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Pathogenic Polemics

Heldenplatz and the “Bernhard Virus”

Jack Davis

I. Introduction

In August 1988, the Viennese newspapers *Neue Kronen Zeitung* and *Die Wochenpresse* published the most inflammatory passages of a leaked script of Thomas Bernhard's play *Heldenplatz* a few weeks before its scheduled premiere. The play, which had been commissioned by Claus Peymann as part of the “*Gedenkjahr 1988*” commemorating the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany, tells the story of the Schuster family, Viennese Jews who return from their exile in England in 1988 only to find that there are now “more Nazis” in the Austrian capital than in the year of the *Anschluß* (63). The uproar that ensued in the wake of stolen text of the play could be seen as an exemplary “viral” event: not only did the medial mechanisms of scandalization make it difficult to tell the “inside” of the performance from the outside, but it also seemed that any attempt by politicians to rebut Bernhard's polemics only disseminated them further.¹ Furthermore, as if in tacit agreement with each other on the metaphorical underpinnings of the debate, media commentaries on both sides of the scandal often portrayed Bernhard's influence in biological terms, for example referring to him as a “doctor” or even “oncologist.”²

This article will argue, however, that it is fruitful to think of Bernhard's discourse as “viral” not only in the way it circulated through the media, upsetting distinctions between aesthetic categories such as “text” and “performance,” but also within the purview of the historical context central to the play itself: the memory of the Nazi past. As Jennifer Kapczynski has demonstrated in a different context, the figure of National Socialism as illness was in widespread use in postwar Germany, with a therapeutic inflection that recast

the Nazi regime's drive to "purify" the national body as the need to purge the post war body of the disease of Nazism (19). Her study would seem to anticipate Roberto Esposito's recent theorization of the biopolitical dynamic of National Socialism which argues that the Nazi regime sought to bring about this "purification" not through a simple excision of "foreign" elements but rather according to a "homeopathic" logic that incorporated ever greater amounts of the very ill that it purported to defend against. According to Esposito, National Socialist biopolitics was characterized by a drive to "immunize" the national body against death through a constant production of death (*Bios* 116). This project, invested in the notion of the German race as a biological collective, was constructed ideologically through the use of figure and metaphor.

This essay argues that Bernhard's pathogenic polemics uncannily recall this procedure through the literary recoding of fascist speech. In reframing this speech but directing its polemic thrust against the Nazi past, Bernhard launches a literary "vaccination" of the Austrian public sphere, which in its viral effects of necessity blurs clear distinctions between the cause and effect of Bernhard's insistence on Austrian malevolence.³ This ambivalent performative effect articulates itself not only in Bernhard's public provocations but also within scholarly and literary encounters with his language.

II. Iteration and Parody: Bernhard's Infectious Prose

It has become a critical cliché to say that Bernhard and Peymann turned all of Austria into a stage during the lead-up to the famous first production of *Heldenplatz*. This cliché, in fact, has its origins in the text of the play itself (89; see also Bentz 26; Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard* 148; Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard* 175). Austrians were seemingly unable to resist taking the bait that Bernhard and Peymann offered, making it appear either that Bernhard's picture of Austrian society was not an exaggeration or that his exaggeration had proven effective in provoking exactly the kind of behavior it attributed to Austrian citizens. Indeed, the *Heldenplatz* scandal provides several examples of public responses as extreme as Bernhard's invective: not only did protesters deposit a pile of manure in front of the Burgtheater in echo of the play's incendiary line "Dieser kleine Staat ist ein großer Misthaufen!" but the curses hurled at Bernhard seemed to be prefigured in the leaked text (Bernhard 164; Bentz 29). Oliver Bentz relates an anecdote from the novelist Josef Winkler, in

which a man accosted Bernhard on the street shortly before the *Heldenplatz* premiere and told him that he should be “gassed,” almost quoting directly the threats that Robert Schuster imagines in the second scene of the play (Bentz 6; Bernhard 115). This ambush also resonates with the account in *Heldenplatz* of Olga Schuster being spat on in the street (112–13). Bernhard’s staging of Viennese vituperation seemed to have conjured that same invective into being.

This story, however, in its iteration here, demonstrates not Bernhard’s ability to provoke mimetic reactions to his tirades but rather the tendency of Bernhard’s language to take on a life of its own: in the sole interview that Bernhard gave during the *Heldenplatz* scandal, he did indeed recount being attacked by a man on the Billrothstraße but claimed that the man had yelled, in the best Viennese dialect, “umbringen sollt ma’ Ihnen.” The next step, Bernhard commented wryly, “ist aufhängen und vergasen” (Burgtheater 65). In Winkler/Bentz’s version of this incident, Bernhard’s remarks and the man’s insults are comingled with the imagery of the Holocaust that Bernhard’s next line evokes. The political present passed through Bernhard’s polemic filter, after being contaminated with the fascist past.

Thomas Bernhard’s writing has been “contagious” for a long time, however. Even before he had perfected his signature style of repetitive, lyrical invective and long before his literary breakthrough with the novel *Frost* in 1963, some critics were writing reviews in the Bernhardian style.⁴ Numerous parodies and imitations followed as Bernhard’s fame grew. This in itself is not remarkable—any accomplished author with a distinctive style is bound to attract imitators and satirists. But in the scholarly and literary reception of Bernhard, his texts also seem to govern the conditions of their reception. Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler speaks in several essays of the ability of Bernhard’s oeuvre to fend off attempts to understand it (*Bruchlinien* 178) and, at the same time, to determine scholarly approaches to it: “Bernhard scheint die Kategorien, unter denen sein Werk betrachtet wird, so unerbittlich vorzugeben, daß die Untersuchungen geradezu gebannt auf eben diese Begriffe blicken, die sich bei Bernhard finden” (“Absolute Hilflosigkeit (des Denkens)” 11; for a similar observation, see Huntemann 156). In a similar vein, Klaus Zeyringer notes that Bernhard’s signature titles (*Holzfällen. Eine Erregung, Verstörung*, and so on) often encapsulate the expected effect of the text—sometimes, of course, with great predictive accuracy, as in *Holzfällen*, which caused a literary scandal after one of Bernhard’s old mentors filed a libel suit against him (133).

Uwe Betz uses the character constellation of *Frost* to illustrate the worst

possible scenario for German-language writers (and, by extension, readers and spectators) after Bernhard: to be placed in the position of the Famulant, the nameless medical student who slowly internalizes the speech and pessimistic outlook of the painter Strauch (72). Though it is not a strictly literary text, Peter Handke's short essay "Als ich 'Verstörung' von Thomas Bernhard las," (published in the first volume devoted to Bernhard's work) is paradigmatic of this type of response. Instead of offering a commentary or critical perspective on Bernhard's prose, Handke spends the vast majority of the essay summarizing and quoting from Fürst Saurau's monologue in *Verstörung*. The final sentence of the essay, "Ich las und las und las . . .," appropriates the ellipsis at the end of the Fürst's monologue, effectively positioning Handke in the place of the narrator of *Verstörung*—and Bernhard's text in place of the Fürst, whose mesmerizing speech fills most of the novel (Handke 106). In another early work of criticism, Hans Höller also seems to place the reader in the role of the transfixed listener in Bernhard's texts, and the text itself in the role of the speaker:

[D]ie sprachliche Form [Bernhards] gibt ja zugleich Denkform, Wahrnehmungs- und Erfahrungsform der Wirklichkeit vor, sie läßt die Haltung des Lesers nicht unangegleichen, zwingt sich in seine Sehweise der Dinge und Menschen und will ihn an ihre beherrschenden Vorstellungsbilder ausliefern. (1)

In this section, Höller inscribes the dynamics of the critical reception of Bernhard's texts into the dynamics of the texts themselves. He continues:

Der Leser kommt sich mit dem Erzähler und seinen konkreten Schwierigkeiten und Erfahrungen, mit seiner eigenen Welt, wie gefangen vor in den Mauern der Welt des Fürsten, in den Mauern einer Burg, von der der Fürst sagt, daß sie die Welt ist. (2)

However, Höller also understands the problem of taking on Handke's perspective and becoming mesmerized by the Fürst/author's magnetic speech (indeed, he discusses Handke's review explicitly). Nevertheless, he takes the attractive pull of Bernhard's prose for granted, using metaphors of attack, defense, and capture to describe the experience of reading Bernhard, even if he seeks intellectually to understand the mechanism of this attraction in his scholarship.

The numerous parodies that Bernhard inspired (which Dittmar has cata-

logged in *Der Bernh ardiner, ein wilder H und*) are equally susceptible to his attractive force. Because parodistic responses to Bernhard’s texts must rely on qualities inherent in those texts, which include the tools of parody itself (exaggeration, for example), they cannot escape the logic of the texts they parody. This is Heide Helwig’s argument:

Damit verweigern sich Bernhards Texte einer allzu planen parodistischen Ausbeutung, das in ihnen angelegte Potential an Komik funktioniert als *Abwehrmechanismus*, und der Lacheffekt, den die Adaption erzielt, bleibt an die Spielregeln des Primärtextes gebunden. (122, emphasis added)⁵

This defense mechanism of Bernhard’s language is closely connected with its infectious quality: while remaining impenetrable itself, Bernhard’s language proves irresistible to other authors. As I will demonstrate, this effect goes beyond the influence that Bernhard, as a major literary author, exerts on his successors—it is a quality modeled in Bernhard’s texts themselves.

For Gitta Honegger, translator and author of biographies of Bernhard in English and German, the attractive quality of Bernhard’s language is so important that she ends her study by describing it:

Bernhard’s speech acts modified the German language. It is hard to resist the infectious rhythm of his phrasing. In Austria, the performative force of his speech continues to impact the country’s collective psyche. His language, its use and misuse after his death, has become an active part, for better or worse, in the production of his native culture, which in turn keeps producing him. (*Thomas Bernhard* 308)

Honegger’s portrayal of Bernhard’s infectious language inhabiting, producing, and being reproduced by his native culture employs the imagery of the virus.⁶ It captures a performative effect that could be called contagious. But Honegger’s quotation also exposes an ambivalence in the reception of Bernhard’s attractive language, hinting at the negative correlate to its “infectious” quality: Bernhard not merely as a writer of illness, but as himself an illness.

Writing a few years after Honegger and more than two decades after Höller, Andreas Maier employs imagery similar to both of them in his reckoning with Bernhard in *Die Verführung. Thomas Bernhards Prosa* (2004):

Bernhards Prosa will, daß ich ihre rhetorischen Strukturen übernehme, daß ich die Welt auf ihre Weise sehe, kurz, daß ich diese Struk-

tur reproduziere. Aber sie liefert mir in Wahrheit gar keine mögliche Sichtweise der Welt, sie liefert mir immer nur ein rhetorisches Konstrukt, dessen Lebensdauer allein davon abhängt, ob es von mir (und anderen) benutzt wird oder nicht. (269)

Despite the anthropomorphizing gesture of the first clause (“Bernhard’s Prosa will”), Maier casts Bernhard’s language as pure structure—a genetic code of sorts—dependent on others to reproduce it and extend its “lifespan” (“*Lebensdauer*”). The viral imagery could hardly be stronger.⁷ Maier, a German novelist whose first book bore a heavy stamp of Bernhard’s influence, seems particularly determined to move beyond his literary predecessor through an exhaustive account of Bernhard’s style and its effects (for more on this, see Betz 89). His study relies on the construct of a naive, more or less helpless reader who is forced by identificatory mechanisms in the text to accept the truthfulness and profundity of the monologues of Bernhard’s characters.⁸ This conceit is not unique to Maier’s book, though it seldom appears in such negative terms.

At variance with Maier’s opinion of Bernhard but in subtle accordance with the imagery he employs, Erich Wolfgang Skwara uses the figure of disease to describe the veridical (and overpowering) quality of Bernhard’s writing. In a 1988 piece about his youthful admiration for Bernhard, Skwara writes that for him, Thomas Bernhard is

der Mensch, dem ich unentwegt beistimmen muß. Ich lauere, bisher vergebens, auf eine Gelegenheit zum Widerspruch. Ich möchte ja Nein rufen, aber es gelingt nicht. Eigentlich bedeutet diese Verwandtschaft der Gedanken eine Gefahr. Wenn wir nämlich merken, daß ein Mitmensch unaufhörlich genau das fühlt und sagt und tut, was wir selber fühlen, wenn auch nicht sagen oder tun, dann werfen wir ihn früher oder später auf den Scheiterhaufen. (277)

This is the familiar trope of Bernhard’s irresistibility. Skwara, however, realizes the potential of unqualified admiration to invert itself at any moment, for admiration to turn into revulsion. He further describes the double-edged nature of this seductive writing in the following passage, in which he compares Bernhard’s prolific production to the growth of cancer:

Dieses Krebsartige wuchernde Werk: das ist keine Belletristik, es hat nichts Dokumentarisches, das benennt und läßt doch offen, das

will nichts erreichen und erreicht doch alles. Das ist wortgewordene Wahrheit, und die hat weder Anfang noch Ende. (278)⁹

Skwara's Bernhard is a cancerous overgrowth, an explosion of disease that has no goal but is nevertheless a lethal avatar of truth. His Bernhard writes neither literature (“Bel letristik”) nor his story (“Dokumentarisches”)—a negative definition that resonates with Maier's notion of Bernhard's prose as empty structure. Skwara's attraction to Bernhard's work led him, as a young man, to follow the writer after readings, to leave notes on his car, and ultimately to seek him out at his home in Upper Austria—all without the desired encounter ever coming to pass (279).¹⁰ What Skwara's account brings to my study is the entrance of the biopolitically tinged metaphor of cancer into the catalogue of figures used to describe Bernhard's infectious language. It is in this confluence of cause and symptom that the “viral” performative effect of Bernhard's polemics can be seen to emerge.¹¹

It is the French author and video artist Hervé Guibert, however, who employs the trope of Bernhard as disease most explicitly and directly. In his autobiographical *roman à clef* detailing his struggle with aids (translated into German as *Dem Freund, der mir das Leben nicht gerettet hat*, 1990), Guibert's authorial encounter with Thomas Bernhard's writing parallels the progress of hiv in his body. Early in the novel, Bernhard appears only as a pair of initials—a cryptic reference that suggests something sinister:

Mein Buch, mein Gefährt, das ursprünglich, vom Vorsatz her, so streng sein sollte, hat schon begonnen, mich nach seiner Pfeife tanzen zu lassen, obgleich doch dem Anschein nach ich der unumschränkte Kapitän auf dieser Sichtfahrt bin. Ein Teufel hat sich in meinen Schiäbsbauch eingeschlichen: T.B. (10; see also Wagner 129)

Only in the next sentence does it become clear that “T.B.” refers to a writer,¹² but the metaphorical conflation of body and text remains in force:

Ich habe aufgehört, ihn zu lesen. Es heißt, jede erneute Einspritzung des Virus durch Flüssigkeiten, Blut oder Sperma, greife den schon infizierten Kranken erneut an. (10)

Guibert's novel, narrated by a writer who shares his name, tells the story of his relationship with Bill, the eponymous friend, who works for an American pharmaceutical company that is testing a vaccine against aids. Early in

the narrative, Bill offers Guibert hope by assuring him of the efficacy of his vaccine and guarantees that Guibert and his circle of infected friends will be included in the pilot study. Moreover, he promises to rig the double-blind test so that Guibert, his partner Jules, and Jules' wife and children get the real vaccine and not the placebo. In the course of the novel, however, it becomes clear that Bill does not intend to keep his promise and that he enjoys holding power over his hiv-positive friends. Ultimately, the two have a falling out, and the novel ends.

In keeping with the nature of the double-blind experiment, the book is structured by pairs. Guibert's text doubles his body, and Thomas Bernhard doubles the virus attacking his immune system. After the initial appearance of the cipher "T.B.," Bernhard is mentioned again, for the first time by his full name, more than a hundred pages later, shortly after the protagonist has received the final assurance that he is hiv-positive. In a long paratactic Bernhard-like passage he writes of Thomas Bernhard's "Fortschreiten" through his text, "das doch genauso unausweichlich ist wie das zerstörerische Fortschreiten von hiv im Blut und in den Zellen" (156).

This "progression" through the text culminates in a decisive final encounter with Bernhard's writing. The narrator heaps a series of creatively insulting epithets on Bernhard, including, among others (in German translation), "zeilenschindender Nörgler" and "Verzapfer sylogistischer Platitudensalates" (205). Bernhard's books are "nichts weiter [. . .] als winzige kleine Nichtigkeiten" (206). Guibert's narrator suffers a similar anxiety of influence as Skwara and Maier. In Bernhard, he is faced with a seemingly empty structure, a code that, though incomprehensible, nevertheless reproduces itself within his own creation, menacing it from within.

This threat becomes explicit when, after more than a page of ranting against Bernhard in the style of Bernhard, the narrator admits:

Ich hatte die Unvorsichtigkeit besessen, für meinen Teil, mich in eine quälende Schachpartie mit Thomas Bernhard einzulassen. Die Bernhardsche Metastase hat sich gleich der Ausbreitung von hiv, das in meinem Blut die Lymphozyten verwüstet, indem es meine Immunkräfte zusammenbrechen läßt, [. . .] parallel zu hiv hat sich also die Bernhardsche Metastase mit Höchstgeschwindigkeit in meinem Gewebe und meinen vitalen Schreibreflexen ausgebreitet, sie phagozytiert mein Schreiben, absorbiert es, nimmt es gefangen, zer-

stört all seine Natürlichkeit und eigene Prägung, um ihre verwüsten-
de Herrschaft darauf auszudehnen. (206–07)¹³

Here, Skwara’s ambiguously inflected imagery of cancer (“Metastase”) meets the viral idiom of the other writers above. Just as Guibert is awaiting the vaccination that his friend Bill can provide against HIV, he is also awaiting a “literarisch[es] Impfstoff” to cure him of the influence of Bernhard’s writing (208). Bernhard’s writing, however, has not had a merely detrimental effect on Guibert: “ich habe mich im Gegenteil gegen Thomas Bernhard empört,” he continues,

und ich, der arme Guibert, spielte nur noch schöner, putzte meine
Waden, um genauso gut zu werden wie der zeitgenössische Meister,
ich, der arme kleine Guibert, Ex-Weltmeister, der ich meinen Meis-
ter gefunden habe sowohl in Aids wie in Thomas Bernhard. (208; see
also Wagner 130)

Through incorporating Bernhard’s influence, Hervé Guibert has strengthened his will to write against exactly this influence. This procedure is not paradoxical; rather, it is the very mechanism of vaccination. By consciously and openly confronting Bernhard’s influence on his text, he is able to restrict the scope of this influence. Bernhard is a poison, but a cure as well. He is grafted into Guibert’s text as an inoculation—albeit an inoculation that, like his friend Bill, will not save his life.¹⁴

III. Previous Iterations of Bernhard’s Poetics of Infection

What is most remarkable about literary and scholarly encounters with Bernhard that cast his writing in terms either connoting or denoting biological illness (like those I have enumerated above) is that they all in some sense replicate the narrative dynamics of Bernhard’s texts themselves, which posit the infectious, dangerous power of language.

The prototypical Bernhard character is a man who is terminally or chronically ill and fixated on his illness. Consequently, scholarly writing on Bernhard has often focused on the various valences of illness as a philosophical or existential category in his work. Bernhard’s prose has been read as an expression of the author’s own struggle with terminal illness, his personal pathologies or traumas, so often that Alfred Pfabigan has dubbed this the “pathographisch”

approach, a conspicuous manifestation of the conformity that he diagnoses in the secondary literature on Bernhard (26). Indeed, metaphors of illness are so omnipresent and diffuse in Bernhard's writing that allegorical readings are overdetermined and thus usually lack precision as interpretive tools.¹⁵

However, instead of pursuing a hermeneutics of illness, two scholars have used the metaphor of infection to conceptualize the narrative or psychoanalytic processes at play in Bernhard's prose. Though their work focuses on Bernhard's autobiographical writing about his time as a patient being treated for a life-threatening lung disease, their insights are crucial to my reading of the dynamics underlying Bernhard's textual confrontation with National Socialism in *Heldenplatz*.

The first, Elisabeth Strowick, devotes a large chapter in her study *Sprechende Körper* to the narrative means by which Bernhard causes the sick body to manifest itself in his autobiographical writings (291). She explicates several polyvalent processes of "infection" in *Wittgensteins Neffe* and in the fourth volume of Bernhard's autobiography *Die Kälte*. According to Strowick, when the narrator of *Wittgensteins Neffe* "goes too far" on his walk between one pavilion and another at the Steinhof sanatorium, he not only exceeds his physical strength as an ailing patient suffering from lung disease, he also intrudes upon the discursively hermetic space belonging to the mental patients whose pavilion he has invaded (293). In doing so, he becomes a taboo breaker, marking himself as an infectious agent (294). Next, in her discussion of *Die Kälte*, Strowick suggests that Bernhard's autobiographical protagonist stages his loss of individuality within in the lung sanatorium Grafenhof as an infection:

Eine Ansteckung—so lässt sich zwar nicht im medizinischen, wohl aber im dramaturgischen Sinn sagen—hat stattgefunden, wobei die Lungenheilstätte als Ort von Ansteckung fungiert. Ansteckung markiert den Prozess der Normalisierung, der Auslöschung jeglicher Individualität und Alterität. (296)

This "infection," according to Strowick, is the result of modern processes of institutional subjectification as analyzed by Michel Foucault (296). Bernhard's means of resistance to this dehumanizing discourse is to thwart it by turning it against itself:

Von einem Gegensatzverhältnis des Erzählers zur Institution kann nicht die Rede sein. Qua Nicht-Ansteckung aus der Gemeinschaft

ausgeschlossen, verworfen, trägt der Erzähler zugleich die Züge der Institution: In seinem permanenten Beobachten, Misstrauen und der erworbenen Immunität unterscheidet er sich in nichts von den Mitpatienten und Ärzten, gegen die er opponiert. Anders gesagt: Bernhard inszeniert autobiographisches Erzählen als unreines Performativ, als einen Sprechakt, in dem sich die Ausnahme die Mittel der Institution aneignet, um sie gegen die Institution zu wenden. (300)

By “infecting” itself with the language of the sanatorium, Bernhard’s language becomes immune to the very “immunity” that constitutes the institution’s discursive hegemony (304). According to Strowick, in Bernhard’s autobiography as in Esposito’s explication of the dialectic of modern immunity (which she quotes), immunity is generated via the process of infection: it is not the elimination of a threat but rather its containment and integration (305). Here, the metaphor of immunized narration resonates with Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler’s notion of Bernhard’s prose “closing itself” against attempts to appropriate it (*Bruchlinien* 304). It also recalls the problems with Bernhard parodies that Heide Helwig explores—the prose itself appears to be “immune” from parody by encapsulating its own “*Abwehrmechanismus*.” At the same time, however, while the “immunized” result may be the same in the texts that Strowick, Schmidt-Dengler, and Helwig examine, the “threat” that Bernhard’s text subsumes into itself in an immunizing gesture is not. For Strowick, this language is the hermetic discourse of the modern clinic as described by Foucault; for Helwig it is the discourse of parodistic appropriation; for Schmidt-Dengler it is the discourses of philosophy or literary theory.

I believe that Strowick’s insight into the textual dynamics of immunization in Bernhard’s autobiography makes explicit a strategy that is present in a general way throughout Bernhard’s texts, even those that do not thematize illness: that of the text incorporating aspects of an oppositional discourse in order to oppose that discourse. Moreover, this process becomes all the more apparent and important when the oppositional discourse Bernhard appropriates is the rhetoric of fascism. This is neglected in Strowick’s account of infection in Bernhard, and it is the point of departure for my reading of *Heldenplatz*.

The second scholar to treat the notion of Bernhard’s prose as infectious is Hélène Francoual. In her 2003 article “Das Imaginäre des Übels oder die Bernhardsche ‘Anthropologie’ der Krankheit,” she draws together Bernhard’s autobiographical encounter with disease and his insistent accusations about

Austria's complicity with fascism. Here, the anxiety of Bernhard's influence as felt by other German-language writers intersects with the performative function of his viral polemics in the Austrian public sphere. Francoual's analysis puts (specifically National Socialist) biopolitics at the heart of Bernhard's poetics, even if this connection remains undertheorized in her short study.

Francoual starts her analysis by examining the imagined etiology of Bernhard's lung disease within his autobiography and in his real life, combining a reading of the texts *Der Atem* and *Die Kälte* with accounts of Bernhard's actual lung illness. She claims that Bernhard's autobiographical protagonist sways between endogenic and exogenic explanations for the cause of his ailment, ultimately settling on the exogenic explanation because the endogenic cause—that he himself is somehow responsible for his lung disease—is intolerable to his ego (239–41).

The repressed endogenic explanation resurfaces, however, as a projection of contagion onto the outside world (243). This is how Austria, Francoual argues, becomes the ultimate source of evil in Bernhard's texts. Looking for a cause of this pestilence, which he himself has shifted onto the environment, Bernhard's protagonist finds it in the unconfessed Nazi past in Salzburg: "Hier sieht er die Ursache für diese gefährliche Ausdünstungen, den Giegestank aus der nationalsozialistischen Ära" (245).¹⁶

In a final transposition, Bernhard, who writes of the persistent illness in the air around him, is himself confronted as a "Störfaktor" or "Krankheitserreger," when he reminds Austria of its complicity with fascism through his incendiary literary and public performances (247). According to Francoual, Bernhard aims to strengthen Austria's resistance to a resurgence of the Nazi past through this program of insistent irritation. He offers his work as a "Heilmittel,"

insofern als er —wie ein Impfstoff, der durch das Einbringen einer Mikrobe in den Körper eines Menschen Immunität gegen die Krankheit erzielt—die alten Dämonen der österrreichischen Gesellschaft aufweckt und somit hofft, ihre Immunabwehr so zu fördern, daß sie selbst ihre eigenen Antikörper erzeugt, um sich gegen eine Reinfektion des Virus zu schützen. Bernhard glaubt an die reinigende Heilkraft einer Selbstbesinnung des österrreichischen Volkes, die es ermöglichen würde, das Übel endgültig zu überwinden, auf die Gefahr hin, der österreichischen Gesellschaft einen Schock zu versetzen. (249)

Francoual’s account of Austrian society immunizing itself through Bernhard is a compelling way to understand Bernhard’s irritations. It provides a therapeutic complement to my readings above of biologically inflected receptions of Bernhard’s work that view his language as at once irresistible and dangerous, as poisonous and salutary. It approaches from a different direction Elisabeth Strowick’s notion of narration that is both “immunized” and “contagious.”

Francoual’s imagery, however, seems to have more in common with catharsis than vaccination or immunization. “Reinigende Heilkräße” implies the purification or cleansing of the emotions that Aristotelian catharsis promises. The hope of “overcoming the evil permanently” (“das Übel endgültig zu überwinden”) further betrays the fact that Francoual has neglected to carry the logic of immunity to its conclusion. In doing so, she has short-circuited the connection between the personal imaginary of Bernhard’s autobiographical narrator and the Austrian public sphere. For a system (here the Austrian state) to protect itself against an external threat through the practice of inoculation, the system must assimilate exactly this threat in an attenuated form. The threat is not cleansed from the system; rather, it becomes a type of embodied memory that is integrated into the autopoiesis (self-fashioning) of the system itself.¹⁷

Therefore, if Francoual is correct that Bernhard is a “vaccination” against the recrudescence of fascism, the logic of immunity would require that Bernhard’s irritations represent a *return* of the fascist past—albeit in an attenuated, though morphologically similar, form. And would the “purification” of emotions related to fascism, the final “healing” of the Austrian state, really be possible?

IV. The Motif of the *Sprachrohr* in *Heldenplatz*

In what follows, I will give a brief reading of Bernhard’s play against the backdrop of the poetics of infection, showing how the immunized narrative that Strowick situates in the institutional contexts of the autobiography also takes place in the text of *Heldenplatz* within a *historical* framing, that is, not merely as a discourse of an abstract “modernity.” Insofar as Bernhard’s work continuously links the dispersal of language to infectious disease, it both resists the biological determinism of Nazism and repeats the immunitary dynamics of Nazism on a symbolic, narrative level. While Bernhard’s novels order the most

trenchant examples of this type of dispersal, his scandalous plays—especially *Heldenplatz*—transport this dynamic into the public sphere.

To understand this connection in the context of *Heldenplatz*, we must trace the provenance of the intra- and extradiagetic *Erregungen* that Bernhard's infectious performance causes. These moments of incensed arousal (which, in turn, cause agitation in their audience) almost always take the form of a male character's polemics that are formulated in categorical terms and directed against either another character or, just as frequently, against the Austrian state or institutions. Thomas Cousineau has proffered an historical explanation for this recurring structure:

Bernhard's foundational story, which transforms elements drawn from Austrian history into an archetypal image, involves a demented protagonist who redirects toward an innocent person the persecutory violence of which he believes himself to be the victim. The avatars of this pattern are obviously Hitler and the Jews. (33)

Cousineau's reading brings out the genealogical affinity between the prototypical Bernhard rant and those of Nazi orators, that is, the shift in signifiers that positions "the Austrians," instead of "the Jews," as an absolute evil that threatens to overwhelm Europe. Later in his study, he demonstrates this inversion in a parallel reading of Bernhard's novel *Der Untergeher* and *Mein Kampf* (93–94).¹⁸ Naturally, there is a danger here of overstating the similarities between Bernhard's characters and fascist dictators. Drawing too close a comparison threatens to blur the lines between the literary tirade and actual hate speech, and Cousineau approaches this boundary with his claim that Bernhard's work creates a "fictional *immediacy* that invites us to imagine what it must have been really like to live in a world ruled by a madman" (33).

Yet Cousineau's claim that Bernhard is channeling Hitler is far from unprecedented. From the early days of his career, Bernhard has been accused of recoding and inverting fascist rhetoric in his diatribes against Austria. In his biography of Bernhard, Manfred Mittermayer relates an anecdote in which H. C. Artmann, Jeannie Ebner, and others responded to one of Bernhard's polemics against the state of Austrian literature and the cultural life in the Austrian capital with an open letter accusing Bernhard of harboring the same animosity toward the city of Vienna as Adolf Hitler (*Thomas Bernhard. Leben Werk Wirkung* 39). And, as late as 2000, the Viennese *Kabarettist* Werner Schnyder claimed that Bernhard had resurrected the "totalizing" language of

fascism (*Thomas Bernhard. Leben Werk Wirkung* 125). During the *Heldenplatz* scandal, it became a journalistic commonplace to make comparisons between Bernhard and Hitler as well as Bernhard and the infamous right-wing demagogue Jörg Haider (see Davis 146–47).

Furthermore, we can profitably apply Cousineau’s insight in reading numerous other texts that he does not mention, where shifting signifiers sometimes yield startling results: in *Frost*, the (failed) painter Strauch (who, the first time he meets the narrator, emerges from a field of shot-up tree stumps reminiscent of a battlefield) refers to himself using the same appellation with which Brecht famously mocked Hitler: “‘Ich bin kein Maler,’ [. . .] ‘ich bin höchstens ein Anstreicher gewesen’” (16).¹⁹ In *Der Theatermacher* Bernhard slyly hints at the affinity between the travelling actor Bruscon and Hitler through the presence of a picture of the “Führer” on stage next to the authoritarian male protagonist.

This does not mean, of course, that Bernhard’s characters are reducible to Hitler caricatures. There is an uncanny resemblance, however, that extends even to Bernhard’s idiosyncratic and much-imitated subtitles that I mentioned above: the complete name of the most notorious book in the German language (at least in one of its iterations) is the very Bernhardian *Mein Kampf. Eine Abrechnung*. These unsettling affinities on the level of the signifier (but also on the level of the form, the categorical rant) take on an increased prominence in *Heldenplatz*, which demonstrates that the originary moment of infection in Bernhard is the introduction of attenuated fascist discourse. This, I will argue, is the homeopathic poison of the “Bernhard virus.”

This recognition of the affinity between fascist rhetoric and Bernhard’s signature style is evident in the secondary literature on *Heldenplatz* but was also prevalent in the political and journalistic reaction to the leaked play script. For example, Vice Chancellor Alois Mock compared the performance of *Heldenplatz* to a violation of the Austrian *Wiederbetätigungsgesetz*, which forbids National Socialist activities: “Kein Freiraum, auch nicht der der Kunst, ist grenzenlos. Hawlicek müsste auch einschränken, wenn ein Stück unter das Wiederbetätigungsverbot fällt” (Burgtheater 45). Although Mock posits here, for rhetorical effect, a (more than dubious) symmetry between hate speech against Austrians and hate speech against Jews in Austria, his comparison quickly became a simple equation in the Austrian press and even later in the scholarly secondary literature on the *Heldenplatz* scandal: Gitta Honegger, for example, misreads this quotation, claiming that Mock called

for *Heldenplatz* to be banned under the *Wiederbetätigungsgesetz* (289). She further links Bernhard's language to National Socialism by suggesting that the complaints about Austria in *Heldenplatz* echo the language of the beer halls in which fascism was born and that Bernhard's style is indebted to Nazi rants (290, 303). Fatima Naqvi has also noticed the resonance between fascist or nationalist rhetoric and the views of the Schuster family, claiming that "the Schusters are victims who themselves tend toward the absolute rhetoric of fascist ideology" (412).

Heldenplatz does not only restage the past through the use of fascist rhetoric, it also offers a unique and at the same time prototypical example of how polemics circulate within Bernhard's texts. The plot of *Heldenplatz* is simple: Professor Josef Schuster, a former Jewish émigré to England, has recently committed suicide by jumping from the window of his apartment overlooking Vienna's Heldenplatz. In the first scene, Schuster's housekeeper Frau Zittel recounts the late professor's opinions on everything from proper reading material for her mother to the correct way to fold a shirt. In the second scene, Olga and Anna, Schuster's daughters, and Professor Robert Schuster, his brother, go for a walk in the Volksgarten, and Anna and Robert take turns describing how terrible life in Austria is in 1988, with Robert doing most of the talking. In the final scene, the family and other guests gather in the apartment and eat dinner. While Robert Schuster continues his polemics against almost all things Austrian, Frau Schuster begins to hear the crowds from 1938 greeting Hitler on Heldenplatz. As the crowd's cries become unbearable, Frau Schuster collapses into her soup and with that, the play ends.

In the first scene, Frau Zittel, Professor Schuster's former head of household, and Herta, his maid, sort the dead professor's belongings. Frau Zittel holds forth on the dead professor's oddities, pausing occasionally to instruct Herta or heap scorn on her: "In Graz hättest du ja nur seinen Wintermantel / hinter ihm hergetragen du dumme Gans" (18). Here, Frau Zittel is not only concerned with maintaining her own position in the household hierarchy, she is also channeling the dead professor's abusive personality. This becomes clear as Zittel recounts one of Schuster's outbursts when she was unable to fold a shirt correctly (in the original production, Anneliese Römer, playing Frau Zittel, indicates that she is quoting her former employer by gesturing at approximately eye level, often impersonating his voice and manner of speaking as well):

So sagte der Professor so / und winkelte die Hemdsärmel ein / so
 Frau Zittel so so so / er war f mir das Hemd ins Gesicht / und ich
 sollte das Hemd zusammenlegen / unerbittlich / Die Dummheit der
 Menschheit kennt ja keine Grenzen / Neinnein Frau Zittel ich bin ja
 nicht verrückt / ich bin ja nur genau Frau Zittel aber nicht verrückt
 / ich bin ja nur genau Frau Zittel aber nicht verrückt / ein Genauig-
 keitsfanatiker bin ich Frau Zittel / ich bin nicht krank ich bin nicht
 krank schrie er / ich bin nur ein Genauigkeitsfanatiker / Professor
 Schuster ich kann es nicht ich kann es nicht sagte ich / Unerträgliche
 Person schrie er unerträgliche Person. (26–27)

In print this scene comes across as excessively harsh, but in the original production the two women exchange smiles and laughter at times when recalling Josef Schuster’s outbursts, a reminder that Bernhard’s polemics represent a weakened and ironized version of real hate speech. This discrepancy between the additive weight of the printed text and the relatively harmless form it takes in performance helps explain why the premiere saw the end of the *Heldenplatz* scandal; this is evident in the next scene in the Volksgarten as well.

Frau Zittel’s abusive behavior toward Herta in the first scene forms the germ of the tirades to come; the play as a whole repeats on a macro level the microstructure of her rant. Echoes of fascist rhetoric are present here on the level of the signifier: as Fatima Naqvi indicates, Frau Zittel, quoting the dead professor Schuster, claims that he did not want any “Untermenschen” at his funeral, clearly a term with a historically loaded past. Naqvi also offers a catalogue of some of Josef Schuster’s blatantly offensive attitudes, which include prejudice toward Asians, the disabled, and the blind (414). In a similar reading, Gitta Honegger points out that the protagonists of *Heldenplatz* sound astonishingly like the unrepentant Nazis of Bernhard’s play *Vor dem Ruhestand* (“The Stranger inside the Word” 139). She attributes this fact to the dynamic of language itself.²⁰ This reading, however, posits a disembodied German language as the source of the poisonous rhetoric that Bernhard’s characters spout. In doing so, it threatens to flatten the difference between political speech, propaganda, and Bernhard’s literary tirades.

Furthermore, what neither Naqvi nor Honegger emphasize in their readings of the dynamics of language in *Heldenplatz* is how the rants of Josef Schuster are voiced through other characters. Having died before the play begins, he is never present on stage. His discourse is dependent on his survivors to carry it forth. This is exactly what happens in the remainder of the play.

As the overall level of excitement in the play begins to climb from Frau Zittel's inaugural monologues, Josef Schuster's language manifests itself in other characters. The second scene introduces three new characters, two of whom, Robert and his niece Anna, carry on the pathogen of the categorical polemic. Here it is once again a female character, Anna, who begins the crescendo of invective that Robert Schuster will continue once he appears. Her claim that "es gibt jetzt mehr Nazis in Wien / als achtunddreißig" (65) is an echo of Josef Schuster as quoted by Frau Zittel in the first few lines of the play: "Jetzt ist alles noch viel schlimmer / als vor fünfzig Jahren hat er gesagt" (11). Anna Schuster continues her polemic until her uncle Robert arrives and takes over, scarcely allowing her and Olga another word, in the same way that Frau Zittel dominates the conversation with Herta. Robert Schuster, also a professor (making him even more explicitly a *doppelgänger* or a vatar of his brother), employs identical rhetorical structures (repetition and climax) in his rants against Austria.

In the final scene, the process of discursive infection reaches comical levels. New characters, including Professor Liebig and Herr Landauer, either merely quote the dead professor or spout polemics with an amusing likeness to the speech of Robert and Josef Schuster. Professor Liebig, for example, claims, "Es ist nur eine Frage der Zeit / daß die Nazis wieder an der Macht sind / alle Anzeichen sprechen dafür / die Roten und die Schwarzen spielen alles den Nazis in die Hände" (135).

In the original production of *Heldenplatz*, Wolfgang Gasser plays most of Robert Schuster's tirades against Austria more as the complaints of a bitter old man than as the ranting of a fascist dictator, including most of the incendiary lines in the Volksgarten, which caused the most uproar during the time leading up to the production. In the last scene, however, during the famous final sequence in which the cries of "Sieg Heil!" are piped over loudspeakers (focalized, the audience knows, through the consciousness of Frau Schuster), Gasser's gestures coincide uncannily with the rhythmic cries of the crowds on Heldenplatz in 1938. As the volume of the recording increases, Gasser must speak louder and louder in order to be heard over the shouts that his character, Robert Schuster, cannot hear. In performance, two temporal and narrative planes collapse (cf. Naqvi 418), with the effect that Robert Schuster appears, for a few moments, as the cause of the unseen crowd's jubulations and thus as a stand-in for Hitler. He becomes a sort of *Sprachrohr* for both authoritarian speakers (his dead brother and Hitler) simultaneously. This is

not only a collision between the past and present, the perpetrators and victims (as Naqvi and Honegger argue), it is also the final evidence for the provenance of the “Bernhard virus.”²¹

While Bernhard is frequently accused of using his characters as a mouthpiece for his own opinions, *Heldenplatz* takes this practice to the extreme, generalizing a single voice to all of the major characters. Bernhard repurposes his trademark artificiality, one that eschews dialogue in favor of monologue, and shows the uncanny origins of his invective (Schmidt-Dengler, *Der Übertreibungskünstler* 107). Although it is common in Bernhard’s plays for most characters to speak in similar voices, there is often only a single tyrannical male character who rants against Austria or the other characters. In *Heldenplatz*, however, there are multiple characters, including female characters, decrying Austria as well. This has the effect of making the generalized polemical voice all the more apparent—and comical. Rather than merely diagnosing the Austrian illness of repression, *Heldenplatz* models infection in the form of discursive imitation that has its origin in the polemics of a dead male tyrant. The play presents his discourse as a sort of virus, a code that spreads to other characters.²²

From my brief reading of *Heldenplatz* it should be clear that the metaphor of the virus (as disease and as poison) not only describes one strain of Bernhard reception, it also captures an important quality of the circulation of discourse within his texts themselves. While the full elaboration of this dynamic is beyond the scope of this article, a short analysis shows that much of Bernhard’s writing models the infectious quality of its reception: in *Frost*, the narrator begins to reproduce and imitate the language and thought of the painter Strauch; in *Verstörung*, Fürst Saurau’s monologue positively overwhelms the doctor’s son, to the point that he is unable to finish his own story, compulsively returning to the Fürst’s speech at the end of his narrative.²³ In other works such as *Korrektur* and *Der Untergeher*, the language of dead characters inhabits and threatens to overwhelm the minds of the living.²⁴ Even in his last completed novel, *Alte Meister*, the thematic of the *Sprachrohr* is humorously recast in the relationship between Reger and Irrsiegler.²⁵ The final moments of *Heldenplatz* reveal the poisonous provenance of the “Bernhard virus”—the language of authoritarianism.

The polemics against the Austrian state in *Heldenplatz* seem to take the form of a program of immunization or homeopathy, one that mobilizes the traces of the fascist past against their recurrence in the Austrian present, not

through a frontal attack but according to a strategy that absorbs and transforms the structures of fascist language, deploying this language against itself.²⁶ This program of active inoculation, the aesthetic correlate to the same contradictory logic that, according to Esposito, drives “all discourses of modernity” toward self-destruction, is not without danger (*Immunitas* 16): the circulation of Bernhard’s textual “poison” represents an uncanny mimesis of the Nazi biopolitical imaginary. Indeed, later events bore out this “auto-immune” potential latent in the “Bernhard virus”: the right-wing politician Jörg Haider, after first calling for *Heldenplatz* to be banned, later adopted Bernhard’s rhetoric in his crusade against funding for the arts and universities (Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard* 289). Bernhard’s language remained virulent, but the political thrust of his polemics had been appropriated by the politics of nationalist demagoguery he despised. Today however, while Bernhard’s language continues to circulate in the literary sphere, the process of “immunization”—not against the National Socialist past but against Bernhard himself—seems to be complete in Austria: as Martin Huber tells it, when *Heldenplatz* was performed at the Theater in der Josefstadt in 2010, even the Bundespräsident applauded (129).

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Notes

1. As Ruth Mayer and Brigitte Weingart show in their introduction to the volume *Virus!: Mutationen einer Metapher*, the heyday for the critical topos of the “viral” coincided roughly with the zenith of academic interest in deconstructive criticism in the late 80s and early 90s. “Viral” discourse, like deconstructive criticism, is associated with the upsetting of boundaries between inside and outside, living and dead, text and context, as well as with “asymmetric warfare” that pits a small minority against a larger system. In all of these senses, the scandal surrounding Bernhard’s *Heldenplatz* in 1988 could be seen as a “viral” event (21–23).

2. I have written on this phenomenon elsewhere (Davis 144).

3. For a detailed account of literary “immunity” in other historical contexts, see Türk.

4. Jens Dittmar provides a long list of reviews of Bernhard’s work that are written in his style, a practice that began as early as 1957 (10–11). Manfred Mittermayer also notes that

journalists covering Bernhard often appropriated the style of his titles (Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard. Leben Werk Wirkung* 133). Literary studies of Bernhard’s work in German also frequently use Bernhardesque subtitles, albeit without the same forceful valence as the originals. For example, see Fleischmann; Hoell; and Bernhard, *Thomas Bernhard. Eine Begegnung*.

5. Zeyringer also argues that Bernhard cannot be satirized or parodied without simultaneously being imitated (135–86). He summarizes this position as follows: “[Die Parodisten] wollen Bernhard schlagen, indem sie seine eigenen Mittel gegen ihn (um)kehren—werden sie aber nicht letztlich von ihm eingesetzt und geschlagen?” (147).

6. Schmidt-Dengler describes the unsuccessful attempts of literary scholars from every perspective to appropriate Bernhard’s work. He also mentions Bernhard fans who are “infected with his seriousness, but not his humor” (*Bruchlinien* 304).

7. Maier does, in fact, employ other biologically tinged language in his study, for example referring to *Der Untergeher* as a “parasitic” text that feeds on Glenn Gould’s success (237).

8. “Wir sollen angeleitet werden, den Texten zu glauben und bei bestimmten Punkten nicht nachfragen. Dadurch wird Kritik dem Text ferngehalten. Es gilt, diese in Bernhards Werk immer wieder reproduzierte Kommunikationsstruktur herauszuarbeiten und zu zeigen, was sie beim Leser bewirkt” (7).

9. In his study of Bernhard’s novels, Thomas Cousineau uses the metaphor of “genetic mutations” (which he takes from the novel itself) to illuminate the way that “corrections” function within the text (72).

10. Manfred Mittermayer also describes the phenomenon of other young writers identifying with Bernhard to the point of fearing the loss of their artistic personalities (*Thomas Bernhard. Leben Werk Wirkung* 135).

11. Interestingly, the tropes of “Bernhard as cancer” and “Bernhard as oncologist” occur in the newspaper battles about *Heldenplatz* (see Davis 144).

12. The correspondence between Bernhard’s initials “T.B.” and the abbreviation for tuberculosis is not present in German or French, so this correlation may be coincidental.

13. Mittermayer quotes the same passage (*Thomas Bernhard. Leben Werk Wirkung* 137).

14. For a discussion of the “Wahlverwandschaft” between Guibert and Bernhard, see Wagner 131–33; see also Mittermayer, *Thomas Bernhard. Leben Werk Wirkung* 136.

15. Monika Kohlhage describes this problem as follows: “Kaum meint man, durch die dargestellte ubiquitäre Morbidität das leidende Subjekt gefunden zu haben, taucht das eben noch betroffenen machende Krankheitsmotiv neuerlich, aber vollkommen lächerlich auf: neben einer organischen Todeskrankheit erscheint plötzlich auch das Zeitunglesen als Krankheit und die Leidenschaft, ins Kaffeehaus zu gehen, wird ebenfalls als Krankheit tituliert” (122).

16. Indeed, this transposition recalls the “rhetorical inversion” of Nazi biopolitical discourse that Kapczynski detects in postwar West Germany (23).

17. See also Luhmann 507 and Esposito, *Immunitas* 15. See also my discussion of Strowick’s work above, who also quotes from this same passage by Esposito.

18. Indeed, in an echo of Francoual’s reading of Bernhard’s biography, Cousineau refers in this passage to Bernhard’s art as an “antidote” to Hitler’s hate speech which can ultimately provide a catharsis from it (94–95).

19. Bernhard certainly read Brecht as a young man, famously claiming to have written a thesis on Artaud and Brecht (which has never been found) (Fialik 9).

20. "Language speaks. It constitutes culture. The victim merges with the perpetrator in the stranglehold of language that keeps restaging their shared history. [...] The real drama is located within the language. The minimal physical action on stage is its melodramatic perversion. The speakers are exchangeable. Their actions are no longer motivated by choices and are instead animated by grammar" (Honegger, "The Stranger inside the Word" 139).

21 See also Cousineau, who also comments on how this passage of *Heldenplatz* brings the past into the present (37–38).

22. Cf. Long, who reads the eclipse of one character's speech by another in terms of the stifling political atmosphere of consensus in the Austrian Second Republic (198).

23. Honegger refers to Strauch and Saurau as "pathologically charismatic" (*Thomas Bernhard* 39); later she describes the narrator's "infection" by Strauch in terms of an actor learning a script (224–25), "rehearsing the language of another" (227).

24. Cf. Honegger, who reads the dynamic in Korrektur between Roithamer and the narrator as homoerotic (*Thomas Bernhard* 163–64).

25 See *Alte Meister* 33: "Wir brauchen einen Dummkopf als Sprachrohr."

26. For another account of "homeopathy" in West German cinema, see Santner 21.

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