A Resolute Thomas Bernhard

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Abstract: This paper proposes a resolute reading of Thomas Bernhard's prose in analogy with the resolute readings of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Drawing on the interpretive framework developed by Diamond and Conant, it argues that Bernhard's obsessive monologues and strategies of nonsense operate performatively, compelling the reader to undergo a process analogous to the Tractarian dissolution of the illusion of sense. Bernhard's fiction enacts a literary dialectic in which exaggerated, self-effacing discourse exposes its own nonsensicality, leading the reader to a transformation of perspective. Reading Bernhard resolutely thus coheres with critical accounts of Bernhard's performative and theatrical prose, in which self-destructive patterns of thought are staged rather than endorsed.

Keywords: Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Nonsense, Resolute Reading, Bernhard

The resolute reading, as initially conceived by Cora Diamond and James Conant, first emerged as an interpretative approach to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Conant and Diamond 2004). This program, defined by its rejection of the commitments characterizing so-called standard readings and the adoption of an austere view of nonsense, sought to emphasize that the sentences of the *Tractatus* are simply and ultimately nonsensical (in the sense of being devoid of propositional or quasi-propositional content). The resolute approach insists that these sentences serve as elucidations dialectically, with their purpose being fulfilled when the reader recognizes their nonsensicality and discards them, "throw[ing] away the ladder" after climbing it (TLP 1922, 6.54)[1]. The contributions of Diamond, Conant, and other resolute readers have sparked a lively debate that has developed and branched out in multiple directions over the past decades, making the notion of a "resolute reading" complex but also productive (Bronzo 2012). Conant and Silver Bronzo (2017) devoted a particularly useful paper to clarifying the meaning of the resolute program, showing how it has expanded over the years to take on different nuances and to be employed in contexts beyond the *Tractatus*. As they note, originally, the resolute reading was defined by its logical dependence on the "standard" interpretations, forming a critique of their inherent commitments, such as the idea that the *Tractatus* conveys ineffable truths or insights together with a theory of meaning. The resolute reading was described as logically posterior and highly generic, primarily concerning how to read the *Tractatus* itself and leaving much about its detailed application undetermined (177).

However, the scope of resolute readings has expanded significantly over time. Later developments saw the term applied beyond its original exegetical focus on the *Tractatus* to other works by Wittgenstein, including his later writings. For example, Stephen Mulhall (2007) attempted to offer a resolute reading of the *Philosophical Investigations*, articulating his program along these lines: "To recognize that the only species of nonsense is gibberish is, accordingly, to recognize that the limits of sense are not limitations; to acknowledge them as limits rather than limitations is precisely a matter of acknowledging that there is nothing (no specifiable thing, no conceivable task or activity) that we cannot do" (8). Such expansions aimed to highlight continuities between Wittgenstein's early and later thought, making the insights of the resolute program a powerful heuristic tool for exploring

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previously overlooked dimensions of his philosophical practice, particularly as an alternative to more traditionally "substantial" views on nonsense.

Moreover, the term 'resolute' began to be used in broader philosophical contexts. It became associated with a more general approach to philosophy, including discussions about "therapeutic" philosophy. As Conant and Bronzo note (191), this shift marked a departure from the original exegetical focus, with figures like Rupert Read advocating for strong resolutism as a way of doing philosophy rather than merely interpreting Wittgenstein, pointing to what he calls a "liberatory philosophy" (2021). These developments led to conceptual shifts and introduced further layers of controversy, while at the same time paving the way for innovative extensions of the resolute program into other fields.

In particular, recent years have seen a growing interest in the relationship between Wittgenstein and literature, to the point that one can now speak of a kind of "literary Wittgensteinianism" (Chodat and Gibson 2022, 12). Even in this context, the resolute program has provided inspiration for scholars who have sought to articulate the application of Wittgenstein's philosophy to literary studies. In the volume *Wittgenstein and Modernism*, Karen Zumhagen-Yekplé (2016) makes this point explicit, writing that the resolute approach "offers new dimensions for understanding his [Wittgenstein's] relationship to modernism that are otherwise unavailable through more traditional readings of the *Tractatus*" (178). In this way, the *Tractatus* takes on the aspect of a "modernist puzzle text," which lends itself to serving as a model for reading, or reading in analogy with, texts belonging to modernist literature.

The idea is that it is precisely through the resolute program that the aesthetic form of the *Tractatus* comes to the fore: its authorial strategy, the performative character of the book, its aim to affect the reader's attitude, and to elicit an ethical sense through the experience of the work, without this sense being stated in what is literally written in its propositions (which, indeed, are not meant to convey any meaningful content). Beyond Zumhagen-Yekplé (2020), who has programmatically adopted the resolute reading as an aesthetic instrument, other examples of its application to literary contexts include Rupert Read (2007), Ben Ware (2015), and, to some extent, Rebecca Schuman (2015).

Curiously, however, this tendency has not yet considered the case of one of the (post)modernist writers most influenced and fascinated by Wittgenstein: Thomas Bernhard. The connection between the two, after all, is explicit, attested, and already widely studied: the figure of Wittgenstein recurs in several of Bernhard's works, sometimes evoked merely by name (*Holzfällen*, *Das Kalkwerk*) or through biographical references (*Korrektur*, *Wittgensteins Neffe*), sometimes fictionalized as a character (*Ritter, Dene, Voss*, *Goethe stirbt*), or again as a symbolic presence embodying the perfect image of the extraordinary intellectual (Huemer 2020, 383).

However, my aim is not to revisit these levels of direct or thematic influence, but rather to examine the ways in which certain Bernhardian strategies of *nonsense* (the obsessive repetition of words until they lose meaning, argumentative drift, the self-cancellation of an entirely self-referential discourse) suggest a deeper kinship with the program of a resolute reading of the *Tractatus*. What I aim to show is that Bernhard's work lends itself particularly well to a resolute reading, revealing a promising way of engaging with it in analogy with the resolute readings of Wittgenstein, as a practice of dissolving the most fundamental illusions about the relationship between language and world from within language itself (Di Massa 2025, 31–33). This will not involve the mechanical application of an interpretive schema to Bernhard's work[2], but rather an exploration of how certain literary motifs resonate with the resolute perspective, before finally making explicit the most evident parallels concerning the dialectical form and the linguistic status of discourse in both cases.

1. Within Bernhard's Narrative Universe

Thomas Bernhard's work is pervaded by the presence of characters driven by an irrepressible impulse toward questioning, which very often leads them to failed (if not tragic or tragicomic)

conclusions. Bernhard's heroes, or rather his antiheroes, are habitually characterized as *Geistesmenschen* (Frantzen 2017, 100): they do not merely think, adopting a stubbornly speculative attitude, but they think too much, to a degree that exceeds any human possibility. These hyper-reflective figures are inexorably drawn into a mortal vortex, foreshadowed and ultimately generated by the picture of some insoluble problem against which they repeatedly, and fatally, bang their heads.

Much as in Kafka's universe, it is the very form of the intellectual problem, as a pseudo-problem, that determines the annihilation and destruction of those who remain trapped within it. The victim, caught in the snare of his own fixations, never finds a way to escape the obsession with reaching a possible solution. As with Kafka, Wittgenstein's remark proves to hold, "it is not a difficulty for the intellect but one for the will that has to be overcome" (VB 1998, 25). Bernhard's antiheroes, by contrast, cling tenaciously to the faculties of the intellect, confronting life as if it were a theoretical problem, and thus setting in motion a trajectory of self-destruction that leads them to sink together with their own thought. They never come to realize that "the solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of this problem" (TLP 1922, 6.521); something the reader, instead, is called upon to grasp.

Let us therefore attempt to enter Bernhard's universe through one of the most significant literary motifs of his poetics: the motif of suicide, which is highly pervasive in his writings, indeed, almost omnipresent. The classical theme of the *praeparatio mortis* is grotesquely transfigured in its twentieth-century version, becoming a kind of "training for suicide (*Einübung in den Selbstmord*)", to use the expression from *Amras* (1988b, 10)[3]. It appears both as the final outcome of his characters' existential trajectory and as a recurring theme of reflection underpinning their thoughts. This is already true of *Frost*, in which the painter's obsessive fixations repeatedly converge on the idea of suicide, as when he confesses: "All my thoughts tried to concentrate at a single point, the point where the answer to the question lies: is suicide permissible? I found no answer" (Bernhard 1972, 19).

At times, one seems to be reading the pages of Wittgenstein's *Notebooks*, which bear witness to his deep engagement with the problem of suicide as a matter of ethical reflection (TB 1961, 91). In the case of Bernhard's characters, it is as though they lack the inner strength to tame a thought that soon becomes abyssal, overwhelming the ordinary cognitive capacities of those who confront it. In other words, and more precisely, whereas Wittgenstein conceives of suicide as a question of an ethical nature, the painter Strauch and Bernhard's other antiheroes are able to see it only as an intellectual problem, thus triggering an inevitable series of failures.

In turn, the motif of suicide and self-annihilation, and the images associated with them (of depletion, exhaustion, and disintegration) point decisively toward the central theme of *nonsense*. It is in this way, indeed, that the loss of sense triggered by these figures' obsessive search is at least partially represented: a process of meaning's hollowing-out that condemns them to exhaustion. Moreover, one of the peculiarities of Bernhard's prose lies in the fact that the formal and thematic presence of *nonsense* manifests itself even at the lexical level. Already in his debut novel *Frost*, the term *Unsinn* appears eighteen times, in various nominal and adjectival forms (*Unsinn*, *Unsinnigkeit*, *unsinnig*); the same is true of the synonymous use of *sinnlos* and *Sinnlosigkeit*[4], which likewise occur eighteen times in the novel.

When considered in light of the debates surrounding Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, one might raise here, too, the question of the status and scope of this nonsense: does it concede something to the idea of the ineffable, following the ineffabilist or substantial line (Peter Hacker, for instance, has spoken of "illuminating nonsense" as opposed to "misleading nonsense"; Hacker 1986, 18)? Or does everything dissolve into the complete failure of a pure and simple nonsense unrecognized as such, as the austere conception would have it (according to which nonsense is simply the incapacity to signify anything at all)? A decisive point concerns the willingness to employ the concept of the limits of language (literally or figuratively) to express what kind of operation Bernhard's literary practice enacts.

The situation is thus analogous to the critical debate surrounding the *Tractatus*, insofar as it concerns whether the meaning of Wittgenstein's logical-linguistic activity lies in delineating, from

within, the strict limits of the expression of thought and language, thereby bearing witness to their validity (the substantial–metaphysical interpretation: through the *nonsense* of the *Tractatus* propositions something is nevertheless communicated), or, conversely, whether the aim is to undermine the very image of definite limits or boundaries imposed upon our language (the resolute interpretation: the functioning of the dialectical book, insofar as it leads one to realize that nothing is communicated by its propositions, thus grasping its ethical point).

Transposing this alternative to the literary domain of Bernhard's writings, at least two interpretive options seem to open up. According to the first possibility, the madness of these antiheroes corresponds to the result of a desperate attempt to hurl themselves against the limits of human thought, ultimately crashing into them, yet indirectly tracing the outline of something that resists those rigid boundaries. The madness into which they plunge would then be the (sublime) feeling equivalent to the transcendence of the outermost limits, beyond which lies nothing but *nonsense*. In this way, writing would communicate, in an indirect manner, a series of ineffable truths about the human condition, which is ineffable in itself, and presented, for instance, through the image of existence as a dead end.

The indispensable concepts remain those of incomprehensibility and elusiveness, which impose substantial limits upon humankind's attempts to penetrate a nature and a reality that become ever more obscure. The more one thinks, the more thought recoils upon itself, as if rebounding from the world, which denies it any effective grasp through its concepts. Everything seems to tend toward the recognition of an ineluctable presence in the world (an essential degree of inexplicability and incomprehensibility) and the only salvation lies in realizing the mysticism of this recognition. In words that echo Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics* (LE 1965, 11), *Frost* refers to a miracle in the absolute sense (an ethical nonsense), that is, the experience of seeing the world and life as a miracle. The result seems to have mystical overtones, conveying something to us in an indirect manner:

> The incomprehensible is life itself (*Das Unverständliche ist ja das Leben*). Nothing else. At times it takes on human form, rises into air as a flock of birds to cast its shadow over everything. The ungraspable is the miracle (*Das Unbegreifliche ist das Wunder*). The world we do not grasp is the miraculous world; the world we do grasp is at best merely wonderful (*Die unbegriffene Welt die Wunderwelt, die begriffene höchstens die wunderbare*). (Bernhard 1972, 249)

According to a second possibility, what is staged is the impulse (experienced subjectively) to transcend certain limits that can be understood, strictly speaking, only in a figurative sense. What provokes the final annihilation, therefore, is not some form of human *hybris*, but rather a complex of fatal illusions that drive thought to the extremes of pure and simple nonsensicality.

Bernhard, that is, may be staging a dynamic in which his characters already find themselves caught in the grip of nonsense at the very moment when they illusorily believe there are limits of thought against which they must struggle, until they reach a final annulment that closely resembles the execution of a self-imposed sentence. They do not, in other words, hurl themselves beyond the frontiers of sense, plunging into madness; rather, they merely radicalize a single thought, or a complex of thoughts, to the point of no longer being able to tolerate its ensuing nonsense.

As an author, Bernhard does not remain "on this side" of those limits in order to preserve the meaningfulness of his writing. From an ineffabilist perspective, however, this relative distance could be understood as the sign of a necessary strategy: narration becomes possible only on the condition that the one who narrates positions himself short of the point of dissolution that engulfs his characters. The constant presence of a reporting narrator (*Erzähler-Ich*), often in the form of an account or testimony, thus constitutes a structural device that makes the unsayable sayable, or rather, that allows for the preservation of a minimum of sense where the protagonists have already crossed the threshold of the sayable.

The gap between the level of the characters and that of the narrator—and, in addition, between the narrator and the authorial instance behind whom Bernhard himself can be glimpsed—proves deci-

sive: a distance that functions as a formal safeguard against total absorption into the *nonsense* that threatens his characters, as though he were stopping precisely at that "fatal instant" in which thought sinks into the abyss (Bernhard 1980, 26).

Yet, against this ineffabilist reading, one may argue that Bernhard in fact stands on this side of the very idea that there exist certain limits that cannot be crossed. In Bernhard's universe, the thought of the limit ultimately operates as a perfect instrument of torture and self-punishment. It is in fact a profoundly destructive device, almost the paradigmatic case of those thoughts which, as we read in *Watten*, "can be used for the total annihilation of our existence, as well as for the annihilation of every existence (*zur völligen Vernichtung unserer eigenen Existenz, wie zur Vernichtung jeder Existenz*)" (Bernhard 1970, 69). Indeed, every thought, as such, can serve as an instrument of self-destruction, producing the complete suppression of cognitive capacities.

The hyper-rationality of these characters, ensnared in their own reasoning, turns into its exact opposite: a form of cold naturalness that merely repeats itself, completing a circular motion that erases any distinction between reason and nature. Moreover, it almost seems as if the setting of Bernhard's novels and stories mirrors the desert-like landscape of the *Tractatus* world, that is, the sober totality of what happens (TLP 1922, 1; 1.1). Nature and reality thus appear as sheer factuality: an essentially a-value dimension.

This factuality, moreover, is progressively emptied of substance through the formal devices of indirect discourse and reported monologue: in Bernhard, everything is said, quoted, reported (1988a, 150; 1980, 22), and language remains trapped within itself, incapable of touching ordinary, meaningful reality. Bernhard's antiheroes thus find themselves cast into a barren and desolate world composed solely of facts and states of affairs, in search of the faintest trace of value within a bleak and comfortless reality. It is a hopeless endeavor, for "in the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value—and if there were, it would be of no value" (TLP 1922, 6.41).

These pure and simple facts appear only in the monotonous form of a series of insignificant actions repeated to the point of exhaustion, reproducing the uniformity of that biological cycle that leads to death through illness and decay. In their literary concretization, they take the form of a provincial, inhospitable Austria, of bare and remote mountain landscapes in which characters isolate themselves, only to declare their impotence before the sinister face of nature. Nor does history offer any firmer support: in Bernhard's universe, the past becomes a ghostly and menacing presence, an unbearable hereditary weight to be immediately cast off[5]. The overall impression is that of a bare, historyless nature, over which hovers the atmosphere of an already accomplished catastrophe.

From this perspective, the natural world that serves as the backdrop to the narrative reactivates a problem typically associated with philosophical naturalism: if the factual and empirical world is logically inert, how could mere facts ever justify rationally the actions or beliefs of human subjects? What reemerges here (amplified) is the very same impasse that afflicts Kafka's characters: the anxiety to find a rational justification collides with the opaque face of a nature that offers no foothold for making sense of existence.

The most extreme conviction crowning this vision is that "nature [...] justifies nature, but nature does not justify reason (*Die Natur rechtfertigt* [...] *die Natur, nicht aber die Natur die Vernunft*)" (Bernhard 1970, 78). The search for meaning in a world of pure factuality thus condemns thought to spin endlessly, without any hold on reality. And this, although manifest, is only one of the many forms of nonsense and despair to which that intellectual attitude leads: an attitude that, through its obstinate questioning, ultimately misconstrues the very conceptual grammar of the most ordinary, meaningful experience.

One cannot but think of the peasant from Kafka's parable *Vor dem Gesetz* (Kafka 1994, 211-212), or other memorable figures such as Joseph K. (Kafka 1990) and the protagonist of *Der Bau* (Kafka 1931, 77-130), for Bernhard, echoing Kafka, portrays men who devote their lives to posing questions that never receive an answer (Gargani 1993, 448–49). It is a linguistic and existential condition

in which the characters themselves become aware that they are trapped. Yet instead of seeking a way out through practical action, they can respond only by means of yet another reflection and a further series of questions about this very process of constant questioning, repeating it until the final limit that coincides with exhaustion and death.

In *Ungenach*, an entry by Karl, one of the two brothers who inherit the eponymous estate, explicitly thematizes this condition:

> We ask, but we receive no answer (*Wir fragen, aber wir bekommen keine Antwort*). We keep asking (*Wir fragen immer wieder*). Just as all of life consists only of questions, because we go on existing only by asking, and because, though we ask, we receive no answer (*Wie das ganze Leben nur aus Fragen besteht, weil wir immer wieder nur, da wir zwar fragen, aber keine Antwort bekommen, existieren*). The fact that I exist because I ask, and receive no answer… I can feel the energies I have doubtless stored up… It may well be that the human being is nothing but an observer of nature, not its judge, for which he has no right… (Bernhard 1968, 89).

Like Kafka's characters, Bernhard's men are excluded from life precisely because of the questions they cannot stop asking. And, as in Kafka, it is not a matter of testifying to the certainty of an unreachable, ineffable truth (the ever-elusive answer to an interminable series of questions) but rather of staging the nonsensical results of such a hyper-contemplative posture before the world, and thus outside of life itself.

The exemplary figure in Bernhard's literary enterprise—given his intent to expose the extreme consequences of a purely speculative search for meaning—can only be that of the intellectual and the scholar. His characters are, in fact, artists, musicians and musicologists, men endowed with a philosophical mind, scholars of science and mathematics, architects, and aspiring authors of revolutionary treatises. In other words, they are all men of abstraction, meditative and contemplative beings: they are, precisely, *Geistesmenschen*, men of spirit.

For example, the task understood as an absolute duty may take the form of writing a treatise, as in *Das Kalkwerk*, where Konrad plans to write a study on hearing, or in *Beton*, where Rudolf's goal is finally to complete his long-contemplated study of Mendelssohn Bartholdy. In such cases, Bernhard's prose takes it upon itself to reflect on the act of writing, on what it might aspire to achieve and on the reasons for its inevitable failure. His characters, in fact, consistently display a peculiar incapacity to write; above all, to begin writing, to set in motion that actual process of composition that always remains indefinitely postponed. Taken as a whole, they seem to embody the idea of the intellectual enterprise as a complete existential failure.

Their story is the chronicle of a downfall, but one not determined by any kind of linguistic skepticism that Bernhard would wish to preach to his readers. On the contrary, Bernhard's prose is a striking example of how language can be masterfully employed, in literary form, to reveal the quite different effects produced by a distorted attitude toward thought and language; an attitude that also includes the illusion of absolute truth, so often pursued by his protagonists. These characters usually begin with the conviction that they can attain an absolute point of view on the world, but, as a result of the natural failure of such an attempt, they end up despairing absolutely of everything. It is, so to speak, a fatal error of perspective that condemns these men, victims of their own mental constructions.

It must be emphasized that Bernhard, as author, does not occupy the same position as his characters, who often waver on the threshold between sense and nonsense, before manifestly lapsing into nonsense. What he seeks to stage is rather the condition of one who sees in language and thought a kind of dead end, a place in which one becomes systematically trapped. Far from sharing the worldview of these figures—as though there were concrete contents or opinions about the world to be agreed with—Bernhard is concerned with giving voice to the derailments of thought that lead to discourse often devoid of sense.

For the reader, too, the issue is not whether to agree or disagree with the apocalyptic vision expressed by Bernhard's characters. The meaning of his literary operation becomes clear only when

one realizes that there is no possibility of agreement or disagreement with what they say. The long tirades that fill Bernhard's prose typically give expression to ethical impulses to assert how things *must* be in the world, masking, in the form of apparently rational discourse, what are in fact ordinary forms of nonsense.

Bernhard's attention is directed less toward the particular content of these pronouncements than toward the delirious and hallucinatory character of a mind that locks itself in its own cage; a concern that is almost formal in nature. Thus the grand proclamations about existence often collapse into the tautological pleasure of sentences that are perhaps more meaningless or senseless (*sinnlos*) than nonsensical (*unsinnig*), approaching the expression of necessary but ultimately empty and sterile truths. In many other instances, it is technically nonsense (*Unsinn*) itself that takes center stage, though always in the disguised form of a language that at least appears to be capable of communicating something.

Needless to say, the monologic form that structures most of Bernhard's works is far from accidental. At the very least, the necessity of the monologue expresses the incapacity to recognize any substantial role for interlocutors, since from this perspective everything would inevitably dissolve into misunderstanding and the impossibility of authentic and effective communication. The long, prolix monologues that fill Bernhard's pages not only convey a profound sense of isolation but also give the impression of spinning in circles, unable to make contact with any external reality beyond a hallucinatory and manic mental state.

Significantly, the expressive necessity of this monologic form is articulated by Prince Saurau in *Verstörung*, in what is itself an extraordinarily long monologue reported by the narrator's voice, where (ironically enough) soliloquies are said to be far less meaningless (*sinnlos*) than dialogues (Bernhard 1988a, 148).

Let us now look more closely at three cases that may be described as Bernhard's "exercises in nonsense," in which the protagonists' ideal projects and all-consuming intellectual undertakings recall the absolutist ambition of the metaphysical readers of the *Tractatus*.

2. Exercises in Nonsense

In the novel *Das Kalkwerk*, the monologic voice and the words of the protagonist, Konrad, are conveyed through the testimonies of several characters, by means of indirect discourse. This technique has the effect of refracting and distancing the original perspective, gradually depriving it of consistency and reality. In the accumulation of obsessive thoughts recorded by these witnesses, every element in Konrad's story is motivated and referred back to what he conceives as his fundamental task, namely, to write a revolutionary treatise on hearing, "the most philosophical of all the sense organs" (2012, 72), while erasing everything that has previously been said on the subject. From the very beginning, the totalizing nature of this intellectual enterprise is evident: Konrad subordinates his entire existence to it, and its very object seems to symbolize the totality of human perception.

To achieve his aim, he moves into a disused limeworks, almost completely cut off from human contact, "in the meaningless conviction of gaining a privileged point of observation with regard to the world" (Latini 2010, 16). Only his wife accompanies him—confined to a wheelchair and eventually murdered by Konrad, as we learn at the novel's opening—thus fulfilling her role as a kind of sacrificial victim for her husband's intellectual project. The enclosed space of the limeworks belongs to that series of settings of extreme isolation and solitude that characterize much of Bernhard's fiction. As in many of his works, the character's initial idea is to find a place completely protected from the distractions of the external world, a space in which to concentrate his intellectual activity. But, invariably, the refuge turns into a deadly trap, becoming a real prison. In this sense, the physical space of the limeworks (with its connotations of darkness) only amplifies and gives visible form to the process by which thought itself becomes the cage in which the anti-hero voluntarily imprisons himself, showing that "this running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless" (LE 1965, 12).

It is the increasingly nonsensical thoughts expressed by Konrad, and his inability to finally begin his treatise, that reduce him to a state of captivity. As he is forced to admit: "Lately I have been consumed by the most nonsensical thoughts (*In letzter Zeit zermürben mich die unsinnigsten Gedanken*)" (2012, 217). The initial Promethean gesture of shutting himself away from everyone in order to complete his task immediately turns into a crude, absurd, and tragic mistake: "the mere fact of calling a nonsense like moving into the limeworks an act of courage amounts to suicide (*Aber allein eine solche Unsinnigkeit wie in das Kalkwerk zu gehen, als Kühnheit zu bezeichnen, bedeute Selbstmord*)" (2012, 193).

The story, however, is far from being a mere tale of ordinary madness, the sad, banal fate of a man who loses his mind and murders his wife. The atmosphere of pervasive nonsense affects every aspect of the novel's situation. Konrad himself is the source of the various instances of nonsense that will lead him to his final delirium. The principal unrecognized aspect of this nonsense lies in Konrad's conviction that he already possesses in his mind the fully formed idea of the treatise and that he merely needs to transfer it onto paper, to give it verbal expression. He thus lives in a state of dilemma: he believes he mentally possesses the entire cognitive content of his work, yet he is constantly prevented, by external interruptions, from finding the right moment to pour that content onto the page.

In a clearly recognizable way, Bernhard draws here on a number of Wittgensteinian motifs, particularly the critique of the idea of a private language and of the correspondence model according to which verbal expression would be the faithful translation of a mental content that precedes language. From a Wittgensteinian standpoint, the claim to have in one's head an organized complex of thoughts that cannot be converted into words is not merely false or impossible: it is, more precisely, nonsense; just as nonsensical would be the belief that the essentially private nature of those thoughts prevents their adequate linguistic formulation[6].

As a writer, Bernhard exploits these philosophical premises to use nonsense as a kind of narrative device, showing the extreme outcome of a mode of thinking that fails to recognize its own nonsensicality and is therefore destroyed by it. Konrad finds himself trapped in a condition of illusory disjunction between thought and language, indulging in the conviction that the ideas he jealously guards in his mind are somehow ineffable and elusive. The written word, and the concept more generally, inevitably betrays what is thought, what lies within the confines of one's mind, failing to articulate it faithfully.

The refuge where Konrad seeks protection thus becomes the myth of the instant, the optimal moment (*Augenblick*), the precise temporal point that would allow him to summon the courage to pour the contents of his mind onto paper. What at first functions as a survival strategy eventually turns into another means of descending more rapidly into the delirium that marks the failure of the treatise itself. Not coincidentally, the novel ends by referring to Konrad's inability to summon the strength to complete his work (2012, 231). These final sentences renew, to the very end, the pressure of that obsessive thought demanding the conversion of the treatise (as an ideal product) into written words, thereby fulfilling Konrad's intellectual undertaking.

What proves fatal, in the end, seems to be the lack of an ethical quality, linked both to the myth of the "right moment" and to the difficulty of translating one's mental contents; though even this consideration belongs to Konrad's openly nonsensical perspective, signifying his definitive failure. The significance of this unfinished intellectual project is not immediately clear to all readers. Bernhard appears less concerned with emphasizing the ineluctable need for a meaning that is, by principle, unattainable, than with representing the illusoriness and nonsense of the search for meaning as totality.

The theme of the unachievable, unfulfilled task functions in a formally analogous way to Kafka's problem of the unanswered question and the exhausting wait for resolution: it is not about attesting, through one's existence, to the certainty of an unattainable truth or transcendence, but rather about exposing an unrecognized, nonsensical enterprise for what it is.

Konrad, in fact, engages in genuine exercises in nonsense within the limeworks, most notably when he subjects his wife to exhausting sessions in which he applies the Urbanchich method (27). He bombards her with a series of disconnected words merely to test her auditory reactions and thus gather more material for his treatise, in a constant approximation toward an improbable degree of ideal perfection. In this way, the words he utters during these singular experiments are stripped of all meaning, reduced to pure and senseless sound. The impossibility of genuine dialogue between the two spouses is expressed in the ironic fact that the application of the Urbanchich method becomes only one of the instruments of mutual torture they inflict upon each other.

Everything tends toward the deprivation of meaning within a deformed and grotesque everyday life, in which language itself—and every concept expressed through it—undergoes the same fate as the expressions used in the hearing experiments: a fundamental regression into meaningless and inconclusive sounds. Bernhard's typically hammering prose fully conveys the sensation of a progressive loss of meaning, through the repeated insistence and circularity that empty words and sentences of semantic content, leaving only a kind of rhythmic or sonic modulation. It is almost as if Bernhard were applying a version of the Urbanchich method to the reader, testing not simply their hearing, but their linguistic sensitivity and their capacity to distinguish between sense and nonsense.

The novel *Beton* revisits several of the central themes already present in *Das Kalkwerk*, above all the question of an intellectual task that proves to be fatally more destructive than productive. The protagonist, Rudolf, contemplates producing an intellectual work of the highest value (a study on Mendelssohn Bartholdy) but he has always been the victim of a "morbid striving for perfection (*krankhafte Sucht zur Perfektion*)" (Bernhard 1982, 116) that prevents him from even beginning to write. On the path toward the realization of his study, he perceives only obstacles (such as the presence of his sister at the family residence in Peiskam, whose departure he impatiently awaits) and he uses these to justify his inability to begin his work.

Setting out for Palma, ostensibly in service of his intellectual project, the only thing that comes close to piercing the hallucination of a world that coincides entirely with his own subjective projection is a desolate story of death and suicide, which plunges him irrevocably into anguish. Like many of Bernhard's characters, Rudolf is almost blinded by the obsessive thought of his intellectual mission, deploying all his energy and every possible stratagem in an effort to create the ideal conditions for beginning his treatise. What is activated is a kind of struggle with his own will, made up of self-deception and self-persuasion, since, in truth, "the misfortune of human beings is that they always decide in favor of something that is, deep down, completely against their will" (140).

Rudolf seems truly to close his eyes to the question of the meaningfulness of his intellectual and existential endeavor, pursuing a paradoxical logic rooted in the inescapable urgency of an absolute imperative. To some extent, what he lacks is the strength of mind to overcome his mania for an ideal and absolute goal more lucidly (173–74). In the prolonged deferral of the question of sense, a declaration of failure is already implicit. Rudolf suffers from a defect of will: he cannot achieve a state of resolute awareness that would allow him to handle the distinction between sense and nonsense as it applies to his own condition.

The tone of his reflections, therefore, is not shaped by the heroism of establishing a meaning that must be pursued at all costs, within a world indifferent to value and regardless of the conditions of its realization. The mission and the search for sense, when developed on such grounds, resemble more a form of quixotism of thought than the defense of a moral duty to confer meaning upon experience.

In Rudolf's written monologue, reported by an anonymous narrator, there is a corresponding tendency toward a kind of passive reflexivity, expressed in the ideal of observation, and above all of self-observation. Rudolf is a man paralyzed and trapped in the obstinate effort to observe himself, as he is forced to admit: "I am my own observer, I have truly been observing myself for years, if not for decades, without interruption; by now I live solely in self-observation and self-contemplation and thus, naturally, in self-condemnation and self-denigration and self-mockery" (142).

In this extreme speculative posture of self-observation, which possesses at best a coldly documentary tone and soon turns into a form of self-condemnation, lies Rudolf's total incapacity to pose consciously the question of the meaning of what he is doing. According to a constant feature of great importance in Bernhard's work, the ruthlessness of the characters' self-analysis invariably leads to their annihilation, largely because the ideal of observation always proves to be something inert, something that definitively estranges them from life and casts them into a state of confusion governed by nonsense.

What escapes them as well is the fact that the capacity to distinguish sense from nonsense is a *practical* ability; one that none of these figures ever manages truly to exercise. Rudolf and other similar characters are too preoccupied with recording every datum of their inner reality—or at least that is their ambition—in order to make it cohere with a governing picture that dominates their imagination. In so doing, they compromise the possibility of assuming clearer, more reasonable perspectives, as well as any margin of action that might genuinely lead to liberation.

In *Korrektur*, the ideal and totalizing project that constitutes the existential purpose of the protagonist, Roithamer, involves the construction of a cone-shaped building to be erected for his sister at the exact center of the Kobernausser forest. Unlike what (does not) occur in Bernhard's other novels, here the task is actually completed, but it is precisely the full realization of this goal that causes his sister's death, crushed by the building itself, and drives Roithamer to suicide. Moreover, the protagonist of *Korrektur* succeeds in initiating the process of writing that was denied to Konrad and Rudolf, undertaking the composition of a manuscript bearing the redundant title *On Altensam and Everything Connected with Altensam, with Particular Reference to the Cone*. From this manuscript and a number of other notes, the novel's narrator derives his material, reporting Roithamer's words (typically for Bernhard) in indirect form.

Altensam, the family estate, represents for Roithamer the place of birth and origin; something which, as always in Bernhard, must be destroyed and liquidated; a task Roithamer first attempts to accomplish through the intellectual exercise of thought. To accept Altensam would mean to assume unreflectively a condition of naturalness bordering on a vegetative mode of existence, marked by mental indolence and passive acceptance of the given. Roithamer's extreme reaction, which he experiences as the only possible escape, therefore takes the form of a radical intensification of his intellectual faculties, to be employed in a project aimed at an entirely artificial ideal product, pursued with the same maniacal determination as the protagonist of Kafka's *Der Bau* (Ware 2015, 135-136).

In all this, the cause of his ruin is not so much *Altensam* itself as the *thought* of Altensam, from whose grip he can never free himself. As is typical in Bernhard, the very name "Altensam," repeated obsessively throughout the novel, does not immediately function as a pointer to an extra-textual referent, but rather, emptied of meaning through repetition, becomes a picture of the sheer contingency of what one inherits and is condemned to bear. The composition of his manuscript also testifies to the incessant pursuit of a degree of ideality that its author continually sees refuted by the reality of events, given the absence of any precise correspondence between the thoughts in his mind and the cold factual reality of the cone's destructive effects, which more or less directly lead to his sister's death.

For this reason, Roithamer intervenes ceaselessly upon the text of his manuscript, rewriting it again and again, introducing endless changes and corrections; where "correction", for him, means nothing other than "destruction". In the end, he is forced to acknowledge that he has fallen into a double form of madness: first with the project of the cone, and then with the writing of his manuscript, in which he confesses to leaving behind only the chronicle of an existential as well as a linguistic and expressive failure. Indeed, the desolate Roithamer must admit "that everything is always different from what one has described (*immer alles anders ist, als beschrieben*), what is the case is different from what is described (*das Tatsächliche anders als das Beschriebene*), Altensam and everything connected with Altensam are something else entirely" (Bernhard 1975, 355).

Remembering that it is not Bernhard himself speaking here but a literary character of his creation, the perception of an irreparable fracture between an ineffective, powerless language and an elusive factuality belongs entirely within the perspective distorted by Roithamer's paroxysmal thought. In his reckoning with Altensam, he ends up annihilating himself, blinded by the mirage of an ideal perfection that has drained his intellectual strength. The realization of a lifelong task, *Korrektur* seems to suggest, naturally leads to one's own annihilation (an outcome already prefigured by the sister's death) as if to intimate that the drive toward the attainment of absolute meaning must remain unfulfilled.

Yet the novel resists any moral about how one ought to conduct one's existential commitment. As in the other cases, the intellectual task (whether unrealized or accomplished) serves as the engine of an unstoppable catastrophe that drives its protagonists into a spiral of madness. In completing his project, Roithamer brings his existential trajectory to its close through the act toward which all of Bernhard's characters ultimately tend: suicide. This, in fact, is the natural outcome of a process of thought that comes to identify life entirely with an intellectual labor subjected to an endless series of corrections.

3. Reading Bernhard Resolutely

Let us finally see more precisely how one might read Thomas Bernhard's novels and stories in a resolute way. Let us begin by considering an argument made by Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (1994), where they famously argue that the sentences and propositions found in fictional works are not to be read as literal (false) assertions by the author about the world. Fictional discourse, they claim, operates according to a distinct set of conventions: within the practice of make-believe, authors do not put forward sentences as true assertions about reality but as contributions to the content of a fictional world (44). The author's role is not to assert propositions as true but to construct a context in which they are to be taken *as if* true, within the imaginative framework of that fictional world. Faced with what Lamarque and Olsen call "fictive utterances," the reader adopts what they term the "fictive stance" (43), an attitude accompanied by a set of expectations and anticipations that may be either fulfilled or frustrated by the narrator.

This conceptual framework proves to be a useful reminder when approaching Thomas Bernhard's prose. Bernhard's writing, notorious for its monologic obsessiveness, its apparent misanthropy, and its sweeping judgments about art, philosophy, or the Austrian nation, might be read as an expression of his own worldview. Yet, as many scholars emphasize, such an identification is methodologically mistaken. The narrative voice in Bernhard's prose is not the transparent medium of the author's conviction but a *figürliche Rollenrede*, that is, a "discursive role" performed within the fiction (Huber and Mittermayer 2018, 437). His narrators are stylized speakers, linguistic figures who enact their worldviews through speech, rather than stable conveyors of an authorial truth. In this sense, Bernhard's prose dramatizes the act of saying rather than the content of what is said; the *Diktion* takes precedence over the *Fiktion* (442), the manner of utterance over the supposed referential (fictional) truth of its statements and the correlative construction of a coherent and stable narrative.

From Lamarque and Olsen's perspective, Bernhard's sentences are paradigmatically fictional at an extreme point: they do not assert, they perform. The endless repetitions, the escalating tirades, and the syntactic spirals of his prose construct a linguistic world governed by the logic of exaggeration and self-enclosure. Each utterance in this world is true only in the sense that it sustains the fiction's internal necessity: it belongs to a rhetorical and psychological economy, not to a statement about reality. To take these utterances literally—to assume that Bernhard himself "means" them as presenting a valuable worldview—would be to collapse the fictional frame and mistake the role for the author.

However, there is a deeper philosophical parallel here, one that connects Bernhard's fiction to the resolute readings of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. In particular, Cora Diamond (2000) develops a crucial dimension of this view: the role of the imaginative activity in the reader's engagement with nonsense. We do not merely see nonsensical sentences as meaningless; we are invited to take them as if

they made sense, to enter imaginatively into the perspective of someone who is tempted by them. For Diamond, understanding the *Tractatus* involves a moral and imaginative discipline: to inhabit the point of view of one who is drawn to metaphysical utterance and to experience, from within, the collapse of that aspiration (161). This imaginative work (taking nonsense as sense, only to recognize its emptiness) is what allows us to see the attraction and the futility of the metaphysical impulse. The reader's activity thus mirrors the very temptation that philosophy must overcome.

A similar imaginative dynamic characterizes a resolute reading of Bernhard's fiction. His narrators produce a relentless stream of apparently absolute statements about the futility of existence, the corruption of humanity, or the impossibility of art. The reader, drawn into this rhetoric, must initially take these pronouncements seriously, entering imaginatively into the speaker's stance, as if these claims expressed a deep truth about the world, at least from the fictional character's perspective. This is the necessary first moment: inhabiting the world of the narrator's obsession, allowing the language to appear meaningful, coherent, revelatory. Yet, as the discourse unfolds, the reader gradually recognizes its instability and self-cancellation. The extremity and repetition of the narrator's voice expose its own fragility; its apparent sense dissolves into the recognition of linguistic and existential excess. The imaginative identification gives way to detachment, and the reader perceives that these utterances, once taken as sense, are in fact nonsensical in their pretension to absolute value. The reader's task, then, is to undergo a transformation in understanding: an experience of seeing the emptiness of those totalizing pronouncements and being restored to the sense of ordinary life[7]. This is the kind of literary dialectic that a resolute reading enacts. His novels do not instruct us in despair, nihilism, or misanthropy; they show, through the overextension of language, the point at which such discourse collapses. They lead the reader, through the performance of excess, to the limit where language loses meaning, and, in that very loss, reopens the possibility of genuine understanding.

More precisely, following in Kafka's wake, Bernhard dismantles the modern form of the novel as a quest for meaning (while at the same time frustrating the expectations of readers who wish to reach that meaning), pointing instead to the nonsensicality of a process of questioning that instantly turns into an obsessive and deadly mechanism. In line with this critical operation, Bernhard exploits the performative quality of his prose to compel the reader to adopt a stance more stable and less self-destructive than that of his characters. The long, delirious monologues of his books do not express an authorial point of view; rather, they deliberately tend toward exaggeration and paroxysm in order to render the deranged perspective of men who suffer unconsciously from "mental cramps," so that the reader may take distance from them.

Bernhard thus practices a deliberate aesthetics of irritation, designed to strike and stun the reader through insistent catastrophic visions in which language and its expressive potential are despaired of. His prose, therefore, lives through its performative dimension: "Performance replaces psychology in Bernhard's thoroughly theatricalized presentations of the vanishing (human) subject" (Honegger 2001, 150). Bernhard himself writes: "In my books everything is artificial (*In meinen Büchern ist alles künstlich*); that is, all the characters, events, and occurrences are represented on a stage, and the space of the stage is completely dark" (Bernhard 1989, 82). On this stage, words get their light as if by contrast.

It is thus an artificial device, used to make the words stand out against the dark background of the page, thereby bringing language itself to the forefront. The clarity of the words (understood only in the sense of brightness and visibility) can nonetheless become blinding, seductive, and deceptive. The general atmosphere of artificiality unfolds a dimension of essential illusion; but readers must be careful not only to recognize the theatrical illusion, but also to avoid being deceived by the (non)sense of what is being staged.

If Bernhard stages on his pages the representation of a thought running off the rails, one must be on guard against the possibility of being captured by the very allure his linguistic formulations may exert upon us. Mistaking those exaggerated and artificial monologues for the heartfelt expression of a shareable worldview—a world anyone might be tempted to conceive as "made up of intolerable

things" and "ever more intolerable" (Bernhard 1968, 92)—is to fall straight into the trap Bernhard has laid. Even if in a somewhat different sense, Dowden reminds us that to be tempted to agree with what one reads in Bernhard's pages is already to misunderstand him (Dowden 1991, 8).

By recognizing instead the artificiality of the staged derailments (conceptual and linguistic alike), one acquires the awareness needed to distance oneself from the lure of totalizing yet nonsensical illusions. Only through an explicit acknowledgment of the nonsensical nature of those impulses—which may indeed make themselves felt in every human being—does it become possible to tolerate, on an existential level, the weight of nonsensicality itself, and to avoid the tragic fate of Bernhard's antiheroes.

At the same time, such recognition allows for greater clarity regarding the intentions underlying the expression of nonsense: whether it is driven by the urge to grasp the totality of the world through thought (philosophical nonsense), or by the attraction to those combinations of words that seem to capture how we *feel* the world ought to be, within or beyond it. Only by clarifying the motivation behind our nonsenses can we learn to free ourselves from their grip, becoming conscious of them rather than their prisoners. After all, as Wittgenstein reminds us, language is not a cage (McGuinness 1979, 117).

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Notes

[1] Quotations from Wittgenstein follow the standard system of abbreviations established by Alois Pichler, Michael A. R. Biggs, and Sarah Anna Uffelmann.

[2] My analysis is limited to Thomas Bernhard's prose works (excluding the autobiographical writings) and, without any claim to completeness, addresses only a selection of texts.

[3] All quotations from Bernhard are taken from the German originals and translated by me.

[4] This contrasts with what we find in the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein introduces a technical distinction between *unsinnig* ("nonsensical") and *sinnlos* ("senseless"), TLP 1922, 4.461 ff.

[5] One of Bernhard's recurring figures is that of the heir, who continually seeks to rid himself of the burden of the property or inheritance passed down to him (*Verstörung*, *Ungenach*, *Watten*, *Korrektur*, *Beton*, *Auslöschung*, etc.).

[6] As Wittgenstein remarks: "*Knowledge* is not translated into words when it is expressed. The words are not a translation of something else that was there before they were" (Z 1967, § 191).

[7] Compare this with Conant (2001), where he distinguishes between a first movement and a second movement both in philosophy and in Kafka's stories. The first movement traces the way in which thought is drawn into illusion and conceptual confusion, while the second concerns the recovery of meaning, to be found in "the place where we already are" (682).

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