

# The Unconscionable Critic: Thomas Bernhard's *Holzfällen*

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Die Distanz ist die kürzeste.  
Thomas Bernhard, *Amras*

We give reasons because we are social animals. If we do not honor a promise or if we behave rashly towards one another, the ensuing rift can be overcome with the help of plausible explanations: I may have inflicted harm on another, yet I did so in self-defense; I may have offended my neighbor, but only because my neighbor first insulted me. The reasons we give for our anomalous behavior are tributes we pay to our interlocutors and to society at large: by justifying apparently unfair or inappropriate practices, we hope to restore social harmony. The articulation of reasons helps us re-establish, repair, and confirm relationships; it secures the future of the community despite fractures and disputes.<sup>1</sup>

By profession, the satirist is someone who constantly has to negotiate the social conventions of reason-giving. He brings ridicule and shame on others through his art, and such apparent acts of aggression stand in dire need of convincing justifications—ones that might placate the witnesses of the satirist's wit, if not its victims. Hence the satirist traditionally fashions himself a servant of the general public, a figure who assumes the role of censor out of a deep concern for common values: he is “a moral man appalled by the evil he sees around him” (Elliott 265). The satirist's aggression is not gratuitous or merely destructive; rather, it is advanced as a form of constructive critique. It must therefore be understood as an activity aiming to reform society, based on exacting standards, and ultimately carried out for the benefit of all. Satire might seem to bring nothing but trouble and thus itself be worthy of censorship or dismissal were it not for its implicit claim to serve a higher good. It legitimates itself by assuring its audience that it is driven by rightful indignation at the threat of societal corruption and degradation.

The history of satire features practitioners who nevertheless seem to have little interest in professing noble motives, in conspicuous indifference to the social costs of their attacks. Thomas Bernhard is perhaps the paradigmatic modern example of such argumentative attenuation. His texts abound with attacks on figures, behaviors, and even whole societies, and yet he often withholds any supporting reasons or measured evaluations that might facilitate our acceptance of his statements. He exposes rather than covers over the provocation of a rhetorical

assault that remains ungrounded in a generally shared repertoire of explanations and arguments.

But this does not mean that Bernhard willingly drifts off into a realm of lunacy, thereby foregoing any valid claim upon the attention of others.<sup>2</sup> Even as he makes little or no effort to mitigate the alienation of a bewildered or even outraged readership, he insists that his writing must be taken seriously as critique. Bernhard's implied claim is that critique can only be sustained as long as the author refuses to detail a coherent moral or political position available for endorsement by others. Critique is possible only insofar as it dispenses with the rationalizations that seem to legitimize it.

In this article, we shall reconstruct the curious divergence of critique and rational argument in Thomas Bernhard's relatively late novel *Holzfällen: Eine Erregung* (1984). As its subtitle intimates, it is a work of some commotion. It offers an irrepressible stream of scathing denunciations and an apparently indiscriminate rejection of the representatives of Viennese cultural life. As a consequence, the novel's appearance generated controversy, especially as the main target of its exhausting diatribes, an artistic couple by the name of Auersberger, seemed a thinly-veiled reference to a real-life couple, the Lampersbergs, literary patrons who had known the young Bernhard.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, and despite the extended assaults that verge on caricature or even insanity, *Holzfällen* assumes the form and structure of critique. A reading of the work must therefore inquire into the articulation of the jarring attack that it delivers and the critical value to which it stubbornly lays claim.

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The narrator of *Holzfällen* attends a soirée at the home of the Auersbergers, where the main topic of conversation is that evening's performance of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* at the Burgtheater. Throughout the novel, the narrator's language and behavior imply, this gathering itself doubles as a performance. For the greater part of the novel, the narrator sits alone in the dimmed hallway: he sees, but is not himself seen; he hears everything, but says nothing himself. Correspondingly, the other guests occupy a kind of performance space. While the narrator sinks back into an armchair partly tucked away behind a door in the "Halbdunkel" of the hallway and quietly observes the animated scene before him (41), the society performs as if upon a theatrical stage, the lighting and acoustics of which are said to provide the ideal conditions for observation. The narrator, silent and immobile in his armchair, assumes the role of the spectator who sits in the darkened theater and remains invisible to the actors.<sup>4</sup>

But his quiet and still demeanor does not indicate passivity: spectatorship does not necessarily imply inaction. Rather, the very conditions that make him a non-participant allow his mental activity to flourish. The narrator assumes the role of a particular kind of audience member, the critic. He does not sit in the darkness,

escaping the attention of the society of actors and avoiding interaction with them, in order to enjoy and lose himself in the spectacle, but rather because he must focus and reflect. That he sees these players as “die in Frage kommenden Gegenstände” indicates an analytical and critical approach to the scene before him. He elaborates on this critical stance when he characterizes his activity as consisting mainly of “die auersbergerischen Gäste mehr oder weniger *auseinanderzunehmen*” (83). This is precisely the method of the critic: by maintaining a degree of distance, he is able to take things apart, to dissect them, so that he can later pass judgment on them.<sup>5</sup> To cite a recent inventory of the methods and aims of critique, the “Fähigkeit zur Distanznahme” belongs to the fundamental “Bedingungen der kritischen Praxis” (Jaeggi and Wesche 9). Bernhard’s narrator admits that his evaluative methods might seem harsh and exacting: they are “skrupellos” and “rücksichtslos” in that they show no respect for their object (83). But if the narrator is a reckless critic, he is a critic nonetheless.

Critique is thus inscribed in the formal structure of Bernhard’s novel, and any discussion of it must therefore address this overt act of positioning. Yet the secondary literature has found it difficult to come to terms with its particular mode of critique, for the novel sets itself up as critical and yet, on the level of individual statements, repeatedly flouts the requirements of grounded, analytical judgment. Bernhard resolutely puts his narrator in the position of the critic, but the narrator’s unending series of agitated disparagements does not conform to an accepted standard of calm and considered assessment. In his repudiations of Vienna and its artists, for example, the narrator of *Holzfällen* forgoes argument and nuance in favor of categorical pronouncements for which he seldom offers a rationale: “alle in Wien gebliebenen sind nichts geworden, alle ins Ausland gegangenen sind etwas geworden, das darf ich ohne weiteres sagen” (98). Not only does the narrator advance an exaggerated and offensive claim about his artist friends and acquaintances, he claims for himself a kind of self-evidence that borders on maniacal overconfidence. By boldly stating that he need not justify his rather contentious claim, he presumes to excuse himself from the job of producing reasoned arguments and explanations. He seems to replace explanation with strength of conviction.

Bernhard’s narrator does not only speak of cultural matters, nor does he always express himself in categorical statements, as if we were simply confronted with the worldview of an arrogant and cantankerous critic. The contents of his long monologue are best described as ravings in which anything can become the object of the most intense revulsion. The narrator in *Holzfällen* hates, and the targets of his disgust, disdain, and revulsion are so varied that one must ask whether they are all equally deserving of his wrath. The reader is treated to a series of affect-driven rants that span the entire length of the novel, and only very rarely does the narrator make a straightforward case for his hatred by attaching examples or arguments that would enable understanding and even empathy. At

the Auersbergers' dinner, for instance, the narrator's hatred suddenly sets upon the china of the hosts, as well as the noisy munching of their guests:

Die meisten rauchten und tranken wie ich Champagner und knabberten an dem Gebäck, das die Auersberger in kleinen alten Herendschüsselchen in der ganzen Wohnung verteilt hatte, auch neben mir stand ein solches Herendschüsselchen, ich haßte aber schon immer alle Herendschüsselchen und auch alles Knabbern und knabberte nicht, habe nie eine Vorliebe für Bäckerei gehabt, schon gar nicht für Salzbäckerei und schon gar nicht für japanische Salzbäckerei, die in den letzten Jahren auch in Wien auf allen Empfänge Mode geworden ist. Eine Unverschämtheit im Grunde, sagte ich mir, die Gäste auf den Schauspieler warten zu lassen. (47–48)

In this brief (and quite simply hilarious<sup>6</sup>) sketch, we learn that the narrator hates nibblers and expensive porcelain, and his disdain for salty treats and recent trends in cordial entertaining is also made plain. One can try to insert more of an explanation into this announcement to mitigate the suspicion of the narrator's unreasonableness and tense oversensitivity to random objects and phenomena.<sup>7</sup> If he hates the Auersbergers, and the high-quality Hungarian dishware is associated with them as a part of their household, then the judgment depends on a deficiently clarified metonymy: his dislike of certain persons is expressed as a dislike of the goods they possess and the lifestyles they have adopted. The narrator's irritability keeps spilling over onto objects and actions—porcelain and munching, for example—in the vicinity of those he hates. Of course, the posh collectible china could also stand for parvenu pretense—its presence in the Auersberger household is neither accidental nor meaningless, but a symptom of their desperate wish to simulate a high-class lifestyle—and therefore becomes yet another object of contempt, one that amplifies and validates the contempt he feels for his hosts.

Yet the wish to elucidate individual judgments, to explain the supposed elisions and render the metonymies transparent, can hardly keep up with the narrator's liberal expressions of negative affect. On most pages of the novel, something or someone is harshly rejected on the basis of unbearable distaste. Delivered in a subordinate clause, for example, one finds an attack on the entire range of ambitious and traditionally respected European newspapers:

[...] ich war in dieser Traurigkeit in die Stadt gelaufen, auf den Graben, auf die Kärntnerstraße, auf den Kohlmarkt, in die Spiegelgasse in das *Bräunerhof*, wo ich, meiner jahrelangen Gewohnheit gehorchend, den *Corriere*, *Le Monde* und die *Zürcher Zeitung*, sowie die *Frankfurter* durchgeschaut habe, um dann, von diesen schamlosen Blättern angewidert, wieder auf den Graben zu gehen. (103–04)

The sharpness of this disgust cannot be directly derived from the narrator's professed mood of sadness. The ranting, unsupported by extended analysis, corroborating

verdicts, or any gesture of justification or explanation, outruns the reader's capacity for confirmation. We are not offered much opportunity to agree since the judgment itself is so hasty, severe, and devoid of context. Even in the company of like-minded individuals, we tend to offer some grounding for our claims: it is as if we want to convince not only others but also ourselves of the opinions we hold; or perhaps it is not a matter of persuasion, but rather that by offering explanations we uphold a higher standard of reasonableness. In any case, the absence of grounding or justification makes it difficult to concur with the narrator of Bernhard's story, whether or not readers are inclined to his views and opinions. The absence of "Appelle an Wertstandards" or references to a "kulturell eingespieltes Verständnis" and the concomitant disinterest in the "*rechtfertigende Kraft*" to be derived from such a shared pool of norms and conventions (Habermas 36) make the narrator seem idiosyncratic and even downright mad.

It therefore comes as no surprise that most critics of the novel describe the narrator's statements as eccentric bordering on pathological (see Naqvi 253), hysterically excessive (see Anderson), or tendentious to the point of being automatically black.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the fact that the novel employs the vocabulary and adopts the gestures of critique has prevented the very same scholars from simply writing off the narrator's ravings. Indeed, one can discern their unease at this tension between the formal structure of the novel, which suggests a critical project, and the seemingly unfounded and indiscriminate polemics delivered within this frame. Intent on dissociating themselves from the immediate indignation of many of Bernhard's contemporaries, whose susceptibility to being scandalized earned the author his reputation,<sup>9</sup> scholars set out to take seriously and to recover the substance of his critical project. When confronted with the unfairness and exaggeration of the narrator's serial condemnations, however, they are forced to locate the critique on a level other than that of individual judgments.

The predicament has generated a number of interpretive strategies. One approach is to acknowledge the "pathological and the epistemological destabilizations" of Bernhard's narrative subjects (Konzett 23) and yet to foreground recognizably respectable aspects of his work or the "least ridiculous features of his oeuvre," such as his interest in the relationship between teacher and student (Naqvi 253).<sup>10</sup> In a treatment of *Holzfällen*, Matthias Konzett attributes to Bernhard a "stubborn belief in the cultural critic" as a figure moving between and hence uniting "subjective sentiment and objective reasoning" (27).<sup>11</sup> However, his interpretation is devoid of examples of such reasoning, suggesting that the drive to elucidate a coherent critical position resides more in the interpretation than in the text. The reading ultimately cannot resolve the contradiction between the narrator's supposed commitment to the restoration of an unmistakably Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, which could serve as a vantage point from which to criticize conditions and habits in contemporary Austria, with the attitude of the absolutely unappeasable narrator.

Rather than insisting on a previously neglected and, indeed, fairly obscured project of edification in Bernhard, other commentators have concentrated on the unusual impact of the style itself as a “relentless *Redefluss*,” all the while admitting its idiosyncrasy or even its tendency toward madness (Anderson 133). No matter how “distant the protagonist may seem from the common realm of experience,” the cumulative effect of his statements still manages to hold the reader’s attention (132–33). What is compelling about this prose is therefore “the mode of Bernhard’s utterance, rather than this or that particular content” (133).<sup>12</sup> Writing on the musicality of Bernhard’s prose, Gregor Hens suggests that readers should not pay unnecessary attention to the novel’s thematic content: “Gesten, Wörter und ganze Sätze werden auf ihre rhythmischen und klanglichen Aspekte reduziert” (116). This reading grants Bernhard’s novels a suggestive effect that may force the reader to confront his bleak landscape of human ugliness and stupidity. But since this is a performative effect that derives from a concatenation of judgments whose individual substance may remain outrageous and tendentious, it is unclear if the texts deserve the name “critique.”

As the unease of the secondary literature suggests, the supply of argument and explanation in *Holzfällen* is too scarce to effectively transform the repeated affective outbursts (hatred, disgust, disdain) into comprehensible and legitimate indignation. Bernhard’s novel seems to want to bring together critique and wild displays of affect, but it does not succeed—or cannot even hope to succeed—in coordinating the constant uproar with acceptable claims to moral rectitude. Instead, the seemingly unbridled presentation of affect continually threatens to eclipse the critical project inscribed in the narrative. In its sheer obstinacy, however, Bernhard’s novel challenges us to read his categorical judgments and expressions of hatred and revulsion as vehicles of, rather than obstacles to, the effort of critique. The task is precisely not to downplay the narrator’s totalizing expressions of negative feeling in an attempt to recover the novel’s critical project, nor only to engage with their suggestive, if unspecific, cumulative impact, but to find some way to reconcile these two observations about Bernhard’s work.<sup>13</sup> The novel is not critical despite its persistent affective flourishes, but rather practices its critique through affect. It is, one could say, far too insistent on both critique and affect to allow the reader to focus on one at the expense of the other. We can only resolve the situation by formulating their integral relationship.<sup>14</sup>

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In Bernhard’s novel, the carefully delineated position of the critic is occupied by a figure that takes no care to meet the standards usually associated with critique. To understand this conundrum, one must attend to the peculiarly transitional conditions of enunciation that the novel constructs for itself. *Holzfällen* opens with a quotation from Voltaire: “Da ich nun einmal nicht imstande war, die

Menschen vernünftiger zu machen, war ich lieber fern von ihnen glücklich” (7). Admitting, perhaps with a note of lament, his inability to make those around him “vernünftig”—to stimulate their critical faculties, to encourage them to think reasonably and fairly—Voltaire’s remaining option is to take leave. This quotation seems to capture the exemplary Enlightenment critic in a somewhat uncharacteristic moment, namely, when he acknowledges that the endeavor to spread reason may have been a futile enterprise. The epigraph indeed traces a past trajectory of disappointment: people have proven impervious to edification and, since the struggle to make them more reasonable will only lead to frustration, it is better (or at least less aggravating) to simply depart from the human community. Voltaire explains a shift from voiced critique to mere exit.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the epigraph itself, the recapitulation of a decision to choose disconnection over continued engagement, a decision made in the past and no longer subject to revision, paradoxically constitutes an act of communication. The utterance itself is neither a future-oriented, traditional Enlightenment attempt to make people “vernünftiger” nor is it mere silence and withdrawal: instead, the statement explains the motivation behind past surrender. We read the words of someone who has temporarily returned to language, but only to produce a single matter-of-fact statement that recalls the obstacle that made him choose exile in the first place. In fact, the line uttered represents neither the option of voiced critique nor the option of exit—or at least not in any clear-cut way. It is the retrospective explication (which is to say, the vocalization) of why exit was to be preferred and voice had to be abandoned, and thus signifies a last and tenuous tie to the humanity he has just rejected.<sup>16</sup>

This brief epigraph, we submit, delineates the position of the narrator whose monologue dominates *Holzfällen*. The narrator is anything but silent, and yet his inner speech does not represent a sustained will to influence or impress others. It is rather presented as an extended prelude to another exit, which, at the moment this prelude is put into circulation, will already have taken place. In a number of ways, *Holzfällen* occupies the moment just prior to departure: it prepares the act of leave-taking. To begin with, Bernhard’s protagonist has returned to Vienna and to the Auersberger residence after having spent decades abroad, but he has no intention to remain—not in the city and certainly not in the salon of his one-time benefactors. The return does not indicate that he is determined to take up the cause of reform and education, to try to stimulate critical thinking, as if he had convinced himself anew of people’s receptiveness to reason. He has no missionary or pedagogical ambitions; he is neither a messenger of truth nor the prophet who has re-emerged from contemplation in solitude to bring light to mankind.<sup>17</sup> If anything, he has simply walked into a trap, a “Falle”: while strolling about “auf dem Graben” in Vienna, he finds himself unable to decline an invitation extended to him (21). He commits a grave mistake: he embraces, rather than rejects, the Auersbergers’ impromptu (and perhaps disingenuous) gesture of friendliness.

The novel depicts a return, but one that is repeatedly described as momentary, unconsidered, and erroneous.

Thus, while the narrator's return puts a temporary end to his departure from the social and cultural milieu of his youth, his long speech repeatedly describes the stupidity of this act and announces an impending resumption of exile. Symptomatically, the very first sentence of the monologue is a statement of regret:

Während alle auf den Schauspieler warteten, der ihnen versprochen hatte, nach der Aufführung der *Wildente* gegen halbzwölf zu ihrem Abendessen in die Gentzgasse zu kommen, beobachtete ich die Eheleute Auersberger genau von jenem Ohrensessel aus, in welchem ich in den frühen Fünfzigerjahren beinahe täglich gesessen war und dachte, daß es ein gravierender Fehler gewesen ist, die Einladung der Auersberger anzunehmen. (7)

To accept interaction is, from the outset, coded as a mistake and nothing that happens during the soirée will really affect his attitude. The narrator will not try to reform his hosts and fellow guests, nor will he allow himself to be susceptible to their ideas and actions.

In a sense, the narrator has come back to do nothing more than prepare the way for yet another act of self-removal: while his voiced critique seems to predominate Bernhard's text, the work's plot centers around a process of delayed exiting. *Holzfällen* is filled with the narrator's own questions as to why he has re-entered a society he despises,<sup>18</sup> stories of self-imposed acts of disengagement,<sup>19</sup> invocations of other places where he was happier,<sup>20</sup> and endless statements of self-reproach at his participation in the social event. In other words, Bernhard's protagonist does not engage in criticism of the scene he observes if criticism equals a desire to reform, to identify failures and flaws with the intention to improve the state of things. The monologue is delivered by someone on the verge of leaving, someone who has already given up on others and the general state of things. To put the point somewhat differently, it is composed by a person who has finally managed to untangle himself from a society he despises and submits his record of how this exit came about. Despite its length, the text describes nothing but the moment prior to departure. The voice that articulates its innumerable but indiscriminate complaints only spells out the necessity of its imminent self-cancellation and reaches us as a final testimony of frustration and disgust. We may feel that the concatenation of judgments that makes up this testimony is unfair or ungrounded, but it does not represent a contribution to an exchange that is expected to continue. The narrator does not threaten us with a possible future departure in order to boost his bargaining power in a negotiation over how best to live and conduct relationships; he is already beyond any such negotiation.

The fact that the monologue is spoken immediately prior to departure may explain its peculiar urgency, as well as its strange freedom from the conventions

that govern the society in which the speaker undeniably participates, even if regretfully and fleetingly. If critique is traditionally understood as communication for the purpose of enlightenment and future improvement, then the narrator has indeed abandoned any critical ambitions. Reasons for departure are everywhere on display, but they are declared rather than explained: most obviously, the narrator loathes the Auersbergers, a couple presented throughout as the “Verachteten und Gehaßten” (140); this is a hatred that irrationally extends to everything that relates to them in any way (“Haß gegen alles sie Betreffende” [76]), so constant and intense as to inspire a new concept altogether—what the narrator calls “*Auersbergerhaß*” (318). This unbridled venting does not simply explain why he feels he must leave; its excessive character is itself also a testimony to his separation. The narrator is on his way out of society, and his temporary presence is not reason enough for him to bow to its discursive conventions. The pronounced defiance of expected forms of critique and evaluation is an extended and elaborate way of saying: “I have already departed from your company.”

At this point, it is possible to draw together various observations and comments we have made about *Holzfällen*. Bernhard’s protagonist is not concerned with making others more rational or fair in the manner of an Enlightenment critic and he makes no effort to appear reasonable to others. He is neither out to impose standards on others (as Voltaire presumably was, prior to his disappointment) nor to submit to standards already established within the greater community. The unencumbered bitterness of his monologue, defined as it is by repeated declarations of strong affect, indicates that he no longer wants to participate in the Viennese society of artists and patrons. He is not an idealistic and demanding member of this community disappointed at its current state but ultimately committed to improving it or, at least, salvaging his place within it. He has, instead, given up on community, and if he is still around, it is merely due to a momentary inertia. In unrestrained language, he states his desire to leave (which he also does at the end), and any attempt to dress this intention in reasonableness runs counter to his impulse of flight.<sup>21</sup>

Reasonableness is a medium for transactions within a community, including the conduct of disputes; to abandon this standard of good sense is to exit the community. The narrator in *Holzfällen* enacts a discursive departure from Viennese society, which accords with his terminal act of physical leave-taking. He may cite causes for departure—his pervasive hatred of Vienna and of the Auersbergers as the prime representatives of that city—but he does so not out of some obligation to uphold the conventions of pedagogical explanation, the adherence to which would secure his continued membership in precisely that community. He has shed the desire to provide comprehensible reasons for his attacks; he no longer performs the duties of a reason-giving and thus social animal. He is, in short, a defector; insofar as he speaks, he articulates and performs his defection. The novel as a whole is an elaboration of the structure of enunciation indicated in the

motto from Voltaire: however loud and lengthy, it is written as the final statement of someone who has already taken his final leave.

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In the context of a discussion of voice and exit, the esteemed actor who attends the soirée after his performance at the Burgtheater mirrors and clarifies the peculiar border position of the narrator. From the very beginning, we are informed that the guests gathering at the Auersbergers' residence are waiting for the appearance of the thespian and that this anticipation drags on for so long that the guests become alternatively insulted or irritated. The parallel to the narrator's situation is unmistakable. Just as the narrator's speech takes place in a protracted moment prior to departure, the people convening at the Auersbergers' home are waiting for a person who has not yet arrived. (The sardonic undertones of messianic anticipation are legible throughout: of course, the society of which Bernhard writes has erroneously set its hopes on a false idol.) The novel thus occupies a kind of prolonged moment of waiting and generates a curious climate of "not yet." Taken together, the impending arrival of the actor and the impending self-removal of the narrator circumscribe a space of multiple transitions, soon to be visited and soon to be vacated.

The waiting does come to an end in the course of the novel, though rather close to its end. When the "Burgschauspieler" finally enters the scene, he appears as the narrator's double. He too has a predilection for extended speeches and a tendency to berate others. In the case of the actor, however, the scathing denunciations seem to lie within the realm of possible explication. Indeed, the narrator himself explains the grounds for the actor's views, as if to emphasize the actor's effective participation in the social conventions of discursive exchange. The narrator notes the actor's preference for forceful words such as "*niederträchtig, gemein, unbotmäßig, verlogen, infam, Größenwahnsinnig, dumm*" (295–96), designations with which one can attract, or rather violently provoke, attention and which seem to mimic the narrator's own pronouncements. But when hearing these words, the narrator assumes that they are a response to abuse that the actor has himself suffered—otherwise, how could one make sense of his response? He posits, for example, that the despicable and mean Jeannie Billroth must have continually tried to upset the celebrated actor, "denn sonst wäre ja dieses geradezu explosive Aufbrausen des Burgschauspielers nicht verständlich gewesen" (300). Indeed, on the basis of such assumed legitimacy of a verbal attack, one can even come to enjoy it as an execution of justice, for one derives pleasure from the spectacle of a bad person forced to suffer for his or her deeds: "Wir empfinden großen Genuß," the narrator states, "wenn wir glauben, einem Menschen widerfährt sozusagen Gerechtigkeit, indem ihm seine eigene Niedertracht und seine eigene Schamlosigkeit und seine eigene Stumpsinnigkeit und Inkompetenz vorgehalten werden" (298). The narrator thus affirms, and perhaps even relishes, the actor's

affective pronouncements, but only after filling them out with good reasons and transparent background stories that allow him to enjoy the execution of justice in the medium of vituperative speech.

The words of the actor provide the narrator with the occasion to outline a minimal theory of satirical speech. The force of the verbal attack first grabs people's attention; it then becomes intelligible to them as a justifiable reaction to previous sufferings and, as such, it can even bring pleasure, as one feels "Genuß" at the spectacle of "Gerechtigkeit." The punishment of wrongdoings is "accompanied by pleasure" (Nussbaum 243). Yet to recognize and outline the mechanisms of satirical critique is not necessarily to abide by and enact them. Faced with the tirades of the "Burgschauspieler," the narrator is inspired to reflect on a critical form that he himself does not actually embrace. The narrator's commentary on something like the practice of satire, which takes the form of an interpretation of the actor's verbal gestures, also indicates that he has left behind this kind of critique. While his language is captivating—on the surface, it seems to employ a vocabulary much like the actor's—he refuses to offer anything like an intelligible case for so much agitation. By denying us the opportunity to understand the underlying reasons for his lacerating speech, he also blocks us from taking a certain kind of morally legitimate pleasure in the attack. However much the musicality and momentum of the voice draws us in and holds our attention, its unrelenting flow cannot itself generate belief in its wild claims. We can be entertained and moved, even fascinated and mesmerized, but we are not convinced of its validity. To speak in the strongest of terms is not to persuade: exaggeration is not in itself argument. Indeed, it is doubtful if any reader, no matter how eager to piece together the fragmentary evidence of the Auersbergers' supposed depravity into a consistent picture, has ever been or ever will be able to join in the narrator's hatred and, through this participation, come to enjoy the execution of justice.

This must not be viewed as a failure on the part of the narrator, but as crucial to the particular kind of critical project he undertakes. By abandoning the task of persuasion, the narrator eludes any wish of his audience to side with him. His implicit message seems to be: "my thoughts cannot be endorsed, my words cannot be co-opted. If you cannot agree with me, you cannot approach me." By means of this strategy, the narrator also robs us of any possible pleasure we might derive from participation in a righteous project. His disinterest in appearing righteous to others prevents us from indulging in the self-righteousness that is the precondition of our pleasure. By establishing his isolation, the narrator eliminates the potentially self-congratulatory element of participation in a project of critique.

The narrator of *Holzfällen* can be said to protect the loneliness of his voice. Above all, it is a voice that produces and maintains its separateness, despite its seductive, maelstrom-like qualities. Its affective onslaught will necessarily frustrate the reader whose impulse is to join the narrator's side as a moral or social

being and, by means of this identification, feel the “Genuß” of just revenge and righted wrongs.<sup>22</sup> Bernhard, in other words, does not permit his narrator to be a leader, to have a following, to be in some way or another “inspirational.” Those readers who do seek to align themselves with the narrator and join him in his rants are at the very least blocked from feeling sanctimonious about their support. More generally, Bernhard may very well have had thousands of fans, but total adulation is not the same as agreement. Indeed, the committed supporters and legions of imitators are bound to appear just as unreasonable as he. Bernhard represents a curious case of someone who is deeply, even obsessively, concerned with a final expression of critique, but lacks any desire to win his audience over.

We have suggested that the narrator’s conspicuous indifference to persuasion represents an alternative form, rather than a failure, of critique. The narrator clearly does fail to fulfill a critical project, if critique must involve the expression of judgments and beliefs that offer opportunities for rational agreement. But it is possible that he is engaged in a form of critique whose very condition is the maintenance of separation: it produces an un-endorsable position, a speech without any platform. Such critique is, quite literally, disagreeable. In its blatant and numerous displays of unreasonableness, the novel implicitly posits the distinct nature of two activities: that of exercising critique and that of building alliances. The more one wants to propagate a set agenda, the less one wants to offend the sensibilities of prospective allies; one must pay them respect in the currency of reasons, evidence, or gripping stories of harm. Yet in *Holzfällen*, the narrator’s strategy is not to embrace as large an audience as possible in order to gain general support for his ideas. And if this severe critic were to succeed in convincing others of his righteousness, critique itself would cease and the critic turn into a pioneer, guru, or leader. Bernhard instead seeks to preserve the position of the critic, and does so by maintaining the separation from the reader. To formulate the matter according to our spatial metaphor, *Holzfällen* defines critique as “Distanznahme”: it champions the means of critique—relative separation from the life of the community—at the expense of the supposed aim of critique, namely, the eventual reform or change of that community.<sup>23</sup>

Bernhard’s *Holzfällen* thus sketches out a topography of critique.<sup>24</sup> As the novel itself makes abundantly clear, critique requires a certain degree of non-involvement and distance. The critic removes himself from the scene of action in order to concentrate on others who continue to act; he even loosens his bonds to others in order to achieve independence from their immediate concerns and interests. Yet the distance that is a prerequisite of critique does not generally develop into permanent exile: the critic only removes himself in order to reinsert himself. Sooner or later, he returns to speak about what he has witnessed from a distance, to point out the flaws and the wrongs, and initiate a process of change. In some sense, he remains loyal to society. In *Holzfällen*, this situation is pushed to its limit: the novel presents itself as written from the position of resumed exile. The

account of the soirée thus emerges from a position beyond society: the narrator only abandons his émigré life temporarily, remains detached and dismissive during his brief and unplanned stay,<sup>25</sup> and quickly disappears again to write up his retort. To understand the conspicuous absence of comprehensible reasons for anger and aversion, one must attend to these carefully outlined conditions of enunciation: *Holzfällen* is a lengthy, maniacal statement by a critic who does not intend to return to or intervene in society and hence feels no pressure to persuade its members of his grievances and his cause. The entire novel is written from a peculiar position at the outer limits of communication; it does represent a lingering tie to social discourse, but only in the most attenuated form. Bernhard's narrator has not let go of language, though he has fully rejected society's guidelines for legitimate critique.

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Bernhard's novel is spoken from a position of extreme critical distance—so distant that it can only be followed by total disengagement. The narrator of *Holzfällen* has given up: on the Auersbergers, on Vienna, and on artistic community. This is why he can hate them severely but harbor no desire to improve them. *Er ist lieber fern von ihnen glücklich.*

And so, at the end of the novel, in a pitch of excited rage, the narrator finally leaves the gathering and runs home in order to write about the events of the evening:

[...] ich lief und lief und dachte, ich werde *sofort* über dieses sogenannte *künstlerische Abendessen* in der Gentzgasse schreiben, egal was, nur *gleich* und *sofort* über dieses *künstlerische Abendessen* in der Gentzgasse schreiben, *sofort*, dachte ich, *gleich* immer wieder, durch die Innere Stadt laufend, *gleich* und *sofort* und *gleich* und *gleich*, bevor es zu spät ist. (321)

The narrator leaves the salon in order to write his final statement, the declaration of his leave-taking. If critique always involves engagement on some level, here it has truly achieved its most tenuous form: a novel-length version of the statement "I have given up on you." And yet, when he leaves the soirée, the narrator does not immediately return to his home, but instead veers towards the inner city without a clear sense of his own motivation for doing so:

[...] ich lief durch die Gassen, als wäre ich einem Alptraum davongelaufen, schneller und schneller in die Innere Stadt hinein und ich wußte, während ich lief, nicht, warum in die Innere Stadt hinein, während ich doch genau in die der Inneren Stadt entgegengesetzte Richtung hätte laufen sollen, wenn ich nachhause wollte, aber wahrscheinlich wollte ich jetzt gar nicht nachhause. (319)

Only many relative clauses later, but within the same sentence, does he discover and articulate the probable reason for his detour:

[...] ich [...] dachte während des Laufens, daß diese Stadt, durch die ich laufe, so entsetzlich ich sie immer empfinde, immer empfunden habe, für mich doch die beste Stadt ist, dieses verhaßte, mir immer verhaßt gewesene Wien, mir auf einmal jetzt wieder doch das beste, mein bestes Wien ist und daß diese Menschen, die ich immer gehaßt habe und die ich hasse und die ich immer hassen werde, doch die besten Menschen sind, daß ich sie hasse, aber daß sie rührend sind, daß ich Wien hasse und daß es doch rührend ist, daß ich diese Menschen verfluche und doch lieben muß. (320–21)

This declaration of love in the novel's final, breathless, four-page-long sentence—indeed, near the end of this marathon syntactical stretch—seems to contradict the spirit of the work. Why is hate suddenly mingled with love? The answer is that a declaration of love is required to finish the story. If the novel is written from a position of distance and sustains itself as a vastly extended pronouncement of defiance of and indifference to the values of society, then it can only end with a decisive collapsing of this distance. As a critical novel, *Holzfällen* consists of the lengthy rambling speech of a critic whose role is defined by unswerving hate; this means that the novel can only be brought to a close when the narrator abdicates the role of the critic by realizing and admitting love. When the narrator ceases to be a critic and confesses his love, the critical novel is over. Love comes at the end of this spiteful novel because love ends the hate that kept the text moving forward.

Yes, the narrator loves Vienna *at the very end*, but that does not mean that the novel as a whole loves Vienna. The confession of love is in fact something of a formal necessity: like the hatred that fills page after page of the novel, this suddenly discovered love is less a feeling than a logical conclusion. Just as we cannot treat the narrator's hateful tirades as stylistic flourish, we should not diminish the importance of his final declaration of love. But this does not mean we must treat it like a heartfelt feeling. Love is a narrative necessity. By collapsing the distance the novel has tirelessly maintained, love allows the narrator's raging speech to come to a close and the novel to begin.

## Notes

1. This is the central thesis of the sociologist Charles Tilly's slender book on the social practice of giving reasons, *Why?*

2. On the basis of his empirical study of citizens' judgments of public complaints concerning economic distribution and social recognition, the French sociologist Luc Boltanski has argued that people typically label criticisms as either "normal" or "deviant." The latter includes claims that do not adhere to a conventional format or address familiar types of grievances (see Boltanski 255–356). It follows that one way of dealing with publicly articulated complaints is to dismiss them as abnormal. In other words, attribution of pathology is a method of neutralizing critique.

3. For a review of the scandal around the publication of *Holzfällen* and the defamation suit initiated against Bernhard and the Suhrkamp publishing house, see Schindlecker. Jonathan Long provides ample evidence for his claim that *Holzfällen* is “the most autobiographical” of Bernhard’s novels: a number of figures who appear in the text can be tied to Bernhard’s actual (former!) friends, supporters, and colleagues (146).

4. For more on the theatrical situation presented in *Holzfällen*, see Hens 89 and 96.

5. In his article on *Holzfällen*, Gerhard Pail observes the narrator’s craving for distance. Pail first characterizes the narrator as someone who delivers a “Bewertung” of life (51). To get a grip on his milieu, and even his past self, in order to formulate evaluative judgments, however, this narrator needs to extricate himself from the social world and maintain his independence from it. Pail speaks of the “Entwicklung des beobachtenden Ichs, das Distanz und Unabhängigkeit voraussetzt” (61). Pail adds that the narrator only joins the soirée because of a momentary “Verlust der Distanz” to the society he despises (60).

6. A proper treatment of the topic of comedy in *Holzfällen* would require a separate essay. The excessive statements on minute details (such as a particular kind of salty treats) may be extremely funny to many, but it is not so easy to declare the entire novel a joking text. More specifically, the observation that the text is humorous does not necessarily clarify or stabilize the narrator-reader relationship as one of happy collusion between a teller and the audience of a joke. Are we supposed to laugh with the narrator at the pathetic Auersbergers or laugh at the irrational hyperbole of the narrator himself? And if the narrator is prone to irrational statements, are we supposed to take pleasure in his intentional funniness or consider him a disturbing madman? Susan Purdie has argued that “[b]ehavior which is ‘mad’ and behavior which is funny are definitionally alike” since they both involve people who “do not make proper sense in or of the world” (84).

7. We cannot with argumentative means *persuade* anyone else to have the same immediate, visceral responses that we do; hence they are bound to remain intensely personal. For a reflection on the relationship between idiosyncrasy and critique in light of the widespread “erkenntnistheoretische Mißtrauen gegen die Kontingenz unserer Neigungen” (19), see Bovenschen’s introduction to *Über-Empfindlichkeit*. Impenetrably idiosyncratic reactions elude even the most charitable attempts to interpret them as rationally intelligible criticisms of society.

8. “Automatically black” is the literary critic George Steiner’s phrase, quoted in Anderson 132.

9. Schindlecker (see note 3) mentions the journalist Hans Haider, who reviewed *Holzfällen* for *Die Presse*, and the artists H. C. Artmann and Peter Turrini.

10. Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler proposes a similar course of interpretation in his programmatic introduction to an anthology on Bernhard’s alleged misanthropy. Bernhard’s work, he argues, must be viewed as a form of serious social critique and, as such, it deserves a differentiated analysis. His texts may contain a stream of exaggerated statements, and yet the reader is still obliged to reflect upon the problematic (Austrian) reality these statements make visible: “In Bernhards Werk ‘klare Definition’ zu finden, wird wohl niemand zu behaupten wagen; doch stellen die pauschalierenden Verdammungsurteile seiner Rede immanent die Forderung, die Gültigkeit des durch Übertreibung zur Kenntlichkeit Gebrachten nachzuprüfen” (11).

11. Konzett ties Bernhard’s “cultural critic” to the notion of a public sphere and thereby implies a historical model for the protagonist, namely, the man of letters in the bourgeois age. As a *primus inter pares* among educated lay readers, the bourgeois critic combines aesthetic sensitivity and reasoning skills to produce judgments with the aim of achieving a consensus with his peers. In a dense article on the misanthrope, Juliane Vogel shows why this might not be the right context in which to consider Bernhard’s monomaniacal

hatters. She suggests that the endless rambling of Bernhard's narrators places them in a tradition of deposed rulers (together with, for instance, Shakespeare's Timon of Athens) who do not accept their position in a flattened social landscape and endlessly lament their own marginalization: "Die misanthropische Rede ist Begleiterscheinung und Vehikel eines mehr oder weniger belanglosen Überlebens" (161–62). The misanthrope is a removed regent who remains the "Alleinherrscher" only in the complete isolation of his cell (162). Both Vogel's and Konzett's historical frames seem somewhat unsuitable to *Holzfällen*. As we will discuss in detail, Bernhard cites Voltaire and chooses to represent the narrator as critic, yet one who has abandoned the ethos of tempered conversation and the project of Enlightenment edification. Like Konzett, we see the narrator as critic, but, like Vogel, as one who speaks from beyond the moment of his departure or demise.

12. Ferdinand van Ingen applies rhetorical categories to Bernhard's text to argue that the author is a practitioner of the "Kunst der Invektive" and that *Holzfällen* belongs to the fully established genre of "Schmährede" (262–63). The unceasing abuse, van Ingen concludes, follows a venerable generic pattern codified by rhetoricians such as Quintilian. However, he too must finally admit that "affektive Überwältigung" trumps any attempt at "rationaler Wahrheitsfindung" in the novel (275). Rhetoric, then, is completely divorced from logic: "es wird nicht logisch, sondern rhetorisch argumentiert" (276).

13. The social theorist Axel Honneth has addressed a similar issue in his writings on prominent cultural critics of the twentieth century and argued for "Idiosynkrasie" as a legitimate "Erkenntnismittel" (61). Honneth states that radical critique cannot adhere to the constraining conventions of public discourse in a given society but instead unsettles the very rules of that discourse. However, it does so at the cost of immediate comprehensibility: such critique cannot generate "argumentative Überzeugung im Augenblick" and frequently comes across as strange and exaggerated (72). In this situation, the critic is forced to rely on rhetorical (rather than argumentative) powers to undermine long-term acceptance of the ordinary world: with the "kunstfertige Einsatz von Übertreibungen," the critic can hope to show current institutions in a "grelles, bizarres Licht" (75–76). As samples of such rhetorical feats, Honneth mentions a series of paradoxical formulas coined by Frankfurt School thinkers, e.g., "Kulturindustrie" (Adorno and Horkheimer), "repressive tolerance" (Marcuse), and "Kolonisierung der Lebenswelt" (Habermas). Despite the fact that Honneth connects radical critique and hyperbole, his description does not quite fit Bernhard's project in *Holzfällen*, for the critics Honneth invokes do have an agenda of some kind and are able to condense these agendas into statements. While their "Bloßstellung fragwürdiger Sozialpraktiken" such as market dominance in the realm of culture is not immediately absorbed by the reading public (72), they aim for and sometimes achieve a less tangible but nonetheless significant long-term "Orientierungswandel" (79). Over a longer period, then, their initially alien thoughts become a new standard. The difference with Bernhard is that no such thoughts or formulas with potential long-term impact are presented, but only ungrounded claims and declarations of strong affect.

14. Of course, for conservatively minded commentators and theorists who dispute the societal need for critical intellectuals, the paradox of Bernhard's unity of affect-driven diatribes and analytical critique can be easily dissolved: all intellectuals are mad. In the early 1960s, the sociologist Arnold Gehlen argued that increasing specialization and access to opaque masses of information in the modern period have resulted in disorientation among literati, who typically lack technical expertise and the capacity to intervene effectively in the practical world of political governance, industry, and commerce. In this situation of isolation and chronic "Überforderung," such literati come to lead lives of "Groll und Unzufriedenheit" (257, 255). Bitterness and resentment are the basic traits of *all* critical intellectuals, and their critique is hardly ever more than an expression of personal

dissatisfaction, despite their own attempts to dress up their anger as general theories. According to this skeptical view, Bernhard's narrator represents the truth of the intellectual.

15. For the distinction between voiced protests submitted to a leadership or the general public, on the one hand, and departure, on the other, see Hirschman. According to the economist Hirschman, people who are dissatisfied with a particular organization (a firm, a party, a family) can either speak up or leave—these are the two possible avenues of critique vis-à-vis a collective entity.

16. In his monumental work on Rousseau, Jean Starobinski notes a similar dynamic at work in Rousseau's authorship. Rousseau can neither forgive society for its pervasive deceptiveness nor leave it behind entirely. This paradox is inscribed and enacted in his writings: even the most total negation of society still prolongs contact with it, insofar as its members remain the addressees or objects of his diatribes. The loneliness Rousseau exhibits can therefore never become complete (49–63). As the author Tim Parks puts it in a recent review of an English translation of Bernhard's *Frost*, in Bernhard's writings, "the very act of expression runs contrary to his obsessive drive toward a superior isolation" (49).

17. Again, Starobinski's portrait of Rousseau provides a useful point of comparison. Rousseau breaks free from society and seeks solitude in unspoiled nature where he is no longer moved by socially generated and, therefore, artificial needs and desires. Yet this trajectory finally leads back into society, for Rousseau soon assumes the role of a prophet who speaks truth to a corrupted humanity. Loneliness is only a stage in the path of the righteous truth-teller (49–63).

18. Sitting in the armchair at the soirée, the narrator ponders his re-entry: "Was suche ich in dieser Gesellschaft, mit der ich seit zwanzig Jahren keinen Kontakt mehr gehabt habe, zu welcher ich seit zwanzig Jahren keinen Kontakt haben wollte, und die ihren Weg gegangen ist, wie ich den meinigen? sagte ich mir auf den Ohrensessel" (139–40).

19. Speaking of his attendance at an exasperating funeral dinner, for instance, Bernhard's narrator reports, "Nein, hatte ich noch im Aufspringen gedacht, mit dieser Gesellschaft will ich nichts zu tun haben" (120).

20. The narrator posits London as a pole to Vienna, which does not mean that he offers a more concrete idea what distance to the Austrian capital would entail. Instead, he offers his judgment in binary terms: he tells himself, "daß mir London immer Glück, Wien aber immer Unglück gebracht hat" (320). London, one could say, is neither a worked-out program or ideology nor is it a full-fledged experience; rather, it is a "not-Vienna."

21. In his study of Roman verse satire, Kirk Freudenburg explores the relationship between free (and aggressive) public speech and the speaker's social standing. An outcast can speak in an unrestrained manner (at the price, of course, of remaining an outcast), and a highly influential man also enjoys the privilege of speaking freely (precisely because he is influential): "The speaker's habits of criticism are a condition of the social position he occupies" (24). In *Holzfällen*, the narrator tries to delineate a (non-)social position that would allow him to speak in an unrestricted way.

22. Strong affects are not necessarily barred from political and social discourse. Philip Fisher reminds us in his book *The Vehement Passions* that anger has been viewed as an entirely legitimate response to gross injustice in the tradition of political thought (175), yet it must be directed at the right people at the right time. As Sianne Ngai comments in her book on minor and marginal negative affects, *Ugly Feelings*, the champions of anger (among them Aristotle) presuppose a kind "proportionality and correctness" without which the affect will be perceived as misplaced, inadequate, and exaggerated (182).

23. Richard Rorty has suggested that people committed to change and reform should jump the process of vocalized critique and get right to the presentation of superior

alternatives: “the best way to expose or demystify an existing practice would seem to be by suggesting an alternative practice, rather than criticizing the current one” (227). Bernhard’s narrator in *Holzfällen* occupies an antithetical position: he willingly lets go of any notion of an “alternative practice” precisely in order to maintain critique.

24. One could refer to numerous other passages in the novel to support this point. For example, the narrator engages in an extended reflection on Vienna and London (see note 20) while he is running, nervously and frantically, to the center of the city. In other words, at the same time that he undertakes an act of mental distancing and makes his last preparations for departure, he races uncontrollably to Vienna’s “Innenstadt.” This passage, like others, suggests that, while the narrator’s critique cannot be rationalized or legitimated, it can be analyzed topographically, so to speak.

25. The narrator claims that he avoids all conversational contact during the soirée: “die Leute erkannten mich in der Vorzimmerdüsternis, sie wollten ein Gespräch mit mir anfangen, ich aber wiegelte alles sofort ab, indem ich ganz einfach im Ohrensessel sitzen blieb und so tat, als verstünde ich nicht, was sie zu mir sagten, auch genau in dem entscheidenden Augenblick zu Boden schaute und nicht in ihr Gesicht, an diesem Abend ganz einfach so tat, als wäre ich tatsächlich noch vollkommen von dem Selbstmord der Joana beherrscht, agierte in einer erfolversprechenden Geistesabwesenheit auf dem Ohrensessel immer dann, wenn Gefahr bestand, einer der Gäste könne auf die Idee kommen, mir Gesellschaft zu leisten, was ich an diesem Abend unter allen Umständen zu verhindern versuchte” (43–44).

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