

From the poetics of disgust to meta-literary affirmations, or what Bernhard found in Gombrowicz

Marian Bielecki

ORCID: 0000-0003-2490-0823

Witold Gombrowicz admitted in his *Diary* that he wished to turn himself into a literary hero, like Hamlet or Don Quixote.¹ That this suggestion is inspiring is perhaps best demonstrated by the gestures of other writers who were eager to turn Gombrowicz into a literary character. Interestingly, most of them were foreign writers,² because Polish authors seem to treat Gombrowicz more seriously, that is, they see him as an ideological opponent and a possible source of inspiration.³ One of the most intriguing transformations of this kind may be found in Thomas

¹ Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary*, trans. Lillian Vallee (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2012), 141.

² Ewa Kobyłecka-Piwońska, *Spojrzenia z zewnątrz. Witold Gombrowicz w literaturze argentyńskiej (1970–2017)* [Views from the outside: Witold Gombrowicz in Argentine literature (1970–2017)] (Kraków: Universitas, 2017).

³ Marian Bielecki, *Historia – Dialog – Literatura. Interakcyjna teoria procesu historycznoliterackiego* [History – Dialogue – Literature: An interactive theory of the historical-literary process] (Wrocław: Wydawnictwo UWr, 2010); Marian Bielecki, *Gombrowicziady. Reaktywacja* [Gombrowicziady. Reactivation] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2020).

Bernhard's novel *Gargoyles*. Prince Saurau at one point mentions "his steward" at Hochgobernitz Castle, "a man named Gombrowicz," who was to "work out a plan for liquidating the entire estate" and who, although his father "disliked the steward's looks, and his mind as well" (G 150), would marry the prince's elder sister. Alas, the plan failed, because "the steward plunged into the gorge and was buried" (G 150–151).⁴ The Polish writer is a side character in the novel, he does not play an important role, and there are hardly any other traces of Gombrowicz-inspired motifs in *Gargoyles*. However, literary critics do write about Gombrowicz and Bernhard together.⁵ In one biographical anecdote, Bernhard recommended *Ferdydurke* to his brother, Peter Fabjan, and in one of Bernhard's houses we can still find *Ivona, Princess of Burgundia*.⁶ While this is the only tangible "evidence" I can refer to, in this essay I intend to argue that the relationship between Bernhard and Gombrowicz may be analyzed in terms of literary influence.

My argument is threefold. Firstly, I argue that in Bernhard's early prose, that is until the publication of *The Lime Works*, the poetics of disgust proves dominant. This affect defines the interpersonal relationships between and the main defense strategy of the characters who wish to protect themselves against others.⁷ *Gathering Evidence: A Memoir* is paradigmatic text in this respect. It is a moving diary of a wounded and abandoned child who processes these emotions in and through a radical critique of institutionalized culture (family, school, politics) that is essentially nihilistic, filled with resentment and disgust. Still, the narrator also tries to work through such negative emotions and arrive at a more optimistic place. Bernhard's early novels have a lot in common: they are all set in the same Upper Austrian province where nature and weather are threatening – both provide a gloomy, sinister, and anti-idyllic background for even more depressing events and even more deprived characters. The protagonist, *homo bernhardus*, is usually a bitter old man, tormented by and suspended in-between pride and a sense of unfulfillment. He speaks in incredible, insane, and monstrous monologues, criticizing everything and everyone, even himself. Arthur

⁴ I refer to Bernhard's novels by means of abbreviations: E – Extinction, trans. David McLintock (New York: Knopf, 1996); OM – Old Masters: A Comedy, trans. Ewald Osers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); KE – "Eine katholische Existenz", in: Kurt Hofmann, *Aus Gesprächen mit Thomas Bernhard* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 1988), pp. 51–60; LW – *The Lime Works: A Novel*, trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Knopf, 1973); MP – *My Prizes: An Accounting*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (New York: Knopf, 2010); B – *Eine Begegnung: Gespräch mit Krista Fleischmann* [A Meeting: Conversations with Krista Fleischmann] (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006); GE – *Gathering Evidence: A Memoir*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Knopf, 1983); CT – *Cutting Timber: An Irritation*, trans. Ewald Osers (New York: Quartet Books, 1988); G – *Gargoyles*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Knopf, 2010); C – *Correction: A Novel*, trans. Sophie Wilkins (New York: Vintage, 1979). Quotations from these editions will be followed by the respective abbreviation and the appropriate page number.

⁵ Stephen D. Dowden, "A Testament Betrayed: Bernhard and His Legacy", in: *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Matthias Konzett (Rochester & Suffolk: Camden House, 2002), 67; footnote. 18; Marek Kędzierski, "Dawni mistrzowie: Witold Gombrowicz i Thomas Bernhard" [The old masters: Witold Gombrowicz and Thomas Bernhard], *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* 4 (2007); Marek Kędzierski, *Posłowie* [Afterword], in: Thomas Bernhard, Bratanek Wittgensteina. *Przyjaźń* [Wittgenstein's Nephew: A Friendship], translated and with an afterword by Marek Kędzierski (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2019), 153, 157; Marcin Polak, *Trauma bezkresu. Nietzsche, Lacan, Bernhard i inni* [The trauma of vastness. Nietzsche, Lacan, Bernhard and others] (Kraków: Universitas, 2016), 213, 217; Paweł Jasnowski, "Świat jako kloaka i udawanie sensu. Paliatywy w świecie prozy Thomasa Bernharda" [The world as a sewer and a quest for meaning: Palliatives in Thomas Bernhard's prose], *Teksty Drugie* 2 (2017).

⁶ Agata Barełkowska, "«Decydujące fragmenty Mrozu napisałem w Warszawie...»." *Polskie wycieczki Thomasa Bernharda*, [I wrote the key fragments of Frost in Warsaw...] *Thomas Bernhard's journeys to Poland*] *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* 3 (2009). Cf. Agata Wittchen-Barełkowska, *Kategoria teatralności w dziele Thomasa Bernharda* [The category of theatricality in the work of Thomas Bernhard] (Poznań: Nauka i Innowacje, 2014), 195.

⁷ I write about it in: "O udręce młodości, resentymentem i wstręciem, a także o tym, czy Thomas Bernhard czytał Witolda Gombrowicza" [The torment of youth, resentment, and disgust, and whether Thomas Bernhard read Witold Gombrowicz], *Rana. Literatura – Doświadczenie – Tożsamość* 4 (2021).

Schopenhauer is an important point of reference here.⁸ Secondly, over time, the writer realizes that this poetics, as well as the emotions that it is based on, namely disgust and resentment, have their emotional, intellectual, and ideological limitations. Friedrich Nietzsche is an important point of reference in this case.⁹ Thirdly, I believe that Nietzsche does help in this process of reflection and Gombrowicz and his meta-literary concepts also prove useful.

A strategy reminiscent of Nietzsche's, implemented on a meta-literary level and over time supported by the poetics of satire, begins to be a dominant feature in Bernhard's works more or less since the publication of one of his most "Gombrowicz-like" works, that is *The Lime Works*. The protagonist is a typical Bernhardian paranoid, deeply affected by the traumas of his childhood: to look into his "childhood was to look into a snake pit, into a hell" (LW 43). He lives in an area that is the "source of every kind of universally infectious disease" (LW 45). He is consumed by chronic states of exhaustion and obsessed with closure and isolation, fearing "the outside" (LW 11), that is misanthropy and hypochondria. Konrad does not believe in understanding (the so-called marital bliss "is a lie" [LW156]). He isolates himself from the world to write a book, but he constantly seems to be looking to find a way to connect with other people, suspended between the "hell of loneliness" and the "hell of togetherness" (LW 156). Such sporadic relations, however, are unique, insofar as they have much in common with observing, rehearsing, directing, and experimenting, especially in the case of Konrad's disabled wife, whom the protagonist tortures with the Urbanchich method and pseudoscientific experimental hearing and pronun-

⁸ The world as representation; pessimism; lack of metaphysical order; salvation through art; the praise of tragedy as the only form capable of representing "the frightful side of life," including "the nameless pain and misery of humanity, the triumph of malice, the mocking mastery of chance, and the hopeless fall of the just and innocent;" in tragedy "the conflict of will with itself that is here, on the highest level of its objectivization, most completely unfolded and comes frighteningly to the fore" (Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, vol. 1, trans., R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1909], 144, hereinafter: WWI); human life as suspended "between pain and boredom" (WWI 177), "desire and satisfaction" (WWI 178), and satisfaction always leads to monotony and excess (WWI 150); recognizing that lasting "suffering [is] essential to all life" (WWI 166), and that life is in equal parts comedy and tragedy (WWI 167) – this is why Bernhard's frustrated characters eagerly read, quote, and reflect on Schopenhauer's works in their excruciating monologues.

⁹ Challenging Schopenhauer's idealism and aestheticism, Nietzsche said: "art is essentially **the affirmation, the blessing, and the deification of existence**. What does **pessimistic art** signify? Is it not a contradictio? Yes, Schopenhauer is **in error** when he makes certain works of art serve the purpose of pessimism. Tragedy does **not** teach 'resignation.' To represent terrible and questionable things is, in itself, the sign of an instinct of power and magnificence in the artist; he doesn't fear them..." (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche* [N.p.: Strelbytsky Multimedia Publishing, 2012], n.p.). Nietzsche also accuses Schopenhauer of having a misguided attitude towards pessimism, arrested in its ambivalence, combining "good will" and "disgust," as a result of which he did not allow the latter to shine through (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of...*, n.p.). Nietzsche therefore argues that in "revaluating all values" he also wished to change how one sees disgust (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of...*, n.p.). A change in the perception of disgust would involve moving away from treating disgust as an epistemic element, seen as a marker of distance and distinctness, towards, hopefully, restraining the gesture of negation, and thus developing an attitude of disgust towards disgust, a homeopathic intensification and a courage to look into the unbearable. This was one of the meanings of amor fati, described in *Joyful Wisdom* thus: "I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of...*, n.p.). This sea-change is documented in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, whose protagonist is "the man without disgust, [...] the surmounter of the great disgust" – "disgust" did not "cleav[e] unto [his] mouth" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of...*, n.p.). To be "without disgust" also means being able to swallow and digest what cannot be digested, and not vomit, by assimilating what cannot be assimilated. It also means being able to dance and laugh because: "Not by wrath, but by laughter, do we slay" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Complete Works of...*, n.p.). There is always laughter, release of tension, exclusion and inclusion, further accompanied by a skeptical, critical approach – a genealogical analysis of certain concepts, including subject, reason, work, goodness, truth, beauty, morality (Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", in: *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited by D. F. Bouchard [Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977], 139–165).

ciation exercises as well as the reading of Kropotkin (against her will). A convicted psychopath, a degenerate, and finally a murderer, but with some intellectual and artistic aspirations – this is Konrad. Either way, his frequent comments on meta-artistic topics seem interesting to me and I do not even rule out direct inspirations from the meta-literary *Ferdydurke*.

His quasi-tirade seems somewhat inconsistent, but I think that his remarks may be read in the wider context of critiquing the modernist concept of the Work. Konrad begins by discussing artistic haughtiness and individualism (“The mass denied to the individual what was possible only to the individual” [LW 48]). Then, he postulates that the Work *The Sense of Hearing* shall evolve from “a scientific work” to “a work of art” (LW 63), and finally rejects everything that is structured, everything that is form (LW 53). The very idea of form is questioned, insofar as the work as something intentional, autonomous (“the writer himself was nothing” [LW191]), structuralist (“the number 9, in fact, played a most important part in this work, (...) everything could be extrapolated from 9” [LW 63]), and essentialist (containing a “truly fundamental idea” and not secondary problems [LW 120]) is questioned. There is no “pure form” which hides a hermeneutic secret.¹⁰

The form is further challenged by the impossibility of comprehending the entire project, because Konrad, due to his autistic hypersensitivity, is constantly exposed to “distraction” (LW 67). Just like Józio, as described in the first paragraph of *Ferdydurke*. The possibility of internal and mental disintegration (“for hours on end Konrad sees himself lying there unconscious in the full possession of his completed manuscript” [LW 162]) as well as the outside world (“the country, as such, tended to distract” [LW 189]) are both a constant threat. The writing process does not unify the I; the subsequent syntheses ultimately lead to disintegration (LW 52). Hermeneutical enquiry fails. Academics (“millions of apprentice workmen in science and history” [LW 61]), discourse (“Words ruin” [LW 122]), the very nature of exegesis (“Every explanation led inescapably to a totally false outcome, the more things were explained the sicker they got, because the explanations were false in every case, and the outcome of every explanation was invariably the wrong outcome” [LW 63]), the non-essentialist deconstructivist *différance*, and the ontology of the work (“any final point is a starting point for a further development toward a new final point and so forth, (...) the so-called approach to the subject would get you nowhere” [LW 58]) all fail.¹¹

The work is supposed to be the “goal of lifetime” (LW 183), but Konrad’s life is a series of failures and missed opportunities. The mind is unable to cope, and Konrad constantly complains: “Then it all fell apart, at the very peak of concentration it all fell to pieces again” (LW 52); “Instead of concentration (on his work) (...) nonconcentration (on his work) suddenly manifested itself” (LW 75). The deconstructive writing process brings to mind post-structuralist notions. The endless syntheses, which by no means lead to a final dialectical synthesis, remind one of Roland Barthes’s notion of Text, which “practices the infinite postponement of

¹⁰The ascetic and functionalist architecture found in *The Lime Works* is important here. Cf. Adam Lipszyc, “Inne gmachy. O kilku budynkach u Bernharda” [Other buildings: About architecture in Bernhard’s prose], in: *Korekty Bernharda. Szkice krytyczne* [Bernhard’s corrections: Critical sketches], ed. Wojciech Charchalis, Arkadiusz Żychliński (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2021), 107–120.

¹¹The analogies with *Ferdydurke* are striking. Gombrowicz’s meta-literary tirades also contained anti-scholastic, anti-hermeneutic, anti-structuralist and anti-essentialist overtones. Cf. Marian Bielecki, *Widma nowoczesności. ‘Ferdydurke’ Witolda Gombrowicza* [Specters of modernity. ‘Ferdydurke’ by Witold Gombrowicz] (Warsaw: IBL, 2014), 90–140; 253–296.

the signified, the Text is dilatory.” Indeed, for Barthes the Text is a “man possessed by devils: My name is legion, for we are many (Mark 5:9).”¹² This is also how Konrad is described by the narrator (almost bordering on “madness” [LW 154]). His artistic perturbations demonstrate what Michel Foucault wrote about on the margins of *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, namely “the absence of a work of art.”¹³ Foucault argued that we should talk about an archeology of silence, which is allowed to but does not speak. Consequently, the text about madness does not contain a hermeneutical secret, but rather a reserve, a residue of signification that postpones and suspends meaning. Jacques Derrida also argued that the discourse on madness, on madness untamed by reason and psychiatry, is an impossible discourse due to the rational nature of language, and in this sense the “demonic hyperbole” of madness cannot be expressed by means of an objectifying, pacifying, policing, and coalitional language of reason. Derrida wrote: “By its essence, the sentence is normal.”¹⁴ Regardless of the intellectual or mental condition of the speaker and regardless of the poetics, even the poorest or the most deviant one, they employ, “the sentence is normal” also because communication is based on the assumption that the self is consistent and transparent.

Ludwig Wittgenstein apparently shared this idea when he wrote: “the thought is the significant proposition.”¹⁵ As we know, Bernhard found Wittgenstein, his views, and his family members fascinating.¹⁶ Linguistic reflection in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* centers on describing the relations between the world (objects) and language (names), and it (language) is seen as a clear and crystalline system of arbitrary and differentiating elements, allowing for full and reliable representation and isomorphic transitions between facts, sentences, and thoughts, essentially truthful and logical. In this sense, it is realistic. In *Philosophical Investigations*, linguistic reflection centers on describing relativizing language games, governed by pragmatic feasibility, comprehensibility, and intersubjective verifiability. In this sense, it is anti-realistic. Considering both approaches, Bernhard’s inspirations are indeed rather general.¹⁷ We do not find in his works detailed and consistent references to meta-theoretical linguistic reflection, neither does he write about propositional logic; instead, we find radical linguistic skepticism, which seems to oppose the most famous Wittgensteinian observations. Most often, however, Bernhard seems to question Wittgenstein’s linguistic pragmatism at the level of explicit and rather general statements. For example, in *Correction* Bernhard writes: “Perfect to the degree to which perfection

¹²Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text”, trans. Richard Howard, in: Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 59-60.

¹³Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Random House, 1965), vii, 286-288.

¹⁴Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago UP), 54.

¹⁵Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1922), 38. Hereinafter: TLP. Dominik Sulej (“Kosmos” jako gabinet luster. Psychomachia Witolda Gombrowicza [“Cosmos” as a house of mirrors: Witold Gombrowicz’s Psychomachia], [Kraków: Universitas, 2015], 53–54) suggests that Gombrowicz engaged in a dialogue with Wittgenstein in *Cosmos*. Some of the interpretative comments are far-fetched, but the suggestion that in one case an epistemological problem is explained by means of *Philosophical Investigations* (triangle = arrow) is probably correct. Cf. Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos*, trans. Danuta Borhardt (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005), 24–26; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. Joachim Schulte, P. M. S. Hacker (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 179-180.

¹⁶Cf. Jakub Momro, “Logiczna składnia obłądu (Wittgenstein, Beckett, Bernhard)” [The Logical Syntax of Madness (Wittgenstein, Beckett, Bernhard)], *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2013).

¹⁷On this linguistic philosophy, see: *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. Alice Cray, Rupert Read (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 9–28.

is possible, anyway, let's sat nearly perfect, 'nearly' as with anything else" (C 165). He thus, as if, engages in a critical dialogue with *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, where Wittgenstein writes "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly" (TLP 45). The idea that language constricts thought and that words ridicule thought may be found in many Bernhard's texts (GE 171, 310; LW 112; CT 2–3). The belief that interpersonal communication is a misunderstanding is also a common trope (GE 106).

Such beliefs are communicated at the level of poetics in the form of radically unreliable narrators and their interlocutors' insane monologues. They may be read as expressions of madness, as a form of questioning the possibilities of expression and representation or *vice versa*/ simultaneously as an attempt to express what is impossible or difficult to name. Indeed, constant repetitions might be read as a celebration of speech, a negation of silence, and a command to tell the truth. Perhaps in this way, in line with Wittgenstein, Bernhard honors the unsayable,¹⁸ but he certainly does not observe cultural taboos. However, it has been suggested more often than not that the repetitiveness of discourse in Bernhard's novels points to the shortcomings of language, difficulties in expressing oneself, and the actual failure of communication. It seems to me that Bernhard is somewhere in the middle – between radical critique of language and the belief in the absolute necessity of language and speech, between belief in vague generalizations and the precision of language – because the writer is famous for explicitly naming what he criticizes. Marjorie Perloff seems to combine these two options in a Wittgensteinian perspective, citing two reasons for the poetics of compulsive repetition, namely the Augustinian attempt to distinguish between a proper name and a reference as well as using ironic permutations and recontextualizations to make subversive and political statements.¹⁹

Linguistic skepticism and the state of mind of Bernhard's protagonists are reflected in the poetics of their incredible stories. Repetitions, parallelisms, enumerations, anaphora, ellipses, endless sentences, broken syntax and grammar, idiomatization of individual voices combined with a multiplication and mixing of narrative voices – the most literal stylistic expression of mental confusion – define Bernhard's poetics. Krystian Lupa was right when he said that the aestheticization and artistic elevation of maniacal monologues makes no sense, because "language is often plain, obsessively simple, sterilely schematic, monothematically morbid, full of clichés; it gets lost in the thicket of endless triviality, stupidity, slander, and calumny, language of maniacal anonymous accusations, a language that is broken, unsophisticated..."²⁰ Bernhard's suspicious genealogical poetics criticizes and satirizes banality, tautology, clichés, colloquiality, stupidity, etc. At the same time, it also communicates, though never openly, Bernhard's views.

Meta-artistic questions play an important role in *Correction*. They arise in connection with a number of "works," most importantly, the architectural design of the Cone, situated in the

¹⁸Rüdiger Görner, "The Broken Window Handle: Thomas Bernhard's Notion of «Weltbezug»", in: *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, 96.

¹⁹Marjorie Perloff, "Border Games: The Wittgenstein Fictions of Thomas Bernhard and Ingeborg Bachmann", in: Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder. Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1996), 157–160.

²⁰Krystian Lupa, "Znowu Bernhard" [Bernhard Again], in: *Thomas Bernhard, Dramaty [Plays]*, vol. 1, trans. Jacek Stanisław Buras, Monika Muskała, Danuta Żmij-Zielińska, selected and with an introduction by Krystian Lupa (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001), 396–397.

geometric center of the Kobernaßerwald forest, designed and built by the professor of natural sciences at Cambridge, Roithamer, and his intellectual legacy in the form of thousands of slips of paper and a manuscript edited by the narrator. Both intellectual and existential projects end in failure. Instead of living in a concrete building without windows, Roithamer's sister chooses suicide, and the process of editing Roithamer's papers, due to the pressure from the outside world (C 2) and his own obsessive thoughts (C 275), which cloud reflection, does not proceed as planned. The narrator feels disgust ("the mere word edit or edition was always enough to nauseate me" [C 132]) and suffers from chronic insomnia, permanent irritability, and prostration. He is at the verge of "madness" (C 108). This insane reconstruction of an insane project may again be read in terms of questioning a certain concept of the work. The titular "correction" does not only refer to the narrator's ordering and reconstruction of Roithamer's papers, putting it "into some kind of order" (C 132) in order to bring out the internal architecture of the work and its "original coherence as envisioned by Roithamer" (C 10). Indeed "all three of these versions of Roithamer's handwritten manuscript, (...) all three versions belong together, each deriving from the previous one, they compose a whole, an integral whole of over a thousand pages in which everything is equally significant" (C 130), and "all this taken together is the complete work" (C 131). Roithamer's work thus supposedly resembles an organic modernist form; it is ultimately to be synthesized in the process of concretization ("think it through to the end, no aspect of it must be left unclarified or at least unclarified to the highest degree possible" [C 35]). Similarly, the Cone in its design is clearly modernist: it is governed by rationalism, functionality, geometry, and ascetic minimalism. This dialogue extends even further due to the assumed correlation between reading, nature, and life: "nature then it's what we read, it's the life and the nature of what we read" (C 157). We can also see that in the connections between "the most important work or brainchild" (C 131) and the notion of "the complete work," which is why the title of the novel further carries some existential undertones.

This combined impossibility – of turning the perfect cone into a home, of constructing the work, of exegesis – therefore points to the inability to comprehend existence by means of contemporary psychology and morality. Roithamer defies normative patterns. He is portrayed as a radical eccentric: he does not fit in (he was "different" [C 32]), he is distant ("there's always been a total lack of sympathy, nothing but mutual dislike" [C 31]), and he is self-reliant ("Roithamer's conduct and decisions were always in character" [C 31]). As any *homo bernhardus*, he relies on "disgust and dislike" (C 220) towards his family (C 220), especially his mother (and femininity [C 195]), his teachers (C 101) and, of course, Austria as a country and state which breaks the spirit and destroys culture. Austria is a hypocritical, shameless, and economically ruined country which poses a threat to the individual – it limits them and turns them into simpletons (C 18–27). However, there are exceptions, insofar as Roithamer is said to have been fond of his real "relatives, physical and spiritual" (C 28), that is the country folk from Altensam, who are described using homoerotic euphemisms ("how very much he loved their ways" [C 53]). He was drawn to simple people, workers, lumberjacks, servants (C 66), because he preferred "the most unwanted, society's pariahs" (C 67), "the poorest of the poor, men totally excluded from society" (C 66). Roithamer even donated the money from the sale of his Altensam property to help "prisoners released from penal institutions," "so-called criminals, who are actually our sick people (...) those whom society has catapulted into their sickness" (C 67, 149).

Cutting Timber may appear to be a social satire or a comedy, but it takes place in a typically Bernhardian world. The narrator is in a permanent psychophysical crisis, as manifested by a sense of isolation and powerlessness (“mental and physical atrophy” [CT 3]; “I’m the very weakest person with the very weakest character” [CT 3]; “I had momentarily become soft and weak” [CT 15]), self-hatred (“once more (...) I was making myself cheap and contemptible” [CT 15]), as well as humiliation, abuse, and isolation. Disgust, revulsion, nausea, and vomiting are affective reactions that define his relation with the world and the people (WE 1, 2, 8, 10, 11, 12, 14, 28, 38, 41, 44, 55, 63, 78, 111, 138, 139, 143, 153, 167, 187). In a state of great irritation, the narrator attends a dinner party in the Gentsgasse. He visits the Auersbergers, friends with whom he has been once very close. Alas, he has later learned to detest them, and they have grown apart. The narrator unexpectedly renews his friendship with the married couple. He decides to do this, even though he hates them: “I was thoroughly familiar with what they were like – and I know of scarcely anything more repugnant. (...) Only a half-wit devoid of all character could accept an invitation like that” (CT 19-20). His insane and delirious monologue, as he gets more and more drunk, seems as confused and confusing as his feelings, because he thinks about the good old decadent times as he lists the wrongs and misgivings he has suffered. Seemingly, this novel is just like other Bernhard’s texts; one might even say that the paroxysm of disgust seems most intense in *Cutting Timber*. However, this is not the case.

First of all, disgust is initially a tool of deconstruction, of “analysis” (CT 45), that is, observation, exposure, embarrassment. It is merciless and malicious. It is even more drastic because, as we know, Herr Auersberger is actually based on the figure of the composer Gerhard Lampersberger, for whom Bernhard once wrote a libretto. Lampersberger, in turn, supported Bernhard financially. In the novel, he is “little paunchy Auersberger” (CT 64), “a so-called successor of Webern” (CT 5), an alcoholic, and a homosexual (CT 152). The narrator argues that the Auersbergers are stupid, megalomaniac, insincere, envious, and mean. He draws attention to their theatrical airs and graces, their sense of humor, their need to show off (CT 59, 61), as well as their love of clichés (they were friends with “artistic people” [CT 2], they loved “artistic dinner[s]” [CT 5] and “intellectual conversation” [CT 141]). Banality is emphasized by the use of meta-expressions (“she used to call it” [CT 1], “as they say” [CT 2, 5, 10, 17], “so to speak” [CT 2], “so called” [CT 7, 13, 27]), which further point to the conceptual use of language. The Auersbergers love their “cultural goodwill,”²¹ their “shabby-genteel” clothes (CT 5), and their house “filled with Josephine and Biedermeier furniture” (CT 17). The narrator finds it all so pretentious and snobbish. Such a lifestyle is for him a failed attempt at imitating the aristocracy. The Auersbergers want to forget about their actual roots and petit-bourgeois mentality. The narrator does not only criticize, but also demonstrates how social class, as a construct, works and in his attempt, I am almost sure of this, he is inspired by the Młodziaks and the Hurleckis from *Ferdydurke*. The examples of social distinction as well as the process of its deconstruction are identical. The decor of the Auersbergers’ house (tapestries, Josephine and Biedermeier furniture) actually shows how absurd the Auersbergers’ belief that people admire their “shameless life-style” (CT 138) is; in fact, they admire the furniture, the works of art, and the sophisticated design. “It’s not only the emperor’s clothes that make the emperor,” the

²¹Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984), 318.

narrator says, “but the emperor’s furniture and art treasures” (CT 138). His suspicious and skeptical eye notices that the music room is “simply too beautiful, too perfectly furnished, and hence unbearable. (...) I found it merely repugnant (...). Such perfection, which hits you in the eye and crowds in upon you from all sides, is simply repellent, I thought, just as all apartments are repellent in which everything is just so, as they say, in which nothing is ever out of place or ever permitted to be out of place” (CT 137–138).

Secondly, visiting the Auersbergers is supposed to be an effective “therapy” (CT 4), and as such lead to “mental and physical recovery” (CT 4). Unlike in other novels, neither Schopenhauer nor Nietzsche are mentioned, but Montaigne and Gogol do appear. There appears to be a more cheerful, affirmative, satirical, and overall ludic message. And this is *Cutting Timber* in a nutshell. It is, in my opinion, Bernhard’s funniest novel. The great dinner scene unfolds slowly, as the Auersbergers spin out their resentful monologues and suspense tactics, as they wait for a famous actor from the Burgtheater to arrive. The narrator-protagonist, because despite his best intentions, falls asleep drunk, and when he wakes up, he is comically rude towards Mrs. Auersberger. Meanwhile, the famous actor from the Burgtheater, the dominant causeur, arrives. The writer Jeannie Billroth (this character is based on Jeannie Ebner), the protagonist’s former lover, now widely perceived as a poor imitation of Virginia Woolf, is also tormented by a feeling of unappreciation. An aggressive social *agon* begins, a sharp exchange of retorts and provocative questions revealing incompetence and hypocrisy. The respective outbursts are ruthlessly honest and arrogant. The poetics of repetition in this parody of critical exegesis plays a satirical role: the tautological nature of the statements in the dispute between the actor and the writer, who argue about theater and dramaturgy, reveals an actual lack of any substance in the entire argument. Not a single argument is mentioned, and instead both speakers rely on institutional legitimization (CT 105). An even funnier effect is created when the gestures and the poses (especially those of the hostess and the actor) clash. Bernhard uses laughter and satire to tame what the narrator finds repulsive. However, he does not stop there, because he recognizes not only the arbitrariness of disgust, but also its simplifying, evaluative, and, in this sense, foundational nature. First, the narrator draws attention to how he treats others – he is ambivalent in his emotional reactions (“but then I looked into one of the mirrors of the coffeehouse and found myself staring at my own dissipated face, and my own debauched body, and I felt more sickened by myself than I had been by Auersberger and his companion” [CT 12]) – and further describes the resentful nature of his feelings: “I had downgraded (...) all the others (...) and at the same time upgraded myself—and that was contemptible” (CT 56). All these disappointments may be summed up as follows: “the world today is ridiculous and at the same time profoundly embarrassing and kitschy and that is the truth of it” (OM 62). “This is the truth” – this phrase may be found repeatedly in Thomas Bernhard’s last few novels.

The Old Masters focuses on Reger, a musicologist writing for *The Times*, who saves himself from despair – first existential despair and then a feeling of dread caused by the death of his beloved wife – thanks to his visits at the Kunsthistorisches Museum. He becomes friends with the museum guard Irrsigler and the narrator Atzbacher. Both relationships are as superficial as they are important. All three men create a narrative constellation, engaging in a dialogue with old meta-artistic concepts which, ultimately, gives rise to a different vision of art. Such

a form of criticism is the most methodical because it addresses not only the institutional conditions of the meta-artistic discourse but also its conceptual nature. Art history institutions, education, and museums are criticized first. The discourse on art is challenged as boring and exegetically empty: “Thousands, indeed tens of thousands of art historians wreck art by their twaddle and ruin it” (OM 15). Teachers are judged even more harshly, they are “petty bourgeois” (OM 23), “[t]here is no cheaper artistic taste than that of teachers” (OM 23). Also, “[m]ost of our teachers are miserable creatures whose mission in life seems to consist of barricading life to the young people and eventually and finally making it into a terrible disillusionment. After all, it is only the sentimental and perverse small minds from the lower middle class which push their way into the teaching profession. The teachers are the henchmen of the state” (OM 23-24). Teachers force their pupils “to learn a sixteen-stanza Schiller poem by heart” (OM 24). Schools are controlled by the state and produce “a state person, regulated and registered and trained and finished and perverted and dejected, like everyone else” (OM 25). Schools also propagate Catholic religion and/or national socialist ideology.

The critical edge is more specific and more direct. Adalbert Stifter, a widely respected Biedermeier writer and a faithful “subject” of the Habsburg empire, who in his works praises the idyllic atmosphere of the province, which is, however, filled with philistinism and devotion, is most strongly criticized. Reger says that readers “are all now making pilgrimages to Stifter, in their hundreds of thousands, kneeling down before everyone of his books as if everyone of them were an altar” (OM 41). This is, of course, brings to mind Gombrowicz and the way in which he used the rhetoric of the sacred in describing the spectacle of art. Reger tests this hypothesis and conducts a “Stifter experiment” and a “Stifter test” (OM 39-40). He tells his friends to read Stifter’s works and asks for their honest opinion: “And all these people (...) told me they had not liked it, that they had been infinitely disappointed” (OM 40). A similar scene could be found in Gombrowicz, as are questions about Titian’s *Madonna of the Cherries*, which apparently is not a beloved masterpiece: “Not a single person I asked ever liked the picture, they all admired it solely because of its fame, it did not really say anything to any of them” (OM 40). The question of reception is also raised in the case of museums. According to Reger, a snobbish and aspirational compulsion propels them: “People only go to the museum because they have been told that a cultured person must go there, and not out of interest, people are not interested in art, at any rate ninety-nine per cent of humanity has no interest whatever in art” (OM 4).

Reger makes very interesting comments about the ontology of the work of art itself and its interpretation. He coins the concept of “incomplete reading,” reminiscent of Barthes’s reflections in *The Pleasure of the Text*,²² brought to life by a talented “page-turner” (OM 17). Such reading is fragmentary, but extremely intense – conducted “with the greatest reading passion imaginable” (OM 17). It is thus better than a superficial attempt to understand the entire work (“It is better to read twelve lines of a book with the utmost intensity and thus to penetrate into them to the full, as one might say, rather than read the whole book as the normal reader does” [OM 17]). It is supposed to be a dialectical reading and lead from the fragment to the Whole, that is, to “the complete and perfect” (OM 17), and, respectively, reduce the

²²Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 12.

Whole to the fragment. As such – and we also notice this, as if Gadamerian, belief that the strangeness of the text and the author may be overcome in reading: “the book was written for me alone” (OM 128)²³ – this procedure resembles a “hermeneutic circle.” It must be deliberate because Reger turns out to be an avid reader of Friedrich Schleiermacher (OM 130).

The reasons for contesting “The Whole” are fundamental because this concept refers to the plane of understanding, reading, and composition which is an exponent of epistemological and anthropological truths. And this is what makes it problematic: “the whole and the perfect are intolerable” (OM 18), “there is no such thing as the perfect or the whole” (OM 19). That is why Reger comes up with the idea of a “massive mistake” (OM 19), that is something that deconstructs the perfect, challenging the very idea of the masterpiece (OM 19). The masterpiece used to be based on the concept of “originality,” but Reger also questions this notion: “every original is a forgery in itself” (OM 56). He thus, as if involuntarily, references Derrida, who writes about the “non-identity to oneself” in the so-called “originary presence.” The priority, source, and purity of the original are questioned by the very existence of a copy. A copy is supplementary and secondary, but it still refers to its (the original’s) possibility, and therefore impossibility.²⁴ The autonomy of the artifact is most effectively undermined in the process of reception: “I am lying when I say I am not interested in public opinion, I am not interested in my readers, (...) no one writes a work for himself, if someone says he is writing only for himself then that is a lie” (OM 88). It has hermeneutical consequences: “The quality of the piece consists more in the fact that it lends itself to discussion than in itself” (OM 93).

It would be relatively easy to find positives in this anti-hermeneutic method. In his late texts Bernhard goes beyond criticism, negativity, resentment, and disgust – both on an affective and discursive levels. Everything, the whole world, including his beloved wife, is disgusting: “For years I simply made everything abhorrent to me” (OM 32). The death of his wife changes everything. Reger begins to hate museums and has a “deep disgust” for exhibitions (OM 31), meta-artistic concepts (OM 101), gifts (DM 108), art experts (OM 110), literature (OM 120), the state and democracy (OM 115–116), but he cannot and does not want to give up on them: “I am by nature a hater of museums, but it is probably just because of this that I have been coming here for over thirty years” (OM 16). He also says: “Only when, time and again, we have discovered that there is no such thing as the whole or the perfect are we able to live on. We cannot endure the whole or the perfect” (OM 19). It turns out that aesthetic categories have ideological and existential implications. In this respect, parodic strategies are an effective tool for problematizing the notion of a “masterpiece” (“No matter which work of art, it can be made to look ridiculous” [OM 57-58]) and this is important insofar as everything may be subject to parody and caricature: both the people and the world (OM 64, 65). Indeed, Reger further writes that “We truly love only those books which are not a whole, which are chaotic, which are helpless” (OM 19-20). That is why, he argues, we love Bach, Beethoven, Mozart,

²³Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Aesthetics and Hermeneutics”, in: *Art’s Claim to Truth*, ed. Santiago Zabala, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), 125.

²⁴Michał Paweł Markowski, *Efekt inskrypcji. Jacques Derrida i literatura* [The inscription effect: Jacques Derrida and literature] (Kraków: Homini, 2003), 235–267. Cf. Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde”, in: *Rosalind Krauss, The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (Boston: MIT Press, 1986) 151-170.

Pascal, Montaigne, and Voltaire. We love them because of their failures; they help us come to terms with our own limitations. The following definition of art should be read in this context: “Art altogether is nothing but a survival skill, we should never lose sight of this fact, it is, time and again, just an attempt (...) to cope with this world and its revolting aspects” (OM 138). This explains a fascination with postponed incriminated Austria (OM 121), even if the Austrian is always “a common Nazi or a stupid Catholic” (OM 122), which is why he is “the most interesting European type, yet at the same time he is also the most dangerous” (OM 122). Bernhard also writes that: “I have always exclusively concerned myself with people, nature as such has never interested me, everything in me was always related to human beings, I am, you might say, a fanatic for human beings (...). I loathe people but they are, simultaneously, the sole purpose of my life” (OM 49-50); “We hate people and yet we want to be with them because only with people and among people do we stand a chance of carrying on without going insane” (OM 145).

In *Extinction*, we meet Franz-Joseph Murau who tells his student Gambetti about his past and present life at Wolfsegg. The past is horrific. It revolves around a toxic family, destructive national-socialist upbringing, which breeds fear and intolerance (E 13-14), and Catholicism, which is a “monstrous falsification of nature, a base insult to humanity” (E 13). Most of all, however, the past is haunted by Franz-Joseph’s mother – the “last human being” (“her big ideas have gradually diminished everything” [E 51]) – and his sisters, with whom he had a disastrous relationship based on mutual distrust, misunderstanding, reluctance, contempt, and reproach, not without incestuous overtones. In a broader perspective, the climate in Wolfsegg is “unbearable” (E 54) and the people “are deaf to all that means so much to [Franz-Joseph], to nature, to art” (E 54). They are greedy and xenophobic. The simplest defensive reaction is disgust: towards Wolfsegg (E 54, 102), his mother and sisters (E 51, 77, 101), his relatives on the mother’s side (E 261), his dead parents and brother (E 161), pigeons (E 202), Christmas (E 55), university, medicine (E 33), photography (E 14), sentimentality (E 212), the powerless (E 56), butchers (E 90), hunting (E 93), hunters (E 95), and a hunting lodge where his family hid the Nazis (E 214). The novel seems to be based on the same premises as Bernhard’s other works. Its conclusion, however, will not be the same.

In the present, we witness Franz-Joseph’s journey from Rome to Wolfsegg to attend the funeral of his parents and brother, who died in a car accident. It is also an attempt to reevaluate the traumatic past and overcome affective negativity. Franz-Joseph was a brilliant and intelligent child who often found a way to make his family uncomfortable or self-conscious. The best tactic was to make them feel disgusted with themselves – he “would spy on them and confront them with their unprincipled conduct” (E 19). He looked at them in “disbelief” (E 76), then “stared at them,” and finally “saw through them” (E 76). He “would dissect them and take them apart” (E 76). He was never forgiven.

One is confronted with “unprincipled conduct” also on the meta-literary level, that is at the level of reception. Murau repeatedly mentions how difficult it is to describe Wolfsegg and finally states that such a book, if it is to be written, should be titled *Extinction* (there are many more such auto-intertextual references in the novel; Bernhard’s name is mentioned [E 83] and Murau describes himself as a “a charlatan, a blatherer, a parasite who battered on

them and everyone else” [E 6–7], which is also an explicit biographical trope) – so he is talking about something and doing it at the same time. The novel turns out to be a performative project of itself and a staging of disgust. This is how we should understand the poetics of “exaggeration” thematized in the novel: “The art of exaggeration is the art of tiding oneself over existence, of making one’s existence endurable, even possible” (E 307). Moreover, it saves one from a boring life (E 88), makes things understandable (E 88), and helps once overcome “mental foolery that led nowhere, a mental dead end” (E 186). Writing this “anti-autobiography” (E 94) involves changing the world, “radically destroying it, by virtually annihilating it, and then restoring it in a form that I find tolerable, as a completely new word – though I can’t say how this is to be done” (E 104).²⁵ In a more general perspective: “the old must be discarded and destroyed so that the new can emerge, even though we don’t know what the new will be. All we know is that it has to come” (E 106). The title *Extinction* points to a book “the sole purpose [of which] will be to extinguish what it describes, to extinguish everything that Wolfsegg means to me, everything that Wolfsegg is” (E 99). In the book, Murau “do[es] nothing but dissect and extinguish [him]self” and his family (E 147). One would therefore have to assume that the poetics of criticism, destruction, and negation will be dominant in the novel. However, this is not the case. Murau insists on the documentary function of writing (E 282). At the same time, he says cryptically that the title *Extinction* “exercised a great fascination over” him (E 140). Are there any traces of affirmation in Bernhard’s pessimistic novel?

Franz-Joseph Murau tries to control his emotions at all costs. Before coming back to his hometown, he is overcome with disgust: towards Wolfsegg, towards his father’s lawyer, his law firm, his wife, the surrounding towns and their inhabitants, and their Catholic and national socialist habitus. This experience, however, leads to a simple conclusion that disgust is something unfair, reciprocated, and actually threatening. It is, as Murau puts it, a persecution mania. The character tells himself: “stay calm (...) keep a cool head, stay calm, quiet calm” (E 152). He tries to rationalize his own emotional responses and therefore reconstructs the etiology of disgust. Firstly, he connects the disgusting with the monstrous (“What had at first seemed repulsive came to be seen as entirely necessary (...) and when it is done with consummate skill it deserves our admiration” [E 90]). He admits: “unlike my parents, I regard people outside Wolfsegg not as a necessary evil but as endless challenge, a challenge to get to grips with them as the greatest and most exciting monstrosity” (E 22). Thus, he exposes the rules of his own poetics, as the category of monstrosity returns again and again (E 22, 24, 57, 83). It may be interpreted literally primarily, though not exclusively, in the context of how Austria represents (or hides) its Nazi past; Austria “is unable to emerge from its coma and return to a state of consciousness” (E 186). Secondly, Murau shows disgust is a reaction to a strong stimulus: “we feel hatred only when we’re in the wrong, and because we’re in the wrong” (E

²⁵Stephen D. Dowden (Understanding Thomas Bernhard [Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991], XI, 3, 15) wrote in this context about the poetics of defamiliarization; the world we know is deformed, revealing what is usually hidden under the ordinary way of looking at things; a “different reality” is created, and chaos informs the ordinary. Respectively, Willy Riemer (“Thomas Bernhard’s «Der Untergeher»: Newtonian Realities and Deterministic Chaos”, in: A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard, 209–222) writes about a world that opposes Newtonian linear, mechanical, predictable reality, with some elements of deterministic chaos. Satire may be found in the poetics of exaggeration and in the uncanny, in the intrusive exposure of what should remain hidden. Indeed, Bernhard’s literary realism was relative. Nevertheless, what Honegger calls “the realism of Bernhard’s hyperbole” is evident (Gitta Honegger, Thomas Bernhard. The Making of an Austrian [New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2001], 241).

53). Considering his own reciprocated disgust for his family, he says that “I use this way of thinking as a weapon; this is basically contemptible, but it’s probably the only way to assuage a bad conscience” (E 53). Thirdly, he attempts to empathetically work through hatred and resentment: “all in all we should have most sympathy with poor people (...) because we know ourselves and know how they, like us, lead a miserable existence” (E 53). Murau also says that being honest should be based on an understanding that we are weak, ridiculous, and lacking in character, and we should not just find fault with other people (E 124). He remembers how much he was amused by looking at bad photographs of his siblings and parents. This “reveal[s] how base and despicable and shameless we are” (E 123) – he eventually concludes. A different scene shows it with even greater force. Murau watches his brother-in-law eat. He is disgusted but he tries to control his reaction: “But people like him can’t help it, I thought, they don’t know any better. Then I desisted from such thoughts which suddenly seemed to me improper – not unfair but improper – and I despised myself for entertaining them. We shouldn’t watch these people and observe their every action, I told myself, because it only makes us despise ourselves” (E 314). He then concludes that although he may feel tempted to feel disgust, it is an illusory consolation based on self-deception and denial. Additionally, disgust leads to self-hatred and isolation. Fourthly, he wishes to overcome negativity and find positivity in his relations with others. After all, misanthropy and isolation lead to madness: “I hate it profoundly, because nothing makes for greater unhappiness, as I know and am now starting to feel. I preach solitude to Gambetti, for instance, yet I am well aware that solitude is the worst of all punishments” (E 153). Ever since he was a child, Murau has been fascinated by simple and unsophisticated people (E 45, 95, 158, 170). It is a form of resistance to distinction that breeds revulsion towards anyone with a different social status, which is very characteristic for Wolfsegg, where “strangers are invariably greeted hostility. They’ve always rejected anything unfamiliar, they’ve never welcomed anything or anyone unfamiliar, as I usually do” (E 7). Disgust is, primarily, heterophobia and in this sense the most petty-bourgeois of all affects.²⁶ Murau confesses: “I was always interested in anything that was different” (E 45), and enjoyed the company of the circus people (E 43), foresters (E 69), miners and villagers (E159).

Existential pessimism combined with a rejection of metaphysics, the vile nature of human beings, the disastrous determinism of history, and a harsh criticism of alienating culture, especially religion and education, and, above all, disgust are all Thomas Bernhard’s trademark tropes. Such a perception may seem one-sided and unjustified. Still, challenging a sense of existential stability, the categorical nature of cultural criticism, the unrelentingly negative attitude towards anything that is considered normal and obvious, and reliance on biting satire could suggest that Bernhard writes not so much from a different, as if morally higher, perspective, but that he writes in the name of some axiology or ethics. Searching for an affirmative message in his works is not an easy task, but the positives are there to be found. For Marjorie Perloff, Bernhard’s works are the culmination of literary Austromodernism – while Roth, Casetti, Kraus, Musil and Kafka depict the departing world of the Habsburg Empire with a certain amount of nostalgia and irony, which is devoid of illusions and filled with resignation and cynicism, in Bernhard’s works “nothing is held sacred except the power of language to convey

²⁶Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 2000), 11, 82.

the mendacities of one's neighbors and countrymen."²⁷ Ingeborg Bachmann, commenting on the category found in Bernhard's last novel, wondered what Modernity would be, what the New that Bernhard offered would be. In his latest texts, Bernhard actually went further than Beckett in terms of violence, inevitability, and harshness, and that was his "New:" "And the New is already here. We don't know how to use it, what to do with it, we don't know yet how to absorb it, it contains everything."²⁸ Elfriede Jelinek was a bit more specific; for her, Bernhard was ostracized by critics and politicians, fighting for his voice ("As long as I say: I am"). In fact, Bernhard deeply believed in Austrian society and wanted at all costs to integrate – as a sick person – with the healthy, unfortunately to no avail, because in the end he "choked on his furious breath."²⁹ Stephen D. Dowden seems to agree with Jelinek. He explains why Bernhard's message cannot be reduced to cynicism and reactionary nihilism and gives three main reasons: 1) Bernhard's inexhaustible rancor is the rancor of an outraged moralist – irony and bitterness, lack of compassion and sentimentality point to disappointed hopes and unfulfilled expectations towards human nature, they also arouse resistance and discord among readers; 2) biographical argument – "the story of his life speaks plainly of a passionate will to live:" as an illegitimate child, a school drop-out, and a person who survived a severe case of pneumonia; 3) writing as a struggle against illness and weakness and as expiation for pessimism and affirmation of values.³⁰

Dowden's argument seems inspiring, even if the first point should be expanded, insofar as it is the lack of illusions that allows one to move beyond resentment, and it cannot be a form of resignation. It seems to me that Bernhard's own explicit declarations defy this possibility, because, while his works rely on the poetics of negativity and disgust ("In fact, I write only because everything is very unpleasant" [B 24]), they also nuanced or at least suspended in a certain ambivalence ("I'm usually mad at them, but sometimes I'm not" [B 24]; "Life is nonsense, it sometimes makes some sense, but it is mostly nonsense. No matter whose life. Even when it comes to wonderful, supposedly wonderful people – everything is misery and leads to nowhere in the end" [KE]). Perhaps because he was perceived by critics as a "negative" writer, Bernhard explained that his attitude towards life was "neither [...] solely negative nor solely positive. Because we constantly face *all* kinds of things. This is the stuff of life. The idea that only negative things exist is nonsense. [...] Because although people say that I am a *negative writer*, I am a *positive person*. [...] Everything is negative, there is nothing positive. You can treat everything in life as either negative or positive, depending on your individual circumstances. [...] However, destroying everything makes no sense, and I have never done it. *Great people* may be found in my works, and then there are *others*" (B 25–26, 50, 114).

I tried to point to an ambivalence similar to the one expressed in the statements mentioned above. It is no coincidence that disgust, as an inherently ambivalent emotion, is an effective

²⁷Marjorie Perloff, *Edge of Irony: Modernism in the Shadow of the Habsburg Empire* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2016), 143.

²⁸Ingeborg Bachmann, "Thomas Bernhard, próba. Szkic" [Thomas Bernhard, an attempt. An Essay], trans. Marek Kędzierski, *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* 3 (2009).

²⁹Elfriede Jelinek, "Bez tchu" [Out of breath], trans. Agnieszka Jezierska, in: Elfriede Jelinek: *Moja sztuka protestu. Eseje i przemówienia* [My art of protest. Essays and speeches], ed. Agnieszka Jezierska, Monika Szczepaniak (Warsaw: WAB, 2012), 165, 166.

³⁰Dowden, *Understanding Thomas Bernhard*, 7–8.

way of reacting to what life brings, one that cannot be reduced to simple negativity.³¹ Bernhard himself said to Krista Fleischmann: “When you get up in the morning, you experience almost everything as disgusting and repellent. And yet you get up, get dressed, go to the radio station, do your job, and that’s it. I do that too; the only difference is that I describe it” (B 114). First and foremost, disgust is part of representation and a tool of defense and criticism – of institutions and ideologies that reproduce and weaponize disgust (the Church, national socialism, the petty bourgeoisie), in a word, of anything that stigmatizes, excludes, and exterminates people like Bernhard (the disbelievers, the disengaged, the sick, the misfits, etc.). Disgust is also something on which relationships with other people are based, and one could even speak in this context about an agon of disgust. The overwhelming traumatic nature of such experiences fuels the work of memory, intensifying the remembered in retrospect and producing a discourse of unprecedented rage, resentment, and hatred. The extreme nature of such emotions seems to ultimately wear off, and perhaps for this very reason, they are further thematized and rationalized by the protagonists-narrators. This reflection eventually leads, in Bernhard’s later novels, to what I would describe as the ethics of tolerance. Apart from discovering the resentment mechanism of disgust, it accepts everything that evokes disgust, especially human weaknesses and sins: dishonesty, pettiness, and meanness. The ethics of tolerance is actually based on a cheerful acceptance of human weaknesses, on recognizing that people – that we – are pitiable. We are pitiable despite our mean or at least ambiguous motivations, despite our embarrassing efforts to amass cultural and material capital and cynically exploit it, despite our failed attempts to overcome our own limitations, despite our pathetic attempts to be someone else, despite our hopeless attempts to be “good,” “honest” or “authentic,” and despite stupid reasons which make us forget about empathy, etc. It is not an ethics of resignation, not even of relativism, mainly because of the documentary functions and the expressive power of Thomas Bernhard’s writing. The strong reactions of critics and readers, both positive and negative, are a testament to this. This is not an ethics of capitulation, because it does not mean coming to terms with the hopelessness and frailty of the human condition. It tragically re-evaluates the human condition instead.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³¹Research on disgust points to its two basic features: ambivalence (“Disgust is deeply ambivalent, involving desire or an attraction towards, the very objects that are felt to be repellent”) and performativity (“This repetition has a binding effect”) – Sara Ahmed, “The Performativity of Disgust,” in: Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London and New York: Routledge). Cf. William I. Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998), X.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. "The Performativity of Disgust." In: Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 82-100. London and New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Bachmann, Ingeborg. "Thomas Bernhard, próba. Szkic". Trans. Marek Kędzierski. *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* 3 (2009): 67-70.
- Barełkowska, Agata. "«Decydujące fragmenty Mrozu napisałem w Warszawie...». Polskie wycieczki Thomasa Bernharda". *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* 3 (2009): 91-99.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.
- . "From Work to Text". In: Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard, 56-64. New York: Hill and Wang, 1973.
- . *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: The Noonday Press, 2000.
- Bernhard, Thomas. *Extinction: A Novel*. Trans. David McLintock. New York: Knopf, 1996.
- . *Old Masters: A Comedy*. Trans. Ewald Osers. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- . "Eine katholische Existenz". In: Kurt Hofmann, *Aus Gesprächen mit Thomas Bernhard*, 51-60. Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 1988.
- . *The Lime Works: A Novel*. Trans. Sophie Wilkins. New York: Knopf, 1973.
- . *My Prizes: An Accounting*. Trans. Carol Brown Janeway. New York: Knopf, 2010.
- . *Eine Begegnung: Gespräch mit Krista Fleischmann*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006.
- . *Gathering Evidence: A Memoir*. Trans. David McLintock. New York: Knopf, 1983.
- . *Cutting Timber: An Irritation*. Trans. Ewald Osers. New York: Quartet Books, 1988.
- . *Gargoyles*. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Knopf, 2010.
- . *Correction: A Novel*. Trans. Sophie Wilkins. New York: Vintage, 1979.
- Bielecki, Marian. *Historia – Dialog – Literatura. Interakcyjna teoria procesu historycznoliterackiego*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo UW, 2010.
- . *Widma nowoczesności. 'Ferdynand' Witolda Gombrowicza*. Warsaw: IBL, 2014.
- . *Gombrowicziady. Reaktywacja*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2020.
- . "O udęcie młodości, resentymentem i wstrętem, a także o tym, czy Thomas Bernhard czytał Witolda Gombrowicza". *Rana. Literatura – Doświadczenie – Tożsamość* 4 (2021).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. Richard Nice. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1984.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago UP.
- Dowden, Stephen D. *Understanding Thomas Bernhard*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991.
- . "A Testament Betrayed: Bernhard and His Legacy". In: *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Matthias Konzett, 51-67. Rochester & Suffolk: Camden House, 2002.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard. London: Random House, 1965.
- . "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History". In: Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ed. by D. F. Bouchard, 139-165. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1977.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics". In: *Art's Claim to Truth*, ed. Santiago Zabala, trans. Luca D'Isanto, 125-138. New York: Columbia UP, 2008.
- Gombrowicz, Witold. *Diary*. Trans. Lillian Vallee. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2012.
- . *Cosmos*. Trans. Danuta Borchartd. New Haven: Yale UP, 2005.
- Görner, Rüdiger. "The Broken Window Handle: Thomas Bernhard's Notion of «Weltbezug»". In: *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Matthias Konzett, 89-103. Rochester & Suffolk: Camden House, 2002.

- Honegger, Gitta. *Thomas Bernhard. The Making of an Austrian*. New Haven & London: Yale UP, 2001.
- Jasnowski, Paweł. "Świat jako kloaka i udawanie sensu. Paliatywy w świecie prozy Thomasa Bernharda". *Teksty Drugie* (2017): 375–398.
- Jelinek, Elfriede. "Bez tchu". Trans. Agnieszka Jezierska. In: Elfriede, Jelinek *Moja sztuka protestu. Eseje i przemówienia*, ed. Agnieszka Jezierska, Monika Szczepaniak, 165–166. Warsaw: WAB, 2012.
- Kędzierski, Marek. "Dawni mistrzowie: Witold Gombrowicz i Thomas Bernhard". *Kwartalnik Artystyczny* 4 (2007): 89–100.
- – –. *Postowie*. In: Thomas Bernhard. *Bratankę Wittgensteina. Przyjaźń*, trans. and with an afterword by Marek Kędzierski, 145–172. Warsaw: Czytelnik, 2019.
- Kobyłecka-Piwońska, Ewa. *Spojrzenia z zewnątrz. Witold Gombrowicz w literaturze argentyńskiej (1970–2017)*. Kraków: Universitas, 2017.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "The Originality of the Avant-Garde". In: Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, 151–170. Boston: MIT Press, 1986.
- Lipszyc, Adam. "Inne gmachy. O kilku budynkach u Bernharda". In: *Korekty Bernharda. Szkice krytyczne*, ed. Wojciech Charchalis, Arkadiusz Żychliński, 107–120. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2021.
- Lupa, Krystian. "Znowu Bernhard". In: Thomas Bernhard, *Dramaty*, vol. 1, trans. Jacek Stanisław Buras, Monika Muskała, Danuta Żmij-Zielińska, selected and with an afterword by Krystian Lupa, 396–397. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2001.
- Markowski, Michał Paweł. *Efekt inskrypcji. Jacques Derrida i literatura*. Kraków: Homini, 2003.
- Miller, William I. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Momro, Jakub. "Logiczna składnia obłędu (Wittgenstein, Beckett, Bernhard)". *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2013): 186–203.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*. N.p.: Strelbytskyy Multimedia Publishing, 2012.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Border Games: The Wittgenstein Fictions of Thomas Bernhard and Ingeborg Bachmann". In: Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder. Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary*, 157–160. Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 1996.
- – –. *Edge of Irony: Modernism in the Shadow of the Habsburg Empire*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 2016.
- Polak, Marcin. *Trauma bezkresu. Nietzsche, Lacan, Bernhard i inni*. Kraków: Universitas, 2016.
- Riemer, Willy. *Thomas Bernhard's "Der Untergeher": Newtonian Realities and Deterministic Chaos*. In: *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Matthias Konzett, 209–222. Rochester & Suffolk: Camden House, 2002.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*. Vol. 1., trans., R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1909.
- Sulej, Dominik. *"Kosmos" jako gabinet luster. Psychomachia Witolda Gombrowicza*. Kraków: Universitas, 2015.
- Wittchen-Barełkowska, Agata. *Kategoria teatralności w dziele Thomasa Bernharda*. Poznań: Nauka i Innowacje, 2014.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1922.
- – –. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. Joachim Schulte, P. M. S. Hacker. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- The New Wittgenstein*. Ed. Alice Crary, Rupert Read. London and New York: Routledge, 2000.

KEYWORDS

Gombrowicz

humor

Bernhard

ABSTRACT:

This article presents an interpretation of selected novels by Thomas Bernhard based on the hypothesis of literary influence, in the wider perspective of Witold Gombrowicz's meta-literary and anthropological views. The article argues that the category of "disgust" is reevaluated in Bernhard's works, where it originally functions as a strategy of radical cultural criticism, and then undergoes transformation by means of the poetics of satire and comedy. Originally, Bernhard and his protagonists read Schopenhauer, then they rely on Nietzsche and Gombrowicz.

Schopenhauer

DISGUST

SATIRE

Nietzsche

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Marian Bielecki – born in 1975; dr hab.; professor at the University of Wrocław. He is the author: *Literatura i lektura. O metaliterackich i metakrytycznych poglądach Witolda Gombrowicza* [Literature and reading: On metaliterary and metacritical views of Witold Gombrowicz] (2004), *Interpretacja i płęć. Szkice o twórczości Witolda Gombrowicza* [Interpretation and gender: Essays on the work of Witold Gombrowicz] (2005), *Historia – Dialog – Literatura. Interakcyjna teoria procesu historycznoliterackiego* [History – Dialogue – Literature: An Interactive theory of the historical and literary process] (2010; “Literatura na Świecie” award), *Kłopoty z Innością* [Trouble with Otherness] (2012), *Widma nowoczesności. ‘Ferdynurke’ Witolda Gombrowicza* [Specters of modernity: Witold Gombrowicz’s *Ferdynurke*] (2014), and *Gombrowicziady. Reaktywacja* [Gombrowicziady. Reactivation] (2020). He is the co-editor of: *Po(granicza) teorii* [Theoretical border(land)s] (2010) (with Ewa Rychter) and *Po Miłoszu* [After Miłosz] (2011) (with Wojciech Browarny and Joanna Orska). He is also the author of the critical edition of *Trans-Atlantyck* (2017).