Sign In

Online Only

GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

You Know Nothing of My Work

On Reading Bernhard in New York

February 11, 2011

This essay first appeared in German translation in Die Welt on February 9, the centennial of Thomas Bernhard's birth.

A few months after I first moved to Berlin I was idly watching some bad television with a German friend as we cooked dinner. *The Nanny* came on and I stopped chopping with interest; I was curious about how they'd dubbed Fran Drescher's delicate Queens lilt. In German she still sounded shrill and histrionic, but seemed to have lost the self-deprecating, fussy warmth a New Yorker would associate with the accent.

"Can I turn this garbage off?" my friend asked. "This woman, all she does is complain. She is a spoiled bitch, like a female version of your annoying Jerry Seinfeld."

"You're missing the point. She complains because that's what she does, but she's a good person. She's not a bitch, she's just Jewish."

"That is anti-Semitism and I would never say such a thing about the Jewish people."

"No, no, it's not anti-Semitic at all. To show your love of the world by complaining about it constantly, it's the only way a New York Jew knows how to endure."

She looked confused. "Here, let me show you." I brought up the opening monologue of *Annie Hall*, where Woody Allen tells the classic joke about two elderly women at a Catskills resort. The first one says, "The food here, it's terrible." The second one says, "I know. And such small portions!"

"If you do not like the taste of the food," my friend said, "then you should certainly not complain about the portion size."

"Forget it," I said.

There are a variety of reasons for Thomas Bernhard's ever-increasing popularity with a certain type of young American literary intellectual. One is that we've never had to deal with him as an exasperating personality; we lack the cultural context of the stir about *Heldenplatz;* the long-litigated matters of libel and his estate; and the constant accusations and counter-accusations about his role as a *Nestbeschmutzer*. (This—the fact that we never had to see him on television or read about him in the newspapers performing the role of the literary bad boy—probably also helps account for, say, Bret Easton Ellis's greater acclaim in Europe than at home.) Another is that Bernhard's work, especially from about 1975 on, blurs the boundary between fact and fiction, memoir and the novel, in a way that's voguish among Anglophone readers. (This also applies to the trans-Atlantic contrast in W. G. Sebald's reputation, or that of the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński.)

But I suspect the chief reason we've taken to Bernhard in a way that surprises German-speakers is that we have long been accustomed to the great pleasures of what the English writer Geoff Dyer has called "the literature of neurasthenia, of anxiety, fretting, complaint." New Yorkers are likely to identify this as the tradition that runs from Groucho Marx through Woody Allen to spoiled bitches like Fran Drescher, but Dyer—whose own exaggerated harangues about, for example, how

excruciating it is to go without the sort of donut he likes, have taught our generation how to read Bernhard—sees it as equally English, running back through Philip Larkin and John Osborne to D. H. Lawrence.

Both Londoners and New Yorkers are thus primed to find Bernhard hilarious in a way that German readers do not. Not all of Bernhard is amusing—the early books, with the exception of Prince Saurau's insane monologue at the end of *Gargoyles*, are too bleakly indebted to psychotics like Georg Trakl to carry off a joke—but the mature quasi-novels Americans tend to read most are terribly funny; the fugal rodomontades of *Wittgenstein's Nephew, The Loser, Woodcutters*, and *Old Masters* are comic rants whose irate narrators are as instantly recognizable to us as Lenny Bruce and Larry David. Naturally these American comics never match the spleen of Bernhard's narrators, but then again Larry David never had to live in a country that elected Kurt Waldheim to office.

Extreme toxicity aside, Bernhard's characters delight in their dark riffing. The narrator of *The Loser* spends more than a paragraph naming Swiss cities and, in turn, calling them 'brothels' before addressing the countryside, of which he's no fonder. "People who go walking in the country walk right into their own funeral in the country and at the very least they lead a grotesque existence which leads them first into idiocy, then into an absurd death." Or, while seated in a high wing-back chair at the "so-called artistic dinner" at which *Woodcutters* takes place, Bernhard's narrator considers the writer Jeannie Billroth, who edits a literary magazine, "a thoroughly dreary publication, utterly worthless and witless, subsidized by our dreadful, disgusting and benighted state, and carrying only the most fatuous and inane contributions, pride of place being given time and time again to poems by Jeannie Billroth herself, who was convinced that she was not only the successor, even the surpasser, of Virginia Woolf, but also a *direct successor and surpasser of Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Germany's greatest woman poet*." Bernhard gets so exercised by her self-importance you can hear the rev of his delight in the downshift from "not only . . . but" to "direct . . . and"—and *see* it in his italics.

It takes *Woodcutters* a hundred and twenty-five pages of such florid vituperation before we learn that the narrator was once in love with this Jeannie Billroth, when he finally spites himself with the admission that "we are not one jot better than the people we constantly find objectionable and insufferable." It's only then that we understand that the narrator's comically disproportionate rage is only barely staving

off despair. Bernhard's narrators don't hate the world; they love it so much they find it all but unbearable. "Nearly everyone," Bernhard once wrote, "destroys himself in between hatred and admiration." The only thing that can prevent us from destroying ourselves is the comedy that appreciates the absurd through resentment. Bernhard wasn't a misanthrope, he just wanted larger portions. +

If you like this article, please **subscribe** or leave a tax-deductible tip below to support n+1.

One-Time Monthly

Custom amount:

$ USD

Donate