Repetition Compulsion

Gideon Lewis-Kraus

Frost
by Thomas Bernhard,
translated by Michael Hofmann.
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"WITH THE passing of the years one's conclusions become more drastic," writes the medical assistant, quoting the painter Strauch, "the curlicues are omitted in favor of a more rustic expression, in favor of forthrightness...," and the unnamed medical assistant, perhaps misquoting the old painter Strauch, trails off into a non sequitur about the war. This augurs with great accuracy the development of Thomas Bernhard's characters. More precisely: the development of that styled rancor that will animate three decades of cynics and curs.

It seems fitting that Bernhard's first novel has become the last to be translated into English. *Frost* (1963) brings the career of the late Austrian writer full-circle: it reads equally plausibly as an uneven debut or an overwrought valediction. After a decade spent writing hallucinogenic Trakl-inspired verse, Bernhard here built the structure his nearly twenty volumes of novels and memoirs would inhabit: a jeremiad delivered by a half-mad aging artist-philosopher, the painter Strauch, as transcribed and interpreted by a young medical assistant. The painter and the assistant have quartered themselves in a dilapidated inn in the frigid Alpine village of Weng, in Upper Austria. Bernhard spent his youth and much of his adult life in the region, and set many of his works in this place he both loathed and loved. The medical assistant has been sent to Weng by his superior, the pompous doctor Strauch, to observe and report on the condition of Strauch's estranged brother, the painter Strauch, who he fears is losing his mind. To avoid suspicion, the medical assistant pretends to be a law student on vacation. The painter Strauch finds this odd—Weng, hunkered down in a mean and cold ravine, is otherwise untouristed—but Strauch, desperate for companionship, shelves this anxiety. The paranoid painter worries he is being constantly deceived. His only confidant is the medical assistant, who is naturally deceiving him.

Like Bernhard himself and virtually all of his characters, the fraying painter Strauch had an unhappy childhood amid an unloving family. Strauch was close only with his sister, who has fled to Mexico. After a short stint in his youth as a rural schoolteacher, Strauch became a painter. Now he has burned his paintings (Bernhard's characters tend to undermine or efface their own work). The painter Strauch, rather than painting, takes plodding walks through hip-deep snow and fulminates:

> The lesson of humanity and inhumanity and human opinions, and of the great human silence, the lesson of the great memory protocol of the great being, should all be tackled through the abattoir! Schoolchildren should not be brought to heated classrooms, they should be made to attend abattoirs; it is only from abattoirs that I expect understanding of the world and the world's bloody life. Our teachers should do their work in abattoirs...the abattoir is the only essentially philosophical venue. The abattoir is *the* classroom and *the* lecture hall. The only wisdom is abattoir wisdom!

This is an early example of what has been called Bernhard's "fugal" style. Bernhard loved Bach and in his youth trained as a singer at Salzburg's Mozarteum, so the repetitiveness of such rants is often interpreted as musicality. As neat as it sounds, this overly formal reading ignores the emotional content embodied in iteration, and thus aestheticizes the probing sadness of these characters. Their repetition is a form of searching—they hope to blunder into the articulate moment where they will finally feel understood.

It is the simultaneous need for and despair about an understanding listener that drives Bernhard's two signature formal devices: the near-maddening repetition and an as-told-to structure of witness and vituperant. These men want nothing more than to be heard—they recognize, to varying degrees, that isolation makes for certain madness—but they suspect that they are most successfully themselves when they irritate. So they irritatingly repeat themselves in the course of these book-length paragraphs, pining for an interlocutor who won't be put off no matter how off-putting they are. Their ideal listener might testify to the sanity and tenderness behind the barbed front.

If that ideal listener exists, however, he will have too much power. As the hypnotically daft Prince Saurus puts it to his attending doctor in *Gargoyles* (1967), "But monologues are just as pointless as dialogues, although in a way much less pointless. Whenever you engage in a dialogue with another person (with yourself!), because otherwise you are suddenly afraid of suffocating, you must be prepared for his doing the utmost to undercut you." For Bernhard, here stands the honest and crippled man: unable to cope alone, unable to trust anyone else, unable not to trust anyone else. He goes as long as he can on injured anger.

Repetition serves as both the primary irritant and the vehicle of unwitting revelation: the slight variations on a theme smuggle messages from the emotional hinterland. Each tirade goes on just too long—that is, just long enough to hint at admiration behind the resentment. As Bernhard wrote in his memoir, *Gathering Evidence* (published in five German volumes between 1975 and 1982, translated as one English volume in 1985), "We make a state of affairs clear, yet it is never the state of affairs we wish to make clear but a dif-

ferent one." Bernhard and his characters are best known for their misanthropy, but the idea that these harangues are simply vicious is as careless as the idea that they are simply musical. These men struggle to vent their spleen ever more cleanly, but they cannot help betraying their loneliness and their disappointment.

In *Woodcutters* (1984), the interlocutorless narrator whiles away a "so-called *artistic* dinner" dreamily eviscerating the writer seated across from him, Jeannie Billroth. There is not a single calumny of which she is undeserving. She 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." This goes on for some hundred-odd pages until we are finally given to understand that the narrator was once in love with this awful Jeannie Billroth; he has for twenty-five years been burdened by his sense of loss. His negativity is not exactly a lie—she seems, indeed, a pretentious petit-bourgeois hack—but it is also a scrim. Disproportionate bitterness is the only strategy these narrators have to disclose their otherwise unendurable affinities. Despite their constant talk of suicide, they cannot and will not kill themselves. They have too much overfierce and protective hatred to nurture.

BERNHARD'S USUAL formal conceits are put to work in *Frost* in an unrefined way: it is sodden with ambiguity. This is an unusual way for a first novel to fail. Ordinarily, their weakness is that they are all too certain about how their characters work. But as Bernhard's style matured, his characters assumed increasing one-dimensionality. They grew more asinine and hermetic—and wittier—in their acrimony. And the stronger the prima facie *No*, the cannier the lurking *Yes*. Bernhard found that notes of affirmation and injury would have greater resonance when struck in *pianissimo*. The more he omitted, the more communicative his silences became.

In *Frost*, the malignancy is muddled. At one point early in the book, the medical assistant quotes the painter Strauch saying, "'It's a torment for me to sit in that public bar. But then I suppose I'm looking for things that will irritate me. The smell,' he said, 'makes me ill. The smell of workmen has always made me ill. And always attracted me.'" This is the sort of sentiment that the later novels would express less nakedly; this construction says too much and thus reveals too little. The reversal is too abject, too excessively cooperative. We are confronted from the outset with the fact that this troubled painter Strauch contains multitudes, so we take it for granted when his mordancy makes way for sentiment or regret.

What is manifest can be ignored; what is unsaid, or said obliquely, or said at long last, retains its power. Hence the intensity at the end of a later work such as *Woodcutters*, where the narrator spites himself momentarily to say, "We are ourselves just as mendacious as those we are always accusing of mendacity, those whom we despise and drag in the dirt for their mendacity; we are not one jot better than the people we constantly find objectionable and insufferable." When Bernhard's later narrators give up their defensive postures of exaggeration and projection, they do so more judiciously. Strauch is too amalgamated from the start.

Along similar lines, *Frost* also allows for more interlocutive interpretation. "Accusations against the world around him," muses the medical assistant, "had always been accusations against himself." Where the unnamed medical assistant freely mediates, the later narrators pretend to pure stenography; the question of their interpretive license is more urgent. These witnesses ultimately either merge with or overtake their subjects, and it is rarely clear to what end. By the end of *Correction* (1975), the unnamed narrator—who has taken on the task of assembling and editing the philosophical fragments of his friend Roithamer (a character based on Wittgenstein, an important antecedent for an Austrian writer so obsessed with suicide and solitude)—has by the end of the book become indistinguishable from his ward. *Frost* announces in its first pages that the relationship between the assistant and the painter is a deceptive one. We're denied the sympathy we feel in the later books as we grope for the trustworthy alongside Bernhard's shaky iconoclasts.

Where these kinds of candor detract from *Frost*, Bernhard uses them with great success in his memoirs. "Nearly everyone," he wrote, "destroys himself in between hatred and admiration." In *Gathering Evidence*, he took up his hatred and admiration with equal fervor, knowing that he could do no real justice to either but striving nonetheless for a ruthless honesty. The attempt in *Frost* to circumscribe emotional complexity fails because, in fiction, it feels too presumptuous. His mature novelistic method suggests richness through caricature. He granted his characters their exaggerated assaults as a way of giving them the benefit of the doubt. He did not always know what motivated them, but he knew their fierceness would gesture toward its complements. When it came to himself, he was less charitable. Bernhard confronted his own demons in a way he could not in good novelistic conscience have forced his characters to do, no matter how autobiographical they were. Such force is the problem with *Frost*.

But despite this, there are many moments even in this early novel where the old painter Strauch is allowed the fiery scope of an unbroken polemic. Strauch fears the frost the way Bernhard feared finality of proposition. Once rigor mortis has set in, the slim chance that we might inadvertently utter something true, or with any luck create some impressionistic truth through a spate of lies, is snuffed. The old painter Strauch quotes the Pascal he carries around in his pocket: "Our nature is motion, complete stasis is death."□