

Thomas Bernhard: Seemingly Misanthropy, Pure Musicality

Bracha Bdil

Composer, Conductor, Music Educator
Ron Shulamit Conservatory, Jerusalem, Israel
<http://brachabdil.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html>
b5377018@neto.bezeqint.net

Recibido: 20/03/2022/**Aceptado:** 15/04/2022

"There's nothing but injustice in the world, I thought. Human beings are unjust, and in justice prevails everywhere – that's the truth, I thought. Injustice is all we have to hand, I thought"¹

Excuse me for this gloomy opening that ostensibly represents the essence of the creative work of the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard.

About the hundreds of concerto compositions composed by Vivaldi, it is customary to say with a hint of irony that he wrote only one concerto. The foundation for the anecdote stems from the great similarity between his works, which use similar patterns and stylistic clichés. Perhaps the same can be said about Bernhard, since most of his works - all written in a similar technique - can be seen as one long autobiographical monologue. But Vivaldi's music is mostly optimistic, dance and even humorous at times, which cannot be said at all about Bernhard's writing the misanthropic imprint is the "hallmark", as they say, of his books.

Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) was a playwright and provocative writer who in his rebellion aroused the wrath of the conservative right in Austria. This was the case, for example, in a ceremony where he received a literature prize: after declaring in his speech that "everything is ridiculous when we think of death", he began attacking the Austrian nation until the Minister of Education and the organizers of the ceremony left the hall. In his writing he attacked social hypocrisy, the institutions of the state, religion, art and culture, and in spite of all this he was honored.

In the five autobiographical novels he wrote between 1975 and 1982 (*A Child; An Indication Of The Cause; The Cellar; Breath; In The Cold*) he recounts his memories as a child whose eyes are torn in the face of humanity immersed in a world war². As a teenager he was sent to a Nazi boarding school in Salzburg, to a hated gymnasium, and then was hospitalized in a lung hospital. As a man who

¹ Thomas Bernhard, *Woodcutters*, trans. from German David McLintock (New York: Vintage Books - Random House, Inc, 1987), 93.

² Thomas Bernhard, *Gathering Evidence and My Prizes*, trans. from German Carol Brown Janeway (New York: Vintage Books - Random House, Inc, 2011).

writes about himself that "I learned through direct experience how terrible life and existence are in general and how little value they have" (Bernhard 2011, 109), his extreme misanthropic approach seems justified; but plays another role, as we shall see in the discussion three of his books: *The Loser*³, *Woodcutters*, and *Old Masters*.⁴

The Loser

The words that open *The Loser* reveal the main card in a pre-addicted game: "Even Glenn Gould, our friend and the most important piano virtuoso of the century, only made it to the age of fifty-one, I thought to myself as I entered the inn. Now of course he didn't kill himself like Wertheimer, but died, as they say, a *natural death*". (Bernhard 1993, 3, emphasis in original). After this statement Bernhard walks with patient linguistic virtuosity towards the protagonist's memories, interwoven with uncompromising life insights. He does so in a seemingly associative flow of speech that propels the school of the stream of consciousness that flourished in the 20th century to one of its peaks.

Three young pianists meet at the Mozarteum in Salzburg to study with the great Horowitz. Briefly listening to the playing of one of them - the piano genius, the Canadian Glenn Gould - performing Bach's "Goldberg Variations", at once eliminated the brilliant career the other two had dreamed of: Wertheimer and the narrator⁵. "I wanted *to be the best or not at all*" (*Ibíd.*, 85), says the protagonist, and Bernhard's gloomy writing, which gives expression to extreme artistic envy that ends in abandoning music and suicide, becomes a fist. The protagonist regretted not answering Wertheimer in a letter that might have prevented his suicide. On the one hand, he relishes his unhappiness and the very fact of his being a misanthrope: "The depravity of my idea had appealed to me immediately", and also "I kept on saying these three words: *Absolutely no artist! Absolutely no artist! Absolutely no artist!*" (8), but also acknowledges with gratitude that he is not one of the extreme unfortunates, like Wertheimer, whose misery - imaginary or real - is the source of their joy of life, the support for their clinging to life.

Seekers of the dramatic plot among us are better off not touching *The Loser*, for even in the middle of the book the line writer is still standing at the inn, waiting for the landlady, and circling in his mind repetitive thoughts about the misery of human existence. The plot in Bernhard's books is minimal and serves only as an excuse to write his thoughts. What, then, compensates for the lack of plot? What prevents the tireless monologue from becoming tedious?

³ Thomas Bernhard, *The Loser*, trans. from German Jack Dawson (New York: Vintage Books - Random House, Inc, 1993).

⁴ Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters: A Comedy*, trans. from German Ewald Osers, (London: Quartet Books, 1989).

⁵ Glenn Gould did give concerts in Salzburg in 1958-9, but his participation in Vladimir Horowitz's piano class in Salzburg is fiction. Gould - for his provocative personality - was known for his exceptional approach that allows for interpretive freedom and increasing the scope of the performer's musical interpretation. Gould is best known for his unique recordings of music for Johann Sebastian Bach's keyboard instruments, including "Goldberg Variations" which is considered one of the most important examples of the variation from.

In the Department of Composition in the Music Academy there is a famous anecdote that a composer needs 10% inspiration and 90% technical skill, and from there the way is paved for composing a masterpiece. How does Antonio Vivaldi, who was undoubtedly a great composer, turn a wondrous melody he composed on a casual morning into a wide-ranging musical composition? If he wanted to compose the first movement of a concerto - which would be cohesive and unified - he should not be content with just a melody. He should fill in at least a few minutes with notes that are not just a random collection of melodies that appear one after the other as patchwork.

If he repeats the melody over and over again, even if it is the most sublime melodic line, the listening will become tedious. He needs something called: development. Every change, from the lightest to the most essential, will refresh the listener's consciousness. He can, for example, write the notes upside down - from top to bottom or from end to beginning. He can cut short motifs in the "scissors technique" and repeat them at a different height, in what is called "sequins". It can be leaning on specific notes from the same melody and emphasizing them by changing their length or intensity, or dressing them up in another "robe" that will give a new character: in "Staccato" - in separate, short and pointed notes, or alternatively in "Legato" - in connected and soft notes.

These are a few of the possibilities for developing a one-dimensional melody, and we have not yet discussed the multicolored harmonic treatment that can be given to the same melodic line by "coloring" it in different chords, or multi-voiced counterpoint treatment composing a "second voice" - one or several independent melodies that oppose-complement the original line. And in general, what about the tempo: how fast does the melody "run"? And with what measure? Do we feel it in a cyclical inner pulse of twos or threes, or is it free from the bars of rhythm and experienced in "one breath" as a long musical sentence?

The protagonist in *The Loser* quotes Glenn Gould's "Artistic Manifesto". If you are alone in the room, try to read the next paragraph aloud. Notice the obsessive repetitiveness that serves the developmental principle of the presented idea, which provides accuracy, prominence, interpretation, decisiveness, reservation, coherence, or refutation. Notice the increasing density, and the intonation that this spoken prose produces:

"Basically we want to be the piano, he said, not human beings but the piano, all our lives we want to be the piano and not a human beings, flee from the human beings we are in order to completely become the piano [...] The ideal piano player (he never said *pianist!*) is the one who wants to be the piano, and I tell myself every day when I wake up, I want to be the Steinway, not the person playing the Steinway, I want to be the Steinway itself [...] Glenn had wanted to be Steinway itself, he hated the notion of being *between* Bach and his Steinway as a mere musical middleman and of one day being ground to bits between Bach on one side and his Steinway on the other [...] My ideal would be, *I would be the Steinway, I wouldn't need Glenn Gould*, he said, I could, by being the Steinway, make Glenn Gould totally superfluous [...] To wake up one day *and*

be Steinway and Glenn in one, he said [...] Glenn Steinway, Steinway Glenn, all for Bach." (81-82) What is it if not music?

Bernhard's writing, as a graduate of the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts in Vienna and the Mozartium University in Salzburg, is a sequence of intertwined poetic sound circles forming a real musical work. The circles of obsessive-associative sentences he builds are widening, curving and flowing into each other in one long monologue-memoir made by a polished hand of an artist.

Reading *The Loser* is both a philosophical and a musical experience, and the two aesthetics violate each other. The insights about art, artists and life in general are intensified precisely by the power of the obsessive repetitiveness that does not let up from the beginning of the book till the end, scratching the reader's consciousness and leaving the person who holds the pages mindless.

Woodcutters

In his book *Woodcutters* (1984) Bernhard attacks the spiritual corruption of the Viennese "Artistic Crowd" or "Art Senate". For about half the length of the plot the protagonist sits on the high armchair waiting for the start of the "artistic dinner" held in honor of the Burgtheater actor. He looks at the "artistic" guests who have been invited and repeatedly regrets accepting the invitation of the Auersbergers couple. In his contemplation he despises the artists in the room and integrates them with the Austrian sculptures that "produce the most artistic garbage and gain the most recognition", with the contemporary Austrian composers, whom he calls "sound-dumbers petit-bourgeois", and with the Austrian writers who write "derivative pseudo-intellectual literary garbage [...] mindless senile prose [...] who actually betrayed literature - and art in general - for the sake of a few ludicrous prizes and a guaranteed pension". (Bernhard 1993, 148 and 145) To his praise it should be said that he also includes himself in the general contempt: "today I write down this nonsense which I dare tell myself is *essayistic*, to use this hated word once again on my way to self-destruction". (*Ibid.*, 110).

At this point, Bernhard's colorful tongue fist elicits a smile of forgiving affection, like watching a child punch his fists into the human globe. And yet these circles of artistic misanthropy are still justified because at the heart of the plot of *Woodcutters* is the suicide of Joana, a close childhood friend, who made her artistic realm a sacrifice to the artistic realization of her unfaithful friends. The protagonist mourns the death of his friend and at the same time is furious at the hypocrisy of the successful artists and of the betrayal of humanity in general, as the famous saying: Why do bad things happen to good people and good things to the bad ones?

Towards the end of the book there is a surprising turning point. The Burgtheater actor, the same "superficial art scarecrow" who was two hours late for the "artistic dinner" held in his honor, astonishes the protagonist with his words: "If only I'd been born different person [...] surrounded by nature, a

nature that was free and unconfined, instead of being surrounded by artificiality" (170). The protagonist is amazed at the philosophical upheaval and does not believe that these words, which merged with his thoughts that are expressed in silence throughout the book, came from the mouth of the artificial symbol - the star of the evening - whose inflated chatter about his art, achievements, self and glove disgusted him all evening.

Bernhard ostensibly despises poetics, but declares its value in doing so. It can be assumed that the misanthropic writer recognized the value of his unique work precisely because it shows up his deliberate poetic despair. He uses all the means that "beautiful literature" dislikes, so that the anti-literary act actually becomes super-literary. Examples?

Bernhard uses clichés and eludes them with the help of the phrase "as the saying goes": "precisely at the moment which is crucial in our lives we find ourselves left alone by all those important and great ones, by those, as the saying goes, immortal ones" (Bernhard 1989, 143); He reveals his poetic tricks to the reader, as in one case when he creates an effect of lack of communication between the conversationalists and brings a tedious answer regardless of the question asked: "I said to the innkeeper, who however didn't want to listen to my senseless digression, as I suddenly noticed, for she was still thirsting for my funeral report" (1993: 121); He invents unusual expressions and as if mocking them: "I had become a *philosophical worldview* artist. This sudden verbal invention of mine made me laugh out loud." (*Ibid.*, 58); Deliberately perceived for explanatory, summary writing, as "spoon-feeding": "Everything in the house was intact – at a time when nothing was intact any longer. It made no sense" (Bernhard 2011, 203); And even states arbitrary assertions in unjustified didactic filament that creates defiance in the heart of the reader: "To say anything else is to make a mindless assertion. That is the truth." (*Ibid.*, 209)

Bernhard, in sheer pleasure, ostensibly disguised, stabs an anti-literary fist in his chatty monologues, thereby committing a pure literary act.

Old Masters

In his book *Old Masters* (1985) Bernhard's contempt captures an impressive peak, as he spits flames of disgust at visual art, music, philosophy, poetics, and so on as far as one's imagination can reach, as they say.

Reger, the Times' old music critic, ridicules all the paintings on display at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna except for a single picture in front of which he sits and piously observes throughout his stay at the museum, that he has been visiting regularly every second day for 30 years. Throughout the book there is no plausible explanation as to why Tintoretto's picture "Man with a White Beard" receives a different judgment from the rest of the Museum's pictures that "there is nothing else in them if we disregard their often inspired artistry" (Bernhard 1989, 151). The only explanation is a sentence that can be found somewhere in the middle of the book: "The *White-Bearded Man* has stood up to my intellect and to my feelings for over thirty years [...] to me it is therefore the most precious item on show here at the Kunsthistorisches Museum". (*Ibid.*, 151-152) - An explanation that is not reasonable enough and

which may leave the reader at the end of the book with a yawning wonder, and yes - also disappointment.

"Comedy", is the subtitle of the book, perhaps because at the end of the story Reger invites his friend Etzbacher, who listens to his reflections, to accompany him to a performance at the Viennese Burgtheater, which he also made fun of. The book is signed with the words "The performance was terrible". (156) It is possible that in this case Bernhard missed both the comedy and its point.

However, in *Old Masters* one can also discover extraordinary and heartbreaking moments about the death of Reger's wife, such as: "We get used to a person over the decades and love them for decades and eventually love them more than anything else and cling to them and when we lose them it is truly as if we had lost *everything*". (142-143). And also: "the whole of art or whatever, is nothing compared to that one beloved person". (*Ibíd.*, 143).

*

In these three of Bernhard's books: *The Loser*, *Woodcutters* and *Old Masters*, as well as in his five autobiographical novels, if we carefully move the misanthropic blocks of text, we will discover the observant Bernhard, with his wise heart, who recognizes the value of life.

He, who despised that "oiled teaching machine" of the education system that unload over his head "revolting historical slops [...] as some kind of higher knowledge [...] from some enormous, inexhaustible bucket" (Bernhard 2011, 133), sees every person as a unique, the "greatest artwork of all time" (Bernhard 1993, 93). He, who despised the fattened Austrian social hypocrisy that earned a nickname "the universal cesspit of petit bourgeois mediocrity" (Bernhard 1987, 127), felt that "everything within me, *derives from this city*" and that he is "bound to it by a terrible, indissoluble bond" (Bernhard 2011, 101). Bernhard, who despises artists whom he calls "repellent artistic nonentities" and "artistic cadavers not yet quite dead" (Bernhard 1987, 57) - declares that art is survival skill, and that it is nothing but a touching attempt "to cope with this world and its revolting aspects" (Bernhard 1989, 151). Other gifted moments in his work are revealed in his interest in the elderly because they have an "*experience of life that goes some way back into history and is constantly informed by history*" (Bernhard 1987, 174), and in sober amusement from life: "What a good thing it is that we have adopted an ironic view of everything, however seriously we have taken it". (Bernhard 2011, 208).

The hatred of human-beings, the hatred of the artist and the hatred of human existence that characterize Bernhard's writing are nothing but an almost reliable and very ironic cover for the appreciation of life and the recognition of the value of the human-being. But why did the writer need this misanthropic irony?

Perhaps because of his repeated disappointment with humanity, especially after experiencing a world war, and perhaps because of the dissonance that

caused him to become acquainted with the art world and with some of its people, those who gained the title of "artist" without bearing the nickname "human". Either way, irony is a wonderful aesthetic tool and has the power to implicitly reinforce the so-called "message of the composition". And if the use of irony allowed Bernhard to write his life and his insights – that is enough for me.

**

Let us return to Vivaldi, whose music is easily recognized by many, and whoever is still undecided - will establish his guess immediately with the appearance of the "sequence cliché" typical of the composer and the Baroque period in which he worked. That stylistic sequence is a harmonic vertebra - a pair of chords – repeated in a row each time at a different height adjacent to the previous one. In each composition, the sequence gets a slightly different meaning depending upon the context, but its clear, endearing and a little simplistic appearance evokes a hint of a smile on the listener's face.

Bernhard's style is also easy to spot. Not only because of the deliberate use of clichéd expressions of language that are commonly used, but also because of the very repetitive writing style that characterizes most of his books; that is, the repetition of a syntactic link over and over again that is the same as a lovable chatterbox. But a sensitive reader will recognize in each repetition a "different height" - a linguistic, informative or cogitative innovation that gives power and uniqueness to that tireless repetitiveness. Is not this one of the ambitions of every artist: to imprint a personal mark in his work and to develop an artistic language and style associated with himself? And when the aesthetic-musical aspect and the cogitative-philosophical aspect unite and violate each other, as in Bernhard's work, there stands before us a harmonious written fusion.

Thomas Bernhard's books can be seen as one long monologue of his life. Although he declares his indifference to all that was, is and will be, and as he says, "no longer cling to life", but "don't throw it away too cheaply either" (Bernhard 2011, 213). Bernhard, in seemingly-misanthropy, despises art and human existence in his words, but glorifies them in his actions. The squeaking of his pen on paper, like a great composer, deepens frequencies in pure musicality, in sound circles of exhalation of life and creative joy.

Bibliography

- Bernhard, Thomas. *Woodcutters*. Trans. from German David McLintock. New York: Vintage Books - Random House, Inc, 1987 (1986).
- - -. *Old Masters: A Comedy*. Trans. from German Ewald Osers. London: Quartet Books, 1989 (1985).
- - -. *The Loser*. Trans. from German Jack Dawson. New York: Vintage Books Random House, Inc, 1993 (1983).
- - -. *Gathering Evidence and My Prizes*. Trans. from German Carol Brown Janeway. New York: Vintage Books - Random House, Inc, 2011.