

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

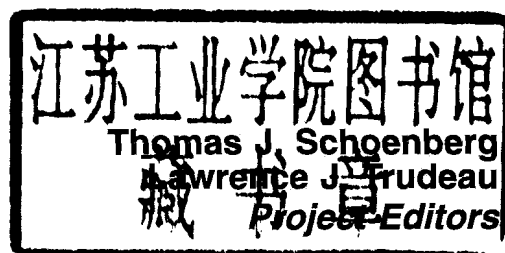
TCLC

165

Volume 165

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 165

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Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. *TCLC* has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as *TCLC*. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” *TCLC* “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, *TCLC* helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in *TCLC* presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of *TCLC* is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Thomson Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (*CLC*) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between *CLC* and *TCLC*.

Organization of the Book

A *TCLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *TCLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook*, which was discontinued in 1998.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

Citing *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*

When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as University of Chicago Press style or Modern Language Association (MLA) style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York: Roof Books, 1990. 73-82. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Janet Witlec. Vol. 127. Detroit: Gale, 2003. 3-8.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Thomas Bernhard 1931-1989	1
<i>Austrian novelist, playwright, short story writer, autobiographer, and poet</i>	
Northrop Frye 1912-1991	138
<i>Canadian critic, essayist, and editor</i>	
Alan Paton 1903-1988	265
<i>South African novelist, poet, essayist, biographer, autobiographer, and short story writer</i>	
<i>Entry devoted to the novel Cry, the Beloved Country (1948)</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 341

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 441

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 453

TCLC-165 Title Index 459

Thomas Bernhard

1931-1989

Austrian novelist, playwright, short story writer, autobiographer, and poet.

INTRODUCTION

Bernhard was one of postwar Austria's most prominent and controversial novelists and playwrights. Presenting a pessimistic view of human nature, and focusing on the possibility of redemption through art, Bernhard's works confront his audience with death, madness, hatred, and disease and carry on a vituperative public argument with modern Austria, repeatedly depicting his country's culture in a bitterly critical light. Nevertheless, his penchant for misanthropy and his criticism of Austrian public figures have done little to erode his popularity in Europe and America. The recipient of numerous literature prizes during his lifetime, he is widely considered to be among the most significant German-speaking authors of the post-World War II period.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bernhard was born in a home for unwed mothers in Heerlan, Holland, in 1931. His mother, Hertha Bernhard, relocated the family near Salzburg, and married in 1935. Bernhard's grandfather, Johannes Freumbichler, was a major influence on the young writer—an unsuccessful novelist, Freumbichler took Bernhard for long walks and taught him about philosophers such as Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche. Freumbichler likely also influenced the pessimistic tone associated with Bernhard's later writing. After unpleasant experiences at a school run by Nazis during World War II and then by Catholics after the war, Bernhard dropped out at age sixteen to study voice in Salzburg. At eighteen, Bernhard became ill with pleurisy and pneumonia. Thinking his illness would prove fatal, Bernhard's doctors sent him to a terminal ward in a public health facility. There he contracted tuberculosis, which permanently damaged his lungs and effectively ended his plans for a singing career. Bernhard spent several years recovering, often in sanatoriums. It is during this period that Bernhard first showed an interest in literature. His grandfather died in 1949, followed by his mother in 1950. After Bernhard recovered from his illness, he returned to school to continue his studies. After graduating in 1957, he published several short books of prose

and poetry, along with librettos. Bernhard did not achieve national recognition until he published his first novel, *Frost*, in 1963. In 1965 he moved to a remote Austrian village, Ohlsdorf, where he quietly spent the remainder of his life writing. He was an extremely prolific figure, completing 15 novels as well as numerous plays, among other works. Bernhard died February 12, 1989. At his request, only three close relatives attended his funeral. Bernhard's will forbids the publication, production, or recitation of his novels or plays in Austria for the duration of his copyright. The will also forbids access to his private papers, letters, and unpublished manuscripts.

MAJOR WORKS

Bernhard's works are stylistically virtuosic, grimly humorous meditations on death, madness, disease, and hatred. His novels typically feature artists, scientists, and intellectuals as narrators or protagonists. These characters are sometimes frustrated to the point of insanity by their inability to finish, or even begin, some grandiose or bizarre ambition, and they invariably project a mad persona from the beginning of the work. In addition, his novels strongly criticize Austrian culture and politics—in *Frost*, for example, Bernhard posits that a hereditary defect exists in the Austrian national spirit, and in his second novel, *Amras*, (1964) he uses hereditary diseases and incestuous homoeroticism to portray the spirit of postwar Austria. Novels such as *Verstörung* (1967; *Gargoyles*) and *Das Kalkwerk* (1970; *The Lime Works*) employ extended monologues spoken by mentally deranged characters. While Bernhard's novels explore the inner world of his characters, his plays are more often concerned with outlandish social relationships that reveal a dementia at the level of society. In Bernhard's first play, *Ein Fest für Boris* (1970; *A Party for Boris*), thirteen legless guests attend a party hosted by a wealthy legless woman. Because the guests are absorbed in sharing their morbid experiences and dreams with one another, they fail to notice Boris's death until the end of the party. Plays such as *Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige* (1972), and *Der Theatermacher* (1984; *Histrionics*) alternately lament the futility and inadequacy of art and lampoon the desecration of art in modern Austria. In addition, works such as *Die Jagdgesellschaft* (1974; *The Hunting Party*) and *Der Präsident* (1975; *The President*) present Bernhard's apocalyptic view of history and savagely attack the lingering effects of Nazism in Austria.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Bernhard's 1984 novel *Holzfällen* (*The Woodcutters*) was seized by the police because of its ostensibly unflattering portrait of a famous Viennese personage. His play *Heldenplatz* (1988) charged that anti-Semitism was widespread in Austria and angered his audiences and the Austrian government. Despite his open contempt for Austria and the dark subject matter of his works, Bernhard is considered by many to be one of Austria's most important writers. Many critics have examined Bernhard's relationship to his country and its history. For example, Stephen P. Dowden has examined the place of Bernhard's works in post-World War II Austria, placing him within the "tradition of Austrian writing that regards the world and its languages with deep mistrust." Jeanette R. Malkin has focused on Bernhard's treatment of the Holocaust in *Heldenplatz*, arguing that "Bernhard's tactics in this uncompromising play go beyond the litany of fierce verbal attacks anticipated by his audience." Jonathan Long has considered the way Bernhard's works call into question the existing class hierarchies of Austrian society. In addition, many critics have applied philosophical and critical theories to Bernhard's works, including Steven Joyce, who has regarded *Der Theatermacher* as "an exemplary postmodern work" in which the main character "ambitiously entertains the idea of performing a grandiose intertextual work that encompasses the thematic concerns of every comedy ever written." Bruce Murphy has examined Bernhard's *Korrektur* in the context of "negation theory," maintaining that the work "foregrounds one notion of negation—involving elimination, nullification, and erasure—while implicitly demonstrating another, that of negation as the mainspring of creative processes." A number of critics have remarked on recurring images and patterns throughout Bernhard's works. Gitta Honegger has found the image of "the fool on the hill" evident in a number of his works, including his quasi-autobiographical works, in which he presents himself as the fool. Joseph Federico has analyzed the recurrence of "isolated, narcissistic, and hopelessly self-absorbed individuals," in Bernhard's works, who, contrary to standard literary tropes of journeys of self-discovery, embark on travels that take them "away from the self and toward the Other." Thomas J. Cousineau, in his overview of the critical reception and major themes of Bernhard's work, has declared that Bernhard "produced one of the profoundest as well as one of the most affirmative literary achievements of this recently completed millennium."

 PRINCIPAL WORKS

Auf der Erde und in der Hölle (poetry) 1957
In hora mortis (poetry) 1958
Unter dem Eisen des Mondes (poetry) 1958

Die Rosen der Einöde: fünf sätze für ballett, stimmen, und orchester (libretto) 1959
Köpfe (libretto) 1960
Frost (novel) 1963
Amras (novella) 1964
Prosa (prose) 1967
Verstörung [*Gargoyles*] (novel) 1967
Ungenach (novella) 1968
An der Baumgrenze (novel) 1969
Ereignisse (prose) 1969
Watten [*Playing Watten*] (novella) 1969
Ein Fest für Boris [*A Party for Boris*] (play) 1970
Das Kalkwerk [*The Lime Works*] (novel) 1970
Gehen [*Walking*] (novella) 1971
Der Italiener (screenplay) 1971
Midland in Stilfs (short stories) 1971
Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige (play) 1972
Die Jagdgesellschaft [*The Hunting Party*] (play) 1974
Der Kulterer (screenplay) 1974
Die Macht der Gewohnheit [*The Force of Habit*] (play) 1974
Korrektur [*Correction*] (novel) 1975
Der Präsident [*The President*] (play) 1975
Die Ursache (short stories) 1975
Die Berühmten (play) 1976
Der Keller: Eine Entziehung [*The Cellar: An Escape*] (memoir) 1976
Minetti: Porträt des Künstlers als alter Mann (play) 1976
Der Wetterfleck (short stories) 1976
Der Atem: Eine Entscheidung [*Breath: A Decision*] (memoir) 1978
Immanuel Kant: Komödie (play) 1978
Ja [*Yes*] (novella) 1978
Die Kälte: Eine Isolation [*In the Cold*] (memoir) 1978
Der Stimmenimitator [*The Voice Imitator*] (short stories) 1978
Die Erzählungen (short stories) 1979
Vor dem Ruhestand [*Eve of Retirement*] (play) 1979
Der Weltverbesserer (play) 1979
Die Billigesser [*The Cheap-Eaters*] (novel) 1980
Am Ziel (play) 1981
Ave Vergil (poetry) 1981
Maiandacht, Freispruch, and Eis (plays) 1981
Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh: Ein deutscher Dichtertag um 1980 (play) 1981
Beton [*Concrete*] (novella) 1982
Ein Kind [*A Child*] (memoir) 1982
Wittgensteins Neffe: Eine Freundschaft [*Wittgenstein's Nephew: A Friendship*] (memoir) 1982
Der Schein trügt [*Appearances Are Deceiving*] (play) 1983
Die Stücke, 1969-1981 (fiction, memoirs, and plays) 1983
Der Untergeher [*The Loser*] (novel) 1983
Holzfällen [*The Woodcutters*] (novel) 1984
Ritter, Dene, Voss (play) 1984
Der Theatermacher [*Histrionics*] (play) 1984

Alte Meister: Komödie [Old Masters] (novel) 1985
Gathering Evidence: A Memoir (memoir) 1985
Auslöschung [Extinction] (novel) 1986
Claus Peymann verläßt Bochum und geht als Burgtheaterdirektor nach Wien (play) 1986
Einfach kompliziert (screenplay) 1986
Elisabeth II: Keine Komödie (play) 1987
Der deutsche Mittagstisch: Dramolette [The German Lunch Table] (plays) 1988
Heldenplatz (play) 1988
Die Irren; Die Häftlinge (short stories) 1988
**In der Höhe: Rettungsversuch, Unsinn* [On the Mountain: Rescue Attempt, Nonsense] (novella) 1989
Claus Peymann kauft sich eine Hose und geht mit mir essen: Drei Dramolette (plays) 1990
Histrionics: Three Plays (plays) 1990
Three Novellas (novellas) 2003

*This work was written in 1959.

CRITICISM

Steven Joyce (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: Joyce, Steven. "Kismet and Continuities: Postmodernism and Thomas Bernhard's *Der Theatermacher*." *Colloquia Germanica* 24, no. 1 (1991): 24-37.

[In the following essay, Joyce examines postmodern elements in *Histrionics*, focusing on the structural and thematic significance of the protagonist's monologues throughout the play and the fragmentary nature of the protagonist's polemics.]

"The misery that is so prevalent in contemporary fiction is due in no small part to the inability of Western man to celebrate that sense of the infinite. Without it, as Blake intuited in the age of Newton, the 'bounded is loathed by the possessor, and that which passes as art is merely the patterned repetitions of the already known and dully familiar.'"

—*Readings From the New Book on Nature*, Robert Nadeau

Referring to the purpose of the play he intends to perform in the little Austrian village of Utzbach, the main character of Thomas Bernhard's *Der Theatermacher* states:

Die Idee war ja / eine Komödie zu schreiben / in der alle Komödien enthalten sind / die jemals geschrieben worden sind / Eine absurde Idee zweifellos / Für Bruscon durchaus zu verwirklichen . . .¹

Bernhard's Bruscon ambitiously entertains the idea of performing a grandiose intertextual work that encompasses the thematic concerns of every comedy ever written. Not only is he interested in the possibility of homogenizing literature but also in the possibility of establishing the principle of the underlying connectivity as well as continuity of all literary endeavor. At the same time Bruscon feels compelled to articulate the essential futility of his task which gestures both toward the absurd² and toward a definition of the postmodern.³

In his work on Thomas Bernhard entitled *Der Übertreibungskünstler*, Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler quotes a number of critics who variously refer to Thomas Bernhard as an "Alpen-Beckett," "Menschenfeind," and an "Unterganghofer."⁴ At the same time he cites the inadequacy of current literary theory to deal with Bernhard's work. He points out:

Die Divergenz in der Wertung wie die Unsicherheit in den Kategorien, die zur Beschreibung herangezogen werden mußten, weil sie in den betreffenden Disziplinen vorrätig waren, belegt die Untauglichkeit der Mittel, mit denen dieses Werk gepriesen oder radikal in Frage gestellt werden sollte. Positiv formuliert: Bernhards Werk könnte den Wissenschaften (und nicht nur der Literaturwissenschaft) helfen, neue Kategorien der Beschreibung zu finden.⁵

Schmidt-Dengler's statement that Bernhard's work allows the sciences to find new categories of description implies a positive postmodern critique that is, perhaps, best explained by Linda Hutcheon:

What postmodernism does, as its very name suggests, is confront and contest any modernist discarding or recuperating of the past in the name of the future. It suggests no search for transcendent timeless meaning, but rather a re-evaluation of and a dialogue with the past in the light of the present. We could call this, once again, "the presence of the past" or perhaps its "presentification" [quoting Hassan]. It does not deny the existence of the past; it does question whether we can ever know that past other than through its textualized remains.

(19-20)

In Bernhard's *Theatermacher* new categories of description emerge when simultaneous interrogations of the past and present occur. In this regard, the play is an exemplary postmodern work. It is both a "Modell der Entfremdung"⁶ and an ironic parody of a number of modernist tenets including "the modernist privileging of the alienated artist's perspective" (Hutcheon 41), "the autonomy of art and its deliberate separation from life [and the] expression of individual subjectivity" (43). The single most important element incorporating these postmodern critiques is Bernhard's doubly reflexive central character who "enact[s] the metalinguistic contradiction of being inside and outside, complicitous and

distanced, [and who] inscribe[s] and contest[s] [his] own provisional formulations" (21).⁷ Bruscon occupies a distinctly postmodern space in *Theatermacher*, what Rosalind Krauss calls a "paraliterary space . . . of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but . . . not the space of unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of as constituting the work of art."⁸ Within this paraliterary space, Bruscon poses significant ontological and epistemological questions, but does so in a ludic manner. He speaks an essentially refractory monologue that is steeped in what Ihab Hassan refers to as "indeterminance."⁹ His "monologue" also reveals evidence of other postmodern tendencies including the notions of fragmentation, decanonization, irony, parody, decenterment of self and carnivalization.¹⁰

Focus of this paper are the postmodern elements informing three primary features of Bernhard's *Theatermacher*: (1)—the structural and thematic significance of Bruscon's monologic voice throughout the play, (2)—the structural and thematic significance of "Das Rad der Geschichte"—Bruscon's predicating center of the play and (3)—the fragmentary nature of Bruscon's polemics of provocation.

Bruscon's voice throughout *Theatermacher* is solipsistic and compulsive. His speeches flow continuously, obsessively, subject only to perfunctory interruptions by the other characters in the play. He filibusters on behalf of what Derrida would call a quest to achieve the "metaphysics of presence." However, Bruscon's voice is not a "metaphor of truth and authenticity."¹¹ Rather, it is a metaphor of epistemological uncertainty and ontological confusion. Behind Bruscon's compulsive speech is a disjunctive, partial, improvisational presence, an entropic presence that easily assumes various ontological shapes. He is an "ex-centric" who "on the border or margin, inside yet outside [has] a different perspective, one . . . that is "always altering its focus," since it has no centering force" (Hutcheon 67). At times Bruscon sees himself as a continuing historical entity:

Manchmal glaube ich / ich bin Schopenhauer / Bruscon
ist Schopenhauer / Schopenhauer ist Bruscon / Wieder-
geburtsgedanke / Geisteshomosexualität denke ich.

(134)

At other times he doubts the significance of "Das Rad der Geschichte":

Fatale Weltkonstruktion / Irrtümmerexistenz / kakopho-
nisch / idiotisch / Vielleicht ist sie gar nicht so gut /
meine Komödie / Zweifelswelt.

(140)

Neither speaking voice nor written text is privileged in *Theatermacher*. Both are suspected of epistemic infidelities. As a result, Bruscon often engenders "aporias"

which entail logical paradoxes for which there are no resolutions. His thoughts on the nature of theater in the following passage explore a maze-like aporia that leads nowhere, at least in terms of resolution. It does, however, illustrate what is meant by Hassan's term "indeterminance."

Wenn wir ehrlich sind / ist das Theater an sich eine
Absurdität / aber wenn wir ehrlich sind / können wir
kein Theater machen / weder können wir wenn wir ehr-
lich sind / ein Theaterstück schreiben / noch ein The-
aterstück spielen / wenn wir ehrlich sind / können wir
überhaupt nichts mehr tun / außer uns umbringen / da
wir uns aber nicht umbringen / weil wir uns nicht um-
bringen wollen / wenigstens bis heute und bis jetzt
nicht / da wir uns also bis heute und bis jetzt nicht
umgebracht haben / versuchen wir es immer wieder mit
dem Theater / wir schreiben für das Theater / und wir
spielen Theater / und ist das alles auch das Absurdeste
/ und Verlogenste.

(36-37)

What is also apparent in this passage is the rhetoric of palinode which Bruscon employs throughout his monologue.¹² Quoting Brian T. Fitch, Matei Calinescu discusses the significance of palinode with regard to postmodernism:

Qualifications and revisions intervene ceaselessly; what was just said is immediately contradicted and then repeated again, and so on . . . The sense of unsolvable uncertainty is constantly reinforced by the narrator's hesitations and self-conscious inconsistencies (blamed, among others, on amnesia, confusion, and inability to separate "fact" from "fiction."

(309)

Bruscon's cavalcade of remarks, complaints, vilifications, assertions, and denunciations erupt spontaneously in this mode of rhetoric throughout the drama revealing an intelligence that pays little attention either to logic or coherence. Inscribed in this rhetoric of palinode, however, is evidence of a will to power that fuels Bruscon's tyrannical nature. For Bruscon, access to power is through voice and intertextual presence. His monologue frames his skewed field of perspective so that all that falls within its purview is incorporated in the extended intellectual panorama he attempts to create. The force and movement of Bruscon's monologue in and through what seems to be a kind of partial flotsam of idea, historical event and personage, subjects the objects of discourse to relentless interrogation.¹³ He questions the ontological significance of self as well as the epistemological and axiological significance of theater and dramatic art.

The text itself stylistically mirrors many of these concerns. First, it lacks punctuation. The technique structurally suggests the continuity of perspective, although continuity of logical thought and motivated feeling is

not forthcoming in the text. Much like the stream of consciousness technique, the monologue provides a continuum for discontinuous ideas and sentiments. Second, the text of *Theatermacher* appears as a kind of free verse. Sentences flow into one another without regard for either logic of coherence. Enjambment widens, distorts and ruptures meaning, at the same time juxtaposing semantic elements that "make strange" the literary field. In short, Bernhard creates a unified, though intentionally unstable field of perspective in *Theatermacher*—unified field predicated on uniformity of voice, problematized by discontinuity of vision.¹⁴

Sponsoring Bruscon's monologue is the obsessively spoken about but never performed "Das Rad der Geschichte." While Bruscon attempts to see the play as a historiographic metafiction whose goal it is to give an intertextual summation of the dramatic significance of history, his vision is undermined by irony and parody. The ironic deferral of the performance of "Das Rad der Geschichte" structurally underscores the postmodernist rejection of totalization and closure. The play itself is an objective correlative to the idea that "reality [is] nothing but a composite of constructs and fictions" (Calinescu 305). The fictive reality presented in *Theatermacher* does not encompass a fixed composite of fictive elements but entails a process of meaning that not only obliterates the Cartesian distinction between perceiving subject and perceived object, but also resists totalization. "Das Rad der Geschichte" is never performed in *Theatermacher* not merely because Bernhard did not wish to elide a delicious irony, but because performance implies closure, a certain fixity of meaning in time and space.

Bruscon's monologic speeches highlight this radical "indeterminance" of meaning, concomitantly illuminating the collapse of the aforementioned Cartesian dichotomy.¹⁵ The dualism between perceiving sensibility and perceived object, between the agency that maps the landscape and the landscape itself, between Bruscon and "Das Rad der Geschichte" is eclipsed in *Der Theatermacher*. Bruscon's existence, his "being-in-the-world" hinges on the fictive vitality of "Das Rad der Geschichte." He is not an observer to the drama he intends to perform in Utzbach; he does not merely recount his laments and complaints but speaks as if there were no difference between thinking about the play and performing the play. As part of the encompassing literary field, he inflicts his perceptions and biases on the historical figures of "Das Rad der Geschichte." In the process, however, he necessarily caricatures and deforms the objects, events and personalities of his scrutiny. He violently trivializes the figures of Nero, Napoleon, Metternich and Caesar, to name only a few historical personalities, by assigning them values in the extended field of the play that mirror his own pedestrian and petty tyrannies. The play that has become so

important for Bruscon's continued existence is less a text than a textile—an artifact which Bruscon weaves and unweaves with large untutored strands of thought and perception. He mantles himself in the dimensions of this artifact, seeking to enlarge his experience of self by parading among those historical characters he imagines are most like himself in temperament and significance.

Framed in terms provided by Saussure, the relation between Bruscon and the characters he hopes to bring to life on stage is a matter of delineating terms of difference. "Das Rad der Geschichte" presents characters who are differentiated from one another like the initial consonants of like-sounding words. The perceived historical identity of the characters comprises the initial differentiating phonemes that are part of an overarching system of meaning of which all the characters are a part. Nero, Caesar, Napoleon, Stalin, Madame de Staël, Madame Curie, Roosevelt, Schopenhauer and Winston Churchill share a basic a-historical, a-temporal likeness to one another and to Bruscon. Yet, the ontologically frightened Bruscon appropriates in a fragmentary manner their perceived historicity in order to shore up his own eroding sense of identity. Bruscon's struggle is not with the significance of the discrete and discontinuous material of "Das Rad der Geschichte," but with the significance of his existence within a fictive-phenomenal system that is at once continuous and fragmented. "Das Rad der Geschichte" is both a fictive construct and a metafictional construct. It comprises a literary field in which there is no distinction between fiction and commentary on fiction.

The literary-intellectual field depicted in Bernhard's *Theatermacher* is based on a modernist question and a postmodernist answer. Bruscon poses the question whether dramatic art can encompass and distill the significance of human history given the constraints imposed on both the freedom of art and the integrity of the artist by the cultural environment. The question identifies Bruscon's central concern of the play. It is his most fervent if perhaps naïve wish that he be able to establish and animate dramatically what he believes is the hidden connectivity and continuity of art and history. Moreover, it is his hope that "Das Rad der Geschichte" be of sufficient intertextual, dramatic and intellectual scope to frame in an open-ended manner the ongoing significance of his project. Bruscon envisions a text that eclipses the distinctions of time and historical context, a summary yet continuing text that establishes "Das Rad der Geschichte" as a timeless center and vehicle of self-transcendence. The realization of this "sacramental" wish however, is undermined by Bruscon himself, by his ironic self-effacement and by the numbing effect of his glacial uncertainties.

The main assertions that Bruscon makes about drama, art, life and self undergo a disabling trivialization that

foregrounds the absurdity of his project. Informing as well as deforming Bruscon's speeches is a debilitating menagerie of seemingly disparate, idiosyncratic concerns. He is worried that if the emergency light is not put out, his comedy, which is in truth a tragedy, will become something else. He complains that firemen never put out fires but merely carry on the destruction begun by fire; he complains about his talentless family, about the wretchedness of Utzbach. He disparages theater as a thousand year-old perversity, laments not being served *Fritattensuppe* and blames the world situation on the proletariat. His remarks, observations, complaints and queries often times do not cohere logically. While his speeches seem to lack motivation and erupt suddenly and compulsively, much of his "polemics of provocation" operate by means of dream logic. A disgruntled, anxious, quasi-intellectual tyrant eager for the company of other larger-than-life tyrants from whom he might glean personal dimension, Bruscon extends his tyranny of perspective to the logistics of monologue and thereby preempts the rules of logic and coherence.

Underlying this suspension of the rules of coherence, however, is the sense that the disparate objects of articulation steeped as they are in non sequiturs of various kinds, cohere, nonetheless, on a different plane of continuity and connectivity. The thematic knots that seem to confound rational comprehension of the meaning of Bruscon's speeches manifest significant aspects of his field of thought. In terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, the intellectual and artistic narrative that remains hidden from rational comprehension lacks a system of articulating lines of connectivity that draw out the unity of seemingly incoherent ideas, events, persons or objects. "Das Rad der Geschichte" in this regard is meant to establish both connectivity and continuity; it is meant to give voice to the silences inscribed in Bruscon's monologue.

This intention, however, is frustrated by Bruscon's doubt as to the play's capacity to realize its intertextual task of becoming an operative, artistic paradigm linking past and present. He says of life and his play: "Immer ganz und gar / gegensätzliches Theater gemacht / Tatsächlich dienen wir lebenslänglich / dem Unsinn" (140). Allied to this doubt is a sense of ontological fragility as well as an almost intuitive sense that the success and meaning of his comedy hinge on aleatory circumstances over which he has no control. He relates how he is struck down by accident in Sankt Radegund by a butcher's apprentice who mistook him for a rival wax chandler, a near-fatal accident to which he responds "das hätte auch das Ende sein können" (23). He wears his maternal grandfather's linen hat in an attempt to discourage theatrical gremlins from destroying his play (Bruscon nervously fears that someone will turn on the emergency theater lights and destroy the climactic moment of his play).

His superstitions, however, shade into a more inimical background. An existential dread pervades the meaning of many of Bruscon's tousled statements. Trying to decide where to place a table in anticipation of performing "Das Rad der Geschichte," Bruscon reminds himself: "Unsere Phantasie selbst unser Geist / müssen immer zurechtgerückt werden / am Ende entspricht gar nichts" (21). "Die ganze Welt / bis in die hintersten Winkel / ist einem durch absurde Gesetze vergällt" (30). Asserting on the one hand that the human spirit must be constantly fine-tuned to receive properly the meaning of the world, Bruscon reveals a modernist-romantic sentiment that is qualified on the other hand by the existentialist-postmodern notion that the human spirit is an entity adrift in a universe that is indifferent to its presence.

Bruscon incorporates these ambivalent feelings into his play when he states that the climax of "Das Rad der Geschichte" is absolute darkness. His first line of defense against the incursions of the enervating, inimical, entropic world to which his play alludes, a world nervously bullied into a malleable repository of multiple meanings by Bruscon, is the play itself. Yet, the reflexivity with which Bruscon regards himself vis-à-vis his play outlines the posture of an aesthetic shaman uncertain of his powers to interpret the meaning of the lay of thrown bones and shells. In Bruscon's hands, "Das Rad der Geschichte" takes on the attributes of the shaman's baubles. It is conscripted not merely to ward off evil, but to incant it, to confront it and finally to banish it by means of mystic words carrying the fullness of meaning.

In this manner Bruscon's play places itself beyond mere art. It is meant to be redemptive art—gnostic-hieratic evidence of the power of the human spirit to resist the gyre of nihilism by holding out to mankind the possibility of plenary signification. And when the play can not be spoken properly, that is, in its incantatory fullness, as in the case where Ferruccio cannot speak the line "Das Gewesene ist es / das Fortwährende Gewesen" (132), Bruscon chooses not to have him speak. And when Ferruccio playfully dons the mask of Caesar, violating in Bruscon's eyes the "sanctity" of character, he erupts in anger, which takes on a Chaplinesque quality when he misses his intended mark only to kick his daughter Sarah in the head.

Dramatic art, whose objective correlative in the play is "Das Rad der Geschichte," is an unstable, polyphonic entity whose nature it is to resist demystification. Part of Bruscon's "performance" of the play, that is, his speaking about the play as well as about himself and the circumstances in which he finds himself, is an elaborate though faulty attempt to overcome the deforming vagaries of "indeterminance" by means of belief in art. Bruscon reminds himself that without belief in art, his ontological significance in the world be diminished:

Nur weil wir an uns glauben / halten wir es aus / über-
stehen wir / was wir nicht ändern können / weil wir an
unsere Kunst glauben / Hätten wir diesen Glauben nicht
/ und ist es auch nur die Schauspielkunst / wir wären
schon längst auf dem Friedhof.

(149)

Further problematizing Bruscon's aesthetic vision is the mercurial nature of the meaning of "Das Rad der Geschichte." The play is "always already" subject to erasure, to alteration, to rewriting. In addition to providing substitute lines as he does for Ferruccio, Bruscon deletes material when he feels it expedient to do so. At the end of scene 3, he decides to delete Act III and scene 17 and 19 as well as the Churchill scene. In Matighofen where his play had previously been performed, Bruscon tells that he deleted the Einstein-scene and any mention of the atomic bomb. The "ex-centric" Bruscon wishes to privilege voice over the written word as an ontic gesture toward belief in the "metaphysics of presence." Yet, in his attempt to achieve the "metaphysics of presence," Bruscon parodies the idea of self-transcendence. "Meaning" in *Theatermacher* is quickened somewhere between the ludic spirit of carnivalization¹⁶ and Bruscon's palsied desire to center both man and meaning in a rich fictive historiographic intertextual fiction. This wish, however, is everywhere frustrated in *Theatermacher*. Bruscon is a kind of Rabelaisian "agélaste" who humorlessly believes himself to be what he thinks he is.¹⁷ Yet he is only a pseudo-agélaste—a modernist, he longs for the certainty of truth; a postmodernist he encounters everywhere its epigonic dispersal.

Bruscon's point of departure in speaking of "Das Rad der Geschichte" is a complaint that mortises snugly with a larger polemic which, harpy-like, torments him throughout the play. Bernhard has Bruscon rail against Utzbach and things Utzbachian as well as Austria and things Austrian by way of allowing a fictional model to mirror a representational one. The polemics aimed at the fictional Utzbach likewise indict the transparent referent Austria.

hier [Utzbach] zerfällt alles / schrumpft alles zusammen / hier wird das Außordentlichste / zum Dilettantismus / Österreich / Verkommen / das richtige Wort / Verludert / ist der richtige Ausdruck . . . / Ein Tirolisches / in meinem Wesen / auch etwas Perveres / Österreich / grotesk / minderbemittelt . . . / Glauben Sie mir / an diesem Volk ist nicht das geringste / mehr liebenswürdig / Wo wir hinkommen / Mißgunst / niederträchtige Gesinnung / Fremdenfeindlichkeit / Kunsthaß / Nirgendwo sonst begegnen sie der Kunst / mit einer solchen Stupidität.

(39-40)

Bruscon's polemics of provocation are a function of the play's radical "indeterminance." The two concepts comprising this postmodern neologism inform his polemics

of provocation. The first, "indeterminacies", places in relief Bruscon's "will to unmaking." Hassan defines this term as "a complex referent that . . . subsumes a dozen current terms of unmaking: decreation, disintegration, deconstruction, decenterment, displacement, difference, discontinuity, disjunction . . ." (92). Bruscon's purpose in polemicizing against the circumstances of time and place, against Austria and things Austrian reveals a strong will to unmake the fictional world of which he is a part and the referential world to which he stands as cultural critic and spokesperson.

The second concept inscribed in the term "indeterminance" is "immanences" which refers to "the growing capacity of mind to generalize itself through symbols." Immanences also refer to that "patina of thought, of signifiers, of 'connections,' [that] lies on everything the mind touches in its gnostic (noö)sphere" (Hassan 172). It implies a "Vernetzung" process that reaches toward, aligns and unites disparate objects of perception. Immanences inform as well as sponsor the spirit of intertextuality which infuses Bernhard's *Theatermacher*. Bruscon pieces together his idiosyncratic "Weltanschauung" based on this idea. He ranges freely throughout history appropriating figures, ideas, and events which he subsequently textualizes. He not only unmakes but remakes, constructs¹⁸ and deconstructs the textual significance of these figures, ideas, and events.

The "indeterminance" that permeates Bruscon's activity and worldview in *Theatermacher* manifests itself throughout his meandering, disruptive, monologue. It is responsible for the "ambiguities, ruptures and displacements" that unmake and delegitimize the "mastercodes in society" (Hassan 169). In fictional complicity with the spirit of Donald Barthelme, Bruscon trusts only the fragment, the bits of flotsam that tenuously buoy him in the chaotic, intertextual waters of his own self-implicating fictions. Yet, his fictional posture pretermits the essentially fragmented and decentered nature of his radically textual-performative world with its multiple re-writings and structural openendedness. Hassan succinctly characterizes this tendency in postmodern literature when he says:

. . . postmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, provisional (open in time as well as in structure or space), disjunctive, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of ironies and fragments, a "white ideology" of absences and fractures, a desire of diffractions, an invocation of complex, articulate silences."

(93-94)

The diacritical significance of the polemics of provocation in *Theatermacher* does not inhere in the controversy generated by the seemingly pointed indictment of Austria and things Austrian. The polemics of provocation are significant insofar as they illustrate a fictional