

Thomas Bernhard (1978)

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WHEN, JUST over a month ago, Thomas Bernhard's last play, *Immanuel Kant*, premiered in Stuttgart—a play in which the philosopher from Königsberg, accompanied by a servant, a parrot, and his wife, undertakes a long, long sea voyage to New York—most German critics, apparently still unaccustomed to the Austrian writer's subtle, intelligent sense of humor, asked sadly why Bernhard had picked on Kant in particular; after all, Kant never left his native city, never married, and what's more—as one very well-informed journalist from Baden-Württemberg pointed out—he had always loathed animals. It seems that the first two volumes of Bernhard's chilling autobiography, entitled *An Indication of the Cause* and *The Cellar*, met with the same degree of suspicion, bewilderment, and alarm. And yet Bernhard not only won both of Austria's most important literary prizes, he also won the Georg Büchner Prize, one of the most prestigious and sought-after literary awards in Germany. This leads one to think that, however lacking in insight in certain areas and however commonsensical their humor, the Germans can at least recognize a great writer when they see one.

That Bernhard is a great writer is the only possible conclusion one can draw after reading *Gargoyles*. Both the story and what those readers who always want to reduce literature down to something tangible would call its message are very simple. The narrator accompanies his father, an old country doctor, on the daily round of visits in the area where his father has practiced for years: a grim, dark, gloomy, desolate valley in Austria. As father and son do the rounds, the various patients, who appear initially to be suffering from merely physical ailments, gradually come to be seen through the lens of their particular affliction (and of that whole fragmented, mutually unsupportive community reluctantly united by illness) as something more than just normal patients. Behind the veil or pretext of their physical ailments, we slowly begin to see in the cripples and the terminally ill, the alcoholics and the layabouts, the dead and the dying who people the novel, a kind of primordial disturbance or disruption or disorder (the title in German is *Verstörung*) not so much psychological as metaphysical. This sense, which is hinted at in the first half of the book, takes on definite shape—is subtly made flesh—in the second half, which consists entirely of the long, magnificent peroration (it takes up one hundred

and thirty pages) addressed to the doctor and his son by the last patient, Prince Saurau, who lives in an old palace overlooking the valley. Throughout that whole marvelous soliloquy of reasoned unreason, you can feel the growing sense of dread felt by both narrator and reader: there is no such thing as a purely physical illness; indeed the origin of all ailments (and, therefore, the sole primordial ill common to all humankind) is none other than language itself and, consequently, thought.

Bernhard never says so explicitly (he is a true artist and not an apprentice), but what comes to mind are some of Nietzsche's later thoughts on the subject, when he wondered: Do we have any proof that happiness can be achieved through thought, through reason? Could the exact opposite be true? Could it be that what I have written, trying to distance myself from all logical discourse, trying to come as close as possible to poetry—could it be that I should simply have kept silent? Is silence the answer?

Prince Saurau talks unstopably on and on, about the divine and the human, the sacred and the profane, the dead and the living, the sublime and the ridiculous. What Bernhard does is to shy away from any position that would allow him to feel some sense of superiority, however slight, over his characters, over Prince Saurau. He avoids imposing any kind of logic on the novel—he loathes critiques or explanations—and with irony and musicality as his only baggage, he dives into the torrent of words and ideas, knowing that, as long as it lasts, the torrent will keep flowing at an insanely fast pace.

The world of Bernhard's novels is unequivocally Middle European: it is the same, ultimately, as that of Kafka, Kubin, Canetti, Walser, or Musil. What sets him apart from them is that he offers us the means of enduring the horror. This whole world is revealed in a dry, caustic, reiterative prose reminiscent of a Bach cello suite; the different themes resurface again and again as if they were the themes of a melody, alternating, combining, conversing, submitting, and negating each other. And as we know, music, the primordial art which pre-dates everything, has no need for words and eschews language. The only problem is that, after reading *Gargoyles*, you do also wonder if it is music that engenders language—and everything that is engendered has a continuing life. As Prince Saurau says at one point in his brilliant monologue: "The tragic thing, doctor, is that nothing is ever really dead." Or, in other words, the torrent will always exist. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Polk Street

I don't remember who chose the shabby tavern on Polk Street three blocks north of Market, only that we landed there afternoons after another

tedious law school class, lounging at its lacquered mahogany bar near the square, filthy, street-facing plate-glass window and its neon MILLERS sign.

There was the one ancient gimpy bartender coughing his smoker's cough in the shadows, and an erratic overhead flickering from bare-bulb fluorescents,

and liquor stocks shelved before a mirror reflecting both a second image of each bottle and our own two faces stenciled by the bar's tinselled, mirrored light.

No doubt you know a place like it. There must be a thousand places like it. But no other with my sister on the high leather stool beside me, lighting up

a mentholed Newport, sipping her vodka martini, still droll and sun-blond, fresh and wicked-clever and cocky at twenty-eight for all her weaknesses.

I'd complain about our dull professors. She would make me laugh as only she could, turning the hour privileged and superb, reducing our current troubles

to brief stations we'd glide through effortlessly together. Carolyn would do good work in the years ahead. She would draft laws still on the books

in California, and before drink took over her life she made the world better for people. For many people, those who know her work maintain.

They say you can't go back but I ask what matters more after everything that happens. My sister slips a Newport from its box. I strike a match and watch

the red glow of tobacco igniting as her cigarette nears my half-cupped hand. Fruitless maybe, yet I go back if only to save a fraction of her liveliness,

even just the match-light's flare in her face. Though doubtless she'd argue, if she could, that I also return for a last word in what became our life-long debate.

Calling for a fresh martini and swinging back my way Carolyn cheerfully tries to persuade again that nothing, not she nor I nor anything else, can be saved.

—Charles Douthat