

itarian hopes the movement inspired should be rejected. This was the crucial period of Reconstruction and of the ratification of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which established the full rights of citizenship to everyone born or naturalized in this country. Its passage was the work of emancipationists, and it was meant to create meaningful political equality for African Americans, among others. The vanguard in the period in which Huxley wrote were those Christian abolitionists whose intentions he dismissed as, of course, at odds with science. Huxley's racism, like Hitler's, is not a standard from which ineluctable progress can be inferred but instead a proof of the power of atavism.

Dawkins allows that our upward moral drift is a "meandering sawtooth"—he is admired for his prose—but he seems not to be alert to historical specifics. The United States never suffered a more grievous moral setback than when it allowed thinking like Huxley's to make a dead letter of the 14th Amendment. As for the lesser issues of justice that arose in the wake of slavery, Huxley had this to say: "whatever the position of stable equilibrium into which the laws of social gravitation may bring the negro, all responsibility for the result will henceforward lie between Nature and him. The white man may wash his hands of it, and the Caucasian conscience be void of reproach for evermore. And this, if we look to the bottom of the matter, is the real justification for the abolition policy." No, he wasn't joking.

Finally, there is the matter of atheism itself. Dawkins finds it incapable of belligerent intent—"why would anyone go to war for the sake of an *absence* of belief?" It is a peculiarity of our language that by war we generally mean a conflict between nations, or at least one in which both sides are armed. There has been persistent violence against religion—in the French Revolution, in the Spanish Civil War, in the Soviet Union, in China. In three of these instances the extirpation of religion was part of a program to reshape society by excluding certain forms of thought, by creating an absence of belief. Neither sanity nor happiness

appears to have been served by these efforts. The kindest conclusion one can draw is that Dawkins has not acquainted himself with the history of modern authoritarianism.

Indeed, Dawkins makes a bold attack on tolerance as it is manifested in society's permitting people to rear their children in their own religious traditions. He turns an especially cold eye on the Amish:

There is something breathtakingly condescending, as well as inhumane, about the sacrificing of anyone, especially children, on the altar of "diversity" and the virtue of preserving a variety of religious traditions. The rest of us are happy with our cars and computers, our vaccines and antibiotics. But you quaint little people with your bonnets and breeches, your horse buggies, your archaic dialect and your earth-closet privies, you enrich our lives. Of course you must be allowed to trap your children with you in your seventeenth-century time warp, otherwise something irretrievable would

be lost to us: a part of the wonderful diversity of human culture.

The fact that the Amish are pacifists whose way of life burdens this beleaguered planet as little as any to be found in the Western world merits not even a mention.

Yet Dawkins himself has posited not only memes but, since these mind viruses are highly analogous to genes, a meme pool as well. This would imply that there are more than sentimental reasons for valuing the diversity that he derides. Would not the attempt to narrow it only repeat the worst errors of eugenics at the cultural and intellectual level? When the *Zeitgeist* turns Gorgon, the impulses toward cultural and biological eugenics have proved to be one and the same. It is diversity that makes any natural system robust, and diversity that stabilizes culture against the eccentricity and arrogance that have so often called themselves reason and science. ■

MISERY LOVES NOTHING

The inimitable Thomas Bernhard

By Ben Marcus

Discussed in this essay:

Frost, by Thomas Bernhard. Translated by Michael Hofmann. Alfred A. Knopf. 352 pages. \$25.95.

Thomas Bernhard, the ranting, death-obsessed Austrian novelist and playwright who died in 1989, was the ultimate *Nestbeschmutzer*, soiling his country with screeds against the landscape, the people, and their history. Not content with the limitations of his own mortality, Bernhard darkened his will with

Ben Marcus is the author of Notable American Women, among other books. His most recent article for Harper's Magazine, "Why Experimental Fiction Threatens Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It: A Correction," appeared in the October 2005 issue.

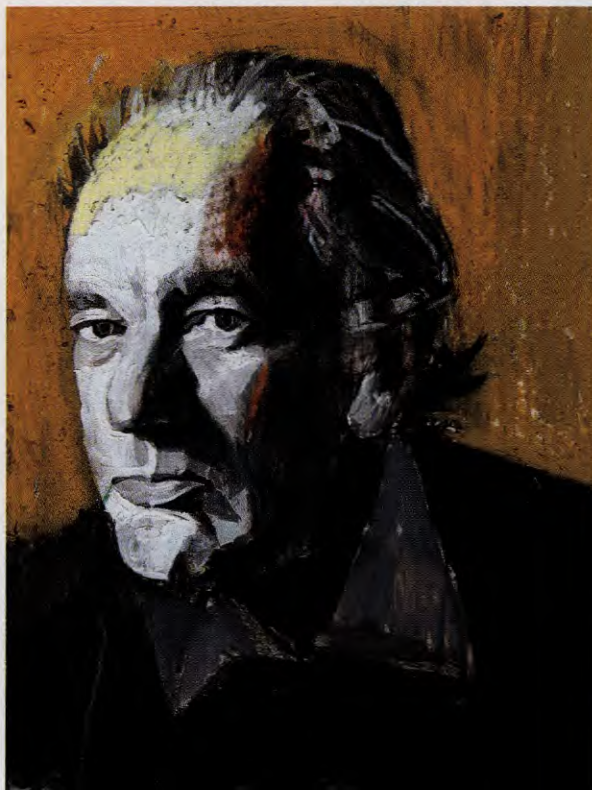
the dictum that his works could not be published or performed in Austria after his death, as if to suggest that his homeland was not even worthy to bathe in his hatred. Although Bernhard's executors have sashayed around his stipulation, his wrath has since matured into something far more universally toxic. In the end, Bernhard's concerns are not a single country and its political crimes but rather the sheer affront of life itself, what the Romanian philosopher E. M. Cioran referred to as "The Trouble with Being Born."

Hermann Broch and Robert Musil, fellow countrymen of Bernhard's, re-

ported on this trouble also, but in prose that was far more stately, tempered, and quite less given to spleen. Bernhard was altogether unconcerned with immunizing a reader against his surgical attacks on humanity, and if he made a blood sport of novel writing, he did it with a zeal and a gallows humor that is unrivaled in contemporary literature. His formally radical novels, which sometimes blasted into shape as a single, unbroken paragraph, were manic reports on such fixations as the futility of existence; the dark appeal, and inevitable logic, of suicide; the monstrosity of human beings; and the abject pain of merely being alive. Bernhard's language strained the limits of rhetorical negativity: if his prose were any more anguished, it would simply transmit as moaning and wailing. Building interest in the grief experienced by people who look at the world and find it unbearable was a dark art of Bernhard's, and his characters do not resist the long walk to death's door but run to it and claw at the surface, begging for entry. After all, says Strauch, the agonized painter in Bernhard's first novel, *Frost*, "there is an obligation towards the depth of one's own inner abyss," even if meeting that obligation destroys you.

A debut work of nearly unbearable bleakness, by a writer who would go on to produce some of the most severely nihilistic literature of the twentieth century, *Frost*, which was first published in German in 1963, is not so much a novel as a persuasive case against happiness, written in the relentless prose style that would become Bernhard's signature. An Austrian medical student accepts a perverse task from a teacher: go to Weng, where "the roadsides favor promiscuity" and "children fall into sudden fits of weakness," and clinically observe Strauch, the teacher's estranged brother. "Watch the way my brother holds his stick, I want a precise description of it," says the teacher. This is a perverse thing to want, par-

ticularly from someone who has not seen his brother in years, and it creeps toward suggesting that such cold, loveless interest from a family member has something to do with Strauch's miserable loneliness. It will turn out that other forces are bearing down on Strauch as well, and that misery happens to be one of his guilty pleasures. This is a man who excels at futility and unhappiness, and the performance of his grief will overpower every other spectacle in the novel.



The narrator arrives in Weng and is soon promised that he'll "get to meet a whole series of monsters," which proves to be true:

I really was frightened by this landscape, in particular this one spot, which is populated by small, fully grown people whom one can certainly call cretins. No taller than five foot on average, begotten in drunkenness, they pass in and out through cracks in the walls and corridors. They seem typical of this valley.

Readers of Bernhard will recognize this distortion as his default, fantastical take on the real world; the people who populate it are crushed into grotesque shapes, colliding with a brutal land-

scape that seems carved out of a cruel fairy tale. The language is gothic and clinical at once, affecting the airs of anthropological rationality. When Bernhard imagines beyond reality, it is to color the world worse, and he can be very convincing about it: "Cities that are long since dead, mountains too, long dead, livestock, poultry, even water and the creatures that used to live in the water. Reflections of our death-masks. A death-mask ball." About his dank, mountainous environment,

Strauch warns the narrator, "It's not possible to be so healthy that being here won't cripple you inside and out."

Crippled inside and out is certainly a good working diagnosis of Strauch, although geography, mutilating or not, seems hardly to blame, however convenient a scapegoat. He is menaced by headaches, convinced that frost is eroding his mind—a destroyed man whose hyper-articulate death throes seem to spout, without cease, not from the landscape but from his amygdala, the nut-shaped cluster of worry in the brain that might as well be called the anxiety fountain. Indeed, the treachery of landscapes in Bernhard's work cannot compete with the poison and peril emanating from within his characters.

The narrator registers at the local inn where Strauch is living and passes himself off as a student of law rather than medicine. As subterfuge goes, the deception proves mostly irrelevant to the novel, but Bernhard clearly requires some established literary devices to keep the book from reading like a hatchet job on life itself. Yet the only character who could possibly care about the narrator's secret identity is Strauch, and he's too busy combing his own hair shirt to detect the lie. Strauch would much rather "make the world die in me, and myself die in the world, and everything cease as though it had never been." That's a pretty ambitious goal, and by the end of the book a kind of success has been achieved, as if the book has fallen on its

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own sword. The world depicted by Strauch becomes fairly cold to the touch, and the narrator, not to mention the reader, is sucked headlong and flailing into his death-ship perspective.

Bernhard is an architect of consciousness more than a narrative storyteller. His project is not to reference the known world, stuffing it with fully rounded characters who commence to discover their conflicts with one another, but to erect complex states of mind—usually self-loathing, obsessive ones—and then set about destroying them. Bernhard's characters are thorough accomplices in their own destruction, and they are bestowed with a language that is dementedly repetitive and besotted with the appurtenances of logical thinking. The devious rationality of Bernhard's language strives for a severe authority, and it tends to make his characters seem believable, no matter how unhinged their claims. Phrases don't get repeated so much as needed until they yield graver meanings, with incremental changes introduced as though a deranged scientist were adding and removing substances in the performance of an experiment. "You wake up, and you feel molested," Strauch says:

In fact: *the hideous thing*. You open your chest of drawers: a further molestation. Washing and dressing are molestations. Having to get dressed! Having to eat breakfast! When you go out on the street, you are subject to the gravest possible molestations. You are unable to shield yourself. You lay about yourself, but it's no use. The blows you dole out are returned a hundredfold. What are streets, anyway? Windings of molestation, up and down. Squares? Bundled together molestations.

Without a story to drive it, *Frost* builds not through unfolding events but by telemarking around Strauch's bitter cosmology while the narrator follows him through the woods, fattening himself on the rage of his new mentor. A chart of Strauch's worldview would produce a splotchy Rorschach of points and counterpoints, contradictions, reversals, and the occasional backflip, none of which could really hold up to a logi-

cian's scrutiny, which adds to his mystery. Strauch, a failed artist who only painted in total darkness, is opposed to nearly everything, and lest you think he's a humanist at the core, with a fondness for the arts (that classic virtue of the misanthrope), he claims that "artists are the sons and daughters of loathsomeness, of paradisiac shamelessness, the original sons and daughters of lewdness; artists, painters, writers and musicians are the compulsive masturbators on the planet." Yet there are even worse evildoers, in his estimation: "I've never hated anything as much as I hated teachers." A notable assessment, given that he was for a long time employed as one. Of his students, he says: "I never told them the name of one single flower or tree. Nor gave them one country of origin. . . . Because I am opposed to the enlightenment of children where plants are concerned, in fact, where nature is concerned." Indeed, he believes that schools should be abolished and that young people should be required to visit slaughterhouses instead, which can teach them far more, and far more quickly: "The only wisdom is abattoir wisdom!" He swears he does not exaggerate, and that "imagination is an illness." On his own powers of observation: "I discovered that my surroundings didn't want to be explained by me." Which doesn't keep him from trying.

Strauch is too deranged to make sense, or, more worryingly, he's too perceptive and intelligent to strait-jacket his explosive declarations with coherence and consistency. Never mind the beautiful paradox of Beckett's motto: I can't go on, I'll go on. Bernhard's version of the phrase removes Beckett's compulsion to live: I can't go on, I'll kill myself. I am a coward for not having already killed myself. But since all pursuits are futile, suicide is futile. Better never to have been born.

One of the unbalancing pleasures of *Frost* is how frequently we can change our mind about Strauch as he himself obsessively changes his own mind, shifting our diagnosis from Angry Genius to Brain-Addled Sad Sack to Poet of Uncomfortable Truths. Not knowing the limits of his hatred and fear makes Strauch fasci-

nating, and Bernhard, even this early in his career, knew how to use characters as shock treatments for the reader, dialing up the intensity before boredom can set in. The most chilling idea that recurs in *Frost* involves suicide, which is offered up by Strauch as the one authentic solution to the problem of being alive. But it is spoken of as such an inevitability—the question is only really *when* it will happen for each person—that it's considered “the decision of the father (first and foremost) and of the mother (as well) to sponsor the suicide of their offspring, the child, the sudden premonition of ‘having created a new suicide.’” Suicide is a project initiated by all parents, and giving birth is likened to plotting a death. It feels violent, and violating, to have suicide threatened in one's presence, even from a character in a novel, and to ignore it is like walking away from a drowning person. If there's something voyeuristic to this role we're forced into, it also imposes an unwanted responsibility, which is quite different from the routine empathy one might feel toward a more typical fictional character. This difference of literary effect begins to describe how assaultive Bernhard's work can be. Strauch foreshadows the kind of character Bernhard would go on to create in novels like *Woodcutters*, *The Loser*, *Correction*, and *Extinction*—a ranting malcontent on a filibuster, staging grand disquisitions on the awful discomfort of being human, frequently endorsing suicide as not only appropriate but desirable. He so loathes the fact that he was born that he wants to erase himself.

Alive with rage and shouting in our faces, a character of this sort eats up so much of the stage that story and plot are crowded out to the perimeter, obediently clamoring for attention now and again, but appearing dim and perfunctory at best. The compelling happenings of *Frost* are mostly interior, and the physical world and its objects are rotely attended to. The narrator, innocent of the world at the outset, is so poisoned by Strauch's perspective that he turns into a kind of destroyed madman himself—as if he

has witnessed an atrocity that he will never recover from—and we see that certain ideas can be so corrosive as to ruin the mind that hosts them. The novel closes with the narrator's “report” back to his teacher, a series of letters that regurgitate some of Strauch's tirade with a degree of desperation, struggling to find a language with which to diagnose Strauch, settling finally on the awkward phrasing of “an amoral interstitial thinking without any declared purpose,” a disorder that has probably not yet made it into the *DSM*. Banging his head against “the unrevealing mysticism of one who is on the run from clarity,” the narrator in the end declares Strauch to be “much more miserably alone than one will be able to imagine even after reading my report.” This is a beautiful bit of modesty that defeats any sense that Strauch has been exaggerating his condition, deepening the already terrible black hole that surrounds him. It seems that Strauch isn't the only one who paints in total darkness. His creator is rather fond of doing so as well.

Bernhard's ambivalence toward the dramatic shape of a plotted story is already in evidence in *Frost*, yet he hadn't quite determined how to supplant it, which leads to a static, sometimes overexcited investigation of Strauch and his manias: a novel that can function more as a perverse disclosure of a disease than as a suspenseful revelation of character. The subplots and secondary characters in *Frost*—intrigue at the inn and the neighboring village, which Strauch and the narrator sometimes gossip about—serve as peripheral animations to throw Strauch's tirades into greater relief, but they also work to allow the reader some much-needed rest from the scorched-earth intensity of Strauch's anger. The knacker, hauling around animal carcasses, is sleeping with the innkeeper, whose husband is in jail for murder; as characters they are somewhat less than human, driven entirely by their lower faculties and made to seem unduly crass and petty. A farmhouse burns, incinerating the animals within, which prompts a cheerful description of their burnt flesh. A woodcutter is killed. But these characters, and their intrigues, are more like hand puppets bobbing atop

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cardboard scenery, a bit of over-rigged, cartoonish entertainment in between bracing doses of death talk. Bernhard doesn't seem particularly convinced of the dramatic potential of this material either, and so it is only lightly and erratically sketched, while Strauch is held in abeyance before he bombards us again with his rant against life. One senses the young Bernhard trying his hand at conventional narrative (an interest he would later abandon), dutifully serving up novelistic material to spackle together the far more potent torment issuing from Strauch, but it's curious in a novel when adultery and animal fires, as well as general mayhem in the Austrian forest, can serve as light comic relief.

Bernhard finds little use for cheerful thoughts, happy people, or positive outcomes. Says the narrator of *The Loser*: "It's always correct to say that this or that person is an unhappy person . . . whereas it's never correct to say that this or that person is a happy one." Facile reasoning aside, his characters might be regarded as arguments, constructed to stifle any possibility of hope or joy, the opposite of what anyone—anyone, that is, with an interest in self-preservation—should want from a book. They petition, with a barrister's authority, a bleak space, interrogating the purpose of life and regularly finding it hollow and terrible. "Who had the idea of letting people walk around on the planet," asks the narrator, "or something called a planet, only to put them in a grave, their grave, afterwards?"

Who indeed? Yet the technique precisely describes the kind of jeopardy in which Bernhard routinely places his characters, choosing to notice them just when their suffering is at its most intense. This procedure allows readers the unusual experience of witnessing people who operate under virtually no illusions, in the most extreme emotional circumstances, at war with fears that none of us can rightly deny. These are characters without the routine protective carapace of denial and evasion, and their raw assault on mortal problems can make them seem both heroic and doomed. As psychologi-

cal specimens, they are among the most dour, depressed, angry, and alarmingly death-obsessed characters in the history of literature; an anecdotal assessment, of course, but if a device existed to measure the nihilism of a fictional character, it is hard to imagine that Bernhard's creations would not peg the needle of the machine.

Bernhard's mortal impulses place him in the company of another contemporary German-language writer, W. G. Sebald. Both were perfect adherents to Kafka's credo to pursue the negative, because "the positive thing is given to us from the start." Each produced portraits of devastated characters, ruined by both circumstance and self-generated torment, but their techniques diverged in stark ways. Whereas Sebald built a tranquil moat around his characters' pain, Bernhard wheeled out the catapult and flung his characters into the fire, paying close attention to the sounds of their screams. In Sebald the emotion is buried under the veneer of manner and etiquette, and its repression and concealment create an exquisite pressure. We tiptoe around his characters and their elaborate denial, which, by its very banality, suggests to us extraordinary levels of pain that cannot be etched in language. They are so obliterated as to be beyond direct communication. Instead, they can talk about the flora and fauna in wistful ways, they can reminisce dully, and we are left to infer the depth of their grief. Sebald promoted his credo of subtlety and indirection when he declared that atrocity could not be rendered directly in literature, a rule that would seem to stuff rags into the mouths of Bernhard's characters, who are so far from standing on ceremony that they may as well be crawling on their bellies through the dirt.

What does bind Bernhard and Sebald, beyond their instinct toward the inner darkness, is an interest in narrative techniques that moderate, and offset, the pain and anguish of their characters. Each frequently presents narrators whose chief function is to listen in on characters in pain, harvesting their suffering. Sebald's quiet narrators work like mollusks on the

encoded confessions that come to them, and it's often the patience and curiosity of the narrators, or their simple drive to listen, that slowly draws in readers, until our own powers of detection are heightened and we can see the delicately buried signs of anguish. It is as though authorial choreography is not enough; an ally must be sent abroad into the text to witness the characters' wounds firsthand.

Bernhard, too, would prove to be obsessed with narrators who spy, eavesdropping themselves in order to feed on a vaster world of feeling. In *Frost*, what keeps all of the madness and vitriol captivating is how elaborately it is mediated through the narrator, who breaks from direct quotation into stylized paraphrases, allowing the raw, spoken material from Strauch the refinements and range of literary prose. Strauch's consciousness is artfully parceled for us to sound both more deranged and more provocative than it would if we were to listen directly to his monologues. This is not your best friend's narcissism: boring and self-centered, repetitive, ignorant of its audience. Yet whenever Strauch worries his wound for too long, the relentlessness of the wrath quickly becomes numbing and theatrical. It strangely loses its conviction.

Bernhard would develop a keen instinct for techniques that allowed him to complicate what is sometimes the very basic message of his books (i.e., it hurts to be alive, and we might consider killing ourselves). Frequently, he would pair his characters with mute sidekicks, like the narrator in *Frost*, who absorb and filter the rage into readable form. This is Bernhard's version of literary suspense: dangling his characters over sharp rocks, wringing from them their tortured confessions, which are then corseted into elegant prose by able chaperones. *Frost* is but a tentative step toward the mediation and rage-processing that Bernhard would continue to hone in his later work. In books such as *Extinction* and *Yes*, Bernhard's ranting narrators move away from their private testimony and manage also to shoulder a story-

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REVIEWS

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telling burden, saving these novels from overdrilling their own resources. A more refined antidote Bernhard discovered to this problem was to increase the curatorial range of his narrators, giving them access to larger and more varied territories, deepening the tragic circumstances that would provide the context for the novel. *Correction*, for example, plants its narrator among the posthumous papers of an architect who has just killed himself, since the perfect structure he built for his sister—a cone in the middle of a forest—has allowed her to consummate her own lifelong desire: to kill herself. The narrator, again unnamed and emotionally muted, can access both recollections and writings of his subject, Roithamer, in addition to his own memories of the man, which allows for a more complicated, contrapuntal force to develop, with multiple channels of content flowing into his shaping hands. The narrative moment of the novel is itself static—a man sits in a garret sorting through papers—but the territories the narrator can access to build a story are expansive and rich, allowing for a layered unfolding of circumstance and consequence.

If *Frost* is an apprentice work, a blast of raw feeling without the formal elegance of his later novels, it already heralds Bernhard's urge not just to look death in the face but to climb directly into its mouth and produce a fearless report of the architectural dimensions of a place that few of us care to imagine for very long. In writing that is remarkable for how close it takes us to our own ending, Bernhard is, finally, uplifting and revelatory, because he does not turn away from the most central and awful part of reality. His characters are so ruthlessly determined not to be fooled that they ruin themselves before our eyes. This is mercilessly honest work that shows the moral consequences of being highly alert to life, and it is terrifying to read. As the narrator of *Frost* says of his own report, "I could read the whole thing back, but I would only give myself a fright."