Goethe schtirbt: Erzählungen

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Bei der Begegnung zwischen Thomas Bernhard und Siegfried Unseld in Wien am 17. Januar 1985 herrscht, wie der Verleger notiert, eine »blendende Stimmung«. Der Autor ist sich sicher, "Alte Meister" in wenigen Wochen abschließen zu können – der letzte von Thomas Bernhard abgeschlossene Roman erscheint tatsächlich Ende desselben Jahres. Von den Gesprächen hält Unseld einen Wunsch Bernhards fest: »Dann läge ihm doch sehr an einem Band ›Goethe schtirbt‹. Er enthielte die Texte ›Goethe schtirbt‹. – ›Wiedersehen‹. – ›Montaigne‹. – Und zwei Stücke, die noch keinen Titel haben.«
Zu Lebzeiten von Thomas Bernhard kam die Publikation dieser Anfang der achtziger Jahre verfaßten und in Zeitungen abgedruckten Erzählungen nicht mehr zustande: zu sehr war der Autor mit seinem zunächst zurückgehaltenen Romanopus "Auslöschung" und mit dem Theaterstück "Heldenplatz" sowie dem dadurch entfachten Skandal befaßt.
In "Goethe schtirbt" werden diese Erzählungen zum ersten Mal, dem Wunsch ihres Verfassers entsprechend, in einem Band zusammengefügt: Sie zeigen den ironisch abgeklärten Meister der tragischen Momente und komischen Situationen, der auf der Höhe seiner Kunst Motive und Strukturen seines Gesamtwerks aufgreift: von den Einsamkeitsexpertisen in Amras, 1964 publiziert, bis zur Haßliebe gegenüber Österreich im Spätwerk.

Goethe schtirbt: Erzählungen Details

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soulAdmitted says

Capisco bene lo "sfinimento cosmico" e anche lo sfinimento comico (questo librino è a tratti esilarante). Ma l'impennata finale, contro il pacchetto Dio-Chiesa-patria-famiglia-Europa- mondo-eroi-buoni-cattivi-cosìcosì, mi arriva come un urlo impostato. Sufficientemente fastidioso. Assai fastidioso. Se niente si salva, scompaiono anche l'urlante e le sue invettive.

Per il resto, qui c'è, ancora una volta, un ipnotico, estenuato, estenuante, bellissimo Bernhard.
In controluce i ciclopi buoni: Wittgenstein, Montaigne, Goethe, la Conoscenza, l'Ardore.

Mark Hebwood says

I loved this. The book contains four short stories, and I thought two of them were very good (4*s), the last one less so but still enjoyable (3*s), and the title story "Goethe schtirbt" was brilliant (5*s). Because I see it as the standout story in this volume, I'll offer a few thoughts on it here, but leave the other three with no comments. I'll also present my thoughts as an annotated text, rather than a consistent review.

Title
Goethe schtirbt
Well this is immediately odd. The German verb for "to die" is not spelt like this. It is spelt "sterben", not "schterben". True, the "sch-" graph is everywhere in German, and words like "schnell", "schoen", "Schaden" etc abound, but the graph never occurs before "t", at least not in initial position. What *does* occur before "t", is the graph "s", and "Stein", "Strand" und "sterben", for example, have the same phoneme /?/ as their "sch-" equivalents. In other words, the pronunciation of "sterben" and "schterben" is identical, but only the former exists, and the latter would get you a bad mark in orthography at school. And yet, the spelling is there, proudly in the title, but not repeated in the text.

Why? I have no idea, I am afraid, so I will offer a guess. The story is a farce and a deeply irreverent take on the last day of Germany's most celebrated man-of-letters. One moment, the fictional Goethe is presented as lucid but obsessed with the idea of bringing the fictional Wittgenstein to Weimar, the next moment we have Goethe babbling like a senile old fool. One minute, Goethe is in discourse with one of his confidants, the next he is throwing a tantrum and shouts him out of the room. Goethe engages in pseudo-intellectual conversations that feel like the venerated poet is a precocious child. Goethe vindictively maligns the names of fellow poets, particularly those of Wieland, Herder and Schiller, who, with Goethe, form the group of thinkers known as the Weimar quadriga, and have given rise to the expression "Weimar classicism". He rails at former friends and associates. In short, he creates a huge fuss. He does not simply die. He "dhies". Er stirbt nicht, er "schtirbt".

First sentences
What joy. The first sentence has 140 words, the second 190, and the third 280! Long-winded, deliberately convoluted sentences are one of Thomas' trademarks. I must say I am not normally a friend of stylistic gimmicks, unless their form has some function to play in the text. I am unsure why these first sentences have to be as long as they are, but I must admit I enjoyed reading them. At least the first two are properly

syntactically "fluted", they form a proper unit and weave in and out of themselves with appositions and nested relative clauses. The third is not really one sentence, but more a simple addition of three shorter ones, stuck together with semicolons and conjunctions, and hence that one feels less crafty, perhaps. Still, when I read them together, I could not help smiling, and the syntactic convulsions of the expository first few pages sort of *do* foreshadow the mayhem that is to come.

Riemer
The fictional Riemer's alter ego in real life is Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer, 1774-1845, a scholar and historian who worked in Goethe's household and edited many of his works.

Kräuter
Theodor Kräuter, 1790-1856, Goethe's private secretary

Eckermann
Johann Peter Eckermann, 1792-1854, poet, writer, and Goethe's acquaintance. He travelled in Italy with Goethe's son and jointly edited (with Riemer) Goethe's Complete Works after G's death. Eckermann is best known for his account of his discussions with Goethe during the last years of Goethe's life, published in three volumes as *Conversations with Goethe*.

Wittgenstein
Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1889-1951, Austrian-British philosopher who does not need an introduction from me. The fictional Goethe in the story is obsessed with bringing Wittgenstein to Weimar, and professes repeatedly that he regards him as his intellectual heir. But, of course, Wittgenstein was born 57 years after Goethe's death. Indeed, Thomas has the fictional Wittgenstein die even before Goethe, in the most obvious anachronism in the story. However, it is true that much of Wittgenstein's thought appears rooted in Goethe's, in particular ideas on causation and explanation. This appears to be the case although Wittgenstein famously did *not* list Goethe among those that he regards as his intellectual models. Hence, Thomas cleverly swaps literary influences, and shows Goethe as feeling indebted to Wittgenstein for carrying on his intellectual legacy.

Relationship Wittgenstein - Goethe
Riemer habe zuerst nicht gewusst, wie eine Verbindung zwischen Goethe und Wittgenstein herzustellen sei... [p11]. My translation: *At first, Riemer did not know how to bring Goethe and Wittgenstein together*. Indeed. Nobody did. Because Wittgenstein was not born yet! :-) The subtle double-meaning of lines like this is one of the many delights in this story.

Treatment of Eckermann
... er, Eckermann, der mir alles verdankt, dem ich alles gegeben habe und der nichts wäre ohne mich... [p10] Niemand weiss, wo Eckermann heute ist [p13]
My translation: *Eckermann, who owes everything to me, whom I gave everything and who would be nothing without me. Nobody knows where Eckermann is today*. Indeed - Eckermann is known today entirely as a source for historical studies focussing on Goethe, through his records of discussions published in Conversations with Goethe. Another subtle double-meaning that plays delightfully with the historical significance of the characters.

Deliberate inaccuracies
... Schopenhauer und Stifter leben nicht mehr.... My translation: *Schopenhauer and Stifter are no longer alive*. Well. Both were, actually. The former was 43 years old on Goethe's dying day, and the latter 27. Thomas has a few historical inaccuracies hidden in his story, and it is amusing to note that the fictional

Goethe is trying to invite somebody to Weimar who did not yet live and dismisses writers as dead who did.

Some minor characters [pp 18-19]
Cornelia Schellhorn Second wife of Goethe's grandfather.
Ernst August. Duke Ernst August II Constantin von Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, father of Goethe's duke and friend, duke Carl August. This is another historical inaccuracy - Goethe and Ernst August never met.
Ulrike. Theodore Ulrike Sophie von Levetzow. In the story, the fictional Goethe includes her in a list of people he unkindly identifies as stupid ("dumm"). Another one of Thomas' satirical digs - Goethe revered Theodore for her quick wit.
Frau von Stein. Charlotte Albertine Ernestine Freifrau von Stein. A close friend of Goethe's.

Rant against his peers
In a bout of churlish ill-will, the fictional Goethe rails at his fellow Weimar men-of-letters: *Kleist habe er vernichtet, was ihm leid täte. ... Wieland, Herder, habe er immer höher geschätzt, als er sie behandelt habe*. My translation: *He annihilated Kleist and was sorry for it. ... He always held Wieland and Herder in greater esteem than he treated them* . These statements are rooted in some historical events: Goethe staged a play by Heinrich von Kleist by dividing it into acts, thereby lengthening its duration and contributing to its lack of success. He wrote a satire directly pinned at Wieland, in which he criticised him as narrow-minded. Goethe ended his long-standing friendship with Herder when it became clear that their opposing views on the French Revolution were unbridgeable.

Goethe's last words
Famously, Goethe's last words are said to have been *mehr Licht* ("more light"). There are many jokes circulating at German academic faculties of literature picking on this presumed legacy. The most widely-known is the jokey contention that Goethe actually said *mehr nicht* ("no more"), and also some others, claiming he said, in dialect, *mer liecht hier schlecht* ("this is an uncomfortable bed to lie in"). Thomas metes out his most irreverent stroke when he places the academic joke into a different context. In the story, the fictional Goethe is said to have focussed on his last intellectual thought before dying, uttering *Das Zweifelnde und das Nichtzweifelnde - mehr nicht* ("the doubting and the non-doubting. Not more." The fictional Riemer and Kräuter, and the I-narrator, agreed in the story to alter these last words to "mehr Licht", and in the final line in the story, the I-narrator confesses that he has lived with the shame of having falsified Goethe's legacy ever since.

This ending is exceedingly subtle. Thomas suggests that the academic joke circulating at German universities is actually the truth, and that Goethe never asked to have the curtains drawn back to let in more light. Indeed, what Goethe actually said was something potentially quite deep, something that proved that his intellect remained strong until his final minute.

But Thomas' sarcasm is deeper still. If we examine this fictional layer, what Goethe actually said appears pseudo-intellectual at best. All through the story, Goethe repeatedly brought up the waffly principles of "doubting and non-doubting", in a loose reference to Wittgenstein's thoughts on scepticism and explanation. However, the concepts were never explored, and hence remained without intellectual substance, akin to deep-sounding words uttered by minor scholars who lack true intellect.

So, what emerges in the end is that Goethe's assistants churlishly, and deliberately, changed words they thought to transport deep meaning into something they regarded as banal. But in doing so, they actually did Goethe a good turn, they changed the babblings of a deteriorating mind into something that posterity may, with a bit of goodwill, interpret as deep last words of a towering intellect, an intellect that in his final seconds was still not satisfied, still demanded deeper enlightenment, still demanded "more light". But we, the reader,

know better...

Brilliant. Go read it - it only takes half an hour or so, but you will have so much fun unravelling the many layers of this story. I can only recommend it.

Bilge Guler says

Kitaptaki ilk öykü gerçekten nefis. Bernhard, bu kez aileyi, Norveç'i ve pek tabii yine Avusturya'y? yerden yere çalm??. Seveni için keyifli öyküler, ben de seveni oldu?umdan bir hayli keyif ald?m.

David Ramirer says

vier erzählungen, die zwar jeweils schon einmal veröffentlicht, aber nie in buchform zusammengeklebt worden sind, vereinigt dieses schmale bändchen. in vier rasch gelesenen episoden findet man den ganz typischen bernhard, den man entweder mag oder nicht, der seine protagonisten "hochmusikalisch" (ein attribut, das er sich selbst gerne verliehen hat, und ihm seine anhimmler gerne abgekauft haben, weil die meistens von musik nicht die geringste ahnung haben. in wahrheit ist seine "musikalität" nichts anderes als geschickte "variation eines themas" einerseits und "minimalismus" andererseits, dadurch durchaus modern - aber darüber hinaus hat er nichts musikalisches in seinen texten formal angewendet) jammern, sich aufregen, zerknirscht erinnern und restlos scheitern lässt. alle scheitern sie und ziehen über abwesendes her, erheben sich mittels entrüstung, schimpfen und "betrachten" das entsetzliche.
wer den humor, der in all dem steckt, ausklammert, kann das für "nestbeschmutzerei" halten. in der überzeichnung aber entdecke ich viel grafisches - karikaturen von menschen, die sich *erheben wollen* und doch an der eigenen beschränktheit kleben bleiben.
in summa: immer noch sehr schön zu lesen, aber da ich von bernhard schon sehr viel in jüngeren jahren gelesen habe, kenne ich das alles viel zu gut, um noch *richtig* beeindruckt zu sein.

1 : goethe schtirbt - eine schöne kurze, typisch bernhardsche blödelei. erfrischend!
2 : montaigne - 42jähriges kind flüchtet vor der pösen familie auf einen turm. kaum originell.
3 : wiedersehen - die übliche jammerei mit befriedigender endpointe.
4 : in flammen aufgegangen. reisebericht ... - lustiger brief, den der empfänger sicher niemals ganz lesen würde.

César says

4'5

Paul Fulcher says

The four pieces in this collection were first released in German as a collection in 2010, although published separately previously.

Other short story/novella collections I have read, e.g. Prose and Three Novellas,. have been earlier, and less developed works, but this is Bernhard at his peak (all written in the early 1980s), and the book would serve as a wonderful introduction to the author, Bernhard in miniature, as well as a wonderful treat for the Bernhard completist (among which I number myself).

The translator is James Reidel, another to add to my growing list for Thomas Bernhard which now reads, of books I've read: James Reidel (Goethe Dies), Martin Chalmers (Prose and also Victor Halfwit), Peter Jansen (Three Novellas - Amras), Kenneth Northcott (Voice Imitators & Three Novellas - Playing Watten & Walking), Michael Hoffman (Frost), Richard and Clara Winston (Gargoyle), Sophie Wilkins (Lime Works & Correction), Ewald Osers (Yes & Old Masters, also the hard-to-obtain Cheap Eaters and an earlier translation of Woodcutters), David McLintock (Concrete, Wittgenstein's Nephew, Extinction & Woodcutters), Jack Dawson (Loser), Carol Brown Janeway (My Prizes), Meredith Oakes and Andrea Tierney (Heldenplatz), Russell Stockman (On the Mountain). And in addition I'm aware of translations by Gita Honneger (author also of a biography of Bernhard), Michael Mitchell, David Horrocks, Peter Eyre & Tom Cairns (various stories, plays and poems).

The title story, Goethe Dies was originally published in Die Zeit in 1982, towards the end of Thomas Bernhard's life, to mark the 150th anniversary of Goethe's death.

The story has Goethe on his death bed, deciding to summon Wittgenstein, who he has not met but sees as his philosophical successor, from England to see him. [Wittgenstein in reality, was not born until more than 50 years after Goethe's death, but in the novel's world is a contemporary].

Except in true Bernhard fashion, the story is told in indirect, often bitter, second- and third- hand accounts, indeed the unnamed narrator has not been present at all in the conversations that take place between the dying Goethe, his secretaries [Friedrich] Kräuter and [Johann] Eckermann and the literary historian [Friedrich Wilhelm] Riemer, the latter being the narrator's main direct source.

"He, Riemer, had spoken with Goethe several times over the last three days, twice in the presence of Kräuter, whom Goethe is said to have requested continuously, and up to the last minute, to remain at his side, but alone at one point as well, for Kräuter suddenly felt stick to his stomach, due apparently to Riemer’s presence in Goethe’s bedroom, and hurriedly took his leave, whereupon Goethe promptly began discussing with Riemer, just as in days past, The Doubting and the Doubting Nothing, just as in those first days of March, during which Goethe, thus said Riemer, kept coming back to this subject time and time again and with the utmost vigilance time and time again to the virtual exclusion of anything else since the end of February, for he had, thus said Riemer, on his daily morning constitutional with Riemer, as it were, hence without Kräuter and hence, from Riemer again, without that evil familiar regarded as the Lier-in-Wait of this Gothean death, been preoccupied with the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus and even referred to the body of Wittgenstein thought as that which stood at once alongside his first, as well as that which superceded his, specifically at the point where the decision came between that which Goethe had been compelled to observe and record as Here and that which he had for as There for a lifetime would have to be eclipsed ultimately, if not completely eclipsed, by Wittgensteinian thought."
[....]
? The idea of inviting Wittgenstein to Weimar occurred to Goethe at the end of February, thus said Riemer presently, and not at the beginning of March, as Kräuter maintained, and it was Kräuter who learned from Eckermann that Eckermann would prevent Wittgenstein from travelling to Weimar to see Goethe at all costs.
[...]
Goethe allegedly said to Eckermann that his services, which he, Eckermann, had always thus far performed for him, for Goethe, in those days and in his saddest of hours in the history of German philosophy, were null

and void, for he, Eckermann, has perfidiously maligned Wittgenstein in front of Goethe’s eyes, had made himself unforgivably guilty and had to leave the room at once, *The room*, Goethe allegedly said, which was quite out of character for him since he always called his bedroom, *The bedchamber*, and then suddenly he, thus said Riemer, flung the word *room* at Eckermann’s head, and Eckermann stood there for a moment completely speechless, not getting a word out, thus said Riemer, and left Goethe."

James Reidel is better known for translating Bernhard's poems, and his translation of the title story wasn't entirely successful for me. Bernhard's sentences, with their nested clauses of indirect speech, are notoriously difficult, but I felt other translations I have read have parsed them a little better. It was also impossible to incorporate into the translation two key features of the German original mentioned in his own Notes. The novel's title "Goethe Schtirbt" is a corruption of the correct German word, but the English title Goethe Dies is in standard English. And the story's conclusion, claiming Goethe's famous last words were misreported, in German has "Mehr nicht" being turned into "Mehr Licht". Reidel's English rendition as "No more" turned into "More Light" is literally correct but loses the pun.

The story is also available on the web in an alternative, unauthorised, translation by Douglas Robertson (http://shirtysleeves.blogspot.co.uk/2...
). He translated the title as "Goethe Dighs" and makes the real last words at the end "More night", which preserves the pun but misses the echo of Goethe's earlier words, "No more", when banishing Eckermann. Ultimately the difficulty of the pun lies in the inability to change the translation of "Mehr Licht" as the "More Light" rendition is already so canonical in English culture as Goethe's last words.

The story Goethe Dies however is a wonderful introduction to Bernhard, very short, which makes his dense prose easier to digest, and packed with subtlety, as Reidel's end notes very helpfully explain.

This is also a truly excellent review:
https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...

The second story, Montaigne, was also first published in Die Zeit in 1982.

This is an example of the Bernhardian monologue from a narrator, directed at his family.

"They reproached me because I was their misfortune; that I had made it against them and their relationships, against their affairs and there ideas, which were my own as well.
That I made it my habit to undermine their thinking, to mock it, destroy and exterminate it. That I enlisted everything at my command to undermine it and destroy it and exterminate it. [...]
From birth I was against them, holding my very existence against them as this wicked, never-speaking child just perpetually staring at them, their perfidious monstrosity".

The set-up is simple, the narrator, in his 40s but still living in the family estate, retires to an abandoned tower to escape his tormentors (i.e. his relatives), a book of philosophy in hand, snatched from the library. The book turns out to be by Montaigne, the irony of course being that he was known for his progressive views on children's education (and also had a library attached to a tower).

His monologue is directed both at his family's treatment of him, and their business dealings. A wonderful Bernhard sentence: "They spooned their soup and came to the defence of a dog which had bitten a passerby and in this canine can't they nevertheless were still talking about their business"

Reunion, originally published in 1982, is the longest story in the collection, although still only 30 pages. Two

friends , aged in their 50s, on a train station and what we read is the comments made by one:

"While I always expressed myself too *loudly*, and especially the word *misery* always too loudly, I said it was invariably typical of him to invariably say everything too softly, something that made it difficult throughout our time together, especially when we so often went walking in the forest every day, as it had been our custom towards the end of winter, speaking not a word to each other in self-evident consent, as I said emphatically, without hesitation."

Then follows a lengthy diatribe about their parents, and in particular their regular, Alpine holidays, in an frustrated search for piece and quiet ("people loke our parents never find piece and quiet, I said, because they themselves *are* the absence of peace and quiet," holidays the two of them were forced to join, largely, in the narrator's view, to serve as a scapegoat for whatever ills befell the trip:

"So, the suspicion cannot be rejected out of hand, I said, of whether our parents made us for no other reason than to personify their guilt."

No responses from the interlocutor are recorded and the piece concludes: "Don't you remember, I asked. No, he said, and then with a very quiet and weak voice:*I remember nothing whatsover.*

The last story, Going Up in Flames: A Travelogue to an Erstwhile Friend, was originally published in 1983-4.

It takes the form of a a letter by the narrator to an architect, a long estranged friend ("my dear architect, my dear building artist, my dear surface area charlatan", sent from Norway ("the people there are unintellectual and perfectly uninteresting", their out of tune pianos having enabled them, in their ignorance, to accidentally discover modern music), telling of a dream he had, en route, in Rotterdam, "the city that is nearest and dearest to me", but set in Vienna and Salzburg:

"What have the Austrian people made of his European jewel in just forty or fifty years, I thought, sitting on this block of conglomerate stone? A single architectural abomination in which the Salzburgers, Catholic and National Socialist haters of Jews and immigrants, race back and forth in there gruesome Lederhosen and Loden cape by the tens of thousands."

A dream that ends with his deepest wish, as the whole of Austria burns:

"And as I saw the Austrian government, which, as you know, has always been the stupidest government on earth, and the remains of the Austrian Catholic clergy, which has always been the most cunning on earth, as well as the barely recognisable remains on Christian-Socialism and Catholicism and National Socialism in that stinking grey-black desert of fire, I breathed a sigh of relief, albeit coughing."

Highly recommended - start here and then read everything Bernhard has written.

Justin Evans says

Four very solid pieces, undermined by some atrocious prose--which I have to assume is the translator's fault.

Perhaps Reidel is of the 'alienate the reader' school of thought, according to which someone reading this book in English must be constantly reminded that the book was originally in German, but I'm pretty sure that grammatical mistakes form no part even of that dubious school.

"In the late morning of the twenty-second he, Riemer, before my appointed visit with Goethe at half past two, warned me to speak softly on one side, but not too softly on the other with that man of whom it could be said is not only the greatest man in the nation but also the greatest German of all to this day..."

That's the first part of the first sentence in the book, and it's missing a pronoun. The book doesn't get better as far as proofreading/editing/translating goes.

It's also the first part of the first sentence in the book, and the humor of enrolling Goethe, of all people, in Bernhard's guerilla war against German and Austrian everything is wonderful, and that kind of wonder is maintained throughout the book. So it's well worth reading, I'm glad someone translated it, and I hope in the second printing a few of the more egregious errors can be fixed.

RK-ïsme says

If I had the wherewithal to write, I should have liked to be a writer in the style of Thomas Bernhard, rambling, repetitive, sardonic, alienated from human kind. But, I am more like a character in a Bernhard book than like Bernhard. I have spent my life preparing to write and have never written. But I do love him.

_____

"... the idea of inviting Wittgenstein to Weimar occurred to Goethe at the end of February, thus said Reimer presently, and not at the beginning of March, as Kräuter maintained, and it was Kräuter who learned from Eckermann that Eckermann would prevent Wittgenstein from travelling to Weimar to see Goethe at all costs."

Typical Bernhard in these four stories of the book entitled: Goethe Dies. Repetition, endless citation of speech, references to Wittgenstein even. All that's missing are the one hundred and fifty page sentences, not likely to be achieved in the short story format.

The titular story, Goethe Dies, takes place, for the most part, on the last day of Goethe's long and productive life. The narrator of the story is unnamed, perhaps Bernhard himself, waiting outside the bed chamber for an audience with Goethe which never comes. Instead we wait with him, learning what we can from Goethe's factotum, Reimer.

What we learn, through Bernhard's many circumlocutions, is that Goethe has dispatched one of his secretaries to Oxford or Cambridge, whichever, to locate Wittgenstein and bring him back to meet with Goethe to discuss Wittgenstein's work, basically the short Tractatus Logico-philosophicus, which Goethe judges to have surpassed his lifetime of work. This is the most wonderful of anachronistic of stories. And Bernhard carries this absurdity through to the end, which I shall not reveal for fear of spoiling your fun. But the very thought of Goethe meeting with Wittgenstein is delectable.

"Even if Wittgenstein and Goethe just stood facing each other or sitting, remaining silent the whole time, and even if it had been the briefest of moments, it would have been the most beautiful moment that I could

imagine, to which I bore witness. Riemer said that Goethe had set the Tractatus above his Faust and everything he wrote and thought. This too is Goethe, said Riemer. He too is such a man."

The story is a general reflection in honour of both Goethe and Wittgenstein, a praise, I suspect, for the general intellectual honesty of the two in a world of pettiness and demagoguery. The story was originally published in Germany as part of a memoriam honouring the sesquicentennial of Goethe's death in 1982. Wittgenstein, on the other hand seems to have been an ongoing subject of respect for Bernhard, a fellow Austrian. Given the general distain of Bernhard for his fellow countrymen, the honour paid to Wittgenstein, (see Bernhard's 'Correction' and 'Wittgenstein's Nephew'), is exceptional.

Of course, Bernhard is playing a slight of hand here in placing Wittgenstein within Goethe's lifetime, their deaths being some 120 years apart. In any event, the story reflects much about Bernhard in his revealed relationship to two intellectual giants while not abandoning his disgust with humanity in general.

The next story, 'Montaigne: A Story in Twenty-Two Instalments', is even more 'Bernhardian'. It is a typical Bernhard rant against family, against a family of philistines.

" I had gone into the library and pulled a philosophy book off the shelves for myself in the full knowledge of committing a crime because in their eyes just going into the library was a crime and for that much greater crime of taking a philosophy book off the shelves, but where my withdrawal from them was still the only thing which counted as a crime. They said that they had bought a house in Encknach in order to enlarge it and then, in a year, sell it at a tenfold profit, they said that they had combined two farms in Rutzenmoos and made a profit of thirty million overnight. We must buy when the weak are Leir weakest, they said at the table, beat the intelligent with a more ruthless intelligence, they said, with a more perfidious perfidy."

This is the lot of a typical refined intellectual born into a family of louts. Life in the family is a constant struggle. The goal of each is to destroy the others.

"l am their destroyer, they said once more today while I, however, relentlessly convey that they are my destroyers, committed to my destruction ever since I had been conceived. My family has me on their conscience, in each and everything I say, while they reciprocate in each and every thing which they say and think, and in their relentless dealings, such that I would have them on my conscience."

Similarly, in the story "Reunion" we again face the horrors of growing up in a barbarian, though pretentious Austrian family. The event is the accidental meeting of two childhood acquaintances, now aged fifty-two, in a rail station. Our narrator spends the entire sixty-seven pages of the story ranting about the mistreatment they had suffered under their parents, in particular during annual trips to the Alps.

"Even the arrangements of our parents for the mountains made us turn against them and furious with the mountains, with the fresh air a with our parents' unalleviated, long-awaited peace and quiet, which they believed they could find in the mountains and only in the mountains, but never did they find it in themselves, as we knew; even when they spoke of their latest impending Alpine holiday, when they packed their Alpine paraphernalia and confronted us with this packing of their Alpine paraphernalia, it made us furious with their Alpine intentions and with their Alpine passion and ultimately with their Alpine madness, and we were as much repelled by their Alpine intentions and passion as we were by their Alpine madness."

Much of my enjoyment of Bernhard is located in his ability to pick on some absurd detail and to continue to enlarge upon it to the point where it borders on being unbelievable. But then I remember the absurdities of my own live. Why the hell do I own all of these books? All of these CDs which I will never even see again?

In this case, we are presented with the knitted red stockings and caps worn by the narrator's parents on each of these vacations and the knitted green stockings and caps worn by the parents of his acquaintance on each of these vacations. Each year, the women knit new stockings and caps in preparation for the trip. Each year, the red stockings and the red caps and the green stockings and the red caps and green stockings and green caps are religiously worn by the parents as they hike and climb. And each year, the narrator was driven to distraction by these stockings and caps.

"You are from the family of the bright green stockings and bright green caps, I said, I from the family of bright red. After my parents were dead, I found in a box and in two chests of drawers nothing but hundreds of bright red Alpine caps, I said, nothing but bright red Alpine stockings. Every one of them knitted by my mother. My parents could have gone into the High Alps with these bright red caps and bright red stockings for thousands of years. I burnt every one of those right red caps and bright red stockings, I said."

Of course, this is all classic Bernhard. The black humour that bring us so much joy as we see ourselves portrayed in the ranting. 'Reunion' is further enhanced with an ending with all of the anticlimactic punch of a shaggy dog story.

The final, quite enchanting story is, 'Going Up in Flames', an eight page letter written to an old (ex)friend, another rant of course, but this a general condemnation of humanity, especially the Austrians, and a discourse on the futility, impossibility?, of writing.

"I had written letters to you in Vienna and Madrid, then in Budapest and Palermo, but letters never sent, all of these letters stamped and addressed, as a matter of fact, but not sent so as not to be a sacrifice to someone’s bad taste. I have destroyed these letters and sworn never to write you another line, not one more to you or anyone else. I permitted myself no more correspondence."

Again, as in the first story, Wittgenstein's ghost is present.

"Because I wanted to be neither an Oxford brain nor a Cambridge brain; above all, to especially endeavour to mightily keep away from every university is what I have always been telling myself in recent years, and, as you know, I have also avoided for years any books with academic content so as to avoid philosophy wherever I can, literature wherever I can, any kind of reading material in general wherever I can out of fear now, for this reading material is getting to be truly crazy and insane and ultimately deadening; hence the difficulties of travelling through Europe and North America."

Here we have Wittgenstein as alienated, from Austria, from academia. Indeed, this is a theme that pervades most of Bernhard's writing. The true intellect is rare. True values are rare. True aesthetics are rare. True intellect is alone, rootless. Austria has nothing to offer. Perhaps Wittgenstein would have found a home with Goethe, were it not for the 150 years between them.

Lee says

FCO (for completists only). Four short stories from 1982, per the notes. Only a few passages in the one about the alpine trekking parents with their trumpet and zither in search of peace and quiet, repeating "peace and quiet" that couldn't be found because their presence filled any setting, no matter how peaceful and quiet, into a restless setting, a setting where peace and quiet couldn't be found thanks to their presence, only this

passage really, a passage that maybe spanned a page and half, attained that particular repetitive Bernhard burn, but otherwise enjoyable on a 106-degree so-called "real feel" July day to dip toes back into a perspective reliant on default adjectives such as "annihilating." A beautiful slim hardcover worth slipping into place among all the other Bernhard on your shelf.

Habemus_apicellam says

Letteratura adulta per adulti

Berhard non è certo una lettura per persone fragili o ancora in via di maturazione: la cifra fondamentale di questo autore è un rifiuto assoluto di ogni ipocrisia, le negazione di ogni possibile compromesso che possiamo usare per nasconderci la amarezza di questa pillola terribile che è la vita. E' duro vivere, è amaro, è esiziale e a nulla servono le storie che ci raccontiamo, le illusioni che ci creiamo per andare avanti in qualche modo e per (sopra)vivere. Le continue ripetizioni nel testo da un lato sembrano quasi deliri di un folle, dall'altro fanno emergere una ironia amara ma intelligentissima e, se si riesce ad entrare in sintonia con questa atmosfera e ad affrontare con serenità le durissime verità che ci sbatte in faccia, queste pagine restano dentro. In questi quattro racconti non c'è scampo, non si trovano vie di uscita - ma la lettura è ricchissima, e traspare quasi una forza e un orgoglio nel descrivere a tinte forti la realtà in cui siamo immersi. Un contraltare unico e inconfondibile alle infinite storie intrise di "falso sentimentalismo" che tanti scrittori (o presunti tali) propinano ai lettori come consolazione e per lisciar loro il pelo. In particolare, il racconto su Montaigne rende evidenti i paralleli tra questo pensatore e l'autore: lo scetticismo e il pessimismo cosmici non portano mai alla disperazione ma ad un umanesimo stoico che può servire a fare qualche passo più coscienti di dove siamo, qui e ora: superare le ipocrisie è forse il primo passo per affrontare in modo adulto la realtà.

Steven says

This striking collection includes four stories by Bernhard: *Goethe Dies*, *Montaigne: A Story in Twenty-Two Installments*, *Reunion*, and *Going Up in Flames: A Letter to an Erstwhile Friend*. Acerbic, witty, relentless, funny, and at times surprisingly moving, these stories are classic Bernhard.

> *"I have always loved Montaigne like no other. I have always escaped to my Montaigne when I felt mortal fear. With Montaigne I conduct and control myself, and, yes, lead and mislead as well. Montaigne has always been my savior and redeemer. When I mistrust everyone else ultimately in my infinitely large philosophical family, which I can only describe as an infinitely large French philosophical family, where there are a few German and Italian nephews and nieces, but who all have, I must admit, died rather prematurely, I have always been in good hands with my Montaigne."* (32-33)

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pierlapo quimby says

Bernhard è così.

Ti attrae e ti respinge, ti affascina e ti repelle, ti ipnotizza e ti ossessiona, e ogni tanto ti rompe anche un po' le palle.

Schnier says

Sono davvero gioielli, questi quattro racconti. Ah, i racconti!… Quando sto per riavvicinarmi al romanzo come genere eletto, puntualmente il caso procura una raccolta che me ne distoglie. Eccezionali, violentissime storie; e con impeto, appunto, infrangono la sacralità dei santuari precostituiti per “legge”: la paternità – o la genitorialità – anche come ascendenza culturale, e la moralità commista a depositi confessionali e dispotici, assorbiti dal – o forse connaturati nel – Volk, dunque universalmente. La filosofia del dolore qui espressa, io la condivido senza esclusione alcuna, finanche nei più radicali accenti. C'è sempre un soggetto stritolato dal proprio artefice, a sua volta vessato da un'oggettività spietata e troneggiante, spirito e sostanza del mondo, contro cui nulla può agire. Ma ecco, presane coscienza, definirsi una norma antitetica, quasi uno stratagemma: lo scherno, e il sogno, dove incendiare e poi rimpiangere tutte le nostre Austrie...
(Mio commento originariamente pubblicato nel vecchio profilo su aNobii)

NobilisGughy says

Perché di fronte a certi libri, libri ben precisi, perdi l’equilibrio e ci precipiti dentro, senza possibilità di salvezza.

Melissa says

This slim volume of four short stories by Bernhard is difficult to describe in a brief review. I experienced them and reacted to them as I would poetry and as a result my instinct is to analyze just about every line in these stories; but then my review would be the same length as this edition of stories. One must really read Bernhard for oneself in order to fully grasp what is the Bernhard literary experience. The stories are dripping with dark satire and are laden with a rebellion against his native home of Austria. No topic related to his homeland is off limits as he pokes fun at the Austrian government, Catholicism, Austrian literature and even his relationship with his Austrian parents.

The rhetorical devices that Bernhard uses in his prose give a lyrical feeling to the text. The persistent repetition of words or phrases, for instance, enhances the level of biting satire in the stories. The incredibly long sentences give the stories a meandering and aimless feel to them; we are never sure when or if Bernhard is getting to the point of his story. In the title story, “Goethe Dies”, Goethe is nearing the end of his life and he insists to his aids and secretaries that he must meet Wittgenstein before he slips away. The idea of this anachronistic meeting is funny in and of itself but the silliness of the meeting is enhanced by the characterization of Goethe who is a cantankerous old man that will not take no for an answer. Why his secretaries and assistants object to Goethe’s meeting with Wittgenstein is never clearly articulated by any of them. Bernhard’s use of indirect speech increases the ridicule of this famous German philosopher and his inner circle.

"With time Goethe allegedly worked himself up over notion, as Krauter confirmed, of summoning Wittgenstein from England to Weimar under any circumstance and as soon as possible and Krauter would in

effect be bringing Wittgenstein to see Goethe oddly enough on this, the twenty-second; the idea of inviting Wittgenstein to Weimar occurred to Goethe at the end of February, thus said Riemer presently, and not at the beginning of March, as Krauter maintained, and it was Krauter who learnt from Eckermann that Eckermann would prevent Wittgenstein from travelling to Weimar to see Goethe at all costs."

The next two stories, “Montaigne: A Story in Twenty-Two Installments” and “Reunion” ruthlessly mock the parent-child relationship. Bernhard highlights the codependent nature of the family dynamic which oftentimes serves very little purpose other than to make the parents and child miserable. In Montaigne, the narrator, similar to the philosopher Montaigne, is trying to lock himself up in his tower so that he can finally have peace from his family. His family is more interested in business and the narrator wants to be left alone to read good books. What bibliophile would not be able relate to this? Bernhard begins the tale of “Montaigne” with:

"From my family and thus from my tormentors, I found refuge in a corner of the tower and had, without light and thus without the mosquitoes driving me insane, brought with me a book from the library after I had read a few sentences in it, by Montaigne as it turned out, to whom I am related in such a close and truly enlightening way as I am to no one else."

“Reunion” extends this dysfunctional family dynamic by describing the young narrator as he desperately struggles to free himself from his annoying, hateful parents. The hyperbole that Bernhard employs in this story made it, for me, the funniest narrative in the collection. The narrator believes that his parents mission in life is to make him miserable and blame him for all of their problems. He writes:

"Essentially everything about our parents was rough, they were rough and ruthless to our whole lives, I said, whenever they should have always been circumspect with us, caring. Mother slammed the doors behind her all the time, Father trampled through the house in his old climbing boots."

The parents are in constant search of “peace and quiet” and to him, the narrator, his parents are the antithesis of peace and quiet. Wherever they go, they disrupt and destroy any chance of peace and quiet. While on vacation in the Alps, the family hikes to a quiet alcove in the mountains and when they reach the quiet peak the parents rupture the “peace and quiet” by playing instruments. Anyone who has gone on a family vacation in search of rest and relaxation, but instead has come home more aggravated and anxious, will most certainly laugh uncomfortably at this story.

These four stories were an excellent introduction to the literary style and talent of Bernhard. I ordered three more of his longer novels after I finished this volume. I am very eager to experience his unique writing techniques in a full length book.
