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THOMAS BERNHARD, OR THE «LACK» OF POSTMODERNISM IN AUSTRIA

Introductory remarks

Among the numerous characteristics attributed to «postmodern»¹ communicative behaviour two aspects will be focussed in this paper: the function of quoting («quotationness») and the distance to authenticity created by this «quoted» reality or «fractured communication».

When looking for postmodern texts in contemporary Austrian literature *prima vista* there seems to be an absence of explicit «postmodern» discourse (maybe with the exception of architecture). However, in texts of one of the most prominent Austrian authors, who had died not long ago, Thomas Bernhard², both can be found: «quotationness» and «distance»: distance between meaning on a superficial level of his texts and a meaning derived from analysing a kind of epistemological fracture as Bernhard's specific application of ironic technique.

The use of a quotation creates a distance between the user and the reality he refers to. It presents a second level of authenticity, offers retreat from originality and thus from responsibility. The quoted can be blamed, the quoter may retreat in ironical distance. This distance Thomas Bernhard has widened to infinity: overdoing as a stylistic feature and an epistemological emergency exit. Those who take his arguments serious find themselves in the trap of fictionalized realities. Life as a fictitious text of life: «Überhaupt ist die Natur Reportage und das Gehirn an manchen Tagen eine feuilletonistische Auslassung in der Natur»/ «Nature, after all, is just reportage, and the brain, some days, a feuilleton-like outlet of nature»³.

While the literature of the absurd would base its «absurdity» on a level of direct non-semantic referentiality (what is meant, has no meaning), texts of Thomas Bernhard cannot be regarded as absurd: they present a level of linguistic coherency in so far as quotation after quotation still prevents syntax⁴ from total destruction, and the meaning within the quotation can be judged on the level of normal standards of cognition. But the high portion of quotationness and the abstruseness expressed within the quotations mislead the reader to an «as if»-interpretation⁵.

If a puzzle-like borrowing of various unrelated and related cognitive and aesthetic concepts is regarded as another characteristic of «postmodernism», an «everything goes» — *quodlibet* that puts together quotations of autochthonous cultural experience, of the past, the exotic, the «primitive», the cross-referring between literature and architecture, fine arts and music etc, it then seems that Thomas

Bernhard's texts reflect quotationness on a higher level of abstraction. His texts transgress the stages of primary semantics of the (verbal) quotations, and probe the very process of quoting. The exposure of hypocrisy of human communication is associated with basic doubts whether there can be reached «meaning» in cognition and verbalization as well as with despair about the finality of life. «Wem es gelingt, auf dem Totenbett eine Komödie oder ein reines Lustspiel zu schreiben, dem ist alles gelungen»/ «He who succeeds to write a comedy on the bed of death is successful in any respect»⁶ Bernhard consoles himself. The contradiction between a reality recognized as fatal and unconcerned consumption of the tragedies of the present age is solved in Thomas Bernhard's texts by ironical distance and self-parody.

The postmodern distance

Umberto Eco supposed that «postmodernism» is rather a mental attitude than a tendency of a limitable period of time⁷. He suspects that each epoch has its own postmodernism, and that postmodernism is just the modern name for mannerism, as a metahistorical category.

In a period for which not only constant progress but the acceleration of innovatory potential of mankind is regarded as a highest value, and hence the traditional social structures (in which the old were respected for representing authority, tradition, preserving) are being replaced by the absolutization of the young, energetic, reformatory, in a period which on the other hand is conscious of its potential of multiple overkill, in such a period any «modern» departure will be observed with suspicion. The reflection on such a «modernism» will be superimposed by the distance of relativation, negation, despair, disgust, or productivity. While things get out of control productivity is expanded to all fields. With accelerating speed the gap is enlarged between analysis and inability to put into practice the necessary consequences. The mental distance, a paradoxical «principle of hope», leads to a stepping back into a second reality, characteristic for the «screen society». Such a distance to our environment, our cultural behaviour and ourselves seems to be a major criterion of post-modern advancement. What Eco called a «mental attitude» might even turn out as «transgressive bewilderment».

The «one» way long had been replaced by arrows into divergent directions. They are now going to be further disassembled. The «condition postmoderne» might even refrain from ironizing a stage of consciousness in which a «conditio humana» had been believed in.

And it might also refrain from a perspective of a future-to-come in which the integration of human selfrealization within the norms of nature is enforced by the selfmechanisms of survival. For the time being, refrainment from consequent responsible behaviour and engagement in the bustling activities of communication (cf. Bernhard's «Gehen»⁸) present the soil for post-modern illusion or rather desillusion.

Our age is still too much orientated towards horizontal communication: intercultural but not interepochal. We do bear in us the burden and the glory of the

past, but we leave back the garbage and chaos of a waste-civilization, live on the expenses of future generations and console ourselves by the postmodern «distance»: Things are not so (bad) as they are! This fracture between insight and behaviour is to be sublimed in the retreat in quotationness.

There is distance instead of stance.

Dissolution instead of solution.

Disengagement instead of engagement.

Only the overcoming of a modern-postmodern dichotomy, the striving for a (maybe neo-humanistic) consciousness in which there is integration between horizontal and vertical communication on the one hand and responsible behaviour on the other might prevent the «human experiment» from failure. Thus, postmodernism is not so much an epoch after a period of modern belief in the departure towards new terrains, but rather the other side of the Janus face of any modernity which bears in itself a lethal tendency of selfdestruction for which the endless roundelay of quoting and irony are but mere shadows on the level of discursive argumentation.

Thus the postulated socio-cultural crisis of «alienation» at the beginning of the 20th century has been succeeded by now by an arrogant distance of non-committment and desinterest by plunging into the excessive (international) supply of information: as an alibi against responsibility, as a mystical asylum of deconstructivism. And yet. It seems that we are on the eve of a new consciousness.

In his discussion of the historicity of the concept of «postmodernism» Calinescu⁹ pointedly depicted the arguments of Eco, Lyotard and Jamesson, and stressed the inescapability of any historical dimension of any term to be used as an indicator of a period. If with «postmodernism» the inhabitants of the global village enter a new paradigm¹⁰ its epistem should be that for the first time in civilization natural sciences show clearly that life is just one being of genetic interrelatedness by the DNS program, a fluctuating organism. So, on the level of ritualized orientation and sublimed selfcultivation, called morale, the feeling for responsibility for future mankind begins to transgress the vista of the Middle Ages with their concern for ones own children, ones own kingdoms, ones own hemisphere.

Confronted with the epistem of not only relatedness but identity of life in an interepochal dimension, the new period of cultural consciousness for which the semantems «post» and «modern» only reflect the tinyess of human reasoning, is inevitably characterized by transhistoricity: on the level of discursive argumentation, however, this transhistorical consciousness is still historically determined. But the preciser periodization and time-identification become, the more meticulous human computerized analysis of the most subtle structures become, the more this epistemological explosion might tend towards the fringes of total insight¹¹.

Thomas Bernhard as an example of nondeclared «postmodernism» in Austria

The postmodern distance between insight and action seems to be (at least in the eyes of some critical intellectuals) even more evident in Austria, where main-stream

trends are said to arrive later and in a blunter manner. In Austria even the label «postmodernism» seems to be evaporated into this «distance». Only scattered symptoms like the double «Aufhebung» (elevation/dissolution) of irony can be conjectured along the traces of «Adabeis» (some sort of selfdeclared VIPs always in the core of the events of others).

«Kann schon sein daß Sie sich ein paarmal im Jahr
in dieser Stadt wohlfühlen
wenn Sie über den Kohlmarkt gehen
oder über den Graben
oder die Singerstrasse hinunter in der Frühlingsluft».
(Thomas Bernhard: Heldenplatz¹²)

(«Maybe that a few times in a year
you might feel good in this town
if you slender along the Kohlmarkt
or along the Graben
or down the Singerstrasse in the spring air»).

These lines on Vienna may be one of very few examples of a charming attitude. Otherwise the works of Thomas Bernhard seem to be an outburst of hatred. But his hatred against his town (Vienna), his country (Austria), his mental environment (the Austrian society) is his hatred against existence. Against his own existence, against existence in general and in its termination. And yet, he would call it a «so called» hatred. «So ist alles immer etwas ganz anderes, als es für uns ist» (so, everything is always something entirely different as it appears to us)¹³. «Life is the hopelessness the philosophers lean at, in which finally everything must get cracy»¹⁴, Bernhard said in his speech at the ceremony when he was awarded the Austrian State Prize 1968. Against this wider background one has to see Thomas Bernhard's retribution against Austria as a «nation of requisites» with a «naive population» («wir sind das Leben als das gemeine Desinteresse am Leben»/ «We are the life as the mean desinterest in life»)¹⁵.

It is the device of «absolutization» which for Thomas Bernhard is in fact a total relativation, an ever progressing detachment by taking refuge in quotationness. Here we are reminded of the stigmas of «postmodernity» although there seems to be such a demonstrative lack of «postmodernism» in Austria. It is an invisible, unquoted, unreferred «postmodernism».

The accessoires of political history differ between Austria and the other European nations. The Freudian amalgamism composed of Habsburgian shadows, Heldenplatz phobias and dilution between the «mock heroic» posure of the past and the scrupulous peering into a future legitimation are the so much unique and unrenouncable requisites of the lover-in-hate Thomas Bernhard. To give up all these deficiencies (that make his literary world) would mean to sacrifice identity on the altar of a culture

of conformity. To preserve the deficiencies, to preserve the need for a Freudian dilemma, to cultivate its unredeemability will be the only way to bring satisfaction for Thomas Bernhard, who so much suffered to bear to maturity the voetus of all the sluttishness of his people. The people that lived in him, that gave him his language, a language he throws back despaired by the impossibility of communication¹⁶.

Here again there is a trace of postmodern distance: the perfecter the mass communication society develops its tools, the more an abyss of profound misbelief in communication turns out to be a tantalus burden.

Thomas Bernhard has brought quotationness to a climax. His texts rank along chains of «... has said», demonstrating a distance of uncertainty, leaving it to the nodding audience to approve or disapprove, drawing the addressees on the side of the author against the world, and at the same time pushing them down this abyss of self-caused primitivity or at least insensability. The playing with quotations turns out as a playing with the audience, compelled to applaude, hence caught in the postmodern trap of seemingly all-understanding insight: in the psychological mechanisms, the ars politica, the decomposition of myths, in the stripping of the last veil of shame.

The so-called existence on the stage of Thomas Bernhard is derived from the ironical, or rather zynical distance from normative behaviour in late 20th century, where screen-realities incorporate the communication partner, channel the reasoning in a worldwide TV network and minimize day and night, time and space.

If the uniforming totalizing of worldwide communication, the passionate consumption of preformulated «news-speak», succeed in bringing into a line the minds who — in reaction still clinch so much to superficial national-chauvinism, then Thomas Bernhard's statement would become valid: «Wir bevölkern ein Trauma, wir fürchten uns, wir haben ein Recht, uns zu fürchten, wir sehen schon, wenn auch undeutlich im Hintergrund: die Riesen der Angst.»/ «We inhabitate a trauma. We are frightened. We can see already-though unclear and in the background — the giants of fear».¹⁷ On the grounds of this contradictory perspective (worldwide communication versus national chauvinism) diversity might replace legitimation with competing microspaces, and at the same time deceives the individual by pushing him into a linguistic solitude.

Conclusion

If pluralism has been widely accepted as a criterion of postmodernism¹⁸ the separation and desintegration of the individual should not be expected. And yet, as the texts of Thomas Bernhard show so convincingly the retreat from a reality in which action would be possible. Inactive despair prevents one to compete with the increasing needs of accelerated speed of information, communicative response and self-cultivation. The reaction is either uncontrolled aggression or mental «ingression».

Diversification as a necessary biological principle must be preserved in a «postmodern» or whatever-to-come society. But diversification (or pluralism) not on the level of quotational irresponsibility, but on a level of authenticity, for which

quotationness could function as an aesthetic/ethnic escape of an epistemological disaster.

Annotations

¹ Introductions into the wide field of studies in «postmodernism» offer: Fokkema, Douwe and Hans Bertens (ed.): *Approaching Postmodernism*, Amsterdam 1986. Fokkema, Douwe and Matei Calinescu (ed.): *Exploring Postmodernism*, Amsterdam 1987. Welsch, Wolfgang (ed.): *Wege aus der Moderne, Schlüsseltexte der Postmoderne-Diskussion*, Weinheim 1988. Welsch, Wolfgang: *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim 1991 (3rd ed.)

² An early but excellent collection of analyses on Thomas Bernhard offers: Botond, Anneliese (ed.): *Über Thomas Bernhard*, Frankfurt/M 1970

³ Bernhard, Thomas: *Ungenach, Erzählung*, Frankfurt/M, p. 68

⁴ As regards aspects of Bernhard's syntax, cf. Lederer, Otto: *Syntaktische Form des Landschaftszeichens in der Prosa Thomas Bernhards*, in: Botond, p. 42

⁵ Some features of «comparison» between Bernhard and Beckett can be found in: Hornung, Alfred: *Reading One/Self. Samuel Beckett, Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, John Barth, Alain Robbe-Grillet*, in: Fokkema and Calinescu, p. 175-198

⁶ Bernhard: *Ungenach*, p. 44

⁷ Eco, Umberto: *Postmodernismus, Ironie und Vergnügen*, in: *Nachschrift zum «Namen der Rose»*, München 1984, p. 77

⁸ Bernhard, Thomas: *Gehen*, Frankfurt/M 1971, esp. p. 27.

⁹ Calinescu, Matei: *Introductory Remarks: Postmodernism, the Mimetic and Theatrical Fallacies*, in: Fokkema and Calinescu, p. 1-16, esp. p. 4

¹⁰ The change of paradigm in the sense of Kuhn

¹¹ To mention just one of the recent books on the philosophy of time: Dux, Günter: *Die Zeit in der Geschichte, Ihre Entwicklungslogik vom Mythos zur Weltzeit*, Frankfurt/M 1989

¹² Bernhard, Thomas: *Heldenplatz*, Frankfurt/M 1988, p. 7

¹³ Bernhard, Thomas: *Gehen*, p. 87

¹⁴ Bernhard, Thomas: *Rede*, in: Botond: *Über Thomas Bernhard*, p. 7

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ One is reminded of Wittgenstein and Canetti

¹⁷ Bernhard, Thomas: *Rede*, p. 7f

¹⁸ Welsch, Wolfgang: *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, p. 5