. In *Extinction* the enemy is obviously the relatives Murau hates, who joined, and later protected, Nazis. But Bernhard makes Murau those same people’s son. He is directly related to them. Bernhard blurs the line of victims and perpetrators often in this way. Similarly, the doctor in *Playing Watten* has been victimized by the world, but there are also very serious malpractice allegations that are mentioned in passing, which the doctor concedes to.

Herzog likens Bernhard’s prose to a musical dream and the fact that the narrators are often so obviously confused by reality is one way that Bernhard’s writing is dreamlike. The dreamlike qualities appear in other ways as well. They are found in scenes that take a subtle turn away from the realistic. *Playing Watten* and the four stories in *Goethe Dies* are particularly good examples of an absurd quality. Sometimes a feeling emerges that is similar to the feeling one gets in Kafka’s “*The Judgment*,” where the father figure suddenly begins behaving in a bizarre way towards the end of an account that started out peacefully, almost mundanely, and ends with the undertones of a horror story. The father in Kafka’s story begins to grow in front of his son’s eyes and seems to have become someone else, not the fragile old man who the narrator was familiar with, but a rude stranger who judges the son viciously with seemingly no love in his heart. In “Reunion” the narrator tries to give the parents the same kind of bizarre quality, but when he describes the way they make a ham sandwich and the way they rub each other’s feet, it is his extreme reaction, not what the parents are doing, that ends up being bizarre. In addition to that, the narrator constantly refers back to his silent listener for approval. The approval is never given. The narrator’s aversion is what ends up being strange, not the parents, who if anything, seem a little on the boring side. In “Gone up in Flames. Travel Report to an Old Friend,” the last story of *Goethe Dies*, the dream like quality is not just alluded to, but the entire story is the

<sup>99</sup> Bernhard, “Reunion” 65.

description of an actual dream. In this case the dream effect is heightened by the fact that the dream is filled with a number of ludicrous as well as horrifying events that are described as pleasurable and satisfying. These narrators are not a literary extension of Bernhard, but a tragic-comedic figure in Bernhard's variations and re-creations, a figure that exists somewhere between memory and imagination and dream.

In "Reunion" the hatred against the parents' crimes is so extreme that the dream like quality resembles a rage-filled fever dream. What are the crimes exactly? There is one instance of outright abuse mentioned, but it happened to the friend, not to the narrator, so we get second-hand information about the time when the friend's parents almost beat the friend to death with a stick.<sup>100</sup> Other examples of abuse are occasional slaps, unnamed threats or metaphors. The abuse is also described in a roundabout way. The effects on a child are described, instead of the actual instances of abuse. The child is metaphorically speaking, suffocating, is hungry and thirsty and not given food and drink right away, tortured with insults, like being told the parents are ashamed of him. Once the child is described as literally trembling and too afraid to comb himself.<sup>101</sup> Other, clearly exaggerated instances of abuse that verge on the comical are described, like having to stare at "deadly art" that the parents hung in their home.<sup>102</sup> The parents are also described as educated and artistic, discussing amongst themselves the likes of Goya, Goethe and Mozart, so the art cannot have been that terrible.<sup>103</sup> The internal effects, the loneliness, the hopelessness, anxiety and fear are there between the lines and not discussed, while the ham sandwiches and the knitwear are elaborated on endlessly. This is an example of the unspeakable crimes so terrible that they cannot be discussed. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must stay silent," this is what Bernhard's narrator does when he avoids what is too terrible to deal with. In this case the great pain that the child had to endure is alluded to, but set aside for ridiculous accusations. The narrator seems to hate the parents the most for thinking themselves to be good poets, musicians and artists, for seeking

<sup>100</sup> Bernhard, "Reunion" 59.

<sup>101</sup> Bernhard, "Reunion" 56, 57, 58. Other similar instances are found throughout the story.

<sup>102</sup> Bernhard, "Reunion" 60.

<sup>103</sup> Bernhard, "Reunion" 61.

peace of mind and for knitting and hiking and rubbing each other's feet on a cold day.<sup>104</sup> These non-crimes are what the narrator is most obsessed with. These strangely petty resentments are focused on almost entirely.

These are a few examples of Bernhard's narrators' feverish and irrational climaxes into "condemnation and exaggerations" that border on the ridiculous.<sup>105</sup> Had Bernhard's main goal been to demonize the parents the way the narrator tries to do, he would not add the narrator's feverish exaggerations. But Bernhard's aesthetic goal is not to accumulate evidence in order to build a case against the people who harmed him. Instead, the aesthetic goal creates prosaic music based on the theme: childhood grudges. Bernhard exposes the child as a victim and the adult that the child has become as its own perpetrator. The child was neglected and hurt, but the adult version of the child keeps the memory of the pain alive. Had Bernhard wanted to depict a truly negative picture of these parents as perpetrators, he could have. He would not have used musical depiction, but a language more clear and concise, more like a lawyer's language, not a composer's. We know that he was aware of and comfortable with that kind of language from his years spent in courtrooms. His very early prose has the nature of court reports. In "Reunion" Bernhard instead gives us a narrator whose resentments and grudges seem unbalanced and whose memories as a whole are called into question at the very end. Bernhard is playing with the themes, not just making a point. But at the same time Bernhard's aesthetic reveals a moral injury to the child. The sadness and loneliness is given weight and compassion. The exact nature of the wrongs, the exact boundary between victim and perpetrator may be blurred, but the sad child that Bernhard was and that the narrator still carries inside of himself, is given a voice. This must not be forgotten in all of Bernhard's playful music making.

By infusing his prose with music, a softer, purer quality surfaces. The earlier "*Leidensdruck*," the pressure to suffer, has gone and Bernhard emerges as a "cheerful sovereign."<sup>106</sup> But why not compose music? Bernhard composed as a young man and could have continued to compose and play music. The reason he used both, words and

<sup>104</sup> Bernhard, "Reunion" 72, 74.

<sup>105</sup> Herzog 39.

<sup>106</sup> Herzog 40.

music, is that “writing is even more fun than something like playing the cello, because the thought is added.”<sup>107</sup> It is also easier to cause mischief if one uses words, because words have the ability to be very specific and direct, and Bernhard was fond of causing mischief. If, among other goals, one has a message one wants to get across, the way Bernhard did, one needs a more concise language than music alone. Bernhard wanted to say “I have been hurt” and “you are phonies” and “you are evil doers who have never been punished appropriately, and the least I can do is prevent the truth from being silenced.” Music has powers that can purify darkness, but for someone wanting to hand out specific insults in a direct and concise matter, words are more useful. Bernhard’s lifelong passion for a public exchange of opinion in a number of different newspapers, his *Leserbriefschlachten*, prove that.<sup>108</sup> The writing in those public feuds is not musical, but very much like a verbal sword fight or a fencing exercise or, sometimes, a bar fight. Bernhard stabs and punches and every detail is designed to insult his opponent. He did hold his own opinion in high regard, but his prose is not the place where his opinions mattered the most. His prose is where he plays and builds and creates worlds in which his opinions are just one of the foundations for his prosaic music.

I have shown how Bernhard’s prose is created from the belief that “words must be the music’s dutiful daughter.”<sup>109</sup> Making music is all about repetition, repetition of theme or rhythm or of whole sections. Seeing Bernhard’s writing as prosaic music means understanding how there are invisible *Wiederholungszeichen*.<sup>110</sup> “Reunion” is musical extravaganza, a polyphonic creation of contradicting themes, change of direction, musical ornaments, repetition, modulations and changes in tempo and volume. The narrator’s voice moves quickly and is the loudest; the child he describes is grave and quieter. The parents’ voices are woven in between and are grandiose, but cheerful. All of this does not add up to an angry rant, but to a musical way of dealing with a catastrophe, a musical

<sup>107</sup> Herzog 40.

<sup>108</sup> The book *Sehr Gescherte Redaktion: Leserbrief-schlachten um Thomas Bernhard* (Wien: Edition S, 1993) has many examples of how the public exchange of letters between Bernhard and a number of newspapers or celebrities would get heated.

<sup>109</sup> Bloomsaet-Voerknecht 105.

<sup>110</sup> “*Wiederholungszeichen*,” musical notation consisting of two lines and two dots, that indicates when a section is to be repeated, rather than writing the whole section out twice.

depiction that transforms heavy pain into something bearable. It is a critique of Austria and also a kind of reverse love letter to Austria. Bernhard imagines and transforms and “performs himself in the act of writing.”<sup>111</sup> No topic is too personal or taboo. Memories, truth, facts, falsehoods, perpetrators and victims, everything can be turned into a musical performance. In the world of theatre, the show must go on, and in Bernhard’s performative, theatrical and musical prose, it does. The words in “Reunion” cannot be taken out of their musical context, because they obey, are guided, lead and shaped by Bernhard’s musical aesthetic.

<sup>111</sup> Matthias Konzett. *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2002) 171.

## **Interlude: *Whereof One Cannot Speak, Thereof One Must Make Music***

I show how Bernhard's prose is a kind of day dreaming that uses language to go beyond the rational world. His musical dream is a life-affirming way of finding a "solution to irrevocable tensions" that does not make use of complete darkness and death.<sup>112</sup> It is also a way of touching on questions of "doubting and non-doubting" that Wittgenstein dealt with from *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* until *On Certainty*.<sup>113</sup> What can one know? What can one be certain of? All of Bernhard's narrators leave room for doubt when it comes to their knowledges and view of their own past and the facts that they supposedly have accumulated in an attempt to bring down the enemy. The more stubbornly they defend their view and the feelings that come from their view, the more doubt the author behind the narrator allows to seep through the cracks of their speech. We have seen how Bernhard's prose uses these questionable, yet stubborn narrators. There are facts that Bernhard leaves untouched and defends, but not in the usual way one would defend a position. When he allows his respect and love for Wittgenstein to shine through his writing, he does it not by shouting it from the rooftops or giving verbal declarations, but by using a Wittgenstein mood and Wittgenstein motifs.

When Bernhard says in an interview that "everything written is false," he is not negating that language has a purpose.<sup>114</sup> But all that is written is false, if the narrator is wrong. However, if the author behind the narrator is not giving us facts, but prosaic music, then is the writing still false, or is it something else altogether? Bernhard's narrators are always very sure of what they are saying and remembering. They are certain they are right. Bernhard plays with that certainty. Wittgenstein also asks: what if I am dreaming, can what I think I am saying still be true or false?<sup>115</sup> Bernhard's narrators often speak as if in a dream state and sometimes they describe actual dreams. In no way does this deter them from believing themselves to be the sole authority on what they are declaring, expressing, recounting, venting. The author behind these narrators is expressing

<sup>112</sup> Herzog 43.

<sup>113</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 46.

<sup>114</sup> Fleischmann 86.

<sup>115</sup> Wittgenstein *On Certainty* 90.

something different that seeps through from behind the scenes and that the narrators are completely oblivious to.

Bernhard's memories and opinions that make up so much of his work because he gives them to his narrators, are never to be mistaken for facts. They are always musical performances. Let us look at one opinion that he voiced.

In *Old Masters* (1985) Bernhard has Reger declare a deep and passionate hatred for Heidegger, the famous, and in some circles infamous philosopher who did so much for the philosophical world, but chose to side with the Nazi regime when other choices presented themselves to the already world-famous man. Bernhard had often voiced disdain for Heidegger as well as the Nazi regime and the people who participated. He hands over his opinion to Reger, but allows Reger's diatribe to end up ridiculous. The intelligent well-read narrator ends up on a comical rant about Heidegger's wife's knitting habit and an exaggerated number of knitted socks and caps she created for her husband who supposedly wore them. Bernhard turned his opinion into a performance, a musical depiction. But Bernhard may as well have used Wittgenstein's words and said that "[t]he picture is a model of reality," not to be mistaken with the actual past or the actual people. The "picture is linked with reality; it reaches up to it," but it is not the same as reality.<sup>116</sup> In other words, "all ultimately meaningful elements of language [must not] be such that they represent elements of reality." They can in fact be their own thing, take on a life and a reality of their own.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, the author behind "Reunion's" narrator knows something the narrator does not know. The author knows that the memories that the narrator is voicing are not representing the reality of past experiences, that they have instead become something else in the narrator's mind, have been grown and cultivated by the narrator for decades. Bernhard's memories are not what fill the pages of his books, as much as it may seem. Bernhard's depictions of his memories are what he takes and puts to music, creating musical prose that is connected to real life and real pain, but only barely touches the "outermost points" of it.<sup>118</sup> Bernhard is playing with language and his language games

<sup>116</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1981) 39.

<sup>117</sup> Pole 10.

<sup>118</sup> Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* 39.

culminate in stories like “Reunion” and “Goethe Dies.” The reader is put in a position to see and feel doubt, but the truth of the music remains.

“Goethe Dies” is not primarily a story about death, it is about Wittgenstein’s eternal influence and the position he holds for Bernhard. But death is as good a starting point for the story as any. Not only was the story penned in honour of the anniversary of Goethe’s death, but death is a driving force for Bernhard. A dying man for many years who knew he would die young, he had, what in an interview with Krista Fleischmann, he called an invisible *Todesvogel* on his shoulder at all times, a *little vulture* reminding him of his coming demise. But his prose did not grow bitter.<sup>119</sup> He continued on, relatively cheerfully, in the face of certain doom, and so did Wittgenstein. When dying of cancer and told he had months to live, Wittgenstein expressed innocent gratitude to have that much more time to work on what would end up being *On Certainty*.<sup>120</sup> *On Certainty* dates the sections so that the reader can follow along with how close to death Wittgenstein was with each page.

During the interview with Krista Fleischmann Bernhard casually mentions how close to death he feels at all times. Bernhard is smiling and jovial. What he says is very serious, but he says it with warmth.<sup>121</sup> He has made friends with his demons after all and this moment caught on tape shows that. He is both, an “exaggeration artist” describing irritation bordering on rage caused by something mundane and harmless, like Heidegger’s socks, or the ham sandwich in “Reunion,” as well as someone who downplays what is the most frightening, like death itself, and the most grand. “Everything is even worse than he describes it. He does not emote for the sake of effect. Instead, he tries, in a childlike way, to neutralize the horrible by voicing it. Fear makes two reactions possible: to close one’s eyes or to be brave and face what one fears with a scowl.”<sup>122</sup> This makes sense when

<sup>119</sup> Fleischmann 52.

<sup>120</sup> Ray Monk. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. (Vintage, 1990) 579.

<sup>121</sup> Monologe auf Mallorca. Filmed version of the book of interviews by Krista Fleischmann. The video is important for this point because of Bernhard’s smile when he talks of death.

<sup>122</sup> Erich Wolfgang Skwara, “*Ein König der Untertreibung. Notizen zu Thomas Bernhard.*” *Modern Austrian Literature* 21. ¾: Special Thomas Bernhard Issue (1988): 279.

turning back to “Reunion,” where the child was abused terribly, but the adult telling us about it can only briefly glance at the abuse, just enough to mention the beatings and starvation before he must turn towards ridiculing the perpetrators for bizarre non-crimes, like being untalented musicians and making ham sandwiches the wrong way. What remains of the actual crimes that he can barely touch on, is this extreme hatred that is out of place if directed at ham sandwiches, but appropriate if inspired by the humiliation and actual abuse that the child experienced. The pain exists between the lines of the narrator’s rants about stupid rock collections and bad art and takes the form of a deeply sad bassline, while the mood of the piece as a whole remains light. “Reunion” is as much a subdued horror story about childhood catastrophes too frightening to describe as it is an absurd comedy. The musical elements add different emotional levels to a fictionalized past that has been set to music.

“Goethe Dies,” on the other hand, depicts that which is too great, too grand, too beautiful to put into words. Momentarily the love that Bernhard had since a very young age for Wittgenstein shines through the chatter of the never-ending dialogue. The neurotic and lighthearted chatter that describes all the events and upsets going on between the half dozen people hanging around a dying Goethe’s home is temporarily interrupted for a few clear, deeply moving sentences about Goethe’s and the narrator’s biggest dream. They both wish to meet Wittgenstein and their desire is deep and pure and in great contrast to the rest of the story’s events and style. Bernhard said he could never write about Wittgenstein, that it would be impossible, because “Wittgenstein is a question that can’t be answered.”<sup>123</sup> And he does not. He writes around Wittgenstein, passes by Wittgenstein, once again adhering to *whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must make music*.

The unsayable in Wittgenstein’s final point of the *Tractatus* on which my interpretation of Bernhard’s prose hinges can be understood in two ways.<sup>124</sup> One opinion held by Wittgenstein scholars, among them Marie McGinn, is that proposition seven of the

<sup>123</sup> Perloff 156.

<sup>124</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* 188.

*Tractatus*, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,” explains that the philosophical confusions Wittgenstein was trying to help humanity overcome

[a]ll have their origin in our desire to speak of something, to represent in a proposition something that can't be spoken, or represented in a proposition. Now, I think this is not to be understood as him committing himself to the idea of ineffable truths, the idea that there are deep truths about the world that have to be grasped wordlessly. It's rather that there is a danger of taking something that has nothing to do with any things being true or false and treating it as if it can be represented as a truth.<sup>125</sup>

But according to Wittgenstein scholar and biographer Ray Monk, Wittgenstein does believe that there are truths that are ineffable. Monk explains: “There are ethical truths, religious truths, there are truths about the meaning of life and all of these truths are at one and the same time enormously important and unsayable.” Monk goes on to explain what he thinks Wittgenstein means with the unsayable: “if noticing a similarity between a mother and a daughter, the similarity is not a third thing one sees. It is part of the picture and cannot be expressed separately.”<sup>126</sup> It is there, for all to be seen, but it cannot be expressed as a separate thing. Both definitions of proposition seven fit as a method of interpreting the theme of unspeakable childhood trauma in Bernhard's prose.

The truth about certain feelings cannot be expressed. The level of hopelessness caused by childhood trauma that some of the children appearing in Bernhard's stories, all based on the child Bernhard once was, cannot be measured. The kind of love that is life-giving and lasts a life time, like the love Bernhard felt for Wittgenstein, that too is difficult to translate from the realm of the heart into the realm of language. Wittgenstein distinguished between saying and showing, and Bernhard, by creating musical depictions of things that cannot be spoken, is showing us something, not telling us something. The *Geschichtenzerstoerer*, the destroyer of stories, is not actually destroying, but transforming something. To borrow Wittgenstein's words, language can be understood as striking a note on the “keyboard of the imagination,” and that is what Bernhard does: his words are notes on the *Vorstellungsklavier*.<sup>127</sup>

<sup>125</sup> BBC “In Our Time,” 14:13-14:53.

<sup>126</sup> BBC “In Our Time,” 15:45-19:30.

<sup>127</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 4.

This is why Bernhard's stories can inspire irrational joy even though they tell of hopelessness, neglect, fear and neurosis: they have been transformed. Wittgenstein can help shed some light here again. He gives the example of witnessing a doctor and a nurse care for a patient and says that doing so, we have a certain "tacit presupposition" about what is happening and why and what may happen next.<sup>128</sup> If we are suddenly told that the scene we witnessed is actually part of a theatre performance, that it "is a scene in a play – Now everything is different."<sup>129</sup> The changed context opens the door to a different way of understanding. If we read "Reunion" and "Goethe Dies" with the "tacit presupposition" that we are witnessing Bernhard vent his anger about his own childhood or poke fun at historical figures, then we have stories with surprising and possibly alienating content and form. If we are told that the stories are actually prosaic dream music, *now everything is different*.

<sup>128</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 153.

<sup>129</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 153

## Chapter 2 “Goethe Dies:” A Wittgenstein Ensemble

Interviewer: Where do you get your ideas from?

Duke Ellington: My ideas? Oh, I got a million dreams. That’s all I do is dream. All the time.

Interviewer: I thought you played piano.

Duke Ellington: No, this isn’t piano. This is dreaming.

*Jazz* (Ken Burns, 2000)

Bernhard called himself a *Geschichtenzerstoerer*, a destroyer of narrative, and yet he wrote prose work after prose work. The destruction of narrative evident in a story like “Goethe Dies” may leave even a friendly reader wondering “what have I just read?” This happens when one wakes from a dream that made sense at the time one was in it, but loses logic and rationality more and more the longer one is awake and the more one is removed from the dream. This is the effect “Goethe Dies” has and this is how Bernhard’s writing can be understood. The dreamlike quality does not mean that Bernhard writes dreamy stories. It refers to Bernhard consciously and confidently creating a world related to the real world, but not quite as real. Much of what one encounters in his world is untouchable, like a butterfly that flits by. There is beauty, although one cannot pinpoint exactly where. “That is what is beautiful in my books, that the beautiful is not described at all and can come to life on its own.”<sup>130</sup> And there is love, but not openly demonstrated love, because “[I]love is everything [...] love can be anything, because everything that exists can be loved by someone.”<sup>131</sup> Even people that are long dead, can be loved as if they were alive, which is what happens in “Goethe Dies.” Bernhard’s is a world that is dreamlike because what was painful is not felt, as in “Reunion,” a story that deals with pain that has been musically purified, and where wishes that go beyond logic and rational thinking can come true, as in “Goethe Dies.” Bloemsaat-Voerknecht believes Bernhard is not a destroyer of narrative at all, not a “dark, serious nihilist, but someone who loves deeply

<sup>130</sup> Fleischmann 127.

<sup>131</sup> Fleischmann 45.

and genuinely, and whose love is directed at music.”<sup>132</sup> That love was also directed at Wittgenstein, for whom Bernhard early on in life had declared a brotherly love.<sup>133</sup>

In the following pages I turn more directly to Bernhard’s writing through Wittgenstein. He dreams Wittgenstein into his world and uses him as a *Leitmotif*, and never more so than in the uncharacteristically bright story “Goethe Dies.” Like Bernhard, Wittgenstein had to create a unique way of writing in order to write at all. He was not able to put his thoughts onto the page in the form he wished and had to settle for the only way he could express himself, which turned out to be unique in poetic quality as well as in philosophical depth. Some of us consider what he ended up creating the most beautiful philosophical, poetic, picturesque and also musical language, that is as difficult to understand as it is awe-inspiring. As a young girl I turned to Bernhard and Wittgenstein before I could understand them fully. Wittgenstein was completely unintelligible to me in English translation, at least until I began to study him as a philosopher, but the German original caught my attention and I read him as a poet until I took lessons, just like Goethe in Bernhard’s story takes lessons, in order to understand the other levels of his writing. Bernhard was difficult to get through at first, because of his complicated grammar and long sentences. I felt tested by the syntax, but the feeling caused by a finished Bernhard novel was worth it, the feeling that I had witnessed a very mischievous, intelligent and loving joke. Bernhard was also my first experience of a writer consciously alienating his readers.

Wittgenstein’s and Bernhard’s tone made me happy as a young reader. This is the irrational joy Peter Brook speaks about that I mention earlier. Regardless what the words are saying, something is happening to the reader’s feelings in spite of the words. A certain audience will be presented with Beckett’s, or Bernhard’s, or Wittgenstein’s work and, sometimes in spite of the words, and sometimes in addition to them, break out into a smile and feel as if a part of the soul is being embraced that they did not even know they had.

Wittgenstein went through meticulous efforts to make himself and his complicated thinking understood. I believe there was a little more calculation in Bernhard’s literature than in Wittgenstein’s. Wittgenstein was playing, but in a respectful and serious way.

<sup>132</sup> Bloemsaat-Voerknecht 230.

<sup>133</sup> Dreissinger 82.

Bernhard was playing too, but he was creating his language games for aesthetic and mischievous purposes and to entertain himself, while Wittgenstein was using his philosophy to uncover and organize problems. In Bernhard's case, if "everything is ridiculous when faced with death," one might as well play. He did not take lightly his understanding of music and his affection for Wittgenstein, both of which had a serious and unshakable hold on his heart and his aesthetic. Bernhard's playful elements purposefully contrast with the serious ones. "*Goethe Dies*" is an exceptionally playful story, but beneath the playful narrative there is a serious aspect and that is the respect and love Wittgenstein inspired in Bernhard.

Bernhard and Wittgenstein treat the reader like a familiar. Bernhard's abrupt beginnings serve to make the reader feel invited into the scene without any formalities. In *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus*, arguably Wittgenstein's most confident work, he already treats the reader with a degree of intimacy when he leaves the possibility open that he may be wrong, putting "if I am not mistaken" at the end of one of his arguments.<sup>134</sup> The reader is not excluded even from that possibility. Wittgenstein was humble about his writing style and did not hide this from the reader. He tells us in the introduction to *Philosophical Investigations* that he would have preferred a different way of offering his thoughts, but was able to accept his fate. The warm and familiar tone he uses when he says "*Du*" instead of "*Sie*," the friendly dialect-like expressions, the real time examples during which he seems to be working out the answers as the reader watches, as opposed to figuring things out first and then showing us the finished product. All these aspects create something quite different from any other philosophical textbook, but these aspects were not consciously sought after by Wittgenstein. These were happy accidents. In Bernhard's writing there are no such accidents.

The phantastical elements found in Wittgenstein's writing stem from a multitude of imageries he used to explain his "thought paths."<sup>135</sup> They range from exploding and vanishing books to disappearing feet, to tables moving on their own, to distant figures that

<sup>134</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* 103

<sup>135</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 13e. My translation. A *path*, instead of "line of thought," which is what Pal and Anscombe use, is more like what he says in German, which is *Gedankenweg*. A path adds to the imagery that is so present in his writing.

change from people into trees, to the possibility of someone having visited the moon and not remembering, to rivers in moving river beds, to chessboards where the figures move on their own, to invisible rhinoceroses and scenes from fairy tales, to sentences that are ill and need treatment, to two-dimensional galloping horses and a life carpet consisting of joy patterns and sorrow patterns.<sup>136</sup> Wittgenstein's writing is also populated with children who are used as examples for the creation and learning of language games and as examples of learned beliefs about doubt and certainty. Wittgenstein did not want to create a challenge, not the way Bernhard did. Wittgenstein certainly challenged the reader's intellect, but did not challenge the reader's understanding by playing with style. He wanted to be understood, and his writing turned out accidentally charming as he tried to express the thoughts bred in his unique brain in such a way that others could understand. Wittgenstein was anguished to get his thoughts onto the page. Bernhard poured his words playfully onto the page. But there was nothing casual about it. Bernhard was at the same time playful and deadly serious.

The phantastical elements in Bernhard stem from his changing of the atmosphere of known words, things or people. Montaigne, and other authors he loves, are changed into literal family members in the story "Montaigne," and in many other stories they are mentioned respectfully and often prefixed with the endearing "my." And Bernhard's childhood memories are changed as they are dipped into a different atmosphere. He places them within a different context, the context of prosaic music. We can use Wittgenstein to explain this change of atmosphere.

When Wittgenstein elaborates on the importance of context in language games in his later writing, he says that when a word is spoken one immediately sees around the word "a 'corona' of lightly indicated uses. Just as if each figure in a painting were surrounded by delicate shadowy drawings" that show the figures in a multitude of possible contexts.<sup>137</sup> This process is intimate and personal and different for every person, Wittgenstein says, and in Bernhard's story "Goethe Dies," we find depicted Bernhard's

<sup>136</sup> Exploding book example is from *Lecture on Ethics*, scenes from fairy tales from *Tractatus* (two boys and their white lilies and their horses), the ill sentences and galloping horses and the life carpet from *Philosophical Investigation* (255, 77 and 172 and 148), all others, including vanishing book is from *On Certainty*.

<sup>137</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 155.

version of the *shadowy drawings* that surround Goethe and Wittgenstein. Bernhard combines their shadowy coronas in a way that makes the end result non-sensical to some, and thought provoking to others. Bernhard is conducting a kind of thought experiment when he asks: what if Goethe were given a chance to love Wittgenstein? Bernhard then gives us his version of a “what if-feeling.”<sup>138</sup>

Wittgenstein asks why we can imagine someone’s drawing of what they think Beethoven may have looked like while he was composing his ninth symphony, but we can not imagine someone’s drawing of what Goethe would look like while he was composing Beethoven’s ninth symphony, without it being ridiculous. Bernhard’s story is ridiculous on one level. But if the story is seen as a musical dream where Goethe’s and Wittgenstein’s “coronas” are blended and combined in unusual ways, then it becomes something beyond the realm of ridiculous. In the dream world feelings like love and longing are the guiding forces and a moving around of *coronas* does not necessarily mean that sense and meaning disintegrate.

Let us now turn to how Wittgenstein and Bernhard incorporated what affected them as writers. Bernhard felt he was dying from a very young age, and this affected every part of his life, from being less tolerant towards his fellows to not wanting to be filmed if he was visibly out of breath and weak, to traveling and running out of medications needed to survive and having to rush home. Wittgenstein, on being told that he had only a few days to live is supposed to have responded with innocent exuberance: “Good!”<sup>139</sup> Wittgenstein was not self-conscious and never set out to hurt feelings, although he often did. Bernhard was terribly self-conscious, as is easy to see in interviews, especially those when he was younger. Bernhard wanted to insult and actually turned insults into an art form. Another difference is that Wittgenstein experienced great hardship, but the pain was not intertwined with his writing. In some of the examples Wittgenstein uses there is evidence that he has known heartache, but what ended up written was clean and fresh, as if a Norwegian or Irish country wind just flew off the page.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>138</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 156

<sup>139</sup> Monk 579.

<sup>140</sup> These were two places that he had often sought refuge in to try to connect with his muse.

Bernhard's pain, on the other hand, is placed on the pages of his books and artfully and lovingly arranged in musical and dreamlike patterns that have been inspired by real events and real pain. By the time we get to set eyes on his pain, it has been transformed into musical depictions. The real pain is there, but not as acute and raw. Eric Clapton's pain when losing his son in 1991 was one thing, and the song "Tears in Heaven" that he wrote about it is another, although they both come from the same sorrow. The personal pain is made eternal and fixed in a way that can be shared with the world. The same goes for Bernhard's writing. The pain is there, but as if behind a glass wall. It is alive and real, but can be used as a specimen now, for literary-musical purposes. Pain can also be used for entertainment. This is nothing new and Bernhard used it as that too. None of his books are sad, per se, because the pain is not used as a plot device, but in order to get to the attitude that everything is ridiculous when we think about death. Even the earliest prose that does not yet make use of musical elements is not sad, because there is a level of detachment that again acts as a glass wall between the pain described and the reader. When Bernhard eventually added musical elements to his writing, the dark subject matter acted like a libretto. Whatever pain the written words carry now is only of secondary importance and the music that has been added is the factor that dominates the tone and the effect on the audience.

This is why Herzog insists we must ask not what Bernhard is telling us in his prose, but why it is as musical as it is. He says it has to do with how Bernhard musically binds language until it works "against narration."<sup>141</sup> Bernhard is a "destroyer of narrative," but he destroys stories in order to turn them into something that can withstand uncertainty and obscurity and repetition, that can light up the dark subject matter. Other rules apply in this realm. The unsayable can be unshackled and Wittgenstein's demand for silence bypassed. Josef König<sup>142</sup> explains this term *destroyer of narrative*, which Bernhard gave himself. König shows how Bernhard was concerned with the comforting order that comes with sequential narrating of events and the uncomfortable chaos that ensues if the "when,"

<sup>141</sup> Herzog 35.

<sup>142</sup> Joseph König, Joseph, „Nichts als ein Totenmaskenball. Studien Zum Verstaendnis Der Aesthetischen Intentionen Im Werk Thomas Bernhards“ (Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften. 1983) 257.

'before' and 'after'" of traditional, straightforward storytelling is done away with<sup>143</sup>. Bernhard removed the comforting order of narration and brought to life something disconcerting, but free.

If the structure of traditional storytelling is missing and the musical structure is more often than not just touched on, rather than fully developed, giving us something in the style of a fugue instead of a complete fugue, or reminiscent of a scherzo, instead of a full scherzo, then only very little can be gained from studying traditional structure. Bernhard's musical structure is a kind of using, skimming, a touching on, a borrowing, rather than a complete re-creation. Therefore, a formal study of these fleeting moments is bound to be limited. For Herzog, the essence of what it means for Bernhard's work to be musical cannot be found in a comparison between Bernhard's language and music, but in what Herzog sees as a "longing for harmony" and a desire for a "higher knowledge."<sup>144</sup> This quest for "higher knowledge" is easy to overlook because Bernhard's stories purposely create ambiguity by using numerous narrators, something that destabilizes seemingly important facts, like the detailed description of Goethe's last days in "Goethe Dies," or the detailed recapitulation of a murder in *The Limeworks*, by making them dependent on hearsay and gossip. Bernhard blurs the lines between truth and fiction.

*The Limeworks* is one of the most elaborate examples of how Bernhard plays with this kind of reporting that depends of gossip and hearsay, but gives the impression of being serious and official. A variety of different voices, ranging from a traveling salesman, police officers and beer drinking locals who gather nightly at the different pubs around town give us a never-ending flow of detailed facts on which the so-called plot hinges. The facts still line up, because the different reported voices do not give contradicting information, just more details that come from a united, general desire of the local population to explain a murder that happened. With the help of narrators Bernhard uses reported speech to create ambiguity regarding what is or was taking place or what the murderer and the victim may have said or thought or felt.

<sup>143</sup> König 257.

<sup>144</sup> Herzog 35.

In “Goethe Dies” Bernhard further obscures who is saying what by jumping back and forth between reporting what the narrator is, or was, thinking while he reports what others have said or have heard being said, or what they feel or think. Indirect speech is used more creatively in German, but in English still creates a sense uncertainty as to who exactly was doing the actual speaking or thinking. Bernhard plays with this uncertainty, making translation very difficult, because there is a certain old-fashioned and elegant charm that the German language allows for indirect speech that is not possible in English.<sup>145</sup> Indirect speech puts distance between the reporting of events and what may have really happened. It is an artful way of putting distance between fact and opinion, as is having a silent listener, who neither validates nor completely denies what the narrators have said, which happens at the end “Reunion.” Bernhard also uses italics to indicate the speaker’s speech, but sometimes he will use italics to indicate the speaker’s words, and in the very same sentence use italics for pure emphasis. Then he peppers his writing with the words “so-called” and “so to say,” adding further and more obvious feelings of uncertainty.

In true Bernhardian style, the plot of “Goethe Dies” seems at times to barely move at all and the many details, digressions and memories distract the narrator and spread the thin action out over twenty-two pages. Still, there is also a feeling of events moving by at a great speed. This has to do with the grammatical acrobatics Bernhard inflicts on us. He does not always want us to be sure who is talking or thinking, and he further tricks us with a heavy sprinkling of commas and semicolons, which seem to want to help organize the long sentences, but actually end up doing the opposite. Yet, “Goethe Dies” misses many of the characteristics that are so familiar to a Bernhard reader. Gone are the “narrator’s irritability [that] keeps spilling over onto objects and actions” and people, gone are the “sharpness of his disgust,” the grudges, resentments and exaggerated hatred.<sup>146</sup> “Goethe Dies” is as lighthearted, cheerful a tale as Bernhard ever created, which in itself is disturbing since it deals specifically with death of two loved and revered famous thinkers. The story is also a love letter to Wittgenstein, while at the same time honouring Goethe in

<sup>145</sup> Bernhard “Goethe Dies” 7. Examples of *Plusquamperfekt* (in English past perfect tense, simple and progressive): “*Er, Riemer, habe mehrere Male mit Goethe gesprochen...*” (7), “*Goethe soll sich [...] aufgeregt haben*” (8).

<sup>146</sup> Gellen 60.

a roundabout way that can be summarized in the conditional proposition: *If Goethe had been aware of Wittgenstein, he would have had the good sense to adore him.*

“Goethe Dies” is first and foremost written for Bernhard himself. It is also for those who share Bernhard’s *good sense*. Similarly, Wittgenstein felt this about his writing: “I believe it might interest a philosopher, one who can think himself, to read my notes. For even if I have hit the mark only rarely, he would recognize what targets I had been ceaselessly aiming at.”<sup>147</sup> This quote from Wittgenstein, besides showcasing humility towards his writing and the intimate way in which he hid almost nothing from his readers, also shows that he too wrote for a likeminded audience. It also points toward what I think is Bernhard’s complimentary treatment of Goethe in “Goethe Dies.” As we will see in this Chapter, Goethe is not paid the usual sort of respect he has been accustomed to as the “greatest of the Nation and at the same time the greatest among all Germans” in Bernhard’s surreal tale about him.<sup>148</sup> But Bernhard did turn Goethe into a character who reveres Wittgenstein, recognizes the *targets* Wittgenstein goes for, understands the need for a tutor and who sleeps with Wittgenstein’s book under his pillow. And finally, after a long life of having been introduced to all the joys and wonders that the world has to offer, Goethe’s only dying wish is to meet Wittgenstein in person.

In “Thomas Bernhard’s ‘Musical Prose’” Andrea Reiter describes a “character’s modulations.”<sup>149</sup> Just as Dostoevsky had before him, Bernhard “transfers onto the plane of literary composition the law of musical modulation from one tonality to another.”<sup>150</sup> In “Goethe Dies” the change in tonality is much more obvious than in “Reunion,” where we have the statement, the development and the modulation of one section into the next, but with no change in mood. The mountain episode leads to the knitting episode. They are equally lighthearted and both seem in a major key.

In “Goethe Dies,” however, we have an ensemble piece. The narrator, Riemer, Krauter, Eckermann and Goethe, as well as the all female kitchen staff, all have their parts.

<sup>147</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 50e.

<sup>148</sup> “Goethe Dies” 7.

<sup>149</sup> Andrea Reiter, *Thomas Bernhard’s ‘Musical Prose’*. *The German Novel in the 1980s* (New York: Berg, 1990) 124.

<sup>150</sup> Grossmann in Bakhtin 42.

All speak and shout more or less simultaneously. Wittgenstein never appears or speaks, but the weight of his character and the depth of love, awe and respect he inspires in Goethe's character and in the narrator, as well as the complicated feelings he inspires in the entourage and that in the end compel them to lie, is present in the mood. Something very important is happening, but it is not the fact that Goethe is dying. Goethe himself seems not to be occupied with his nearing death, only with his new-found passion for Wittgenstein. Goethe is excited and happy, while his entourage is worried and nervous. These conflicting emotions are reported to us by the narrator that Bernhard readers have become very accustomed to. A passive voice gives the impression that the narrator is re-enacting the other voices and their moods and attitudes.

The modulations in "Goethe Dies" move from one voice to another, from one perspective to another and occasionally from one mood to another. When the narrator interrupts the reporting of events and suddenly tells us about his own dearest wish, we come straight from a cheerful mood of idle chatter into a moment of deep love and longing for an impossible ideal, namely the wish to witness a meeting between Wittgenstein and Goethe during which the latter would proclaim the former his successor. Bernhard understood Wittgenstein's as a "poetical brain, through and through," so it is fitting that he has Goethe, who was first and foremost a master poet, declare Wittgenstein his successor.<sup>151</sup> From this moment on the modulations fly into a final spin, a kind of coda that ends abruptly with the confession, the lie about Goethe's final words. Goethe's famous last words are "*Mehr Licht*," but in the story we are told that the actual last words were "*mehr nicht*," nothing more, which the entourage did not feel were appropriate because they were uttered in connection with Wittgenstein. Goethe is said to have died saying he wishes to meet with Wittgenstein, *nothing more*.<sup>152</sup>

Keeping in mind the proposition "if Goethe had been aware of Wittgenstein, he would have had the good sense to adore him," let us take a more detailed look at how Bernhard's Goethe treats Wittgenstein. Goethe quotes multiple times from Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, that as the title suggests, deals with what philosophy can and cannot say

<sup>151</sup> Gargani 21.

<sup>152</sup> "*Mehr Licht*" and "*mehr nicht*" mean more light and no more.

about doubt and certainty. Goethe tries hard to understand what Wittgenstein meant with “doubting and non-doubting behaviour.”<sup>153</sup> At one point he confidently declares an iced-over dahlia growing in his garden to be “the doubting and non-doubting.”<sup>154</sup>

Wittgenstein says: “[o]ur doubts depend on the fact that some prepositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those doubts turn.”<sup>155</sup> “As messy, nonsensical at times, comical, disrespectful and bizarre as “Goethe Dies” is, all those characteristics can be said to be held in place by one aspect of the plot that is *exempt from doubt*, namely, the fact that Wittgenstein deserves Goethe’s love and respect. The *hinge*, to use Wittgenstein’s word, is the depiction of an ideal meeting of the minds. We have a Bernhardian fairy tale in which time and space are arranged differently than in real life, where peculiar events happen, as they do in fairy tales, but where certain truths are untouched. Bernhard loved Wittgenstein “beyond the borders of death” and in this story this is exactly how Goethe loves him, *beyond the borders of death* and beyond the borders of space and time.<sup>156</sup>

Throughout Bernhard’s career there are only a few figures that are spared his biting humour, and Wittgenstein is one of those. Other writers that Bernhard loved are sometimes spoken about in a casual manner bordering on disrespect. He considered Schopenhauer, Kant and Pascal to be great, but it was their greatness that also made him laugh. The “great jesters of history,” he called them.<sup>157</sup> In Bernhard’s work Wittgenstein is mentioned in passing more than in detail, but always with reverence. He gets a lead role in “*Der Weltverbesserer*,” as well as “Goethe Dies,” and in both those works he is treated warmly. In “*Der Weltverbesserer*” many of Wittgenstein’s character traits which made him difficult to live with are highlighted, but playfully, not with malice. The pain that fame and relationships caused Wittgenstein are also highlighted and the end result on Bernhard’s end is compassion mixed with comedy, not mockery.

<sup>153</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 46e.

<sup>154</sup> “Goethe Dies” 16.

<sup>155</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 44e.

<sup>156</sup> Dreissinger 82.

<sup>157</sup> Fleischmann 28-29.

As mentioned earlier, “Goethe Dies” is unusually bright in terms of the plot. There is no mention of Nazis, of traumatic childhoods, murder, suicide or life-long deadly illnesses. The only death that occurs is a man dying in old age surrounded by his loved ones. The only crimes are Goethe’s confession that he consciously betrayed the German people and intentionally destroyed Schiller.<sup>158</sup> Those crimes may be entertaining for some, or an insult for others, but the narrative is absurd and dreamlike through and through.

A dream combines the real and the unreal in bizarre, sometimes humorous, sometimes frightening ways. Bernhard’s dream world in “Goethe Dies” is a fantastic one. As he did with Glenn Gould in *The Loser*, he takes facts and mixes them with fiction, having Goethe and Wittgenstein be alive, but near death at the same time. What to make of a bizarre story about two men whose extremely famous lives are known to the world in every detail? Is Bernhard mocking Goethe or Goethe lovers, is he mocking Wittgenstein? In *The Literary Wittgenstein* Gibson and Huemer mention a “highly problematic” view of literature as they discuss the “significance of Wittgenstein’s philosophy for our theoretical understanding of literature.”<sup>159</sup> This aesthetic problematic has to do with a refusal to assign literature any “cognitive value,”<sup>160</sup> a refusal that stems from an attitude towards literature that is best shown by Bertrand Russell, who said: “the propositions in [Hamlet] are false because there was no such man.”<sup>161</sup>

Two points are worth mentioning here. First, that Bernhard once said that he only allowed himself to be interviewed because he knew that if he did not tell his story, someone else would.<sup>162</sup> He understood that once he was in the public eye, his life, his story would be available and open to the public and potentially be taken by someone else and distorted. He did this with Glenn Gould, Goethe, Wittgenstein, among others. He takes their personas and makes them his own. And if one exchanges the term *famous people* with the term *musical motif*, then the term theme and variation comes to mind. Many composers have taken themes composed by other composers, sometimes as a

<sup>158</sup> “Goethe Dies” 19 and 20.

<sup>159</sup> John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer, *The Literary Wittgenstein* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 3.

<sup>160</sup> Gibson 3.

<sup>161</sup> Gibson 3.

<sup>162</sup> Dreissinger 52.

compliment and a declaration of appreciation, and have written variations on it. Taking Goethe or Wittgenstein or Glenn Gould and writing variations of their lives is then a similar compositional technique and one no less complimentary. At the same time, Bernhard has complete freedom, because he is not dealing with the real people, but his depictions of them. Second, Bernhard does not use language in order to add *cognitive value* to his stories. Goethe and Wittgenstein never met, yet the story Bernhard wrote is not false, as Russell might say, but an ideal reality that he created, a wish that he breathed life into by imagining a musical dream.

Bernhard's words are infused with a playfulness that comes from music: the alliterations, the use of his negative word reservoir, the rhythmic-climactic repetition of words or phrases, the almost random seeming use of italics, the equally random seeming use of punctuation and the use of indirect speech that does more for a setting of tone, than it does for delivering information. At the same time he makes use of a precise kind of power found in the written word in order to set clear ethical boundaries between right and wrong. The he used the subtle power found in music to add a fantastical quality that, some might say, is the only way one can really express concepts like love or beauty. Words offer a precision that music lacks and music purifies the words and lifts them into an irrational realm where the seriousness of absolute cognitive values and rational thinking are left behind. Bernhard expresses the tension between the "being of prosaic isolation and the seeming of a musical dream."<sup>163</sup> Reality "cannot be brought to order and cannot be turned into a fairy tale," but Bernhard's prosaic music does not give up trying to bridge the two.<sup>164</sup>

The musical components Bernhard uses do two things: they make what might be ugly beautiful and they prevent issues to do with truth and lies to come between the story and audience. By combining the high potential for emotional expression and humour with a relative disregard for facts, Bernhard creates in "Goethe Dies" a world where everything looks familiar, yet so different from reality, and where everything that happens is as important, if not more, than its counterparts in real life. Music is the act of weaving facts and feelings, people, places and events, discipline and abandon into one. Music is beyond

<sup>163</sup> Herzog 43.

<sup>164</sup> Herzog 43.

truth and lies and beyond good and evil. In the words of Adorno, music “points to something beyond itself by reminding us of something, contrasting itself with something or arousing our expectations.”<sup>165</sup> Music is a language, but it adheres to different rules, “what it has to say is simultaneously revealed and concealed.”<sup>166</sup> What cannot be said is also *revealed and concealed* at the same time. What is too painful to put into words, what is too close to an ineffable truth for which there are no words, this is where music can express what otherwise would remain hidden. Music is the human attempt to give shape to the “divine Name [...], not to communicate meanings.”<sup>167</sup> This is the origin of Brook’s definition of irrational joy.

“Goethe Dies” does not begin dreamlike or joyful, but is pedantic and dense as it dives straight into historical accuracy with an archaic tone fitting for a story that was written about Germany’s great thinker on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. But it soon takes off into a realm of the surreal where logic and historical accuracy have no place. Keeping in mind Adorno’s thoughts on the special quality of music, we can say that “Goethe Dies” *takes flight on the wings of music*.

On the date stated in the first sentence, Goethe had actually been near death and he had been surrounded by his entourage, including Riemer. Bernhard’s first sentence tricks its reader by setting the stage as a factually correct one.

In the late morning of the twenty-second he, Riemer, before my appointed visit with Goethe at half past two, warned me to speak softly on the one hand, but not too softly on the other with that man of whom it could be said is not only the greatest man in the nation but also the greatest German of all to this day, for he can now hear in the one ear quite disturbingly clear while in the other almost virtually nothing at all anymore, and one never knows what he hears or what he does not, and the hardest part of holding a conversation with a man who lies on his deathbed, more or less motionless the whole time, a genius staring in the direction of the window, is to find the appropriate pitch in one’s own voice, which was still possible, specifically through the most supreme mental effort of attentiveness, to find in this

<sup>165</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Quasi Una Phantasia. “Language and Music: A Fragment”* (London: Verso, 1998) 6.

<sup>166</sup> Adorno 2.

<sup>167</sup> Adorno 2.

now simply depressing conversation indeed that precise midpoint which is still in accord with the mind of one who has arrived, for all to see, at his endpoint.<sup>168</sup>

The second sentence veers away from reality drastically in a sudden change of direction as Riemer mentions, in passing, Goethe's fascination with and study of "Wittgenstein's body of thought."<sup>169</sup> The story takes on a surreal, dream quality once we realize that in the world Bernhard created both Goethe and Wittgenstein are alive at the same time. Music plays with time, and so does this story. Two pieces of music can be combined and played together with startling effect. Two melodies that were not written to be performed together can be placed together under certain conditions, if the rhythm and the harmony line up. In "Goethe Dies" Bernhard creates a similar effect. The Wittgenstein theme is introduced and integrates with a Goethe theme in a way that is unsettling and entertaining at the same time. These two *parts*, Goethe and Wittgenstein, as they appear in "Goethe Dies," were not written for each other, but Bernhard finds a way to combine them: he composed them into one. Goethe and Wittgenstein "*sind eins*," are one, says Riemer in the story. For him it is not a happy thought. For Bernhard's narrator it is *the* happiest.

Adorno says expectations create a feeling of the familiar. Music is structured with rhythms and melodies and chord progressions moving forward in ways that we know and are attached to. If music were to become completely free, meaning "bereft of all intentionality, the merely phenomenal linking of sounds, would be an acoustic parallel to the kaleidoscope" and so would literature.<sup>170</sup> But a good composer can use the need for the familiar and still find a way to surprise. Bernhard can blur the boundaries between the real and unreal. There are kaleidoscopic moments in Bernhard. In the previous Chapter I described how in "Reunion" the narrator loses himself to the hated images of red and green knitwear. Those sections seem absurd, but entail a kaleidoscopic beauty stemming from colours and feelings thrown together and being twirled in Bernhard's evermoving verbal machinery that his sentences have come to be. Similarly, when Goethe adores Wittgenstein, it is not absurd, but the testament of Bernhard's musical dream. By the time

<sup>168</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" 3.

<sup>169</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" 4.

<sup>170</sup> Adorno 3.

we get to the sentence where the narrator declares that his greatest happiness and “the climax of his existence” would be to see Goethe and Wittgenstein standing face to face, the absurdity is no longer abstract, but the clear depiction of a wish and a dream.<sup>171</sup> The statement “[e]ven if Wittgenstein and Goethe stood facing each other or sitting, remaining silent the entire time, and even if it had been the briefest of moments, it would have been the most beautiful moment that I could imagine,” is an expression of deep reverence and love.<sup>172</sup> The change from complicated grammar in long sentences to this relatively clear, simple and short sentence is the author behind the narrator interrupting the flow to say something from behind the stage.

In the story Goethe is actually being respected and honoured when he is handed Bernhard’s love for Wittgenstein. Bernhard often shows respect in a seemingly disrespectful way. A scene in one of Bernhard’s late books, *Cutting Timber* (1984), comes to mind. The narrator runs into the couple, Auersberg, and he lashes out against them when they mention their intention to casually read “all of Wittgenstein.”<sup>173</sup> One does, of course, not just read Wittgenstein, but this couple thinks themselves capable, like the parents in “Reunion,” who consider themselves capable of making good music without having the right kind of talent. One must keep in mind that Bernhard considered great music, literature and philosophy precious. To him the two sets of parents in “Reunion” are just as pretentious, fake and arrogant about their art as the Auersbergers are about theatre and philosophy in the novel *Cutting Timber*. But even though *Cutting Timber* and “Reunion” criticize Austria’s complacently arrogant, pseudo-artistic and pseudo-philosophical circles, they are also gestures of respect. *Cutting Timber*, as vicious as it is at times, ends with the narrator leaving the dinner party to run through the empty streets of Vienna declaring his love for the city and its people. And “Reunion,” which is equally cruel in its depiction of Austria’s people, is also an homage, although not a pretty one. Austria’s people mean a lot to Bernhard, even though what they mean is not always flattering. Wittgenstein had a similar way of paying homage to people. He often uses examples of fellow philosophers that he proves wrong. George E. Moore and Bertrand

<sup>171</sup> Bernhard, “Goethe Dies” 24.

<sup>172</sup> Bernhard, “Goethe Dies” 18.

<sup>173</sup> Thomas Bernhard, *Holzfällen. Eine Erregung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 19.

Russell come to mind easily. The fact that these philosophers are important enough to have their arguments refuted in Wittgenstein's deliberations is high praise and a great compliment. He would not bother with them if they were not important to him.<sup>174</sup> The same goes for Bernhard. That he used people as motifs in ways that were not flattering to them meant that they mattered to him. After all, he had enjoyed a long friendship with the real-life people that he based this Auersberger couple on.<sup>175</sup> Still, when *Cutting Timber* was published, the real-life people sued Bernhard. Bernhard's literary mantra may well have been: *What I speak of often, matters to me*. His family and the state of affairs in his homeland, past and present, had a place in his mind and work, even though they also bothered him.

Bernhard's stories would seem to be stark and grim, filled with insults, mockery, an impenetrable sense of doom and slip into kaleidoscopic nonsense, were it not for the musical components. His language, on the surface so grammatically correct, is actually being "*entfunktioniert*," which means that the function of his language is transformed one very long sentence at a time into something that is different from mere prose.<sup>176</sup> Bernhard's inner world is one in which something "wonderfully, mysteriously incomprehensible" appears if the music is not ignored.<sup>177</sup>

We can say that Bernhard uses language to depict. His work can be read as *Darstellung*. This means it is a representation of what Bernhard feels, experiences, of his attitudes, memories and opinions, and not a description. About representation (*Darstellung*) Wittgenstein says: "The concept of a representation of what is seen, like that of a copy, is very elastic, and so *together with it* is the concept of what is seen. The two are intimately connected. (Which is not to say that they are alike.)"<sup>178</sup> Bernhard's representations are *elastic*. Goethe is the Goethe who lived and also someone else,

<sup>174</sup> Russell and Moore were teachers and then colleagues of Wittgenstein's. Both were his examiners for his PhD defense at Cambridge.

<sup>175</sup> The Auersberger couple is based on Mr. and Mrs. Lampersberg, famous in Austria's artistic circles and people Bernhard had partied with, composed and even lived with for a few years as a young and struggling artist.

<sup>176</sup> Herzog 41.

<sup>177</sup> Herzog 41.

<sup>178</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 169.

someone who is better than the real thing for loving Wittgenstein. The members of the entourage are equally elastic. The only thing not elastic is the respect and love that Wittgenstein inspires. It is important that Wittgenstein does not appear in the story. Wittgenstein is not represented. He is untouched and firm, not elastic. He and the love he inspires in Goethe are not elastic. They are set in place even in the absurd world of Bernhard's story in which space and time are misplaced and rearranged. In Wittgenstein's words: they are the fixed hinge around which doubt can revolve. We only get one actual picture of Wittgenstein in "Goethe Dies," that of a laid out haggard man with a sunken in face.<sup>179</sup> There exists such a picture of Wittgenstein after his death and Bernhard uses that picture exactly as it appears, he does not change it. It is not elastic, but fixed. Something *wonderful, mysterious and incomprehensible* is found in the plot when Bernhard's elastic representation of Goethe falls in love with a fixed Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein is all he can think or talk about, study and read and his dying wish is to have Wittgenstein come to his side. In real life Goethe and Wittgenstein lived two hundred years apart, but Bernhard maneuvers between fact and fiction and creates an *elastic* depiction.

Let us turn again to Bernhard's first publication. "*Mein Weltenstueck*" is the friendly, but serious vision of a little boy's "piece of the world."<sup>180</sup> It begins with the line "ten thousand times the same glimpse into my piece of the world." This piece of world is worth taking notice of a thousand times and more, because it harbours familiar inhabitants and occasions. What the boy sees ten thousand times is a friendly village that is his home and the people in it are of his kind and he feels a part of the community. Excessive repetition is a positive reinforcement of what is familiar and safe and as with Wittgenstein's language games, the creation of a child's view of the world is based on "words 'and objects' being recognized again [...] with the same inexorability."<sup>181</sup> For the narrator in the poem the fact that he can see the same picture many thousand times is a source of joy and comfort. The world remains the same and so does his place in it. The child feels safe. In Wittgenstein's words: "The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes *after* belief."<sup>182</sup> Bernhard was under the intellectual and emotional protection of his grandfather as a young child and

<sup>179</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" 23.

<sup>180</sup> Bernhard, *Gesammelte Gedichte* 6.

<sup>181</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 59.

<sup>182</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 23.

even though the world around him was falling apart because of the war while his mother was barely surviving as a single parent, Bernhard had a certain degree of footing and trust in the world that allowed him to write a poem with that kind of positive outlook. The later poetry that came soon after is heavy, disturbed and depressed. The trust the boy had felt he could put into the world had proven to be a mistake. The grandfather and mother had died and he himself had almost died because of a doctor's mistakes. The world he had trusted had let him down. Doubt took over from trust and while this did not turn Bernhard into a depressed pessimist, it did have an effect on his writing, eventually leading him towards the enchanted ways in which music could change his inner world.

Relating this to "Goethe Dies" means understanding that Bernhard's insistence on the absurd is his insistence on doubt, or, to give it another name, on hope. Doubt does not only imply negative certainty, it can imply hope. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein asks: When someone says 'I hope he'll come' – is this a *report* about his state of mind, or a *manifestation* of his hope?"<sup>183</sup> The statement could also be translated as: there is some doubt as to whether he will come. In Bernhard's story Goethe dies with the hope alive that he might get to meet Wittgenstein. The cruel certainty that Wittgenstein has, in fact, already died and can never come to see Goethe, has been removed by the entourage, which does not tell its master that the object of his greatest affection and the object inspiring his greatest hope has died. In Goethe's mind it is not certain that he cannot meet Wittgenstein. Bernhard is gentle with Goethe's dream, an unfulfillable dream that is a possible reality to Goethe while being a certain impossibility to everyone inside and outside of the story. At the end of the story we find out that it would also have been the highlight of the narrator's life to meet Wittgenstein. The narrator's dream is over, because he knows Wittgenstein has just passed away, but Goethe's dream and hope lives on beyond the borders of death.

Now let us again return to the relationship Bernhard creates between Goethe and Wittgenstein. That relationship is where Bernhard honors Goethe. Goethe calls Wittgenstein "the most deserving of adoration and respect," his "closest confidant," that which is the "most holy" to him "and "the absolute greatest."<sup>184</sup> He believes that

<sup>183</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 130.

<sup>184</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" 9, 10, 22.

Wittgenstein's thinking is most related to his own and says it should be "the one that succeeds his own." Wittgenstein is mentioned on almost every page at least once. Goethe becomes happily agitated at the thought of Wittgenstein and insists he be called to Weimar from England, no matter what the cost and as soon as possible. Goethe says he was saved by Wittgenstein when Wittgenstein came into his life through a little red book with red binding from the Suhrkamp library, which was actually established only in 1950 long after Goethe's death. Goethe sleeps with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* under his pillow.<sup>185</sup> He mulls over and quotes this part from it: "The tautology has no truth-conditions, for it is unconditionally true; and the contradiction is on no condition true."<sup>186</sup> He takes part in daily morning lessons with Riemer on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and Wittgenstein in general. He does so up until two days before his death. Besides the *Tractatus*, which is Wittgenstein's first published work, Goethe often mentions the term "doubting and non-doubting."<sup>187</sup> This is from Wittgenstein's last published work, *On Certainty*. Goethe becomes very confidential when describing his feelings for Wittgenstein. He says that Wittgenstein is the only one he wants near him because "among all of them, Wittgenstein is the greatest."<sup>188</sup> Among the many well-wishing letters and gifts Goethe receives in the mail because of his ailing health and old age, there is a glass on which Goethe and Wittgenstein are depicted together "as one." Riemer is surprised about the fact that the people in the town of Elenbogen, where the glass is made, could possibly know that Goethe and Wittgenstein "are one."<sup>189</sup> Krauter confides that he agrees with Eckermann and also thinks Wittgenstein's visit should be prevented. He laments the fact that Goethe tells everyone who will listen that he considers Wittgenstein the most important person. Krauter thinks it is embarrassing that Goethe would feel that way about "an Austrian thinker" as well as become public about it.<sup>190</sup>

The open hostility that Goethe's entourage expresses throughout regarding Goethe's feelings towards Wittgenstein seems similar to a person of nobility choosing a

<sup>185</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" 22.

<sup>186</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicus Philosophicus* 4.461.

<sup>187</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 354. The whole sentence reads: "Doubting and non-doubting behaviour. There is the first only if there is the second."

<sup>188</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" 17.

<sup>189</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" 22.

<sup>190</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" 16.

spouse that the household thinks beneath them. The staff is embarrassed for Goethe's obsession and against the union, so to say. This explains the ending, where Riemer and Krauter and the passive narrator decide to keep the truth about Goethe's last words a secret from the world. The advisors comically choose two words that in German rhyme with the original two words and can be interpreted as Goethe wishing for *more light*, more enlightenment, philosophically or literally, as his death is minutes away and his world darkening, literally and metaphorically. Wishing Wittgenstein close to him, and *nothing more*, shows a much more human Goethe. A man who, while dying, is not concerned with great thoughts and philosophy, but his most personal wish.

It is also worth mentioning that Riemer has never stated a negative opinion about Goethe's love for Wittgenstein, yet he is one of the three who lie about Goethe's last words. Riemer is the one with whom Goethe takes part in the morning Wittgenstein lessons. He has been the one who made the long and treacherous trip all the way to England on Goethe's request to personally invite Wittgenstein. Not only had Wittgenstein died just before Riemer's arrival, but none of Wittgenstein's entourage surrounding his deathbed "are familiar" with Goethe. Riemer is depressed about the insult to his master and is afraid to bring home the "*horrifying news*" of Wittgenstein's death, which will end Goethe's dream of meeting him, to his frail and dying master.<sup>191</sup> Riemer's love and care for Goethe's wishes and well-being are a depiction of tender love. Bernhard shows Goethe love and care through Riemer.

As we can see, Goethe is, on closer inspection, not as mocked in this story as it first seems. Bernhard did not treat Goethe too harshly at other times either. In *Extinction* Goethe is mentioned warmly alongside "Voltaire, Pascal, Sartre," writers that a young Murau was taught to respect by his beloved uncle George.<sup>192</sup> In "Goethe Dies" Bernhard has no ill will towards Goethe, whom he assigns this detailed infatuation with Wittgenstein's work and character. This infatuation is described seriously and tenderly. But Goethe is not treated with velvet gloves. Bernhard has him speak about knowingly betraying and tricking the German world, Schiller in particular, and that he considers nothing he wrote as equal or even close to anything Wittgenstein wrote. Also, Bernhard's

<sup>191</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" 26.

<sup>192</sup> Bernhard, *Ausloeschung* 43. (*Ein Glueck dass es sie gibt.*)

Goethe is surprisingly casual and careless with certain details. He cannot remember whether Wittgenstein is a Cambridge or an Oxford man. One of the most strict thinkers of the German speaking world keeps saying *Oxford or Cambridge*, instead of Cambridge, where Wittgenstein actually worked and lived. Even after Riemer corrects him, he keeps saying Oxford or Cambridge, as if making a point of how little the distinction matters to him. In another comical instance bordering on the absurd, Goethe exclaims that the rooster is to blame for something that is not specified. He uses a very childish term for rooster, "*Gickelhahn*," which is more of a sad nod towards the workings of a dying man's brain.

In order to elaborate on such tender moments, let us return to what happens midway through the story when Bernhard drops a variation of the aforementioned beautiful sentence that we have already seen in *Extinction*. Goethe says that he has had many happy thoughts in his life, but "of all these thoughts, the thought that Wittgenstein exists is my happiest one."<sup>193</sup> In *Extinction* Murau says "[w]hat a blessing it is that she exists" about his friend Maria, who is based on Ingeborg Bachmann, the Austrian poet who Bernhard really did know and love in real life. Because declarations of love are so very rare in Bernhard's prose, they change the feeling of the moment and create a sensual tone. Here Bernhard gives this beautiful and clear sentence about Wittgenstein to Goethe. Everything Goethe says about Wittgenstein is admiring and respectful, but this sentence is uncharacteristically grammatically quiet and simple. Gone is Goethe's slightly comical and careless, excited agitation and we are left with a quiet love. It is as if the background voices have stopped and made way for a new melody that is in a different key and played by an instrument that has not been highlighted in this piece before.

"Goethe Dies" is really about Wittgenstein. He is a leitmotif that weaves in and out of the plot. The moments of expressions of love to do with Wittgenstein are Bernhard's love chord. In "Goethe Dies" the love chord sounds twice, once when Goethe says that his happiest thought is of Wittgenstein, and again when the narrator says that it would be his happiest moment to witness a meeting between the two. In *Extinction* the love chord sounds when Murau speaks about Maria. These simple statements are out of place

<sup>193</sup> Bernhard, "Goethe Dies" e11. "[v]on allen diesen Gedanken ist der Gedanke, dass es Wittgenstein gibt, mein glücklichster."

among Bernhard's complicated sentences, his ridiculing and mocking, his detailed, ornamented digressions. For very short moments these simple and clean chords break through Bernhard's tumultuous onslaught of words and change the feeling. As with any chord, it is the interval, the space between the notes that creates colour and mood. And this is what one misses if one does not hear the music in Bernhard. One needs to understand the distance between what came before the chord and how the chord is placed. Love is as important in Bernhard's writing as death is. Bloomsaat-Voerknecht goes as far as to say that Bernhard's work shows "overflowing and exuberant love."<sup>194</sup> If he felt that "love cannot be described [...] because love is everything," then he certainly could depict it by writing around it, the way he said he had to write around Wittgenstein, and these short and sudden moments of deep emotion are where his love appears.<sup>195</sup> The sudden change in tone is radically different from the rambling style we are used to by the narrator, because what happened is that the author behind the narrator pushed the narrator aside to make a declaration.

The love chords are the author's voice breaking through and interrupting the narrator's voice. When Bernhard writes that it is a blessing that Maria (Ingeborg) exists or that the greatest happiness he could ever know would be to see Wittgenstein and Goethe face to face, he is not explaining something, he is not using words alone to describe something. He is using the space of what has been left unsaid as the space between the notes of a chord. To Bernhard, the few examples of purity and goodness in a world he knew as cold and cruel are what makes life bearable. They deserve complete and utter loyalty *beyond the borders of death*. The heart wrenching effect that Wagner's Tristan Chord has on the ear comes from the context, from how the chord is placed, and how that chord is built. In *Extinction* the sentence about Maria comes out of nowhere. In no other part up until that sentence does Murau present himself as anything other than agitated and disturbed by his family and the way they have affected him. The love chord is not in Murau's voice. And in "Goethe Dies" the narrator is excited about what is happening when

<sup>194</sup> Bloomsaat-Voerknecht 230.

<sup>195</sup> Fleischmann 46.

suddenly the excited and nervous narration stops and we get a rare, quiet moment. In this case, the love chord is not in the narrator's voice either.

These love chords are an example of the "summoning of music when language has failed radically."<sup>196</sup> Bernhard felt compelled to write prose but hated it at the same time, calling it "the most terrible" and "the most difficult," but somehow it was his prose where he was able to be the most magical.<sup>197</sup> He approached prose from a different angle than a storyteller. Even his early stories like "*Der Kulterer*" and "*An der Baumgrenze*" are more about mood than plot. A feeling, in both those cases a gloomy one, lingers and draws the reader in. And Bernhard's first longer work, "*On the Mountain: Rescue Attempt. Nonsense*" (1898) is one long poem with no periods, but hundreds of paragraph breaks, something one never sees in any other Bernhard novel. Splintered thoughts, dreams, hints, vague observations and memories make it impossible to see a plot, and yet one goes on the journey with the narrator, who, as far as one can tell, is unwell and uninviting. It is only possible to read if one can abandon hope for a rational line of thought and a traditional plot.

Bernhard wrote about qualities that the human language was not emotionally capable of handling and that is why he turns to the "summoning of music."<sup>198</sup> The narrators in "Goethe Dies," "Reunion," and *On the Mountain: Rescue Attempt, Nonsense* need to continue talking, to "admit that things are not as they say," and never can be, so as not to "deteriorate into complete silence."<sup>199</sup> The accusations that only make sense to the narrator in "Reunion" or the painfully correct but neurotic reporting of exact details in "Goethe Dies" are the narrators trying to avoid that which is most important but most unspeakable.

The important and simple truth presented between the lines in "Goethe Dies" shows us that Wittgenstein is the yardstick against which the rest of the thinking world should want to be measured. Goethe, who is designated leader of that thinking world,

<sup>196</sup> Herzog 41.

<sup>197</sup> Ferry Radax, *Thomas Bernhard. Drei Tage* (Wiesbaden: IFAGE, 1970).

<sup>198</sup> Herzog 41.

<sup>199</sup> Herzog 43.

comes to realize Wittgenstein's worth. Within the confounds of Bernhard's world, this makes perfect sense and to understand Bernhard and appreciate the magic his prose offers, one must realize that when opening a book of his, one has in fact entered Bernhard's world. It is a world very similar to the real one, but represented elastically around a few firm foundations. The fixed "river bed" that does not move while the river within it flows this way and that, is the place Wittgenstein held for Bernhard.<sup>200</sup> The "hinge," to which all that can be questioned is attached, is the place Wittgenstein held for him. With these certainties understood, Bernhard's "Goethe Dies" is more than a strange story. This is a musical composition based on Wittgenstein's statement: "Doubting and non-doubting behaviour. There is the first only if there is the second."<sup>201</sup> A person can only know what doubt feels like if he felt certainty before. Bernhard has, and his non-doubtable certainty surrounding Wittgenstein is fixed beyond the borders of space and time and life and death and immortalized in a respectful celebration of Wittgenstein.

Goethe is treated slightly more mischievously. He is respected by being given the ability to appreciate Wittgenstein's greatness, but the story, which was penned to supposedly honour Goethe's 150<sup>th</sup> death anniversary, is really not about Goethe as much as it is about Wittgenstein. Also, a few pages later, in the story "Reunion," which was published together with "Goethe Dies," Bernhard places a sneaky, snide remark against Goethe. When the narrator is listing all of the great thinkers and artists he has learned to understand in his own elevated way, as opposed to the vulgar way his parents had wanted him to, all of them, from Mozart to Goya, are mentioned without any side commentary. But when he gets to Goethe, he has the need to make sure that it is understood that Goethe is not a favorite. He says: "Goethe, if I read him at all [...]." But in the end Goethe is honoured nonetheless by being given the ability to admire Wittgenstein.

Why defy logic and space and time the way Bernhard does in "Goethe Dies"? Was Bernhard trying his hand at surrealism? Was he bored with his usual style that never veers from reality as much? Until then it had only been the misguided, doomed narrators whose realities were in danger of falling apart, but in "Goethe Dies," space and time are turned upside down as if we entered the world of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, a work that

<sup>200</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 15.

<sup>201</sup> Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* 46.

does not usually come up in connection with the feelings Bernhard's stories evoke. Wittgenstein asks: can we imagine a painting depicting Goethe composing Beethoven's ninth symphony? Bernhard asks: can we imagine a Goethe that loves and studies Wittgenstein? Bernhard can. For him it is part of Goethe's "corona;" for him it is one of the "delicate shadowy drawings of scenes" that are within the realm of possibilities when it comes to what could be.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>202</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 155.

## Concluding Remarks: Composing Wittgenstein

“Music saves me over and over again [...]”<sup>203</sup>

Thomas Bernhard

Academic literature about Bernhard ranges in tone from disturbed contempt to respectful awe. Bernhard has been studied from many angles, including psychological, philosophical, comedic, political, linguistic and musical. Some very valuable ways of understanding his importance have been established. Gargani argues that Bernhard uses language to create a “perfect, geometrical center”<sup>204</sup> that prevents human thought from collapsing. Charles W. Martin examines the nihilism he sees in Bernhard’s work<sup>205</sup> and Russel T. Harrison looks at possible socialist tendencies, especially in *Old Masters*, which he calls a “materialist masterpiece.”<sup>206</sup> J. H. Reid protests against dismissing Bernhard’s sense of humour and considers works like *Cutting Timber* “hilarious”<sup>207</sup> before they are provoking. For Bernhard specialist Katya Krylova “the psychological and dissecting portrayal of his characters has led to comparisons with Dostoyevsky and Franz Kafka, as well as with Samuel Beckett” and is as much a “distinguishing feature of Bernhard’s writing as is the musicality of his prose.”<sup>208</sup> There is much writing done on Bernhard’s unique use of language and the structural similarities of his language to music. What all these studies have in common is that they miss the point of reading Bernhard. My argument is that the most interesting aspect of Bernhard’s prose is how he infused his writing with musical elements to create prosaic music in order to express both suffering and love that cannot be expressed by words alone. Gibson and Huemer bring up a similar relationship when

<sup>203</sup> Bernhard, *Alte Meister* 243.

<sup>204</sup> Gargani 32.

<sup>205</sup> Charles W. Martin, *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard: The Portrayal of Existential and Social Problems in his Prose Works* (Editions Rodopi, 1995).

<sup>206</sup> Russel T. Harrison, “The Socialist Construction of Art in Thomas Bernhard’s ‘Alte Meister’” *Monatshefte* 101, No. 3 (2009) 395.

<sup>207</sup> J.H. Reid, “Review of *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard: The Portrayal of Existential and Social Problems in his Prose Works*” *The Modern Language Review* 94 (1999) 266.

<sup>208</sup> Katya Krylova. *Walking Through History: Topography and Identity in the Works of Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard* (Peter Lang 2012) 212.

emphasising that the activities of writing philosophy and writing poetry are closely related in the case of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's comment that "philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry"<sup>209</sup> suggests that philosophical ideas would be better served if there were more freedom when it came to expressing them. Bernhard's stories needed more freedom than poetry or prose alone could afford. He added the "mythic aspect" that music offers to bring his stories to life in a special way.<sup>210</sup> He transferred "onto the plane of literary composition the law of musical modulation from one tonality to another," and by using theme and variation and repeated basslines to create a literary passacaglia, Bernhard played with his words, relieving them of certain pressures, while investing them with the ability to represent love, respect and pity as a musical depiction. "Whereof you cannot speak, thereof you must stay silent" meant for Wittgenstein that some truths are outside of the boundaries of human logical language. By using language in a figurative way, Bernhard circumvents this demand.

If we got a language that describes all the arrangements of the things in the world and all the facts of the world, take all those parts of language and think of all the possible recombinations of their parts that are legitimate, that the language allows. Now you describe all the possible ways the world could be, not just the way it actually is, but all the possible ways it could be. Language then, in describing all the possibilities there are, describes the limits of reality. So the limits of language are the limits of reality. And the boundaries of what's intelligible are the boundaries of logic.<sup>211</sup>

Bernhard adheres to logic in this way: if Goethe is the greatest German thinker and if he had had the opportunity to know Wittgenstein's work, then he would have revered Wittgenstein the way Bernhard dreams it.

In "Reunion" Bernhard's musical "recombinations" end with the narrator so blinded by hate that he sees thousands of red and green socks and caps, when the actual number was probably much lower. The narrator is so blinded by hate that he remembers the parents as vile monsters who killed their daughter and relished in destroying their son. To him that is reality. His silent listener may well have confirmed the memories, had they been less colored by hatred and the despair of obsession. For the narrator, his way of seeing

<sup>209</sup> Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* 24.

<sup>210</sup> Adorno 3.

<sup>211</sup> "In Our Time" BBC Radio 4.

the past is his reality. The author's voice behind the narrator has a firm, compassionate, but mocking hand on the story. The author has been on both sides of the shores of memory, the emotionally charged side and the calmer, retrospective side that allows time to aid understanding for past situations. The same Bernhard who never loses an opportunity to put down the mother figures he creates, takes time within his most biographical work, *Gathering Evidence*, to point out that the scenes he described also looked like this: a tantrum-throwing child howling in the corner and an exhausted, overworked mother at the end of her rope on the other side of the room. The monster mother is common in Bernhard's work, and is not otherwise shown from this gentler side. This scene stands out and could have been excluded, but Bernhard included it. If one takes this scene, which was created before "Reunion," then the monsters described in "Reunion" become people who were not the best parents, but not the worst, and who have no idea about how their offspring still views them. The fact remains that to the narrators the parents are monsters and Bernhard allows this perspective to stand as one legitimate way that the parts of reality can become elastic and be recombined.

In "Goethe Dies" Bernhard's musical "recombinations" create a reality as if he was putting together a puzzle, but instead of finding the ways the puzzle pieces are meant to fit together, he carefully and artfully uses the pieces in a new way and puts together a musical representation. This too is a way that the parts of reality can be assembled. After all, "this too was Goethe, this too," the way Riemer says, or at least, it could be.<sup>212</sup> Maynard Keynes was to have said "Well, God has arrived. I met him on the 5:15 train."<sup>213</sup> Others have expressed that meeting Wittgenstein was like meeting Plato. It is curious that Bernhard would never mention Wittgenstein as similar to one of his failed protagonists who could not write. The fact is that yes, Wittgenstein wrote, we have his thoughts on paper to study and appreciate and marvel at. But Wittgenstein was in some ways just like a Conrad from *The Limeworks* or a Roithamer from *Correction*. Much of Wittgenstein's work was published posthumously because, as in the case of *Philosophical Investigations*, he "kept adding to the manuscript and delaying the promised delivery to the publisher." Wittgenstein thought about writing all the time; he lamented not writing or not writing the

<sup>212</sup> "Goethe Dies" 24.

<sup>213</sup> "In Our Time," BBC Radio 4.

way he wished he could. In a way, he wrote so little and with so much difficulty. He really only put out one book himself, the *Tractatus*, and everything he ever wrote was borne painfully. Of course, Wittgenstein is not Konrad in the sense that he did create masterpieces that are still discussed and studied decades after his death, but the similarities between his tortured mind and the minds of Konrad and Roithamer are too obvious not to mention. This similarity is just one more way of depicting Wittgenstein's presence in Bernhard's work.

Ferry Radax, in his film about Bernhard, *Three Days*, by zooming in on Bernhard's hand holding and twirling a branch while he speaks, explains the way he tried to get to an understanding of Bernhard: by looking past the obvious, past the speaking man's face, which would have been the obvious way to film for a documentary. One is not well-served to look for facts and a way of using language that portrays facts when reading Bernhard. One is better off trying to understand what is going on outside of the facts that make up what looks like a plot that the narrator wants us to believe as absolute truth. A scene in *The Loser* comes to mind, where the Glenn Gould character plays Bach while the vacuum cleaner is turned on beside him. He wants to hear the skeleton of the music, that part of the music that survives breaking through the noise of the vacuum cleaner. Gould is listening for the essence that does not need the kind of socially accepted respect that comes from performing the music in the traditional way, namely in silence so that every note is heard. The essence of what Bernhard has put into his stories is also barely audible over the rambling of the narrators. They are the vacuum cleaner. But yet, the essence is there and in some way the essence *needs* the vacuum cleaner, the narrators' rambling in order to shine behind the scenes, behind the stage, where it lives. The "curse of ambiguity" did not scare Bernhard because being understood was not what was most important to him. "To make oneself understood is impossible," he said to Ferry Radax.<sup>214</sup> He used language differently than for the mere purpose of exchanging information or describing something. His stories are not to be understood, they are to be felt.

Glenn Gould is another one of Bernhard's heroes, a character that is depicted simply as up high on the scale of what humanity is capable of. In *The Loser* the two friends

<sup>214</sup> Radax, *Drei Tage*, Chapter 5.

who could have become famous and accomplished concert pianists give up that dream after hearing Gould play in person. His gift is so great it shatters theirs as if in getting too close to a bright flame, they burn up. The narrator wastes away slowly and Wertheimer suddenly, and with an explosion. Glenn Gould is not painted in negative colours, though. The death of Wertheimer's person and the death of the narrator's dreams are circumstantial and an inevitable consequence of having been too close to greatness. In Goethe's case, he was cursed, or possibly blessed, not to have had the possibility of getting as close to Wittgenstein as he had wanted. He got close enough to sense greatness, but it did not destroy him. His persona could handle the greatness and instead of destroying him, it fed his passions and kept him young at heart and innocently excited until the end.

The fact that Bernhard wrote about Austria and Austrians even if what he wrote was unflattering, was a sign of attachment, of a complicated love, but love nonetheless. He did not care if some readers were unable to understand. The music in his writing is there for anyone with an ear for music to hear and appreciate, and he did not care if some readers remained unaware of it. For those unequipped, his writing remains gloomy and uninviting. And Bernhard did not chase after his audience. The subject matter he returned to over and over again was important to him, the less than ideal childhoods and the search for the ideal way to live, which is captured in the narrator of "Reunion," in Roithamer, Wertheimer, Konrad, Murau and in Bernhard's version of Goethe. The fact that none of them succeeded with what they set out to do for the world does not detract from the respect Bernhard assigns their quest. Every pained detail of Konrad's and Wertheimer's failed journeys and Goethe's final betrayal caused by trusting an ignorant entourage is told with pity and understanding.

The Glenn Goulds, and even more so, the Wittgensteins of the world, are Bernhard's heroes and he weaved them and their respective languages and characters into the world he created in his prosaic music. The *Glück* and gratitude Bernhard felt for Wittgenstein is alive and available for those Bernhard readers who understand his work to be prosaic music. Bernhard said that all his words are "musical notes and [the actors]

have to play them, then the music appears.”<sup>215</sup> Once all the sentences are understood as scores and notes, then the doors of Bernhard’s world open up and reveal the lights, the set, the actors and the musical, theatrical performance, where Bernhard as the “tragic king” is a “champion of pathos” who pushes the boundaries of logic and reality where nothing is as serious as it seems, not even death.<sup>216</sup>

We cannot forget that in music silence is as important as sound. Arvo Part’s “*Für Alina*” comes to mind. In it the silences are heartbreaking, full of tension, and if played without the pauses, the piece would be destroyed. Bernhard’s silence is present within the ravings of narrators who seem to fill every possible space available to them with an outpouring of words that does not even allow for paragraph breaks. And the empty spaces between the notes of the love chords are where the pain and the love live. “There are other worlds than these” and unlike his imprisoned narrators, Bernhard was aware of this and kept on creating new ones. There are also more languages than those that necessitate words and Bernhard made his own by crafting prosaic music that offers a wealth of emotions that may otherwise have been left not unspoken, but unexpressed.<sup>217</sup>

“Reunion” is one example of how Wittgenstein’s work is immortalized in Bernhard’s. Repeated words, like those in the hiking episode or the knitting episode of “Reunion,” are an “odd repetition compulsion” that imitate Wittgenstein’s writing in *Philosophical Investigations* where he makes use of an “Augustinian attempt to find a specific meaning behind a given name.”<sup>218</sup> But Bernhard’s narrators’ attempts, unlike Wittgenstein’s, “always backfir[e],” because instead of using repetition to understand language and the origin and meaning of words, the narrator is using Wittgenstein’s method to understand the origin and meaning of something much more subtle, his past suffering.<sup>219</sup> And because the suffering is personal and “too close” to write about, it remains “a question

<sup>215</sup> Dreissinger 57.

<sup>216</sup> Skwara 279.

<sup>217</sup> King, Stephen, *The Dark Tower* (New York: Pocket Books: 1982) 290.

<sup>218</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein’s Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996)157.

<sup>219</sup> Perloff 157-8.

that can't be answered."<sup>220</sup> This is why the words of Bernhard's stories seem often to slip into absurdisms, while the music behind the words expresses and answers what the words cannot. Unhappiness and pain are touched on just enough so that Bernhard's words become "constellations created from deep unhappiness that determine the joy of finding what is truly significant."<sup>221</sup> Beauty, truth and love are not approached directly, but seep in between the lines. "That is what is beautiful about my books, that the beautiful cannot be described and must arise of its own accord."<sup>222</sup>

"Goethe Dies" is another example of Bernhard playing with Wittgenstein. He stages a scenario for his beloved "brother" and by playing with time and space creates a world where appreciation for Wittgenstein reaches not just the generations that were to follow him, but the generations that came before him. Both stories make use of and at the same time honour Wittgenstein. They also express a deep love for music. I will allow Bernhard to conclude this journey of ours with his own words:

How I write my books? It is a question of rhythm and has a lot to do with music. Yes, what I write can only be understood if one is clear about the fact that first and foremost the musical component is what matters, and that what I write about is secondary. [...] I get from these musical elements just as much satisfaction as if I were playing a cello, actually, even greater satisfaction, because added is the joy of the thoughts that I am trying to express. <sup>223</sup>

<sup>220</sup> Perloff 156. The full quote reads: "Bernhard replied that he felt "too close to Wittgenstein's philosophy (or rather, to his 'poetry') to write about it."

<sup>221</sup> Bachmann 363. My translation of "*Konstellationen aus tiefem Unglück die das Glück des Bedeutenden ausmachen.*"

<sup>222</sup> Fleischmann 125.

<sup>223</sup> Rambures 23.

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