

“Brief Reviews”

*Three Novellas*

Thomas Bernhard

Trans. Peter Jansen and Kenneth J. Northcott

Foreword by Brian Evenson

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by Jeff Bursey

The Austrian writer, Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989), has created controversy in his homeland. Right-wingers protested his last play, *Heldenplatz* (1988), its English translator relates, by depositing “horse manure in front of the theater” on opening night. Earlier, a Minister of Culture and Education had implied Bernhard was mad. Though he is invoked with admiration by the unnamed narrator in William Gaddis’s *Agape[macron over e] Agape* (2002), his writings are insufficiently known to English readers. *Three Novellas* is not a major work, unlike *Concrete* and *Wittgenstein’s Nephew*, but it does present an early version of the complex world Bernhard devised for his aesthetic purposes. Each novella is economical and slight in plot. Each shows two main features: his development of the narrator who captures the speech of others within his own, and the compulsions, usually political and social, which force characters to question everything. When answers are arrived at, the temporarily self-aware characters regard them as provisional, and demands of themselves further scrutiny. Any answer expresses in disguise that person’s ulterior wishes and hopes, as if Narcissus was continually forgetting whom he regarded in the pool.

“Amras” (1964) features two brothers, separated from their parents, who are recluses on the property of their uncle. They indulge in morbid self-examination, and are attuned especially to each other’s thoughts. However, the preciousness of the language and the inbred nature of the narrators’ perceptions are relayed with little stylistic distinction. The narrator of “Playing Watten” (1969) is a disgraced doctor who is writing a report to a scholar on his thoughts from a particular day. Most deal with why he will never play cards again with a familiar group of men. A visitor identified as “the truck driver” acts as society’s stand-in, and endlessly interrogates the self-proclaimed outcast on his decision. Frustrated with himself for making the truck driver leave him alone, the doctor almost wails, “A person like the truck driver gradually reduces a person like me to despair...” Unable to practice medicine, withdrawing from human contact, the narrator in his hut waits for death. “But all thoughts can be used for the total destruction of our own life, just as they can be used for the destruction of every life.” This novella is a good depiction of the cramped life of the intellectual who denies empathic connections with others, and who self-indulgently ascribes the possibility of his own death and the impersonal slaughter of millions equal weight.

In “Walking” (1971) Bernhard most fruitfully works on philosophical concepts which intrigue him, while refining his style. Two men talk about a mutual friend confined to a mental

institution. Oehler, the narrator's friend, speaks most about madness, children, how horrible Austria is, and also about holes in trousers. His appraisal of life is strict and rigorous:

“If we do not constantly exist *against*, but only constantly *with* the facts, says Oehler, we shall go under in the shortest possible space of time. The fact is that our existence is an unbearable and horrible existence, if we exist with this fact, says Oehler, and not *against* this fact, then we shall go under in the most wretched and in the most usual manner, there should therefore be nothing more important to us than existing constantly, even if in, but also at the same time *against* the fact of an unbearable and horrible existence.”

Oehler's words are rendered by the narrator, along with quotations from their absent friend, from the doctor treating him, and from a tailor. Repetition of utterances and agonizingly defined ideas build a narrative maze where air is removed and horizons lost. For some readers, Bernhard's reported speech technique may not overcome an inculcated preference for conventional representations of dialogue. Having characters dwell obsessively on fine points might seem nothing short of maddening, in which case reading Bernhard will be like death by pushpin. But for those who can bear the hypnotic sentences and who will engage the grim mind behind them, *Three Novellas*, particularly “Walking”, will be refreshing, and a stimulus to thinking about other ways to conceive of fiction.