Carnival and the Theatre of Eccentricity:

An interpretation of the late plays of Thomas Bernhard, with special reference to Der Theatermacher, Ritter Dene Voss, Elisabeth II and Heldenplatz

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ABSTRACT

Despite the heated public controversy generated in Austria by the first performance of Thomas Bernhard’s last play, *Heldenplatz*, at the Burgtheater in Vienna on 4 November 1988, the late plays as a whole have to date received surprisingly little detailed critical analysis. In all of them, blanket condemnations of Austria and the Austrians are delivered by the main characters, and those characters are eccentric in the sense that they reject and consciously invert and carnivitalize the social norms and conventions which define and govern what is regarded as acceptable, polite or decent behaviour.

The concept of eccentricity is central to the concept of carnival as defined by the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, which has had a major impact on a number of disciplines, including literary theory. My thesis undertakes to interpret Bernhard’s late plays in the light of the Bakhtinian understanding of carnival; it concentrates particularly on the linguistic dynamism which privileges the eccentric’s voice. The Bernhardian eccentric bestrides the stage of the Burgtheater in Vienna, validating life by translating it into a private theatre in which carnival predominates, mocking and upending the bourgeois conformism of the ordinary, noncarnival world of the audience. But although the eccentrics endlessly berate and carnivitalize Austria, they remain bound to it and to all aspects of the Austrian heritage, precisely because that heritage provides them with an excuse to perform, to act. Their performance may be absurd, and it refuses all forms of dialogue with the family, dependants, servants and friends who watch it, but the energy the eccentric figures generate makes their lives (and perhaps the lives of those who watch and support them) tolerable.
I dedicate this work to my mother,
without whose constant support
this project would not have been possible.

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browse in its library and answering questions on the state of Bernhard’s literary estate, long before the Bernhard Literatur Archiv in Gmunden (Upper Austria) was officially opened on 17. 11. 2001. Professor Dr. Armin Eidherr, Rector of the University of Salzburg and former President of the Internationale Thomas Bernhard Gesellschaft (founded on 11. 2. 1999) kindly advised me on various general issues and informed me of interesting events organised by the society. During my visit to the Bernhard Literatur Archiv in February 2002, Dr. Martin Huber of the University of Vienna, who continues to order Bernhard’s estate and is preparing a new edition of his entire work, made the unpublished manuscript of Bernhard’s final, incomplete play *Die Schwerhörigen* available to me for note-taking. His assistant, Frau Katharina Pektor, continues to supply me with general information on the activities and events organised by the Internationale Thomas Bernhard Gesellschaft. Frau Marianne Gruber, the President of the Österreichische Gesellschaft für Literatur, invited me to the society’s offices in Herrengasse, Vienna in March 2001 and showed an interest in my research. Last year I had the pleasure of meeting Herr Johann Maxwald, resident in Ohlsdorf and Bernhard’s neighbour for 24 years. He supplied me with a copy of his recently published book *Mein Nachbar* and kindly sent me information and photographic documentation about the fire brigade in Ohlsdorf.

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ABBREVIATIONS

DT

Der Theatermacher
(Thomas Bernhard Stücke 4,
Suhrkamp taschenbuch number 1554,
Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main,
First edition 1988, pp. 7-116)

EII

Elisabeth II
(Thomas Bernhard Stücke 4,
Suhrkamp taschenbuch number 1554,
Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main,

HP

Heldenplatz
(Suhrkamp taschenbuch number 2474,
Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main,
First edition 1995)

RDV

Ritter, Dene, Voss
(Thomas Bernhard Stücke 4,
Suhrkamp taschenbuch number 1554,
Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main,
First edition 1988, pp. 117-227)
PRODUCTION DETAILS OF PLAYS REFERRED TO IN THESIS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

(LISTED IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER ACCORDING TO FIRST PERFORMANCE):

*Der Theatermacher* (Burgtheater production; first performed at the Salzburger Festspiele, 17. 8. 1985. First performance in Burgtheater: 1. 9. 1986)
Producers: Claus Peymann; Karl-Ernst Herrmann (Stage)

Producers: Claus Peymann; Karl-Ernst Herrmann (Stage)

*Heldenplatz* (Burgtheater production; first performance in Burgtheater: 4. 11. 1988)
Producers: Claus Peymann; Karl-Ernst Herrmann (Stage)

Producers: Claus Peymann; Philip Tiedemann (Stage). This play is referred to in the text of the thesis only.

*Elisabeth II* (Burgtheater production; first performance in Burgtheater: 30. 5. 2002)
Producers: Thomas Langhoff; Roland Gassmann (Stage)
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Photographs of productions are with kind permission of Magister Claudia Kaufmann-Freßner of the Burgtheater’s Dramaturgie Department. Other material is from programmes and documentation as listed.

The photographs have been selected to give the best possible insight into the settings of the plays. Each photograph refers either to a specific production detail (i.e. on the stage) or to an aspect within the play itself (i.e. the figures’ gestures or movements, or the theme of eccentric theatre) pertinent to my analysis of the text. The sequence of photos from one scene in Ritter Dene Voss (Nos. 8-13) is intended to illustrate my analysis of a series of gestures in the main figure’s performance.

2. (Three pages) Photographs of the Surabhi theatre group in: Ramchander Pentuker, “Surabhi Theatre: Pioneering a unique tradition”, in India Perspectives (New Delhi, August 2001), pp. 7-10.
24. Ohlsdorf’s former fire brigade station, 1957. Provided by Herr Johann Maxwald of Obernthal, Ohlsdorf, Upper Austria.
34. Elisabeth II, Burgtheater Production, 2002.
42. Der Theatermacher, Burgtheater Production, 1985.
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Razumovsky, Frankfurter Allgemeine, 15.10. 1988

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Arbeiter Zeitung, 11.10.1988

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Der Standard, 13.10.1988

Kurier, 15.10.1988

Frankfurter Allgemeine, 15.10.1988

Kurier, 24.10.1988

Neue Kronen Zeitung, 15.10.1988

Salzburger Nachrichten, 7.11.1988

Süddeutsche Zeitung, 7.11.1988

Jüdische Rundschau, 10.11.1988

Frankfurter Rundschau, 7.11.1988

Tagesspiegel Berlin, 7.11.1988

Die Wiener Zeitung 14.10.88


Hannoversche Allgemeine, 7.11.1988

Kurier, 5.11.1988

Salzburger Nachrichten, 7.11.1988
Weltwoche, 10.11.1988
Württembergisches Sonntagsblatt, 13.11.1988
Basler Zeitung, 7.11.1988
Profil No. 37, 13.9.1999, p. 148-9
Arbeiter Zeitung, Tagblatt, 7.11.1988
Darmstädter Echo, 7.11.1988
Stuttgarter Nachrichten, 7.11.1988
Die Rheinpfalz, 7.11.1988
Handelsblatt, 7.11.1988
Wiener Zeitung, 7.11.1988
Arbeiter Zeitung, Tagblatt, 5.11.1988
Weltwoche, 10.11.1988
Profil, 15.2.1999
Frankfurter Rundschau, 19.2.2000
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 22.2.2000
Frankfurter Rundschau, 25.2.2000
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 26.2.2000
Süddeutsche Zeitung, 4. - 5.3.2000
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Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1.6.2002
Die Welt, 1.6.2002
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 1.6.2002
Die Presse, 1.6.2002
Profil, 3.6.2002
Format, 22/2002
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I. Introduction

I. 1 Thomas Bernhard and Austria

Bernhard’s work has aroused great interest over the years and he may be seen as the most significant and polemical author of Austrian contemporary society. This is due in part to the particularity of stylization, notably of language and form, and in part to the denunciatory aspect of his work. Bernhard, like his eccentric figures, remained attached to Austria in a love-hate relationship throughout his life. He relied on Austria to perform as Theatermacher in and outside his works. Provoking his country as a Nestbeschmutzer, as he was often called, guaranteed a reaction and it was also this characteristic which brought him fame and success as a writer, from Frost (1963) onwards, in which such a rebellious tone is already prominent. From within Austria, Bernhard confronted the issue of the Herkunftskomplex at a time when many other Austrian writers emigrated. He belonged to a generation of writers who wanted to face up to the repression of recent Austrian history and the political amnesia burdening their parents’ and grandparents’ generation; he attracted attention by bringing up issues that had been ignored by successive governments. He was also traumatized by the economic repercussions of the war in Austria. Bernhard created himself as an eccentric individual by defining himself in opposition to Austria’s heritage and the present socio-political conditions in Austria; likewise, the performance of the eccentric figures in his works relies on this kind of striking invective against Austria. Bernhard’s antipathy towards the Austrian state intensified over the years, but was in part rooted in his traumatic childhood experiences in institutions; the scars he bore from primary school in Germany made him identify himself with “[… Kinder […] die von ihren Eltern […] aus dem Kopf und aus der Hand in die staatliche Züchtigung gegeben sind […].” \(^1\) Later, he was accommodated in a National Socialist boarding house during his time as pupil in a Salzburg day school (1943) in which indoctrination was rife: “[… sich nach und nach durch einen staatlich-faschistisch-sadistischen Erziehungsplan als staatsbeherrschendes Erziehungssystem nach den Regeln der damaligen großdeutschen Menschenerziehung- und also Menschenvernichtungskunst zerstören und vernichten zu lassen […] in einem solchen

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\(^1\) Thomas Bernhard, *Die Ursache* (Salzburg, Residenz, Neuauflage 1998), p. 11
Immediately after the war he joined a Catholic Gymnasium and was accommodated in a Catholic boarding house, the Johanneum, but these establishments instilled the same terror in him as during his time in the National Socialist “Internatskerker” in 1943-44. Having contracted tuberculosis at 17, he was admitted to state hospitals and centres for convalescence which he considered, according to Höller, “[... als Fortsetzung und Steigerung der als verletzend erlebten Staatsgewalt [...].” Many Austrians felt offended by Bernhard’s ongoing mockery of their nation, state, government and institutions, as well as the attacks on cultural heritage and lampoon of prominent individuals, which spanned his entire oeuvre, yet many others continued to show avid interest in his writing. Bernhard may be seen as the foremost of Austrian contemporary writers, and his work has been interpreted as bearing a political dimension, particularly in the light of recent political developments in Austria, not merely because he has been perceived as following a tradition of Austrian Nörgler writers.

Bernhard’s argument with Austria continued even after his death. He reacted to the Heldenplatz debate by creating another controversy through his will signed on 10 February 1989, the eve of his death, in which he forbade any future performance and publication of his work within Austria, despite contracts signed with publishers during his lifetime. Bernhard’s outsider status was hereby confirmed. His half-brother recalls that: “er wollte, so sagte er wortlich, 'eine Emigration, eine posthume literarische Emigration’”. The Aufführungsverbot (ban on performances) created much polemic and was enforced for a time, as the Berliner Ensemble mounted the first production of Elisabeth II, which was first performed after Bernhard’s death, on 5 November 1989 in Berlin’s Schiller Theater, although it could not have the same resonance there: “Die Elisabeth in Berlin von Berliner Schauspielern einem Berliner Publikum vorzusetzen mag ja lieb sein, aber der Biß kann sich erst gar nicht einstellen. Wie alle Bernhardschen

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2 Die Ursache, p. 20
3 Die Ursache, p. 16
4 Hans Höller, Thomas Bernhard, Rowohlt Monographie 504 (Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1993), p. 22
5 C.f. Karl Kraus, Die letzten Tage der Menschheit (Act 1, Scene 4: “Der Optimist und der Nörgler”) 
Stücke ist auch die Elisabeth zunächst für Peymann und sein Ensemble bestimmt und sodann für Wien, maßgeschneidert für diesen Platz und sein Publikum.” Elisabeth II was subsequently performed as a Gastspiel by the Berliner Ensemble in Bratislava, Slovakia, in May 1990 as part of the Wiener Festwochen, since Bernhard’s will forbade performances in Austria for 50 years; consequently, curious theatre lovers in Austria were obliged to travel to a city just beyond the Austrian border to see the play. The Burgtheater Ensemble finally performed Elisabeth II in Vienna in May 2002, in a new production under the management of Klaus Bachler, Peymann’s successor from September 1999.

The ban on performances had been relaxed by the intervention of Bernhard’s surviving family in 1998, who had maintained it for almost 10 years, and evidently realised the interest that the public continued to show in his work. The Burgtheater thereafter created several new productions. Moreover, since 1998, there have been numerous new productions of Bernhard’s plays on other prominent Austrian stages, including the Theater in der Josefstadt and the Volkstheater, long-established Viennese institutions which had previously not produced Bernhard’s plays for the stage. Outside Austria, productions have also been widespread, particularly in France and Germany.

I. 2 Theatre and politics: Heldenplatz and the problem of interpreting Bernhard’s late plays

Despite the storm of controversy generated by the first performance of Heldenplatz in the Burgtheater in Vienna in 1988, Thomas Bernhard’s late plays remain comparatively little studied, perhaps because critics have yet to find a satisfactory way of accounting for their appeal. Hans Höller remarks that Bernhard’s dramas generally offer few of the satisfactions conventionally associated with theatre: “Bernhards Dramen kommen mit einem kleinen Figurenensemble und mit wenigen dramatischen Konstellationen aus”, and he adds: “Oft wurde in kritischen Theaterrezensionen die ‘fix eingeplante Standard-Ausstattung des immergleichen Bernhard-Schauspiels’ und eine von Stück zu Stück sich überbietende ‘Monotonie’ registriert.” The plots of the plays are rudimentary, little happens in them, and they give far more room than is usual in stage plays to monologue,

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7 Sepp Dreissinger, Thomas Bernhard Portraits — Bilder und Texte, p. 326
8 Hans Höller, Thomas Bernhard, p. 118
allowing Winkler to argue in his study *L’attente et la fête* that “Bernhard refuse un théâtre de l’action, au profit d’un théâtre du langage.” To this it needs to be added that the monologues which create the recurrent focus of interest, and which made Bernhard into a scandalous figure for many of his fellow Austrians during his lifetime, are characteristically (and in the case of *Heldenplatz* notoriously) delivered as tirades against Austria and Austrians by central figures, themselves Austrian, who are both dictatorial and eccentric. Bernhard described himself as a “Fallensteller” and cultivated from the outset a form of generalized anti-Austrian invective in his prose fiction and his plays alike which was clearly designed to provoke the Austrian readers and audiences at whom his work was primarily directed: “Im ersten Roman schon, *Frost* (1963), ist das österreichische ‘Staatsoberhaupt’ ein ‘Konsumvereinsvorsteher’, der Kanzler ein ‘Naschmarktzuhalter’ und der Staat ‘das Bordell Europas’. ‘Das Parlament des heutigen Österreich’, heißt es fünfzehn Jahre später in Bernhards Beitrag für eine geplante Anthologie des Residenz Verlags, ‘ist auf dem politischen Unrat in diesem Lande ein luxuriöser und kostspieliger, Lebensgefährlicher Wurstelprater, und die Regierung ist eine ebenso teure Dummkopfelslotterie’. Ähnliche Zitate lassen sich von der Mitte der fünfziger Jahre bis zu *Heldenplatz* aufreihen.” Writing of *Heldenplatz*, Holler notes that the media sensation that surrounded its premiere in 1988 was generated by the anti-Austrian diatribes which are so prominently foregrounded in the play, and not by the references it makes to the public celebrations which greeted Hitler’s annexation of Austria in 1938: “Das große Medienspektakel um Bernhards Stück entzündete sich aber nicht an dem Heldenplatz-Trauma, sondern an den Österreich-Beschimpfungen, einer Art literarisches Gegenstück zu den Lobreden auf Österreich im Werk des österreichischen Burgtheater-Klassikers Franz Grillparzer.”

Bernhard’s reversal or inversion of the laudatory view of Austria associated with the theatre of Grillparzer poses a particular problem for the interpreter, the nature of which is perhaps best illustrated by giving a detailed account of the controversy ignited

12 Holler, *Thomas Bernhard*, p. 9
by the premiere of *Heldenplatz* on 4 November 1988. Appendix I documents the critical outrage which the play provoked. But what gets lost in all this polemical cross-fire is any preparedness to hear Bernhard’s text as a fiction – an outrageous one, admittedly, but a fiction none the less. Throughout his work, both drama and prose fiction, Bernhard delights in incorporating torrents of abuse against Austria. It is hardly surprising that such tirades proved offensive, not least because, at one level, they were clearly meant to provoke. Yet the vituperative response which they elicited tends invariably to overlook questions of tone, register, of literary and cultural conventions. The most spectacular example of this is *Heldenplatz*. Hostility towards Bernhard existed throughout his career and culminated in the weeks leading up to the first performance of *Heldenplatz*.

Furthermore, the *Heldenplatz* scandal has to an extent overshadowed the reception and interpretation of Bernhard’s plays in recent years, particularly in Austria. In a press release of 10 October 1988 the Burgtheater tried to invoke Bernhard’s manifest international stature as proof that he had to be more than merely the high protest of anti-Austrian sentiment: “Seine Theaterstücke beeinflussen seit zwanzig Jahren in hohem Maße das Theater in Europa, so werden allein in diesem Herbst in Paris an vier renommierten Theatern vier seiner Stücke in prominentester Besetzung gespielt.”  

Bernhard’s wider, non-Austrian and non-German-speaking audiences will have had little knowledge of, or interest in, Austrian politics, and the fact that Bernhard’s plays achieved success outside Austria would suggest that their appeal was not exclusively rooted in provincial or domestic scandal and the responses it evoked. But how to account for it? *Heldenplatz* is in some respects a special case; it links 1938 and 1988 and foregrounds the situation of Jews returning to Austria from wartime exile in a way which is unique; nevertheless, it has many features in common with three other late plays chosen for study in this thesis: *Der Theatermacher*, *Ritter Dene Voss* and *Elisabeth II*. All of these plays contain anti-Austrian invective delivered by figures who, like Robert Schuster in *Heldenplatz*, present themselves as strongly eccentric in the sense that they are deviant, crassly egocentric, dictatorial, staggeringly rude, and self-opinionated to the point of madness.

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13 Höller, *Thomas Bernhard*, p. 11
I. 3 Bernhard's theatre and Bakhtinian carnival

The eccentric figures in all of Bernhard's late plays are driven by a desire to stand apart, and whether as individuals, or operating in a group, they may be described, to borrow Bernhard's own term, as "Außenseiterexistenzen". 

Bruscon in *Der Theatermacher*, Herrenstein in *Elisabeth II*, Ritter, Dene and Voss in the play named after them and intended for these actors, and Professor Josef Schuster and his brother Robert in *Heldenplatz* all live on the margin of society, as "ex-centrics", people of the periphery, and in each case an absence of social responsibility permits their eccentricity to flourish. They do not feel themselves to be answerable to anybody, and maintain a distance from society, from concerns that seem to them mundane, and their selfish detachment claims for itself a privileged status. Their "ex-centric" position therefore encompasses eccentricity of mind and attitude.

The figures are, by their own choice, marginalized from society, since they insist on living apart from it as far as possible, rejecting the norms and conventions which define it, and this distance from the mainstream, both physical and mental, enables a form of carnival to unfold that is distinct from, yet shares some common traits with, Bakhtin's theory of carnival. To consider the eccentric figures in Bernhard's theatre from the perspective of Bakhtin's carnival theory makes possible an analytical approach to the implications of the various forms of theatrical performance mounted by the eccentrics which has not been attempted before.

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14 Bernhard, *Der Keller*, p. 32. Bernhard here refers specifically to the working class inhabitants of the "Scherzhauserfeldsiedlung", a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Salzburg, and although it is a term he used only in this context, it can be employed as a wider definition of an outsider existence. Between April 1947 and January 1949 Bernhard worked in this area in a grocery situated in a cellar – hence the book's title.

15 Damerau's thesis (Selbstbehauptungen und Grenzen — zu Thomas Bernhard; Würzburg, Königshausen und Neumann, 1996) does not take into account the impact of the eccentric figure on private group relations and the fundamental indifference of Bernhardian figures to social norms. On the contrary, his main thesis centres on viewing figures as types, whose roles are shaped by society; he sees them as typical and unable to escape from this mould: "Sie wirken typisch. Das heißt, die früheren und noch die späteren Figuren in Bernhards Stücken behaupten sich mit einer traditionsgemäßen Identität: mit einer schon vorgefertigten und erneut eingefahrenen sozialen Rolle, an die sie sich halten." (p. 277)

16 Much of Betz's study (Polyphone Räume und karnevalisiertes Erbe: Analysen des Werks Thomas Bernhards auf der Basis Bachtinscher Theoreme; Würzburg, Ergon, 1997), the only work so far to have approached Bernhard from a Bakhtinian perspective, analyses Bernhard's prose using Bakhtin's theory of the chronotope, the poetics of the marketplace and the polyphonic novel. Betz does not develop Bakhtin's theory of carnival and its significance for the analysis of the eccentric figure and group theatre. See also: Adrian Stevens, "Schimpfen als künstlerischer Selbstentwurf: Karneval und Hermeneutik in Thomas Bernhards Auslöschung", in *Thomas Bernhard: Beiträge zur Fiktion der Postmoderne*, (F. am Main, Lang, 1997), pp. 61-91
Bakhtin thought of himself as a theoretician of the novel, and applied his theory of
carnival mainly to prose fiction, although many categories may be fruitfully applied to
theatre, which Bakhtin did not. But Bernhardian carnival is not identical with Bakhtinian
carnival; in order to differentiate between Bernhard’s and Bakhtin’s carnival, the main
principles of Bakhtin’s carnival theory must be outlined, before considering those aspects
of it which seem relevant to Bernhard’s theatre. Bakhtin thinks of carnival as “a
bewildering constellation of rituals, games, symbols, and various carnal excesses which
together constitute an alternative ‘social space’ of freedom [...]” 17 He defines it as “the
sum total of all festivities, rituals and forms of a carnival type” 18 and speaks of “the
determining influence of carnival on literature”. 19 He sees “the laws, prohibitions, and
restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is non-carnival, life” 20
as being suspended during carnival, including “hierarchical structure and all the forms of
terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it – that is, everything resulting from
socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people [...]” 21 On this
definition, “all distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes
into effect: *free and familiar contact among people.*” 22 As Bakhtin sees it, “this temporary
suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank, created during carnival time a
special type of communication impossible in everyday life [...]” 23 This leads to the
creation of “special forms of speech and gesture” which are “frank and free, permitting
no distance between those who come in contact with each other” and liberating them
from the “norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times”. 24 Carnival is the site
for working out what Bakhtin terms “a *new mode of interrelationship between
individuals*, counterpoised to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-
carnival life [...]” 25 He notes that in carnival the “behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a

17 Michael Gardiner, *The Dialogics of Critique: M.M.Bakhtin and the theory of ideology* (Routledge,
1990), p. 45
18 Michael Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson,
(Manchester UP, 1984), p. 122
19 ibid, p. 122
20 *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 122
21 ibid, p. 123
22 ibid, p. 123 (Bakhtin’s emphasis)
23 Michael Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Indiana University Press,
1984), p. 10
24 ibid, p. 10
25 *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 123 (Bakhtin’s emphasis)
person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in non-carnival life"; the corollary is that from the vantage point of non-carnival life their behaviour seems “eccentric and inappropriate” and in consequence eccentricity becomes in Bakhtin’s usage “a special category of the carnival sense of the world, organically connected with the category of familiar contact”; it permits “the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves […].” 26 Clark and Holquist point out that Bakhtinian carnival reacts against social norms and that “since the dominant ideology seeks to author the social order as a unified text, fixed, complete, and forever, carnival is a threat” 27 to established order.

But eccentricity, as a specific form of carnival, establishes itself differently in Bernhard’s theatre from Bakhtin’s theory. The concept of an “alternative social space” 28 of behavioural freedom can usefully be applied to define the situation of Bernhard’s eccentrics. Bakhtin understands theatre as a site in which characteristic forms of carnival continue to exist; he notes that “certain elements of carnival” are “preserved in the life of the theatre”, adding that “the subculture of the theatre” has “retained something of carnivalesc license, the carnivalesc sense of the world, the fascination of carnival.” 29 Further, Bakhtinian carnival enables a way of life, a different order, since the participants in carnival “live in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a carnivalesc life. Because carnivalesc life is drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent ‘life turned inside out’, ‘the reverse side of the world’ (‘monde à l’envers’).” 30 Bakhtin’s definition of carnival places great emphasis on what he terms “folk laughter”. He notes: “folk laughter expresses a distinctive ideological viewpoint which is diametrically opposed to the monolithically serious world of officialdom […].” 31 In practice, this involves the “profanation of higher authority”, 32 overturning norms, a transgressive form of behaviour which is central to the alternative culture of carnival, as manifested in the behaviour, gestures and language of the participants. Carnivalesc laughter, as Bakhtin puts it, is directed toward “a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of

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26 ibid, p. 123
27 Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, Michael Bakhtin (Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 1984), p. 301
28 Gardiner, p. 45
29 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 131
30 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 122 (Bakhtin’s emphasis)
31 Gardiner, p. 49
32 ibid, p. 46
world orders”; it is in its own special way “a profoundly universal laughter, a laughter that contains a whole outlook on the world.”

The carnival experience, which is in Bakhtin’s words “opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretence at immutability”, seeks “dynamic expression” through “ever changing, playful, undefined forms […]”. Bakhtin speaks of the “characteristic logic” of carnival, the “peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (à l’envers), of the ‘turnabout’, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrowning.

As Bakhtin writes, “abuses, curses, profanities and improprieties are the unofficial elements of speech. They were and are still conceived as a breach of the established norms of verbal address; they refuse to conform to conventions, to etiquette, civility, respectability […]”; speech forms of this kind, “liberated from norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom, become themselves a peculiar argot and create a special collectivity, a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally.”

In the case of Bernhard’s eccentrics, reversal of the established bourgeois order, which represents a rejection of the pre-made social world, is staged in a language which expresses the eccentric’s characteristic perspective; it involves a deliberate and systematic subversion of accepted truths. In this way, the figures develop their own peculiar topsy-turvy logic. The language used stands outside conventional descriptive forms of Austria, as it delights in inverting the established view of the world. A typical example is the way in which Bruscon sets about overturning Austria’s standard glossy image as tourist destination:

Österreich
Verkommen
Ist das richtige Wort
1a
Verludert
Ist der richtige Ausdruck
1b
[...]
Österreich
Grotesk
Minderbemittelt

33 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 127
34 Rabelais and his World, pp. 10-11
35 Rabelais and his World, p. 11
36 Rabelais and his World, pp. 187-88; cf. Gardiner, pp. 50-51
He inverts the descriptive norms usually applied to Austria, and so performs a
carnivalized travesty of the country, its famous composers, its inhabitants and its art. His
insistence on a carnivalistic image of Austria and its people is apparent through a
rhetorical mode of speech that is characterized by the figure of anaphora; the repetition
of the rhetorical emphasis of the phrases “Das richtige Wort” (1a) and “Der richtige
Ausdruck” (1b) foregrounds the abusive terms (“verkommen”, “verludert”, “grotesk”,
etc.) employed to enounce his perspective. His statement develops its own peculiar
carnavalesque logic to the extent that Bruscon’s view of what constitutes correct
description is a reversal of the comfortable, clichéd image of Austria. “Wo wir
hinkommen” categorically denounces Austria as a whole, asserting Bruscon’s eccentric
norm as the reversal of the accepted perspective. Through the crescendo in the lines
following the stage direction “Ruft aus”, Bruscon stages an emphatic rejection of the
provincial mindset which, given its ignorance, fails to appreciate art.

He goes on in the same speech to uncrown the conventional high status of Austrian
culture and attacks Austrians as radically uncultured. His carnivalistic inversion of the
standard descriptions of Austria leads him to lampoon the nation using improper, crude
language that is uncivil in that it opposes the “monolithically serious”, official, received
image. He caricatures Austria as a cesspit and as the pustular boil of Europe, in which, as
he emphasizes, this time not by shouting, but in a stage whisper, “everything stinks”:

Österreich
L’Autriche
Es kommt mir vor
Als gastierten wir
In einer Senkgrube
In der Eiterbeule Europas
Winkt den Wirt heran
Flüstert diesem ins Ohr
Hier stinkt ja alles (46-7)

The angle of attack is then varied, with Bruscon giving vent to his sense of outrage at what he describes as the devastation of the Austrian landscape. In his eyes, the countryside is deformed and dehumanised, a symbol of the state of the nation. The deformation is evident in the mutation of a wood into a trench of road metal; likewise, inhabitants are dehumanised into what he perceives as ubiquitous Nazis:

An jeder Ecke
Dreht es einem den Magen um
Wo ein Wald war 3
Ist eine Schottergrube
Wo eine Wiese war 5
Ist ein Zementwerk
Wo ein Mensch war 7
Ist ein Nazi

Diese Tournee ist ein Beweis
Dieses Land
Ist das Papier nicht wert
Auf dem seine Papiere gedruckt sind (47)

Again, rhetorical repetition ("Wo [...] ist" (lines 3, 5, 7) creates a carnival perspective, a reversal of the norm; the non-carnival world is seen from a topsy-turvy angle ("monde à l’envers"). Yet the eccentric is not genuinely interested in society, since his blanket rejection of everything Austrian is too undifferentiated, too grotesquely exaggerated to carry ideological conviction.

In *Ritter Dene Voss*, Voss comically pillories his family’s taste in art, while proclaiming his own detestation of the perversity of art nouveau and creating his own peculiar carnivalesque logic:

Immer gehaßt
Immer verabscheut
Jugendstilperversität (186)

He dismisses conventional art through the concluding use of the neologism "Jugendstilperversität", which characteristically encapsulates a carnivalistic negation of the Jugendstil in one word. The eccentric’s speech hereby has the power to “transgress the limits of the established language [...]” 37 The carnival perspective, opposed to all

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37 *Rabelais and his World*, p. 188
that is "ready-made and completed, to all pretence at immutability", seeks a "dynamic expression"; it demands "ever-changing, playful, undefined forms [...]." This inventive form of language is energised by his familiarity with the family home. Voss carnivalizes his domestic surroundings, he sees the family portraits as evidence of portraiture mania and an absurd cult of ancestry: "Portraittfimmel /Ahnenkult" (199); he therefore mocks the family's obsession with its history, and goes on to criticize his sisters for having commissioned their own portraits from anti-artists who demand colossal fees for their hideous and repellent daubs:

Ihr seid schamlos genug
Und habt euch malen lassen
Von diesen Antikünstlern
Die heute überall auftreten
Und sich anbiedern
Und Millionen für ihre abstoßende Schmiererei verlangen (201)

His speech form embodies his self-imposed distance from what Bakhtin defined as the norms, hierarchies, and prohibitions of established idiom. Voss revels in proclaiming a view that is disrespectful of the tradition of commissioning portraits and refuses to conform, in Bakhtin's terms, to norms of etiquette and decency. He stages an extreme reaction to the bourgeois cult of ancestry which is an example of the inversion of socio-cultural tradition and accepted practice in what he goes on to characterize as an era of dilettantes, ("Dilettantismusepoche"; 201). He sees the new portraits as worse than the earlier monstrosities: "Scheußlichkeiten" (207). His era will only be recognisable as a white stain of shame, as an art disaster and as an art crater emitting a vile odour:

Diese Zeit geht nicht in die Kunstgeschichte ein
Als weißer Schandfleck ja
Als Katastrophe ja
Als Kunstkatastrophe ja
Als ein riesiger Kunstkrater
In den die Leute in hundert Jahren hineinschauen
Und aus dem es nur herausstinkt
Sonst nichts (207)

Voss's carnivalesque logic devalues Austrian art and the role of portraiture in bourgeois Vienna by exposing them to ridicule: "Portraits sind immer schlecht gemalt /außer sie sind von Goya" (201). When he apparently qualifies his blanket condemnation of portrait painting by citing Goya as an exception, he is merely introducing a variation on his theme of Austria as the home of anti-artists ("Antikünstler"; 201).

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38 Rabelais and his World, pp. 10-11
His carnivalised perspective is also apparent in his scornful attitude to his sisters’ way of life. He condemns his sisters’ adherence to their family’s practice of putting on the cloak of (art) patronage: “Das Mäntelchen des Mäzenatentums umhängen /es gibt nichts Abstoßenderes” (206). His sisters’ profession of acting is dismissed as lacking dignity, and as excessive, a form of defamation, a surrender to a superficial world of entertainment: “Schauspielerei /Ehrabschneidung /Unterhaltsamkeitswelt” (214-5); Dene’s neurotic domesticity is mocked as a tableware fetish and a crockery sickness: “Geschirrfetischismus /Porzellankrankheit” (215). Voss also uses the language of carnivalesque reversal to voice his scorn of conventional medicine and his own hatred of doctors as an example of perverse monument preservation (lines 3-4):

Weil wir keine Krankenkasse haben  
Tragen wir ein Vermögen zu diesen Leuten  
Ungeheuerer Spezialistenverschleiß  
Die Medizin ist eine perverse Denkmalpflege (214)

The appeal of this kind of exaggerated invective lies in the freedom it claims for itself from all conventional (or what Bakhtin would term “official” or “serious”) restraints. What is at stake here is not the accuracy or truth of Voss’s tirades, but their capacity to shock, titillate, and entertain by knowingly flouting and inverting the attitudes and decencies which normally define and delimit the kinds of things which can be said and done in the high bourgeois Viennese society to which he himself belongs. Voss arrogates to himself the fool’s licence which is constitutive of all forms of carnival, and enacts a continuous reversal of social norms, savaging everything Austrian and being deliberately, cruelly, and breathtakingly rude to his sisters.

Previous attempts to define the comedy inherent to the kind of performance staged by Voss and Bruscon, which is typical of the performance of all the Bernhardian eccentrics, fail to do it justice because they fail to link it specifically to the forms of humour and comedy which are integral to carnival. Haider-Pregler sees Bernhard’s plays as an adaptation of the Viennese folk theatre tradition; she describes them as: “keine Komödien, sondern das schadenfrohe Lachtheater eines egomanisch philosophierenden Dichters, der in unseren aufgeklärten Zeiten die alte Lustigmacher-Komödiantik, um ihre verlorengegangene Naivität wissend, in ihrer dialektischen Spannung zum
Tragischen ausspielt.” Haider-Pregler does not mention the carnivalistic aspects of the figures’ performance. There are other specific issues which Haider-Pregler identifies in associating Bernhard with the folk theatre tradition. Höller, referring to an interview Bernhard gave in which he claimed a lack of knowledge of modern drama and mentioned only Nestrov and Raimund as having influenced his work, tries to locate Bernhard within the great comic and satirical tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Austrian literature: “Johann Nestrov konnte für die sprachparodistische, kritisch-satirische österreichische Theatertradition stehen, zu der Karl Kraus, Ödön von Horváth und Elias Canetti gehören, während Ferdinand Raimund das tragisch-komische Zaubertheater repräsentiert, das romantische Märchen in der Volkstheatertradition, das auch den dunklen, destruktiven, dem Tode verschworenen Seiten des Ich, der Misanthropie und Melancholie, einen Platz einräumt.” But it is difficult to see how the blanket invective of Voss and Bruscon could be viewed as an agent for change; neither of them can be described as a satirist, because neither of them is primarily concerned to expose specific ills and deficiencies which are amenable to remedy. Their invective does not serve the purpose of trying to alter or improve the status quo; if anything, they are resigned to the world in general and Austria in particular remaining as they are. Indeed, Bernhard’s eccentrics have no moral values or principles; they are all amoral with regard to society. Critics have discussed the old figures in Bernhard’s theatre 43; Haider-Pregler speaks illuminatingly of them as representing “einen eigenen komischen


40 In terms of Bernhard’s plays commissioned by the Burgtheater, he may be a modern writer following the tradition of Volkstheater dramatists such as Goldoni, Hafner and Nestrov, each of whom was a “Hausautor eines aufeinander eingespielten Ensembles” (Haider-Pregler, “Ist es eine Komödie?”, p. 161). Two aspects of the folk theatre, “Das Spiel mit dem Aufdecken der Spiellusion” (ibid, p. 164) and the plays written on a specific real-life theme, known as “Gelegenheitsstücker” (ibid, p. 165) may be identified in Bernhard’s Claus Peymann Dramolette, in which life in the theatre is dramatised as life itself.

41 Die Feuer- und die Wasserprobe. Gespräche mit Thomas Bernhard. Ein Film von Norbert Beilharz (1978), quoted by Höller, Thomas Bernhard, p.120

42 Höller, Thomas Bernhard, p. 120

Charaktertypus" comparable to the Harlequin figure of the commedia dell'arte or the Hanswurst of Viennese folk theatre ("der sogar – wie einst Arlecchino oder Hanswurst – in sein eigenes Typenkostüm gesteckt wird [...]". But if Bruscon and Voss are clowns, they are clowns who appear in bourgeois dress; their scandalous behaviour stands in sharp contrast to their conventional appearance. Jang’s thesis focuses on the “Altersnarr” and she identifies the eccentric figures as belonging to the “Altersnarrentypus”. She sees the “Altersnarr” as following on from other traditions (in particular, the Misanthrope, Commedia dell’arte and Altwiener figures). She links the “Altersnarr” with the actor Bernhard Minetti, for whom Bernhard wrote various lead roles (in Die Macht der Gewohnheit, Minetti, Der Weltverbesserer, Der Schein trägt, Einfach kompliziert). Haider-Pregler termed these roles “Minetti-Rollen”. Although the figure of the old fool is recognisable elsewhere in Bernhard’s theatre, Jang’s definition of the fool as “Altersnarr” identifies only one aspect of the Bernhardian fool; it is too limited a term to apply to all Bernhardian eccentrics. Detailing Haider-Pregler’s concept of “Die ’Minetti-Rolle’ oder: die Mutation der ’lustigen Person’”, Jang focuses on the appearance and gestures of the “Altersnarr”, studying the characteristic traits of the Altersnarren, reminiscent of the Viennese folk theatre. But the physical condition of these old figures is not the only determining factor. Jang does not link the behaviour of Bernhard’s figures to their carnivalesque eccentricities: “Die Altersnarren brauchen die Mitmenschen, da sie körperlich nicht mehr kompetent sind und nicht allein sein wollen. Aber ihr autoritärer Umgang mit den Menschen ist tyrannisch und menschenfeindlich. Es sind leidende Menschen.”

Bakhtin speaks of the figures of the rogue, the clown and the fool as enjoying a particular privilege, “the right to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common

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44 Haider-Pregler, “Ist es eine Komödie?”, p. 164
45 ibid, p.164
47 Jang, pp. 140-141
48 Haider-Pregler, “Ist es eine Komödie?”, p. 167
49 ibid, p. 167ff.
50 Jang, p. 144. Jang’s other examples are the “Typenkostum”(p. 146-7); physical infirmity (p. 145); the walking stick (p. 151); personal gestures of hygiene (p.149); “das Selbstgespräch vor dem Spiegel ist [...] eine Selbstinszenierung” (p. 149-151); “die Fresssucht” (p. 156-159).
51 Jang, p. 140
cause with any one of the existing categories that life makes available". 52 and Morson and Emerson suggest that “these figures do not belong to social categories, but exist in homeless, defiant opposition to them [...].” 53 They note that “laughter serves to externalize them, to liberate them from the constraints that might be dictated [...] by outside conditions of class, status, profession, or environment.” 54 Bruscon and Voss exercise the right of the rogue, the clown and the fool to be “other”; although they have families, they are not in any normal sense domesticated; they are homeless in the sense that they are not at home in bourgeois society, but exist in opposition to it, constantly overturning its norms and refusing to accept its constraints.

Much the same applies to Herrenstein in Elisabeth II. Herrenstein uses an antisocial language to perform a characteristic carnival perspective. Central to Elisabeth II is the way in which Herrenstein distances himself from the popular appeal of royalty. He uncrowns royalty, speaking of the royal family as designer dolls: “Burberry- und Greenfellpuppen [...] die ganze Brut ist schüfflich” (300), and claims that kings have only ever worn fools’ crowns: “die Könige haben immer nur eine Narrenkrone aufgehabt” (320). This neologism is a direct expression of an image in a ritual central to carnival: “The primary carnivallistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king [...]. Crowning / decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing [...] the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start.” 55 Herrenstein debases (uncrowns) the Queen by describing her (and all other monarchs) as fools. Herrenstein scorns popular tastes with a disrespectful language and sees Austrians as a foolish, unintelligent people: “dummies

53 Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 352
54 ibid, p. 436
55 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 124 (Bakhtin’s emphasis). Ritualistic accessories such as the crown, according to Bakhtin, are also symbols which are infused with ambivalence: “as real symbols of power, that is in the non-carnival world, they are single-levelled, absolute, heavy, and monolithically serious” (Dostoevsky’s Poetics, pp. 124-5). Betz, in his study Polyphone Räume und karnevalisiertes Erbe (pp. 276-278), analyses the crowning ritual in Einfach kompliziert (which is based on the old actor’s role in Shakespeare’s Richard The Third). Bakhtin’s theory of carnival has been applied to Shakespeare: R. Knowles, Shakespeare and Carnival. After Bakhtin (London, Macmillan and New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1998).
unbelehrbares Volk /für den Adel und die Witzbolde /haben die Österreicher am meisten übrig” (313). Herrenstein’s neologisms also indicate a playful dynamism and a theatrical element in verbal performance that should not be taken too seriously. Herrenstein projects his carnivalesque perspective onto the first theatre in the German-speaking world. He employs some memorable neologisms to ridicule Viennese institutions; the Burgtheater is a permanent horror stage (“permanent Schauerbühne”; 293) and a perverse play-destroying machine: “perverse Stückevernichtungsmaschine” (293). There is, however, a revealing ambiguity about all this, since the eccentric is attached to the very cultural institutions he condemns.

Herrenstein has remained in Vienna since his childhood: familiarity inspires the tirades. Herrenstein’s tirades against the ugliness of the buildings of Vienna reveals a sense of revelry:

Ich weiß gar nicht
Warum die Ringstraße so berühmt ist
Ist sie doch eine der häßlichsten Straßen der Welt
Nichts als pompöser Kitsch
Das Parlament die Burg die Oper
Alles Beispiele schauerlicher Architekturverirrungen
Geschmackloses Baumeisterallerlei
Monströse Zuckerbäckerei
Ein Gebäude scheußlicher als das andere
Und doch lieben wir das Ganze (309-310, my italics)

He gives a theatrical description of Vienna’s architectural heritage, inverting the established view and employing a series of grotesquely humorous neologisms, as the concentration of neologisms “Architekturverirrungen”, “Baumeisterallerlei” and “Zuckerbäckerei” form a dramatic climax to the tirade. He pretends not to understand why Vienna’s architecture is so famous. He sees it as ugly, nothing but pompous kitsch, ghastly architectural aberrations and tasteless concoctions thrown together, architectural disasters resembling monstrous confectionary shops with one building more hideous than the next. Yet Herrenstein withdraws his offence against Austria to an extent with the words “Und doch lieben wir das Ganze” – he loves it, just as everyone else does; this totally unexpected punch line deflates the thrust of the tirade. The self-proclaimed arbiter of taste reveals himself as a lover of ugliness. His carnivalesque portrayal of Vienna is undercut by his attachment to the city’s heritage. Herrenstein does not need to propose any alternative to Viennese culture, since the carnival perspective makes life
interesting and gives him a reason to perform. He liberates himself from conventional ways of seeing culture through dynamic, humorous language. Herrenstein’s comic neologisms and playful attacks on Vienna are theatrical in their exaggeration, but they show nothing of the bleakness of Robert Schuster’s language. A reviewer of the premiere of *Elisabeth II* at the Burgtheater on 3 June 2002 notes: “Sprachlich fesseln sowohl Bernhards satirischer Witz als auch die aufs allzu österreichisch Selbstgefällige gemünzten Polemiken.”  

Herrenstein sees Vienna as hellish: the city of the devil: “Teufelsstadt” (352) — he once again smugly expresses his love-hate relationship with the city. Monologues such as this, although they constitute a “breach of the established norms of verbal address” when heard on the Burgtheater stage in front of conservative Viennese audiences, could not really have sounded seriously offensive given Herrenstein’s playful concluding remark quoted above (*EII*, 310), which reveals a revelry in his carnivalesque perspective, even if he appears to refuse to conform to bourgeois respectability.

Some tirades give a darker portrayal of Austria, its politics and culture by ignoring and defying taboos and through the eccentric’s desire to shock and his refusal to conform to respectability and the “official” views on the public stage. Herrenstein pillories Austria’s past, associating the nation’s heritage and beauty of the countryside only with Nazism. According to Herrenstein, the beauty of the provinces of Salzburg and Upper Austria appears to have always appealed mainly to Nazis, and he turns these regions into “Nazi nests”, thus fundamentally discrediting them:

Die schönsten Gegenden Österreichs
Haben immer die meisten Nazis angezogen
Salzburg Gmunden Altaussee
Das sind nichts als Nazinester (307)

With the use of the neologism “Nazinester”, Herrenstein appears to express a political condemnation; however, the eccentric lacks any specific political principle — as can be seen in his attack on other groups. Here, Herrenstein scorns the popular tastes in the non-carnival world, such as fashion and heavy jewellery, in his eyes representative of the working class, tastes which he vilifies. He sees socialist ministers as “Proleten”, who are inexclusably vulgar, dressing and behaving just like the proletariat:

Heute laufen auf dem Semmering
Die wild gewordenen Proleten mit Hosenträgern und Pumphose herum

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56 *Wiener Zeitung*, 3.6.02
57 *Rabelais and his World*, p. 187
Bernhard from early on in his career as writer and journalist described Austrian society as a theatrical show, as in an article eventually published by the Hamburg weekly Die Zeit under the title “Die Kleinbürger auf der Heuchelleiter” (17 February 1978). The object of his attack was the parliament along with the administration: “Wenn der Vorhang des Staates aufgeht, sehen wir an jedem österreichischen Tag [...] ein Lustspiel für Marionetten [...]. Die Marionetten sind das schwachsinnig unbelehrbare Volk, und die daran ziehen (die Drahtzieher), die das Volk für dummm verkaufende Regierung.”

He saw politics as a comedy for puppets (the people).

Bernhard as playwright and novelist claimed a fool’s licence (“Narrenfreiheit”) in creating works calculated to offend conservative elements in society, and often faced the wrath of the public in the furore surrounding publication of his works. He equally suffered from and revelled in conservative hostility towards him as author throughout his life: “Und das Anpinkeln, das wird man im Lauf der Jahrzehnte auch gewohnt. Na ja, man bietet sich als Baum wahrscheinlich an. Da kommen halt die Hunderln und machen hin. Aber es ist noch kein angepinkelter Baum eingegangen.”

The eccentric’s carnivalization of Austria finds its counterpart in the persona adopted by Bernhard in the interviews he gave: “In Wirklichkeit ist ja alles noch viel furchtbarer als in meinen Büchern. Aber würdevich so leben wie in den Büchern, würde ich wahnsinnig werden”;

here, Bernhard states an interesting paradox: he does not admit to the writer’s fool’s licence of exaggeration in his portrayal of reality, claiming that the real world is worse (in itself an eccentric stance to take), but at the same time, although he is equally an eccentric individual, he appears to ridicule the eccentric figures in his work and

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58 Alfred Pfoser quotes this article in English and states that the Salzburg publishers “Residenz Verlag” had intended his article for the anthology “Glückliches Österreich”, but decided not to include Bernhard’s contribution following the trial surrounding Die Ursache (N.B. in 1976). Pfoser, “Thomas Bernhard — Scandal as an Artwork”, in Vertreibung der Vernunft: The Cultural Exodus from Austria, edited by Peter Weibel, Friedrich Stadler, (Wien, Löcker, 1993), pp. 245-248


60 André Müller im Gespräch mit Thomas Bernhard (Weitra, 1992), p. 24
dissociates himself from them. In fact, Bernhard’s claim quoted above testifies to the
topsy-turvy logic of carnival, the mad voice of the fool; the writer as fool sees reality as
worse than his own depiction of it. He also adopts an eccentric persona to enable him to
mock his eccentrics from outside the creative oeuvre: Bernhard as an eccentric
comments on his figures (created by the writer Bernhard given his fool’s licence) and
condemns them to fiction. To speculate whether the figures are Bernhard’s mouthpieces
therefore cannot bring about a fruitful interpretation of his work. Any version of truth is
always relative, as writing is based equally on fantasy and autobiography: “Ich bin
immer wieder selbst überrascht, wie viele Leben man als das eigene ansieht, die zwar
alle miteinander Ähnlichkeit haben, aber eigentlich doch nur Figuren sind, die mit einem
selbst genausoviel und sowenig zu tun haben wie irgendwelche andere Leben. Es stimmt
ja immer zugleich alles und nichts.” 61

The performance of Bernhard’s fictional eccentrics is motivated by truths they
claim to hold as outsiders. Outsiders are not constrained by norms others must conform
to, and they may therefore be seen as Narren — fools. The fool as an outsider derides
aspects of this topsy-turvy world by giving a carnivalesque perspective of society. His
truths are entirely subjective as he reflects the chaotic state of the world, as Winkler
states: “La folie des hommes n’est autre que le reflet – ou la conséquence – de la folie du
monde. Dans ce monde – toupie, seul le fou détient la vérité, comme dans le Roi Lear de
Shakespeare, car il est à l’image du chaos universel.” 62 The fool’s distorted perspectives
of the world correspond to the theatricality of the world as a stage. Similarly, the truths
Bernhard’s fools reveal are never an objective, satirical exposition of society; as
eccentrics, they do not reveal ills with the objective of finding a remedy, for they are
genuinely indifferent to society’s values and social conditions. Some of the truths
Bernhard’s fools reveal are focused on the world as an absurd stage to perform on; this is
an aspect central to their theatre of eccentricity. Whether they operate in an official
institution of theatre (the fictionalised Claus Peymann and Hermann Beil in the dramatic
trilogy Claus Peymann kauft sich eine Hose und geht mit mir essen), or create theatre as
an independent artistic endeavour (Bruscon’s travelling theatre group), or project an

61 André Müller im Gespräch mit Thomas Bernhard, p. 36
62 Winkler, L’attente et la fête, p. 226
eccentric identity from within bourgeois society (Voss, Herrenstein and Schuster), Bernhard’s fools exploit their surroundings to carnivalize them, which enables them to perform as eccentrics. Significantly, the eccentric, like the fool, retains his capacity to act as an individual at all times without committing to normal social standards since he accepts no social responsibilities.

Robert Schuster refuses to take on inherited truth and received perspectives, and therefore is not a type, but an individual voicing subjective truth, which is offensive at times; he creates “a certain unofficial view of the world.” Schuster’s language may lack the creative dimension of eccentrics like Bruscon who are inventive in their use of neologisms, yet the distinctive carnival perspective asserts itself in his condemnation of Austria and Austrians:

Vor achtunddreißig hatten sich die Wiener
an die Juden gewöhnt gehabt
aber jetzt nach dem Krieg gewöhnen sie sich nicht
mehr an die Juden
sie werden sich niemehr an die Juden gewöhnen (114)

Robert Schuster’s invective not only overturns the official image of Jews in the Austria after 1945 as silent, but also presents him as an eccentric Austrian Jew. Schuster lives for the denunciations of carnival. His tirades cannot be taken seriously given the entirely unfounded assertions, over-dramatisation and absurd exaggeration. His attacks are carnivalesque visions, and could be seen as characteristic of the eccentric as fool – one who enounces a different view of the world. The charge that anti-Semitism is worse in the Austria of 1988 than in the Austria of 1938 is untenable. The topsy-turvy carnival logic inverts the conventionally accepted standard view of Austria. Schuster’s carnival is characterized by the suspension of norms of political speaking: there are no arguments or facts in his monologue; he merely offers a blanket condemnation of the anti-Semitism that supposedly pervades Austria today. Heldenplatz cannot be seen as a satire; a logical exposition of issues is totally lacking in Schuster’s tirades, nor are any solutions proposed, no matter how radical these might be. There are instances when his niece Anna gives a very similar carnivalesque portrayal of Austria:

Es ist doch alles viel schlimmer
Als achtunddreißig
Und es wird noch alles viel fürchterlicher sein

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63 Rabelais and his World, p. 188
Die Feindschaft zeigt sich ja schon ganz offen
Der Judenhaß zeigt sich ja jetzt schon ganz offen (81-2)

The Holocaust becomes an excuse for dramatisation; Robert and Anna claim that all
Austrians are anti-Semitic and waiting to set the Holocaust in motion again in 1988.
Robert creates his own radical perspective on specific institutions within the
Establishment:

Die Kirche und die Industrie sind schon immer
Am österreichischen Unglück schuld gewesen (88)

He caricatures the Austrians as a debauched, insignificant and corrupt people, and the
politicians responsible for the miserable state of affairs as corpulent and grossly fat,
representing pseudo-socialist perfidy:

Wenn es heute in Österreich wieder fast nur Nationalsozialisten gibt
So sind daran nur die Sozialisten schuld
Wenn Österreich heute ein so heruntergekommenes Volk
Und ein so unansehnliches durch und durch verderbtes Volk ist
So verdanken wir das diesen feisten und fetten Pseudosozialisten
Pseudosozialistische Perfidie als Demokratie das ist es (98)

This could be read as meaning that the Socialist party is responsible for the anti-
Semitism that is worse than in 1938, an entirely illogical charge. As he denounces
politics in Austria, through slandering the Socialist party in power in 1988, his tirade
overturns norms of etiquette, civility and respectability. He compares Austria to a sewer,
whose stench has spread throughout Europe and beyond. Socialism is poisoned by
megalomania and has become unrecognisable from the National Socialism of 50 years
ago. He condemns the Socialists as criminals, branding them as catholic Nazis:

Eine geist- und kulturlose Kloake
Die in ganz Europa ihren penetranten Gestank verbreitet
Und nicht nur in Europa
Dieser grässenwahnsinnige Republikanismus
Und dieser grässenwahnsinnige Sozialismus
Der mit Sozialismus schon seit einem halben Jahrhundert
Nichts mehr zu tun hat
Was die Sozialisten hier in Österreich aufführen
Ist ja nichts als verbrecherisch
die Sozialisten heute sind im Grunde nichts anderes
als katholische Nationalsozialisten (97)

Schuster abandons any of the efforts to differentiate logically between opposing political
parties, a characteristic of his fool's perspective; the refusal to acknowledge any
difference between parties is mad. He makes an absurd statement by lumping together
Socialists and National Socialists and equating post-war Austrian socialism with Hitler’s
National Socialism, making it out to be an equally depraved ideology. The carnival perspective also abuses the entire political spectrum with vulgar language. The conservative “Volkspartei” (People’s Party) politicians are imbeciles without exception, and the only motivating force within all parties is filth and obscenity. Anyone who uses his right to vote is voting for a corrupt pig:

Und die Schwarzen sind lauter Dummköpfe
Und die Schweinigelei ist in allen Parteien die Triebkraft
Wenn Sie heute in Österreich einen Politiker wählen
Wählen Sie doch nur ein korruptes Schwein (127)

Robert uses a theatrical metaphor which represents Austria as mad actors screaming for a director; since they are a brutal and stupid people without exception, having learnt nothing from history, they risk becoming not victims, but perpetrators of such a totalitarian system again:

Die Österreicher insgesamt als Masse
Sind heute ein brutales und dummies Volk
[...]
Sechseinhalb Millionen Deile und Tobsüchtige
die ununterbrochen aus vollem Hals nach einem Regisseur schreien (88-89)

Robert Schuster here publicly abuses and vilifies the population as a whole, making oblique reference to the extermination of the Jews and Hitler, who was the Führer they welcomed. Magnification (“Masse”) creates the exaggerated carnival perspective. Nothing can redeem Austria; these accusations allow Schuster to dramatise his “otherness”. The fact that Schuster is an Austrian Jew will have been uncomfortable to Austrian audiences in 1988; his outspoken claims will have had the potential to shock conservative groups.

I. 4 Carnivalistic mésalliances

Bakhtin’s view of carnivalesque mésalliances results in new amalgamations: “a free [...] attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things [...]. Carnival brings together [...] the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.” At times, Bruscon’s words create absurd combinations; butchers and theatre: “Die Fleischhauer haben zur dramatischen Kunst /eine sehr schöne Beziehung” (114); talented actors and the anal opening: “Ein talentierter Schauspieler /ist so selten wie ein Arschloch im Gesicht” (48). Bruscon’s megalomaniac self-image

64 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 123
feeds off his status as playwright, albeit an unconventional one, and the ambiguity of the crowning act as defined by Bakhtin is a central symbol for Bruscon’s performance as theatre maker in Utzbach: “The primary carnivalesque act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king […] Crowning/decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position. Crowning already contains the idea of immanent decrowning: it is ambivalent from the very start.” 65 According to Damerau, the eccentric’s megalomaniac declarations make a mockery of the setting: “In den Selbstbehauptungen […] führt Bernhard permanent grotesk die Fallhöhe zwischen Autorität und Arnseligkeit bzw. Banalität vor, bis zur abschließenden, mehr oder weniger großen Katastrophe.” 66 The provincial setting creates an ambiguity: Bruscon uses the setting to distance himself from it in intellectual terms, and yet his self-proclaimed image is never challenged by any other figure. He symbolically crowns himself king of his own carnival by declaring: “Shakespeare /Voltaire /und ich” (23); “Unter uns gesagt /ich bin ein Klassiker /bald wird /was bis jetzt nur unser Geheimnis ist /weltbekannt sein” (75).

Similarly, he claims:

Manchmal glaube ich
Ich bin Schopenhauer
Bruscon ist Schopenhauer
Schopenhauer ist Bruscon
Wiedergeburtsgedanke
Geisteshomosexualität denke ich (97)

The neologism “Geisteshomosexualität” is an example of the dynamic expression characteristic of the carnival experience, which asserts originality of form, even if Bruscon here reveals his dependence on the classic writers. His declarations are all the more curious since he performs in the depth of the Austrian provinces, where the provincial stage provides the comic aspect of *Der Theatermacher* in view of the contrast. During rehearsals, he is invaded by the sound of pigs’ grunts and the odour of their proximity, which create a visually comic scene on the stage of Utzbach’s village hall:

BRUSCON
Metternich kann viel freier agieren so

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65 *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 124 (Bakhtin’s emphasis)
66 Damerau, p. 297
Plötzliches anschwellendes Schweinegrunzen aus den umliegenden Ställen
BRUSCON hält sich das Sacktuch vor die Nase und versucht, sich gleichzeitig die Ohren zuzuhalten
Nach einer Weile
Die Metternichsche Redeweise
Ist keine gehetzte (93)

The contrast between the provincial setting and the themes in “Das Rad der Geschichte” in Der Theatermacher carnivalizes the historical figures in Bruscon’s play, turning them into a show. The carnival of contrasts and absurd timescale involves appearance of Lady Churchill wearing red shoes (68); “Metternichs Geliebte” (68); the Tsar, Napoleon, Einstein, Madame Curie (92); Hitler and Napoleon, Goethe with Kierkegaard (46); “Nero Metternich Hitler /Geschichtskonstellation /Bindeglied Churchill” (102). The grandiose play with its elaborately costumed figures is to take place in what Bruscon generalizes from the outset as the characteristic of the primitive Austrian provinces, a region where pigs are bred everywhere, and where he is on tour. Life itself becomes theatre:

BRUSCON
[...]
kauert sich zusammen
Dieser abstoßender Gestank
Trägt denn die Schweinemast noch etwas
Wirt macht das Fenster wieder zu
Oder ist es nur eine Perversität der Gastwirte
Überall dieser Schweinegestank
Von einer Schweinemastanstalt zur anderen
Tatsächlich gibt es hier nichts
Außer Schweinemastanstalten
Und Kirchen
Stöhnt
Und Nazis (17)

Bruscon is physically repulsed by the surroundings, as the stage direction “kauert sich zusammen” indicates. The neologism “Schweinemastanstalt”, enouncing a pig fattening institution, playfully carnivalizes the impossible conditions he is confronted by. When the official performance is botched at the end by the village fire, Bruscon looks out from behind the stage curtain dressed as Napoleon; he performs to his family not as Napoleon in “Das Rad der Geschichte” but as the eccentric who has power over his family theatre group. The primacy he accords to himself in the family hierarchy enables the theatrical carnival to continue. Indeed, Bruscon delights in the private theatrical carnival throughout the final scene of Der Theatermacher (Scene 4), enouncing his belief in
theatre for theatre’s sake (107-8), ordering his daughter to clean his shoes, and painting his wife’s face black himself. The family’s passivity backstage reveals their solidarity in the carnival, despite the crisis in Utzbach. Yet Bruscon’s long term theatrical existence is by no means doomed, even if the events in the hall deny him official performance as king of his own carnival, since the consequence of his experience in Utzbach is relativized, not least by his own declaration: “Hier probieren wir es nur aus /entwickeln wir es” (24), and finally an ironic repetition of the opening lines of Der Theatermacher: “Als ob ich es geahnt hätte” (116). To Bruscon, what really bears significance, and the only aspect he privileges, is the theatre-making process.

I. 5 Eccentricity and carnival

A strict division exists between the carnival world of Bernhard’s plays and the non-carnival world of theatre audiences watching them, which necessarily imposes a division between performers and spectators, unlike Bakhtin’s carnival, which is “a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act.” Bernhard’s theatrical carnival is necessarily one which is not inclusive in this way; audiences, part of the “official”, bourgeois, conformist non-carnival world, react to what they see on stage, and even before the first performance, they can be provoked by the eccentric perspectives developed there, as the polemics provoked by the first performance of Heldenplatz show. There are also divisions between the characters in the plays; not all of them actively participate in the carnival, but are spectators at others’ carnival performance (e.g. the provincial residents, such as the Wirt (innkeeper) on the stage of Utzbach in Der Theatermacher; the asylum residents in Ritter Dene Voss — who are on the receiving end of Voss’s bizarre gestures; domestic employees and high society in Elisabeth II; Robert Schuster’s nieces and Herta in Heldenplatz). The innkeeper, the asylum residents and Viennese high society represent the non-carnival world. Despite the predominantly bourgeois settings with the exception of Der Theatermacher, the carnival unfolds in very different personal arrangements, given the individual idiosyncrasies of the figures in the four plays specified above (DT, RDV, EII, HP).

67 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 122
Given that Bernhard’s figures define themselves as eccentrics against the “official”, accepted norms in society, the nature of their contact with society is determined by their megalomania, a trait common to all eccentrics and inherent to a “crowning” of the self and projection of difference.

To define Bernhard’s figures as “eccentrics” seems a more accurate term than “Geistesmensch”, which has become a commonly used expression in scholarly research. The concept of the “Geistesmensch” type is first distinguishable in the traits of the character Saurau in Verstorung, without specific reference to the term — which Oliver Jahraus later articulated in an article, applying it to his analysis of the novels, and Hoell also used the term. To Jahraus, the “Geistesmensch” type is a central novelistic device: “Indem Bernhard den Figurertyp des Geistesmenschen erfindet, schafft er einen Figurertyp, der ihm seine Texte — sozusagen wie von selbst — schreibt.” Critical research has given prominence to the intellectuals in the novels, and has not differentiated between these and the eccentric nature of other figures. Herrenstein cannot be seen as a “Geistesmensch” in the true sense of the term, because he lacks intellectual independence in his pursuits, and Voss is more an eccentric theatrical figure than a “Geistesmensch”, since he uses his “philosophy” to perform on the stage of home and the asylum; the carnival is the foundation of these figures’ existence. Voss uses his philosophical project to perform as an eccentric in the home and in public; it is the basis of his proclamation of difference. Bruscon does call himself “ein Geistesmensch” (DT 103). He performs infinite versions of his theatrical carnival “Das Rad”, based on creative self-indulgence, and his existence focuses on a carnival of originality and fertility. But he is clearly not merely driven by the obsessive intellectual endeavour of the “Geistesmensch” which is too limited a term to apply to him. Crucially, the megalomania of Bernhard’s eccentrics is central to their carnival and all forms of performance, both linguistic and ritualistic. The eccentric does share certain

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70 Jahraus, “Von Saurau zu Murau”, p. 71 (Jahraus’s emphasis)
characteristics with the “Geistesmensch”, whom Jahraus describes as bearing a notable antisocial trait: “Der Geistesmensch ist kein Gesellschaftsmensch, weil er sich gerade durch Exklusion und nicht durch Inklusion versteht.” Society is a threat to his mind and existence as a whole, whereas Bernhard’s eccentrics rely on society to react against its norms and to project their individuality. Although they are by nature “ex-centric”, they do not totally shun society indefinitely through physical absence. Jahraus sees an élitist self-perception in terms of the mind of the “Geistesmensch”, also identifiable in the eccentric: “[ein] Selbst- und Fremdverständnis [...] [als] eine an sich elitäre Charakterisierung des Geistes [...].”

Bernhard’s eccentrics, in contrast to Bakhtin’s democratic idea of carnival, live out a carnival of exclusivity, a carnival of privilege, which scorns the collective, open contact emphasized by Bakhtin, as their carnival is fundamentally individual, often reactionary and anti-populist. Indeed, Bernhard’s carnival feeds off what the eccentrics view as stale and outmoded conventions in society, since they positively reject these conventions, and their reactions are energised through performing against received social norms, which reveals their indifference to society and those beyond their immediate, intimate circle. When the eccentric does come into contact with society beyond his group, his conduct generally characterizes his status as an eccentric. Bernhard’s eccentrics thrive on performing their carnival within a conventional sociocultural setting which is inherently hostile to them and their world view: provincial Austria in Der Theatermacher, a high bourgeois suburban residence in Ritter Dene Voss (alongside Voss’s presence in a renowned Viennese psychiatric asylum), Viennese high society in Elisabeth II, another bourgeois residence in Heldenplatz. In all plays apart from Der Theatermacher, a domestic setting prevails. The setting of Austria (provincial or Vienna) is the foundation for the eccentric’s carnivalesque reaction to the cultural, historical and political influences he witnesses.

At times, the Bernhardian carnival is intended for a public place, yet it is distinct from Bakhtin’s popular carnival. Bruscon does not perform out of a genuine interest in audiences, his play is not a communal carnival; it is not a mass event, nor is it a folk

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71 Jahraus, “Von Saurau zu Murau”, p. 72
72 “Von Saurau zu Murau”, p. 71
carnival which audiences participate in. “Das Rad der Geschichte”, Bruscon’s play within a play, a selfish carnival of innumerable variations of a play, celebrates change and unpredictability to audiences. The constant changes inherent in “Das Rad der Geschichte”, and preparations for performance itself, are performed solely within the family theatre group. Voss stages his public carnival in the Steinhof sanatorium, making use of the patients and staff present there to perform his own obsessions. In contrast to Bakhtin’s carnival theory, Bernhard’s figures give prime importance to the private stage in the home or equivalent in performing their carnival as a way of life (“To be sure, carnival also invaded the home; in essence it was limited in time only and not in space; carnival knows neither stage nor footlights” 73), marking their indifference to popular opinion. In all the plays under consideration, in a very short time span, the nature of the group’s private life is uncovered. In Elisabeth II, Herrenstein’s retreat from the world, in Der Theatermacher, Bruscon’s megalomaniac private family rituals, the ritual family scene in Ritter Dene Voss, Hedwig’s theatre and Zittel’s domestic ritual in Heldenplatz are all essentially private forms of carnival. Furthermore, the eccentrics Bruscon, Voss and Herrenstein perform theatre and eccentric carnival rituals in front of the family/domestic group, and the carnival becomes more radical in this private setting. There is always a need for an audience due to the exhibitionistic tendency that characterizes the Bernhardian eccentric. He is mostly indifferent to conditions in society, where these do not conflict with his own interests (as when Bruscon confronts provincial officialdom in Utzbach). Bernhard’s carnival can therefore be seen as celebratory in the sense that it proclaims difference and, given the privilege the eccentric figure accords to his own opinions, it is fundamentally anti-populist.

I. 6 Carnival and theatre

Bruscon’s ongoing theatrical project is particularly significant for the established carnival as way of life, as he forces his family to lead a bohemian existence performing on improvised rural stages. Bakhtin notes that “something of the carnival atmosphere is retained, under certain conditions, among the so-called bohemians, but here in most cases we are dealing with the degradation and trivialisation of the carnival sense of the

73 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 128
world (there is, for example, not a grain of that carnival spirit of communal
performance).” Yet Bruscon’s is not a communal performance, as it involves no one
beyond the family. Furthermore, Bruscon’s theatrical project, a form of “subculture”, an
alternative way of life, stimulates artistic spontaneity and renewal in a way that other
eccentrics’ forms of experimentation cannot, since they are less creative than Bruscon.
The many levels of theatrical performance in Bruscon’s carnivalistic way of life will be
analysed in chapter III. Bruscon is the only eccentric figure to have liberated himself
from material concerns. Other eccentrics, notably Voss and Herrenstein, paradoxically
rely on their wealth, which frees them from genuine social responsibilities, to define
themselves as individuals reacting against pre-imposed conventional burdens of the non-
carnival world (i.e. social class, inheritance). All eccentrics use Austria as a stage to
perform their carnivalesque perspectives. Indeed, Voss uses his family inheritance to
turn against it and perform as an eccentric, and therefore cannot fully reject it (his
special privilege will be discussed in chapter III). Similarly, Herrenstein cannot break
entirely with his social class. Despite travelling frequently and widely, all the eccentrics
show themselves to be rooted in a specific cultural and geographical location, namely
Vienna, or the Austrian provinces in the case of Bruscon, where they lead a selectively
antisocial existence, using their attachment to their heritage/nation to deride it. The
eccentric carnivalizes the image of Austria, and Austria becomes a stage for the
eccentric’s carnival.

I. 7 The influence of the eccentric in Bernhardian carnival

Given that the social status of these eccentric figures remains intact, their sense of
hierarchical positions within the eccentric group arrangement determines their relations
with others, creating a carnival quite different from Bakhtin’s theory. According to
Bakhtin, “the behaviour, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority
of all hierarchical positions (social estate, rank, age, property) defining them totally in
non-carnival life [...]”, but Bakhtin’s democratic idea of carnival cannot apply to
Bernhard’s eccentrics. Whereas Bakhtin insists that “all distance between people is

74 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 131
75 ibid, p. 131
76 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 123
suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people*, the outsider status of the Bernhardian eccentric and his chosen path in life turns the carnival into a privilege that the eccentric determines, whether staged in public or private. By consequence, no “special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free” can be established in respect of Bernhard’s plays. The eccentrics do not engage in open dialogue and are never directly challenged or contradicted by their entourages. The secondary figures’ silence is an essential role in the carnival, enabling the eccentric to have the dominant voice and to perform his tirades, which are never debated. This unnatural situation in view of the lack of dialogue depends not only on the hierarchy in the group carnival; in all cases there is an inversion of the normal forms of communication in the family and with domestics. Bruscon’s wife Agathe in *Der Theatermacher* is denied a voice throughout the play. Any exchange between Bruscon and his children revolves almost exclusively around theatre.

The eccentrics perform neologisms and other free speech forms to the other figures within their exclusive groups. The eccentric alone generally has the privilege of creating new language or phrases that others repeat, indicating his influence (in *Ritter Dene Voss*, *Heldenplatz*). The figures around the eccentric are generally subordinated to a social or private hierarchy which has little potential for genuine communication or dialogue, quite unlike Bakhtin’s definition of “a group of people initiated in familiar intercourse, who are frank and free in expressing themselves verbally.” The authority of the Bernhardian eccentric is never entirely overturned and this creates a rigid hierarchical division between himself and others in his group, as in *Der Theatermacher*, *Elisabeth II* and *Heldenplatz*, since his self-determined performance depends on the others’ acceptance of the situation and active role in enabling his theatre. Even where there is minimal dialogue, the secondary figures allow his established theatre to continue; there is never any spontaneity or divergence from what is expected from them. The commonly used neologisms in the family group in the case of *Ritter Dene Voss*, which authenticate the eccentric nature of the group members and their relationships with each other, are not a form of marketplace speech. In *Ritter Dene Voss*, the fascination with the eccentric and

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77 *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 123
78 *Rabelais and his World*, p. 10
79 *Rabelais and his World*, p. 188
his power over others is evident in the sisters’ repetition of his language forms. In *Ritter Dene Voss*, the siblings are all compliant with each other in maintaining the established eccentric way of life. The nature of the family group does lead to some spontaneity, verbally or in seemingly provocative gestures towards the eccentric. But even in the family, in view of the authority of the eccentric in determining the lives of those in his circle, relations do not change or develop, since the eccentric has little consideration for the feelings and self-respect of the others in the group, and often reacts insensitively, without regard for their emotions. The attitude of the family members living around the eccentric in *Der Theaternacher* and *Ritter Dene Voss* in performing prescribed lines or recycling his language attests to his power over them. Bruscon’s children in *Der Theaternacher* must recite a precise formula of speech in “Das Rad der Geschichte”; in off-stage theatre, praise rituals take place in front of the inn’s stage. The children are resigned to both performances; Bruscon relates to his family only through theatre. The children also have specific roles to play in the stage preparations; his neologisms announce the nature of these, and his dehumanizing judgment of his family. Bruscon addresses his son, an essential member of his exclusive troupe as “Du Handwerksidiot/ [...] Vorhangzieher” (85). Where there are social differences imposed by the master-servant relationship, as in *Elisabeth II* and *Heldenplatz*, no genuine, profound communication is established either, since the social roles of those serving the eccentric remain subordinate and fixed by him. The dead eccentric’s servant Frau Zittel in *Heldenplatz* remains traumatised by the power his memory continues to wield over her and she continues to recite large fragments of his speech in an inauthentic monologue. In *Elisabeth II*, verbal exchange between Herrenstein and his long-standing employees remains flat and is not allowed to deepen, even if the servants at times provoke Herrenstein with their polite stock responses.

The power of the eccentric figure over others does not diminish; group theatre is an essential foundation of carnival eccentricity as the eccentric establishes his authority over others by controlling their performance. Further, the secondary figures display a willingness to allow the eccentric to perpetuate his carnival of difference, indeed, his influence is central to their whole existence, since they are on the whole mesmerized by him. Their lives become a form of theatre, and the eccentric’s control can be seen in the
most diverse settings. Whether as audience or by taking on roles and actively participating in eccentric group theatre, they set the scene for his projection of eccentricity, and their presence ensures that the carnival is a collective performance. They may at times oppose him indirectly within the group theatre he establishes, yet their generally silent and submissive forms of reaction, to be analysed in chapter III, are ineffective, as they do not bring about any change. An overall respect for the eccentric is preserved.

I. 8 The exclusivity and permanence of Bernhardian carnival
The communal principle of Bakhtin’s carnival is subverted by the exclusivity of Bernhard’s carnival, in which the constellation of the groups does not change. In contrast to the brevity of freedom in Bakhtin’s carnival, carnival in Bernhard’s theatre is upheld by giving permanence to the framework of the group structure, and carnival is thus undemocratic, in contradiction to a popular experience (it is not a “symbol of communal performance” 80 – involving large groups of people). Equally, to the eccentric, the non-carnival world does not change; it is anathema to him, but he nevertheless relies on it in order to react against it. Unlike in Bakhtin’s theory, carnival in Bernhard’s theatre involves more than “a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order […]” 81 Carnival in Bernhard’s theatre is permanent, since the well-established groups formed around the eccentrics lend exclusivity and unchanging stability to their domestic arrangements, enabling the eccentrics to create a set of self-defined, individual and private rituals. Non-conformism takes shape within a group recognisable at least from the outside as conventional. Carnival is a licensed form of behaviour within the seemingly conventional structure of the family or domestic groups, in which traditional roles such as father or servant acquire new dimensions. Further, the physical aspect of the framework of the traditional and stale domestic interiors inhabited by the eccentrics is the backdrop to an established carnival in the figures’ relationships. Interior domestic settings are generally predominant in Bernhard’s theatre. Within generally private settings, earlier plays deal with specific, recognisable groups within society, socially stereotypical roles, and parody conventional social roles (i.e. so-called

80 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 128
81 Rabelais and his World, p. 10
charitable groups and the handicapped in Ein Fest für Boris, the upper echelons of society in Die Jagdgesellschaft, the Austrian cultural élite in Die Berühmten, political élite in Der Präsident, intellectual élites in Immanuel Kant, Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh, Am Ziel). Even if there are eccentric aspects in these plays, they are subordinated to the study of these groups' interaction in society. The later plays, whether in a private or public setting (as in Der Theaterspieler), are particularly focused on a private permanent eccentric arrangement, in which the main eccentric figure prescribes a carnival of eccentricity and thus determines the roles of others in the fixed group. In the case of Der Theaterspieler, the existential issues go far beyond the performance issues of artist figures in Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige, Die Macht der Gewohnheit, or Minetti. Bruscon's family, for example, is consumed by the carnival of theatre. In the later plays under discussion in this thesis, the conventional structure is only a façade.

As soon as we enter the private sphere, the carnivalesque nature of the relationships within these groups immediately becomes apparent, as it provides a foundation for an “alternative”, eccentrically determined way of life. This “alternative”, a way of life in an environment familiar both to the eccentric and to all the figures around him, is the site of the distinctive Bernhardian form of carnival. Yet carnival cannot be seen as having utopian possibilities in Bernhard, since no alternatives to the way of life the eccentric leads, along with his group, are seriously entertained. According to Bakhtin, “Carnival is […] not even performed; its participants live in it […] live a carnivalesque life. Because carnivalesque life is drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent ‘life turned inside out’, ‘the reverse side of the world’, (‘monde à l’envers’).” 82 What in Bakhtin is a temporary reaction to non-carnival norms paradoxically becomes long-term in Bernhard; an eccentric “‘life turned inside out’” becomes the only conceivable way of life, inescapable, since given the collective rejection of a “normal”, non-carnival life, there is no possibility of returning to the non-carnival conditions of the “normal” world. Nor is there any potential for liberation, since there is an implicit solidarity, co-operation and mutual dependence within the group. The long-established relations within the group and the group’s willingness to remain committed to the group keep the carnival alive. The dependence on the eccentric extends

82 Dostoevsky's Poetics, p. 122 (Bakhtin's emphasis)
beyond death in *Heldenplatz*, as the domestic rituals introduced by the eccentric are preserved. In *Ritter Dene Voss*, Voss needs his sisters in order to stage the carnival of defying social norms through incest; and in *Elisabeth II*, Herrenstein has imposed his physical and emotional needs on Richard, creating a permanently eccentric relationship. Equality and freedom are therefore not possible, since an order of subordination and subjection exists in the group. Bernhard’s carnival can never be idealised as the kind of utopia envisaged by Bakhtin when he speaks of the participants in carnival being “reborn for new, purely human relations [...]” 83

Eccentricity is for Bakhtin “a special category of the carnival sense of the world”; eccentricity in Bernhard characterizes the very nature of the dominant figures and the foundations of the group arrangement. Eccentricity does permit, as Bakhtin says, “the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves” 85 in the behaviour of the Bernhardian eccentrics. They define themselves as transgressing or living beyond the confines of pre-given social norms and roles, as their way of life overturns bourgeois dictates and convention. They bear no social responsibilities and through their self-defined group rituals, they reject conventional codes of behaviour. The main eccentric figure reacts with disrespect against convention and reveals an unpredictable antisocial stance when facing the non-carnival world (discussed in chapter III). Within the group, carnival does permit many limits to be transgressed, but in Bernhard it is not a form of “complete licence”, 86 as new experiments are not always completed (e.g. the sexual fantasies in *Ritter Dene Voss*, although unconventional, stop short of actual physical incest). The supporting figures show no initiative, as they are willing to perpetuate a system determined by the eccentric.

One of the principles of carnival is the desire to be unpredictable and to shock. This behaviour involves transgressing accepted social forms and threatening the status quo, since it is the essence of carnival to reverse norms and conventions. Carnival, as Clark and Holquist remark, “must not be confused with mere holiday play. The ability to revel in the world’s variety, to celebrate its openness and its ever-renewed capacity to

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83 *Rabelais and his World*, p. 10
84 *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 123
85 ibid, p. 123
86 Gardiner, p. 44
surprise, is a `special form of life’, a kind of existential heteroglossia. Carnival is a gap in the fabric of society. And since the dominant ideology seeks to author the social order as a unified text, fixed, complete, and forever, carnival is a threat."  

87 The eccentric’s antisocial attitude represents a form of carnival debasement. The carnival unfolds typically on the public stage of the Burgtheater, the symbolic bastion of Austrian bourgeois theatre, before audiences which belong to the non-carnival world; where Bernhard’s eccentrics exhibit attitudes which are abnormal, atypical, new and above all, shocking and offensive (i.e. characteristically overturning received attitudes towards culture, heritage, politics and Austria as a nation). The provocation of the Bernhardian carnival to Austrian audiences, for whom the plays were intended, lies in its unpredictability and reversal of the status quo.

I. 9 Bernhardian carnival and genre issues in Bernhard’s theatre

Bakhtin defines carnival as “the people’s second life, organized on the basis of laughter”, a celebration of the “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.” 88 Bakhtin’s theory that the inversion of norms is necessarily comic, because it engenders “the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities” 90 governing the non-carnival world, is problematic when applied to Bernhard’s eccentrics. The reversal of the normal order is not automatically comic in Bernhard. When the eccentric mocks the world, it is often an unfunny and dark performance. There is little humorous verbal contact between figures, and little that is joyful in the eccentric arrangements, in the permanence of their carnival. The definitions of conventional comedy therefore cannot bring about a fruitful interpretation of Bernhard’s plays. Indeed, Elisabeth II may be ironically subtitled “Keine Komödie”, but if there are instances of humour, they are very black indeed. To Huntemann, the ending of Elisabeth II “ergibt sich […] nicht aus dem Sinnzusammenhang des Stückes, sondern erfüllt das Schema einer komischen Schlußkatastrophe, wie sie schon den Theaternacher krönte.” 91 The final disaster in Elisabeth II dramatises the superficiality

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87 Clark and Holquist, pp. 300-301
88 Rabelais and his World, p. 8
89 ibid, p. 10
90 ibid, p. 11
91 Huntemann, p. 215
of high society and hereby uncrows it. Bernhard subtitled *Vor dem Ruhestand* “Eine Komödie deutscher Seele”, a bitter attack on the surviving Nazi perpetrators, since humour is entirely absent in the play.

Bernhard saw the cripple as comic: “Über Mängel und Gebrechen wird gelacht – nicht über Normales”; “Das Ernst ist der Kitt für das Lachprogramm”. Bernhard thus identified the significance of a fascination with deformity, which is central to carnival grotesque caricature, and indeed several figures are infirm (Boris, the Weltverbesserer, Herrenstein). Infirmitiy in itself has been interpreted as a source of comedy; potentially tragic aspects of reality thus take on a comic dimension. One of the oddities of Bruscon and Herrenstein is their obsession with cripples, even if they do not necessarily find them funny. In taking a specific interest in them, they invert conventional norms of perspective, but their view is not in consequence humorous as in Bakhtin’s theory. The cripple is an outsider, and Bernhard’s eccentrics can identify with such a figure. At times, the image of cripple is an extension of the eccentric’s own condition, as in Herrenstein’s case (his view of the world as “verkrüppelt”; 290). Metaphorically speaking, he is existentially crippled in remaining in Austria, as are other eccentrics, yet in doing so they are provoked into performing their tirades, time and again. The image of cripple, both on stage, and as a peculiar preoccupation of the eccentric’s perception, is a factor in Bernhardian carnival.

Critics have addressed the genre issue in Bernhard’s plays. According to Haider-Pregler, Bernhard was already seen as a radical dramatist early on; she describes him as: “einen alle Konventionen des bürgerlichen Illusionstheaters demolierenden Dramatiker, als Schöpfer einer intellektuell-nihilistischen Tragödie, deren irritierende Dramaturgie und Rollengestaltung völlig neue Maßstäbe der Theaterästhetik zu setzen schien.” She describes the dualism in the reception of the earlier plays: “[…] ihr nicht wegzuleugnender Unterhaltungswert opponierte gegen die vorschnell für verbindlich erklärte, stringente Tragödieninterpretation[…]”. Conventional tragedy cannot apply to Bernhard since early plays (*Ein Fest für Boris, Vor dem Ruhestand*) and late plays

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93 See Haider-Pregler, “ Ist es eine Komödie?”, p. 162, p. 167ff; Huntemann, p. 201
94 Hilde Haider-Pregler, “ Ist es eine Komödie?”, p. 153
95 “ Ist es eine Komödie?”, p. 154
(Der Theatermacher, Elisabeth II, Heldenplatz) all tend, as Haider-Pregler states, "zur Katastrophe, gleichgültig ob diese ins Geschehen einbezogen ist oder nicht [...]." The disaster prevents tragedy given the absurd aspects, whether comic or not, since there is little development before the sudden and final event, and sudden death, a frequent outcome, whether on- or off-stage, is in itself often absurd; yet the eccentric survives when disaster strikes in Der Theatermacher and Elisabeth II. In Elisabeth II death takes place off the actual stage: Richard wheels Herrenstein to the balcony door, and Herrenstein attempts to view the consequences of the collapse of the balcony, which are not visible to audiences of the play, although the actual disappearance of the balcony is visible. Herrenstein, upon peering down, gives a deadpan account of the result: "Wahrscheinlich sind sie alle tot" (356) and Richard relates a confirmation in an equally detached fashion: "Sicher" (356), since neither is interested in the human dimension. All that matters to Herrenstein is to maintain his carnivalesque domestic arrangement. In Ein Fest für Boris, following the sudden and for a significant time unnoticed collapse of the cripple Boris, the final stage direction ends as follows: "Kaum ist die Gute mit dem toten Boris allein, bricht sie in ein fürchterliches Gelächter aus" (77). Death is trivialised and in Ein Fest für Boris it is even ridiculed, its main purpose is to expose the futility of human activity and existence generally. Death is denied dignity, and tragedy is thus thwarted. As Bernhard stated, all aspects of existence paradoxically become insignificant when one is faced with death: "es ist alles lächerlicher, wenn man an den Tod denkt". Jang, who discusses the endings of the plays in general terms, states: "der Ausgang mit dem Coûp de théâtre [ist] bei Bernhard einerseits absurd-komisch, andererseits verblüfft er damit das Publikum mit dem betroffen machenden Schockeffekt bis zur Erschütterung, so daß einem das Lachen im Halse stecken bleibt." Contrary to Jang's view, however, death has no devastating effect, since audiences are distanced from its palpable aspects. She goes on to remark that the sudden ending or catastrophe recalls earlier traditions: "Auch in der Commedia dell' Arte war ja diese Technik als Verblüffungscoup ein

\[96\text{ Thomas Bernhard, \textit{Rede zur Verleihung des kleinen österreichischen Staatspreises für Literatur, März 1968}, in \textit{Über Thomas Bernhard}, edited by Anneliese von Botond, (1. Auflage, F. am Main, 1970), pp. 7-8, (pp. 7-8)}\]

\[97\text{ Jang, p. 94}\]
beliebtes Spielmittel [...]” 99 Death has no immediate or personal consequences for the survivors Richard and Herrenstein, whose own existence is consequently trivialised, even if the eccentric relationship between master and servant is preserved, since Herrenstein is saved by his indifference to an event which he sees as a manifestation of popular culture. Death is denied a personal dimension, as Herrenstein’s guests are victims of the fascination of spectacle, which destroys them, and death’s impact is relativized by their lack of real values. As Damerau argues: “Die Schlußkatastrophe [...] hat keinen tragischen Wert, ist nicht individuelles Ende eines individuellen Lebenslaufs.” 100 At the same time, the finality of death creates a shock effect at the end of the plays theatrically speaking. According to Schmidt-Dengler, the on-stage enactment of the unconventional circumstances characteristic of everyday life in the eccentric’s domestic circle precedes a final shock for the survivors: “Wenn jedoch der Tod eintritt, gibt es ein abruptes Ende. Ist der Alltag schon schockierend, so wird am Ende gegen alle Gewöhnung ein Gegenschock mobilisiert [...].” 101 But even death never seriously threatens Herrenstein’s long-established eccentric way of life.

Huntemann sees Bernhard’s oeuvre as innovative in that it goes beyond a fusion of genre and is distinct from hitherto clearly recognisable tragicomedy, since Bernhard’s game with comedy and tragedy is radicalised through its trivialisation: “Bernhard geht, das sei betont, weiter als die moderne Tragikomödie, die sich als Genre wenigstens noch Ernst nimmt, wenn auch Komik und Tragik in ihr bis zur Untrennbarkeit miteinander verschmelzen.” 102 A fusion of tragedy and comedy creates dramatic ambiguity. Yet the carnivalization of genre, which goes beyond this fusion, is pronounced in the late plays, in which the very notions of tragedy and comedy are subverted and thus trivialised. Comedy and tragedy are no fruitful definitions for Bernhard’s later plays. Bruscon’s play within a play in Der Theatermacher, in particular, could be seen as a non-committal carnivalization of genre, as he deliberately transgresses the idea of genre boundaries

99 Jang, p. 92
100 Damerau, p. 298
102 Huntemann, p. 219. Uwe Betz also makes a similar comment, which could apply to all plays: “Die aporetische Ambivalenz von Komödie und Tragödie in der letzten Werkphase überschreitet die Tragikomödie insofern, daß sie auch diese Gattung, so wie alle anderen, nicht ernst nimmt” (Polyphone Räume, p. 271). C.f. also Klug, “Zum Verhältnis von Komischem und Tragischem” in Thomas Bernhards Theaterstücke, p. 96 ff.
when he speaks of "meiner Komödie / die in Wahrheit eine Tragödie ist" (DT 15-16). Huntemann also points out that Bernhard himself did not take genre definitions too seriously, since he played a game with audiences, designed to subvert conventional definitions of genres: "Daß die Genrebefestigungen der Stücke ihrem Charakter meist gegenläufig sind [...] ist zusätzliches Verwirrspiel, dessen sich Bernhard wohl bewußt ist." In the autobiographical narrative Der Keller Bernhard again returns to the theme of genre mélange, distinct from the specific genre of tragicomedy: "dann vermischte sich das Theater, es ist nicht mehr erkennbar, ob es eine Tragödie oder eine Komödie ist. Das verwirrt die Zuschauer." Genre is thus trivialised in Bernhard’s own words; the main aim is to play a game with audiences. Writing may be seen as a form of survival, particularly in Bernhard’s case, and he thematises the absurdity of existence in his plays. Schmidt-Dengler points out that Bernhard’s attitude to genre reflects the present era of indifference and a lack of ideology: "Bernhards Epoche ist die Epoche der Gleichgültigkeit, zu der uns die kapitalistische Marktlage verurteilt, und Bernhard spielt raffiniert damit: Egal ist es, ob es eine Komödie oder eine Tragödie ist, und weil wir nichts mehr zu beklagen haben, weil uns selbst die Utopie eines besseren oder auch nur anderen Zustandes abhanden gekommen ist, haben wir uns der Farce anheimgegeben, dem Lächerlichen. Indem wir schreiben, dienten wir diesem Lächerlichen, das uns über die Zeit und damit über das Leben hinweghilft." Schmidt-Dengler describes Bernhard’s dramatic technique as "das ständige Grenzgehetum zwischen Komödie und Tragödie", making differentiation of genre difficult, and sees Bernhard as "ein Autor, der virtuos die Grenzen von Tragödie und Komödie wechselt", adding that "seine Texte funktionieren nach dem Modell des Umspringbildes [...]." Tragedy and comedy are interchangeable. Although Schmidt-Dengler does not intend a reference to Bakhtin’s

103 Huntemann, p. 218
104 Bernhard, Der Keller, Residenz Verlag, p. 102
105 W. Schmidt-Dengler, "Komödien-Tragödien: Zum dramatischen Spätwerk Thomas Bernhards" in Bernhard-Tage Oehsdorf Materialien (Weitra, Bibliothek der Provinz, 1994), pp. 74-98, (p. 82-3)
106 W. Schmidt-Dengler, "Die Tragödien sind die Komödien oder Die Unbelangbarkeit Thomas Bernhards durch die Literaturwissenschaft" in Koninzent Bernhard — Zur Thomas Bernhard Rezeption in Europa, Wolfram Bayer (editor), (Wien, Böhlau, 1995), pp. 15-30, (pp. 28-9)
carnival theory, the term "Umspringbild" is reminiscent of Bakhtin's belief that carnival involves inversion (a topsy-turvy world).

Tragedy can be seen as integral to Bernhard's theatre, yet it takes on new carnivalistic dimensions: "Bernhards Dramen zehren aber mittelbar von den großen Tragödien der Weltliteratur, aber auch der Geschichte, wobei sie es sich aber nicht angelegen sein lassen, diese parodistisch zu denunzieren [...]"; 108 this can be seen in Bruscon's use of literary and historical figures in his play, and also the mésalliance of the eccentric playing the role both of fool and king as in Minetti and Einfach kompliziert: "Die Narr-König Mésalliance ist die Paradefigur der Tragikomödie, einer Bastardgattung [...]" 109 In Der Theatermacher, Hamlet's lines are subverted, and according to Schmidt-Dengler indicate Bernhard's attitude to genre: "Ob Leberknödel- oder Frittatensuppe — das ist die tragische Alternative, vor der ein Bruscon steht, eine Alternative, die auch zeigt, wie Bernhards Stücke zwischen dem Komischen und Tragischen irisierend ihr Irrwesen treiben." 110 Referring to Bruscon's discussion of the roles of "Ein König [...] Eine Stallmagd" (DT, 30), Schmidt-Dengler notes: "Weder das Hohe noch das Niedrige paßt mehr für das Theater [...]" 111 Performing any role is absurd, but Bruscon is not concerned with imitation. The language of the eccentrics constantly flips between tragedy and comedy, thus diminishing the potentially tragic aspects of their existence: "Die tragische Existenz wird innerhalb ihrer hilflosen Sprachexzesse zur komischen Figur [...]" 112 The linguistic performance of Bernhard's eccentrics, however, is not "hilflos"; it is certainly integral to the idea of eccentricity. The eccentric's carnivalistic performance, linguistic and otherwise, "transgresses all distances between objects, manifestations, and values" and "fuses and combines elements that the mind is accustomed to divide strictly and even to oppose each other." 113 The ambiguity Bakhtin refers to here is reflected in the eccentric's language. Many contradictions of the eccentric's character are recognisable in linguistic performance, such as his ambiguity towards socio-cultural heritage and ritual, given his lack of any firm principle, and his

108 Schmidt-Dengler, "Es ist alles egal", p. 148
109 Betz, p. 270
110 Schmidt-Dengler, "Ohnmacht durch Gewohnheit", p. 158
111 Schmidt-Dengler, "Es ist alles egal", pp. 148-9
112 Betz, p. 272
113 Rabelais and his World, p. 421
dehumanising language yet reliance on the individuals he mocks. Tragedy is thematised in *Der Theatermacher* and *Heldenplatz*, as well as *Der Weltverbesserer* and *Der Präsident*, but the figures’ lack of principles prevents the kind of recognition necessary for tragedy: “Die Figuren sind so heruntergekommen, daß ihnen die tragische Fallhöhe schon auf Grund ihrer psychischen oder sozialen Disposition versagt ist, aber nichts desto weniger zehren viele Stücke Bernhards von jenem tragischen Ausgang, von der Unentrinnbarkeit eines letalen Endes, und er läßt die Figuren auch stürzen.” 114 Death is trivialised, which prevents tragedy. Thus death in *Heldenplatz* and the balcony collapse in *Elisabeth II* cannot be seen as tragic, although the latter play clearly does not conform to a conventional sense of what constitutes comedy either, as Bernhard emphasizes by giving it the subtitle “Keine Komödie” – possibly a new genre in itself. Hermann Beil, producer in the Burgtheater, commented on the symbolism of the balcony scene: “Es ist schrecklich und komisch, das ist eigentlich eine geniale Metapher für eine verrottete Gesellschaft, die an sich selbst krepiert”, 115 and described the play as “eine bittere oder eine böse Komödie”. 116

Bakhtin associates carnival laughter and humour with “a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (à l’envers), of the ‘turnabout’, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.” 117 A culture of comic mockery can be detected in Bernhard, but it is not founded on a healthy or “whole outlook on the world”, 118 of the kind which Bakhtin attributes to folk laughter. Folk humour, an essential component of Bakhtin’s carnival laughter theory (“a second world of folk culture” 119), is of no relevance to Bernhard. Likewise, Bernhard’s eccentrics also indulge in the mockery of officialdom — “a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders”, 120 yet this carnivalization of accepted norms is not necessarily comic. In Bernhard’s theatre, there is no alternative to the inherited socio-political or cultural

114 “Es ist alles egal”, p. 148
115 Jang, p. 265 (Interview with Beil)
116 ibid, p. 265
117 *Rabelais and his World*, p. 11
118 *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 127
119 *Rabelais and his World*, p. 11
120 *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 127
heritage (the “monolithically serious” \(^{121}\)), which the eccentric mocks, and despite the mocking tone and the fixation on ridiculing standards that he perceives as debased, no joyful celebration of an alternative can develop. The world of Bernhard’s eccentrics is far removed from the domain of Bakhtinian folk humour. At most, some of the eccentric’s assertions may be seen as comic in their absurdity. According to Bakhtin: “Folk humour denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture.” \(^{122}\) Unlike folk laughter, which “expresses a distinctive ideological viewpoint” \(^{123}\), the eccentric’s ridicule is never employed in the service of a precisely delineated political or social programme.

The carnival laughter identified by Bakhtin is dependent on alternation; he speaks of both carnival and non-carnival life as being “legitimate, but separated by strict temporal boundaries.” \(^{124}\) In Bernhard, there is a permanent co-existence of the carnival and non-carnival world, breaching Bakhtin’s definition of the concept of carnival time. The eccentric’s behaviour, roles and language are all characteristic of carnivalesque mockery and ridicule.

I. 10 Ritual and the grotesque in carnival

Private ritual is essential to the carnival. Gardiner states that ritualistic behaviour is a form of carnival: “carnival is Bakhtin’s term for a bewildering constellation of rituals, games, symbols, and various carnal excesses.” \(^{125}\) The meals or feasts in Bernhard’s early and late plays (in particular *Ein Fest für Boris, Vor dem Ruhestand, Ritter Dene Voss, Heldenplatz*), which appear to symbolically recall celebratory aspects of the carnival, have no utopian possibilities, as the figures are not free, even if they are eccentric. As Höller states: “Die Maskierungen, Verkleidungen, das besoffene Gerede oder der Verlust der Selbstkontrolle haben in diesen grotesken Endspielen jeden utopischen Aspekt verloren [...].” \(^{126}\) Eccentric ritual takes place in the private carnival sphere, is an established self-projection, and corroborates the capacity for the individual’s self-definition and his influence over others’ existence. Within the domestic

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\(^{121}\) *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 125

\(^{122}\) *Rabelais and his World*, p. 11

\(^{123}\) Gardiner, p. 49

\(^{124}\) *Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 130

\(^{125}\) Gardiner, p. 45

\(^{126}\) Hans Höller, *Thomas Bernhard*, Rowohlt Monographie, 1993, pp. 111-112
sphere, the power of the eccentric becomes apparent; the departed eccentric in Heldenplatz has left his trace in Zittel's domestic ritual. Other domestic ritual upholds existential routine, as in Ritter Dene Voss and Elisabeth II, and is literally life sustaining in Elisabeth II. Whether in the framework of theatre as a way of life, domestic or family life, ritual generally gives structure to existence in an absurd world. Compulsive ritual, even when this is performed as a way of killing time, does not diminish its eccentric aspect. Only socio-cultural rituals take place in the non-carnival world. Where the main eccentric figure adheres to these, ambiguity arises, given that socio-cultural rituals in Ritter Dene Voss, Elisabeth II and Heldenplatz reveal a shared heritage with other members of society. As seen, Herrenstein gives an unconventional perspective on this heritage; he also affirms difference during an exceptional social occasion.

There are grotesque aspects in Bernhard's theatre, associated with creative freedom, such as Bruscon's play in Der Theatermacher ("incompleteness, becoming, ambiguity, indefinability, non-canonicalism" 127), and the visually grotesque meal scenes in Ritter Dene Voss. Carnival is also associated with the creative exploitation of aspects of the human body, such as Herrenstein's obsession with cripples, reflecting his own state of infirmity: "Nennen Sie es Perversität Richard /ich bin von den Verunstaltungen der Körper angezogen [...] /gleichzeitig von der Masse ihrer Körperverunstaltungen" (289); he makes his own carnivalesque view of the world using a language of extreme repetition: "es wird nur Verkrüppeltes gesagt /wenn es noch so gut gedacht ist /ist es doch verkrüppelt gedacht /wenn es noch so gut gesagt ist /es ist doch verkrüppelt gesagt /[...] /die ganze Welt ist eine verkrüppelte" (290).

I. 11 Interpretation of the figures in Bernhard's plays

For an effective analysis of the eccentric figure, it is important to note that the eccentrics in Der Theatermacher, Ritter Dene Voss, Elisabeth II and Heldenplatz have little in common as individuals, and therefore cannot be equated with a particular philosopher or artist type, which some critics have tended to do. 128 Originality is of central importance

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127 Gardiner, p. 47
128 Previous research has focused on grouping later plays into various unhelpful categories such as "politischen Dramen und Künstlerdramen [...] Späthase mit Stücken über die sogenannte Wirklichkeit" (Jang, p. 8); and chronological divisions, in which the aforementioned categories merge: "In der letzten
to the eccentric, in terms of his innovative language, creativity and unaligned perspective. Herrenstein, Voss and Schuster (and with the exception of Bruscon) live in a bourgeois setting that they use as a stage to perform their invective, but beyond their common characteristic as eccentrics, they are very different as individuals. That individuality means that they are not interchangeable mouthpieces of Bernhard’s hatred of Austria. Rather, they are specified as speakers. And it is that drama of specified speaking more than the content of what is spoken that gives Bernhard’s œuvre its enduring fascination.

Schaffensphase verschmelzen die beiden Themenblöcke, das Politische und das Künstlerische, zu den realistischen Stücken, deren Protagonisten Philosophen und Künstler sind” (Jang, p. 21)
II. The eccentric figure

II. 1 The eccentric and the domestic setting in Elisabeth II

Within the traditional relationship of master-butler, Herrenstein gives Richard an unconventional status and he becomes an unlikely family substitute for Herrenstein, who has established an eccentric bond with him. In some ways, he sees Richard as a son: “Ich bin ja auch wie ein Vater zu Ihnen” (292). Conventional family relations are meaningless to him: “Mich hat Verwandtschaft immer abgestoßen /mit den Jahren immer mehr [...] /wenn wir ihre Heuchelei abziehen /bleibt von allen diesen Menschen nichts zurück /als ihre Häßlichkeit” (283-284). Herrenstein longs for human affection, which Richard is unable to provide, as his exterior remains impenetrable, and he is expected to perform commands. In the second scene Herrenstein tries to draw Richard’s attention to his condition and desire for sympathy and physical closeness:

HERRENSTEIN
Die ganze Zeit habe ich es
diesen Brustschmerz
sehen Sie Richard hier
Richard tritt vor
HERRENSTEIN
Hier Richard hier
Genau da
Da genau
Genau da
Richard muß die Stelle berühren (333-334)

Herrenstein’s attitude to Richard here reflects less his physical condition than an eccentric dependence on him coupled with a desire to control him. He admits to Guggenheim that his dependence is psychological, as he cannot envisage a replacement, even though Richard’s execution of his duties is not to his satisfaction:

Wenn wir einen Menschen am Notwendigsten haben
verläßt er uns
Ein fremder Mensch an meiner Seite
ist mir unerträglich
Die Verlässlichkeit von Richard
läßt zu wünschen übrig
alle Augenblicke ertappe ich ihn
bei einer Ungenauigkeit
aber ich sage nichts (328)

Throughout the play, Herrenstein determines and observes the performance of others, no matter how menial their task. Yet Herrenstein’s indifference to Richard’s failing
competence in banal duties indicates that Herrenstein’s need for him is entirely peculiar. The role of butler is subordinated to other roles, such as that of companion. Nonetheless, for Herrenstein, change to his routine would be death, and although physical debility and helplessness are in themselves a dead end, his existence is given another dimension because of Richard’s submission to him: “Wenn Sie mich verlassen töten Sie mich /ich bin ohne Sie nichts wert das wissen Sie /dann bin ich nicht nur ein Krüppel /sondern ein toter Krüppel” (345).

Herrenstein’s lack of mobility and activity in and outside the home are particularly significant for the domestic arrangement. In the Burgtheater production (2002, stage by Roland Gassmann), within the enclosed, claustrophobic atmosphere of the flat, emphasized by the heavy curtains, moss green wallpaper and gloomy rooms, lit up only by the bright shaft of light coming in from the window facing the opera, Herrenstein, virtually housebound, is totally dependent on Richard’s presence and therefore needs to maintain the bond at all costs. His need for regularity is shown in the ceremonial breakfast ritual with Richard, who is relied on as a companion. The outside world is at times a threat to Herrenstein, who lives on routine familiarity in his home. The conventional setting of Herrenstein’s Viennese “Gründerzeit” apartment with its Biedermeier furniture is once again typical of the interiors the “Großbürgertum” figures in Bernhard’s domestic settings in Ritter, Dene, Voss and Heldenplatz inhabit. The heavy furniture adds to the sense of being trapped, weighed down by the past. Overall, the interior appears aged, despite its grandeur, symbolic of the sense of imminent death Herrenstein feels. The stage in Elisabeth II is oversized (huge rooms, exceptionally high walls and doors, wall portraits, large central heaters), and the figures performing within it appear dwarfed by contrast; this effect of distortion is deliberate, as they are threatened by isolation and loneliness. Moreover, within the conventional appearance of this setting, an eccentric relationship flourishes.

On the one hand, Herrenstein feels threatened that Richard might leave him even after twenty-five years, and the fear of change merges with resignation: “Richard hat mir gedroht /mich zu verlassen /[...] /faselt etwas von Amerika Kalifornien /[...] /das war

129 See Appendix II, No. 34, p. 351
130 See Appendix II, No. 15, p. 332 & No. 33, p. 350
reaction to Richard’s proposals is an embodiment of the anger Herrenstein feels at his dependence on him, as to him, change can only bring negative consequences: “In Ihrem Alter Mitte Fünfzig /da kann man doch nicht nach Amerika gehen /um ein neues Leben anzufangen /das ist ja alles schon von vornherein zum Scheitern verurteilt” (334). On the other hand, the fact that Richard has so far remained in the same set-up for twenty-five years is a relief to Herrenstein, as he needs him for his peculiar domestic theatre and Richard’s loyalty shows he is certainly willing to play the necessary roles. He has given Richard no guaranteed inheritance (348), and yet the latter has remained under his influence. The relationship between Richard and Herrenstein is based on Richard’s passivity; his lack of opinions – given that he remains a flat character, his silence and refusal ever to contradict his master, permit Herrenstein’s eccentric performance to continue:

Sie sind ein eigenartiger Mensch
Ihr größerter Vorteil ist
daß Sie nichts von einem Widerspruchsgeist in sich haben
Fünfundzwanzig Jahre im Hause Herrenstein
der Gedanke ist mir persönlich grauenhaft
aber Sie bedrückt er nicht
Sie sind gleichmäßig gut aufgelegt
Von kleinen lächerlichen Anlässen in dieser Richtung abgesehen
Ich bin ja auch wie ein Vater zu Ihnen
Sie sind der einzige Mensch den ich aushalte
Ich kann nicht sagen warum
Es ist die Tatsache mein lieber Richard (292)

Herrenstein has imposed an unconventional role on Richard, seeing himself as a father figure and admitting that the only person he can tolerate is Richard. Living out such a relationship with anyone else is inconceivable to Herrenstein, and this fact privileges Richard’s role in the domestic carnival, albeit in a bizarre way. His role reaches far beyond that of domestic servant within the eccentric domestic arrangement. Herrenstein needs him for various forms of private theatre. His very presence as companion, which is his prime role, is essential to Herrenstein: “Ich brauche Sie ja nicht immer /aber natürlich muß ich wissen /daß Sie in der Nacht da sind” (313). Even if Herrenstein feels uneasy at times as to Richard’s plans, and is irritated by his contact with Schuppich, Richard’s own life in the 25 years has long become routine, and his life in Herrenstein’s household is partly that of audience, and partly that of secondary performer in domestic theatre whose role is to maintain the domestic ritual on which both he and Herrenstein depend. Often, Richard
maintain the domestic ritual on which both he and Herrenstein depend. Often, Richard merely plays the role of silent audience. It is clear that his long-standing service to Herrenstein does not stem merely from Herrenstein’s requirements. Richard lacks true individuality, which is a psychological boost to Herrenstein’s tirades, yet Richard is also under the power of his old master, whose private everyday life is self-determined. DAMerau discusses only Herrenstein’s dependence: “Das Maß an Macht, das die Bediensteten gewinnen, verlieren die autoritären Gegenüber. So wird in Elisabeth II auch die zentrale Machtgestalt unterwürfig.” Crucially, DAMerau neglects the dominance of the eccentric figure, Herrenstein, and the extent to which he prescribes the idiosyncratic rituals in the home, i.e. meals (including daily breakfast with Richard – which again elevates his status to that of companion), reading and the clock ritual, as well as moving around in his wheelchair. For all these rituals Richard is essential (apart from Herrenstein’s carnivalistic ritual of putting on shoes on to artificial feet), but it is Herrenstein who determines them; Richard is completely subordinated to the eccentric, who dictates his part. DAMerau sees Richard’s loyalty as a form of power: “Das Selbstbewuβtsein des Bediensteten, für jemanden dazusein, der einen braucht, ist auch ein Bewuβtsein von Macht”, yet he does not take the eccentric’s ability to impose a hierarchy into account, nor Richard’s willingness to remain in the arrangement. Jang claims: “Der Dieners Richard [...] hat in Wirklichkeit seinen behinderten Herrn in der Hand”, overlooking the fact that mutual dependence becomes a mutual need for routine. Gert Voss, who played the role of Herrenstein in the Burgtheater, went as far as to state in an interview: “Das ist schon eine Art Liebesgeschichte. Der Kammerdiener Richard ist Herrensteins Lebensmensch”. Richard is as dependent as Herrenstein on the security of the private situation, having made no attempt to leave, since he has no real intiative. He has become used to the undemanding, predictable ritual of his role. Richard remains Herrenstein’s privileged companion, far beyond an employee, with little apparent scope to live a life of his own. Herrenstein has

131 DAMerau, p. 365
132 DAMerau, p. 369
133 Jang, p.79
II. 2 The eccentric figure and the eccentric family in *Der Theatermacher*

Using the family as a captive audience facilitates the development of the cult of the extraordinary. The family in *Der Theatermacher* is also the travelling theatre group, taking on the roles Bruscon demands of them. Grandville’s “Ein Rad der Geschichte”, a lithograph image of a wheel of hats with turning spokes was used in the programme of the Burgtheater production as a symbol of “Das Rad der Geschichte”, Bruscon’s play within a play. Bruscon determines the family’s performance in turning the wheel of time without regard for chronology (“Wir können das Rad der Geschichte /nicht zurückdrehen”; 112), by arbitrarily picking out the historical figures, making his wife and children play the parts of those figures, whilst dressing them in the appropriate clothes to make a show for the audience.

In *Der Theatermacher*, the domestic setting merges with the theatre setting, and no indication is given of the existence of a conventional domestic household, in the present or in the past. The Bruscon family is not affiliated to a commercial theatre group, but leads an independent artistic existence. Their family life such as it is, is played out as a carnivalesque theatre, and the family’s unity is based on its acceptance of Bruscon’s imposition of that theatre on them. The Bruscon family participates in a carnival through leading a totally theatrical life. The adult son and daughter do not lead independent lives outside the family. Eccentricity is evident in the fact that no member of the Bruscon family is able to exist outside the theatre; this constitutes the basis for their deviant, non-conformist way of life. All continue to alternate between multiple levels of theatre. “Off-stage” theatre covers all the multiple levels of theatre apart from official stage performances of “Das Rad der Geschichte”. The family performs the roles in “Das Rad” (including rehearsals taking place on and in front of the stage), and roles in everyday off-stage theatre (including private ritual).

There are some interesting comparisons between Bruscon’s theatre and the world’s oldest living theatrical tradition, in India. “Surabhi Theatres was established in 1885 by three brothers – Ramaiah, Venkaiah and Krishnaia […]”. It is the only one of its kind in the

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world, run entirely by the descendants of a single family for such a long time”. Living for the theatre embraces all aspects of everyday life: “Theatre is such an integral part of life for this family that most of their activities are conducted in and around the theatre. They live inside the theatre, cook their food there, with make-up on their faces and when the time comes, they dismantle it and move on to yet another destination”. Unlike Bruscon, the Surabhi theatre group transports a mobile theatre construction with space for audiences.

Bruscon’s scorn of audiences and the unconventional set-up of his family as travelling theatre group in the provinces leads to a reliance on the family in three main areas outside “Das Rad der Geschichte”. Firstly, they fulfil their role in acting out a prescribed formula of praise (chapter V. 8) and secondly, they perform the off-stage ritualistic preparations for the performance (chapter III. 7). Finally, they serve as a private audience for his off-stage performance behind the stage curtain (chapter III. 6. 2). The family members’ off-stage performance is vital in enabling the eccentric’s theatre to continue. Although his children and wife are unenthusiastic in collaborating in “Das Rad”, given their boredom with the roles, they never challenge Bruscon or his ideas off stage. His authority is thus preserved. There seems to be no other option for the son and daughter, since they have not conceived an alternative life. Although Bruscon accuses them of incompetence in all aspects of their roles in “Das Rad”, their off-stage roles (rituals) are generally performed to his satisfaction. It is a marked idiosyncrasy in Bruscon’s character that he uses both their comic lack of talent and their resignation to his advantage in his self-centred off-stage theatre. Harmless attempts to react to paternal and creative authority during preparations (Sarah showing her tongue during the curtain drawing exercise – 73; Ferruccio and the Caesar mask he places in front of the innkeeper’s face – 52) do not detract from the overall authority Bruscon exercises over the family. Their compliance with Bruscon and loyalty to his definition of a theatrical existence to the detriment of their own independence mean that his lifestyle is essentially theirs.

No indication is given of life outside the theatre group or independent relationships, thus allowing an unconventional arrangement of family as theatre group and eccentric relations within it to become established. The family participates in a group carnival. Using

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136 Ramchander Pentuker, “Surabhi Theatre: Pioneering a unique tradition”, in India Perspectives (New Delhi, August 2001), pp. 7-10, (p. 8). See Appendix II, No. 2, pp. 317-319

the family as travelling theatre group has allowed “Das Rad” to develop around these individuals: “Diese Rollen habe ich meinem Sohn /auf den Leib geschrieben /diesem Antitalent” (49). The family’s relationships are always framed against the backdrop of the stage of “Das Rad” and the rituals to which it gives rise. Work on the play becomes performance in itself and performance of the unconventional family relations of the Bruscon family. Since there is no real private life outside the theatre, either in or outside the family, the boundaries between private and public fade, and this is further emphasized by the stage structure; all performance takes place in front of the stage, including the enforced verbal praise rituals performed by Bruscon’s children. If the family is judged to be a “Talentlose Brut” (101) by Bruscon, their lack of talent is integral to the performing of his play, as their weakness ironically enables its staging: “Der Dramatiker tut gut daran /sich der Tatsache bewusst zu sein /daß nur Antitalente /seine Komödie auf die Bühne bringen” (49). Bruscon is the only Bernhardian artist figure to have resigned himself to imperfection; ongoing performance of rehearsal is an opportunity for him to stage attacks on his family, on their incompetence as performers.

Bruscon presents himself to the Wirt (innkeeper) as the victim of his family’s incompetence. Yet he turns each complaint into a devastating attack: “Debiler Sohn /mehr oder weniger /dumme Tochter /[...] /fortwährend sich zurückgesetzt fühlende /verrückt machende Frau” (42). Just before the scheduled evening performance, behind the stage curtain, Bruscon laments his family’s incompetence, which he links to his own inhumane ambition, condemning his insistence that they perform the public theatre as a crime against art:

dreht sich um und schaut die Seinigen an
Darsteller
Hauptdarsteller
Steh auf und geht in die Podiumsmitte
Über euch nachgedacht
Nicht weitergekommen
Kein Kunstverständnis
Meine Schuld
Mein Größenwahn
Mein Verbrechen (105)

He needs his own flexible play, as very few official plays could survive with a cast of four actors.
Bruscon imposes an eccentric way of life on to his offspring. He depends on his children’s lack of any independent existence outside the theatre and, indeed, the family. Their willingness to serve him assures him of their commitment to a theatrical life within the hierarchy he imposes. Total dedication on the part of his family is essential, as he makes them dependent on him: “Seid froh daß ihr mich habt /und nicht in einer Ehe ersticken müßt” (69). Bruscon’s theatre necessarily survives on incompetence, because this stimulates the theatrical endeavour: “Daß ihr Künstler seid /oder wenigstens dem Anschein nach” (69). Appearance is more important than reality, because this gives him something to work on in day-to-day life. Ironically, Ferruccio is named after Busoni (“ich bin nämlich Busoniverehrer”; 23), although this merely exposes his son’s lack of intellect. Yet Bruscon has no genuine intellectual ambitions for his children, he depends on them as their lack of talent ensures the continuity of the off-stage show. Bruscon has the scope to criticise the entire family theatre group that plays his necessarily flat, uninspired roles (48; 111), and uncovers the incompetence of the actors all the more.

Human relations are for the most part superimposed by the primacy of theatre. Moral and practical support from his family, even if it is not enthusiastic, sustains the family theatre, on which Bruscon is dependent. Yet in return Bruscon offers little support or praise for his children as individuals beyond their role in his production of his play. He treats his grown-up son and daughter as children, addressing them as “Die Kinder” (61) and his daughter Sarah as “unverschämtes Mädchen” (64). Their potential independence as adults has been eroded by the perpetual theatre he has imposed on them, and scope for individual development has been thwarted, as Bruscon is interested in them only insofar as their personal traits can be replicated in the roles he prescribes for them (48-49); his offspring are instruments for performing his play and serving his needs, which are entirely theatrical.

Bruscon’s performance of frailty and sickness to Sarah and Ferruccio (“Sarah wischt ihrem Vater mit einem großen Tuch den Schweiß von der Stirn” – 51; “Ferruccio und Sarah nehmen den Vater in die Mitte und führen ihn zum Tisch […] Sarah schiebt Bruscon einen Sessel hin” – 60) allows them to show affection for him in attending to his needs. At the end Sarah shows profound affection for him as a father: “ihren Vater umarmend, ihn auf der Stirn küssend, sehr zärtlich /Mein lieber Vater” (116). Her gestures often show true solidarity and respect for her father both as actor and as father. Bruscon’s self-pity
throughout is an attention-seeking behavioural trait. Having perfected a pose of helplessness in daily life guarantees the eccentric the execution of any task he demands. Having spent some time in the hall in the sole presence of the innkeeper, he laments upon his children’s arrival:

Alleinsitzen lassen hier
in diesem fürchterlichen Saal
in dem ich mir eine Todeskrankheit hole
alleingelassen von allen
sitze ich hier
auf diesem harten Sessel
[...]
das haben Sie von den Kindern
die Sie erzeugt
und jahrzehntelang aufgepäppelt haben (51)

For all that he criticizes his children, he cannot bear to be alone without them. Much as Ferruccio may disappoint him, he finds him useful to his eccentric system:

Du bist meine größte Enttäuschung
das weißt du
aber du hast mich nie enttäuscht
Du bist mein Nützlichster (56)

The comic subservience of the children is evident in the banal tasks they conduct. Equally, there is a willingness to go along with their father’s off-stage theatre. Ferruccio busies himself moving around the stage and up and down the ladder (82–85), removing all the wall decorations (88), despite his handicap, which adds to the comic effect. When Bruscon asks his children to perform mundane tasks, they obediently comply, affirming their position as children habitually disciplined under a father’s authority.139

Zu Sarah direkt
Hast du die Perücke ausgebessert
SARAH
Ja
BRUSCON zu Ferruccio
Und du
Hast du die Schuhe geflickt
FERRUCCIO
Ja (57)

Zu Ferruccio
Hast du das Loch zugenaßt
FERRUCCIO
Ja (66)

Zu Ferruccio im Befehlston
Hierher hierher

138 Burgtheater Production, 1985. See Appendix II, No. 3, p. 320
139 Sarah and Ferruccio always stand to Bruscon’s attention. See Appendix II, No. 4, p. 321
Ferruccio geht mit Kübel und Fetzen augenblicklich zu Bruscon
BRUSCON hebt seine Beine
Hier muß du sauber machen
Hier hier hier
Ferruccio wäscht unter Bruscons Füßen auf (90)

The Bruscon family is defined by its almost total subservience. Bruscon relies above all on the weakness and lack of independence of his children in all aspects of life, but their financial dependence is not of primary significance. The family sees no purpose in life outside Bruscon’s purposeless theatre. Although it is absurd, they go on with it because it is the only thing to do. They have nothing else to keep them occupied. The unconventional relations are also characterised by the lack of confrontation between father and offspring, which prevents real communication, and secondly, by the passivity of the children. These two factors combined turn the family into a refuge for the eccentric and an object of attack by him simultaneously.

The lack of independence and individuality on the part of the children exposes Bruscon’s lack of interest in family as such and reveals the eccentric relations within it. Indeed, any positive characteristics, in Sarah’s caring nature, or Ferruccio’s emotional, helpful if clumsy nature are only recognised if used for the theatre or his own ends: “Ein Genie wollte ich /einen guten Menschen habe ich” (85) remarks Bruscon of Ferruccio’s kind nature. He generally scorns this quality unless it serves him: “Geh schon /mach weiter […] Nichts ist gefährlicher /als die guten Menschen” (85). What Bruscon means by “good” is that they are compliant – they do what he wants them to do, to perform in his theatre.

Bruscon’s dominating language towards Ferruccio is a control weapon which he uses in his aggressive performance of criticism of his son’s intellectual passivity (84).

Bruscon attacks the very people he relies on to perform his play and makes them victims of his megalomania, a trait central to his eccentricity. Ferruccio’s incompetence is scorned, yet he becomes a scapegoat for Bruscon. Bruscon exonerates himself on the basis of his genes (“In mir selbst /ist wenigstens noch italienisches Blut /Leidenschaft für die Kunst /[…] /ein Genialisches mein Herr /aber in diesen Kindern /ist nichts Italienisches mehr”; 51) when he states: “Fast nichts von mir in diesem Menschen” (85), during the second curtain drawing rehearsal. Bruscon neglects his family in human terms, seeing them only through theatre, whereas Ferruccio and Sarah show sensibility. Bruscon may be faced with an unsatisfactory cast in his family but he neglects the positive, humane aspects of
theatre, an outlook which is reflected in the cruelty shown to his family. Ferruccio shows an emotional, non-confrontational side which is not conducive to Bruscon’s theatre. During rehearsals Ferruccio is reduced to tears when he is unable to remember the precise words of his speech (94). The mutual dependence in the family, although essential to the existence of Bruscon’s theatre group, continually undermines the quality of his theatre in terms of public stage performance as compromises are made in every sphere, both private and public. Performance must continue at all costs, the family serving both as audience and as actors. He only has his family; he never speaks of engaging other/better actors, because ultimately the fact that “Das Rad” is performed badly is of no consequence to a theatrical existence. Haider-Pregler sees Bruscon’s troupe as a family-run theatrical enterprise: “Bei Bruscons Truppe handelt es sich um ein Familienunternehmen.”

Despite the physical weakness and emasculation of the male figures in Der Theatermacher, women are not seriously seen as a threat. Bruscon’s paranoia is part of the eccentric personality, first directed at the setting (“Utzbach /eine Verschwörung /gegen mich”; 47), then at the female members of the family: “Ihr beide seid ein Komplott” (58); “Du steckst mit deiner Mutter /unter einer Decke” (77); “Der Vater kann sagen was er will /es nutzt nichts /die Mutter verdirbt alles /was der Vater zustandegebracht hat” (41-2). But he needs women: their incompetence in theatre does not exclude them from it. Despite declaring: “Caesar Napoleon Churchill /treten auf /das heißt aber nicht /daß das weibliche Wesen /zu kurz kommt” (15), only two female figures are mentioned – Madame Curie (93) and Lady Churchill (68). In the final scene Bruscon prepares Frau Bruscon as Curie for her performance and de-feminizes her appearance completely by painting her face black. This action is a ritual of frustration backstage, where he wields power over the family, just before the fire interrupts. Bruscon is torn between suppressing his nerves (“Kein Angsthase sein”; 106) and attacking as a means of reasserting control, because he does not respect his wife as a woman: “Streng gekämmt /[...] /die Madame Curie war häßlich /[...] /ich weiß /du möchtest eine schöne Person sein /auf dem Theater” (110). Women are perceived from a one-dimensional perspective only: “In meinem Stück kommt keine Courtisane vor

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140 Hilde Haider-Pregler und Birgit Peter, Der Mittagesser – Eine kulinarische Thomas Bernhard Lektüre, (Wien, Deuticke, 1999), p. 162
Schließlich ist es kein Hurenstück" (110). Bruscon does not appreciate the feminine qualities in women, as they appear without beauty or charm.

Betz sees Bruscon’s choice of roles as an indication of a desire to surpass the classics: “Typisch patriarchalisch, stellt Bruscon Ahnenreihen auf und versucht alles bisher Dagewesene zu übertreffen.” According to his theory, this ambition has failed since male figures in Der Theatermacher are derided: “Das patriarchalische Prinzip wird inszeniert und lächerlich gemacht. Die Karnevalisierung der Patriarchen ist in den Theaterstücken allerdings wesentlich augenfälliger.” Yet Bruscon holds great power as the eccentric who prescribes the group carnival; his influence over others maintains the arrangement. His patriarchal influence serves an unconventional arrangement, the carnival of the family as theatre group. It is true that the male figures in Der Theatermacher are to an extent exposed; the emasculated Ferruccio disappoints Bruscon overall, and the megalomaniac Bruscon himself needs constant praise for his image. It is precisely the eccentric’s megalomaniac character that keeps the family arrangement in place, since his role is never seriously questioned and the others keep up their roles. He uses his patriarchal authority to preserve the hierarchy in the family theatre group. Equally, the eccentric crowns himself as the carnival king “Theatermacher” through self-promotion (encompassing his original concept of theatrical performance and his play “Das Rad”) and tyrannically enforced rituals. Here, Bruscon is less concerned with emulating the distinction of the classics, than with establishing a global reputation, which they have achieved, whilst showing no regard for historic timescale (no “Ahnenreihen”, as Betz puts it, in “Das Rad”) and dramatizing the foibles of famous names in history. He is more interested in bringing together figures who symbolize the vice of ambition in the fragments revealed to audiences of Der Theatermacher (“die Caesar – Napoleonszene” – 40; “Hitler […] kommt mit Napoleon zusammen / und trinkt mit Roosevelt” – 46; “Goethe […] wird von Kierkegaard […] hinausgetragen” – 46), he thus overturns conventional historical truth (timescale). He above all desires recognition for a theatre he has created himself and does not hesitate to use these names, but has his own specific artistic purpose which he alone determines. He does refer to the classics to place himself on a level with them and to crown himself

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141 Uwe Betz, Polyphone Räume und karnevalisiertes Erbe: Analysen des Werks Thomas Bernhards auf der Basis Bachtinscher Theoreme (Würzburg, Ergon, 1997) p. 249
142 ibid, p. 241
(“Shakespeare /Voltaire /und ich”; 23), as Tabah writes: “Das Meisterwerk wird vom Geistesmenschen zum Fetisch erhoben, es ist ein imaginärer Phallus, das Symbol geistiger Potenz, das auch er in Form einer Studie produzieren muß, um sich seines Ich zu vergewissern.”

Bruscon’s ambition, however, is not to produce a final version of his own play. Furthermore, Bruscon has no one to answer to; his theatrical existence remains an essentially selfish one. If his play is “eine Schöpfungskomödie” (18), Bruscon is rewriting history in a carnivalesque form which deprives it of sequence and, apparently, seriousness, but this is of no consequence, as the real purpose of the play is simply to provide limitless opportunities for theatrical performance. Bruscon’s refusal to produce a final version of his “Jahrhundertwerk” (18) distinguishes his project from the ultimate “Studie” other Bernhardian philosophers and writers fail to create.

Furthermore, his project is made possible through the established medium of language (“Wie alle große dramatische Literatur /existiert meine Komödie /aus dem Wort”; 99), his own definition of language in theatre is unconventional in its use of word play and basic humour: “Revolutionär /in gewisser Weise /Wortspielkünstler /der auch den billigen Witz/nicht verabscheut” (112). Bruscon’s linguistic carnival uses the entire spectrum of language, one that equally challenges the monolithically serious, official truths and seeks dynamic expression through changing linguistic forms; cheap humour is an example of impropriety, a form of speech liberated from the norms of established idiom.

The male figures in “Das Rad” (Bruscon as Napoleon – 106; Ferruccio as Caesar, Hitler and Churchill – 55; Ferruccio as Metternich – 91) are all power figures, which Bruscon uses to assert authority over his family when performing on stage, and during rehearsals. Off stage, criticism of others reflects his dependence on his family as theatre group, yet his theatre thrives on endless, if incompetent, rehearsals, since he hereby carnivalizes others’ weaknesses. Betz correctly sees father-son rehearsals as the father imposing authority (which he would like to cling to with the use of great figures) on the son, and failing to inspire or stimulate success in him; however, contrary to Betz, Bruscon does not respect a reproduction of a conventional representation of tradition, as can be seen

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in “Das Rad”: “So examiniert Bruscon im Theatermacher, trotz der eigenen Vorbehalte gegenüber seinen Ahnen, den eigenen Sohn, um auch ihm die Denktradition aufzuzwingen, in der er selbst scheitert. Bei dieser Initiation wird klar, was Schauspieleri für Bernhard bedeutet und warum er sich immer so polemisch bezüglich Schauspielern äußert: Schauspieleri ist Reproduktion in Perfektion, die absolute Angleichung an die Tradition […]”. Bruscon läßt seinen Sohn Das Gewesene ist es /das Fortwährende Gewesene ständig wiederholen, womit er ihn rituell in seine Ahnenreihe anpassen will und andererseits sein eigenes Identitätstrauma formulieren läßt. Vor dem Sohn geht er nun ganz in der Rolle des Vaters auf und verschmilzt mit dem patriarchalischen Erbe.” 144 Bruscon’s performance in “Das Rad” is not a failed attempt to emulate his predecessors, the classics, as his ambition is to radicalise the concept of theatre and carnivalize historical figures by stripping them of the importance usually attached to them. Bruscon does not intend to mimic the classics in either the form or the language of “Das Rad”. Acting for him is not “Reproduktion in Perfektion” but a way of life, made possible by the diversity and flexibility of performance. Bruscon does not attempt to emulate what has come before, and his wilful alteration of scenes has nothing to do with perfectionism. Bruscon depends on Ferruccio as an established member of his individual carnivalesque theatre, and his son’s passivity allows Bruscon to mould him to his concept of theatre. The rehearsals with Ferruccio are indicative of Bruscon’s own inflated sense of his genius, which is inconsistent with what Betz terms his “Identitätstrauma”. All off-stage performance re-iterates his self-defined role of patriarch, and reinforces his unchallenged position in the family.

The spectacle aspect of carnival is apparent in the costumes, which rotate through the family corresponding to the gender roles. Bruscon’s creation of an image through costumes, on which he places great emphasis, is another form of control over others. He prescribes Lady Churchill’s outfit: “Das ist von großter Wichtigkeit /daß sie rote /und keine schwarzen Schuhe an hat” (68). Bruscon spontaneously dictates which roles they are to perform on the day (“Du spielst heute Caesar”; 55). Ferruccio’s and Sarah’s childlike compliance is a characteristic upon which Bruscon relies. In the production (Burgtheater, 1986), Ferruccio cries during rehearsals and whilst listening to Beethoven. Sarah’s childlike movements include crying and grimacing. She is also relied on for her doll-like appearance.

144 Betz, p. 251-2
They become puppets, especially just before the dress rehearsal, when they are dressed in costumes as in a puppet theatre. On stage behind the curtain, just before the planned performance, they stand motionless, serving almost as temporary stage props, next to the clothes stand. The family becomes Bruscon’s puppets, serving his carnival. Bruscon as artist distances himself from the uncultured provincial mindset and dramatizes his confrontation with Utzbach officialdom by condemning the male population there: “Hier sind alle Männer Hitler” (81). The eccentric Bruscon appears to defend freedom of expression, but in terms of his role as patriarch and head of his theatre troupe, in which he imposes roles on others, the declaration also applies to him. Misogynistic aspects are apparent in his attitude towards his wife and daughter. He performs a reactionary carnival, not a progressive one, since he lives in an age in which anti-feminism is not the norm.

Bakhtin’s carnival relies upon the upsetting of conservative norms. Yet Bernhard’s carnival, in the figure of Bruscon, represents patriarchy as absurdly reactionary (“Hier sind alle Männer Hitler”; 81), he overturns the liberal norm by subverting commonly held views in today’s society. His carnivalistic topsy-turvy view of women is comic in that it reverses fashionable attitudes towards women. As Tabah observes: “[...] das weibliche Geschlecht [...] wird zur Selbstgewinnung und Selbsterhaltung der männlichen Hauptgestalt instrumentalisiert.” 145 Bruscon’s ludicrous claims underpin his prejudiced stance towards women; his contempt for his wife’s incompetence becomes a blanket condemnation of all women: “Wenn wir einen weiblichen Darsteller beschäftigen /beschäftigen wir sozusagen einen Theaterhemmschuh” (30). Agathe’s cough seems to support this judgement. At the beginning of the play, he complains to the innkeeper about Agathe’s poor memory and goes on to radically attack women in theatre: “es sind ja auch immer die weiblichen Darsteller /die das Theater umbringen” (30); “eine weibliche Tragödin /ist ja schon immer eine Absurdität gewesen” (30). Bruscon accuses women of a lack of commitment to theatre and an inability to engage fully with the process of making theatre: “Sie gehen nicht bis zum Äußersten /sie gehen nicht in die Hölle in die Theaterhölle hinein /alles ist halbherzig was sie machen” (28). These absurd generalisations do not advance Bruscon’s project in terms of the public performance of his play, but they are an integral part of his private theatre. His tirades against women are a form of

145 Tabah, pp. 138-9
performance. He blames his wife for seducing him to appear in Utzbach: "Das Weib lockt den Mann aus der schönsten Gegend in das scheußlichste Loch" (34). This tendency to caricature and exaggeration is a source of comedy in the play; in Bakhtinian terms, Bruscon parades the fool's upside down view which can be seen as the carnival laughter of the outsider, directed towards a reversal of accepted attitudes and encompassing a peculiar, topsy-turvy outlook on the world.

Bruscon evidently does not act upon his judgement of women, or of women in theatre. His language, therefore, however brutal, remains a verbal display. The attacks are manifestations of the eccentric persona. Bruscon exposes his theatre out of his own mouth, and his attitude remains without consequences, in that he criticizes, yet remains dependent on women in his life. Ironically, Bruscon’s theatre does rely on women and produces the reverse effect in an attack on women, laying bare his own status: "Was die Kunst betrifft haben wir das weibliche Geschlecht niemals gebraucht im Gegenteil es hinderte uns immer daran an der Entfaltung wo wären wir heute ohne sie" (82-3). He remarks ironically: "Will unsere Komödie aufblühen brauchen wir Frauen in unserer Komödie" (29), even if women have no talent: "Mit Frauen Theater zu machen ist eine Katastrophe" (30). Rooted to his chair for most of the play, Bruscon remarks in a neologism which could be seen as self-referential and exposing his own periodic lack of bodily mobility: "Die Frauen sind nicht so wendig wie wir Schwerfälligkeitsmenschen" (38). Bruscon’s theatre cannot be a theatre of equals. He nevertheless applies banal language to both sexes. Although he claims that "Frauen machen Theater Die Männer sind Theater Frauen machen Theater das ist die Schwierigkeit" (41), when he refers to himself he declares vaguely: "Theatermensch /Theatermacher /Fallensteller schon sehr früh" (24-5). Whilst he relies on the conflict between the sexes to create theatre, he uses a compound noun (Theatermacher) based on the verb which mocks women’s role in theatre ("machen Theater"), as self-stylization.

Women are needed not only for the roles in theatre and practical duties but are also represented as fuelling man’s image on stage and Bruscon’s machismo: "Die Frauen haben keinen Kunstbegriff den Frauen fehlt gänzlich alles Philosophische […] Man sagt die Frauen seien heute im Vormarsch ja in die Katastrophe hinein Bald kommt der weibliche Offenbarungseid denke ich Gefühlswelt auch nichts als Lüge" (83). There is a sense of
solidarity with Ferruccio when Bruscon speaks of his wife and mother of his children to him (83), although unlike his father, Ferruccio is not interested in reading (96; 84). Agathe is needed for Bruscon to carnivalize her as anathema in theatre and as a woman; initially, he expresses contempt for all women, and he takes her as an extreme example of female weakness: “Nur du glaubst /auf die Dauer /mit Gemüse /und diesen scheußlichen Salaten /überleben zu können /Wie du aussiehst /eine Schande für das Theater /eine Schande für das weibliche Geschlecht” (114). Theatre must belittle the female sex. Nonetheless, although he chose Agathe for a lack of talent and status, his language ultimately expresses affection for and dependence on her alongside his humiliation of her status through his scorn of the working class: “Maurerpoliererstochter /Meine Proletarierin /meine Lieblingsproletarierin” (114, my italics). His attacks are thus relativized as mere theatre. Bruscon prepares Agathe for her stage appearance himself. The comic inconsistencies in Bruscon’s attitude to women may be seen as part of the eccentric’s performance. The eccentric’s cruelty to his wife in relishing her weaknesses means that his perspective on women is entirely subject to personal experiences.

Bruscon’s megalomaniac enunciations on his play to the innkeeper (“Shakespeare /Voltaire /und ich” – 23; “der große Bruscon” – 52; “schließlich ist eine solche von mir gegebene Unterschrift /eines Tages ein Vermögen wert” – 27) are undermined by incompetence in the family circle. “Bruscons sublimer Kunstanspruch auf der einen Seite, sein künstlerisches Unvermögen und die erbärmliche Theaterpraxis auf der anderen, klaffen abgrundtief auseinander.” The family does not match up to Bruscon’s expectations, yet he continues to write for this “gigantischer Antitalentismus” (49) because it gives him something to do and they still put up with him. Inflated self-evaluation isolates the “Geistesmensch” (103) from his family and reality, since his own life unfolds outside traditional institutional structures, which results in comic self-exposure, although he has come to terms with the fact that his actors are incompetent, which fuels his tirades:

Aber Tatsache ist doch
daß wir allen Schauspielern
gleich welchen
immer anmerken
was ihre Väter gewesen sind

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II. 3 Eccentric family relations in *Ritter, Dene, Voss*

The sisters do not need to earn a living and their high bourgeois background enables them to use their wealth to be eccentric ("Drei Millionen in zwei Jahren bezahlt /weil wir keine Krankenkasse haben"; 124). Within the conventional role of a domestically orientated woman, one which seems superfluous given the employment of domestic services, Dene reveals herself as apparently upholding the role of carer, which has become neurotic; the eccentricity of her pedantic nature in carrying out domestic tasks masks her real obsession, which is her brother, Voss. He has become a substitute for genuine relations outside the family. Off-stage theatre of real life in the home takes on several different forms for the trio and is far more central to their existence than creative theatre in the Josefstadt. Dene explains her minimal involvement in the professional theatre as a consequence of her commitment to Voss, and hence, her obsession with the domestic theatre. Ritter encapsulates the hierarchy in her sister’s relationship with Voss in articulating the neologism “Ludwigopfer”, although Ritter in her own way has equally succumbed to him:

**DENE**

Du wolltest immer nur die großen Rollen
Das wollte ich nie
Der Unterschied ist
Daß ich wegen Ludwig vier Jahre
Nicht mehr aufgetreten bin
Nicht wie du
Weil ich keine größere Rolle mehr bekommen habe
Ich hätte jederzeit eine große Rolle spielen können
Ludwig machte das unmöglich

**RITTER**

In jedem Fall
Ein Ludwigopfer (160-1, my italics)

Dene exposes her sister’s unfulfilled ambitions, whilst justifying her own lack of ambition as founded on her ritualistic dependence on Voss, which is expressed as a subordination of her own interests to his needs. His presence at home and in Steinhof determines her existence. For Dene, the domestic role is part of the dependent relationship with Voss, yet it
has no social consequences, remaining entirely private. The roles of authority are imposed when Voss is working on his “Lebenswerk” (139), a work of philosophy (“Logik I / Logik II”; 139). Voss prescribes her role, which has become a ritual determined by his eccentricity. Dictating to Dene imposes permanent and unconditional collaboration: “Das ist meine Todesstrafe für dich / daß ich dir diktiere hat Ludwig gesagt / oder wenigstens und auf alle Fälle lebenslänglich” (142, my italics).

A psychological motivation prevails which goes beyond Damerau’s argument, which perceives the role of figures in Bernhard’s (early and late) plays as fulfilling the following function: “Sie [die Theaterfiguren] wirken typisch. Das heißt, die früheren und noch die späteren Figuren in Bernhards Stücken behaupten sich mit einer traditionsgemäßen Identität: mit einer schon vorgefertigten und erneut eingefahrenen sozialen Rolle, an die sie sich halten. Sie versuchen, den beängstigenden Bedrohungen und Abgründen zu entkommen: sie retten sich ins typische Ritual.”

But the performance of Bernhard’s figures is not moulded by social norms. In the family home, the Worringer family is indifferent to the outside world, and because of their financial independence, they have no sense of answerability to society, nor do they have a need to justify themselves, they are profoundly indifferent to social norms. Theirs is an eccentric, not a socially prescribed ritual. Overall, their rituals are a carnivalesque subversion of social norms (apart from Dene’s insistence on the traditional family meal, which then takes on an abnormal aspect), and represent a projection of eccentricity for them. Their domestic carnival unfolds within the stale bourgeois setting of the family home. Despite having a maid, Dene may control domestic aspects of the home, in a frenzy of artificially keeping busy, yet her dedication is to her brother within the exclusive family group. Her domesticity is symbolic of how her life at home revolves around her brother. It is no coincidence that she has dismissed domestic service for the day (140), resulting in her taking on the elaborate preparations; the carnival must be performed in private with no third parties involved. The very fact that Dene has repeatedly brought her brother home despite his condition indicates the importance of their atypical family set-up for them all. Whilst appearing to take on the responsibility of bringing him back home, Dene agrees to conform to all his neuroses, and she is not really interested in his recovery, since her existence revolves around him.

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147 Damerau, p. 277
Furthermore, the brother’s presence at home allows the eccentric relations to flourish. Dene’s roles in themselves provide a firm foundation for the eccentric’s roles to thrive, quite apart from the direct help she gives him in practical tasks.

Dene admits that she keeps on bringing her brother home from the sanatorium out of an instinct for self-preservation: “Aus Selbsterhaltungstrieb nehme ich meinen Bruder nach Hause” (124, my italics). Self-fulfilment cannot be possible outside the home and without the brother. Her role in the trio is also to provide for his basic needs, and her domestic tasks revolve around him, to an extent manifesting her inability to form relationships outside the family – although the same fate has befallen her entirely undomesticated sister, Ritter. Dene has renounced her own individuality in favour of serving Voss and repeatedly putting herself in a position ready to receive him, in and outside the home.

Since the sisters’ life seems predicated on the presence of the brother (Ritter sums up the nature of the private theatre in the home and the unity of the trio as “Geschwisterliebe /zu dritt”; 154), Dene’s domestic routine reinforces the private family rituals in the parental home. Yet her role is not, as Damerau contends, “vorgefertigt”, “traditionsgemäß”, or “sozial” even if it is ingrained (“eingefahren”) – it essentially involves satisfying the eccentric’s unsocial and antisocial obsessions, and this is eccentric in itself. Playing the domestic provider means offering him the usual foods in a familiar setting, but also requires her to meet his exacting requirements, which make her perform her role nervously and, at times, apparently fearfully. Carnival depends on an inversion of norms, and a distortion of seemingly conventional roles is essential to carnival in Bernhard. Caring for his bodily needs through buying underwear and bathing him puts Dene in a position to partake in an incestuous sexual ritual, which inverts normal sexual relations, time and again. Even when Dene’s sexual involvement with him is not directly physical, as in the praise she gives him during bath time (134), and touching and smelling his underpants (221), she certainly does not try to impose social normality on him. Dene’s role of carer gives a solid foundation to the arrangement whereby the eccentric brother now controls the sisters:

RITTER
es ist ekelhaft
wie er von dir immer wieder
aufgepappelt wird
Immer hat es geheißen
Unser Schwächling
Bis dieses Ungeheuer aus ihm geworden ist
[...]
die Schwachen beherrschen uns
nicht die Starken (152-3)

Koberg notes: “Auf Denes Betreiben wird Voss aus der Wiener Nervenheilanstalt am Steinhof in die Wohnung geholt, wo die ältere Schwester mit den unglücklichsten Methoden den Bruder normal glücklich machen will, während die jüngere Denes Scheitern spöttisch zusieht.” But this is a very naive and superficial reading of the text. Dene’s thoughts of integrating Voss into social and cultural norms like concerts (132) and to socialise outside the family, by inviting guests to the home (170) are never put into practice. Within the home, even though Dene’s role seems partly conventional, given that meal times symbolize family tradition, the meal ritual is overshadowed by the disturbances it creates and the incestuous nature of her relationship with her brother.

Both brother and sisters are dependent on their private rituals, the three do not operate independently of each other. Kober wrongly states that normality in the form of social integration is the goal of Ritter, Dene, Voss, though it is never achieved: “Das Stück handelt von einem unlösbaren familiären Resozialisierungsversuch.” Koberg underestimates the abnormality of the siblings’ relations and plays down their deliberate attempts to preserve the eccentricity within the family group, the essence of their private carnival. Voss’s reactions during the meal confirm his rejection of convention, a pretended desire to exist alone. Yet for all his hostility towards his sisters, he fails to initiate any change. The incestuous relations between the three of them perpetuate themselves because all of them reject other, potentially more normal relationships outside the family circle.

The meal therefore serves as a private pretext for other activities. There is nothing typical about the private life the Worringer trio leads, either in their relationships with each other or in their language. Bringing her brother home for a change of scene to alternate with his periods in Steinhof is an attempt on Dene’s part to perpetuate the eccentric family arrangement and the private theatre that it makes possible. The whole process becomes a ritual. Constructive change is not on the cards and is rejected by all. Each attempt to re-establish Voss in the family home is part of a ritual of failure, yet it continues:

148 Roland Koberg, Alle Tage Abenteuer: Claus Peymann (Berlin, Henschel, 1999), p. 276
149 ibid, p. 276
RITTER
Du hättest ihn in Ruhe lassen sollen
in Steinhof lassen sollen
DENE
Es ist ja nur ein Versuch
RITTER
Der jedes Mal mit einer Katastrophe endet (125, my italics)

Whilst Dene’s role maintains the domestic ritual, she complies with Voss’s fantasies. Ritter
describes Dene as a control freak whose ritualistic preparations precede the eccentric’s
return:

Du hast immer alles
in deinem Kopf geplant
und mit allen Mitteln durchzusetzen versucht
ohne Rücksicht auf andere
Du hast Ludwig aus der Anstalt herausgenommen
Du hast die Anna wegeschickt
Du hast diese Einteilung am Tisch gemacht
Immer hast alles du gemacht (154, my italics)

But both sisters are desperately anxious to satisfy his neuroses, as they fastidiously pander
to his lifelong obsession with clean cutlery, which as Ritter states earlier, runs in the family:

“Ludwig ist eine Reinlichkeitsfanatiker /naturgemäß krankhaft /wie unser Vater” (141):

DENE wischt nacheinander das Besteck mit einer Serviette ab
RITTER
Besteck Geschirr
Alles muß perfekt sein
Hebt eine Gabel gegen das Licht und kontrolliert sie
Er sieht alles
Und wir haben Angst
Daß er etwas sieht
Was er nicht sehen soll
Legt die Gabel auf den Tisch und nimmt einen Löffel
Und hebt ihn gegen das Licht und kontrolliert ihn
Schon als Kind
Ekel vor schmutzigem Besteck (147)

Dene and Ritter play unchanging parts in a private play (“unsere zweite Kunst”) dictated by
Voss, which includes rituals of incest. This compulsive theatre fuels and sustains their
brother’s eccentricity. Their active participation perpetuates the unconventional domestic
arrangement:

RITTER
Und Ludwig weiß gar nicht
Daß alles das er ist
Von dir ist
Du hast dich für die Schreibmaschine entschieden
ich für das Klavier
Was unsere zweite Kunst betrifft
Auf den Geschmack gekommen
Das ist es
This, too, is an example of a family ritual with carnival features. Ritter thinks of Voss and his philosophy as being absolutely mad. Yet however mad his writing, Dene always types it out (Ritter remarks: “seit zwanzig Jahren”; 137), and Ritter herself always plays improvisations on the piano while her sister is typing. They may be less eccentric than Voss, but the difference is one of degree, not of kind. The motivation for Dene’s domestic performance stems from a servile attitude towards the eccentric. According to Damerau: “Dene hat also ein Konzept. Es ist das Konzept einer Dienenden.” 

Nevertheless, although she may serve Voss, it is in an unconventional way; their relationship is mutually dependent as neither has initiated change and both conform to the established patterns, however crazy; they are dedicated to the eccentric and the private carnival. A mutual sense of madness is thus preserved through collective adherence to roles, but it is not a comic show. Dene imposes the role of helpless patient on Voss, and maintains it to justify her own role, whereas Ritter defines him as a “Gewaltmensch”, the eccentric who controls them by force:

DENE
Ludwig ist so schwächlich und
So zerbrechlich
RITTER
Das glaubst du
So siehst du ihn
Weil du Ludwig so sehen willst
Weil du ihn so sehen mußt
Diese Menschen erscheinen so schwächlich
Und sind so stark wie keine anderen
DENE
Ich weiß doch ich sehe doch
Wie hilflos er ist
RITTER
Er hat dich in seiner Gewalt
Vollkommen
Ludwig ist ein Gewaltmensch
Das ist die Wahrheit
Und das weißt du auch
Gewalttäter mit philosophischen Absichten
Aber das darfst du dir nicht sagen

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150 Damerau, p. 360
Although Dene sees Voss as weak and helpless, and Ritter sees him as a strong and violent personality, this has no effect on the domestic rituals which dominate their lives. Jahraus claims that Ritter is the stronger of the two sisters, and that Dene is content with the role of carer: “In Ritter, Dene, Voss ist die eine Schwester (Ritter) stärker als Individualistin gezeichnet, während die andere (Dene) ihre Individualnorm zugunsten der Sorge um den geisteskranken Bruder in den Hintergrund gerückt hat.” Yet Ritter is no less dependent on her brother than Dene. Neither is at all concerned to nurse him back to health. The authority of the eccentric is evident in Dene’s roles, which are also performed in settings outside the home, as recounted in Scene 1. She describes an outing with Voss, during which she submits to his demands:

Er wollte die Höhenstraße fahren
beim Fischerhaus sind wir stehengeblieben
[...Er]
wollte wissen wo unser Haus ist
er fand es nicht sofort
das ärgerte ihn
Da ist es sagte ich
Das ärgerte ihn doppelt
[...]
Er wollte einen kleinen Spaziergang machen
Wir gingen ein Stück in den Wald (126-127)

The strongly foregrounded rhetorical repetition of “er wollte” underlies the extent to which Dene lives her life in conformity with the eccentric’s obsessions, and her awe of him. At times, her presence is silent, as in Steinhof, when she merely watches her brother, unable to stop him from distributing bank notes to strangers in Steinhof (157). Ritter questions her sister’s passivity. Yet Dene’s co-operation enables Voss to continue his performance, for her to gain his favour and also to facilitate making her own desire to bring him home a reality:

RITTER
Und du hast das nicht verhindert
DENE
Nein
Ich wollte ihn widerstandslos
Aus der Anstalt herausbringen
Er war ganz ruhig
[...]
dann umarmte er mich plötzlich und sagte
wie froh bin ich
daß du da bist (158)

151 Oliver Jahraus, Die Wiederholung als werkkonstitutives Prinzip im Oeuvre Thomas Bernhards, (Frankfurt am Main, Lang, 1992), p. 63
The aim of her visit is to bring him home, but bringing him home serves only to perpetuate the eccentric circle. The sisters are not concerned with his welfare or his recuperation.

Voss’s life alternates between periods in Steinhof and periods at home with his sisters, but it is a repetitive alternation from which there appears to be no significant deviation. Fulfilling his neurotic requirements is a perverse privilege for Dene. Voss’s preoccupation with “das extravagante Lebenswerk” (139) gives Dene more time with him as a necessary partner, obsessively, throughout the night: “willst du mir diktieren /am Nachmittag /die ganze Nacht habe ich mit dir verbracht /mit dem Dualismuskapital” (170). Dene’s attitude to Voss both in and outside the home enables him to continue voicing his eccentric demands and acting out his neuroses.

II. 4 Notions of sexuality in the trio in Ritter, Dene, Voss

When referring to the sexual ritual she performs with Voss, Dene is reluctant to go into intimate details. She submits to his obsessions, which she re-enacts verbally in front of Ritter, apparently reluctantly, and only at Ritter’s prompting:

DENE
dreimal mußte ich sagen
du bist häßlich
ich sagte es widerwillig
dabei berührte er
RITTER
Was
DENE
Ach immer bringst du mich so weit
Alles zuzugeben
RITTER
Perverse Person
DENE
Und du
RITTER
Der Schwanz des Bruders
der dich beinahe wahnsinnig macht
nicht wahr (135, my italics)

Even what here seems to be an intimate exchange appears to form part of a ritual. The implication here is that both sisters have an incestuous relationship with their brother. Ritter derives a vicarious satisfaction from Dene’s description precisely because she can identify with her obsession. Ritter incites her to break the incest taboo verbally. Dene’s dependence on her brother in this ritual is the source of Ritter’s provocation. Both sisters play with the reality of their relationship with Voss and reveal a mutual rejection of normal relations.
Dene allows herself to be persuaded to voice her fascination with the sexual ritual, and although she refuses to give full details, Ritter fills in the gaps in her account. Ritter playfully pretends ignorance, and pretends to criticise her sister for her involvement with Voss, yet she revels in the abnormal, incestuous ritual as can be seen from her explicit use of the word “cock” (“Schwanz”): the description “Schwanz” is in itself a vulgar expression, suggestive of regular intimate contact, even as a fantasy, and is grotesque in its explicitness.

This scene, too, is ritual; Dene “always” finds herself talking about her incestuous relationship at her sister’s prompting (“immer bringst du mich so weit”).

Similarly, Ritter listens intently when Dene tells her about Voss’s sexual exhibitionism in the bathroom. Voss orders Dene to fetch his note pad on the pretext of wanting to make a philosophical reflection; but when she carries out his order, he denies having given it. The crazy reversal first claims then denies the legitimacy of philosophical thinking. But the term “Gefriertechnik” appears to relate to the bath Dene is running for her brother. Far from being a philosophical term, Voss uses it to accuse his sister of having developed a technique of freezing him rather than warming him; but this allegation simply initiates a further demand (this time sexually perverted) that she should watch him undress.

The one demand she refuses to comply with is his order to her to tell him he is ugly. Dene insists that her brother is beautiful. Her logic here is the inverse logic of carnival; Voss seems to feel some shame at his exhibitionism, but Dene rejects this out of hand. The conventional view of their relationship would be that it is ugly and unnatural, but Dene’s insistence that it is beautiful enacts a reversal of the (intrinsically bourgeois) norm:

Wie ich ihm das Badewasser einlaufen habe lassen
hat er zweimal Gefriertechnik philosophisch gesagt
das wollte er gleich notieren
so rannte ich um seinen Notizblock
aber wie ich zurückgekommen bin
hat er mich angeschrien
er hätte niemals Gefriertechnik philosophisch gesagt
und auch nicht nach seinem Notizblock verlangt
er verlangte
daß ich so lange im Badezimmer bleibe
bis er vollkommen nackt war
ich sollte ihm sagen daß er häßlich sei
du bist nicht häßlich du bist schön
habe ich gesagt
und es war ja nicht gelogen
und er ist ja auch schön (134)
Dene finds immense satisfaction in playing what she sees as the privileged role of the submissive, admiring partner. However abnormal the command, she is willing to perform, to be close to him, while all the time demonstrating the central role played by abnormality in her life – an abnormality which equally informs the life of her sister, who derives a vicarious pleasure from Dene's incestuous role and its focus. Although there is little direct reference to eroticism, nor visually explicit scenes, its fascination is clear in Dene's language: “L’élément érotique n’est pas localisé, il n’est nulle part, il est disséminé partout et investi surtout dans la parole.” In the asylum, it appears that his eccentric exhibitionistic poses which he recounts to Dene during the bath ritual in the family home (“Der nackte Ludwig ist gern gesehen sagte er”; 135) involve the attention and participation of the other patients and his doctors, who indulge their voyeuristic tendencies by watching him undress (like Dene) while subjecting him to physical beatings, which he despises but needs:

Die Wärter sehen mich immer gern
auch die Ärzte
sagte er
perverse Brut
sie schlagen mich auch gern
und ich lasse mich gern von ihnen schlagen
und meine Mitpatienten sagte er
sehen mich auch gern
und schlagen mich auch gern
Aber ich schlage sie nie
Ich schlage nie zurück sagte er
Der nackte Ludwig ist gern gesehen sagte er
Und tauchte in der Wanne unter (134-5)

Although Dene does not beat Voss, she shows and replicates the voyeurism of the doctors and patients in the clinic, and this establishes a strong parallel between Steinhof and the family home. Dene, in recounting the details of Voss's account, is fascinated by his exhibitionism and mock submission in performing his bath ritual, which she encourages him to perpetuate.

There is no attempt on the part of either Ritter or Dene to cease abnormal sexual relations. They constantly bring their brother back home, showing that they are no more capable of normal relations than he is. Dene is not interested in other men, and Ritter

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152 Dieter Hornig, "Le corps dans le théâtre de Thomas Bernhard", in Hutt/Chabert, Thomas Bernhard, Paris, Minerve 2002, pp. 357-361, (p. 360)
appears as unable as Dene to move away, and equally in need of the perverse security of the family home:

DENE
Mich haben die Männer nie interessiert
dich ja
trotzdem bist du geblieben
RITTER
Nicht wegen Ludwig
DENE
Ludwig Ludwig
[...] 
du bist geblieben
weil du nichts riskieren wolltest
wegen deiner Josefstadtbeziehung
das ist die Wahrheit
RITTER
Deine Wahrheit
DENE
Meine Wahrheit (143)
DENE
ich kenn dich nur im Bett liegend
[...]
und immer enttäuscht was die Liebe betrifft (144)

The relations between the brother and his sisters are mostly performed alone or as a duo, not as a trio. Profound verbal exchange often occurs between two siblings alone, as here, in Scene 1, when Voss has not yet appeared; equally, when Voss appears at the beginning of the second scene, Ritter and Voss speak of Dene’s shortcomings whenever she is in the kitchen. Ritter refers to her other neurotic domestic rituals, affirming: “Sie ist die Kranke /[…] /wir sind schon beinahe erstickt /in uns” (170). Ritter and Voss are also alone at the beginning of the scene after lunch. Following Ritter’s talk of her desire to act and Dene’s obsessive “Putzfimmel” (171) which masks her more eccentric forms of behaviour, Ritter reveals her witnessing of Dene’s private obsessions and desire for her brother, which at times turn into the perverse carnival role reversal of dressing up as a man: “zu Tode erschrocken erklärte sie mir /sie wisse nicht /was sie dazu gebracht habe /deine Frackhose anzuziehen” (171). Ritter also tells Voss that Dene “bürstet deine Kleider aus /stundenlang” (171). Brushing his clothes is a form of repressed affection. Dene’s obsessive ritualistic preoccupation with Voss in his absence signify the powerful influence the eccentric has on her. Her private life is dedicated solely to enabling his eccentricity. On the subject of excessive purchases for him, she admits to her dependence on Voss’s eccentricity: “Wir kommen aus den Irrtümern /nicht heraus” (146). Dene’s
other abnormal rituals which Ritter witnesses include not only her cleaning his room
(“während ich doch da bin / und sie beobachte / sie macht alle Laden in deinem Zimmer
auf / nimmt alles heraus / wischt alle Laden aus”; 171), but private sexual fantasy:
“Völlig nackt sitzt sie am Fenster / und löffelt ihr Joghurt aus / und hört dazu Schumann”
(172). Ritter is content to play the role of voyeur; she does nothing to try to change the
perverse ménage-à-trois precisely because she is as dependent on it as her brother and
sister. The extremism which characterizes Voss’s behaviour is also a factor in Ritter’s
sexual attraction to him. When Voss shows her the self-inflicted wound on his hand, this
initiates incestuous sexual contact with Ritter, which occurs when Dene has left the
stage:

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RITTER
In aller Heimlichkeit
Sie zieht ihn an sich und will ihn küssen
Zuerst weigert er sich, dann drückt er sie fest an sich,
Um sie zu küssen, bis sie ihre Schwester kommen hören
RITTER stößt ihn weg
Bist du wahnsinnig
Du brichst mir ja das Genick (222)
```

Ritter’s pushing away of Voss seems to be the expression of a sexual taboo, but to the
extent that it is continually re-enacted, it is merely a resumption of a ritualised perversion
which as usual stops short of full sexual relations when bourgeois language invades: “Bist
du wahnsinnig...”. The sisters’ participation allows sexual fantasies to be performed, but
never to fulfilment. The sexual rituals in the family home have become banal through their
continual re-enactment; a non-incestuous relationship remains a fantasy, and the three make
do with incomplete substitutes such as the kiss and the bathing ritual.

The scene Nach dem Mittagessen, which focuses entirely on the trio’s attempt to
initiate a new performance together, follows Dene’s apparently harmless presentation of the
new set of underpants to her brother. Ritter encourages her brother:

```
VOSS
Das sind ja wunderbare Baumwollunterhosen
Ob sie auch passen
DENE nimmt eine Unterhose und gibt sie ihm
Es ist deine Größe
VOSS
Meine Größe
RITTER lacht auf, steht auf und stellt das Streichquartett leiser
VOSS
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153 Burgtheater Production, 1986. See Appendix II, No. 5, p. 322
Meine Größe sagst du
Meine Größe (218)

Despite the sense of anticipation on the part of Ritter and Voss, Voss’s desire to try on the underpants is frustrated. He has never before tried on underpants in the dining room, and he shocks Dene with his statement that he wishes to do this. Ritter condemns her sister’s rejection of her fantasy for a threesome:

VOSS
Montblanchose
Natürlich
Die bewährte Montblanchose
Sie paßt wirklich
Am liebsten würde ich sie sofort anziehen
Fragend
Ja
DENE
Nein, nein
Hier nicht
Nicht jetzt
Nicht hier
Doch nicht im Speisezimmer
Hier
Jetzt
RITTER
Warum denn nicht
Wenn er es will
Warum soll er denn nicht jetzt und hier
Die Unterhose anziehen
Steht auf und betastet die Unterhose, die Voss noch immer in Händen hat, ruft aus
Phantastisch
Die bewährte Montblanchose
Zieh sie doch an hier
Warum denn nicht (219-220)

Ritter’s voyeurism has apparently never been indulged directly up to this point; she has made do with Dene’s descriptions of bathing Voss. Now she wishes to witness him undressing for herself, and so encourages him in his exhibitionism; but Dene wishes to contain it within the fixed location of the bathroom. Her opposition to the change of location can hardly be seen as moral (she makes no objection when Ritter, in a symbolic act which is grossly indecent, feels her brother’s underpants). She refuses to give in to Ritter’s provocation. What Dene cannot contemplate is any kind of alteration to the established perverse ritual of nakedness, whereby Voss’s exhibitionism and her own voyeurism can be indulged only in the bathroom. Provoked by Dene’s reluctance to permit a new form of exhibitionism, Ritter reproves her for having brought the new underwear along at all:
“Warum hast du die Unterhosen hereingebbracht jetzt /wenn er sie nicht anziehen darf”
(220), but Dene’s unwillingness to change is absolute. When Voss makes as if to try on the new underpants, she leaves. The act of undressing is not completed because this form of exhibitionism has never before taken place in this setting. Ritter remarks on Dene’s incestuous love for her brother, which renders her unable to move on and create an independent life, despite being unhappy in the long term:

Sie liebt dich
Unglücklich
Nach wie vor
Sie hat sich nicht geändert
Sie hat herausgekommen
Daß du lange grobe Baumwollunterhosen liebst
Sofort hat sie einen Haufen
Dieser langen groben Unterhosen gekauft (220-1)

At the end of the scene she reproaches Voss for not staging the show she so much wants to watch: “Du hättest die Unterhose anziehen sollen /diese falsche verlogene Scham /[..] /von Kindheit an verlogen” (221). She feels no guilt for her own incestuous love of her brother; on the contrary, she reproaches her brother for failing to put on the underpants in her presence, and accuses him of a misplaced and hypocritical shame, a false sense of prudery. In conversation with Voss, Ritter proceeds to reveal Dene’s private performance in the next room, turning off the music as the show has been interrupted: “Was glaubst du was sie jetzt tut /stellt das Streichquartett ab /Sie steckt ihr Gesicht /in die Unterhose /die du in den Händen gehabt hast” (221) – a very powerful image of her fantasies, and a replication of Ritter’s feeling of the underpants. Dene is as fascinated by Voss’s underpants and obsessed with sexual perversity as Ritter. Ritter’s own voyeurism permits her to carnivalse sexual relations by breaking all the taboos associated with them:

VOSS
ich hasse weiche Unterhosen
ich habe sie immer gehaßt
das ganze Leben
hatte ich zu weiche Unterhosen
DENE
Du hast immer Seidenunterhosen angehabt
VOSS
Weil sich das meine Mutter
in den Kopf gesetzt hatte
und ich hatte es mir zur Gewohnheit gemacht
und immer nur Seidenunterhosen (219)

The fact that the underpants Dene buys for Voss are cotton rather than silk is also heavily symbolic. It emerges that Voss’s mother only ever bought him silk underpants; in buying him the cotton underpants which he prefers, Dene is asserting her (and Voss’s)
independence from the mother, and her rejection of the norms the mother imposed on the family. Dene’s purchase of cotton underpants enables him to react, with an affirmation of his liking for especially rough underpants:

DENE
Ganz grobe Baumwollunterhosen
VOSS
Ja
DENE
Aus der Schweiz
VOSS
Schweizer Baumwollunterhosen
Sogenannte Gebirgsbaumwollunterhosen (219)

There are sinister undertones in Voss’s references to incest with his mother earlier in life (164), who appeared to have known no sense of shame generally (184). Voss’s criticism indicates repressed sexual fantasy in the family.

II. 5 The omnipresent eccentric and his undemocratic carnival in Ritter, Dene, Voss

Given their failure to find any satisfaction in the world outside the home, the sisters’ existence turns inward, to their eccentric brother. Scene 1 focuses exclusively on the eccentric’s condition and behaviour and on his relationship with the sisters. Voss does not appear until the second scene, allowing the first scene to centre on talk between the sisters, each of whom performs a recitation of their brother’s eccentricities. The significance of the first scene lies in the dramatic potential of Dene’s recounting of Voss’s performance in the Steinhof sanatorium and of the verbal advice (focusing on Voss’s obsessions) given by the director there. The effect is similar to the first scene in Heldenplatz, in which the eccentric is absent and Frau Zittel performs the rituals he has imposed, using his words. The first scene in Ritter, Dene, Voss then dramatises the eccentric’s influence over the sisters. The eccentric exercises a fascination over the sisters, which causes their dependence on a spectacle revolving entirely around him. So strong is the fascination that the sisters continue performing the essentials of the family ritual even in his absence. Their verbal performance is motivated by an existential dependence on him and reflects the family’s eccentricity. There is virtually no conflict between the sisters when discussing their brother’s behaviour, revealing their complicity with the carnival, and their respect for him.

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154 See Appendix II, No. 6, p. 323
Dene dramatically recites examples of Voss’s eccentricity in the Steinhof sanatorium, to which she has just been a passive witness: “Desinteresse /Katafalkismus wirft er uns vor/ [...] /Zerstörung Selbstzerstörung philosophische /hat er gesagt /das Wurstbrot in die Klosettmschel geworfen /vor meinen Augen /Schopenhauer und Händewaschen” (123-4). The incongruent details in this account, i.e. the contrast between base and elevated concerns, are characteristic of carnivalistic mésalliances. Dene reveals a voyeuristic fascination with the brother even in situations with no explicitly sexual connotation. Dene follows with a recitation of the Director’s recommendations for Voss’s return home (129-130). Dene later meticulously recounts Voss’s bet with the Director: “wissen Sie Ihr Herr Bruder /hat mir seinen Hut geschenkt / [...] /ich wettete mit Ihrem Herrn Bruder /daß ich den Hut auf dem Kopf behalte /während Sie in meinem Büro sind” (156). This is a rude form of behaviour; Voss is here again overturning social convention. The Director is thus actively involved in a carnival which Voss alone determines. Dene’s description of what happened when she and Voss left the sanatorium again focuses on the carnival aspects of Voss’s eccentricity and his ability to manipulate people into behaving in a degrading or abnormal way:

Er warf den Leuten
die überall herumstanden
weil ja Besuchszeit gewesen ist
Kusshände zu
und dann griff er auch noch in die Manteltasche
und holte einen Bundel Hundertschillingscheine hervor
und fuchtelte zuerst damit herum
und plötzlich teilte er das ganze Bündel
nach und nach unter den Leuten aus
Patienten und Besucher rissen sich um seine Hundertschillingscheine (157)

His carnival in Steinhof seems more democratic given its spontaneity, and the general participation by patients, visitors and, on other occasions, the Director. Yet given his authority, it is undemocratic: Voss alone determines its nature, and it is performed in an exclusive setting, i.e. an asylum. The others are passive participants when he distributes cash and other objects, gestures that reflect apparent generosity, if not megalomania and the desire to distinguish himself in some way. Voss’s behaviour in Steinhof can be seen as a crazy bid to free himself from his home roots and sisters’ materialism. In the asylum, he is seen as the privileged eccentric who pays for his freedom, although he has some sociable traits, albeit exaggerated, as these gestures show. His carnival serves a selfish purpose, the
self-indulgence of the exhibitionist eccentric. His actions involve patients, visitors, management and Dene alike, in a series of carnivalistic acts which reverse the norms of “proper” behaviour. Dene goes on to recount the journey home from Steinhof in great detail (126-7), yet another indication of the mesmerizing effect the eccentric has on her and everybody else. Ritter’s role of silent audience to Dene’s account of that day confirms her acceptance of the situation and her solidarity in the trio, since she too is under the power of the eccentric.

Ritter and Dene also perform a description of Voss’s crazily carnivalistic behaviour in Steinhof, which is an ongoing show and still holds fascination even for them, although its outcome can never be a surprise to them. His behaviour is in part a reaction against the sisters, and their apparently caring gestures enable him to keep up this form of theatre, which is also ritualistic, as Ritter recounts: “Fünf Hemden gekauft / die teuersten / und hinausgebracht nach Steinhof / und er hat nicht ein einziges angezogen / hat sie alle verschenkt” (146, my italics). Other similar actions are equally repetitive, as Dene states: “In zwei Wochen / vier Paar Schuhe nach Steinhof gebracht / und er hat alle verschenkt” (155, my italics). Ritter describes this compulsive behaviour as “Menschlichkeitsgrößenwahn” (155), an aspect of the eccentric’s carnival and evidently a form of (humanitarian) megalomania. Their roleplay suggests that they do not confront the eccentric’s behaviour even when they disapprove of it, and never challenge their brother, but allow him to continue performing his eccentric parts to the extent of actively complying with them.

Dene recounts the advice of the Director word for word (129-130), in a way that is indicative of her excessive preoccupation with Voss, since although she despises the Director, she delights in the focus on the nature of the eccentric brother. Her relationship with her brother is also defined and controlled by her visits to the asylum. She lists the Director’s instructions, which prescribe the basic daily ritual of satisfying Voss’s neurotic demands in the family home. These literally become a formula for maintaining eccentricity: not allowing him to cut his toenails alone, knowing how to hang his coat up, how to play audience to his private lectures, how to clean his glasses, indulging his underwear fetish, his bath ritual, inviting guests (129-130). Ritter fully recognizes that her brother has had a destructive influence on her and her sister. She describes him in a cruel neologism as a
“Geisteskrüppel”, but even though she knows that Voss is mad, and that there is a very real sense in which her and Dene’s fixation with him has wrecked their lives, she cannot and will not do anything to change their situation. They have continued to put up with his show for years, and talk of change is without consequence, as in their own ways they are equally “Geisteskrüppel”:

RITTER
Wir müssen uns in acht nehmen
vor ihm
er legt es darauf an
uns völlig zu ruinieren
jahrelang
jahrzehntelang betreibt er sein Zerstörungswerk
Wir sind die Hilfsbedürftigen
Nicht er
Wir sind die Geschädigten
Nicht er
Uns müssen wir helfen
Nicht ihm
Geht auf die Schwester zu
Unser Geisteskrüppel
Zerstört uns
Hat uns schon fast zerstört
Das ist sein Triumph
Das ist sein Werk (150, my emphasis)

Although “Geisteskrüppel” indicates that Ritter can rationalise the sisters’ situation, and understands how destructive it is, she is powerless to do anything to change it. Both sisters and their brother are dependent on a mutually destructive relationship. The life of the trio is motivated by mutual dependence on familiar rituals both in and outside the home. Scene 1 reveals Dene’s attachment to Voss from Ritter’s perspective and the need for the brother to keep up the sameness of his existence. Dene affirms the role of the eccentric in maintaining the crazy family structure:

Ohne Ludwig wären wir
gar nicht da
schaut um sich
wir wären nicht mehr da
es wäre alles verkauft worden
vielleicht wärst du in Rom
wer weiß wo ich wäre
Ludwig hält uns zusammen (149)

Dene is entirely passive when reflecting on other possibilities; perhaps Ritter would be in Rome, but this is really of no consequence. The presence of the eccentric ensures the collective madness within the trio. Dene points out that they share a common fate:

Auch wenn er es gesagt hat
They all accept the diagnosis that they are up a one way street from which they will not return. Any alternative lifestyle outside this structure seems impossible to all of them. Their entire lives are ritualized; even the periods Voss spends in the Steinhof sanatorium are part of a fixed pattern which sees him moving back and forth between the asylum and the family home, which Dene claims to be a joint effort between the sisters. Ritter initially reacts against this, but then shows solidarity with her sister, who reminds her of her involvement and commitment: “Du willst doch auch / daß er zuhause ist / Er ist auch Dein Bruder” (133). This overall rejection of change entails all three of them living with the staleness and predictability of the last twenty years. Their resigned acceptance of the “Sackgasse” thwarts any chance of individual development, and in the absence of change leaves only a life of mutual dependence.

II. 6 The meal ritual in *Ritter, Dene, Voss*

Within the exchanges between brother and sisters during the second scene, “Mittagessen”, the sisters play audience to Voss’s verbal performance.¹⁵⁵ Dene insists on keeping up the fixed domestic arrangement of family meals. This is in itself perverse; during the lunch, Voss speaks of the meal times that he and his sisters had with their parents as a form of hell in which the members of the family all had their parts to play:

Das Speisezimmer
von dem alles Unheil ausgegangen ist
Vater Mutter Kinder
nichts als Hölendarsteller
in Suppen und Saucen ist immer alles
das etwas wert gewesen ist
ertränkt worden
hatte ich einen tatsächlichen
hatte ich einen wertvollen Gedanken
ertränkte ihn die Mutter in ihrer Suppe
hatte ich ein tatsächliches
hatte ich ein wertvolles Gefühl
deckte sie es mir mit ihrer Sauce zu (183)

The family home is considered hostile to intellectual endeavour. Thus, the consumption of food within the home recalls oppression of the mental faculties and therefore provokes

¹⁵⁵ See Appendix II, No. 7, p. 324
repulsion, through the image of philosophical thought being drowned by soups and sauces. Voss’s intellectual independence was thwarted to the point of being symbolically drowned in soups and sauces. The neologism “Höllendarsteller” reflects his and his family’s passive acceptance of ghastly routine. Although the supper clearly symbolizes a continuation of ghastliness, and although Voss complains vociferously about it, he remains fixed in his and his sisters’ culture of complaint.

Dene’s efforts are entirely devoted to the preservation of the family ritual, which, for all its destructiveness, is her raison d’être. Sharing food serves the function of continuing the incestuous ménage-à-trois. The burden of the past and its ritualized continuation into the present is symbolized by the sharing of meals. Bernhard’s feast shares some common aspects with the official feast: “the official feasts of the Middle Ages […] did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it […]. The official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present. […]. The official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy […]. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it.” 156 Like the official feast, Bernhard’s feast is not joyous, it is not a carnival of liberation; it asserts the preservation of the hierarchy of the family order, since the trio continue to perform the meal ritual. Both the official feast and Bernhard’s feast are an affirmation of the continuity of a specific social truth and order. Yet unlike the gay agrarian festivities in the Middle Ages (the type of carnival which had comic elements given its pagan influence), festivities which were, as in earlier civilisations, a celebration of the power of man over nature (the hunt and harvest), a central aspect of carnival, Bernhard’s feast is quite different, is associated with trauma, and is not celebratory, since it is not positive or regenerative. To Voss, food brings back unpleasant memories of the family past and childhood. The meal instinctively provokes Voss into performing a verbal mockery of his childhood experiences of family meals. He sarcastically repeats “Meine Lieblingsmehlspeise /meine Lieblingsmehlspeise” (191); he

156 Rabelais and his World, p. 9
hereby verbalises the revulsion which “Brandteigkrapfen” (choux buns) inspire in him, and his addiction to them.

Voss therefore has an ambiguous attitude to the family meal ritual. The domestic carnival in this scene is characterized by a conflicting attitude to the past. The dialectic he performs is one of attachment and revulsion. He rebels against physical symbols within the home setting, and mocks his sister’s conventional efforts there: “Verschönen wollen /Freude machen /weibliche Unsinnigkeiten” (213). Ritter reminds Dene of their mother’s traits Dene has inherited and which cause tensions in the trio: “du sagst auch immer so Das Nachtmaul /dann sitzt du da und schweigst wie die Mutter” (144). Dene’s efforts in the home are largely silent. She cannot help but impose the setting on Voss through her irritating gestures, despite being aware of the difficulties in bringing him home: “zu dritt wie schon lange nicht mehr /Der erste Abend ist der allerschwierigste” (140).

In this scene, which has grotesque visual aspects, Voss stages a comedy and tragedy simultaneously. Overall, Ritter, Dene, Voss sways between comedy and tragedy. Dene, in a ritual of cruelty, has brought about Voss’s traumatic confrontation with the past time and again. The meals become a ritualized carnivalistic subversion of normality, since Voss is always disturbed by them, and they do not conform to the enjoyment normally associated with the feast. When Dene serves the dessert, Voss’s senses are stimulated. His visual and tactile senses are provoked by the appearance of the dessert, which he reacts to through an alternating posture of force and frailty, as the stage directions indicate:

[Dene] stellt Mehlspiesteller auf den Tisch
[...]
VOSS
[...]
richtet sich hoch auf
[...]
sinkt zusammen
[...]
richtet sich auf
[...]
sinkt zusammen
[...]
sie teilt die Brandteigkrapfen aus
VOSS

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157 Hans Peter Cloos, producer of the Théâtre de l’Athénée’s Ritter, Dene, Voss (April 2003), sees conventional genre definitions as continually overturned through their convergence: “Il a besoin d’une mise en scène d’une extrême clarté, d’une légèreté joyeuse, en parfait équilibre entre la comédie grise et la tragédie souriante” (Programme, April 2003)
Here, the seeing the choux buns being served and pulling at the tablecloth are the first signs of torment, because they are symbols of the past. The tablecloth symbolizes the family and his inability to escape from it; their grandmother embroidered it, and the fact that they are still using it represents the hold the past has on them. Voss does not participate in a carnival of liberation. This continuity recalls participants in the official feasts who were aware of their common hierarchy and truths and were not liberated from the existing world order:

Von Großmutter
nicht wahr
gestickt
[...]
In der Sommerfrische
Haben sie alle gestickt
[...]
wer hassen alles Gestickte
auch wenn es die Großmutter gestickt hat
[...]
zieht ganz leicht an der Tischdecke (189)

As soon as the dish is served, Voss begins to deride his sister’s efforts. The suffocating, deadly atmosphere in the family home is conveyed by the metaphor of a crypt, “Gruft”, given a black comic aspect through the adjective “köstliche”. His language creates a carnivalistically subversive performance, provoked by setting and the aroma:

Die ganze Zeit in Steinhof habe ich an nichts anderes
als an die Brandteigkrapfen gedacht
schaue um sich
wie in einer Gruft ist es hier
wir sind ja schon begraben
eine kostliche Gruft
in der Brandteigkrapfen serviert werden
riecht an seinen Brandteigkrapfen
der typische Brandteigkrapfenduft
[...]
Die höchste Kunst ist die Backkunst
RITTER lacht laut auf
VOSS riecht wieder an seinen Brandteigkrapfen
[...]
und schließlich hassen wir sie (188-190)

158 See Appendix II, No. 8, p. 325 & No. 9, p. 326
Voss appears to celebrate his sister’s culinary talents ("Die höchste Kunst...") yet hates them. He has a love-hate attitude towards the past, embodied in the expression “köstliche Gruft”, since the image of a crypt ("Gruft") reflects a sense of suffocation in the family home but is also associated with delicacies. He is clearly repulsed by the indestructible family tradition, yet remains attached to it. He crowns ("Die höchste Kunst...") and finally uncrowns ("schließlich hassen wir...") the contrasting elements associated with the meal ritual, combining positive and negative perceptions; a form of speech which is central to carnival. Further, his tone of mockery is a carnivalistic reversal of normal perspective, since his frenzied performance oscillates between initial recollection of his thought preoccupation with his favourite dessert, followed by an expression of his antipathy towards the past, through voicing disgust with the choux buns. He goes on to mock the role expected of him in the trio, through ridiculing his sisters’ ritualized gestures at meal times:

VOSS
Der Teufel sagt
Iß den Brandteigkrapfen
Den deine Schwester gebacken hat
Der Teufel sagt es
Der Teufel sagt es
Und Ludwig ißt ihn
Ludwig ißt den Brandteigkrapfen
die ältere hat ihn gebacken
die jüngere hat ihn aufgetragen
und jetzt warten sie beide darauf
daß ich ihre Brandteigkrapfen esse
überdeutlich
Vorgesetztebekommenes (190-191)

There is a jeering tone in the voicing of the neologism “Vorgesetztebekommenes”, expressing scorn at the sisters’ gestures, and turning them into a form of behaviour recalling parental authority, which he rebels against disrespectfully with a mocking facial expression, yet accepts. The repetition of “Teufel” literally demonizes his sisters. Whilst Voss gives this sarcastic comment on the meal, his sisters listen silently. They have just perfected a silent ritual focused on preparing and serving the meal. Carnival feasts are characterized by “the power of food and drink to liberate human speech”. Voss then gives a grotesque performance of devouring the choux buns against his will:

packt einen Brandteigkrapfen von seinem Teller und

159 See Appendix II, No. 10, p. 327
160 Clark and Holquist, p. 305
161 See Appendix II, No. 11, p. 328
If he were a beast in a single stroke, würgend
[...]
See you how I force your brandtigkrapfen
Hinunterwürgen
Ein so ekhafter Brandteigkrapfen
Ein so widerwärtiger Brandteigkrapfen
[...]
Dene springt auf und will hinauslaufen, bleibt aber
erzrocken an der Tür stehen, wie sie sieht, daß ihr
Bruder auch noch einen zweiten Brandteigkrapfen in
den Mund steckt
[...]
er würgt so lange, bis er die Hälfte des
Brandteigkrapfens geschluckt hat, und spuckt die Zweite Hälfte blitzartig aus und schlägt mit beiden Handflächen auf die Tischplatte (191-2)

His bitter repetition at intervals of “Meine Lieblingsmehlspise” highlights the fact that this is not a celebratory action. The choux buns are a symbol of the continuity of family ritual, a preservation of past hierarchy, since Dene’s fixation with the past, evident in her neurotic attitude to objects, exposes Voss to the trauma of the past time and again. Her gestures are not motivated by a sense of caring for him in the communality of the family, but are driven by an obsession with a perverse, sinister ritual of cruelty through provoking him. The carnival of the feast cannot be celebratory; Voss’s reaction appears to have become ritualized and in the end he always conforms, although he does not enjoy the buns and performs unwillingly each time. Dene is able to manipulate her brother and control him, since she provokes his emotions; there is no meeting of minds, only desperation on his part.

Voss finally gives a seemingly unpredictable (albeit calculated) violent outburst, by tearing off the tablecloth; along with this act of turmoil, his actions of spitting and banging on the table are a carnivallistic disruption of decorum in the family. It is not clear from the text whether this is a repeated ritualistic act or whether Voss’s outburst is a spontaneous gesture, a variation on the theme of carnival he performs. He appears to justify his deranged action by maintaining that it is a study which is part of a rehearsal: “Eine Etude mein Kind /damit ich nicht aus der Übung komme” (192, my italics). The fact that the destructive act takes place at a critical moment during the meal ritual indicates that it is a culmination of a theatrical performance. He is dependent on the past yet hates it – his reaction may well be a ritual because carnival and the inversion of norms (particularly during the meal) are forms of “Übung”. Voss’s ambiguous attitude towards family ritual

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162 See Appendix II, No. 12, p. 329
reveals violence and anger, feelings which are impotent as they do not change the situation. His outburst is certainly an expression of the dissatisfaction with predictable family life, as he declares, slumped over the table in despair in the aftermath: “Dem Leben einen Sinn geben” (192). Desire for meaning must involve a reaction to the family, even if the trio’s roles remain unchanged and there is no constructive confrontation.

Food is an example of a form of familiar oppression, although in other areas Dene’s behaviour equally displays not caring but obsessive traits: “Ich sage zu deiner Schwester /ich will in ein Konzert /und sie kauft ein ganzes Abonnement /ich sage ich will einen Brandteigkrapfen /und sie setzt mir Dutzende vor /ich sage ich will meine Ruhe haben /und sie fragt mich andauernd /ob ich Ruhe haben will” (215). Schmidt-Dengler cites food and clothing as the two dominant structuring rituals in Bernhard’s dramas: “Kleidung und Essen – darum ranken sich die meisten Rituale, die die Struktur der Dramen Bernhards bestimmen. Das Anziehen und die Einnahme des Essens sind Vorgänge, die dem dramatischen Progreß parallel gelagert sind [...] Das Essen verwandelt sich zum Aggressionsgeschehen, zum Herrschaftsritual [...] so reagiert [Voss] auf den gastronomischen Terror der Schwestern durch Gegenterror; das Essen wird zum Ausspeien”. Voss’s anger is not merely directed against his sister. As discussed, food is a symbol of parental authority and Voss’s early years at home. Yet his performance is a carnivalistic reaction against the family order, and it is an unrestrained one, triggered by the ritual of the meal and the choux buns. “Ausspeien” is a verb with a carnivalesque implication. Yet it does not refer, in Ritter, Dene, Voss, to symbols of terror or abuse of power, but of trauma (food) and perversion (underpants); neither of these objects is innocent. Voss’s rebellion against his sister’s cooking looks like an assertion of independence, yet his destructive outbursts are nevertheless a repetitive, if on occasion frighteningly violent, part of family life. It is the oppressiveness in the private domain which provokes the carnival outburst. Damerau recognizes the stale domestic setting in Ritter, Dene, Voss as central to Voss’s eccentric performance: “Insgesamt wirkt die Situation im Speisezimmer des großbürgerlichen Elternhauses – ähnlich wie in Am Ziel – wahrscheinlicher. Requisiten bleiben in unauffällige Verrichtungen eingebunden,

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163 See Appendix II, No. 13, p. 330
werden also nicht durch Worte oder im Geschehen sinnbildlich aufgeladen. Die Konstellation bleibt alltäglicher. Und erst daraus tritt Einzelnes besonders hervor, hier etwa die Brandteigkrapfen, die Familiengeschichte haben und dadurch Ludwigs Ausbruch verursachen. *Ritter, Dene, Voss* vermittelt den besagten Eindruck, der charakteristisch ist für die späteren Stücke Bernhards. Das Geschehen auf der Bühne wirkt weniger krass, stattdessen intimer.” 165 Indeed, the “Requisiten” such as the tablecloth provoke Voss’s outburst. Damerau does not mention that Dene has an unhealthy obsession with crockery and other domestic objects, and that this is fundamental to the family ritual of cruelty she imposes on Voss. The domestic setting and the objects and rituals associated with the past are the basis for the carnival.

In every respect the sisters’ lives are geared to meeting the eccentric’s demands and needs, but their treatment of Voss is also self-serving. Ritter discloses Dene’s total commitment to and obsession with Voss: “Du bist vollkommen auf Ludwig konzentriert /du hast dein Leben ganz auf ihn eingestellt” (127). For Dene, Voss is the centre of existence and she attempts to lure him into the cage of the home: “Ludwig ist für mich alles /hast du immer gesagt /Jetzt hast du ihn wieder in deinem Luxuskäfig” (Ritter, 143). The cage is Ritter’s too; it is a cage for all three of them. She accepts her position in the trio passively and her condemnation to watching the spectacle of dependence between Voss and Dene as a form of voyeurism: “Ludwig ist dein Besitz /wie umgekehrt /Ludwig besitzt dich /und ich bin dazu verurteilt /diese Schamlosigkeit anzustarren /Wie mir alles hier auf die Nerven geht” (149, my italics). Her use of “verurteilt” implies a sense of imprisonment in the cage. Neither of the sisters can form stable relations outside the family; Ritter cannot (143-4), and even initiates incestuous acts with Voss (kissing him, 222). The sisters put no obstacles in the way of the unconventional family relations.

The rivalry between the sisters which centres on the eccentric perpetuates their self-imposed patterns of behaviour, i.e. Dene’s fussy domestic roles (“die Betuliche”) and Ritter’s idleness (“die Nutzlose”):

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DENE
Philosophisches Desinteresse deinerseits
Darauf ist er wieder zurückgekommen
Die dumme Schwester
Die bist du
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165 Damerau, pp. 329-330
The sisters define their own roles according to what the other is and does. Their jealousy and rivalry which alternates with self-deprecation, ensures the continuity of the incestuous arrangement, and perpetuates the ménage-à-trois. The emotional tension resulting from the trio’s dependence on each other has annihilated any possibility of self-development, resulting in an unhappy life for all of them (“Du hast dein Unglück ich das meinige”), characterised by repetitive and stale activities, upheld out of boredom; a life which has caused resentment above all in Ritter, as she feels betrayed by the other two:

**RITTER**
Ich fühlte mich immer
Hintergangen
Von euch
In der Volksschule
Warst du mir fünf Jahre voraus
Das ganze Leben
Aber unglücklich sind wir doch beide
Du hast dein Unglück
Ich das meinige (145)

Ritter’s allegation of having been deceived by her brother and sister is yet another expression of the ugliness of the situation.

### II. 7 The figure of the outsider in *Ritter, Dene, Voss*

Voss indicates that the outsider trait in the trio is an essential characteristic in the bonding process. Their differences have one factor in common: their unusualness. They all generate criticism and social disapproval:

**Wir drei**
haben nie zusammengepaßt
zu exaltiert
zu außergewöhnlich
Intelligenzgeschwister
tatsächlich von allen verabscheut
oder wenigstens beargwohnt immer
Unheimlichkeit
was sie uns immer vorgeworfen haben
meine Geisteszertrümmerung zweifellos
Höchstanspruch
Menschensehnsucht selbstmörderische
alle drei (194-5, my italics)

Voss identifies with his sisters’ extraordinariness, their acceptance of their existence as
outsiders. Even with each other, they do not fit together, as each in isolation is an eccentric
individual, with marked differences, i.e. between the sisters. They share a common
rejection of social norms. The play on the word “Unheimlichkeit” expresses Voss’s inability
to feel at home in the family home. Permanent “Heimkommen” is not possible, and yet it is
only in the domestic setting that he can live out his perverse individuality; nor is there any
homely atmosphere in the family house, as it is haunted by the past. His self-imposed
“Geisteszertrümmerung” or philosophising separates him from others, although his
obsessive behaviour affects the sisters (the “Geisteskrüpel” status which they all have in
common; 150). The violent connotation in the neologism “Geisteszertrümmerung”
expresses his obsessive preoccupation with mental activity. Even the philosophy (such as it
is) is dependent on the domestic setting.

Even given the uncomfortable atmosphere in the house, and the differences between
the siblings, what unites them is a shared past. “Menschensehnsucht” goes no further than
the family, since Voss states at the end of the play that there is “kein
Gesellschaftsbedürfnis” (225) at home. Individual differences are accepted, the fact that
they do not get along does not diminish a sense of mutual complicity in leading an
eccentric life. The siblings reinforce each other’s eccentricity. The family as a whole are
seen to keep together at the end of the play owing to their difference from mainstream
society in the way they lead their lives. Their lives and the rituals that enable their lives
resist social norms.

There are elements of fear of death in Voss. Yet overall, the figures’ performance is
not dictated to by fear. Performance is an assertion of life. The figures themselves are not
types, nor are their rituals. Dene’s and Ritter’s dependence on their brother is atypical.
Damerau’s thesis neglects the importance of the main eccentric figure who determines an
alternative set-up which is not concerned with any form of “Schutzbehauptung”\(^\text{166}\) against

\(^{166}\) Damerau, p. 301
society. Bernhard’s eccentrics are not fearful; there is no fear of the outside world which could be of consequence to the eccentric set-up. Their private theatre is not threatened. It is not performed as a distraction from the world outside, but out of disgust and profound indifference towards a normal life.

II. 8 Carnival eccentricity in *Der Theatermacher*

The figure of Bruscon combines the carnivalistic perspective of the eccentric artist and revolutionary playwright (112), who revels in taking on a different view, along with an alternative life not realised in previous plays. Since acting is a way of life, his play within a play, “Das Rad der Geschichte”, is the source of his creative and existential “Selbsterhaltungstrieb” (104), which enables his carnival of poetic licence to become both private (through the ongoing creation and rehearsal of the play) and public (“Das Rad” is performed in innumerable versions). He thinks of himself as a “Geistesmensch” (103) but not in the conventional sense. Bruscon cultivates individuality through the artistic endeavour; having adopted a travelling existence with his family, he is able to move about freely, and liberate himself from domestic structures in a way in which the eccentrics in *Ritter, Dene, Voss* and *Elisabeth II* cannot. Bruscon is one of the few eccentrics to live on limited financial means, but frees himself from the conventional desire for material luxurious goods. His idealism is entirely non-materialistic since he despises the greed of the proletariat (66-67). In the case of Voss and Herrenstein it is precisely material wealth and the visible signs of affluence which allow them to perpetuate eccentricity, as they both rely on paid staff to allow them to perform their eccentricities. It is not possible for them to live outside this framework and thus a different type of eccentricity characterizes their existence, one that is confined to the domestic setting.

Bruscon’s lifestyle is a reaction to a traditional domestic set-up, and a manifestation of his rejection of a conventional career, a logical consequence of his early rebellious phase. All the same, the unity of his own family is preserved by, and depends on, theatre and group rituals performed with his grown up children, a curious arrangement. Bruscon’s desire to be extraordinary develops from an early age, despite his apparently inauspicious circumstances. He is self-taught: “Ich studierte ja alles im Selbststudium /[...] /extralange Hosen /trug ich damals /und eine Leinenkappe auf dem Kopf /ich nannte sie meine
Vorteilskappe /[...] /Wollte ich klar denken /setzte ich diese Kappe auf” (21). The obsession with the linen cap is a typically eccentric obsession: “es war mir auch in der Großstadt nicht möglich /ohne diese Leinenkappe meines Großvaters zu denken ” (21), although in Utzbach the linen cap’s effect, comically, vanishes (83). Bruscon’s self-portrayal of the early years is summed up in a few lines and focuses on his desire to pursue a life in the theatre, despite the opposition of his father, emphasizing how his struggle since adolescence to write his play “Das Rad” developed into a way of life:

Im übrigen habe ich schon mit vierzehn Jahren
 einen Entwurf für diese Komödie gemacht
 Mich lebenslänglich verfolgender Stoff sozusagen
 [...] eine Art Welttheater
 [...] Ausbruch von Zuhause
 Ohrfeigen Hiebe
 Kopfstücke väterlicherseits
 Totale gegenseitige Verachtung
 [...] Selbstinfamie
 von ganz unten herauf gearbeitet (24-5)

But despite his bohemian rebelliousness, he studied the classics, as Voss did: “Konkret mit dem siebzehnten Jahr angefangen /mich mit der klassischen Literatur zu beschäftigen /begierig nach dem Geist /nach dem Schöpferischen” (80). He claims: “Ein gewisses Talent für das Theater /schon als Kind /geborener Theatermensch wissen Sie /Theatermacher /Fallensteller schon sehr früh” (24-5). His knowledge of literature is used to turn against the world to which he performs his theatre as one who sets traps. He is totally consumed by his passion for the theatre, which makes him in every respect a “Theatermacher”. The range of roles he takes on are all versions of living as a “Theatermensch”.

His personal eccentricities are inseparable from his theatrical obsessions: “Nehme ich die Kappe herunter /ist meine Komödie vernichtet” (21). Bruscon’s theatre must take precedence over everything, including safety regulations: “Der Höhepunkt meiner Komödie /ist die absolute Finsternis”; “ohne das Abschalten des Notlichts /wird nicht gespielt” (22). The social world is opposed to this mission, so his efforts are always directed at distancing himself from it.

As we see Bruscon behind the scenes, the incongruity of his idiosyncratic concerns can be observed. For the sake of theatre, he has abstained from alcohol, which he used to consume in high quantities: “Meine Leidenschaft für den Alkohol /habe ich der hohen
Kunst geopfert [...] /eine Verrücktheit /wenn nicht Wahnsinn /die hohe Kunst /oder der Alkoholismus /ich habe mich für die hohe Kunst entschieden” (76-77). Theatre is a way of life, even though it is perceived as madness. Bruscon’s subservience to the madness of art is one of the essentially comic elements in the play. Even in the most trivial ways, Bruscon sees himself as fighting for survival in a hostile world: “In diesem Saal wird der Finger nicht trocken /eine solche Feuchtigkeit /ist Gift für das Theater” (32). The high art which he claims as his raison d’être is a struggle in itself: “Hohe Kunst /ist ein fürchterlicher Prozess” (76). He is necessarily isolated, given the hostility to intellectual endeavour: “Erfrierungsangst” (115). Furthermore, there is a constant comic tension between the pursuit of “Hohe Kunst” and practical concerns. Food is as important for Bruscon as for the provincials, who make a ritual of slaughtering animals every Tuesday. Bruscon becomes fixated on Blutwursttag (43), Essigwurst (39) and performs a small comedy about which soup he should eat (27-28, 38-9). Demanding a special meal (“Unsere Existenzsuppe” (40); other food (71, 114) and especially “Römerquelle” to drink (68-9, 74-5) become small dramas in themselves.

Bruscon’s hypochondria is part of the eccentric personality: “Diese Schwüle /Gewitterschwüle /Ein solcher empfindlicher Geist /in einem solchen empfindlichen Körper” (14); “Diese Schwüle /[...] /Andererseits erkalte ich mich /ziehe ich den Mantel aus /Alle Augenblicke von Husten gequält /von Halsschmerz gepeinigt /in Schweiß gebadet” (17); “Ich habe eine Nierengeschichte” (19). Physical complaints seem to reinforce Bruscon’s mental hyperactivity, as he remains seated for most of the play, giving orders to his son to set up the stage. His movements are limited. His apparent physical weakness serves as a means of attracting attention. He uses reliance on care to his advantage, as when he demands of Sarah: “Du sollst mir die Schuhe ausziehen /Alles tut mir weh /alles /ein einziger Schmerzensmensch bin ich” (52). Bruscon is aware of his mortality, and thus sees theatre as absurd: “Wir sind todkrank /und tun so /als lebten wir ewig /wir sind schon am Ende /und treten auf /als ginge es immer so weiter” (54). His physical condition is linked to his wartime experiences: “Da bin ich niedergeschlagen worden /[...] /neunzehnhundertvierundvierzig /[...] /davon habe ich heute noch /diese Schulterschmerzen” (20-21). His physical wounds become psychological. In other instances his complaints about his health become a defence mechanism which he uses to
assert himself against the family: "Deine Mutter behauptet /sie sei herzkrank /aber ich bin es wirklich" (75).

Bruscon’s daily routine is controlled by his physical conditions and eccentric requirements: "Der Doktor behandelte außerdem mein Ohr /chinesische Säfte eingeträufelt" (102); and his self-declared intellectual status has led to abstinence: "Ich trinke nur Mineralwasser /ein Geistesmensch /kann nicht anders" (103). His refusal of alcohol is "ein ganz und gar unsinniger Verzicht" (77). He overreacts with an impromptu theatrical performance when Sarah serves him tap water:

BRUSCON trinkt einen Schluck, erkennt, daß es sich um gewöhnliches Wasser handelt, das Sarah gebracht hat, und spuckt es aus
Gewöhnliches Wasser
Leitungswasser
Hier in Utzbach
Hier wo alles verseucht ist
Wo alles eine Kloake ist
Stößt Sarah mit dem Wasser weg,
Das Glas fällt zu Boden (74)

Bruscon’s preoccupation with bodily needs plays an important part in his life as “Theatermacher”. Physical incapacity or weakness is a source of repetitive performance of variations on the theme of health. Momentary deafness, however, does not prevent the staging of his play “Das Rad” (102). Bruscon’s professed ambition for theatre is physically demanding (a nomadic existence: “Unser Vorteil ist /daß wir in einem einzigen Wagen reisen”; 36), in view of his bodily weaknesses, but his creative ambitions are certainly undimmed by his exhausting nomadic life style. His existence is not, as Höller believes, “hinfällig” – fragile – despite his physical condition: “Den entscheidenden Kontrapunkt zu den Ideengebäuden und Kunstillusionen Bruscons stellt die Hinfälligkeit seiner Existenz und die Gebrechlichkeit seiner Physis dar”.

Steven Joyce’s perception of Bruscon in his essay is fundamentally inaccurate. Joyce quotes Hutcheon in relation to Bruscon’s concern with tradition: “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. […] It does not deny the existence of the past; it does question

167 Höller, “Zur Poetik….” p. 403
168 Joyce, “Kismet and Continuities: Postmodernism and Thomas Bernhard’s Der Theatermacher”, in Colloquia Germanica, (published for the University of Kentucky by Francke, Volume 24, 1991), 24-37
whether we can ever know that past other than through its textualized remains. In Bernhard’s *Theatermacher* new categories of description emerge when simultaneous interrogations of the past and present occur.” Bruscon is not concerned with a truthful representation of the past; his play “Das Rad” is not a historical play. As theatre for Bruscon is a game, his use of famous historical figures has no historical purpose. He makes the inclusion of any scene at least partially dependent on the location of the performance of “Das Rad” as well as on other factors such as mood. Bruscon sees the National Socialist past as haunting Utzbach, and is concerned to perform carnivalesque tirades on this claim (*DT* 46; 81); he uses his play in part to distance himself from any suggestion of pro-Fascist sympathies.

Similarly, Joyce sees Bruscon’s mission to be: “to receive properly the meaning of the world” (p. 30). Bruscon, however, wishes to create and interpret a vision of reality for himself. Bruscon does not hesitate to alter the scenes and content of his play; he randomly follows his own personal predilections, and adapts the script quite unpredictably, according to the capacities of the family theatre group (pruning of lines if necessary). In incorporating famous historical figures into his play Bruscon, as Joyce notes: “re-writes their stories; he re-speaks their words; he re-presents their significance in terms of their vital fictional affinities to one another and himself.” (p. 34). For Bruscon there can never be any truth defining as there is no possibility of finding a whole that corresponds to an official truth: “Am Ende entspricht gar nichts” (*DT* 90). Truth does not correspond to a pregiven structure of meaning, for it is entirely subjective. Improvisation is what is significant to his style of writing and producing theatre. Joyce says of Bruscon: “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.” (p. 26). But Bruscon’s preoccupation with theatre in all its dimensions can be seen as “a centering force”, a force that affords him endless opportunities for eccentric self-presentation.

Joyce claims: “Neither speaking voice nor written text is privileged in *Der Theatermacher*. Both are suspected of epistemic infidelities.” (p. 26). The voice itself is central to Bruscon’s state of being. The play is not philosophical by nature; historical sequence, authenticity, or logic are not important, but Bruscon certainly does question “the

169 Joyce, p. 25. Further references to Joyce’s article are given after quotations in the text.
ontological significance of self as well as the epistemological and axiological significance of theatre and dramatic art.” (p. 27). His use of historical figures results in the crazily self-confident creation of “Das Rad”; he does not use them for personal reasons in the way that Joyce argues: “in order to shore up his own eroding sense of self-identity.” (p. 28).

Bruscon’s theatre feeds off the megalomania of its eccentric creator, which extends to making others perform their roles in off-stage rituals. Joyce restricts Bruscon’s activities to the production of his play, when in fact they are merely part of his life as theatre: “‘Das Rad der Geschichte’ is both a fictive construct and a metafictional construct. It comprises a literary field [i.e. theatrical] in which there is no distinction between fiction [theatre] and commentary on fiction.” (p. 28-9). But Bruscon is not narrowly confined to a literary field; he philosophises within as well as outside his play. The fact that he is always acting, always performing, whether on an actual stage or not, blurs the distinction between on- and off-stage theatre; “Das Rad der Geschichte” is a play which he continues to re-write as part of his performance of life itself. The rehearsals of it encompass only part of Bruscon’s theatrical existence. Logic is not Bruscon’s aim, since he thrives on not being understood and inverting and carnivailing conventional ways of thinking. Joyce is right when he observes of Bruscon that “his remarks, observations, complaints and queries often times do not cohere logically” (p. 29). Bruscon’s theatrical existence celebrates the overturning of conventional logic both on and off stage. He deliberately incorporates absurd falsifications of history, which demonstrates his disregard for plausibility and his privileging of fantasy and whimsy. His pronouncements and performances are the product of spontaneity, and that spontaneity is driven by a desire to be different at all costs, as far as Bruscon is concerned, since it drives the creative process. Schmidt-Dengler claims: “Selbst bei sehr weitherziger Auslegung literarischer Praktiken dürfte das Stück Bruscons und seiner Theatertruppe mehr an Schmiere erinnern denn an eine seriöse Bühne. Doch hat sich selbst in diesen Niederungen der – für alle Figuren Bernhards typische – Absolutheitsanspruch an die Kunst erhalten.”

Bruscon’s group may be a strolling company because it rejects convention; yet perfection is not his main aim, it is secondary to experiment. His declared ambition of writing a comedy that contains other comedies is, as he himself acknowledges, absurd: but the very absurdity of the idea is what makes it attractive to him:

170 Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, “Es ist alles egal”, p. 149
II. 9 Herrenstein’s characteristic carnivalesque perspective

All Bernhard’s late eccentrics are dependent on some form of continuity as a foundation for a lifestyle that is radically different from the norm. Bernhardian carnival is parasitic on continuity; the eccentric figures stage their own carnival as a reaction against social convention. Herrenstein’s deliberately eccentric position in taking on a different viewpoint is also evident in his conversations, when he takes the opposite view, inverting conventional perspective. In Rome he stays in the Hassler Hotel because it is ugly, and because the cripple hates the view of the Spanish steps which it affords: “weil es seine Gewohnheit ist [...] / das Hassler ist ja letztenendes auch ein häßliches Hotel / ich weiß gar nicht warum ich immer wieder sage / das Hassler ist schön / Den Blick auf die Spanische Treppe / hasse ich wie nichts sonst” (288). He stays in Bad Ischl despite finding it repulsive in its tastelessness: “Bad Ischl ist doch widerwärtig [...] / die Konditorei Zauner / heute eine der geschmacklosesten Konditoreien überhaupt / je größer eine Geschmacklosigkeit im Salzkammergut ist / desto beliebter ist sie” (299). Similarly he finds in Vienna: “nichts als pomöser Kitsch / das Parlament die Burg die Oper / alles Beispiele schauerlicher Architekturverirrungen” (309). Yet his rhetoric of repulsion cannot free itself from the settings in which it finds itself.

Lacking any coherent philosophical or political principles, the only way Herrenstein can show independence is by expressing contradictory views. His respect for Guggenheim, who is Jewish, makes Herrenstein an unlikely candidate for a supporter of National Socialism, as Damerau believes him and his butler Richard to be: “mit dem Diener Richard [wird] in Aussicht gestellt, daß eine derart geförderte Hörigkeit leicht ins Totalitäre münden kann. Darin liegt der Witz der weniger offenkundigen Motive des Stücks: Herrenstein führt Klage gegen den Nationalsozialismus, für den er selber in gewisser Hinsicht ein Kandidat ist. Denn in seinem Budenzauber der Schimpftiraden verbirgt sich eine traumatische Angst, die die beschimpfte Gesinnung überhaupt erst möglich macht. Freilich bleibt es in diesem analytischen Typendrama Bernhards bei der Suggestion einer Verbindung von Angst,
Unterwürfigkeit und Nationalsozialismus.” That his condemnation of the Austrians’ hatred of the Jews’ fate, especially of those who returned from emigration (307) is sincere, emerges clearly from his relationship with Guggenheim, although his egocentric lack of interest in Guggenheim’s opinions suggests a lack of comprehension of what it really means to be a Jew in Guggenheim’s position (329). He condemns Schuppich, Richard’s friend, in front of Guggenheim, as belonging to “eine alte Nazifamilie” (329), and thus brings up the issue of Austria’s refusal to accept blame for crimes, and the persistence of Nazis in Austria in 1969, the date of Queen Elizabeth II’s visit to Vienna.

The difficulty is that Herrenstein’s eccentric tirades are stripped of substance by his continual returning to the places he condemns. Moreover, the way in which those tirades lump together locations such as the Hotel Hassler in Rome, the Semmering and Altaussee detracts from the political outrage he pretends to feel at the alleged persistence of Nazism in Austria. Such merging of issues is characteristic of a peculiar carnivalesque logic. The carnivalesque perspective also equates the beauty of Austria with Nazism: “die schönsten Gegen den Österreichts/haben immer die meisten Nazis angezogen” (307). He also relates his failure to breathe in Altaussee to the fact that it is a stronghold of Nazism: “ich weiß schon warum ich in Altaussee /keine Luft bekomme /es ist nicht nur wegen der Berge /es ist wegen der vielen Nazis /die dort ansässig sind” (307). He attacks the architectural style of the houses in Altaussee, including his own (“ich habe die Jahrhundertwendehäuser /immer gehaßt /Veranden Holzbalkone [...] /was gibt es Scheußlicheres”; 326). The attack on the architecture of Altaussee (326) is a repetition of his attack on the architecture on the great architectural buildings of Vienna (309), but when he goes on to complain that he prefers the Socialist Semmering to National Socialist Altaussee, the equivalence he claims between architecture and politics robs his political views of real seriousness. Although he explicitly distances himself from outright sympathy for or adherence to National Socialism, he pretends to prefer the Socialists: “der Sozialismus auf dem Semmering /und die Sozialisten auf dem Semmering /sind mir noch tausendmal lieber /als der Nationalsozialismus /und die Nationalsozialisten in Altaussee” (355). In an earlier speech, however, he also scorns the leftwing political affiliation on the Semmering: “Heute laufen auf dem Semmering/die wild gewordenen Proleten mit Hosen trägern und Pumphose herum /jedes Hotel ist heute

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171 Damerau, p. 370
ein Gewerkschaftsverein” (329). The topsy-turvy carnival logic refuses to genuinely differentiate between left and right wing groups; he cannot present a rational, coherent judgment. Herrenstein avails himself of a fool’s perspective, but he remains rooted in familiar structures. His contradictory views stem from a desperate desire to think differently, since the fool has no serious principles, but Herrenstein is also too passive to initiate change for himself. Herrenstein’s monologues do not have the destructive dimension of Robert Schuster’s; metaphors such as “Gewerkschaftsverein” contain a playful element. Herrenstein’s condemnation of aspects of culture is inconsistent with change. He has grown old with the other residents in Altaussee, given his long-standing attachment: “diese alten Häuser diese alten Leute /alles muffig und vermodert /alles feucht /[…] /es hat mir immer den Hals zugeschnürt in Altaussee” (282). Yet in saying this, he is no different from the “Gesindel” (283) resident there. He is used to the oppressiveness of the provinces, and exaggeration in the grotesque reflects his acceptance that “der Küchengeruch kann nicht aus dem Tal hinaus /[…] /die Leute kochen mit altem Schweinefett /und den Fisch bringen sie auch nur stinkend auf den Tisch” (315). His eccentric views of the political and cultural heritage of Austria imply an acceptance of the status quo in the sense that it offers him a stage on which to perform the rhetorical diatribes. Those diatribes owe more to a desire to be different than to any progressiveness of outlook on Herrenstein’s part. Real change remains inconceivable; talk does not turn into action, as he remains rooted in places he affects to despise. Herrenstein is like Bernhard, who claimed: “Ich lebe hier in Österreich, weil ich nicht anders kann, weil ich an die Landschaft gebunden bin”. Herrenstein remains attached to Austria in a complacent way, since it permits the eccentric to revel in the pure theatricality of his tirades.

II. 10 Herrenstein and the uncrowning of tradition

Herrenstein displays carnivalesque disrespect for the British royal family’s status and authority. Austria may be awful, but so is everywhere else:

Ich mag diese Leute nicht
Burberry und Greenfell-Puppen
mit ihrem stupiden Lächeln
ob sie sich mit ihren Staatsoberhauptern
oder mit ihren Hunden zeigen

\[172\] Thomas Bernhard, “Brief an das Komitee”, in *Autoren Solidarität – Komitee zur Fortsetzung des Schriftstellerkongresses*, G. Ruiss (editor), (January 1982), pp. 20-22, (p. 22)
es ist immer das Gleiche
die ganze Brut ist scheinlich (300)
The juxtaposition of heads of state and dogs represents the high and low of carnival. The visit of the Queen symbolizes the status quo in society. Herrenstein’s carnivalistic perspective is therefore a reversal of the normal reception of such a tradition. The Queen in Herrenstein’s carnival is reduced to a fool. He flouts etiquette by using derogatory terms to describe royalty: “Leute” (300); “die ganze Sippschaft” (298); “Brut” (300). Herrenstein verbally uncrowns the Queen and her privileges symbolised through a double carnival image of fool and crown – “Narrenkrone”: “die Leute machen sich unter der Krone zum Narren /die Könige haben immer nur eine Narrenkrone aufgehabt” (320). His scorn for the popularity of royalty is central to the eccentric persona and places him outside conventional social interests. This is another instance of Herrenstein’s perception of society and its traditions from an outsider’s (carnivalistic) perspective.

II. 11 The eccentric and society
Herrenstein’s desire to be different expresses itself in an antisocial reaction on the occasion of the Queen’s visit to Vienna. Herrenstein’s antisocial monologue reflects his helplessness, as he feels invaded, but cannot reject the initial situation:

Unertraglicher Gedanke
daß alle diese Leute hierher kommen
ausgerechnet jetzt
schamlos neugieriges Volk die Wiener
Wie viel sind es Fräulein Zallinger (285)

Like Bruscon, Herrenstein scorns the masses and defines himself as an anti-populist:

Die Normalität ist es nicht
abgestoßen zu sein von der Masse
die Leute lieben die Zusammenrottung
alle streben immer zueinander zusammen
ich habe immer von allen weg wollen
aus allen hinaus wollen
das ist wahrscheinlich mein Unglück (304)

Herrenstein’s statement is a carnivalistic inversion of what he perceives to be the norm; he rejects the popular enthusiasm generated by the Queen’s visit because it symbolizes the social conformity of the masses. The eccentric establishes his difference by ridiculing the crowds in the streets. Looking out of the window, he gives vent to his hatred of the masses but also to his underlying fear of them: “widerlich /die Masse ist widerlich /aber wehe wir verweigern uns ihr /sie zertrampelt uns” (282). His interest in the Queen’s state visit is
restricted to the fascination of the masses with the Queen: “eine Menge Leute kommen /alle wollen die Königin von England sehen /das verstehen Sie doch /die Königin von England will jeder sehen” (323). Ernst Seibert in discussing Elisabeth II mentions that the Queen is not included in the play for concrete political or historical reasons: “Die Figur Elisabeth II ist scheinbar nichts mehr als die Trägerin eines Namens; mit keinem Gedanken wird auf die Regentschaft der englischen Königin oder auf den Grund ihres Staatsbesuchs hingewiesen.” It is not the Queen as a real purpose who is the target of Herrenstein’s attack, but her ability to attract crowds. His personal rejection of the spectacle is rooted in his hatred of the masses: “Es war vorauszusehen /daß alle die Königin von England /sehen wollen /das Pack” (322); he refuses to go out onto the balcony, keeping a distance from the guests: “Das ist nur für den Abschaum” (354). Yet it is difficult to see this as much more than a pose, for the ostensible purpose of the party he gives is to allow his guests to watch the Queen from his balcony. Like the other eccentrics, the principles he proclaims are more apparent than real.

In the final scene, Herrenstein’s residence is a stage for the guests to watch a show, and for him to observe from a demonstrative distance what he terms their repulsive theatre: “ein abstoßendes Schauspiel” (356) – significantly, just before the balcony collapse. His rejection of social norms is complete in his analysis of Viennese high society, an exposure of their show. When the balcony collapses and his guests are killed, Herrenstein is unmoved and reverts to his domestic routine; he continues to perform the role of outsider he has sustained throughout the play, like the Weltverbesserer. Herrenstein ultimately witnesses a very black comedy, whereby he performs the carnival laughter of an outsider. Bernhard’s subtitle for Elisabeth II is ironically “Keine Komödie”. As H. Haider-Pregler remarks: “Daß Bernhard […] die mit situationskomischen Effekten reich bestückte Elisabeth II ausdrücklich als ‘Keine Komödie‘ eingestuft hat, und die nicht mit den Maßstäben der Gattungspoetik zu messen ist, verwundert wohl nicht weiter.” Life and death are clearly trivialised by the sudden ending, a moment of “Situationskomik”; tragedy

173 Ernst Seibert, “Kindheit als poetologisches Prinzip im Oeuvre Thomas Bernhards”, in Die Zurichtung des Menschen, edited by Alex Honold, Markus Joch, (Würzburg, K&N, 1999) pp. 239-249 (pp. 247-8)
174 Burgtheater Production, 2002. See Appendix II, No. 14, p. 331
is thus prevented. The balcony collapse in itself could be seen as bearing a satirical
dimension in that it exposes the hollowness of Viennese society, as one critic wrote of the
Burgtheater production (2002): “Im komödiantischen Höllensturz errichtete Bernhard ihr
[der Gesellschaft Wiens] ein Denkmal von zeitlosem Bestand, denn auch alle Unlust will
Ewigkeit.” 176 The farcical disaster contrasts with the subtle drama earlier in the play.
Herrenstein’s guests die because they succumb to the curiosity of the herd to see the Queen,
and are in pursuit of the extraordinary, but Herrenstein’s own existence continues without
interruption, unthreatened, given his rejection of whatever is new. His indifference ensures
his survival, and he is unmoved when he looks out after the disaster. 177

Herrenstein’s antisocial “Schadenfreude” comes in the final scene. When all have left
the stage of his reception room to go on to the balcony, he asks Richard how many guests
have appeared (354). He is only interested in the group as a number. He too participates in
the black comedy verbally before the outcome is known, making ironic comments whilst
they gather on the balcony. He resents their healthiness (Line 9; cf. also EII, 284), and this
distances him from them further:

Gesindel widerwärtiges
Damit habe ich sie aber endgültig los
Das ist das letztemal
Daß diese Leute
In meinem Haus sind
Es sind ja von allen die abscheulichsten
Es sind genau die
Die ich am tiefsten hasse
Dieses gesunde Gesindel
Sofort auf den Döblinger Friedhof
Wenn sie weg sind (354)

His references to his invitation to the guests (“Das ist das letztemal…”) and his visit to the
cemetery of Döbling comically anticipate the disaster of the collapsed balcony moments
later. In keeping with his detestation of his guests, their death leaves him indifferent
(“Wahrscheinlich sind sie alle tot”; 356), but this very indifference is characteristic of the
isolation of the Bernhardian eccentric. Herrenstein’s calm retreat from the balcony disaster
is also met with mere resignation and even detachment by Richard: “Das alte Kind hat alles

176 Die Welt, 1.6.2002
177 See Appendix II, No. 15, p. 332
Welt—, sondern am Liebesuntergang. Herrenstein’s indifference can also be seen as a rejection of novelty and change. Although he acknowledges that “Die Königin von England kommt ja nicht jeden Tag nach Wien /wahrscheinlich kommt sie nur einmal in ihrem Leben /nach Wien” (324), his refusal to join his guests on the balcony to watch her symbolizes his rejection of anything which disrupts his routine. Ironically, the guests die in pursuit of novelty and spectacle; Herrenstein survives because he has spent his life avoiding change and remaining outside the group as far as possible. Herrenstein mocks the curiosity of the Viennese in other situations and recalls the visit of the Negus of Egypt, when one million gathered (320).

Bernhard’s last play Die Schwerhörigen, an unpublished manuscript, also deals with eccentric geriatrics. Several of the numerous old figures present in the play’s setting, a doctor’s surgery in Vienna, are antisocial geriatrics:

Natürlich gehen mir die Leute auf die Nerven
ich habe es mir abgewöhnt
mich unbedingt durchsetzen zu wollen (1)

II. 12 The eccentric and cripples
Herrenstein’s obsession with deformity and cripples paradoxically develops from an acute awareness of his physical handicap, and his clock ritual and shoe ritual are projections of his awareness of still being a human being, even if his body is only half man. His lack of physical independence brings about a preoccupation with his own grotesque body (half prosthesis); Herrenstein’s mind and body are characterised by artificiality. By extension, his observation of cripples whilst travelling may be seen in the light of Bakhtin’s “material body principle” which, as part of the aesthetic of “grotesque realism”, embodying the opposite of the cult of classical beauty, constitutes a fundamental dimension of the carnivalesque vision of the world. The fact that he chooses his holiday destinations according to specific, eccentric criteria to create his own thrills also involves a situation when Herrenstein inverts conventional perspective in celebrating his fascination with deformity:

Ist Ihnen aufgefallen
daß nirgends auf der Welt so viele Krüppel herumlaufen
Wie in Lissabon

178 Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 1. 6. 2002 (on Burgtheater production)
179 Gardiner, p. 47
Whether Herrenstein as a grotesque figure identifies with cripples as humans or not, his verbal performance rejoices in the carnival as a way of life; instead of searching for beauty and glamour, he is drawn to deformity. It is unconventional for a cripple to be attracted to disfigurement ("Verunstaltungen"), rather than his opposite. His thirst for this bodily spectacle, even if it is physically speaking a passive activity, and the magnetism of malformed, ugly bodies are an eccentric subversion of conventional perspectives, a perversion ("Perversität"). Heritage is distorted: just as he visits Rome with the sole purpose of revelling in what he sees as ugly locations (288), so he can see Lisbon only in terms of his perceptions of abnormality, and beauty for him is thus an inversion of the norm. His view of the material world is carnivalistic, beauty in the city for him is equated above all with physical abnormalities.

Bruscon’s interest in cripples becomes a spectacle of deformity for the eccentric when he observes his Utzbach audience, yet although he is fascinated by it, he does not see it as a source of amusement: “Noch immer dieser penetrante /Schweinestallgestank /Seltsam verwachsene Menschen /Hochinteressante Verkrüppelungen /[…]/Ein Gelähmter /in einem Gelähmtenwagen” (112); “Merkwürdig kleine Leute /merkwürdig klein /und dick” (106); “In Meran kamen /nicht einmal drei Leute /nur ein Krüppel /der sich von der Garderobenfrau /in die erste Reihe hat fahren lassen” (85). This carnival exaggeration and interest in the grotesque, physically abnormal characteristics of people is an assertion of eccentricity and non-canonicalism.

II. 13 Bruscon’s “Das Rad der Geschichte” as carnival
Bakhtin’s carnival theory places great emphasis on the grotesque. There is a very obvious sense in which figures like Herrenstein and Voss are grotesque in their fixity and self-enclosure, but they, and perhaps Bruscon in particular, are grotesque in the special sense given to the term by Bakhtin: “To Bakhtin, the grotesque is the expression in literature of the carnival spirit. It incorporates what for him are the primary values: incompleteness,
becoming, ambiguity, indefinability, non-canonicalism — indeed, all that jolts us out of our normal expectations and epistemological complacency.” In endlessly changing “Das Rad” (re-writing – 98; cutting and re-ordering spontaneously – 104-5), and refusing to give it a final form, Bruscon produces a play that is at once carnivalesque and grotesque.

Changes occur even during official performance: “Es war eine kleine Pause entstanden / ich als Stalin / sagte ganz einfach einen Text / den wir ursprünglich gestrichen hatten” (23). He thereby foregrounds himself as a grotesquely unconventional kind of dramatist, one who makes a virtue of formlessness, unpredictability and regeneration. Bruscon’s play within a play is marked by its permanently “unfinished becoming”, its refusal of completion and of a polished entity. There is always the scope for spontaneity in each single performance. Bruscon’s carnival celebrates difference and unpredictability in a way which, to quote Bakhtin, “keeps alive a sense of variety and change”. Bakhtin insists that the grotesque as a constitutive feature of carnival “is directly opposed to the official emphasis on the past, to a stasis so complete that it becomes eternity”. Carnival enacts a liberation from “the oppression of such gloomy categories as ‘eternal’, ‘immovable’, ‘absolute’, ‘unchangeable’”, and celebrates “the free laughing aspect of the world, with its unfinished and open character, with the joy of change and renewal.” Bruscon’s play certainly changes the past with an extraordinary uninhibitedness, it celebrates the theatrical nature of the world, and presents itself as “eine Art Welttheater” (24). He announces his version of truth as a self-proclaimed “Wahrheitsfanatiker” (198). Churchill is apparently transmogrified into Napoleon (“Churchill wacht auf in der Nacht / vor seinem Tod / und sagt nur noch das Wort Elba”; 22-23), and Lady Churchill is made into a contemporary of Metternich. He carnivalesizes the serious or even tragic aspects of history by ignoring them and by placing emphasis on trivialities. At one moment he crowns the figures in their glory, the next he uncrowns them in terms of appearance and mockery of human weakness, thus confirming: “the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position.”

In the scene with Metternich and Lady Churchill, which he rehearses with Ferruccio,

180 Clark and Holquist, p. 312
181 Gardiner, p. 47
182 Gardiner, p. 47
183 Rabelais and his World, p. 81 & p. 83
184 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 124 (Bakhtin’s emphasis)
Bruscon creates a fantastic story, placing great emphasis on absurd gestures, which turn his wheel of history into a theatrical grotesque. He instructs Ferruccio that what matters about acting the part of Metternich, who is eager to do Lady Churchill a favour although he is not interested in her, is that he should execute a bow which is not too abrupt, because this would be out of character with the historical figure:

Wenn er an Zar Nikolaus denkt
und gleichzeitig der Lady Churchill
für die er sich ja nicht wirklich interessiert
einen Gefallen erweisen will
darf er sich nicht zu abrupt bücken verstehst du
Immerhin ist er ja schon der Fürst Metternich
Etwas Koblenzisches ist naturgemäß noch in ihm (91)

This wholly idiosyncratic representation of historical figures in "Das Rad" and their inconsequential modes of behaviour suggest that history is meaningless theatre, a trivial spectacle that can be endlessly redesigned. Bruscon stages a carnivalesque history. The figures are represented as absurdly deformed caricatures: "die sogenannten Großherrscher/hatten alle einen verkrüppelten rechten Arm" (48). Bruscon sees them through his carnivalesque perception of a common genetic deformity. He tells Ferruccio to perform Metternich as a caricature: "Mehr eine Karikatur/von Metternich/schlechte Schminke/außerordentliche schlechte Körperhaltung" (112-113) and goes on to apply make up to his face. Overturning norms and ignoring "official truth" in respect of historical accuracy is apparent in Bruscon’s refusal to respect famous figures and their historical/cultural contexts. He appropriately calls himself a "Revolutionär" (112).

Bruscon inverts all conventional ideas of historical sequence or accuracy. Whilst styling himself a "Wahrheitsfanatiker" (108) he overturns historical fact and creates his own truth. The wheel of historical time which he invents plucks figures arbitrarily from the chronology of history. Bruscon transgresses norms in upsetting historical chronology and creates fantastic and absurdly comic scenes: "Auch in meinem Stück tritt Hitler auf/er kommt mit Napoleon zusammen/und trinkt mit Roosevelt auf dem Obersalzberg"

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185 Bernhard commented on the world as a stage (which he terms "Weltbühne") and the world as theatre (theatrum mundi) as follows:


186 See Appendix II, No. 16, p. 333
(46); "Goethe bekommt einen Hustenanfall /und wird von Kierkegaard aus dem Salon hinausgetragen /nachdem Hitler und Napoleon eingetreten sind" (46). His use of the neologism "Geschichtsstandpauke" to describe his play ("Wir können das Rad der Geschichte /nicht zurückdrehen /habe ich zum Bürgermeister gesagt /Eine Geschichtsstandpauke ist mein Stück"; 112) means a dressing down of history. His claim that the wheel of time cannot be turned back has a double meaning; the past is done with, and equally, history cannot be dealt with chronologically. Bringing together Hitler, Napoleon, Roosevelt, Goethe, Kierkegaard and other figures creates a carnivalistic mésalliance, for example: “Nero Metternich Hitler /Geschichtskonstellation /Bindeglied Churchill” (102). To link Churchill with people like this is to uncrown him, that is, to invert his normal status as the great champion of liberty. Betz sees reductionism and deformation as an aspect of the carnival: “Die überzogene Anstrengung, die Spiralbewegungen der Geschichte in einer einzigen Komödie zu bergen, ist an und für sich lächerlich. Aber Bruscon scheint zudem das Wichtige gestrichen zu haben und die Nebensächlichkeiten auf die Bühne bringen zu wollen. Die Reduktionsverfahren, die Bruscon dramaturgisch anwenden muß, um geschichtliche Totalität errichten zu können, machen seine Rad-Partitur zu einem karnevalsen Lückentext, in dem sich die einzelnen geschichtlichen Kontexte in lächerliche Fragmenten verzerren. Kontaminationen, Klitterungen, Kürzungen und Deformationen erzeugen den assoziativen Reduktus des Narren, der sich aus dem Zwangsdialog mit der Tradition nicht lösen, deren Meilensteinen aber auch nicht die ihnen gemäßige Dignität zukommen lassen kann. Durch diese Kontraktion kommen die Weltgeister unters Rad." 187 In forcing the famous figures who populate his play into the free and familiar contact of carnival, Bruscon strips them of the dignity and status conferred on them by official histories, and uncrowns them. Irreverence can hardly be taken any further than this.

Schmidt-Dengler notes that history is trivialised – but it should be noted that this is not because of the setting of Der Theatermacher: "Die große Geschichte spiegelt sich in dem Stück Bruscos so wie ein Deckengemälde sich auf dem kaum gebohnerten Boden dieses Gasthofsaals spiegeln würde: Bruscons Königen und großen Herren widerfährt das, was den Figuren der großen Tragödien auf der Bühne der Wiener Komödie

187 Betz, pp. 252-253
widerfahren mußte: Fiesco wird zum Salamikrämer, die Ahnfrau zur Frau Ahndl und Othello zu einem Bedienten.” The famous figures are not ridiculed due to the provincial stage. The actual appearance of the figures is due to Bruscon’s carnivalisation of history in “Das Rad”.

II. 14 Bruscon’s production: the artist as carnival director

The carnivalesque frenzy of the theatrical preparations at the end of the play places great emphasis on the visual dimension of “Das Rad”. The colourful costumes put onto dummies lined up on the actual stage create a carnival atmosphere in contrast to the drab provinces. The family theatre group uses the ritualistic masks of carnival in performing the play “Das Rad” on stage. The carnival of masks is restricted to the actors; when Ferruccio holds the Caesar mask up in front of the innkeeper (52), Bruscon’s furious reaction indicates that the group’s carnival is not, like Bakhtin’s carnival, a communal performance, but an exclusive one, and Bruscon asserts the anti-populist nature of his carnival by mocking the innkeeper in a degrading language, and by judging him as uncultured, given his occupation: “solchen Leuten die Caesarmaske vorzuhalten /einem Nichtswürdigen /einem Wirt /einem Kunstfeind /einem Theaterhasser” (52). Disrespectfully, he does not address him directly. The ritualised presentation of an array of striking figures in “Das Rad” turns performance into a ritualised pageantry, since “Das Rad” in its countless versions is performed regularly. Aspects of the production are an “Empireparavent” (99); a “Barockparavent” (90); green stage lighting (68); red shoes for Lady Churchill (68).

Since carnival is a victory over fear, Bruscon’s own carnival of “Das Rad” can survive the conditions in Utzbach. The frenzy of getting the figures dressed and made up, therefore entering fully into the world of theatre, is a way of asserting his theatre against the world. Since “Das Rad” is primarily a selfish endeavour, Bruscon performs as “Theatermacher” backstage. He paints his wife’s face black, then cruelly says: “Wenn ich dir nur Leben /einhauchen könnte” (110). As well as being part of the carnival of last-minute preparations, the performance of applying make-up is a self-conscious change to theatre and is also an outlet for the creative endeavour. Bruscon is dressed as Napoleon commanding as the eccentric “Theatermacher” backstage. His carnival centres on the

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188 Schmidt-Dengler, “Es ist alles egal”, p. 149
189 See Appendix II, No. 17, p. 334
family theatre group and his authority within it.

Bruscon sees Curie as “äußerst langweilig [...] reizlos” (111), like Agathe, although he recognizes that “sie [Curie] [hat] das Atom gespalten” (111). According to Betz, the preparation of Agathe as Madame Curie, an apparently important figure in “Das Rad”, is an expression of patriarchal authority, and Agathe, who remains mute throughout the play, is given a cough which is scorned by Bruscon as a form of theatre (“Krankheitsfetischismus”; 90), but which is equally supposed to reflect how the male-dominated world of science minimized Curie’s mammoth contribution to research: “Madame Curie tritt mit dem schwindsüchtigen Husten ihrer Darstellerin (Bruscons Ehefrau) auf, eine Person ohne Text, die, wie man weiß, durch die männliche Wissenschaft zerstrahlt wurde. Während Bruscon seiner Frau mit schwarzer Schminke brutal das ganze Gesicht zuschmiert, lautet sein Text ‘Atomzeitalter meine Liebe...’. An diesen beiden Frauen zeigt sich demnach nur die Wirkung männlicher Handlungsweisen.” Agathe’s visible theatrical value lies in that she is meant to represent the atomic age. She must display “Das Ende der Welt /in Deinem Gesicht” (109) with her black face. Bruscon’s preparations of Agathe are an ecstatic frenzy, a carnivalistic degradation of femininity. In combing back her hair as tightly as possible, he de-sexualizes her.

II. 15 Creative eccentricity: “Das Einfache hat mich nie gereizt” (DT, 89)

Bruscon’s play is an inversion of the norms governing conventional theatre. Not only does it carnivalize history; it is designed not to be understood by its audiences, hence the symbolic importance of darkness at its climax, for five minutes: “Der Höhepunkt meiner Komödie ist die absolute Finsternis” (22). His play is an experiment in which he plays with audiences: “Wenn die Leute /meine Komödie verstehen /habe ich keine Lust mehr /sie zu spielen” (115). Opposition to and defiance of popular theatre motivate the self-creation process in the quest for a liberated theatre. Inverting conventional audience expectations is typical of the eccentric Theaterrmacher, who scorns audiences’ conventional expectations of watching entertainment: “das Theater /ist keine Gefälligkeitsanstalt” (90). Bruscon’s theatre is a theatre which reacts against traditional theatrical models: “Immer ganz und gar /gegensätzliches Theater gemacht” (101). Theatre enables Bruscon to

[190] Betz, p. 251
[191] See Appendix II, No. 18, p. 335
develop a self-defined ongoing project, which defies norms in terms of a rejection of production details, characterization, and audience expectations and thus asserts and celebrates a sense of difference.

Throughout most of the play Bruscon relies on his status as a Staatsschauspieler (16) to buttress his rejection of institutionalized state theatre (notwithstanding the irony of the actor Buhre performing him on the stage of Vienna’s state funded Burgtheater with its multiple levels of “Logen” (boxes) in September 1986). Despite declaring himself “Der Staatsschauspieler Bruscon /der in Berlin den Faust /und in Zürich den Mephisto gespielt hat” (16), Bruscon’s endeavours are directed towards escaping the norms of the theatre: “So entkommen wir /der Verkommenheit /der Staatsstheater /[…]/Niemehr auf ein Staatsstheater /Wie ich das Wort Loge hasse” (108). He scorns the tradition of the state theatre. The reduced circumstances of the travelling family theatre group are in sharp contrast to any idea of publicly funded theatre. The dominant eccentric persona prevails over what a critic termed Bruscon’s “Lebenslüge”, or any sense of failure. Indeed, Bruscon’s megalomania makes him indifferent to provincial audiences: “Unser Vorteil ist /wir klagen niemanden an” (115); his project is independent. He does not perform for the people, yet nor does he seek the exclusive audiences of “Logentheater”.

Bruscon inverts and carnivalizes the traditions of the “Logentheater” with regard to the comic incongruity between the setting and aim of his play, which is not meant for entertainment. Indeed, the performances of “Das Rad” take place in a setting far removed from the “Logentheater” setting: “In gewisser Weise /haßte ich ja schon immer /das Logentheater /die Logentheaterleute” (101). Performing in Utzbach represents a mockery of Bruscon’s pretended high standards. The run down hall with inadequate facilities and the dreary setting shows that Utzbach is at the very bottom of the scale for venues. By bringing his play to places with only simple theatrical traditions, i.e. “Tourneetheater” (100), Bruscon enacts his rejection of the “Logentheater”. “Logentheater” implies a certain exclusivity. Since “Das Rad” is not a play in the conventional sense, it would not fit into the programme of a “Logentheater”. Even if “Meine Komödie ist so /daß auch der letzte ganz hinten /alles verstehst” (108), there must still be an intellectual gulf between audience and

192 See illustration of “Logentheater”, in Der Theatermacher Programmbuch Nr. 1, Burgtheater Wien (1986), p. 61, in Appendix II, No. 19, p. 336
193 Süd-Ost-Tagespost, 3. 9. 1986
performer. Although Bruscon places himself in line with great dramatic literature ("Wie alle große dramatische Literatur /existiert meine Komödie /aus dem Wort"; 99), a radically different concept of theatrical language and structure differentiates his play from everything that has gone before it.

On one level Der Theatermacher is an attack on theatre from outside institutionalized theatre. On another, comedy arises from Bruscon's reliance on praise and recognition from more exclusive readership, despite mockery of provincial audiences who have no access to distinguished theatre. Moving away from traditional theatres has enabled Bruscon to attack standards by performing to a far larger audience, whilst placing himself within the worldly theatrical tradition (passing off Pirandello's words as his own – 49; "Shakespeare /Goethe /Bruscon /das ist die Wahrheit" – 115). Although he has rejected the Staatstheater, he claims to remain in the thousand-year-old tradition of producing theatre and performing in public: "Das Theater ist eine jahrtausendalte Perversität" (31). Nevertheless, rehearsing his play enables him to stage his own kind of theatre, the purpose of which is to rescue life from banality by making it theatrical. To talk in a sustained monologue in theatrical language is to project, subconsciously, the fact that theatre has permeated all aspects of his life. He determines the ongoing changes to his play, and rehearsal thus becomes a way of life: "Wenn wir nicht von uns selbst traktiert werden /erreichen wir nichts" (115). His theatre is unconventional because it reacts against audience expectations, whether exclusive audiences or not.

The identity of "Staatsschauspieler" (13) is a useful tool in Bruscon's megalomaniac self-projection ("Möglicherweise [...] /bin ich größtenwahnsinnig"; 115) and crowning as carnival king on the provincial stage. Bakhtin writes: "The primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king [...]. Crowning /decrowning is a dualistic ambivalent ritual, expressing the inevitability and at the same time the creative power of the shift-and-renewal, the joyful relativity of all structure and order, of all authority and all (hierarchical) position." The eccentric's personae in the monologue fluctuate between inferiority and superiority complexes, especially at the end of scene 3: megalomania ("Bruscon ist Schopenhauer"; 97) contrasts with his self-martyrdom in theatre: "Lebenslängliche Theaterkerkerhaft" (100). As one critic put it: "Traugott Buhre

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194 Dostoevsky's Poetics, p. 124 (Bakhtin's emphasis)
in seiner eitel aufgeblähten, wiederholt in sich zusammenfallenden Suada: ein Clown als Goethe und umgekehrt: Fast erbarmt einen dieser gröszenwahnsinnige Perfektionist, wenn er sich mit soviel Unverstand und Untalent herumschlagen muß, gleich darauf aber widert einen seine Prahlsucht, sein verzweifelter, aber auch brutaler Egoismus an." 195 In Utzbach, in the absence of any understanding or true recognition, a frustrating existence, he must perpetuate the illusion of grandeur: "Durch Größenwahn also, sowie dadurch, daß sie ihre Umgebung drangsalieren, setzten Bernhards Künstlerfiguren sich gegen das Bewuβtsein ihrer Nichtigkeit zur Wehr." 196 Utzbach reminds Bruscon of Butzbach, the site of a prison since 1884. Utzbach thus becomes a metaphor for an existential prison, within which Bruscon tries to stage his "Rad der Geschichte" experiment, talk of which is an essential part of Bruscon’s project, which has everything to do with self-projection. Society in Utzbach, in Bruscon’s eyes, is virtually illiterate (the spelling on a poster; 111-112) and uncultured (the audience attending “um sich abzukühlen”; 37).

Bruscon’s “Größenwahn” (105) is central to his eccentric on- and off-stage performance. He is driven by the absurd desire to create something that has not existed previously, a synthesis of all theatre (“Eine absurde Idee zweifellos /für Bruscon durchaus zu verwirklichen allerdings”; 99). His eccentric lifestyle is confronted with material obstacles, yet these reinforce his sense of difference. “Vollkomenheit, Größe, das Außerdorntliche sind bei ihm zu Idees fixes geworden, zu einem Zwang, der ihn bis ins Innerste beherrscht. Der Kunst-Riese als Zwerg, als Objekt und Opfer seines (Größen-) Wahnsystems.” 197 Speaking to the innkeeper, Bruscon considers giving the Feuerwehrhauptmann (fire brigade chief) his autograph, an exception to his principle, as he is a man “der solche Unterschriften niemals gibt /[…]/Schließlich ist eine solche von mir gegebene Unterschrift /eines Tages ein Vermögen wert /wenn ich nicht nur als Schauspieler /sondern auch als Dramatiker als der groβe Bruscon erkannt bin” (27). Making his mark motivates his entire existence as theatre, despite the incompetence of his family. Damerau sees the simultaneity of the presence of historical figures as a reflection of the playwright’s ambition: “Sein Drama läßt ja eine Vielzahl vergangener Machtmenschen gleichzeitig

195 Kurier, 3.9.1986 (on Burgtheater production)
197 Der Theatermacher, Programmheft – Materialien zur Aufführung, 11 April 1987 (Programmbuch 9, Schauspielhaus Zürich 1986/7), p. 83
auftreten und hebt damit die Zeit auf. So zeigt das Drama sein Lebensdrama: Es zeigt seine Angst, zu vergehen, und den Wunsch, durch seine künstlerische Leistung im Gedächtnis der anderen zu bleiben: im schlichten Sinn die Zeit aufzuheben, unsterblich zu werden".  

He may want to arrest the passage of time, but he does it by performing. Life without performance is nothing for the eccentric. An anti-populist tendency in the projection of his image into the future co-exists with performing in a provincial backwater.

The fact that Bruscon parades his inflated sense of his own genius produces a comic effect as he crowns himself king of his own carnival: "Shakespeare / Voltaire / und ich" (23); "Unter uns gesagt / ich bin ein Klassiker / bald wird / was bis jetzt nur unser Geheimnis ist / weltbekannt sein" (75); "das ist eine schopenhauerische Finte / ich könnte auch sagen eine Brusconfinte / Manchmal glaube ich / ich bin Schopenhauer / Schopenhauer ist Bruscon / Wiedergeburtsgedanke / Geisteshomosexualität denke ich" (97). Bruscon in his neologism "Geisteshomosexualität" claims to suffer from intellectual homosexuality, acknowledges his dependence on the great thinkers, including Spinoza (84; 97), and recognizes their status, even if he wants to pass their ideas off as his own, as he claims here (and when he quotes Pirandello; 49). Betz points out the mésalliance in this neologism: "So nennt Bruscon seinen Bezug auf die philosophische Ahnenreihe 'Geisteshomosexualität', was den patriarchalen und unfruchtbaren Charakter seiner dramatischen Bemühungen hervorragend beschreibt und auf eine unfreiwillige Selbstverhöhning hinausläuft. Diese formelhaften Neologismen sind, weil ihnen der erklärende Kontext fehlt, mehrdeutig und durch ihre bizarre Ungewöhnlichkeit von beträchtlicher Komik, meist, weil sie Banales mit 'Hochgeistigem' verbinden, also wiederum den Marktplatz mit dem Museum in Bezug setzen."  

Yet the fact that Bruscon is never contradicted by the innkeeper or family allows his eccentric performance to continue. The theatre of self-creation becomes a self-indulgent ritual, Bruscon does not, as Betz claims, indulge in self-parody, but really believes in his self-definitions. He uses philosophy for his own ends in his theatre, and to assert authority over his son. Performing his paranoia, however, goes no further than the inn and family. It has no effect beyond the immediate circle.

198 Damerau, pp. 322-323
199 Betz, p. 252
As self-styled “theatre maker” (in German the noun has connotations of someone who makes a fuss of everything) Bruscon depends on the setting to perform his self, against the provincial mentality he confronts. Bruscon’s “Größenwahn” is not affected long-term by what Meyrenhofer describes as obstacles in the setting: “On the one hand Bruscon is a new variant and tragi-heroic allegory of the eternally misunderstood lonely artist who is vainly in quest for perfection, and on the other hand he is a shrill parody of precisely such an artist. Finally, both man and nature conspire to keep Bruscon from realising his Utzbach production of ‘Das Rad der Geschichte’.” 200 It is true to say that Bruscon’s theatrical way of life gives the play Der Theatermacher comic elements, with its aspects of parody in “Das Rad”, but to Bruscon, a theatrical existence is not tragic. Nor does Bruscon perform self-parody in “Das Rad”; his play is a parody of history. Meyrenhofer argues that the setting of Utzbach parodies Bruscon’s work as Theatermacher, given the problem of staging (one version of) “Das Rad” in the most unfavourable of circumstances. These factors do contribute to the comic effect of rehearsals. Any drive for perfection, however, is subordinated to the exploitation of variations on a theme. Perfection is far less important than keeping up a theatrical existence. The unexpected ending of Der Theatermacher highlights the absurdity of the intended Utzbach performance. The obstacles fuel Bruscon’s megalomania and his indifferent reaction to the outcome. The show that really matters has already taken place in the form of off-stage theatre; official performance is insignificant. The very absence of actual dramatic action at the end gives prominence to Bruscon’s insatiable need to lead a theatrical life.

Holzner claims: “Der postmoderne Fallensteller wird also mitleidslos als Dilettant entlarvt.” 201 But Bruscon cannot be termed a “Dilettant” for two reasons. Firstly, his family’s incompetence has no impact on their permanently theatrical existence, which is not answerable to anybody. Secondly, the significance of Bruscon’s potential performance in Utzbach is undercut by his scornful reaction at the end, which is not one of surprise but a repetition of the opening lines of Der Theatermacher (13): “Als ob ich es geahnt hätte” (116), which relativises the experience. It actually does not matter to


him that “Das Rad” is not performed, what matters is that preparing to perform it enables him to live his life in the only way he wants to – as theatre, with the ongoing preparations and rehearsals of “Das Rad”. His theatrical existence, therefore, is not doomed, despite preparations for an Utzbach version and being denied a public audience. A lack of impact on the setting in the Utzbach episode has no repercussions for his existence and theatre project, and this is made clear by the timescale of Der Theatermacher, which is very short, as in other Bernhard plays: at the end of Der Theatermacher, Bruscon’s brief visit to Utzbach is over. Bruscon’s antisocial nature reinvigorates a sense of selfish purpose in the provinces, since theatre is a way of life, not a performance for the public (“Schließlich spielen wir /für uns selbst /[…] nicht für dieses Landpack” – 88; “Hier probieren wir es nur aus /entwickeln wir es” – 24), and he hereby radicalises the concept of theatre as entertainment by criticizing audience expectations: “Das Theater ist keine Gefälligkeitsanstalt” (90). Bruscon hereby exonerates himself from any potential problems there.

The eccentric’s theatrical monologue feeds off what his comically paranoid persona claims to be a plot, which he verbally rationalises as “Kunstfalle”:

Utzbach
Eine Verschwörung
Gegen mich
Gegen alles
Das etwas wert ist
Raft aus
Eine Kunstfalle mein Herr
Eine Kunstfalle

Bruscon does admit at the beginning of Scene 1 that he is shocked to be performing in Utzbach in an inn where there is a dearth of visiting theatre groups, shown by the lack of effort made to prepare a stage for Bruscon in advance. “Das Rad” is the only form of “event” there. Bruscon’s self-definition as theatre maker feeds off these very conditions. He observes: “Absolute Kulturlosigkeit” (13). Following this first impression he expresses his own delusion of performing as a recognised actor in such a problematic setting: “Der Staatsschauspieler Bruscon /in Utzbach /Meine Komödie in diesem Utzbach” (13). He remarks on the dusty, run down podium, apparently unused for years: “Hier gibt es ja nurmehr noch alte Leute /die tanzen nicht /seit Jahrzehnten kein Theater mehr gespielt /hier” (19). His own project contrasts with the provincial mentality which he is exposed to: “Erst ein gebildeter Mensch /ist ein Mensch /in meinem Verständnis naturgemäß /nicht im
Allgemeinverständnis” (84). Bruscon scorns provincial audiences’ lack of education (“Bildung”): “Wir unterschätzen die Dummheit /dieser Leute /wir denken sie begreifen /weil wir begreifen /Irrtum /sie begreifen gar nichts” (88). Bruscon is fundamentally indifferent to audience tastes. He does not conform to any expectations in the production of his play; Betz believes he does: “Es bleibt allein der Opportunismus, sich dem Publikumsgeschmack, oder was man für diesen hält, beugen zu müssen. Das Theater wird unter dem Diktat des Publikums […] zur Zwangsanstalt.” Yet Bruscon is indifferent to audience tastes, since although he notes in self-flattery that the Utzbach spectators present seem to represent a certain “Bildungshunger” (112), he mocks them, and they ultimately show themselves to be only interested in sensation, i.e. the imminent village fire and its damage to the rectory.

The travelling theatre group in the provinces recalls Tschauner’s Viennese Stegreiftheater of 1952 in terms of provincial audiences who have no access to institutional theatre, recalling the audiences of spartan post-war working class Vienna. An awareness of the larger context of history provides a stark contrast with the setting, which in the present echoes the oppressive dullness of the first part of the twentieth century.

Despite Bruscon’s portable set (including “Spezialvorhange /[…]/Spezialhaken in unserem Theatergepack /[…]/Unsere Beleuchtung ist aus einer Spezialfabrik /[…]/Unser Vorteil ist /daß wir in einem einzigen Wagen reisen”; 36), the conditions remain inauspicious for the travelling theatre group. The varied figures and portable colourful stage production are an expression of a carnivalistic celebration of theatre and of entering into a different order, which he curiously defends against the dusty hall and ugly setting of Utzbach: “aber meine Komödie trägt /auch unter den widrigsten Umständen” (99). Roth sees Bernhard’s use of Bruscon as the main figure as the dramatist’s self-parody: “Die Probe vom Rad der Geschichte wird so in mehrfacher Hinsicht zur Probe aufs Exempel: […] für die lebenslange Kerkerhaft im provinziellen Weltheater Österreichs und für einen Autor, der sein Werk und seine Person kunstvoll selbstironisch zu inszenieren weiß […] die Verachtung des Proletarischen und seine Invektiven gegen die Donaurepublik […] hier tauchen sie als Äußerungen eines Komödianten wieder auf. Indem Bruscon zum

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202 Betz, p. 250
203 In Der Theatermacher Programmbuch Nr. 1, Burgtheater Wien (1986), p. 46. See Appendix II, No. 20, p. 337
karikierten Ebenbild des Autors heranwächst, erweist sich Bernhards unerschöpfliches Repertoire an Beschimpfungen, so sehr es auch stets die Gemüter seiner Landsleute in Wallung gebracht haben mag, rückwirkend als ein einziger großer Theaterdonner.” 204

Similarly, Höller states: “Der Theatermacher stellt eine witzige Selbstparodie der Kunstprogrammatik Bernhards dar und ist zugleich das welthaltigste, komischste Gleichnis über die Kunst in einer kunstfeindlichen Welt.” 205 Bernhard declared theatre to be an alternative way of life preferred to conventional social roles: “Schauspiel ist besser als arbeiten.” 206 Likewise, Bruscon lives for the theatre as the boredom of social norms is anathema to him: “es interessiert uns nichts /als unsere Kunst /nichts mehr” (107).

Bruscon’s gestures reaffirm his status as Theatermacher. He uses his stick theatrically during his monologue:

Wirt will ein Fenster aufmachen
BRUSCON herrscht ihn mit hochgeschleudertem Stock an
Unterstehen Sie sich (17)

stelltsich in Podiumsmitte auf und streckt den Stock
so weit wie möglich in die Höhe
gegen die Saaldecke starrend
Utzbach
Senkt den Arm und geht fünf Schritte nach rechts und
Dann zehn Schritte nach links, die Bühne ausmessend, stehengeblieben
Größer war die Bühne
in Gaspoltshofen auch nicht (18)

Jang notes: “Der Spazierstock ist die Narrenpritsche des Altersnarren. Er deutet einerseits auf die körperliche Schwäche des Alten hin, er dient andererseits zur bewußten Demonstrierung der Autorität, mit der sich die Altersnarren in Szene setzen. Der Stock funktioniert sogar als Waffe zur Ausübung ihrer gewalttätigen Herrschaft.” 207 Bruscon’s examination of the conditions in the hall are comic, as Höller notes: “das ist die witzigste Vorführung der Grundlagen des Theaterbetriebs.” 208 He repeatedly tests the floorboards: “stampt auf den Boden” (twice, 23); “bückt sich und prüft den Podiumsboden” (twice, 25). He also tests the acoustics: “reißt seinen Stock in die Höhe und ruft in den Saal hinein”

205 Hans Höller, Thomas Bernhard, Rowohlt Monographie 504 (Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1993), p. 126
207 Jang, pp. 151-2
208 Höller, Thomas Bernhard, p. 126
(24). He denounces the palpable decomposition in the hall by licking his finger to test the humidity, as if this were the embodiment of the hostility he confronts in Utzbach: “In diesem Saal wird der Finger nicht trocken /eine solche Feuchtigkeit /ist Gift für das Theater” (31-2). During rehearsals with Ferruccio, Bruscon moves in an exaggerated fashion: “streckt den Oberkörper ganz vor, um Ferruccio besser beobachten zu können” (78).

Bruscon certainly exploits the status of Utzbach as being at the very bottom of the scale for performance venues. Betz, in his analysis of Bernhard’s prose using Bakhtin’s theory of the chronotope of the marketplace, interprets the setting of Der Theatermacher from this aspect, which certainly applies to the comic contrast between Bruscon’s ideal and the dilapidated conditions, which coexist and provoke his tirades. Yet Betz makes no reference to Bruscon’s undemocratic carnival, nor the hierarchical division between himself and his family (and society at large), which prevents genuine marketplace communication in the inn: “Die Handlung im Tanzsaal eines Wirtshauses zu Utzbach – ein folkloristischer Platz, wo geschichtliche Fakten zum Tanzen gebracht werden – die aus den Schikanen und dem Monologisieren Bruscons besteht, kann als der Metatext seiner Komödie gelesen werden.” The conditions in the hall make for a pathetic stage, but it remains a stage all the same; he exposes the awful aspects, but the stage is all he needs.

Bruscon’s verbal expressions are a comic reflection of the gulf between artist and provincial society, which he mocks: “nicht einmal zum Wasserlassen /habe ich diese Art von Gasthäusern betreten” (13). His metaphorical language appears to show contempt for the provincial setting and ignorance of elite theatre: “Auf dem Land /ist jedes Geistesprodukt /vor die Säue geworfen” (80); but the fact that he is performing before swine does not matter, the performance is everything and its carnivalistic inversions make life theatrical and interesting. Self-pity encourages self-esteem, which is in turn reinforced by misanthropy faced with an inauspicious setting and lack of appreciation: “Der wahre Künstler /wird in den Dreck gezogen /dem verlogen dem nichtsnutzigen /laufen sie alle nach /machen den Buckel /vor dem Scharlatanismus” (33).

The stage preparations for the Utzbach version, despite the limitless creative independence over the actual play, expose all hope of regeneration within Utzbach itself as

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209 Betz, p. 250
futile. The surroundings literally undermine renewal and the hoped for “Erneuerungsprozeß” (101) Bruscon speaks of. Bruscon becomes a comic figure, whilst touching the floorboards and commenting: “Alles verfault und vermodert /wenn wir nur nicht durchbrechen hier /eigentlich sollte ich /Schmerzensgeld verlangen” (101). The atmosphere is oppressive, given the stench: “Wenn die Fenster aufgemacht werden /sind wir verloren” (37). The unfavourable surroundings reinforce his sense of determination to rehearse against the odds:

denkbar schlechteste Akustik
[…] aber meine Komödie trägt
auch unter den widrigsten Umständen (99)

This declaration also relates to his own life and circumstances; his life is a comedy of his own performing and is unthreatened by outside circumstances. Bruscon enters a visual timewarp (cobwebs, layers of dust on all surfaces, green mould and bloody fly stains on cracked walls decorated with dusty antlers\(^\text{210}\)), which Roth terms: “Die Falle, das ist ein geschickt arrangierter Oberflächenrealismus.”\(^\text{211}\) This effect is deliberate. The details in the setting, along with Bruscon’s expectations, are a potential basis for a farce. Bruscon voices the impression he has of Utzbach as a visitor there: “Was hier /in dieser mufifigen Atmosphäre /[…] /Und hier soll ich /mein Rad der Geschichte spielen” (13); “Schwarzer Hirsch /nun ja /als ob die Zeit stehen geblieben wäre /[…] /Trostlos /[…] /Absolute Kulturlosigkeit” (13). The indications are that the post-war conditions in the inn have not advanced (“Utzbach wie Butzbach /Halbverfaultes Bettzeug /Zerrissene Plastikvorhänge /Blick auf den Schweinestall /Wenn ich sie nicht gesehen hätte /die Tausende von Blutflecken an den Wänden”; 43), the exception being the cheap neon tube lights above the hall’s stage. Utzbach remains a provincial backwater, as Bruscon comments sarcastically: “Eine Zwerggemeinde” (15). The innkeeper confirms that no work has been done in the inn since the war: “Über vierzig Jahre ist /nicht ausgemalt worden” (45), confirmed by the hall’s back exit clearly marked in chalk “19 C+M+B 45”, a symbol of the wheel of time having stopped turning in 1945 in Utzbach, a forgotten village.\(^\text{212}\) Traditionally in Austria, young people dress up as the three kings, Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar, on the feast day

\(^\text{210}\) See Appendix II, No. 21, p. 338
\(^\text{211}\) Roth, “Das Gewesene...”, p. 19
\(^\text{212}\) See Appendix II, No. 22, p. 339
of the Epiphany, 6th January, and mark the threshold of homes they sing to with the year. The inversion of historic time sequence in Utzbach recalls the lack of change over decades and thus ironizes Bruscon’s position and the lack of influence he will have there. Bruscon’s game with historic timescale in his play comically contrasts with the time warp of Utzbach. It is not surprising that Bruscon’s preliminary talk in Scene 1 of a hotchpotch of history in his play has no effect on the present reality of the provinces. Bruscon uses the metaphor of “pigsty” to describe the hall, symbolic of creative suffocation in intolerable conditions: “Ein richtiger Geisttöter ist dieser Saal [...] /Bruscon zahlt doch keine Saalmiete /für einen solchen Saustall” (40).

The metaphorical “Saustall” becomes an audible reality for the comic scenes of ineffective rehearsals with Ferruccio, during which the proximity to the real pigsty is the basis for the disturbance of the rehearsal and Bruscon’s reaction. The stench accompanies Bruscon to the end of the play: “Noch immer dieser penetrante /Schweinestallgeruch” (112); Bruscon’s gestures at this moment, attempting to block out the smell and noise, are amongst the most entertaining in the play:

plotzliches anschwellendes Schweinegrunzen aus den umliegenden Ställen
BRUSCON hält sich das Sacktuch vor die Nase und versucht, sich gleichzeitig die Ohren zuhalten (93)

At this point Ferruccio is constantly interrupted in his rehearsal of selected lines by pigs’ grunts, which become a chorus behind the incompetent rendition of the precise text. Hence, the naturalistic details evident in the Utzbach setting generate the drama outside “Das Rad”. This is not the basis for a slapstick comedy, but creates a comic effect. Roth writes: “Diese Bühne eines Provinzgasthauses ist nicht nur dekoratives Element, als Reibungsfläche für den Protagonisten gewinnt sie eigene Spielfunktion.” Der Theatermacher points to the material and ideological limitations within the Austrian provinces, given the burden of history and the lack of scope for intellectual endeavour. This perception manifests itself in the verbal metaphors of decomposition: “hier zerfällt alles /schrumpft alles zusammen /hier wird das Außerordentliche /zum Dilettantismus” (32). As Höller states: “Der höchste Kunstbegriff stößt sich an der niederdrückenden Schäbigkeit des verkommenen Saals im Schwarzen Hirschen.”

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213 Roth, “Das Gewesene...”, p. 20
214 Höller, “Zur Poetik...”, p. 401
Utzbach, with its 280 inhabitants, is near the bottom of the scale of possible venues for performing. Geographically speaking, it is a fantasy place, but Bernhard no doubt invented the name from the village Atzbach which is situated in the provinces of the Bundesland Oberösterreich (Upper Austria). The confirmation of the opening lines of the play ("Als ob ich es geahnt hätte"; 13) through their re-iteration at the end, indicate that Bruscon’s surprise at the end is overridden by his willingness from the outset to play along with the caprices of Utzbach. Utzbach is hostile to any event outside the scale of predictability. Out of a total of more than 40 references to places in general, 13 mention Utzbach directly. The Utzbach refrain has already been discussed by Winkler and Jang; they see it as a metaphor for an existential prison. Winkler argues: "Utzbach wie Butzbach bedeutet nicht nur die phonetische Austauschbarkeit der Orte und der nichtigen Ereignisse. Die klangliche Analogie zwischen dem fiktiven Ort der Aufführung und einer realen Strafanstalt zeigt, daß es für den Künstler kein Ausbrechen aus seiner Kunst gibt. Ebensowenig wie es für den Menschen kein Ausbrechen aus der Welt gibt." Jang writes: "Sein Gefangensein in der Provinz suggeriert Bruscon im wiederholten Spruch ‘Utzbach wie Butzbach’ [...] Butzbach ist nämlich eine Stadt in Hessen, die durch eine große Strafanstalt bekannt ist." Furthermore, in the context of Bruscon’s world of performance, Utzbach is not a fantasy place as it forces him to confront the depth of the provinces, symbolized by the details in the setting, which are not of mere theatrical significance, but expose poverty: "Utzbach wie Butzbach, Halbverfaultes Bettzeug /zerrissene Plastikvorhänge" (43) and primitivity: "Blick auf den Schweinestall" (43). Bruscon equates Utzbach with sickness: "wie wenn das mein Tod wäre in Utzbach /Utzbach wie Butzbach" (99). Although Utzbach is not a place of specific interest, the obscure name symbolizes the drabness and above all the insignificance of the village. It is not a place of geographical or cultural interest. Utzbach is also deeply symbolic of a condition in the Austrian mentality which, given the country’s history, cannot be overcome, as the Notlicht debate and Bruscon’s conversation with the innkeeper show.

216 Jang, pp. 72-3. See also photo of Butzbach prison in Der Theatermacher Programmbuch Nr. 1, (Burgtheater 1986), p. 39; See Appendix II, No. 23, p. 340
Bernhard deliberately localises *Der Theatermacher* in the provinces of Upper Austria; they remain a backdrop for the struggle with the provincial mentality Bruscon confronts. Equally, every banal reference Bruscon makes to Utzbach and the other places he has performed in ridicules the image of “Staatsschauspieler”. The frequency of specific reference to provincial towns in Oberösterreich also reveals Bruscon’s dependence on them as audiences for “Das Rad”. Provincialism is a source of comedy in *Der Theatermacher*. Gaspoltshofen is mentioned 27 times and becomes a farcical refrain given the uninteresting factors which are associated with it, such as: “830 Zuschauer” (15, 108); “Fußboden” (19); “weißes Tischttuch” (39); “Dumme Leute” (41); “Römerquelle” available (75); “keine Saalmiete bezahlt” (80); Agathe “weigerte sich in Gaspoltshofen /mir die Schuhe zu putzen” (84); “Selbstgestrickte Strümpfe von der Frau des Wirts /in Gaspoltshofen” (102); “in Gaspoltshofen /eine Ente gegessen” (114); “nicht einmal eine Vorhangprobe gemacht” (72). Provincial banalities are a source of comedy. They become a mockery of the deluded state of mind behind the talk of his project. Bruscon condemns himself to provincial banality out of his own mouth by recalling his curious experiences: “Gaspoltshofen was für dumme Leute /Menschheitsverdummung” (41); which contradicts “Gaspoltshofen hat es mir angetan /ganz andere Leute” (33); “In Mattighofen wurden die Schweine /[...]/durch halbneun gefüttert /und zergrunzten alles” (37); “In Mattighofen hatte ich nicht unbedingt ein Sendungsbewußtsein” (37); “Als Draufgabe bekamen wir in Mattighofen /einen Käselab”(38); “In Gallspach wollten wir /[...]/eine Essigwurst essen” (39); “In Meran kamen nicht einmal drei Leute” (85); “198 ÖS für das Nachtmahl in Ried im Innkreis bezahlt” (101, repeated several times in play). The comic dramatic ironic contrasts in Bruscon’s self-defined image and the reality of his presence in the dull provinces forms part of the drama of *Der Theatermacher*, since there is a gulf between Bruscon’s play and the setting: “[Bruscon] schaut um sich /Die Theorien /stimmen mit der Praxis nicht überein” (14); and, as Roth states, between the play and its audiences: “Die Diskrepanz zwischen Sendungsbewußtsein und tatsächlichem Wirkungskreis [...] könnte extremer nicht sein [...]”. 217

217 Roth, “Das Gewesene...”, p. 24
II. 16 “Das Gewesene ist es /das fortwährende Gewesene” (DT, 94)

Fragments of Bruscon’s past are revealed to the innkeeper. The first reference is to a shoulder injury inflicted 40 years ago in Sankt Radegund, a town that happens to be 10 kilometres away from Utzbach. We do not know if his “Selbststudium” (21) took place in that area. Now he has ended up back in the neighbouring villages. Bruscon’s biographical details remain vague, although he is not ashamed to admit: “In gewisser Weise Infamie /Selbstinfamie /Von ganz unten herauf gearbeitet” (25). Both the innkeeper and Bruscon came from Gaspoltshofen to Utzbach; Bruscon tells him: “Gaspoltshofen hat es mir angetan/ [...] /Wahrscheinlich hätten Sie sich /in Gaspoltshofen besser entwickelt /Wer weiß” (33-4). The innkeeper came to Utzbach on marrying his wife. Bruscon came because of his wife: “Nicht unter vierhundert Einwohnern /[...] /habe ich gesagt /Agathes Geldgier” (104). To the innkeeper: “Es blieb Ihnen keine andere Wahl /Das Weib lockt den Mann /aus der schönsten Gegend /in das scheußlichste Loch” (34). As Höller states: “Ein Herakles müßte Bruscon sein, um die Häßlichkeit wegzuschaffen, die zum Weltzustand geworden ist. Alles ist vom Geschäftsgeist verschandelt und von der unbewältigten Vergangenheit beschädigt.” Overall, performing in the provinces means confronting the ugliness of the present social setting, despite Bruscon’s aim: “Wenn wir auf Tournee gehen /hatte ich gedacht /ist es ein Erneuerungsprozeß /für das Theater” (101). In several instances, Bruscon does not refer to specific locations when attacking the provinces en gros, carnivalizing the setting through exaggeration: “Überall dieser Schweinegestank /Von einer Schweinemastanstalt zur andern” (17); “Kommen wir in einen Ort /ist ein stumpfsinniger Ort” (46); “in den Alpen sind sie alle verdorben und verderbt” (104); “wohin man schaut doch nur Häßliches” (36).

II. 17 “Der Mensch verweigert sich der Störung durch den Störenfried” (Der Keller, 28)

Bruscon, through his play, projects himself as a “Störenfried” on a short visit to the backwater village of Utzbach, and through his outsider status scorns official authority and the provincial mentality. Bruscon as “Störenfried” to the parochial provincial order is perceived as a visitor disturbing routine in the inn and the village. The minimal contact with
the village stems from the conflict over Bruscon’s curious demand for the emergency lighting to be extinguished for artistic purposes, an inversion of the norms in theatre: “Wenn es am Ende meines Theaterstückes [...] nicht fünf Minuten absolut finster ist /ist mein Theaterstück vernichtet” (25). Utzbach is shown to be governed by small-mindedness and the non-carnival world as represented by the Feuerwehrhauptmann is perceived as hostile to Bruscon’s creative endeavour. Bruscon attacks the pettiness of the fire brigade regulations in Utzbach as symbolic of an absurd system: “Die ganze Welt /bis in den hintersten Winkel /ist einem durch absurde Gesetze vergällt” (26). Bruscon is aware of the power of authorities generally: “Mit Behörden ist nicht zu scherzen” (86); he realizes the fire brigade chief’s potential to ruin his performance in Utzbach: “Ein Feuerwehrhauptmann ist imstande /mich zu vernichten /diese Kreaturen haben alle Macht” (86).²¹⁹ Bruscon’s confrontation with provincial officialdom, his derision of the mentality in Utzbach, through his insistence on his demand as an eccentric artistic prerogative (“Wenn das Notlicht nicht gelöscht wird /verkehrt sich ja meine Komödie /gerade ins Gegenteil /In Gaspoltshofen hatten sie das Notlicht gelöscht /in Frankenmarkt auch /selbst in Ried im Innkreis /das doch als einer der dümmsten Orte verschrien ist”; 16) can be seen from a Bakhtinian carnival perspective: “folk laughter expresses a distinctive ideological viewpoint which is diametrically opposed to the `monolithically serious’ world of officialdom.”²²⁰ Bruscon asserts his eccentricity faced with the officials, since his demand for darkness transgresses the rules. The initial outcome of the debate conforms to his demands when the innkeeper tells him the light may be switched off (103), whereupon

Bruscon mocks the Utzbach officials:

Gelöscht werden kann
Ja natürlich
Das wäre ja auch lächerlich
Wenn sie hier in Utzbach

²¹⁹ Most villages in Austria have a fire brigade station, manned by committed voluntary bodies living in the immediate vicinity (“Freiwillige Feuerwehr”) who also help with other accidents and domestic emergencies. These volunteers must be differentiated from paid professional firemen, are considered indispensable in towns and countryside alike and held in high esteem. For example, Obermathal village in Upper Austria (the location of Bernhard’s farm residence) is one of 32 “Ortschaften” (neighbourhoods or villages) belonging to a district – “Gemeinde Ohlsdorf”. “Gemeinde Ohlsdorf” has two fire brigade stations, one in Ohlsdorf village (See Appendix II, No. 24, p. 341), and one in Aurachkirchen. Districts usually have a number of engines dispersed in various shelters (Filialen) in the neighbourhoods. In Austria, the sense of solidarity within the “Freiwillige Feuerwehr” is also evident amongst village inhabitants in the fundraising events for this cause held regularly.

²²⁰ Gardiner, p. 49
But in the final scene Bruscon’s judgment of Utzbach (“wo hier alles vermodert ist /kann ja
gar kein Brand ausbrechen”; 26) are parodied when, during the thunderstorm, the
auditorium is flooded and plunges into the darkness Bruscon demands in normal
circumstances, and only the rectory catches fire. The decision to turn the emergency
lighting off in Utzbach represents Bernhard’s parody of the official obstacles placed in the
way of the one and only performance of Der Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige at the Salzburg
Festival in the summer of 1972, during which the lighting remained on despite prior
agreement to the contrary. To Jang, Utzbach is favoured over Salzburg: “So stellte
Bernhard das Niveau des kleinen Provinznestes Utzbach, das vom fiktiven Theatermacher
Bruscon als unmöglichster Ort für das Theater abgestempelt wurde, in Sachen Kultur-
Landschaft einige Stufen höher als das der Kulturstadt Salzburg.”

The scandal of the authorities’ refusal to turn off the emergency lighting for Der
Ignorant und der Wahnsinnige in 1972 was based on the insistence on a law from the
nineteenth century. Hilde Spiel wrote on the circumstances and the unexpected outcome,
namely deceit on the part of the authorities: “Die Feuerpolizei, sich berufend auf eine
Verordnung aus dem Jahre 1884, als in Wien das Ringtheater brannte, besteht auf ihrem
Scheinen. [...] Am Abend der Premiere bleiben wider allem Erwarten und ohne jede
Vorwarnung die Notlichter eingeschaltet; Peymann, hinunterschauend, findet den Kasten
versperrt.” Der Theatermacher, intended as a parody-like response to the 1972 scandal,
was premiered in Salzburg in the summer of 1985. The Salzburger Nachrichten reported
the Landestheater’s concerns on 18.7.1985: “Mit 700 bis 800 Fliegen und Kübeln voller
stinkendem Schweinetrink in verschiedenen Bereichen des Landestheaters will der
Regisseur und künftige Burgtheaterdirektor Claus Peymann im neuen Stück von Thomas
Bernhard Der Theatermacher einen darin vorgesehenen Misthaufen auf der Bühne für alle
Festspielbesucher so realistisch wie möglich machen [...] Der Gestank würde sich in dem

221 Jang, p. 217
222 Hilde Spiel, in Frankfurter Allgemeine, 4. 9. 1972, in Thomas Bernhard und Salzburg: 22 Annäherungen,
M. Mittermayer (editor), (Salzburg, Jung & Jung, Salzburger Museum Carolino Augusteum, 2001), p. 225
Samt der Sitze und Tapeten einfressen, es würde dann auch bei anderen Festspielaufführungen außerhalb des 'Theatermachers' […] übel riechen. Bei Einsatz von 700 Fliegen käme auf jeden zahlenden Festspielbesucher eine Fliege.** Ultimately, Peymann used plastic flies on the stage backdrop, following his official satirical response: “Salzburg, 18.7.1985 […] der Salzburger Fliegenkrieg konnte beigelegt werden. 1. Weil es gelungen ist, für die Fliegen eine eigene Schutzimpfung zu entwickeln, durch die jede Fliege einzeln immunisiert wird, womit jede Ansteckungsgefahr ausgeschlossen ist. 2. Durch intensives Training konnten die Fliegen derart dressiert werden, daß sie auf Kommando sofort zurück in den Käfig oder in die Direktion fliegen.”**

Koberg also summarizes the political reaction to the play by quoting Chancellor Vranitzky’s opposition to Bruscon’s tirades: “Die politischen Reflexe folgten sogleich. Man ließe sich nicht durch einen ‘verschmierten Spiegel’ einen nationalen Minderwertigkeitskomplex einreden, sagte der Finanzminister Franz Vranitzky.”** Consequently, as Fuest records: “Thomas Bernhard reagiert auf die Äußerungen des Ministers mit einer Polemik in der Presse, unter dem Titel ‘Vranitzky: Eine Erwiderung’. Darin wirft er dem ‘Provinzschnurrenfinanzminister’ vor allem vor, er habe ‘öffentlich zur totalen Verdammung der Arbeit des Thomas Bernhard aufgerufen’ und empfiehle damit ‘die infernalische Kunst- und Kulturzensurbremse à la Metternich, Stalin und Hitler’.”**

Bruscon in *Der Theatermacher* overturns Austria’s glossy tourist image and mocks provincial attitudes. Bruscon’s conflict with the authorities over the emergency lighting appears as a manifestation of refusing to conform to the typically Austrian mindset of “Obrigkeitsgehörgfühl”, of accepting authority and obedience to it, which allowed Nazism to take root. Bruscon uses his conflict in Utzbach to act as “Theatermacher”, to make a show and to carnivalize his surroundings. Bruscon denounces the image of minor representatives of provincial authority by attacking what he perceives as an exploitation of respected authority in Utzbach, hereby carnivalizing it: “Sogenannte Machtmenschen /die Feuerwehrhauptleute” (25). He hereby makes an implicit reference to Hitler and the abuse of power over the population by the Nazis. Bruscon’s carnivalesque perspective associates

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223 Salzburger Nachrichten, 18.7.1985, in Thomas Bernhard und Salzburg, 2001, p. 227
224 ibid, p. 227
225 Koberg, p. 275
226 Leonhard Fuest, Kunstwahnsinn Irreparabler: Eine Studie zum Werk Thomas Bernhards (Berlin, Lang, 2000), p. 213
the core of authoritarianism in provincial nests (i.e. the fire brigade) with Austria’s National Socialist past and its preservation given the population’s ingrained willingness to conform to and respect a hierarchical structure of authority. To Bruscon, the conflict over the fire brigade regulations in Utzbach recalls that such authority is still rife in other forms and is respected. Although there is no reminder of this in Der Theatermacher, one of the characteristics of authority which indeed characterized the National Socialist regime and remains apparent in the Austria of the 1980s and into the present day in the behaviour of those high up on the scale of state authority (such as the police), down to those in minor positions of authority (such as bureaucrats or even the fire brigade chief), is a systematic authoritarian aggression, primarily in the exploitation of their authority over others subordinated to it (“nach unten treten”). Yet in Der Theatermacher, there is no indication of the fire brigade chief’s personality. Bruscon reminds the innkeeper, who acts as go-between for Bruscon and the fire brigade chief, that other towns waived the fire regulations for him (16). To Bruscon, the symbol of the Hitler portrait displayed in Utzbach’s dance hall embodies the innkeeper’s acceptance of hierarchical authority, because Bruscon associates him with the state and National Socialism (45-47). Bruscon’s address to the innkeeper (45-47) may be seen as offensive, and his carnivalesque perspective as contradicting the official image of Austria.

The performance of “Das Rad” in the provinces is significant since the position of Bruscon as “Störenfried” in Der Theatermacher makes central the wider context of Austrian provincialism. Bruscon is more concerned about his image abroad (24) than in Austria, where freedom of thought and artistic creativity is met with indifference or hostility. As Fuest writes: “Die zweite Republik ist ein europäischer Kleinstaat, in welchem die wichtigen gesellschaftspolitischen Themen nicht allein auf der parlamentarischen Bühne in Wien, sondern auch und vielleicht in erster Linie in der Provinz zu finden sind. Gerade hier, fernab von aller Urbanität, spielt sich das Alltagsleben eines Großteils der österreichischen Bevölkerung ab. Folglich spürt ein Teil der österreichischen Literatur in dieser Provinz der gesellschaftlichen Realität nach und entdeckt darin eines der brisantesten politischen Themen: den Fortbestand naziistischen Gedankengutes.” 227 The persistence of National Socialist thought post-1945 has traditionally been associated with the provinces.

227 Fuest, p. 225
Bruscon wants to perform “Das Rad” against an Austrian past that cannot be forgotten, as he claims it is still part of the present social fabric: “Tatsächlich gibt es hier nichts /außer Schweinemastanstalten /und Kirchen /stöhn /und Nazis” (17); “Möglicherweise geht es /ohne Hitler /Nein /hier nicht /Ohne Hitler geht es hier nicht” (40-41) – since Hitler originated from Upper Austria. Bruscon’s insistence on the inclusion of the Hitler figure in the Utzbach version of “Das Rad” is an implicit attack on present conditions in Utzbach as he sees them. Confrontation with the Utzbach authorities reminds him of his own partly Austrian origins (32) and the unease on returning to Austria, facing ignorance and provincial hostility: “Wo wir hinkommen /Mißgunst /niedertrachtige Gesinnung /Fremdenfeindlichkeit” (32). Bruscon feeds off his perceived discontent with Austria to carnivalize its image as “Theatermacher”.

Bruscon’s image of Utzbach is largely a humourous fantasy, as Roth points out: “die in braun-schwarzen Farben geschilderten Utzbacher Verhältnisse sind großenteils Brusconsche Projektionen.” This is due to the fact that Bruscon certainly carnivalizes the image of all other men in Utzbach, whom he sees as Hitlers, given their uncooperative attitudes: “Hier sind alle Männer Hitler” (81). Yet this statement primarily refers to the authority exploited by the Feuerwehrhauptmann. The need to keep Hitler in “Das Rad” in Utzbach (41) reflects Bruscon’s personal confrontation with the authority of the Utzbach officials. Performing as Hitler enables him to face the other men in Utzbach. Bruscon and the innkeeper enter into little exchange with each other throughout Scene 1, apart from two issues: following Bruscon’s enquiry about the regularity of the Blutwurst ritual (43-44), he questions him on the significance of the Hitler portrait in the hall:

BRUSCON
[...]
Ist der Blutwursttag
Jede Woche
WIRT
Jeden Dienstag
Zieht einen Vorhang auf und reißt ihn gleich ganz
herunter und wirft ihn auf den Boden
BRUSCON
Die sind ja alle kaputt die Vorhänge
Schaut gegen die Decke
Lauter Risse in der Decke
WIRT
Über vierzig Jahre ist

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228 Roth, “Das Gewesene…”, p. 24
nicht ausgemalt worden

BRUSCON

Ja

Schaut auf die Reproduktionen
Und diese Bilder diese Landschaften
Das sind ja nur noch häßliche Flecken
Hinter Glas
Diese Bilder müssen herunter
Mit diesen häßlichen Bildern kann ich nicht spielen

Schaut auf eine ganz bestimmte Reproduktion
Ist das nicht ein Hitlerbild

WIRT
Ja freilich

BRUSCON fragend
Und das hängt schon immer da

WIRT
Ja freilich

BRUSCON
Man muß schon genau hinschauen
Daß man sieht daß das Hitler ist
So verschmutzt ist es

WIRT
Daran hat sich bis jetzt
niemand gestoßen (44-45)

Against the hall’s dilapidation, comically exposed by the innkeeper’s gesture of tearing down the curtain, the exchange brings to light the gulf between mentalities, and the innkeeper’s ironically passive reaction to Bruscon’s query (“Daran hat sich bis jetzt…”)
is an indictment of his provincially Austrian inertia. Bruscon’s questioning foregrounds the palpable presence of the past in the present, symbolized by the Hitler portrait. The innkeeper is not only an example of a “Dienerfigur” (repetition of “Ja” which prevents genuine exchange), but of human resignation and a fatalistic acceptance of order and history. The innkeeper represents the submissive population, its unassertive nature symbolized by the preservation of the Hitler portrait. The innkeeper’s reaction is a reminder of the lack of change of attitude in contemporary society; all he can express is maintenance of the status quo in the setting. Having submitted to a routine in everyday life (Tuesday as Blutwursttag), he is unable to resist either verbally, or by removing the symbol of the past (the portrait). The innkeeper’s reaction to Bruscon’s verbal challenge is not a source of comedy, but a sinister reminder that inertia is to be condemned; the conditions for a climate of Neo-Nazism to flourish are a question of mentality, and are not linked to the threat of physical force as in the National Socialist era. Bruscon is unable to provoke the innkeeper into a decisive response. By insisting on Hitler as the predominant male figure
not to be cut from the Utzbach performance (40-41), Bruscon exposes the local population's indifference to history within the provinces.

Jürgens argues: "Wenn sich Bruscon auch verbal vom Nationalsozialismus abgrenzen will, dagegen jedoch Adolf Hitler als Kunstfigur in sein ästhetisches Denken integriert, als Bild an der Wand und als Figur in seinem selbstverfaßten Stück, so bestätigt er damit nur den Sachverhalt, daß seine gegen die Gesellschaft gerichtete Pose das Erbe desselben antibürgerlichen und gleichzeitig bürgerlichen Denkens ist, das zu den wesentlichen Grundlagen des Nationalsozialismus gehörte." Jürgens uses the inclusion of the fictionalised Hitler in Bruscon's play as a factor undermining Bruscon's attempt to distance himself from National Socialism, whilst pointing to an apparent similarity with Hitler's early years; from this comparison Jürgens presumes an admiration for Hitler on the part of Bruscon, through the prominence of the Hitler figure. Yet Bruscon's early years, although showing elements of Hitler's education, are not an attempt to imitate Hitler, as Jürgens claims: "Der angeblich 'größte Schauspieler aller Zeiten' [...] imitiert auch damit den selbsternannten 'Kunstmaler' Adolf Hitler, der es zeitlebens nicht verwinden konnte, von der Wiener Kunstakademie abgelehnt worden zu sein, und der in Kunstfragen immer ein Autodidakt und Dilettant blieb." Bruscon's projected megalomania in his theatre and rituals is a central focus of his eccentric personality and not a reaction to his early years, which were a free and deliberate manifestation of a sense of difference. Bruscon's eccentric image feeds off forms of "antibürgerlichen [...] Denkens", corresponding to his rejection of convention by leading an alternative life; he cannot be seen as "bürgerlich" in any way. The inclusion of Hitler in "Das Rad" is a logical extension of his contempt for National Socialism. He does not admire Hitler; he selects figures according to the setting (105). Rather, given the visual presence of Hitler in the hall and Bruscon's assertion that: "Ohne Hitler geht es hier nicht" (41), his insistence on keeping the figure of Hitler in "Das Rad" and not removing the portrait in the hall is a reminder of the localisation of history: the relevance of Utzbach as a village in Upper Austria, Hitler's home region. If, as Bruscon states, the dirty Hitler portrait is a "Demonstrationsobjekt" (81), it acts as one for Bruscon's play in the inn, but less on an aesthetic level than on a social level. The fact that it can only

229 Dirk Jürgens, Das Theater Thomas Bernhards (Lang, 1999), p. 186
230 Jürgens, p. 186
be identified from close up leads to Bruscon inverting the normal perspective once more: "Hier stellen alle Männerporträts /Hitler dar" (81).
III. Theatre, performance and the eccentric

III. 1 Introduction

Eccentricity is projected from within conventional structures, i.e. family (Der Theatermacher, Ritter, Dene, Voss), an asylum (Ritter, Dene, Voss) and bourgeois households (Elisabeth II, Heldenplatz). These structures, in which the eccentric is granted a special status, are a foundation to his performance, since what appears to be conventional in the arrangements then reveals his control over curious relationships. A central aspect of the eccentric is a status akin to that of a fool, one who is not limited by social rules and who reveals truths and breaks taboos in society. Bakhtin defines clowns and fools as: “the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season.” In contrast to Bakhtin’s concept of carnival time, Bernhardian carnival is characterized by its permanence: Bernhard’s eccentrics are fools in that their existence is centred on the world as an absurd stage upon which they perform the theatre of survival. By extension, they see all humans as performing on this stage.

Staging a carnival relies on others to participate (sisters, Steinhof Director and patients in Ritter, Dene, Voss; family theatre group in Der Theatermacher) and watch (Voss’s performance as an eccentric in front of patients and sisters). Independent actors such as Bruscon have the greatest freedom compared to the fictionalised court jester (“Hofnarr”) figure Claus Peymann in Claus Peymann kauft sich eine Hose, as Bruscon is not answerable to institutions, and his non-conformism embraces all aspects of his life. In all cases, however, the eccentric’s performance is a form of exclusive carnival, given his status as out of the ordinary. The carnival attracts the attention of others because the eccentric wishes to provoke, shock and grants himself licence to perform and project a sense of difference. Attention must be paid to the performing quality of the eccentric’s carnival, which may be analysed from the essential presence of the established audiences watching it in and outside the play (Der Theatermacher, Ritter, Dene, Voss, Elisabeth II, Heldenplatz).

231 Rabelais and his World, p. 8
For an effective analysis of the scope of the concept of theatre in Bernhard's plays, we must distinguish between real life theatre in a functional location, and the metaphorical sense of theatre as a way of life, *life as theatre*. Where the eccentric is not involved in the actual theatre-making process (as with Voss and Herrenstein), other everyday locations become a stage upon which he performs his carnival, dramatizing issues that allow him to project his sense of difference and reaction to convention. On the official stage, performance may be defined as follows: “In ordinary usage, a *performance* is a specific action or set of actions – dramatic, musical, athletic, and so on – which occurs on a given occasion, in a particular place. An artistic performance [...] is further defined by its status as the single occurrence of a repeatable and pre-existent text or score. Thus there is *Hamlet*, and there are its many performances; there is the play itself, and its interpretations.” 232 Such a definition of performance “anticipates, even authorizes, its many occurrences and somehow contains their variety.” 233 Even in conventional performance, each performance is unique, and there is always a slight variation of detail. In Bruscon’s case, however, there is a radicalisation of what defines a work of art in his reaction to convention; his play is not one whole, coherent or completed masterwork that is performed in its entirety. He cannot, therefore, be judged according to the authority of an official text. The versions of his play are infinite because they are not a representation of a fixed, pre-defined work; his eccentricity lies in that he alone defines performance through alteration. Any on- or off-stage performance is seen as rehearsal (“hier probieren wir es nur aus /entwickeln wir es”; 24). There is no interpretation of a whole, but an ongoing modification of scenes and lines. Traditionally, performance is secondary to the work of art. Performance, in Bruscon’s case, is a way of life. When Bruscon rehearses off stage, the process has equal status with official performance and “the private, repetitive exercise of rehearsal has become the work of art itself.” 234 Bruscon and his family live in the world of theatre, which involves scene preparation, innumerable versions of “Das Rad”, and rituals within the family, in particular, the praise ritual; these become a stage for Bruscon to perform as an eccentric.

233 ibid, p. 91
234 ibid, p. 93
Performance therefore encompasses on- and off-stage acting, i.e. the official and private domain. In Der Theatermacher, a play about the theatre-making process, Bruscon’s family theatre troupe cannot maintain individual identities, since these have been sacrificed to his eccentric notion of theatre as a way of life. Their scope for spontaneity is thwarted, since he controls their performance and their reactions have no consequences. Bruscon prescribes his children’s praise ritual and it thus becomes an artificial, inauthentic performance that they ultimately always submit to.

Bruscon’s public carnival of “Das Rad” is one form of the theatre as a way of life: “Certain elements of carnival are also preserved in the life of the theatre and spectacle in modern times. It is characteristic that the subculture of the theatre has even retained something of carnivalistic license, the carnivalistic sense of the world, the fascination of carnival.” Bruscon’s theatre-making process has become a way of life, which stands apart from prosaic ways of life, since the eccentric reacts against pre-defined social roles. His performances of parts of “Das Rad” are a form of self-preservation: “Es geht um den Selbsterhaltungstrieb” (104). Life itself is theatrical: his continuous presence in Der Theatermacher allows many levels of performance to unfold, foregrounds the concept of life as theatre, and Bruscon’s need for a theatrical existence that embraces all aspects of life. The performances in Der Theatermacher, for example, make a mockery of the provincial standards in Austria. Bruscon stages a carnival of regeneration in his ongoing creation of “Das Rad”, a theatrical project which merges with real life, given the public and private forms of the carnival founded on the undomesticated lifestyle of the family theatre group. Outside forces also disturb rehearsal and official performance in Der Theatermacher, creating a parody of the provinces, and in the ultimate instance, local audiences. As Sayre notes: “A good way to think of performance is to realize that in it the potentially disruptive forces of the ‘outside’ [...] are encouraged to assert themselves [...]”.

Group theatre involving the main eccentric figure and the secondary figures is significant as it forms the foundation for the carnival to take place, in that it enables the eccentric to perform. The carnival is ritualistic. Domestic and family rituals provide the

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235 Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 131
236 Sayre, p. 94
eccentric with the “stage” on which to perform. The carnival is defined by the eccentric; he determines the group’s roles overall, since he prescribes their theatre, which takes place on both a public stage (*Der Theatermacher*) and a domestic stage (*Ritter, Dene, Voss, Elisabeth II*). The established nature of the group and its curious roles affect the inescapability of the carnival. Group theatre confirms the permanence of the well-established eccentric arrangement. There is virtually no scope for spontaneous performance on the part of the secondary figures. Given the familiarity within the group’s relations with each other, the mutual dependence between eccentric and the members of his group is an essential prerequisite for the eccentric to stage his obsessions in various forms of group theatre. Group theatre, therefore, reveals aspects that give permanence to the relations in the group, and to the eccentric’s influence over the secondary figures. The eccentric depends on these figures to play their role in his theatre (including that of audience), since the carnival can only take place with their subservience. Various forms of dependence become apparent in his group theatre.

Human dependencies are mutual; firstly, the eccentrics cannot perform as eccentrics in isolation, and depend on the group for survival. Secondly, the other figures remain in the same arrangements indefinitely, by choice, and never directly challenge the eccentric, whether they respect him to a greater or lesser extent. The group hierarchy is hereby preserved, whether socially defined by master-servant relations, or within the family. Hence, there is little genuine communication between the eccentric and the other figures.

The secondary figures’ performances tend to be mechanical, and stem from a routine sense of dependence on the eccentric in allowing him to have his way. Long-standing loyalty leads to acceptance of his idiosyncrasies. The secondary figures show no initiative in creating any independence for themselves; their only choice has been to remain with the eccentric in absurd compliance. Thus no real change is effected, which allows the carnival to become established as an alternative way of life.

Some research has been done on the verbal silence of the secondary figures surrounding the eccentric; previous research has focused mainly on inauthentic dialogue (absence of genuine dialogue: c.f. Klug, Winkler237). Even where there is limited

dialogue it is symbolic of a mentality (such as the exchange between the innkeeper and Bruscon: chapter IV. 6). Silence in its various forms is a form of theatre, of particular relevance to group theatre, since it communicates a message. Schmidt-Dengler analysed the role of Clara’s reactive silence in Vor dem Ruhestand, terming Bernhard “ein Dialogzerstörer”. Significantly, “Die Schweigenden sind die Wissenden”. Clara’s sister, Vera declares: “Wir sind nur die Stichwortgeber /Indem sie schweigt /hält sie die Komödie in Gang” (Vor dem Ruhestand; 75). The silence of the secondary figures at times reaffirms the authority of the eccentric and ensures the continuity of his theatre by providing secondary roles or a private audience (as in Einfach kompliziert); at others, their artificial replies enable the eccentric to act (as in Elisabeth II, c.f. III. 8. 2). The verbal silence of the secondary figures is of crucial importance to the eccentric’s performance, since their silence enables his theatre to continue, and signifies at least superficial compliance with it: “Durch ihr Verhalten [der Schweigenden] den Sprachgewaltigen gegenüber, das zum Beispiel devot, betont desinteressiert oder obstinat gezeigt werden kann, werden sie zu gewichtigen Partnern, die das theatrale Geschehen aktiv mitgestalten und auf ihre Art beeinflussen können.” This is in part due to the role of “Abhängigkeitsspiele”, evident in the relationships between the main eccentric and the other figures. In view of the ritualistic character of the group’s performance, the secondary figures’ silent gestures often help the eccentric to perform his theatre. They hereby reaffirm their long-standing acceptance of the conditions that the eccentric determines and they enable the carnival to establish its permanence.

The secondary figures not only actively participate in the eccentric’s theatre but their frequent verbal silence is essential to their role in the eccentric’s carnival. They all play dumb with the eccentric, whilst he performs monologues, and their silence is thus an enabling one. The innkeeper’s reticence (see II. 17 and IV. 6) and Agathe’s permanent verbal silence off stage (III. 10. 1) when faced with Bruscon’s mockery are carnivalistic inversions of the expected reaction to such antisocial verbal offences. Richard’s silence on many occasions (III. 10. 2) testifies to the fact that his own life is two-dimensional. In

238 Schmidt-Dengler, “Ohnmacht durch Gewohnheit”, p. 169
239 ibid, p. 172
240 H. Haider-Pregler, “Thomas Bernhards philosophisches Lachprogramm”, p. 126
all cases, the secondary figures’ lives are boring and empty, so they play along with the eccentric’s theatre, no matter how absurd it is. They cannot initiate change in their lives which revolve entirely around the eccentric. In all the plays, the norms governing family relations and civility in social relations are inverted by the abnormal forms of address on the part of the eccentric, the lack of genuine communication and dialogue and the silence of the secondary figures.

The silence of the secondary figures is to an extent theatrical. Agathe’s cough in Der Theatermacher has become a ritualised form of non-communication, a predicable role within Bruscon’s theatre, without real power, since she is denied an actual voice in Der Theatermacher. Richard’s ambiguous silence in Elisabeth II is uncomfortable for Herrenstein, yet it does not translate into action. Further, Richard often gesticulates mockingly behind Herrenstein’s back, but this is a harmless, playful form of silent theatre. Exceptionally, the woman’s silence in Der Weltverbesserer is one of compliance and masochism simultaneously. Yet in all cases, any possibility of change through indirect reaction is thwarted. Overall, mute reactions bear no long-term consequences for the eccentric’s theatre, since the figures remain loyal to his system.

In group theatre, movements and gestures of figures are significant as they are clearly visible, yet subtle given that they are frequently accompanied by silence. Winkler comments on the silence between spoken words in the genre of theatre: “auf den Brettern wird die Stille zwischen den Worten als Stille hörbar. Dadurch ist auf der Bühne eine Dimension des Bernhardschen Werkes betont […] die zwar in der Prosa zu finden ist, darin jedoch nicht als solche auftritt.”

Gestures are one of the main qualities of Bernhard’s theatre, since they are visibly prominent, and ought to be emphasized as particularly significant for the genre of theatre. Gestures are performed as a distinct language, communicating aspects of the self to other figures. As Haider-Pregler notes: “Die schweigsamen Nebenfiguren ´antworten´ auf die artikulierten Kommunikationsangebote der Beredten auf ihre Weise, nämlich mit mimischen und

körpersprachlichen Reaktionen und mit der Benützung von Gegenständen." 243 Theatrical aspects are also evident in the incompetent performances of the secondary figures, and become comic given the eccentric's constant dependence on these figures (as in Der Theatermacher). Overall, the visual dimension of group theatre is comic; these aspects are often neglected when studying the content of the plays without seeing a production.

There are at times antisocial traits in the behaviour of the eccentric. The geriatric Herrenstein gives an unpredictable performance when the official reception in the play takes place; his reaction is a form of carnival laughter, since it represents a rejection of socially acceptable behavioural norms. The eccentric as an outsider watches society from the sidelines, and enounces a distorted vision of the world; this is apparent in Herrenstein's language reflecting his condition as a cripple. Herrenstein refuses to conform to social norms and gives a performance of unpredictability, characteristic of carnival laughter, when confronted with social pomp.

III. 2 The fool and the theatre

Bernhard, in writing Drei Dramolette (a dramatic trilogy first published in the feuilleton individually), confirmed his position as the fool of Austrian society by commenting on his artistic relations with Claus Peymann, but without the initiation of Peymann. (Bernhard was later to respond to Peymann's demands, by writing Heldenplatz). Bernhard fictionalized Claus Peymann, the new Director of the state-funded Burgtheater, as a figure in the dramatic trilogy, Claus Peymann verläßt Bochum und geht als Burgtheaterdirektor nach Wien. Bernhard also styled himself as a figure representing the non-committal writer collaborating at times with Peymann, the theatre director; in real life both could be seen as "Störenfriede" given that their productions in the Burgtheater offended bourgeois convention.

In the absence of a feudal system, the role of the modern court jester ("Hofnarr") permits a greater choice of subject matter. The real Claus Peymann as Director of the Burgtheater could be seen as a modern court jester operating from within a state institution (the Burgtheater) and indulging in the privilege of a fool's licence

(“Narrenfreiheit”) in the creative sphere. Peymann styled himself as a fool performing what can be seen as a carnival in Viennese élite state theatre, through producing plays which did not always fit in with the official image of the Burgtheater:


Equally, this describes what appears to be happening in Bruscon’s “Das Rad der Geschichte” in view of the figures. A lack of respect for great past figures and official historical truth leads to trivialisation and ridicule of human endeavour and power. Hierarchy is subverted and derided; Bruscon lampoons revered figures. Bruscon’s alternative family theatre group performing a carnival, a kind of “Gemeinschaftskunst” of rotating roles, also challenges the primacy of state theatre. Bruscon is not, like Peymann who plays the fool within the Burgtheater, dependent on state subventions; these nevertheless permit Peymann’s show in theatre to go on. Peymann declared: “Theater besteht auch aus Grenzüberschreitung”. 245 Peymann transgresses conventions from within the Burgtheater, whereas Bruscon’s rejection of institutions allows him to perform a radical rejection of the conventions and status of state theatre through an alternative way of life. Like Peymann, Bruscon asserts his theatrical carnival through continuous “Grenzüberschreitung”; he transgresses norms in theatre and gives an innovative representation of figures in his “Das Rad der Geschichte” experiment.

Peymann’s concept of theatre exemplifies that “Die Kunst äußert sich immer in Extremen.” 246 Peymann commented through theatre on Viennese society and the Austrian state, mocking prominent individuals, as well as provoking conservative audiences by making revolutionary productions from within a conventional sphere, the Burgtheater, thus incensing the public even more: “Ich versuche, eine Gegenwelt aufzubauen. Das Theater hat sich immer als staatsfeindlich und menschenfreundlich empfunden. Wir machen die Mächtigen lächerlich. Wir ziehen ihnen die Hose aus.” 247

244 Peter von Becker und Michael Merschmeier, “Das Gespräch mit Peymann, Beil, usw...”, in Theater heute 6/1984, 1-7, (p. 4)
245 Becker/Merschmeier, p. 4
246 ibid, p. 4
247 André Midler im Gespräch mit Claus Peymann, p. 172
This “Gegenwelt” also characterizes theatre in Bruscon’s sense, an alternative to standard forms of theatre and a form of existence. Carnival involves inversion of truths. Bruscon’s depiction of historical figures denies them status (“Wir ziehen ihnen die Hose aus”) through caricature and overturning their significance.

III. 2. 1 The eccentric as fool – Voss’s staging of a public carnival in Steinhof

To reside in Steinhof reinforces the rejection of norms the eccentric asserts through his behaviour – a public, ritualistic, privileged carnival of self-determined eccentricity. Voss always rebels from within pre-imposed structures. He crowns himself king of his public carnival by declaring his privilege to perform his carnival as “Narrenfreiheit” (213) – a fool’s licence. He therefore plays the role of fool from within the institution of asylum, revelling in the privilege of one who is not constrained by social rules, but from within a conventional structure. His “philosophical project” such as it is must be an expression of this principle:

Wir gehen tatsächlich
auf einen Vertrag ein
aber wir brechen ihn
jeder Vertrag muss gebrochen werden
Wenn wir einen Vertrag unterschrieben haben
müssen wir ihn brechen
Verträge sind tödlich

Entweder wir unterschreiben keine
oder wenn wir sie unterschrieben haben
müssen sie von uns gebrochen werden
die ganze Menschheit wird von Verträgen zusammengehalten
und wird von diesen Verträgen erstickt (182)

Although Voss feels different from other patients in Steinhof, the habitual aspects in performance remain, as he never abandons the core family and its eccentric arrangement – in itself a form of carnival. As he speaks at home, he is drawn back to the institution of Steinhof, which he is equally attached to as a reaction against his family: “Die Minderwertigkeit des Lebens /sie kommt ganz klar zum Bewußtsein /wenn wir in ein solches Haus zurückkommen /das wir für immer verlassen haben /[...] /ich habe mich an Steinhof gewöhnt /ich sterbe in Steinhof /nicht hier” (179-180). Voss is used to playing the outsider in Steinhof, whereas to return home in some ways challenges this existence, given what he has in common with his sisters, yet he consciously distances himself from his sisters by refusing to follow trends and reacting against whatever is popular: “Da es jetzt
wieder modern ist /die Haare kurz zu schneiden /lasse ich sie mir wachsen /ich gehe nicht mit der Mode /Mode habe ich immer gehaßt /ihr geht mit der Mode” (214). In other respects he needs his sisters enable him to perform his carnivalesque rituals. Human relations both in the asylum and at home all serve to perpetuate his carnival, which enables him to react to social norms.

The family home and Steinhof are two established stages for the ritualised performance of aspects of the eccentric self. In both settings, there is a willing audience. In Steinhof his position in many ways resembles his position at home, yet he returns home only for a brief time: “Zwei drei Tage /schon den vierten wäre ich ja tot” (175). He describes the privilege he has in Steinhof as “Narrenfreiheit” (213). Yet his family inheritance has made this possible, as Ritter declares: “Du kannst dort machen was du willst /fast alles /Du bezahlst ja auch siebentausend am Tag” (226). The outsider status of the eccentric Voss (Ludwig) has parallels with Paul and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Bernhard had met Paul in a sanatorium. “Mit seinem berühmten Onkel hatte Paul gemein, daß beide von ihrer Industriellenfamilie ausgestoßen waren (wie übrigens auch Bernhards Freundin Hedwig Stavjanicek von der ihren), daß sie in der Verwandtschaft als Narren galten. In der Erzählung wie im Theater zeigt Bernhard die Nähe und Verwechselbarkeit auf zwischen Ludwigs ‘Philosophie’ und Pauls ‘Verrücktheit’, und verleiht in Ritter, Dene, Voss jener Paul’schen Figur, die von Gert Voss gespielt werden sollte, folglich den Namen Ludwig.” 248 Steinhof is an alternative stay to the family home, the location he keeps coming back to:

Bin ich in Norwegen
sage ich mir London
dann gehe ich wenn ich nicht weiter weiß
nach Steinhof
Aber ich bin nicht entmündigt
das müßte euch doch zu denken geben
ich bin der einzige in Steinhof
der nicht entmündigt ist
ich genieße die Narrenfreiheit kleine Schwester (212-3, my italics)

Voss has been granted a special status in the asylum, which turns his carnival into a privilege. Voss exploits the status of fool, using the corrupt institution to behave as he wishes, to perform, whilst taking advantage of his financial status: “Nur weil ich sie alle mit Tausendschillingscheinen füttere /existiere ich noch /Steinhof ist eine

248 Koberg, p. 276
Bestechlichkeitsanstalt” (217). If Voss hereby recognises the state of corruption in the sanatorium, this neologism reveals his dependence on the setting to perpetuate his carnival of difference. He avails himself of the fool’s freedom to be crude: “Wenn ich sagen würde /sie sollen mir den Hintern auswischen /wie ich es will /sie rissen sich darum” (218). The carnival in Steinhof is made possible through the fool’s money, which enables him to play the part of ruler rather than patient. Steinhof is a stage for him, not a place of treatment in the conventional sense:
sie hassen jeden Neuangekommenen
auf mich freuen sie sich
Worringer kommt
geht wie ein Lauffeuer durch Steinhof
das schallt durch die ganze Anstalt
der Millionär Worringer kommt
heißt es
da stürzen alle diese weißen Kittel herein
und verbeugen sich
und lassen sich von mir füttern
[...] Dafür lasse ich ihnen das Schimpfwort Philosoph
das sie sich mir gegenüber angewöhnt haben (217-218)

Voss’s love of playing the fool coupled with his wealth frees him from normal constraints. His philosophical project is a form of theatre, an excuse to perform to others. He recognizes the mindlessness of the patients, but even the Director is a poor substitute as the only audience for his “philosophical” thought: “Aber ich habe ja nur den Direktor in Steinhof /die Patienten sind absolut stumpfsinnig /das ist das Faszinierende /daß sie so grenzenlos stumpfsinnig sind” (179). The eccentric needs no real friends: “Freunde habe ich keine /wenn ich davon absehe /daß meine Mitpatienten meine Freunde sind” (175). Genuine social contact has been replaced by carnival ritual; philosophy has become a lifelong preoccupation and substitute for human relations. Thus his outsider status is confirmed even within the institution, where his status as fool is established. His acts of generosity towards the other inpatients distance him further from so-called “normality”. His motives are those of an outsider. His behaviour is characterised by eccentric repetition, another form of rehearsed unpredictability, which refers to giving away papers (165) and expensive shirts (168), and ritualised experimentation with pretended suicide attempts (177).

Voss uses his status as institutionalised outsider to launch a carnivalistic attack on his sisters’ materialism and to distance himself from the family, since he does not abuse his privilege for personal greed but mocks others’ acquisitiveness: “Verlogene
Glaubensgemeinschaft / Anhaltender Lebensüberdruck / Der Direktor hat gesagt / es wird eine Zeit kommen / in der es auch in Steinhof / keine Erbsensuppe mehr gibt / [...] / Reichtum verpflichtet vergebt das nicht” (224). He gives his sisters a status different from other visitors coming to Steinhof because they too belong to a socio-cultural élite: “Meine Schwestern sind Schauspielerinnen / habe ich zum Direktor gesagt / wie ich ihn zum erstenmal gesehen habe / nehmen Sie sich in acht / sie haben Geld wie Mist / und sind Schauspielerinnen” (176). He condemns their vanity: “Millionen Kinder verhungern in Afrika / und ihr laßt euch malen” (202). Voss’s apparent social awareness allows him to play down his wealth as it is not used for conventional purposes: “Wir haben Millionen in der Hosentasche / und können nichts damit anfangen” (181). Dene’s gestures enable his carnival to continue in Steinhof: “Sie hat mir fünf Hemden gebracht / und ich habe sie alle verschenkt / das ärgerte sie natürlich / aber es ist ja mein Geld / Der Philosoph verschenkt seine Gedanken / es ist ja sein Denken” (168); Dene therefore collaborates with his ritualistic behaviour. Ritter is well aware that it is her brother’s wealth which buys him the privilege of “Narrenfreiheit” in Steinhof: “Du bist der einzige Privilegierte in Steinhof / Du kannst dort machen was du willst / fast alles / Du bezahlst ja auch siebentausend am Tag / du kannst noch jahrelang in Steinhof bleiben” (226). He pays to stay in Steinhof to perform a privileged carnival, his prerogative. He can behave as an eccentric due to his status, buying himself the servile rituals of Steinhof, and is driven to behave in this way due to a desire to be different. His residence could be permanent.

Voss’s donations of money in the asylum recall the gesture of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who gave up his wealth in order to unburden himself from material constraints and to teach in a school in the mountains. Dene recounts Voss’s gesture that is symbolic of his status as outsider, a performance she watched passively: “Patienten und Besucher rissen sich um seine Hundertschillingscheine” (157). Yet his sisters do not see him as genuinely mad, accepting his behaviour as their own relations with him are thus maintained. Ritter insists on the fine line between genius and madness: “Unser Bruder ist ein Genie / kein Narr / eines Tages arbeiten sie an allen Universitäten / über ihn” (137). Their willingness to play audience in private, however, does not compel them to take him entirely seriously: “aber wer sagt denn / daß sein Denken etwas wert ist / Vielleicht ist alles nur Unsinn was er denkt” (Ritter, 153).
Voss’s performance is divided between his roles in Steinhof and those at home, and is
determined by his need to react against convention. He needs the limits of an asylum in
order to define himself against them. Performing as fool in the Anstalt is facilitated by the
roles the others play. Dene recounts Voss’s bet with the director to make him wear Voss’s
hat during her visit: “natürlich die Leute sagen /alle Irrenhausdirektoren sind verrückt /die
Direktoren sind verrückter als die ihnen anvertrauten Patienten” (156). Voss hereby tests
the limits of official authority in Steinhof.

III. 3 Voss’s theatrical roles

Voss’s own sudden (temporary) adherence to rules in the asylum, which he recounts at
home, is a form of mockery of the institution and serves to re-affirm his desire to be
different long term:

VOSS vorgebeugt
Gerade gegangen
Weißt du was das heißt
Es gelang mir die ganze Zeit nicht
Plötzlich wieder gerade gegangen
Richtet sich auf
Vorschriftsmäßig (163)

His spontaneous compliance with regulations is self-determined, since he does not comply
with the rules unless he wants to. Damerau observes: “In seinen ersten Worten ist die
Wirklichkeit im Hintergrund ein paradoxes Spektakel: ein Irrenhaus der allgemein
verordneten Selbstbestimmung.” 249 Voss does not adhere to the system in the asylum,
unless it is useful as a reaction to family trips or traditions: “anstatt mit uns nach Sils Maria
/geht er nach Steinhof /[…]/anstatt mit uns nach Luzern /geht er nach Steinhof /Nicht
einmal Weihnachten mit uns /unser Feiertagehasser /singt am Heiligen Abend /in der
Anstaltskleidung” (Ritter, 138).

Voss’s fantasies are ritualised experiments. Unfinished experimentation characterizes
Voss’s suicide attempts in Steinhof (217), a performance marked by certain principles of the
grotesque: “the `material bodily principle’, which is connected to the aesthetic of
`grotesque realism’. “ 250 The grotesque incorporates “incompleteness, becoming,
ambiguity, indefinability, non-canonicalism – indeed, all that jolts us out of our normal

249 Damerau, p. 331
250 Gardiner, p. 47
expectations and epistemological complacency." The experiments are never completed since he inverts the norm by playing the theatre of suicide. Voss’s eccentric behaviour in the Anstalt is tolerated due to his riches: “Was ist denn das /hat der Assistenzarzt gefragt /auf seine gefinkelte Weise /Ein Strangulierungsversuch /in der vergangenen Nacht /[...]/er nahm den Tausendschillingschein /und verschwand” (216-7). Voss manipulates others in order to perform; the doctor is servile, as are all other figures. Further, the doctor is not interested in Voss’s welfare, or in treating him, but gives him full licence to continue the grotesque show. Voss’s experiments with death may be an attempt to come to terms with his fear of death. The attempt to experiment frees from the everyday, helps to fight boredom, yet any existential or sexual experiment remains without drastic consequences, since there is no innovation or change in life. Others allow the experimental performances to continue. Voss’s philosophy project forms part of the dual role he performs at home and in Steinhof. At home, to his sisters, he re-iterates his ideas jotted down in a notebook in Steinhof. This performance preoccupies him for a time during the home visit. His sisters allow his performance to continue.

The scene Nach dem Mittagessen is, for the most part, a virtually uninterrupted monologue, with the sisters playing audience to Voss’s performance as fool. This performance is mainly verbal; apart from Voss’s verbal confrontation with the sisters over the portraits, the group’s attempt to move the sideboard, and talk of moving the clock, Ritter and Dene listen to Voss’s words. The scene opens with the stage direction: “Ritter zigarettenauchend, Weißwein trinkend auf einem Sessel an der Wand” (193). Following the portrait scene (199-207) in which Voss attacks bourgeois tastes in art, and the disastrous attempt to move the sideboard (208-9) – an experiment that lies outside ritual – there is little movement. Ritter turns on the record player to listen, appropriately, to a Beethoven string quartet. Voss’s monologue then begins as: “Dene kommt herein und setzt sich auf einen Sessel ziemlich weit von RITTER entfernt” (210). His performance of reading extracts from his Steinhof diary follows almost immediately, after a comment on the house’s walls and his preference for string quartets – which initiates the start:

Und gegen acht hörte ich die Eroica .
unter Knappertsbusch

25 Clark and Holquist, p. 312
This ritualistic rebellion against his father’s musical preferences (“Solange der Vater gelebt hat /durfte die Eroica nicht gespielt werden /Im übrigen haßte er Knappertsbusch”; 222) has lost its thrill even for Voss. He makes a statement on the freedom he has but is fixated on the past. Voss has been unable to develop true mental independence, as he has not found an alternative to reacting against the father. The reading continues with sections on his sisters’ character traits and their involvement in the theatre. His words are intended to generate curiosity in the sisters, but his own pastimes are seen to be one-dimensional. Dene leaves the room following the cessation of this brief performance, whereas Ritter prepares to listen to the next instalment, and encourages him with specially selected titles and the neologism “Notiziar” (212) – referring to his notebook writing, which she uses to address him with apparent acquiescence, if not mock praise. There is a leisurely pace. Yet no real conversation is needed at this moment:

VOSS
schlägt das Notizbuch zu, steckt es wieder ein
Eine Kostprobe
DENE geht hinaus
RITTER zündet sich eine Zigarette an
Unser Grübler
Unser Alleswisser
Unser charmanter Notiziar (212)

The next part of the performance is spontaneous talk to Ritter (212-218), which is uninterrupted until Dene’s appearance with a pile of new long underpants. Ritter’s virtual silence allows the eccentric’s performance to continue, if not as entertainment for her, then as a way of passing the time alone with him. Ritter’s presence motivates Voss to speak (213); Ritter plays the inactive sister while Voss mocks Dene’s domestic activity: “wahrscheinlich wäscht sie ab /bügelt” (213). Amidst personal justification for his brief visit home and an attack on doctors, there is an intermittent reading of a further small extract from his diary. He uses the diary as a text to perform from, evident in a ritualistic gesture: “nimmt sein Notizbuch aus der Rocktasche”, the same stage direction as when he reads out his obsessive musical preferences moments earlier. He now refers to his disillusionment with philosophy and to banal ways of passing the time:

streckt die Beine aus, nimmt sein Notizbuch aus der
Rocktasche, blättert, liest
Eine Welt die fortwährend
Ursache mit Wirkung verwechselt
Leide an Größenwahn
Das ist richtig
Vertraute Schopenhauer
Vertraute Nietzsche
Vertraute mir nie
War plötzlich immer wieder
Von allen verlassen
Darunter steht
Schuhe geputzt um halb drei Uhr nachts
Macht das Notizbuch wieder zu, steckt es ein (214)

Bakhtin notes that “carnival brings together [...] the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.” Voss moves from philosophical concerns to mundane tasks (shoe cleaning in the middle of the night). The latter part of the monologue sways between a love-hate tirade on the “Vaterland” Austria and his extraordinary performances in Steinhof which, however, have lost their capacity to shock, since he is now a familiar figure playing stock parts to audiences who know what to expect.

The predictability of challenging norms applies to all eccentrics, who are carnival figures – Voss, Bruscon, Herrenstein, and Robert Schuster. Voss and Bruscon are both theatre makers in their own way; Voss’s stages are the home and the asylum, and the carnival is a way of life for all of them. Philosophy is an excuse to perform, not to create a theory in the conventional sense. Bruscon’s carnival involves playing with audiences through his performance as actor and creator of plays, hence inventing himself as a theatre maker who needs to trap an audience (i.e. the family, the innkeeper, as well as official audiences) into helping him perform as “Fallensteller”:

geborener Theatermacher wissen Sie
Theatermacher
Fallensteller schon sehr früh (24-5)

Equally, Bruscon is trapped by his need to perform, and has trapped his family into a theatrical existence. Bruscon’s performance on multiple levels projects his self-defined existence as “Theatermensch” (24) by confirming his unchallenged status as director, writer and performer of his single, endlessly altered play. Multiple levels of performance are created through Bruscon’s commentary on the setting, his preparations and the diverse subjects incorporated into his monologue outside “Das Rad”; these levels intensify the stage presence all the more, since he is never off the stage of Der Theatermacher. All other aspects in life are subordinated to theatre, which encompasses

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252 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 123
the whole of existence for Bruscon. The carnival is a victory over fear: despite acting being a lethal profession, it enjoys a freedom which exists in no other sphere. According to Bakhtin, “laughter [...] overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations”.

Living beyond the conventional borders of reason, the actor can laugh, as he is not responsible to society:

Es interessiert uns nichts
als unsere Kunst
nichts mehr (107)

Bruscon’s family relations are dominated by theatre, yet they allow him to be the eccentric whose play is fuelled by “Narrenfreiheit”. Kathrein sees Bernhardian artists as failures, like the “Geistesmensch” in Bernhard’s novels, but does not take into account Bruscon’s eccentric character and unpredictability: “Interessant macht diesen rücksichtslosen, aufgeblähten Menschen jedoch erst seine Leidenschaft. Bruscon brennt für seine Theaterkunst und wird in der Sinnlosigkeit seiner Bestrebungen, denen er alles unterordnet, tragisch und berührend.” 254 Bruscon’s efforts are not “sinnlos” and are challenged only temporarily by the difficult environment of Utzbach. Bruscon’s passion for theatre is not pointless (“sinnlos”) but is the basis of a selfish existence. There is no rational reason for Bruscon to continue with his theatre, yet the absence of answerability gives him complete freedom in his project. A passion for theatre does not make Bruscon a tragic figure, since he is free to style himself through a self-determined theatre which has become a way of life and cannot be destroyed by external factors. As a figure whose whole life is given to the theatre and lived theatrically, he is comic rather than tragic, he finds no role too ridiculous to be performed. Tragedy is not a theme which is applicable to Bruscon since his theatre is spontaneous, unending and all-encompassing, it enables him to exist outside social norms in every aspect of life in a way that the heroes of conventional tragedies cannot. His theatre is life itself, his roles are unlimited, and it is only without theatre that he would confront the tragedy of not knowing how to exist.

III. 4 Life as theatre in Der Theatermacher

To Bruscon, involvement in theatre is permanent and lifelong. His references to his

253 Rabelais and his World, p. 90
perception of theatre as an alternative way of life are given a connotation of lifelong imprisonment. It was Bruscon’s free choice to enter the world of theatre, yet it is the only existence possible for him: “Ich litt aber tatsächlich /lebenslänglich darunter /Schauspieler sein zu müssen” (115). In respect of “Das Rad”, he speaks of: “mich lebenslänglich verfolgender Stoff” (24), turning the theatre-making process into a lifelong project. For an actor, theatre is ultimately a death sentence:

Lebenslängliche Theaterkerkerhaft
ohne die geringste Begnadigungsmöglichkeit
Und doch niemals aufgegeben
Strafanstalt als Theater
Zehntausende Insassen
die alle keine Aussicht
auf Begnadigung haben
Nur die Todesstrafe ist ihnen allen sicher (100)

“Theaterkerkerhaft” is a neologism which reflects the condition of being trapped in a theatrical existence. Elsewhere, he says that being committed to theatre is a “Theaterhölle” (28); theatre is hell, from which there is no escape, and yet paradoxically it enables him to live a life which is as free of the dictates of social conformity as is possible. It also gives him the greatest artistic freedom possible. His decision to devote his life to theatre is his own, a choice of life imprisonment: “freiwillig in die Strafanstalt hineingegangen /auf lebenslänglich” (100). Bruscon claims to have always taken full accountability for his fate, as the artist is answerable to nobody: “Selbstanklagebedürfnis lebenslänglich” (115). As he sees it, we are all “Opfer unserer Leidenschaft /[…] /gleich was wir tun” (54); all passions, including theatre, claim victims. Bruscon’s lifelong performances are not meant to enlighten audiences: “lebenslänglich treten wir auf /und kein Mensch versteht uns” (100); despite ostensible preaching: “Wir predigen /und sie begreifen nicht” (115). Bruscon himself declares that theatre satisfies his selfish need for artistic challenges: “Das Theater /ist keine Gefälligkeitsanstalt” (90). Liechti argues: “Existieren ist bei Bernhard synonym zu Scheintod-Dasein, während Leben ein sinnvolles Dasein bedeuten würde.” But although theatre for Bruscon is a fatal disease (“wir sind totkrank /und tun so /als lebten wir ewig /wir sind schon am Ende /und treten auf /als ginge es immer so weiter”, 54), it offers possibilities other domains do not and above all, it enables him to tolerate the everyday world: “Nur weil wir an uns glauben /halten wir es aus /überstehen wir /was wir nicht

ändern können /weil wir an unsere Kunst glauben" (107). A desperate belief in his own selfish art is essential to survival, even if it comes at a price, namely the flaws in theatre: “Hätten wir diesen Glauben nicht /und ist es nur die Schauspielkunst /wir wären schon längst auf dem Friedhof” (107).

For all his use of metaphors of death, sickness and imprisonment to define his life in the theatre, Bruscon revels in a theatrical existence itself: writing, producing and acting out theatre give him a privilege others do not have. Theatre encompasses existence as a whole, there is nothing worthwhile for Bruscon which is not theatre. As Jahraus remarks: “Die Existenz ist das Thema des Theaters und das Theater ist das Thema der Existenz.” 256 Beyond the practicalities of producing “Das Rad” for the stage, theatre merges with life off stage. Theatre enables the individual to be extraordinary in offering new and different perspectives on the meaning of existence. Acting roles both on and off stage shows the eccentric responding to the world in a way which is not constrained by social conformity. Bruscon’s theatrical existence reflects human nature itself in its ambition and folly, whilst giving him the scope to create an original perspective as a reaction to social norms.

Despite being concerned with the lack of authenticity in theatre, he revels in its artificiality: “Dargestelltes ist Verlogenes /und dargestelltes Verlogenes lieben wir /so habe ich meine Komödie geschrieben” (31). As Jahraus remarks: “Die Künstlichkeit und Verlogenheit des Theaters ist nur die Widerspiegelung der Künstlichkeit und Verlogenheit der Existenz.” 257 Theatre can be the only way to make life tolerable; performing is done for the sake of performing, even if the roles performed are ridiculous: “Wer existiert /hat sich mit der Existenz abgefunden /wer lebt /hat sich mit dem Leben abgefunden /so lächerlich kann die Rolle gar nicht sein /die wir spielen /daß wir sie nicht spielen” (108).

The theatrical nature of his existence is symbolized by the fact that Bruscon remains on-stage throughout the play, literally seated in front of the platform of the actual stage, hereby continuing his theatrical performance throughout. Even off the stage of “Das Rad” his life depends on his performance of monologues which have the function of dramatising his status as “Theatermacher”, a person who turns every petty

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256 Jahraus, Das monomanische Werk, (Lang, 1992), p. 123. Similarly, Peymann’s total existential identification with theatre as an alternative existence beyond the institution is clear in his declaration: “Das Theater ist mein Lebensraum, und es hat mich vollständig verschlungen. Es gab außer dem Theater nichts.” (Interview with Peymann, Profil, 2.1.1999)
257 Das monomanische Werk, p. 126
aspect of life into a theatrical spectacle and who sees no real distinction between theatre and life. Bruscon cannot exist outside the framework of theatre, as he uses no language which is not theatrical; the rehearsals of his play show that there is no essential difference between on- and off-stage theatre, there is just the continual process of performance.

Performance is a constant and unpredictable experiment; it relies on spontaneity and allows plenty of scope for play, as Eisner remarks: it “allows for the possibility of playing with an audience, of making the text a game.” Bruscon’s technique of playing with the audience is evident in _Der Theatermacher_ in the conversation with the innkeeper in Scene 1. Here, the theatrical ritual focuses on Bruscon alternating twice between projecting his voice into the hall (to the audience of _Der Theatermacher_) and speaking to the innkeeper directly, indicated to the reader by the repetitive stage directions, and obvious to an audience of _Der Theatermacher_:  

Jedes Wort wirbelt hier Staub auf  
und dieser teuflische Text  
meiner Komödie

_raft in den Saal hinein_  
Exzellenz ich bedauere  
Zum Wirt direkt

Mehr oder weniger  
Eine Schöpfungskomödie

Um nicht sagen zu müssen  
Ein Jahrhundertwerk

_raft in den Saal hinein_  
Calabrien  
Daß ich nicht lache  
Zum Wirt direkt

Ein Alterswerk zweifellos  
Haben Sie darüber gelesen

Alles Unsinn  
Wie alles in den Zeitungen

Inkompetenzschmierer (18-19)

To the innkeeper, he enounces the impossible conditions in the hall (lines 1-3), his creative ambition (lines 7-10), interspersed with line rehearsal performed to the auditorium (lines 5, 12). Finally, to the innkeeper, the critics’ assessments (line 15-18) are disqualified with a neologism “Inkompetenzschmierer” (line 19). Whether he is addressing an audience or the innkeeper, it is all acting. The same effect may be perceived later, in Scene 2, during ritualistic preparations with Ferruccio, when rehearsal and commentary are performed simultaneously. Bruscon’s addressee is Ferruccio, yet he is

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also addressing the putative audience of his play “Das Rad”, but all on an equally theatrical level. The gestures of a “Theatermacher” rehearsing his lines on the real stage unfold alongside commentary on the innkeeper and the setting:

Der Wirt
hat einen ganz übten Mundgeruch
**geht ein paar Schritte nach rechts**
Ein Alptraum
**Tritt vor und spricht in den Saal hinein**, 
Lörrach wird fallen
**Geht ein paar Schritte nach links und spricht in den Saal hinein**
Und Sie sprechen von Ruhrkohle
Herr Präsident
**Geht wieder zur Podiumsmitte**
Vor die Säue
Auf dem Land
Ist jedes Geistesprodukt
Vor die Säue geworfen (80)

Theatre is the only way to live life for the Bernhardian eccentric. Theatre for Bruscon is a continual process as he uses a variety of roles to perform variations on the one theme of theatre. This approach ensures a process of continual creative regeneration; he thus stages a carnival in the artistic sphere. Bruscon’s “Menschheitskomödie” (15) is a way of life; his rehearsals of it are a means to an end. Whether a performance takes place or not is of no real consequence to the eccentric. By altering parts and refusing to finalize his piece, Bruscon ensures the total domination of theatre over his life both on and off stage. Despite being a victim of his passion for the theatre, Bruscon cannot envisage any other existence. Theatre is the only viable antidote to the tedium of ordinariness, yet there is no antidote to the suffering and sacrifices it demands:

**BRUSCON**
Wir sind totkrank
Und tun so
Als lebten wir ewig
Wir sind schon am Ende
Und treten auf
Als ginge es immer so weiter
**Läßt sich auf den Sessel fallen**
Sarah mein Kind
Du mußt zu mir halten
Gerade dann
**Wenn es die Höle ist (54)**

Theatre becomes an ironically life-affirming process, although it is an inescapable dead-end: “die Hölle”. The carnival of a theatrical existence cannot be truly liberating, as all actors suffer the death penalty: “Todesstrafe” (100); they will die performing. An all-
pervasive awareness of death confronts the impotence of theatre to change the fundamental nature of existence.

Bernhard declared in an interview: “Schauspiel ist besser als arbeiten.” This comparison implies that acting is preferable to a routine occupation. Acting for Bruscon also symbolizes a rejection of conventional occupations. Bruscon’s life project gives him the possibility of diversity since finalization of text and performance is not the main objective of his drama, but rather, improvisation in performance. The existence of the “Geistesmensch” is given a new dimension through acting out a play: Bruscon is fully in control of the endlessly changing rehearsals and versions of “Das Rad”. Daily life in the theatre group also becomes fused into continuous performance. The very nature of the travelling theatre group in the depth of the provinces largely excludes Bruscon’s theatre from the purview of the critics, and although he longs for official recognition, his intellectual solitude allows his theatre to thrive. For the Bruscon family theatre group, random changes and the absence of an ending makes the figures perform in a never ending, ever changing series of rehearsals.

Bruscon’s theatrical life entails for him and his family the rejection of a “normal” life, and can be compared to life in the circus. In *Ein Kind*, tightrope walking in the circus is presented as an art of existential survival: “Insoferne waren wir eine seiltanzende Zirkusfamilie, die es sich niemals und auch nicht einen Augenblick gestattete, von dem Seil herunterzusteigen, und deren Übungen von Tag zu Tag schwieriger wurden. Wir waren auf dem Seil gefangen, vollführten unsere Überlebenskunst, die sogennante Normalität lag unter uns, wir trauten uns nicht, in die Normalität hineinzustürzen, weil wir wüßten, daß dieser Kopfsprung unseren sicheren Tod bedeutet hätte.” Theatre is another example of this “Überlebenskunst”, as it is an all-encompassing existence, geared to escaping the death which normality is perceived to be. Bernhard himself compared writing with circus performance: “Das ist meine Leidenschaft. Das ist wie für einen Zirkusmenschen, der muß tanzen, sonst bringt er sich um.” Bakhtin notes that “many ancient forms of carnival were preserved and continue to live and renew themselves in the farcical comic antics of

259 “*Die Ursache bin ich selbst*”, ORF, 1986
260 Thomas Bernhard, *Ein Kind*, p. 31
261 S. Dreissinger (editor), *13 Gespräche mit Thomas Bernhard* (Weitra 1992), p. 64
The circus as a performance which overturns and suspends normality resembles Bruscon’s notion of theatre. There is an evident parallel between Bernhard’s use of the image of the tightrope walker in the circus to define the author’s life as a life played out “wie in einem Zirkus in dem man alle Rollen zu spielen glaubt” and Bruscon’s understanding of theatre as a prison which confines its actors while allowing them to stage their lives in the only way which gives them real satisfaction.

III. 5 Carnival incompleteness and the theatre

According to Clark and Holquist, the grotesque “incorporates what are [Bakhtin’s] primary values: incompleteness, becoming, ambiguity, indefinability, non-canonicalism.” Bruscon’s drive to improvise and make changes in the content and sequence of “Das Rad” reflects his commitment to a theatrical existence. Joyce notes in respect of Bruscon’s refusal to complete or finalize “Das Rad” that his “ironic deferral of its performance structurally underscores the postmodernist rejection of totalization and closure.”

Bruscon states that provocation is central to his theatrical concept: “Auf die Irritation /kommt es an /[…] /Das Theater /ist keine Gefälligkeitsanstalt” (90). His theatre of variations allows control over the audience and negates the disclosure of any possible final meaning in “Das Rad”. His efforts are, therefore, also directed at an intellectual distancing from his environment through a theatre which is not easily accessible, as it provokes audience’s expectations, and continually generates new versions. Bruscon does not perform for others’ entertainment or satisfaction, and refuses to present any familiar, unchanging message to his audiences, whose passivity he confronts. The eccentric rejects the traditional relationship between actor and audience, his play must not be understood, as it is the product of a desire to be different. To Bruscon, performing “Das Rad” on and off stage is a way of self-preservation: “es geht um den Selbsterhaltungstrieb” (104); performing the play in whatever version takes his fancy is done purely out of an instinct for self-preservation.

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262 M. Bakhtin, Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 131
263 Der Theatermacher, Programmheft – Materialien zur Aufführung, (Schauspielhaus Zürich 1986-7), Interview with Bernhard, pp. 30-31
264 Clark and Holquist, p. 312
265 Joyce, p. 27
266 Bernhard commented on performing tragedy and comedy in alternation: “Das verwirrt die Zuschauer. Sie haben mir applaudiert, jetzt bereuen sie es. Sie haben geschwiegen […] jetzt bereuen sie es. […] Unser Geistszustand ist unberechenbar” Bernhard, Der Keller, p. 102
Huntemann claims: “Die eigentliche Irritation liegt jedoch [...] tiefer, in der Struktur der Bernhardschen Schreibform begründet, die den Leser im Unklaren läßt, ob ein ernstes Anliegen nur ‘tragikomisch’ intensiviert werden soll, oder der ‘ Ernst’ gar nicht mehr im Thema liegt, sondern nur in der artistischen Perfektion seiner Inszenierung.” 267 Yet Bruscon’s general concept of deliberately irritating audiences through changes and fusion of genre is as important as his obsession with the tiny details of the individual figures’ performance.

Both Bruscon and his creator Bernhard are writers and “Theatermacher” and share a common system; there is no masterpiece which other works must correspond to, although Bernhard, unlike Bruscon, wrote many completed works: “Mir war die Sinnlosigkeit und die Wirkungslosigkeit von sogenannten Hauptwerken noch nicht vertraut gewesen [...].” 268 Bernhard does appear to question the supremacy of any one single work. He referred to his repeatedly encountered boredom resulting from a completed work: “Wenn das Werk fertig ist – gedruckt, dann ist es für die Katz, und man ist auf den Hund gekommen.” 269

Bruscon’s single unfinished play arises out of his rejection of the traditional idea of the completed masterpiece: “Eines jeden Ziel /ist das Unglück /und das Ende” (56). “Das Rad” can never become a unified chef d’œuvre, but can be seen as a comédie humaine of innumerable playlets incorporated into the umbrella of an unfinished magnum opus; in this sense he is a very modern theatre maker. Bruscon has been working on “Das Rad der Geschichte” since his youth (“schon mit vierzehn Jahren /einen Entwurf für diese Komödie gemacht /Mich lebenslänglich verfolgender Stoff”; 24) and criticises the reception of “Das Rad”, despite playing games with these critics through changes to “Das Rad”: “Ein Alterswerk zweifellos /Haben Sie darüber gelesen /Alles Unsinn /wie alles in den Zeitungen /Inkompetenzschmierer” (18-19).

“Das Rad der Geschichte” is by its nature a lifetime’s work. There are no secondary themes or scenes: “In meinem Rad der Geschichte ist alles gleich wichtig” (41). This absurd principle gives equal importance to every element in any performance and is the foundation of Bruscon’s fool’s licence in the creative sphere. The readiness for self-determined spontaneous change is Bruscon’s unique characteristic. Bruscon sees the work

267 Huntemann, p. 218
268 Bernhard, Der Keller, p. 64
269 “Die Ursache bin ich selbst”, ORF, 1986
on “Das Rad” as a continual, lifelong process, a radically new form of theatre. In practice, there is no moment when Bruscon stops acting. Theatre is a way of life, even if it borders on the insane; as Bernhard stated in an interview, the value of existence is relativised through the absurdity of suicide: “Sich umzubringen das hat genausowenig Sinn wie weiterzuleben.” Bruscon communicates with others through theatre and work on the play, and by using the language of the theatre. His attitude is not to be confused with that of someone wanting to “write a play”. He is not concerned with a final version; the play is a creative outlet, an excuse to perform. He speaks of the ongoing creation of a comic masterpiece, with the emphasis on creation: “Eine Schöpfungskomödie [...] Ein Jahrhundertwerk” (18). The fragmentation of any performance of “Das Rad” means that paradoxically it can never be performed as a whole, and no performance is the same as any other. There is no limit to possibilities that can be tried out even if they are ridiculous, no role being too absurd or laughable to act out: “Wir haben alle möglichen Ideen /aber es sind größtenteils lächerliche” (73).

Betz argues that the speeches are entirely interchangeable amongst figures: “Jedem kann beliebig jede Parole zum Text gegeben werden, denn die Wirkungsweise des Rades erklärt sich durch die Figuren der Austauschbarkeit, der Entsprechung und der Wiederholung. Hier wird m.E. auf ein Klischee angespielt, das auf einer groben Verallgemeinerung beruht: Die Großen würden doch allesamt irgendwie das gleiche sagen.” Certainly, interchangeability of figures’ performances gives Bruscon freedom to make theatre in a way which suggests that there is no truth in the sense of correspondence to reality, only endless talking and speech making which never achieves certainty or finality. As Bruscon puts it: “am Ende entspricht gar nichts” (20). Conceptually, the wheel of time, “Das Rad”, manifests Bruscon’s ideal of theatre, one with no final goal or telos. The world’s lack of progress is founded on an absence of ordered movement towards a preordained truth, which the figures embody in their encounters. Truth is entirely subjective and cannot correspond to external facts, opinions are merely recycled; they go round and round endlessly. The fact that the title of Bruscon’s play figures history as a wheel suggests that it and the characters that people it do not in any conventional way

270 13 Gespräche mit Thomas Bernhard, (edited by S. Dreissinger), p. 65
271 Betz, p. 253
make sense. The characters act their on- or off-stage parts for want of anything better to do. In Winkler’s apt summary: “Obstacle a toute évolution et à toute quête du sens, la répétition cyclique du temps étend le grotesque des personnages au grotesque du monde dans lequel toute tentative est vouée à l’absurde [...]. Le théâtre bernhardien s’affirme ainsi comme théâtre du grotesque, expression d’un monde-toupie qui tourne sur lui-même au lieu de progresser [...].” 272 Winkler believes that the fundamental characteristic of Bruscon’s play is its view of history as meaningless repetition: “La mise en abîme d’un théâtre de l’éternel retour fondé sur la roue de la déesse Fortuna renvoie à la temporalité cyclique du théâtre bernhardien, qui fond dans l’éternelle répétition tout acte unique potentiellement porteur de sens.” 273 Bruscon has chosen theatre as a way of life despite its absurdity: “In meinem Rad der Geschichte ist alles gleich wichtig” (41). The implication of this is that there is no finality in human endeavour. Bruscon carries out ongoing radical alteration to scenes according to the setting: “Eine gekürzte Fassung in Mattighofen /Die Einsteinszene gestrichen /alles was über die Atombombe in meinem /Stück gesagt wird /allerdings Entscheidendes /[...]/übrigens habe ich dort die Szene /in welcher Napoleon sich über den König von Sachsen lustig macht /auch weggelassen” (38); “In Gaspoltshofen habe ich mit Absicht /Einstein gestrichen /während ich alles auf die Madame Curie gesetzt habe” (92). Towards the end of Scene 3, following a rehearsal, a re-writing of Ferruccio’s role as Napoleon is necessary, given his incompetence:

BRUSCON winkt ab
Das Ganze gefällt mir nicht
Was ist
Wenn wir diese zwei Sätze überhaupt weglassen
[...]
Wir lassen Das Gewesene etcetera weg (98)

At the end of the scene, Bruscon is still considering whether to cut a whole act and several other scenes besides: “In Utzbach muß nicht die ganze Komödie /gespielt werden /vor die Säue” (104). Unpredictability is central to a theatrical existence. Bernhard declared in a discussion: “Ich habe immer nur für Schauspieler geschrieben”, 274 and although in contrast to Bernhard’s approach, the figures in Bruscon’s play are anything but inspired by the members of his troupe, Bruscon writes tailor-made, infinitely flexible versions of his play

272 Winkler, L’attente, p. 224
273 ibid, p. 223
for these incapable actors who are also the members of his immediate family in order to
give them (and himself) something entertaining to do. The cancellation of the evening’s
performance paradoxically foregrounds all life as theatre, since whether one particular
performance takes place or not seems of little consequence to a theatrical existence. Any
one performance of “Das Rad” is relativised by the off-stage performances that surround it.
The discussions and preparations ought to be seen as as flexible, open-ended performances
in themselves rather than as rehearsals of a single play that can never be staged. The
unfinished nature of “Das Rad” is essential to Bruscon’s life.

Bruscon’s changes to the figures’ speeches echo Bernhard’s scepticism about the
legitimacy of representation in the spoken or written word: “Die Wahrheit, denke ich, kennt
nur der Betroffene, will er sie mitteilen, wird er automatisch zum Lügner. Alles Mitgeteilte
cann nur Fälschung und Verfälschung sein, also sind immer nur Fälschungen und
Verfälschungen mitgeteilt worden […]. Das Beschriebene macht etwas deutlich, das zwar
den Wahrheitswillen des Beschreibenden, aber nicht der Wahrheit entspricht, denn die
Wahrheit ist überhaupt nicht mitteilbar […]. Immer wieder nichts anderes als die Lüge als
Wahrheit, die Wahrheit als Lüge et cetera […].”²⁷⁵ The attempt to tell the truth results in the
telling of lies. Writing for the theatre or acting parts in the theatre of life is absurd because it
involves telling lies, and exposing what passes for truth as untruth. Bruscon’s claim to be a
“Wahrheitsfanatiker” (108) is undermined by the very nature of theatre: “Wir schreiben für
das Theater /und wir spielen Theater /und ist das alles auch das Absurdeste /und
Verlogenste /[…]/Der Schreiber ist verlogen /die Darsteller sind verlogen” (30-31).

III. 6 Levels of performance in Der Theatermacher

Bruscon’s continuous presence on the stage of Der Theatermacher results in multiple levels
of performance unfolding during one afternoon. Bruscon’s “Weltheater” (24) becomes
central to his self-projection. The discussion and preparation of Bruscon’s ambitious play
become performances in themselves. The limited space in front of the actual stage in the
Tanzsaal itself is a stage where Bruscon remains to work on the production and to speak to
his family and the innkeeper. The issues he discusses are all focused on theatre in one form
or another (women, the emergency lighting, the provincial tour, his family’s lack of

²⁷⁵ Bernhard, Der Keller, pp. 29-30
competence as actors), and are given prominence in his monologues as off-stage performances within *Der Theaternacher*. The stage in front of the official stage in the inn’s dance hall becomes the spot where life is performed off stage; both the official and unofficial forms of theatre are fully visible to audiences of *Der Theaternacher*, as they take place on these two adjoining stages. Exchanges with members of Bruscon’s family are dominated by theatre and are denied privacy as they unfold in a public place. There is no interruption to his on-stage presence in *Der Theaternacher* whether in life or in rehearsal. Thus, no words are spoken and nothing is performed outside theatre.

**III. 6. 1 Bruscon’s monologues as theatrical performance**

Within the framework of rehearsals, everyday themes become a series of small performances interspersed with brief discussions of aspects of the play that the theatre group have still not mastered. In Scene 2, for example, after both Sarah’s roles have been worked on, Bruscon stages a series of attacks on Agathe’s proletarian origins (66-7), the proletariat’s destruction of the theatre (68), and the water supply (74-5). After Ferruccio’s rehearsals, Bruscon speaks to Ferruccio on music (78-79), the Hitler portrait (81), women in theatre, the emergency light (87), the provinces (88), and ends with a solitary bout of self-pity (89). The rehearsals of the play are further punctuated by Bruscon’s random repetition of his arbitrary refusal to pay for the hire of the hall (40, 57, 85, 102, 88, 101), symbolic of his scorn of Utzbach.

Bruscon’s obsessive reactions during preparations are performed off stage next to the inn’s stage as another play framing “Das Rad”. The fact that the inn’s stage remains empty until Scene 2 indicates that performance does not have to take place on an actual stage. All life revolves around the stage, even if its performance never achieves perfection. Bruscon’s obsessiveness as writer and director becomes apparent when in Scene 1 the maskbox appears.²⁷⁶ He insists that it must be placed in exactly the right place (50). His instructions to Ferruccio are followed by an attack on the innkeeper, a figure representing the non-carnival world. Being allowed to participate in theatre is considered by Bruscon to be a privilege. The family must tolerate his eccentricity. Similarly, the laundry basket must be placed in the exact spot Bruscon points to with his stick: “Ach bitte /stellen Sie den Korb

²⁷⁶ See Appendix II, No. 25, p. 342
The positioning of the paravent on the stage is also the object of the use of the stick and identical language ("Dahin /den Paravent dahin"; 92). Jang points out the imprecision of Bruscon's repetition of “dahin” in both the maskbox scene (50) and the paravent scene (92) as an instruction: “Bernhard parodiert seinerseits das Richtungsadverb „dahin” und macht auf die Inkompetenz der Sprache aufmerksam.” Even the simplest and apparently most concrete instructions fail.

Bruscon’s rehearsals occur sporadically; rehearsal is secondary to his staging of a carnivalistic philosophy of life. Placing his linen cap on his head is a gesture of existential self-awareness of his role as actor performing off stage, and preparing on-stage performance: “Nehme ich die Kappe herunter /ist meine Komödie vernichtet” (21). Comedy thus embraces both on-stage and off-stage theatre. Bruscon’s fixation with his linen cap is comic. He asks Ferruccio for it and then finds it in his coat pocket (82); when he does put it on, he claims that it has lost its effectiveness because it is sticking to his head: “Die Leinenkappe klebt /auf meinem Kopf /als hätte ich sie angeklebt /wirkt nicht /wirkungslos /vollkommen wirkungslos” (83).

As off-stage theatre director, Bruscon remains physically inactive during most of the preparations; his checking of the floorboards turns into a performance in itself. Other preparations involving the members of the family are also a form of performance. Whilst Ferruccio and Sarah attend to all the work, Bruscon remains seated, giving orders – to Ferruccio to sew (66), play music (78) and to Sarah to give him a foot massage (52). When Bruscon repeatedly commands Ferruccio to close the stage curtains (72-3), this ritualistic rehearsal of the technique ("Vorhangprobe"; 72) exposes Ferruccio’s role of performing as a silent marionette; his mechanical gestures are comic. Incompetent preparations are central to off-stage theatre. Bruscon asks Sarah to wait on the stage with the glass of water he demanded earlier. Her presence becomes an unwelcome show that disturbs the preparations; the comedy lies in her petty rebellion of picking her nose and sticking out her tongue prior to her offering of the glass (of tap water) to Bruscon:

[BRUSCON]
zü Ferruccio
Zieh den Vorhang wieder zu
Ferruccio zieht den Vorhang zu
BRUSCON

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277 Jang, Die Ohn- Machspiele, p. 152
Bruscon uses the preparations to attack his children, turning them into an audience for his eccentric performances. The threefold interaction of stage preparation as ritual – as discussed above – rehearsal, and family theatre, within the play of Der Theatermacher, shows Bruscon exercising power over his family. He appears as the director during the rehearsals, acting as scathing critic. For much of the play Bruscon needs an audience. An ironically comic twist is his lack of influence on the family’s rehearsals of and performance in “Das Rad” – as when Ferruccio misunderstands the lines he must rehearse (98); Agathe’s cough during official performance (58); and Bruscon’s demand that she pronounce Odense 8000 times (29). Yet he relies on his family’s incompetence to perform off stage. During rehearsals with Sarah, Bruscon is provoked by her poor rendition of her lines and interrupts her: “SARAH /Wenn wir die Schönheit nicht besitzen /BRUSCON /bricht ab /Das ist ja unmöglich” (63-64); his criticism of Sarah then turns into a tirade on standards in theatre (64). Part of Bruscon’s private life is actually performed as it unfolds off stage as he relates to his family only through theatre. Total identification with theatre as a means of self-preservation shows that Bruscon cannot for a moment exist outside the theatrical realm.

III. 6. 2 The stage in “Zum schwarzen Hirsch”

The space in front of the actual stage within the inn functions on several levels as a platform for theatre: Bruscon’s monologues interrupted by discussions with the innkeeper, the preparations for the intended performance of “Das Rad”, rehearsals with the family, are all performed on it and it also serves as a makeshift dining room. Only in the final scene does the back of the stage itself in the inn take over as platform for acting. Jang discusses Bruscon’s on-stage position in Scene 4: “In dieser Szene zeigen sich die Schauspieler hinter dem Vorhang ihrer Bühne im Gasthof, ohne daß sie aber den Platz, wo sie bisher gespielt haben, wechseln müssen. Diese Umwandlung wurde durch einen Vorhang, der die vordere
Bühne (im Stück die Bühne) von der hinteren Bühne (im Stück der Publikumssaal) trennt, ermöglicht. Das Publikum der Komödie 'Das Rad der Geschichte', das sich jenseits des Vorhangs, also im off stage befindet, bleibt unsichtbar. Hier wird nun zur Vermittlung der Vorgänge im off stage ein seit der Antike bekanntes Mittel, nämlich die Teichoskopie, angewendet. Wie in einer Mauerschau beobachtet Bruscon durch den Vorhangspalt den Zuschauerraum und teilt seinen Mitspielern und natürlich auch den realen Zuschauern mit, was er sieht." 278 The curtain serves as a division between the private (back) stage of the family as theatre group, and the public (front) stage where Bruscon’s play “Das Rad” is to be performed; the auditorium for the villagers who come to see “Das Rad” remains invisible to the audiences of Der Theatermacher. In Scene 4, backstage performance to his family is visible to audiences of Der Theatermacher, as the private domain takes precedence; Bruscon does not perform parts of his role as Napoleon in “Das Rad”, but instead, enacts the role of eccentric artist in the dress of Napoleon to his family which is seated and watching him in the way an audience would. 279 The private carnival is privileged. Bruscon comments on the auditorium to his family and reaffirms the general nature of the tour to the group: “schaut auf seine Darsteller /In gewisser Weise /habe ich ja nichts /gegen diese Nester /Wo ein Wille ist /da ist auch ein Weg” (106). The Utzbach audience gathering to see “Das Rad” is visible to him through the curtain, but not to the audience of Der Theatermacher. 280 Even the front of the stage is barely visible to audiences of Der Theatermacher; what matters is the private carnival. Agathe and the children are seated in a row as audience behind the curtain and their performance is one of apathy; they never question Bruscon’s authority, and do not react, despite the sense of doom created by the rolls of thunder. Dressing up and zealously painting his wife’s face black (109) is the ultimate performance of preparation and which he uses to maintain power over his family theatre group. During these preparations his monologues reflect his increasing intellectual isolation. As Bruscon periodically peers through the stage curtain towards the front of the stage, the dance hall is secondary to the performance on the private stage. The frenzied painting of faces is the culmination of the work on the set. 281 Bruscon

278 Jang, p. 75
279 See Appendix II, No. 27, p. 344
280 See Appendix II, No. 28, p. 345
281 See Appendix II, No. 26, p. 343
performs the violent undercurrents of his theatre to his family. The threatening, destructive aspect of this private theatre is revealed behind the curtain.

Jang does not note the consequences of the theatre group having indeed moved from the front of the actual stage and the space in front of the stage which they have occupied for most of their performance in *Der Theatermacher* and which Bruscon has remained on throughout the first three scenes, to the back of the stage itself. Backstage, Bruscon acts in front of his family before the presbytery on fire becomes the stage for the villagers as their preferred entertainment, momentarily visible to audiences of *Der Theatermacher*, who see the audience dispersing as the curtain opens and hear multiple cries of “Der Pfarrhof brennt” (116). Bruscon remains backstage apart from looking out into the auditorium, performing as the eccentric “Theatermacher” to his family. Bruscon’s family theatre group are ultimately exposed to an empty auditorium in darkness and rain pouring in from the roof. When the scheduled performance of “Das Rad” is cancelled, he looks out once more and is not taken by surprise: “Als ob ich es geahnt hätte” (116). In the Burgtheater production, Bruscon defiantly faces away from the wide open stage curtain in the final instance, once he has realised that the auditorium is empty; he hereby signals that the survival of “Hohe Kunst” (76) must remain a private affair.

Although Bruscon is denied the opportunity to perform his play, he continues his theatre backstage, not as Napoleon in “Das Rad” but as an eccentric, even as he literally turns his back on the stage of the village. Family solidarity in the form of his family’s silence is shown as he once more takes centre stage in the private carnival while the chaos continues in the village. Dressed as Napoleon, his authority and control over the existence of all the members of his family is clear. The family plays a crucial role in maintaining Bruscon’s theatre; it functions as theatre group and audience simultaneously. He declares: “gerade heute Abend /wo ich die Absicht habe /mehr oder weniger eine Galavorstellung zu geben” (61), but this claim is later negated when he proceeds to make radical cuts for the Utzbach performance (105). His declared intention to rehearse *after* the performance (64) diminishes the importance of the Utzbach performance. The real performance unfolds off stage. The show of affection and pity from his daughter (116) also marks her recognition of the importance of theatre for him. The family’s understanding and acceptance of the fact that theatre is his life project allows his theatre to continue in private and behind the stage.
Jang terms him an “Angsthase, der seine Angst vor dem Publikum zu verdrängen versucht”, but Bruscon is not fearful. Fear is irrelevant to the carnival of creating his play, and represents a victory over the Utzbach audience whom he scorns as “Zwerggemeinde” (15).

The public performance of Bruscon’s play is momentarily eclipsed by the Utzbach audience’s focus on the burning rectory, but his existence is not doomed for three reasons. Firstly, cancellation of the performance has no effect on the nomadic lifestyle he and the family lead (and hence on the theatrical foundation of their existence); the play may be performed elsewhere. Secondly, the family as theatre group remains as closely knit as ever in the final scene backstage, serving as an audience for Bruscon. Thirdly, the fact that the play is not performed in Utzbach is relativised in his last words, echoing the opening lines of the play: “Als ob ich es geahnt hätte” (116). The show that matters has already taken place off stage. The failure of the performance in Utzbach leads him to re-affirm his belief in making theatre: “nachdem er durch den Vorhangspalt geschaut hat / Nur weil wir an uns glauben / halten wir es aus / überstehen wir les donnert / was wir nicht ändern können” (107).

Bruscon’s private theatre serves, in Gamper’s words, as a distraction from the catastrophe: “Pointiert erscheint so das Theater als ’Ablenkung von der Katastrophe’” (quoting Heldenplatz; 132).

Holzner states that Bruscon’s “Erfrierungsangst” (115) isolates him as theatre maker and deprives him of human warmth: “In der kalt gewordenen Welt ist dieser Theatermacher nicht imstande, das Eis zu brechen. Was bleibt, ist die Sehnsucht nach Wärme, nach mehr Menschlichkeit.” The fact that family relations are entirely determined by his theatrical project often makes Bruscon appear brutal and lacking in affection, yet at the end, he can affirm the importance of theatre as a compensation for the banality and misery of life. To Bruscon, family can only exist through theatre. Nevertheless, there is a confirmation of family solidarity at the end of Der Theatermacher, in the final gesture of affection Sarah shows her father backstage (“ihren Vater umarmend, ihn auf die Stirn küssend, sehr zärtlich [...] bringt ihm einen Sessel, auf dem er zusammensinkt”; 116), which arises

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282 Jang, p. 75
284 Holzner, p. 25
precisely out of the necessity for theatre in existence. Bruscon’s family members remain loyal to him because their lives have merged with his theatrical project, they show no desire to escape from it, and his children, his daughter Sarah in particular, give him emotional support. Both Sarah’s and Ferruccio’s defining characteristic is their unquestioning acceptance of Bruscon’s theatre as the motivating force in their lives.

III. 6. 3 Performance as rehearsal

In view of the incompetent theatre group, rehearsal is always unofficial performance, given the primacy of acting as a way of life. Equally, official performance becomes rehearsal. Even if a public audience is needed to maintain the image of “Das Rad” as world theatre, to Bruscon acting is primarily a form of self-realisation: “Aber schließlich spielen wir /für uns selbst” (88); “Hier probieren wir es nur aus /entwickeln wir es /perfektionieren wir uns” (24, my italics). He claims at first that he is determined to give a full run-through of his play (57). Yet this is not a serious aim; it is because acting is an end in itself that it does not matter what changes are made to the play in Utzbach. What matters to him is not performing for swine in Utzbach, but performing: “Möglicherweise streiche ich /den dritten Akt /die Churchillszene /siebzhente Szene /neunzhente Szene /In Utzbach muß nicht die ganze Komödie /gespielt werden /Vor die Säue” (104). On this basis entire scenes, even a whole act, can be casually dispensed with: “Wie in Gaspoltshofen /neunzhente Szene gestrichen /siebzhente Szene /die Churchillszene /den ganzen dritten Akt” (105). When in Scene 2 Bruscon demands of Sarah: “Nach der Vorstellung kommst du zu mir /und wir probieren die Stelle /und wenn es zwei Uhr früh ist /kein Pardon” (64, my italics), he is emphasizing the primacy of acting for its own sake.

Winkler argues that the primacy accorded to unofficial performance is of prime importance in Bruscon’s existence: “le ‘faiseur de théâtre’, n’apparaît jamais en tant qu’acteur et incarne ainsi l’absence chronique de théâtralité dans ce théâtre. Si elle avait été possible en dépit des empêchements matériels tels l’absence de spectateurs, l’orage et l’incendie du presbytère, la représentation théâtrale de La roue de l’histoire donnée par la troupe de Bruscon à Utzbach n’aurait eu lieu qu’après la pièce Le faiseur. Chez Thomas Bernhard, les acteurs n’ont pas a ‘faire’ de théâtre, à jouer la comédie. Ils attendent de

285 See Appendix II, No. 29, p. 346
pouvoir jouer, ou bien jouent à pouvoir attendre, en attendant de pouvoir agir, une fois le rideau tombé." Acting in private is more important than public performance.

### III. 7 Group theatre in *Der Theatermacher*

Off-stage and on-stage family theatre contributes to the comedy of *Der Theatermacher*. During the preparation of the stage, Ferruccio’s willingness to play his role in the on-stage preparations, in the theatre of Bruscon’s obsessions, is apparent in the scene where the baroque screen is placed on the stage, and Ferruccio (to play Metternich) obediently performs the tedious chore of positioning it where Bruscon wants to have it in relation to Lady Churchill’s fallen hat pin. The procedure extends over four pages (90-93):

BRUSCON  mit dem Stock auf den Paravent zeigend

[...]

Die Hutnadel liegt vor dem Paravent

Etwa da

Zeigt es mit dem Stock an

FERRUCCIO verrückt den Paravent

Fragend

Da

BRUSCON

Etwa da

Fuchtelt mit dem Stock herum

Da

Da

Wir dürfen natürlich

Nichts dem Gefühl überlassen

Wir haben alles ausgeklügelt

Und sind doch immer wieder am Anfang

Da

FERRUCCIO fragend

Da

BRUSCON

Ja da

Ferruccio stellt den Paravent ab

BRUSCON

Wo die Hutnadel liegt

Weiß Metternich nicht

[...]

Dahin

FERRUCCIO fragend

Wohin

BRUSCON

Dahin

Den Paravent dahin

\[286\] Winkler, *L'attente*, p. 25
Ferruccio rückt den Paravent dahin, wo ihn Bruscon haben will

[...]  
Ferruccio schiebt den Paravent nach rechts
BRUSCON
Das ist zu weit
Damit gewinnen wir nichts
Damit bekommt die Lady Churchill
Einen zu fahlen Gesichtsausdruck
Mit dem Stock anzeigend
Der Paravent muß wieder zurück
Ferruccio befolgt Bruscons Befehl
BRUSCON
Halt halt halt
Ferruccio holt Hammer und Nagel und nagelt den Paravent am Boden fest
BRUSCON
So ist es gut (90-93)

Ferruccio is an essential prop in Bruscon's theatre. Ferruccio's servility vis-à-vis Bruscon extends to performing puppet-like gestures that directly enable Bruscon's off-stage theatre to continue. Performance, even of a banal nature, such as repositioning the screen, is given primacy at all costs, since Ferruccio respects Bruscon's every whim as theatre maker.

Ferruccio's readiness to perform his father's theatre generally contrasts comically with his incompetence in rehearsing his roles in "Das Rad". The rehearsal with Ferruccio produces a comic show before the actual performance of "Das Rad" takes place. Bruscon points the stick to where Ferruccio should position himself and examines his posture and his bow, criticizing him: "Es stört mich immer /wenn du dich zu tief verneigst /wenn Napoleon hereinkommt /Schließlich bist du der König von Sachsen" (78). Elsewhere, despite extensive rehearsals, Bruscon is unable to make Ferruccio remember his lines as Metternich in relation to the set. Lady Churchill is supposed to lose her hat the moment Metternich appears (95-6), but Ferruccio's words do not correspond to the planned sequence: "Nein nein /die Hutnadel ist ja schon gefallen /wenn du das sagst /ich meine nicht die Hutnadel /der Hut /der Hut ist schon gefallen" (96).

With Ferruccio, there are comic rehearsals of inaccurately performed lines and misunderstandings (94-8), which Bruscon reacts to dramatically: "Bruscon mit dem Stock in die Luft schlagend /Um Gottes willen /weglassen habe ich gesagt" (98). There are senseless repetitions in the ineffective rehearsals. Any rehearsal is fruitless, yet Ferruccio is required to perform to Bruscon in front of the stage:

Ferruccio holt sich einen Sessel und setzt sich darauf
BRUSCON
Das Gewesene ist es
Das fortwährende Gewesene
Von da an
Also bitte
FERRUCCIO
Wir verhandelten ja nicht
Ohne diese Dokumente
BRUSCON *Ferruccio anherrscheid*
Aber nein
Ich sagte doch von Das Gewesene Das Fortwährende Gewesene an
FERRUCCIO
Das Fortwährende das Gewesene
BRUSCON
Umgekehrt Ferruccio umgekehrt
Schweinegrunzen
FERRUCCIO
Das Gewesene Das Fortwährende Gewesene
BRUSCON
Idiot
Ich sagte doch von da an
FERRUCCIO
Von da an
BRUSCON
Von da an
FERRUCCIO
Also von da an
BRUSCON
Mit hochaufgerichtetem Kopf naturgemäß
FERRUCCIO
Mit hochaufgerichtetem Kopf naturgemäß
BRUSCON
Um Gottes willen das steht doch nicht in meiner Komödie
Das sagte ich doch gerade
Zu dir (94-95)

Ferruccio's poor memory, absentmindedness, and parrot-like repetition of every line Bruscon utters, including the prompting, along with the interruption by pigs' grunts (94-5) heighten the comic effect of the scene. Ferruccio's repetition of lines does not improve his expression, but reinforces the comically inane lack of communication of his role. Other rehearsed lines are cut at the end of the rehearsal (98). Yet in the production (Burgtheater, 1985) Ferruccio's tears of desperation during this rehearsal are not met with sympathy. Bruscon does not genuinely want his children to perfect their roles, as rehearsal is a drama in itself, and their incompetence provides him with the scope to perform as theatre maker off stage, to chide them and enounce his perspectives on theatre (with Ferruccio - 96-7; with Sarah - 64).

The circumstances of Ferruccio's on-stage injury irritate Bruscon as they distracted the audience from the actual play, "Das Rad". In a scene with Stalin, Bruscon requires
Churchill (the accident-prone Ferruccio) to stamp on the floor. Despite Bruscon’s permanent fears of the floorboards breaking, Ferruccio injured himself up to the knee whilst stamping on the floor during the performance in Gaspoltshofen (23). Bruscon as Stalin picked him up and dragged him off the stage, which created immense applause, and so the injured Ferruccio as Churchill became a comic figure: “Ich hob Churchill auf /und trug ihn hinaus” (23). Following an earlier injury when falling from the first floor whilst going to the toilet (38), Ferruccio in plaster produces a different type of comedy on stage: “Im Gegenteil spielt er mit diesem Gipsarm /diese sogenannten Großherrsch /noch ausgezeichneten /als er sie bisher gespielt hat” (49) and his clumsiness is also a form of performance. Bruscon carnivalizes the historical figures played by Ferruccio with the palpably nonsensical assertion that all of them had a crippled right arm: “Die sogenannten Großherrscher /hatten alle einen verkrüppelten rechten Arm” (48).

Ferruccio fails to win Bruscon’s satisfaction even in the practical sphere. Much of the comedy in Der Theatermacher consists of incompetent performances during preparations. Ferruccio’s quality as theatrical figure lies far less in his verbal performance than in his silent gestures, as one critic noted: “Sensationell wie Martin Schwab den geistig minderbemittelten Sohn Bruscons nahezu ohne Worte gestaltet: Ausgefeilt in jeder Geste, jedem Mienenspiel, jeder Bewegung, erzählt dieser großartige Schauspieler das traurige Schicksal eines Unterdrückten mit seinen kleinen Freuden und einem großen, kaum bewußten Leid.” Ferruccio’s willingness to serve him in his preparations: “Ferruccio springt von der Leiter und nimmt wieder Geweihe und Bilder von den Wänden” (85) and he praises Ferruccio’s physical agility: “Gelenkigkeit” (69). The carnival of theatre as a way of life needs a fool present at all times, since the fool is integral to carnival, being “the constant, accredited representative of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season”. In the scene when Sarah and Ferruccio bring the mask box in front of the inn’s stage, and Bruscon performs fastidious instructions as to where it should be placed, Ferruccio awkwardly

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287 Die Presse, 3. 9. 1986 (review on Burgtheater production)
288 Rabelais and his World, p. 8
attempts to help, despite his temporary handicap, vexing Bruscon and provoking him into
deriding Ferruccio as a cripple:

*Ferruccio will den Kistendeckel aufsperren, aber es
gelingt ihm nicht mit seiner Gipshand*

**BRUSCON**

Ach Herr Wirt
Sperren Sie doch die Kiste auf
Mein Sohn ist ein Krüppel
Er ist unfähig
Die Kiste aufzusperren
Jetzt ist der Dummkopf
Auch noch ein Krüppel (50-51)

Both Sarah and Ferruccio seem completely resigned to tolerating their father’s theatre of
whims. They act as audience for his tirades against the world, but are also subjected to
unpredictable outbursts of violence, indicative of the capricious nature of the eccentric.
Bruscon throws a glass at Sarah (74); when she massages him, he kicks her face (52); he
makes her fall during the praise ritual (65), or attempts to beat her with a stick (77). Yet at
times he draws her towards him affectionately (56). Her childlike movements encourage
his behaviour. At times, he treats Sarah as a child: “tätschelt Sarahs Hand/Wenn wir erst in
Rouen sind /bekommst du auch das Ballkleid /das du dir wünschst” (75); “Du bist dumm
geblieben /aber ich liebe dich /wie kein zweites” (54); he sees her as “ein schönes Kind”
(55). What little resistance she shows is mute, as when she sticks out her tongue (73). On
the pretext of the tap water Sarah serves Bruscon, which he reacts to furiously, kicking
Sarah away and throwing the glass on the floor (74), Bruscon plays the children off
against one another once Sarah has swept up the glass, first ordering Ferruccio off the
stage to fetch mineral water and embracing Sarah, then chasing Sarah off the stage with
a stick, and telling Ferruccio how much he likes him, using virtually the same words he
had addressed to Sarah:

*Herrscht Ferruccio an*

Geh schon
*Ferruccio geht*
**BRUSCON zieht Sarah an sich*

Wie schön mein Kind
Mit dir allein zu sein
Wenn diese Fürchterlichen
Alle sind
*Nimmt ein Tuch aus der Rocktasche*

Sarah wischt ihm die Stirn ab (75, my emphasis)

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289 See Appendix II, No. 30, p. 347
Zu Sarah
Du steckst mit deiner Mutter
Unter einer Decke
Für Scherze
Die unter Umständen tödlich sein können
Habe ich nichts übrig
Geh und übe deinen Monolog
Du bist die größte Schwachstelle in meiner Komödie
Also verschwinde
Jagt sie mit dem Stock hinaus
Zu Ferruccio
Wie schön
Einmal mit dir allein zu sein
Wenn sie alle zum Teufel sind
Die uns zur Verzweiflung bringen (77, my emphasis)

But although both Ferruccio and Sarah submit to Bruscon’s dictates, their relationship with
him is not just servile; it is also supportive, and it enables performance. Sarah appears more
mature in the final scene. In human terms, Bruscon becomes the vulnerable figure at the
end of the play. Dressed as Lady Churchill, with sophisticated hairstyle and make-up, Sarah
comforts Bruscon and is the strong figure. Complete sympathy and solidarity with his
project are shown to Bruscon. This contrasts with her behaviour as a passive “Trotzkopf”
(sulky child) dressed in childlike clothes earlier in the play.

The theatre of life is as important as preparations for “Das Rad”; Sarah and Ferruccio
have been taught a massage technique by Bruscon which they perform in front of the stage.
It is the only occasion when Bruscon gives them outright praise. First, Sarah gives him a
foot massage:

Sarah zieht ihm die Schuhe aus, er streckt die Beine so
weit wie möglich, bewegt die Zehen
BRUSCON
Mach es wie in Gaspoltshofen
[…]
Wie in Gaspoltshofen mein Kind
Von oben nach unten
Von unten nach oben
Wie in Gaspoltshofen mein Kind
Sarah massiert ihren Vater an den Fußsohlen
So ist es gut (52)

Then, shortly afterwards in the same scene, both children give him a massage:

[BRUSCON]
Streckt die Beine weit aus, Sarah massiert die
Fußsohlen
Ferruccio stellt sich hinter Bruscon auf und macht auf den väterlichen Schultern Massagebewegungen
BRUSCON
Ihr beide
Seid die geborenen Massagekünstler
The link Bruscon makes between massage and performance lies in the art of massage, which encourages acting, imagination and art. The children are again facilitating Bruscon’s theatre. Their roles as “Massagekünstler” make up for their lack of talent in theatre; here, Bruscon makes his son and daughter an essential part of the sequence of preparations for a performance. Despite accusing them of a lack of talent in theatre, he needs his children’s support to continue his theatre. Through his authority over them, he has imposed a complementary ritualistic performance onto them, which, in contrast to their mother, they have perfected.

III. 8 Group theatre in Elisabeth II (Domestic theatre)

The domestics’ performance of the duties assigned to them by the eccentric attests to a mutual dependence and acceptance of routine. Herrenstein dictates and controls Fräulein Zallinger’s actions in his home and is equally proud of the fact that her independence was curtailed long ago: “Sie sind jetzt zweiundvierzig Jahre in meinem Haus Fräulein Zallinger /[…] /Sie hat ihre Karriere meinetwegen abgebrochen” (314). Both Richard and Zallinger have spent their working lives with Herrenstein. He treats them as his family, and his contact with them reflects a possessiveness and dependence that have increased with age. Yet they tolerate this routine and appear to have come to terms with it and the eccentric way of life. Loyalty goes far beyond that of fulfilling usual tasks in domestic service. Neither

290 See Appendix II, No. 31, p. 348
employee has demanding household tasks to complete. The eccentric’s rituals appear to mesmerize them.

Herrenstein depends on Richard and Zallinger despite their imperfections. He needs them to perform at the times he specifies. Both are there to play the roles he demands of them. When Zallinger is forced to play the piano during preparations for the buffet, Herrenstein becomes both stage director and audience. He tells her to play ("Sie sollen spielen"; 304) after a year’s interruption ("Es ist doch sicher ein Jahr /daß Sie etwas gespielt haben"; 305), yet claims to hate the piano: "Ich mag Klavier nicht /es ist nur für den perversen Geschmack" (305). It is an opportunity for him to criticise her performance whilst fighting boredom in existence, since he does not really appreciate her playing. His remarks: "Es war doch immer so angenehm wenn sie spielte" (305) are insincere, since he is merely addicted to the ritual of killing time: "ein Ohrenzeitvertreib ja" (306). This seems to be a ritual which has been discontinued, and which is now being reinstated. Zallinger for once appears to have asserted her own will, which seems to irritate Herrenstein ("Auf einmal haben Sie es aufgegeben /es ist sicher ein Jahr /[…] /Stellen Sie sich nicht so an Fräulein Zallinger"; 305). Herrenstein now reimposes his authority in the domestic arrangement because the domestic routine, in any case boring, has been upset: "Sie hat uns doch jeden Tag etwas gespielt /warum spielt sie nicht mehr /[…] /Sie ist natürlich ganz aus der Übung /was wir nicht fortwährend üben /geht uns in die Brüche" (305). The need for her role is entirely unrelated to appreciation of musical performance but centres on routine ("üben"). His demand for the ritual indicates that the existence of others in the group is completely dominated by the eccentric. There can be no life outside the eccentric arrangement.

Unfinished performance characterises both Zallinger’s playing and Richard’s reading. Herrenstein controls what they perform. Their performance takes the form of repetitive cycles that never advance because they never change and are never completed. Herrenstein depends on these rituals, though he affects to despise them. Herrenstein is unwilling to listen to a performance in its entirety (306). His interruptions form part of a routine which the automated secondary figures are used to. Although this routine sustains a deadly boredom, he is addicted to it.
Zallinger’s theatre alternates between attempted perfectionism when performing menial domestic rituals such as laying the table, and momentary clumsiness, as when she falls over with a tray of full glasses (339). She represents another of Bernhard’s negative female images on the stage of the Burgtheater: “Libgart Schwarz (Zallinger), so scheint es, wurde von Thomas Langhoff zu ihrem Unglück aufgetragen, die Karikatur von Bernhards Frauenfiguren aus Peymann-Inszenierungen zu geben.” Like Agathe Bruscon, she coughs (317). Further, despite her tendency to be accident prone, Herrenstein needs her, although he claims: “Um mich kümmert sie sich nicht die dumme Gans” (339). He sarcastically questions the usefulness of her miscellaneous tasks, emphatically dehumanizing her: “Die Zallinger ist ein Faktotum/mit stark eingeschränktem Nützlichkeitsfaktor” (339). Zallinger’s on-stage movements, commanded by Herrenstein, are ritualistic and stiff. She takes her roles seriously; in the production (Burgtheater, May 2002), she wipes her hands and makes the sign of the cross before submitting to the role of piano playing. She never developed as an individual and her failure to perform well is symbolic of her failure to become independent and her non-achievements in her own life. Herrenstein controls her non-development for his own ends.

At the same time, just as Herrenstein watches his domestics perform their “duties”, so his obsessions are performed in front of them: he depends on them to be his audience as well as his puppets. In private, the eccentric is centre of attention, whereas he remains deliberately in the background when guests gather for the reception (332 ff). Richard serves as a silent audience for Herrenstein’s tirades, as at the beginning of Scene 2, but Herrenstein’s physical dependence on him becomes apparent at regular intervals; it must always be Richard who helps him in his personal rituals. Winding the clock is an eccentric performance which, despite its element of banal necessity, produces an odd exposure of Herrenstein’s disability. Nevertheless, it is a self-defined performance, a ritual which is rooted in his childhood (as the family meal in Ritter, Dene, Voss) and thus symbolizes the continuity of the past in Herrenstein’s life into his present old age. Herrenstein is dependent on the regularity of the ritual which he has performed since childhood (“Es ist diese alte Gewohnheit /daß ich die Uhr aufziehe /ich habe sie schon in meiner Kindheit aufgezogen”;

291 See Appendix II, No. 32, p. 349
292 Süddeutsche Zeitung, 1. 6. 2002 (on Burgtheater production)
317), and he is reassured by this fact. Herrenstein is irritated that the regularity has been allowed to slip recently: “in letzter Zeit vergessen wir oft /die Uhr aufzuziehen” (316).

Routine is necessary to existence, as without it there would be nothing. He is fearful of forgetting, in particular his rituals: “Wir existieren ja nur /weil wir noch nicht alles vergessen haben” (286). The stage directions indicate the accuracy of the gestures during the ceremony: “Richard schiebt Herrenstein vor die Standuhr und gibt ihm den Uhrschlüssel” (316); “Richard hebt ihn in die Höhe [...] /Frl.Zallinger und die Mädchen sind stehengeblieben und beobachten, wie Richard Herrenstein hochhebt und wie Herrenstein die Uhr aufzieht” (317). The eccentric is at the centre: his rituals appear to sustain not just his own life, but the lives of his servants. This is very like Der Theatermacher. Herrenstein relies on Richard to enable him to perform the ritual of winding the clock, a daily show which is watched silently by the whole body of maids. 293 The daily performance is necessary to the self-discipline which enables Herrenstein to go on living: “so wie ich die Uhr aufziehe /ziehe ich mich selbst auf jeden Tag” (317). The ritual is an instance of “Situationskomik” in Elisabeth II, given its theatrical aspects and the awkwardness of Herrenstein’s movements, even if he as cripple is not meant to be seen as a comic figure in the play as a whole. The comedy of the clock ritual lies in Herrenstein’s desire for physical closeness. In the production (2002), the gestures of the helpless cripple are exaggerated, as Herrenstein clings to Richard whenever possible. Richard helps him in and out of the wheelchair and Herrenstein’s plastic feet fall to the ground stiffly. Herrenstein hugs Richard at the end, an apparently coincidental gesture of physical frailty, before falling back into his chair.

The cripple’s theatre is also symbolic of Richard’s role in the eccentric’s system. Richard enables this theatre of disability to continue. His latent rebellious tendencies are evident when he lifts the cane and almost hits his master as soon as Herrenstein remarks that the clock has stopped (316), thus initiating the start of the ritual. Even if this is merely a playful gesture, as it is made to seem in the production (2002), Richard’s theatrical gestures convey a sense of a lack of seriousness in performing Herrenstein’s theatre, and his domestic role overall, since he does not always respect Herrenstein. Nonetheless, Herrenstein’s final spontaneous movement towards Richard at the end of the ritual when

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293 See Appendix II, No. 33, p. 350
Richard carries him to his wheelchair is a prominent detail in the production (Burgtheater, 2002): in a curious gesture, Herrenstein suddenly pushes Richard into the wheelchair, reversing their positions at the moment when Richard performs Herrenstein’s demand to place him – a cripple – in his “Ohrensessel” (318) for a brief time. This detail is significant for Richard’s own passive position given his role in Herrenstein’s existence. Herrenstein takes his place in his armchair ("mein[em] Sterbesessel"; 318), a scene combining comedy and tragic illusion: although Herrenstein remains a terminally ill cripple and needs his wheelchair, Richard is trapped in the eccentric system and is under the power of the crippled eccentric, unable to live freely. Richard too is a cripple: his body may be healthy, but his life is crippled by his dependence on Herrenstein and his inability to escape from the domestic routine which shapes his existence. Yet this routine facilitates his (and Herrenstein’s) performance.

**III. 8. 1 Herrenstein’s private theatre versus social theatre in Elisabeth II**

Herrenstein is more concerned with the disturbance to his domestic rituals than the Queen’s visit to Vienna. He has opened his doors to a number of select guests outside his domestic circle, from Viennese high society; yet the eccentric is fundamentally indifferent both to the socially exclusive reception and to the Queen. When his nephew arrives at the party, he greets him with a complaint concerning the number of guests (330-1), in view of the fact that he despises them: “Ich hasse diese Leute wie du weiß” (331). No other topic is broached with the nephew. Herrenstein’s private theatre focuses on his own condition: in the midst of the social gathering in the flat Herrenstein indulges in a self-pitying account regarding his isolation and lack of sleep; he then voices his sense of loss and abandonment as a geriatric in front of his nephew and Richard: “Warum hat denn deine Mutter so früh wegsterben müssen /alle sterben sie weg /dem Übriggebliebenen bleibt nichts erspart” (332). Finally, Richard is forced to examine Herrenstein’s painful chest in front of the approaching guests (333-4).

Later during the reception held on the occasion of the grandiose public show – which only Herrenstein is unexcited by, he openly speaks of his dependence on Richard: “zieht an Richards Rock /Das wissen Sie doch Richard /Sie wissen ganz genau /wie ich zu Ihnen

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294 See Appendix II, No. 34, p. 351
stehe /[..] /Sie können alles von mir haben /wenn Sie bleiben alles /wirklich alles” (345). Herrenstein attempts to distract Richard at an important moment, like a child. Herrenstein always gives prominence to private, domestic performance over the reception unfolding simultaneously, and this exchange with Richard, in the presence of the guests – to whom Herrenstein seems oblivious, foreshadows Herrenstein’s final indifference to the collapse of the balcony and his reversion to his eccentric routine. There is very little left for Herrenstein to live for, since he is a cripple on the verge of death. Material riches and social theatre no longer hold significance: “Mir gefällt nichts mehr” (347); he is attached primarily to the domestic routine. Indeed, to be left alone in his home by Richard would mean death: “ich bin ohne Sie nichts wert das wissen Sie /dann bin ich nicht nur ein Krüppel /sondern ein toter Krüppel” (345). These words are spoken whilst the guests enter the stage which, although set in Herrenstein’s private salon, recalls the exceptional public event that day given the central view of the balcony at the back of the stage. As a geriatric, his isolation from the world and above all his eccentricity are intensified by his physical distance from the group of guests gathered on the other side of the stage: the reception lies outside Herrenstein’s sphere of interest.

The guests’ need for spectacle and theatre unfolds against Herrenstein’s private theatre, which is foregrounded on the stage. At the beginning of Scene 3, on one side of the stage, the guests who have arrived appear to be enjoying the occasion. As they listen to Neutz’s jokes with repeated loud outbursts of laughter (347), they themselves begin to act out their own black comedy. Their uniformly black attire, intended for the second social event of that day, Heldwein’s funeral, turns the event into a performance of social falsity. In the Burgtheater production, the large group of guests is visible but (with the exception of Neutz) inaudible apart from its stilted laughter, throughout the final scene. The group laughs, then enters the balcony (visible to audiences) before the imminent disaster, which unfolds against the backdrop of of the Queen’s visit – a spectacle unseen by audiences of Elisabeth II, who do not see the pomp, the Ringstraße or the consequences of the balcony collapse which takes place just behind the stage as part of the public show. What really matters in Elisabeth II is the contrast between the theatricality of a superficial reception and, on the other side of the stage, the eccentric’s private, self-centred, antisocial discourse.
III. 8. 2 Verbal exchange between Herrenstein and domestics

Zallinger and Richard both appear polite to Herrenstein. Both answer questions with standard responses, which are a mockery of truth, since they are not always genuine, as they reflect inner indifference and mere routine loyalty to the eccentric arrangement. These responses also provoke Herrenstein’s tirades. Zallinger and Richard are servants first and foremost, and despite the lack of depth, the group relationship continues because the roles are fixed by the eccentric. The domestics’ verbal responses correspond to a fixed role in the hierarchy of the relationship – which the carnival depends on. Despite a relationship which has in other respects become comfortable and predictable, there are clearly still abnormal forms of verbal exchange between master and servants (mainly Richard, but at times Zallinger); these pre-empt open, authentic dialogue. Herrenstein, for his part, attempts to play a game of insincerity with them, giving false opinions. In giving these, he is never contradicted by his domestics. This absence of any debate and the unnatural responses on the part of the domestics is a reversal of the norms of genuine communication, given the 25 year-long relationship between master and servants. Herrenstein’s desire to be different reflects a subversive attitude to the world, a carnivalesque freedom to invert norms. He uncrowns the value of cultural and social traditions and projects the “peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’” by attacking the characteristics of the Salzkammergut, a region he knows well (299). Herrenstein insists on independence by enouncing a different view of the social world. His repetitive abuses are a form of carnival, since they reverse bourgeois views and create the characteristic eccentric perspective, but one which has no real principles: “Bad Ischl ist doch widerwärtig /[…] die Konditorei Zauner /heute eine der geschmacklosesten Konditoreien überhaupt /je größer eine Geschmacklosigkeit im Salzkammergut ist /desto beliebter ist sie /Das Salzkammergutpublikum ist das geschmackloseste überhaupt” (299). Richard never confronts Herrenstein when he performs his tirades, thus allowing the eccentric to take centre stage to carnivalize his heritage.

Bakhtin writes: “Many ancient forms of carnival were preserved and continue to live and renew themselves in the farcical comic antics of the public square, and also in the circus.” Herrenstein’s exchange with Richard over breakfast on the subject of his

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295 Rabelais and his World, p. 11
296 Dostoevsky’s Poetics, p. 131
fascination with the circus as a form of theatre (291-2; see below) gives an interesting insight into the symbolism behind Richard’s firm rejection of the circus. As discussed earlier, in Ein Kind the circus image of a tightrope is a symbol of survival. All tricks have been mastered in this art of “Überlebenskunst” (Ein Kind; 31), but despite the rejection of a normal life, the circus is not a free or fun existence; it is risky and demanding, and Richard rejects the circus because he prefers the security of Herrenstein’s household. Yet the circus is also predictable, as is Richard’s existence in Herrenstein’s household, and Richard’s life and the life of the tightrope walker may be likened through the continual re-enactment of a succession of well-rehearsed roles. Richard is also trapped in the carnival, even if his roles are unexciting by comparison; he performs his own “Überlebenskunst” and enables Herrenstein to do the same. The home therefore represents a perverse stability, a prison like the circus in which Richard is “gefangen” (Ein Kind, 31); he must perform in Herrenstein’s theatre. Herrenstein for his part is allured by the circus because it is a life so different from the norm in society (with its elements of degeneration: “Verkommenheit”; 292). But he has imposed an arrangement in his household which is abnormal in itself. Further, Herrenstein is conscious of the theatricality in his life – his rituals, his tirades, all are performed. He has a love-hate relationship with the theatre, having wanted to be an actor in his youth (290) but at the same time claiming: “Schauspielerei hat mich aber doch immer abgestoßen” (291). Yet he acts out his own theatrical carnival in the home, and is fully in control of Richard’s role in it – ironically, he tells Richard he would be good as an actor, but he is already performing in Herrenstein’s domestic theatre:

HERRENSTEIN
Selbst Ihre Stimme ist eine Schauspielkunststimme
Sie haben nie gedacht zum Zirkus zu gehen nie
RICHARD
Nie
HERRENSTEIN
Als ganz kleines Kind
Hatte ich die Idee zum Zirkus zu gehen
Wie meine Mutter
[...]
Alle Leute haben doch Lust auf Theater
Auf Verkommenheit
RICHARD
Ich habe diese Lust nie gehabt (291-292)

The social hierarchy is thus maintained, preventing the free expression of human feelings. Above all with Richard, talk is never allowed to deepen, although Herrenstein
longs for closeness. The frequent distance between them on the stage corresponds to the flatness and lack of emotion in the relationship. As one critic noted on Herrenstein’s isolation: “Er ist auf Liebesworte oder wenigstens liebe Worte aus. Und bekommt nur gehorsamste Wortknickse. Er bekommt wie ein reiches, ungezogenes Kind jeden Wunsch erfüllt. Und muß doch im Sandkasten allein spielen.” 297 Herrenstein inhabits a world of existential coldness. At times, he attempts to communicate feelings underneath the guise of query; 298 at others, he tries to initiate an exchange of opinion. Richard for his part knows that his forms of non-communication will provoke Herrenstein, and gives a formula of feigned indifference calculated to generate an angry response. Richard’s words are all part of a routine according to which he incites Herrenstein to act.

Herrenstein’s tirades and carnivalesque perspectives are the theatre which sustains his life:

Zu Richard
Sie sind doch auch kein Anhänger
von Giordano und Konsorten
das trieft ja vor Verlogenheit
Mögen Sie Giordano oder nicht
RICHARD
Natürlich nicht Herr Herrenstein
Natürlich nicht
HERRENSTEIN
Es ist unerträglich
Wenn Sie immer natürlich nicht sagen
Es gibt Tage da sagen Sie nichts anderes (294-295)

Richard tends to give the viewpoint Herrenstein expects, reflecting his role in the hierarchy of master-servant. His refusal to confront Herrenstein in any way even after 25 years is a carnivalistic form of behaviour. Herrenstein makes others perform a viewpoint which he accepts, with no regard for truth, merely for the sake of a response. Herrenstein dislikes theatre, but here he is indifferent to Richard:

Sie gehen doch gern in Schauspiele nicht wahr
RICHARD
Natürlich Herr Herrenstein
HERRENSTEIN
Die Oper strengt mich weniger an (341)

297 Frankfurter Allgemeine, 1.6.2002 (on Burgtheater production)
298 Herrenstein enquires to Richard about the weather at the beginning of the play (“ist es denn heute trüb”; 283), to which Richard’s response is minimal and contradicts Herrenstein. Jang refers to this exchange: “Der einsame Räsonieur, der sich mit seinem Haß gegen die Welt wendet, sucht doch über das Handicap seiner Sehschwäche wiederholt die Kontakt- bzw. Dialogmöglichkeit” (Die Ohn- Machtpiele, p. 80).
In another exchange, Richard appears to be complacent with Herrenstein’s antisocial nature, and his repetitive response establishes a routine which enables Herrenstein’s theatre of eccentricity:

Stoßen Sie denn Menschenansammlungen nicht ab  
stört es Sie denn nicht  
soviele Leute auf einem Platz  
RICHARD  
Natürlich Herr Herrenstein  
HERRENSTEIN  
Die Normalität ist es nicht  
Abgestoßen zu sein von der Masse  
Die Leute lieben die Zusammenrottung  
[...]  
ich habe immer von allen weg wollen  
aus allen hinaus wollen (304)  

Zallinger briefly provokes Herrenstein with her stock response, which gives him the prompt he needs:

Sind Sie ehrlich Fräulein Zallinger  
wo fahren Sie lieber hin  
auf den Semmering oder nach Altaussee  
ZALLINGER  
Nach Altaussee Herr Herrenstein  
HERRENSTEIN  
Daß sie immer alle  
In dieses perverse Künstlerloch wollen (292)  

In another instance, her words confirm loyalty to the domestic arrangement, and the prompt is the same formulation Richard uses:

Hat es Sie jemals gereut  
daß Sie bei mir sind Fräulein Zallinger  
ZALLINGER  
Natürlich nicht Herr Herrenstein  
HERRENSTEIN  
Sie sind jetzt zweihundvierzig Jahre in meinem Haus Fräulein Zallinger  
[...]  
Wir werden jetzt wieder jeden Tag Musik machen  
Sie werden jeden Tag ein anderes Stück spielen  
Damit Sie wieder in Übung kommen (314, my italics)  

Here, Zallinger acts as Richard’s double: to give precisely the prompt that Herrenstein wants, as he continues to control her life, with its lack of scope for self-development; this has been thwarted by routine imposed by her master. Yet Zallinger appears to have no regrets and simply continues to prompt Herrenstein by giving him the absurdly compliant responses he expects; her character has been moulded by decades of service to Herrenstein. Herrenstein affirms his need to control her life by subjecting it to routine performances
which enable his theatre: he repeats “jeden Tag”, determining the regularity of “Übung” –
 piano practice, which is part of a ritualistic performance.

Herrenstein regularly receives the standard responses “Natürlich” or “Natürlich
nicht” on the part of his employees. They are carnivalistic expressions, firstly because they
are not genuine expressions of opinion, but are symbolic of mock submission to the
standard master-servant verbal rituals within the carnival. They are abnormal forms of
verbal exchange which pre-empt genuine dialogue. Secondly, the servants know that
phrases like “Natürlich” prompt Herrenstein in the way he needs. In the following scene,
there is a joint refusal on the part of Richard and Zallinger to enter into a real conversation.
They collaborate in making his theatre possible when they are on the stage with him.
Herrenstein imposes on them a ritual which refuses human closeness; this is part of the
(absurd) isolation and fixity of the eccentric, but it is that very isolation which is the
precondition of his theatre. The cruelty here, in the repetitions he provokes, is on
Herrenstein’s part. Words are not allowed to break free from whatever is established,
becoming a farce of non-communication; they confirm the social hierarchy in the domestic
carnival and the eccentric’s central role within it. In general, there is virtually no genuine
exchange between master-servants. Herrenstein also repeats satirically the employees’
stock responses of conformation to his own expectations, but his is acted irritation, not
genuine:

zu Fräulein Zallinger
Haben Sie meinen dicken schwarzen Mantel ausgebürstet Fräulein Zallinger
ZALLINGER
Natürlich Herr Herrenstein
HERRENSTEIN
Natürlich Herr Herrenstein
Zu Richard
Für das Begräbnis nehmen wir den Renault
RICHARD
Natürlich Herr Herrenstein
HERRENSTEIN
Natürlich Herr Herrenstein
Natürlich Herr Herrenstein
Greift sich an den Kopf
Natürlich Herr Herrenstein
Zu Fräulein Zallinger nach einer Pause
Nur Kaltes gibt es
Nur Kaltes
ZALLINGER
Natürlich nur Kaltes
Herr Herrenstein
HERRENSTEIN
Ich esse ja fast nichts mehr (308-309)

Richard’s responses are spoken indifferently, yet they are of real consequence to Herrenstein and to their relationship. Richard is used to performing according to Herrenstein’s moods. Herrenstein may or may not be serious about the issues he addresses; what matters to him is the freedom to perform which gives his life what (absurd) substance it has (this also applies to Bruscon and Voss). The servants play a vital enabling role in the carnival.

To the eccentric, the creative licence of verbal performance is everything. Words are Herrenstein’s reality, since his non-committal nature undermines the significance of the spoken word. Words enable him to create himself by being different, and Herrenstein knows that Richard knows this. Every human life may be seen, according to Rorty, as an ongoing process of self-definition: “the always incomplete [...] re-weaving of such a web.” Since the eccentric has no real principles, language enables the creation of changing individuality. What matters is performance, not what is said. The eccentric never commits himself to one view and continues to remake himself through language:

Ich sage jeden Tag etwas Anderes
das wissen Sie doch Richard
das ist ja das Furchterliche
ich lege mich fest
und löse alles wieder auf
so ist es seit Jahren (348)

Here, Herrenstein also admits how, through playing language games, and making promises without keeping them (i.e. concerning his testament), he controls others, particularly Richard. Herrenstein’s awareness of the plasticity of language is the springboard for his licence to create contradictory versions of himself and of his opinions:

Alles ist wichtig
wir vergessen immer
daß alles wichtig ist Richard
es gibt nichts Unwichtiges
glauben Sie nicht auch Richard
daß es nichts Unwichtiges gibt
daß alles wichtig ist
darauf beruht doch alles
daß alles gleich wichtig ist
und nicht anders (324)

What is important is to perform – no matter what. The routine of the servants prompting Herrenstein is necessary if he is to continue staging his life as a theatrical performance.

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Rorty, “The Contingency of Selfhood”, in Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, pp. 42-3
III. 9 The influence of the family home on performance in Ritter, Dene, Voss

The claustrophobic interior of the family home provokes a brief performance of reaction by Voss, which reveals an inability to effect change in the setting or home arrangement, since the carnival of the siblings’ private relations is performed there. Voss’s proclaimed desire for independence from the past is constantly thwarted by the home environment, his attitude to his sisters and the need for repetition in his obsessive behaviour. Voss is compelled to make regular visits home, even though he claims to feel existentially threatened there, because there is real understanding between the brother and his sisters. He, therefore, refuses normal communication with his sisters and accuses them of destroying him. Family relations are destructive in the sense that they inhibit change, but change would destroy the routines on which all three are dependent. Voss knows that, judged from a “normal” perspective, routine is deadly, yet it is necessary for him to stage his carnival, part of which is his claim to be a misunderstood philosophical genius. He admits that this sense of being misunderstood by others is a trait he shares with his sisters, but he instinctively realizes that they know and understand him, so there is an ambiguity. The eccentric cannot admit that others know more than he does, but the sisters remain part of his life, and he needs them to perform his “philosophy”:

Ich habe nicht die Absicht gehabt
hierher zu gehen
Meine Schwestern sind meine Zerstörerinnen
sie vernichten mich
sage ich mir immer
 [...] 
gehe ich nach Hause
ist es mein Tod
Verwandtschaft bedeutet den Tod
 [...] 
die Verständnislosigkeit ist das einzige
das mich an meine Schwestern bindet
habe ich gedacht
du verstehst mich doch (174-175)

Voss desperately attempts to assert a sense of difference from his sisters, through mockery and rejection of the family heritage, which is part of his carnival pose. Taking down and re-arranging portraits of members of his immediate family, he claims: “Daran haben wir immer gelitten /unter diesen häßlichen Bildern” (200) and criticizes what he sees as distortion and falsification in portraiture (200), scorning and thus carnivalizing the value of
this convention. He accuses his sisters of following this tradition: “ihr seid doch nicht
/auf einen solchen malenden Scharlatan hereingefallen” (200). The sisters’ portraits, when
presented to Voss, provoke an angry reaction of disgust (204-6), and the sisters thus enable
him to stage a performance. Dene then removes the sisters’ portraits (205). This scene
forms a preliminary to the interlude of the group’s destructive attempt to move the
sideboard.

Voss’s attempts to effect change are destructive and frustrating, whether they are
habitual or not. In earlier years, he attempted to escape his past by going abroad, but never
permanently (184), since travel resulted in a loss of self-esteem: “wir geben alles auf /um
alles zu gewinnen /und sind am Ende weniger wert als am Anfang” (184). He attempts to
come to terms with the past through philosophy: “ich überwinde alles nur mit Denken”
(174), but Voss’s kind of thought involves carnival, since he is disillusioned by
conventional philosophy and sees Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as “ekelerregend” (196).
On returning to the family home from Steinhof, Voss remarks: “Ich dachte /es wäre alles
anders /aber ihr habt es nicht geändert /Alles wird anders sein habe ich gedacht /An allem
festhalten /ist charakteristisch für euch” (179). The sisters have not changed the interiors,
but this gives Voss his cue, as they know it will. He knows they will not (and cannot)
change anything, nor does he really want them to, because this is part of the ritual in which
they all collude. He controls the group’s theatre. Holding the father’s portrait provokes a
theatrical reaction: “Ich habe ihn immer gehaßt /ich wünschte seinen Tod /sein Tod hatte
auf meinen Haß keinen Einfluß” (182-3). When faced with the family portraits, his actions
of rearranging the order (199-200) and removing the other portraits from the walls (203;
207) are a reaction to the ever-present hierarchy, but in the end the only change made is
hanging them up back to front in the same room (225) when the sisters go out of the room,
since this gives him the excuse to stage a performance, to “celebrate” his “difference” and
his inversion of bourgeois family norms. The apparent attempt to gain authority over the
situation and to deal with the past must fail as no real change is ever effectuated or desired.
The traditional, stale interior and sense of continuity are symbolic of family roots. “Ganz
allgemein herrscht in Bernhards Oeuvre eine Aura des Altmodischen, des Vergangenen, in

300 See Appendix II, No. 35, p. 352
301 See Appendix II, No. 36, p. 353
Figuren-Konstellationen und Lebensproblematik. Die Personen leben in einer Welt der Vergangenheit, mit der Kunst der Vergangenheit, in Intérieurs der Vergangenheit [...].”

In the production (Burgtheater, 1986), the old discoloured interior decoration is apparent. The past symbolizes the fixity and continuity which are the basis of routine.

Real change is thwarted. Exposing the walls underneath the portraits Voss removes uncovers relatively dark, clean wallpaper which, despite its ugliness, and the fact that it has not been changed for fifty years, signals the desirability of change in theory, yet also the tangible weight of the past:

[VOSS]
Aber es muß natürlich
ausgemalt werden
oder tapeziert werden frisch
fünfzig Jahre ist nicht ausgemalt werden
nicht tapeziert worden
dieser Geruch
sieht sich die Tapete da an, wo er die Bilder
heruntergenommen hat
So war sie einmal
Die Tapete
Auch nicht besser

Das Neue ist ja noch abstoßender
Und überhaupt gehört hier
Einmal etwas geändert (207-8, my emphasis)

The ritual of attempting to gain authority over the situation and to deal with the past fails, as Voss cannot initiate change by arranging for redecoration or the like. Voss does not really seek newness or change, being afraid of both, because they are symbolically associated with the end of the carnivalesque rituals which sustain his and his sisters’ performance.

Ultimately Voss hangs the portraits up back to front (225), but they remain in the same room. He symbolically refuses change. Voss tries to convince himself and the sisters of the necessity for change: “Es ist unser Haus/nicht mehr das der Toten” (208), yet change is inimical to the group’s theatre, given the burden of the past carried by the brother and sisters alike.

Attempts to move the sideboard are devastating and result in the shattering of inherited family porcelain (208-9), symbolic of the inability to deal with the family past effectively. The attempt at change results in destruction, so it is discontinued:

[VOSS]
Anschieben

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302 Bernhard Sorg, Thomas Bernhard, Autorenbücher 627, (München, Beck, 1992), p. 172
Konzentrieren und anschieben
Alle schieben ruckartig an und in der Kredenz fällt
Geschirr durcheinander
[...]
DENE macht die Kredenztüren auf und nimmt nach und nach
einen Haufen Scherben heraus
Die schönen Herendteller
Die schöne böhmische Teekanne
Mein Gott
Dreht sich nach ihrem Bruder um
Die schönsten Stücke zerbrochen (209)

Next, his theatre of experimentation with the position of the clock, which Voss believes
does not fit in the dining room, does not result in fundamental change and the
repositioning of the clock is symbolic of domestic stagnation. Obsessions are
inconsequential; again, the desire for change is again pretended, not sincere:

Solange ich denken kann
stört es mich
daß die Uhr dort steht
Nur einen halben Meter nach links
Vielleicht nur auf Probe
Geht zur Uhr und schiebt sie ein wenig nach links
und tritt zurück und betrachtet sie
Geht so weit als möglich zurück und betrachtet sie
Nein
Nicht gut
Nicht gut
Geht zur Uhr und schiebt sie wieder auf ihren
ursprünglichen Platz und tritt einen Schritt zurück
und beobachtet sie
[...]
Was sagt ihr dazu
Wohin stellen wir die Uhr
Aber die Uhr muß hinaus
Ich ertrage den Anblick der Uhr nicht (209-210)

The clock gives him the opportunity to make theatre – the only antidote to boredom he
knows, and which he cannot give up.

Voss perceives the palpable past in the home as deathly. After the clock experiment,
Ritter turns on the record player to a Beethoven composition and Voss comments on the
ceiling whilst looking up at it: “Eines Tages stürzt sie ein /und tötet euch” (210). Later in
the scene, he again looks at the ceiling. Despite the threat of destruction, he is unable to
break away from his roots:

richtet sich auf und schaut auf die Decke
Ein Erdbeben wirkte sich allerdings
verheerend aus
aber die alten Häuser
stürzen ja nicht ein
[...]  
dieses schäbliche Vaterland  
Dann denke ich wieder  
Daß wir kein besseres haben (216)  

There is no alternative to the inherited culture. Although he despises his heritage, and sees Austria as awful, it can be carnivalized, and nowhere else is any better.

III. 10 The mute theatre of the secondary figures

The eccentric is never confronted by other figures. His views are never challenged directly; he depends on the other figures to participate actively, taking on roles, as stage hands in his theatre, as well as silent audience for his monologues. The secondary figures thus play an integral role in the eccentric’s theatre through compliance with it, giving him practical and moral support. Bruscon, Herrenstein and Voss rely on the others’ long term dependence on the structures they impose which give scope for difference from the norm, but not individuality for the secondary figures in any real sense. The secondary figures, unable to establish their own lives in the long term, often seem mesmerized by the eccentric, and their acceptance of the domestic/private conditions allows the carnival to become established. Their frequent dumbness faced with the eccentric’s criticisms may seem absurd, because it is an inversion of normal social relations (as is the eccentric’s mocking or scolding form of address), but playing dumb is an essential role within the carnival, because it allows the eccentric to perform. The secondary figures are often absurdly compliant with his theatre, and their roles do not change or develop, because they are imposed on to them by the eccentric and their own lives are empty outside the carnival which in itself allows for no fulfilment.

The silence of the secondary figures is at times an indirect encouragement of the eccentric’s performance; at others, it is ambiguous. There are moments of apparent rebellion against the eccentric through a momentary refusal to participate in a prescribed theatre, as in Agathe’s case during rehearsals and behind the stage curtain just before the scheduled performance of “Das Rad”. In Der Theatermacher, the family affects Bruscon’s own theatrical performance, as is evident in Agathe’s incompetent theatre and cough (see below: III. 10. 1). The apparent rebelliousness in the behaviour of these secondary figures becomes a joke at their own expense, effectively an acknowledgement that they cannot and will not change. Whereas Voss’s sisters allow his domestic
performance to continue and their vocabulary bears strong traits of his creation, Richard’s crucial periodic verbal silence (which enables Herrenstein to perform – see below: III. 10. 2) and Agathe’s cough used as a form of petty rebellion thwart any possibility of genuine dialogue. But these performances are ineffective as they do not harm the eccentric set-up. Agathe’s cough is in fact accepted as an established role in the eccentric’s theatre. The secondary figures do not initiate change as their role enables the eccentric to perform his roles and tirades. Nevertheless, even if there are moments of mute rebellion, the eccentric’s influence on the other figures’ lives in general is evident in their passivity and acceptance of the arrangement. Richard compromises any individuality by staying in Herrenstein’s household, and Agathe’s independence, even her earlier influence on the children’s upbringing, has long been curtailed by Bruscon.

III. 10. 1 Agathe’s theatre

Bruscon accuses his wife of acting out her own theatre, and mockingly disqualifies this as reflecting her incompetence in theatre: “Krankheitsfetischismus” (90); “Hustenvortäuschung / Asthmatheater” (69). He scorns this form of acting: “Ihr ganzes Talent / investiert eure Mutter / in ihre gespielten Krankheiten / anstatt in die Schauspielkunst” (69). But Agathe never directly challenges Bruscon. Her absurd tolerance of his whims is a form of behaviour which is also typical of her children, but it is taken to extremes as she has no words to speak in Der Theatermacher. The fact that she never verbally confronts Bruscon indicates that in Der Theatermacher there is a complete carnivalistic inversion of the norms determining family relations (although there is limited verbal exchange between father and children, even if it concerns theatre alone). The abnormal absence of communication between husband and wife, particularly when he castigates her as part of his eccentric theatre, corresponds to her role of playing dumb in the carnival, which enables his theatre of tirades. Although Agathe’s roles are fixed in “Das Rad”, she apparently fails to satisfy Bruscon, whose exasperation with her continuous incompetence in learning lines and her endless coughing becomes a source of comedy in Der Theatermacher. Her cough has become a ritualised performance of helpless acceptance of Bruscon’s authority in the family and theatre group. Yet Agathe’s persistent cough is her only form of communication with Bruscon: it irks him and he tries to suppress it with “Antihustenpillen” (57).
Agathe’s cough indicates how Bruscon’s theatrical project has contaminated the family. Bruscon does not communicate with her, apart from when rehearsing. As patriarch of the family, he denies her a voice. Agathe’s first appearance in Der Theatermacher is followed by a comic acknowledgement by Bruscon only after he refuses to see her: “Wo ist sie [...] ich sehe sie nicht” (60). She wears a dressing gown for lunch. Following her awkward waiting posture, he orders her to sit down and to eat: “So setz dich doch [...] so iß doch” (61). Bruscon is no longer attracted to Agathe: “Der einzige Reiz an dir / ist der Hustenreiz” (105). There is no genuine dialogue beyond the theme of theatre. The coughing gives him a prompt (as she knows it will) to stage a tirade. Bruscon pretends to be exasperated by her incompetent rehearsals, and chides and threatens her:

Du hast die Passage verhustet
ist das wahr
das kann doch nicht dein Ernst sein
die Passage verhustet
wie mir Sarah berichtet
das kann ja schön werden heute abend
gerade heute abend
wo ich die Absicht habe
mehr oder weniger eine Galavorstellung zu geben (61)

Her cough is also linked to her role in the family. Attacking her for coughing is an attack on her role in bringing up the children in which she appears to have had more control than Bruscon (66). But theirs is only a mock battle of wills; she goes along with the family theatre. Bruscon also resents her proletarian tastes and behaviour (66-67), as when he rebukes her for her accent having remained the same (58). Agathe’s origins are blamed for her performance: “Das ist das Proletarische / daß sie alles Großartige zerstört / und sei es auch nur durch Husten” (58). Bruscon dehumanizes Agathe as a “Proletariatsprodukt” (42) and as a “Maurerpoliererstochter” (114). Yet in his theatre, her indifference and lack of talent enable Bruscon to enounce the ideals of his theatre all the more clearly. It is through theatre that Bruscon can best give expression to his vexation with his wife and subordinate her, remarking sarcastically to Sarah: “Deine Mutter / ist ein Antitalent / aber gerade deshalb / habe ich sie genommen” (54). The “anti talent” fits his scheme, because he is not really concerned with success, only with staging (his) theatre. What matters is to act, no matter how badly; this applies to the children as well. He has come to terms with her incompetence, telling Sarah: “Eure Mutter ist Proletarierin / Aber ich liebe sie / das ist die
Wahrheit /ich ärgere mich ununterbrochen über sie /aber ich liebe sie“ (58). He remains affectionately attached to Agathe, as “meine Lieblingsproletarierin” (114).

Any rebellion by Agathe is based on her habits and is generally silent: “Im Bett liegen /und dem Nichtstun frönen /über Eingebildetes sinnieren /Füße in die Kamillenlauge stecken /am Fenster hocken” (89). She maintains a stance of hypochondria (“eine kranke dumme Mutter /die in die Hypochondrie geflüchtet ist”; 66) and refuses to conform to Bruscon’s sexist demands: “Trotzhaltung /Pfefferminztee trinkt sie /läßt sich die Füße mit Kamille einreiben /[...]/ Weigerte sich in Gaspoltshofen /mir die Schuhe zu putzen” (84).

Agathe’s cough not only sabotages the roles Bruscon prescribes for her in “Das Rad”, but displays her only means of communicating with Bruscon. Her cough is not a form of real reaction; it can only be seen as an effective performance insofar as it functions as her only self-determined “role”, a significant role because it acts as a prompt for his tirades that create a form of off-stage theatre. Agathe cannot identify with the idealism in Bruscon’s theatre, and by coughing and forgetting lines presents herself as an antithesis to his ambition; he reacts in his attacks as a “Theatermacher” to her. Bruscon’s theatre rehearsals become a farce, since Agathe’s seemingly voluntary performance of coughing perpetuates the family theatre of incompetence. What looks like resistance functions as enabling compliance. Agathe’s consent to playing a virtually mute figure both on stage in “Das Rad” and off stage is central to her subordinated position in Bruscon’s theatre; it is essential to the established theatrical carnival.

Bruscon relies on a virtually silent and compliant audience for his theatre with all family members and for his monologue – they are, therefore, not just victims, as Winkler claims: “La tyrannie domestique, artistique et sociale du faiseur de théâtre Bruscon [...] engendre une tyrannie de la parole sur le silence. Les victimes muettes sont Mme Bruscon, le fils Ferruccio et la fille Sarah, ainsi que l’infortuné aubergiste.” 303 Although the members of the family are not entirely silent, as when Sarah initially refuses to perform the ritual of fixed lines of praise correctly, any silence is ambiguous. Although on stage Agathe gives a poor performance through pronunciation (58), deliberate coughing (57) and incompetence in failing to memorize her lines (55), she is resigned to participate in Bruscon’s theatrical lifestyle. Throughout most of the play, Agathe remains silent and is

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303 Winkler, L’attente et la fête, p. 69
addressed separately from the rest of the family, as if she were an outsider, which produces a comic effect. Her bizarre clothing, a heavy dressing gown (60) also separates her from the rest of the family, as she first appears to arrive from a bedroom in the inn. The dressing gown is also a symbol of domesticity – Agathe may not like the theatre (we do not know) but she is at home in it, and Bruscon accepts her coughing because it prompts him to act: he is at home with it.

Her cough is a performance in the final scene, but at that moment remains merely a revolt behind the curtain (106). In the frenzy of preparations, her chronic cough, along with her comic gesture of bending down in an attempt to suppress it, becomes a refrain of frustration and also an omen of the imminent disaster. During the repeated rolls of thunder in the final scene, Agathe’s laugh (“Frau Bruscon lacht plötzlich laut aus sich heraus”; 114) seems to be inevitable, given the sense of doom threatening the group’s performance. In breaking her passive role following his mockery of her, she lifts her arm and her laugh is hysterical, faced with his increasingly frantic attacks which express a continued reliance on her as part of the performance of “meine Lieblingsproletarierin”; but this time she reacts only with a laugh, which Bruscon dismisses as madness. Yet she can laugh at him because she does not really feel threatened by him, she knows and can predict his theatricality:

Wie du aussiehst
eine Schande für das weibliche Geschlecht
Frau Bruscon wehrt ihn mit der rechten Hand
schweigend ab
BRUSCON
Maurerpolierstochter
Meine Proletarierin
Meine Lieblingsproletarierin
Frau Bruscon lacht plötzlich laut aus sich heraus
BRUSCON faucht sie an
Ganz aufgebraucht
Was unterstehst du dich
Zu Sarah
Sarah mein Kind
Unsere Mutter ist eine Verrückte
Es donnert ganz gewaltig (114)

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304 See Appendix II, No. 37, p. 354
305 See Appendix II, No. 38, p. 355
The cough symbolizes the absurdly low level of performance of the family group. Bruscon affects to be irritated by this, but it gives him the springboard he needs to stage his theatre – the theatre which, however absurd and poor it is, gives his life substance.

**III. 10. 2 The theatre of Richard's silence**

Herrenstein’s theatre relies on a hierarchical relationship with Richard in the sense that the industrialist has never been challenged or contradicted by his employee, even in the smallest of issues, and this in itself is a carnivalesque form of behaviour. In all respects there is apparent mutual respect and Herrenstein’s behaviour is as polite as Richard’s servility in provoking Herrenstein in his ironic way, which Herrenstein wants him to do, and in continuing to play the role of carer. At times, Herrenstein’s words to Richard attempt to break taboos, although Herrenstein does not really wish to hear the truth of Richard’s possible frustration despite Richard’s lack of initiative:

**HERRENSTEIN**

Haben Sie in den fünfundzwanzig Jahren
die Sie jetzt bei mir sind niemals gedacht
daß Sie mich töten wollen
erschlagen
von hinten
so
macht es ihm vor
das wäre doch naheliegend
[…]
nicht Lust
die Notwendigkeit haben Sie gespürt
mich zu töten
das fühlt ein Mensch wie ich genau
Ich weiß was Sie denken
Wenn Sie so hinter mir stehen
Die meiste Zeit Schweigsam
Wortlos
Ich bin mir sicher in diesem Punkt
Sie werden mich nicht umbringen
Seit langer Zeit bin ich mir sicher in diesem Punkt (314)

Richard’s silence provokes a reaction. Herrenstein’s words to Richard are open, yet Richard’s refusal to interrupt exploits Herrenstein’s apparent curiosity, as there is an unwillingness to respond. Richard’s respect for Herrenstein may only be superficial and insincere, but this corresponds to Richard’s role in the carnival. Richard appears silent and indifferent to Herrenstein’s question, and his complicity in the game is evident. His silence enables Herrenstein to sound off dramatically, to invent a murder story, again a moment of pure theatre. Richard’s performance is one of apparent loyalty of an employee, possibly
masking indifference. Herrenstein, for his part, exploits Richard’s loyalty by asking a taboo question which he answers himself (with certainty), without waiting for a stock response. At times, Herrenstein wishes to prescribe roles in his verbal theatre that are subsequently refused by the others. Although Herrenstein cannot control responses of others, he is quite confident of his long-term influence on those in his immediate circle.

Richard’s servility in terms of his long-standing loyalty to Herrenstein’s household (despite apparent threats which have not materialized) makes him appear willing to go along with his employer’s theatre in practical terms. But Richard’s role goes beyond cooperating with Herrenstein in the completion of physical tasks. At times, Richard gesticulates disrespectfully behind Herrenstein’s back, in the Burgtheater production, as when Herrenstein is seated at the table in the first scene. In this production, Richard’s mocking gesticulations include performing movements with the bow of a violin as the tirades recommence at breakfast in Scene 1 (290), and performing a tap dance before giving Herrenstein his silver-capped walking stick (281), which he as a cripple barely needs. This is all heavily theatrical, since Richard takes centre stage, making himself part of a performance.

Richard’s lack of sincerity despite apparent respect is interesting, according to a critic of the Burgtheater production: “Ignaz Kirchner muß sich als Herrensteins Diener Richard weniger exponieren. Er zeigt einen Menschen, der im feinen Haus seine guten Manieren eingebüßt und davon nur mehr eine Maske behalten hat.” Richard does not take Herrenstein all too seriously, above all concerning his will, as Herrenstein deliberately seems not to have decided on the issue of inheritance (348) and Richard performs his role as butler dutifully and mockingly simultaneously. Another critic sees him as materially ambitious, but this is not his main driving force: “Kirchner hält die Balance zwischen Gruftspion und Lebenskünstler.” Richard privileges life with Herrenstein over his own, which is empty. Ultimately, Herrenstein is able to keep Richard within the carnivalian arrangement he determines.

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306 Die Presse, 1. 6. 2002 (on Burgtheater production)
307 Salzburger Nachrichten, 1. 6. 2002 (on Burgtheater production)
III. 11 The eccentric’s antisocial performance of unpredictability

Although Herrenstein participates in cultural and social rituals, these are of no real interest to him, as they are performed in the absence of other pastimes. He tells himself at the beginning of the play that shaking hands is a minimal gesture of etiquette, which is all he would do in the presence of the guests:

nie sehe ich diese Leute
[...]
und auf einmal kommen sie alle hierher
entsetzlicher Gedanke
aber ich kann mich nicht weigern
sie zu empfangen
andererseits ist es eine Gelegenheit
ihnen die Hand zu schütteln
dann jahrelang nicht mehr (283)

His rebellious, antisocial behaviour on the day of the Queen’s visit relies on the upheaval of spectacle to perform hysterical misanthropy and a comic protest of repulsion. As an eccentric, he does not respect social conventions or the meaning of the occasion. Furthermore, the party does not fit his routine – in fact it interrupts it – and so he resents it. It is not part of the theatre he determines, hence his hostility, and his indifference to the deaths at the end:

Die Leute kommen her
und fressen hier auch noch alles auf
Das ist ja Wahnsinn
Dass ich die Leute alle eingeladen habe
Ich habe ja nicht eingeladen
Sie haben sich eingeladen
Nur der Neffe dachte ich nur der Neffe
Und jetzt kommen vierzig Leute
Zum Schluss kommen noch mehr als vierzig
[...]
Ein Mensch
Der jahrelang völlig allein lebt
Nur mit Ihnen Richard
Mehr oder weniger mit Ihnen
Das Fräulein Zallinger zählt ja nicht
Alle andern zählen ja nicht
Und plötzlich kommen vierzig Leute (302)

Later, after a brief greeting, he tells two ladies who have arrived early: “Ich bin nicht in der Lage /Konversation zu machen /Mein Neffe ist ja da” (333). Gert Voss, who played Herrenstein in the Burgtheater production, said of Bernhard’s antisocial main figures:

"Jeder Bernhard-Protagonist ist eine Variation des Menschenfeindes. Aber er haßt nicht
The eccentric’s performance is always motivated by profound indifference to society. Herrenstein is entirely self-absorbed with his terminal condition: “ich brauche mich nicht halbtot zu stellen ich bin es ja” (335).

With Gräfin Winterhalter (“Die Dame mit dem roten Hut”; 338), Herrenstein’s verbal performance is a brief antisocial exchange, in which his antisocial unpredictability lies in his refusal to remember a past occasion and give her a response on it, compared to her theatre of untruths and falsity with which she tries to provoke him into performance. On stage, her hysterical laugh contrasts with the paucity of his words (337-338). She laughs at the moment when he claims not to know the Aschenhöhe, a high society residence where she claims Herrenstein spent New Year’s Eve 1936 (338), and dismisses his words: “Mein Gott Rudolf /du bist immer zu Scherzen aufgelegt” (338). Here, the slanted framing of the stage in the production (Burgtheater, 2002) remarkably captures the artifice of social theatre of the “Hautevolée” and “Möchtegern” society in Vienna. Since the figures’ performance is unnatural in terms of their gestures and words, distortion of reality and theatrical exaggeration are made apparent by the frame surrounding the stage; the frame is set at an angle tipped towards the left and is highlighted throughout the play by a neon light: the audience of Elisabeth II hereby perceives a distancing effect from real life in Vienna, as the scenes which unfold in Herrenstein’s flat facing the visible opera and Hotel Bristol (opposite each other, as in reality) in the background are thus overtly presented as on-stage theatre.

Antisocial parallels with the Weltverbesserer are evident just before the event, when Herrenstein seems to be at a loss as to what to say to the guests, and refuses to perform socially acceptable gestures (handshakes) and words:

\begin{verbatim}
  winkt Richard ganz an sich heran
  Glauben Sie
  Soll ich dann etwas zu den Leuten sagen
  Etwas in Zusammenhang mit Elisabeth der Zweiten
  Oder ist das Unsinn
  RICHARD
  Vielleicht sagen Sie ein paar Worte
  HERRENSTEIN
  Ein paar Worte ja
  Aber was für Worte
  RICHARD
\end{verbatim}

308 Format 22/2002
309 See Appendix II, No. 39, p. 356
Ein paar Begrüßungsworte

HERRENSTEIN

Begrüßungsworte belanglose

Drei Damen und vier Herren sind eingetreten

RICHARD

Es genügt ja ein Satz

Irgendein Satz

HERRENSTEIN

Da haben Sie recht

Aber einen Satz sage ich doch

Irgendeinen Satz

Ich habe Ansprachen immer gehaßt

Es wird ja überall nur Unsinn gesagt

Graf Neutz ist eingetreten und geht direkt zu Herrenstein und begrüßt ihn, Herrenstein gibt ihm aber nicht die Hand

HERRENSTEIN

Ich gebe die Hand nicht

Möglichwerweise habe ich eine ansteckende Krankheit (342)

Herrenstein’s dislike of etiquette is expressed in the words “Begrüßungsworte belanglose”, which do not interest him because they are not theatrical enough. The inversion of social convention lends a note of carnival debasement to the scene. Herrenstein’s refusal to conform to a social ritual he does not prescribe can be related to his need to perform at all costs. There seems to be “Sprachskepsis” (language scepticism) in his attitude. In his actions, he is antisocial (line 25-6). His refusal to shake hands with Neutz is eccentric and Herrenstein’s excuse is comic. He does not give a speech, chats to Richard and Neutz briefly, and goes on to repeat this eccentric performance of silent unpredictability and rejection of social norms. He remains consistently eccentric in not shaking hands with and performing small talk with the ladies:

Zwei alte Damen treten ein und treten ungeniert vor
Herrenstein und rufen beide

Rudolf

Unglaublich wie gut du aussiehst

Sie wollen Herrenstein die Hand geben, er nimmt sie aber nicht (346)

A few moments later he justifies his instinctive dislike and confirms his stance:

Das ist die Strafe

jahrelang habe ich zu diesen Leuten

keinen Kontakt aufgenommen

und jetzt sind sie alle da

Ich weiß ja warum

Ich mich von allen getrennt habe

Von diesem Pack

Abgeschnitten

Von der Gesellschaft abgeschnitten (346)
Critics did not see the significance of the necessity for the guests’ apparent falsity and the physical distance on the stage between Herrenstein and the throng of guests – with the exception of Guggenheim, to whom Herrenstein speaks at length. One critic of the Burgtheater production claimed: “Es gelingt ihm [Regisseur Langhoff] nicht, den Auftritt der verhassten Verwandtschaft am Ende des Stücks auch nur einigermaßen realistisch in Szene zu setzen [...].” Yet the artifice of non-communication amongst the guests is deliberate so as to contrast with the eccentric’s stance. The theme of the isolation of the eccentric is again prominent in this scene, given his physical distance from the crowd. Herrenstein avoids set social rituals because they do not give him the scope to perform in the way he likes. Richard is not offended by his antics, he accepts them, and this renders them relatively harmless.

310 See Appendix II, No. 40, p. 357
311 Profil, 3. 6. 2002
IV. The art of self-creation: Language and the eccentric

IV. 1 Introduction

So far, little research has been done on the relation between language and identity in relation to Bernhard’s eccentrics. Critics have reached radically divergent views on language. Klug claims that “Thomas Bernhards Theaterstücke sind Inszenierungen von Sprechsprache”, yet it needs to be emphasized that there is little genuine dialogue, given the eccentric’s domination on stage. Other critics have focused solely on the violence in the language of Bernhard’s eccentrics and have missed its essential function of foregrounding difference and eccentricity. Dronske goes so far as to claim that: “Die Bühnenstücke handeln weder von den in ihnen auftretenden Personen, noch sind deren konkrete Aussagen von interpretatorischem Interesse.” He maintains that the language of the plays lacks individuality: “Sie ist in ihrer penetranten Stereotypie extrem entindividualisiert, also einem individuellen Sprechen vollständig entgegengesetzt […]. Sie bildet somit auch kein Medium der Selbstaneignung oder des Selbstausdruckes”. He sees language as a form of “imaginär bleibende Selbstbehauptung”. Betz foregrounds the impotence of the eccentric’s language, referring to: “Sprache als ihrer Ohnmacht bewusste Widerstandswaffe”. But Bernhard’s eccentrics are not interested in changing society. They create themselves through inventing a language which is arguably very much their own. Betz, discussing Minetti, notes that: “Die tragische Existenz wird innerhalb ihrer hilflosen Sprachexzesse zur komischen Figur.” But since the language of the eccentric is staged and self-conscious, it is not “hilflos”. As Kiss notes in respect of Bernhard’s prose: “Es entsteht eine Sprache des Selbstbewußtseins, welche die

314 ibid, p. 72
317 Betz, p. 272
¨normalen¨, ¨bürgerlichen¨ Werte direkt, bewußt stört¨. This carnivalesque language is predominant in the plays, too. In Sorg’s view the eccentric’s language is an assertion of individuality: “die Sprache der Figuren […] ist also der Ausdruck ihres Willens zur Selbständigkeit ein Instrument der Machtausübung und eines der eigensinnigen Bewahrung von individueller Geschichte.”

Bernhard commented on the limitations of language on the occasion of being awarded the Büchner Prize in 1970: “die Wörter infizieren und ignorieren, verwischen und verschlummern, beschämen und verfärben und verkümmern und verfinstern und verfinstern nur.” On this view of things, language cannot describe or represent things accurately. Everything which is said is a distortion – or as Bernhard puts it, judgments are pre-judgments or prejudices, and language is radically divorced from truth: “Meine Urteile sind nur Vorurteile. Urteile gibt es nicht.” Linguistic expression automatically deforms and distorts as it voices the subjectivity of the speaker. All Bernhardian eccentrics are guilty of this kind of prejudice and distortion.

In the opinion of the autobiographical narrator of Die Kälte, language expresses a subjective perception of truth; any quest for truth is absurd, never definitive. Words spoken are misleading, given their potential for falsifying: “Die Wahrheit ist immer ein Irrtum, obwohl sie hundertprozentig die Wahrheit ist, jeder Irrtum ist nichts als die Wahrheit […] . Dieser Mechanismus hält mich am Leben, macht mich existenzfähig. Mein Großvater hatte immer die Wahrheit gesagt, und total geirrt, wie ich, wie alle. Wir sind im Irrtum, wenn wir glauben in Wahrheit zu sein, und umgekehrt. Die Absurdität ist der einzig mögliche Weg.” It does not matter what people say or think – even if they are right, they are always in the wrong, but then so is everyone else. The corollary is that a world which offers truths which are false is absurd, yet it is this very absurdity which makes life tolerable (existenzfähig). The eccentric’s self-centred theatre is absurd in this sense, but it is better than nothing. Language is given a privileged status in Bernhard’s theatre. To perform as an individual means constructing one’s own language

318 Endre Kiss, "Thomas Bernhard, Dichtung des Selbstbewußtseins oder Verösterreichung des Absurden" in Debrecener Studien zur Literatur, Band 1, Lang, 1995, 207-216, p. 207
319 Bernhard Sorg, Thomas Bernhard, p. 155
321 Bernhard, in Monologe auf Mallorca, ORF, 1986
322 Thomas Bernhard, Die Kälte, p. 46
and inventing new names and descriptions for things. The eccentric refuses to settle for cliché or mimicry, in the sense given to that term by Derek Walcott when he wrote of the artist’s need to forge “a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things.” Honegger wrongly claims that: “Like hamsters in a barrel, Bernhard’s despotic clowns cannot wriggle themselves free from the wheel of handed-down language which keeps them running in place.” But they can and do wriggle free, since they reject conventionally accepted truths and the handed-down, cliché ridden language in which those truths are expressed.

Language encompasses all aspects of existence, since there is no language that exists outside the theatre of life that the eccentric figures stage. The relationship between eccentricity and language must be examined. The eccentric performs central aspects of his difference through neologisms and this is one of the things that enables him to create himself as an eccentric. Richard Rorty’s philosophy of language is of particular interest here, as it focuses on the invention of new language or what he often describes as a new vocabulary, as a central prerequisite for individuality. Fundamental to Rorty’s philosophy of language is the idea that “most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary”; Rorty associates himself strongly with “the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found”. The Bernhardian eccentric creates himself through language, and hereby creates his own subjective truth, in keeping with the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found. Bernhard’s eccentrics are makers rather than finders of language, and create their own perspective on the world. There is no fixed vocabulary that a human being must conform to. As Rorty sees it, self-definition is only possible through the invention of new language: “to fail as a human being, is to accept somebody else’s description of oneself.” According to Rorty, the process of coming to know oneself “is identical with the process of inventing a new language, that is, of thinking up some new metaphors. Any literal description of one’s individuality, which is to say any use of an inherited language-game for this purpose, will necessarily fail. One

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323 Derek Walcott, What the Twilight Says: An Overture, 1970, p. 17
324 Gitta Honegger, Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian, Yale University Press, 2001, p. 214
326 Rorty, “The contingency of Selfhood”, in Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, pp. 23-43, (pp. 27-28)
will not have traced [one’s] idiosyncrasy home but will merely have managed to see it as
not idiosyncratic at all, as a specimen reiterating a type, a copy or replica of something
which has already been identified. “327

Seen from this perspective, the invention of a new and personal vocabulary is an
integral part of self-creation and the self-definition which goes with it. One of the features
which distinguishes the eccentric figures of Bernhard’s late plays is their refusal to content
themselves with being a replica or type, and theatre for them is the stage upon which to
invent and perform in a language which is distinctively theirs, and which makes and
foregrounds them as (deviant) individuals. It is only by creating language that a person
can become an individual, since he hereby authenticates himself, his assertion therefore
is not a form of “imaginär bleibende Selbstbehauptung”,328 as Dronske argues. The
eccentrics invent themselves through language, not least through the use of neologisms.
New language enables new images of the self to be projected. The eccentric who creates
himself as an eccentric by inventing his own idiosyncratic language is free to remake (his
view of) the world. Neologisms are an original and spontaneous definition of the
eccentric’s and others’ condition, they often have a distinctively carnivalist function in
that they have the power to “transgress the limits of the established language” 329 of the
non-carnival world. Neologisms are one of the tools which enable the eccentrics to perform
their characteristic reversal of inherited forms and conventional perspectives. Since
Bernhard’s eccentrics are foremost performers, they stage language, and
characteristically invent terms which carnivalize the world they inhabit.

Linguistic innovation forms an essential part of the Bernhardian carnival
experience. The eccentric is a carnival figure in that he rejects official, socially accepted
truths and the linguistic clichés in which they are endlessly recycled. Carnival according
to Bakhtin opposes all that is “ready-made and completed”, “all pretence at
immutability”, it demands “ever-changing, playful, undefined forms”; its logic is “the
peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (à l’envers), of the ‘turnabout’, of a continual shifting
from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties,

327 Rorty, pp. 27-28
328 Dronske, “Sprach-Dramen”, p.122
329 Rabelais and his World, p. 188
humiliations, profanations, comic crowning and uncrownings.” The eccentric introduces neologisms as a dramatic means of staging his inversion of established norms and perspectives. Bakhtin speaks of the creation during carnival time of “a special type of communication impossible in everyday life” which offered a temporary liberation from the “norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times”. Bernhard’s late plays play in a certain sense in carnival time; his eccentrics are by nature outspoken and unrestrained in using unconventional, carnivalesque language in the domestic groups that they dominate.

IV. 2 Neologisms in *Der Theatermacher*

Bruscon’s language is a mark of his individuality as it is an original linguistic expression of a perspective on the environment and other figures. Bruscon’s neologisms on the surroundings tend to be spoken extemporaneously off stage and are thus part of his performance of existence as theatre. The exaggerated character of such linguistic creations as “Theaterhemmschuh” (30) to describe the impact of women in theatre does not square with Klug’s view that the eccentrics use “beliebig verfügbaren epischen Klischees”. Bruscon’s neologisms emphasize his eccentricity by forcing others into a carnivalesque mould that he defines. The originality and playfulness inherent in the neologisms contributes to the humour of the linguistic carnival. According to Klug: “Bruscons Scheltreden sind sprachlich kraftlos, die Metaphorik ist blaß. Hemmschuh in dem Kompositum Theaterhemmschuh ist zum Beispiel eine verblaßte Metapher, die auch durch Zusammensetzung oder Kontext nicht wieder belebt wird. Deshalb dominiert in der Scheltvokabel die sachliche (metonymische) Beziehung: die Frau wird als Hemmnis aller das Theater betreffenden Vorgänge bezeichnet. Die Scheltvokabel hat eine rein verstärkende Funktion ohne bildlichen Eigenwert. Die Beschimpfungen verfehlen ihr Ziel; sie sind bei weitem nicht so grob unsachlich oder verletzend, wie sie wohl sein sollen.” Bruscon’s tirades are not “sprachlich kraftlos”, but inventive; their theatrical quality does not diminish their force. The neologism “Theaterhemmschuh” is certainly brutal, as it automatically stigmatizes all women for acting as a “brake shoe” on theatre; this neologism

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330 *Rabelais and his World*, p. 11
331 Rabelais, p. 10
332 Klug, p. 132
333 *ibid.*, p. 132
is an example of the eccentric’s distorted perspective. Furthermore, Klug’s analysis does not account for Bruscon’s playful theatricality. Bruscon does not seriously intend to free Agathe from her role in his theatre by offending her; the neologism with which he appears to attack her is part of the ongoing game he plays with her in the off-stage family theatre upon which he depends. The fact that Bruscon’s neologisms generally bear a comic element, as is evident here, differentiates his language from the bleakness of Robert Schuster’s carnivalesque language. Neither Robert’s nor Bruscon’s subjective perspective can be taken seriously, as their assertions are unfounded, but the innovative, comic aspect in Bruscon’s neologisms distinguishes his carnivalesque views from the relentless misanthropic blanket condemnation characteristic of Robert’s carnivalization of Austria.

Bruscon’s tirades provide no scope for genuine dialogue or debate, but are a theatrical performance, as are his neologisms. When he rants and rails at the ugliness of the inn in Utzbach, he is indifferent to the innkeeper’s response:

Dieses schauerliche Utzbach
[...]
diese bauwerkliche Hilflosigkeit
diese Wändescheußlichkeit
diese Deckenfürchterlichkeit
diese Türen- und Fensterwiderwärtigkeit
diese absolute Geschmacklosigkeit
hat Ihnen Ihre weitere Existenz ermöglicht (35)

Bruscon’s words would normally be seen as an attempt to offend the innkeeper, his host. In terms of decent social exchange, they are certainly an abnormal form of address, confirming Bruscon’s position as outsider and “Störenfried” in Utzbach. Yet in the carnival of Der Theatermacher, norms in human relations are reversed from both parties: surprisingly, the innkeeper never reacts, even to Bruscon’s impoliteness and open disrespect for his domestic circumstances, although audiences may expect him to; his absurd silence when confronted by Bruscon’s deriding tirade is a carnivalistic inversion of the norm. Bruscon and the innkeeper both inhabit the same provincial dismalness, having both fallen into the trap of Utzbach, but Bruscon is able to exploit the situation to carnivalize their surroundings through comic neologisms. The innkeeper compounds the carnival by remaining unnaturally silent in the face of Bruscon’s onslaught. The compound neologisms “Wändescheußlichkeit”, “Deckenfürchterlichkeit” and “Türen- und Fensterwiderwärtigkeit” foreground Bruscon’s mockery of the dilapidation in the inn.
Moreover, the innkeeper’s almost comic silence enables Bruscon to launch from the above tirade into a self-centred monologue concerning his equipment and tour, without interruption (36-37).

Neologisms are an expression of the eccentric’s fantastic megalomania, and are therefore more than clichés. The effect of these self-referential neologisms is varied; some humourously echo the eccentric’s projection of eccentricity as he crowns himself king of his own carnival; a playwright adept with puns: “Wortspielkünstler” (112); a fanatic of truth: “Wahrheitsfanatiker” (108). Self-definitions contain a great deal of self-congratulatory spontaneity. Equally, he admits that he is a victim of “Theaterkerkerhaft” (100). During his early years he believes he experienced “Selbstinfamie” (25), by leaving home and reacting against his father by taking up the theatre (25). Rehearsals of lines from “Das Rad” spontaneously provoke new compound nouns: “In Lorrach lagert das Gift /das die Menschheit auslöscht /zum Wirt direkt /Das ist der Lorracheffekt /in meinem Rad der Geschichte mein Herr” (25).

Other neologisms categorize, stereotype, dehumanize and trivialise existence, either his own or that of others, and they thus reveal an element of finality, despite the contingency of human destiny. They express in original, even comic terms what has already taken place and offer no possibility for debate. Concerning the biographical detail of an individual’s past expressed in neologisms, categorisation is a form of trivialisation, a cliché in terms of human fate. “Atlantikküstenbekanntschaft” (24) banalises his own fate, concerning his relationship with his wife. His grandfather’s destiny is addressed in the same type of language: “Schwellenarbeiterischicksal” (52); reference to the innkeeper’s destiny reveals an absence of genuine interest in the individual apparent through linguistic categorization, condemning him to his provincial inn leasehold in the non-carnival world and mocking him as a man leading such a limited existence: “Pächterschicksal” (35). The fate of these people is given a sense of fortuity, and consequently, inescapability, and moreover, their very sense of individuality or destiny is annihilated. The innkeeper’s life (as “Pächter” – leaseholder) can be seen only from a perspective of ordinariness, which even Bruscon’s grandfather is not spared, through the repetitive use of the identical component “-Schicksal”. Klug comments on these neologisms as follows: “Bruscon [reduziert] auch die Erzählansätze des Wirtes auf verdinglichte Vorstellungen einer schematischen
Lebensmechanik [...]. In ähnlicher Weise wird die Lebensgeschichte von Bruscons Grobvater [...] subsumiert. Muster biographischen Erzählens und Begründens werden in diesem Grad von Reduktion zu beliebig verfügbaren epischen Klischees; die individuelle Lebensgeschichte des Wirtes erscheint als normale, gesetzmäßige, 'naturgemäße' Biographie.” Some words categorize and disqualify certain groups, expressing contempt. Theatre critics are "Inkompetenzschmierer" (19); tuberculosis sufferers are “Niederträchtigkeitsfanatiker” (42). The individual’s fate is in all cases determined by the social circumstances randomly bestowed on him, which depersonalizes experience. As seen, Bruscon's neologisms certainly convey a sense of reductionism, given the eccentric’s lack of concern for human fate, but their linguistic originality remains.

IV. 3 The eccentric and neologisms in *Ritter, Dene, Voss*

Neologisms in this play reflect long-established eccentricity in relations and rituals; innovations authenticate the peculiar and unconventional nature of the trio and the relationships within it. The eccentric brother is the subject of neologisms spoken, but it is he who has the privilege of creating new language, which becomes a symbol of power. The extent of his influence over his sisters is evident in their frequent repetition of his distinctive usages. Language is not a liberating performance for the sisters. They are rooted in the eccentric arrangement, the home being the centre of the group’s rituals, and language confirms the sisters’ intimate attachment to their brother. Dene refers to the neologism “Ludwigkomplex” created by Voss to characterize Ritter’s behaviour (1, below). Dene also repeats her own banal mantras (not neologisms) to affirm her feelings for her brother (2, below). The first example indicates how the eccentric invents the terms which the others recycle:

(1)
DENE
Du regst dich auf
Wo nur nüchterne Betrachtung
Das einzig Richtige ist
Du hast dich verrannt
In deinen Ludwigkomplex

RITTER
Das hat er gesagt
Nicht wahr
Nicht du

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334 Klug, p. 132
DENE
Auch wenn er es gesagt hat
Du hast einen Ludwigkomplex (150-1)

(2)
RITTER
Mein Lieblingsbruder
Mein Lieblingsphilosoph
Hast du immer gesagt
DENE auf dem Weg in die Küche
Mein Lieblingsbruder
Mein Lieblingsphilosoph (143-4)

Dene’s use of Voss’s words shows an absence of independence of mind and dependence on Voss, which she equally affirms for her sister’s part. If “Ludwigkomplex”, a neologism probably created by Voss, means repeating what he has said in his absence, then Ritter is like Frau Zittel in *Heldenplatz*, who is equally mesmerized by the eccentric (Josef Schuster). Dene repeats her own mantras in response to their enunciation by Ritter; but the language the sisters create is for the most part unoriginal. The sisters largely think in terms set by Voss or in terms which express their subservience towards him. Voss’s control over his sisters is clear in their conversations in his absence, which focus on their rivalry for the brother’s attention, and they again use banal language in contrast to his own:

RITTER
Mein Ludwig sagst du
und du denkst
mein Ludwig mein Philosoph
während er doch nur dein Narr ist
dein Lieblingsnarr
Der Bruder als Lieblingsnarr
als Lieblingspersöversität (153)

Ritter’s language does not challenge the eccentric, but is an expression of her and Dene’s willingness to go along with Voss’s carnivalesque behaviour as fool, and Ritter’s language (repetition of “Lieblings-”) reveals a certain sexual jealousy, given the possessiveness he has unleashed in both sisters. Yet Ritter equally participates in illicit relations with her brother.

Ritter’s recycling of Voss’s language reflects an acceptance of the situation and an affirmation of his authority in the trio. She repeats the eccentric’s own neologisms which mock his sisters, as his view of Ritter’s taste in clothes: “Sommerkleiderfetischismus /hat er mir vorgeworfen”(131); and Dene’s precision in typing, a ritual performed on Voss’s

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335 An exception is Ritter’s neologism which she enounces to Voss: “Ludwig /Wir sind Cottagegeschöpfe” (223), a reference to their rooted position in Vienna’s Cottageviertel, the most luxurious residential area in the city’s upmarket 19th district, Sievering-Döbling. Ritter hereby identifies herself with a privileged upbringing.
demand: “die Präzisionsmaschine /als die er dich bezeichnet” (139). Dene is denied individuality and, as in other neologisms, no affection is expressed by Voss, who dehumanizes his sisters. Whilst setting the table in their mother’s style in preparation for the lunch ritual, Dene remembers her brother’s neologism concerning his hatred of candles: “Illuminationshaß” (140). Whilst Dene straightens the cutlery, Ritter comments on her brother’s eccentric obsessions in the home through recycling his neologisms which celebrate Voss’s extraordinary approach to philosophy, and echo her own thrill with his obsessions: “Geometriewahn selbst auf dem Speisezimmer /Unterwürfigkeitsübungen” (140). His definition of his sisters as “Gebrauchsgegenstände” (155) indicates that he dehumanizes them as useful objects to serve him, while their adoption of his formulations reflects acceptance of his exploitation of their passivity and dedication to him, in allowing him to determine their roles (such as Dene’s typing): “Als Gebrauchsgegenstände /bezeichnet er uns / [...]und mißbraucht uns” (155). Ritter sees Voss as Dene’s philosophical obsession, a neologism no doubt originally articulated by Voss: “Dein Gegenkant” (144).

The trio’s reunion ritualistically takes place in the family dining room, as Voss says: “Das Speisezimmer /von dem alles Unheil ausgegangen ist /Vater Mutter Kinder /nichts als Höllendarsteller” (183). He sees the family as relentless performers of an unbearable, hellish ritualistic theatre from which there is no escape. This sense of the abnormal relations within the family is evoked elsewhere in the play in another neologism; the atmosphere in the family home has become increasingly oppressive for the trio, haunted by its past, as Ritter recycles Voss’s description of the family home as “Worringerhölle” and affirms his ritualistic mockery of their parents:

RITTER
Wohltuende Atmosphäre
aus Geborgenheit und Wärme
hat unser Vater immer gesagt
Ludwig hat diesen Satz
oft wiederholt
den Vater verhöhndend
immer absurder
ist dieser Satz geworden
mit der Zeit
Nach und nach
ist dieses Haus uns
zur Hölle geworden
Als Die Worringerhölle
hat es Ludwig selbst oft bezeichnet (151, my italics)
Ludwig repeats the father but sarcastically, and so he distances himself from the father, establishing himself as different and unbourgeois. He disrespectfully repeats the words with the intention of making them absurd. This state of being permanently trapped in the past is further confirmed by Ritter’s repetition of Voss’s neologism describing the hellish existence they are all trapped in. The neologism reflects the rejection of an alternative to the situation. The “Worringerhölle” effect is evoked by the visual quality of the stage production. The dining room is oval-shaped, its rounded walls and oval carpet dark red in colour, details which symbolise the vicious circle of a living hell, which the siblings are condemned to. This sense of inescapability is intensified by the sombre, oversized room, high walls, tall stained glass windows and dark Jugendstil furniture; the type of Großbürgertum furniture in the Biedermeier style to be seen again in Heldenplatz and Elisabeth II. The siblings are trapped together in the inherited past as well as in their present, self-inflicted situation. Half of the oval room opens out into the auditorium of the Burgtheater. The spectator therefore inevitably invades and witnesses a private theatre, in which the sisters and brother are often positioned at a significant physical distance from each other, suggesting individual isolation within the family unit, maintained through mutual torment.

IV. 4 Voss’s philosophical neologisms

Philosophy forms part of the foundation of the peculiarity of Voss’s linguistic performance. Voss’s neologisms also constitute and express part of the “Lebenswerk” (139) which is an ongoing effort to exist at least mentally outside the family. During his research he experienced a “Blockhausproblem” and “Cambridgeproblem” (164). Voss approached the study of philosophy as a consumer in a restaurant and sought philosophy as a substitute for social relations. The comic metaphor of “Gasthäuser” indicates that Voss is interested in philosophy as intellectual nourishment, although even philosophy turns out to be an unfulfilling trick for the eccentric, without potential for satisfaction. Yet it gives him an opportunity to launch a tirade:

Ein Stück mit Schopenhauer gegangen
mit Nietzsche

Elsewhere, sitting in front of the family portraits, Voss affirms his established mockery of his ancestors: “Es ist doch wahr /es ist nichts als ein Verhöhungsprozeß” (183)

See Appendix II, No. 41, p. 358
fatale Freundschaften
Papierbindungen
Bücherbrüder
gedruckte Liebesverhältnisse
Schließlich nichts
als ekelerregend
In Bücher gehen wir hinein
wie in Gasthäuser
hungrig durstig
ausgehungert mein Kind
Zuerst werden wir freundlich empfangen
bedient
aber immer schlechter bedient
immer noch schlechter bedient
und schließlich verjagt
oder wir selbst verlassen diese Gasthäuser augenblicklich
weil wir ihren Gestank nicht mehr ertragen
das Schlechtgekochte
das Misereabelservierte
aber natürlich nicht
ohne eine ungeheuerliche Rechnung zu bezahlen (196, my italics)

Voss's creation of the neologisms "Papierbindungen /Bücherbrüder" is a simultaneous reflection of his eccentric experimentation with philosophy in place of normal social relationships, and his more recent mockery of precisely such inclinations. Having now rejected the study of great philosophers, feeling disillusioned and betrayed by the promise of "eine philosophische Mahlzeit" (197), Voss concentrates on writing his own "philosophy" which, as discussed in chapters III. 3 and V. 9. 2, is the framework for his theatrical performance as philosopher at home and in Steinhof.

IV. 5 Neologisms in *Elisabeth II*

Herrenstein sees Austria as a stage upon which he performs his carnival of difference. He also carnivalizes the image of Austria and its culture on the stage of the renowned Burgtheater, like Robert Schuster in *Heldenplatz*, and both eccentrics remain attached to the over-familiar environment, to perform against it. Herrenstein and Robert, rooted in Vienna, are victims of what the latter terms: "die Wiener Falle /[…] die Österreichfalle" (HP 163): all Austrians need a stage. Herrenstein, however, differs from Schuster in that he still expresses a certain sentimental attachment to Vienna (309-310), whereas there is nothing to redeem the entirely negative and empty theatre of gloom in Schuster's portrayal of Austria; he never claims any positive or affectionate bond with Austria.

Herrenstein's neologisms indicate his attachment to social ritual in Vienna. After complaining of the frequent funerals which he as a member of Viennese high society is
invited to, and in view of the jeweller Heldwein’s funeral later that day, following the Queen’s visit, which Herrenstein repeatedly refers to (330-1; 335-6; 353), he declares that he is an avid wearer of funeral attire: “Wissen Sie Richard /ich bin ein Begräbnisanzugenthusiast” (303). What matters to Herrenstein is the theatricality of funerals, the dressing up, getting into costume; these aspects excite his enthusiasm, whereas death as such leaves him indifferent. The comic effect created by the compound noun which Herrenstein invents, apparently on the spur of the moment, is due to the reversal of what might be called the funeral norm. Far from being saddened or depressed at the prospect of attending a burial, Herrenstein positively relishes it. The neologism also comically foreshadows the balcony collapse later on – which in itself consequently prefigures the subsequent mass funeral of the high society guests. He overturns conventional expectations through a desire to provoke: by offering an unexpected take on bereavement in front of Richard, his immediate audience, and, of course, the wider audience of the Burgtheater.

The renowned Burgtheater, epitome of cultural significance throughout history, is described by Herrenstein as a “ perverse Stückevernichtungs maschine” (293), a perverse play destroying machine. Again, the inverted compound noun enacts a carnivalistic reversal: theatre has the function of trying to produce plays to their best advantage, but in Herrenstein’s eyes, the Burgtheater, the foremost Viennese theatre, is dedicated to destroying every drama it offers the public. Further, all theatrical productions are worthless, since the Burgtheater destroys plays, and actors and producers are dehumanized. The neologism was created to make a dramatic impact when uttered on the floorboards of the actual Burgtheater in the presence of conservative patrons of what is recognised as the first theatre in the German-speaking world. Elisabeth II is one of Bernhard’s typically Viennese plays. Herrenstein’s neologisms centre on comic exaggeration and ambiguity concerning his attitude to Viennese culture. The creation of the noun “Stückevernichtungs maschine” (293) to describe the Burgtheater, the former “k. & k.” (Kaiser und königliches) Hofburgtheater of the Hofburg, the royal palace of the Habsburgs, is an indication of Herrenstein’s relation to Viennese culture and preoccupation with it. The Burgtheater has conserved its representative cultural significance in Austria to the present day, but Herrenstein’s language is irreverent to the Establishment. Bernhard stated in a discussion:
Die Vergangenheit des Habsburgerreichs prägt uns. Bei mir ist das vielleicht sichtbarer als bei den anderen. Es manifestiert sich in einer Art echter Haßliebe zu Österreich, sie ist letztlich der Schlüssel zu allem, was ich schreibe.” 338

Herrenstein has continued to observe the lack of change in the Burgtheater throughout his life: “Wie viele Direktoren ich auf dem Burgtheater /schon erlebt habe /und im Grunde hat sich nichts geändert” (293). Herrenstein turns the public stage (Schaubühne) of the Burgtheater into a “Schauerbühne” (293), a permanent horror stage of ghastly performances: “In die Oper gehe ich nicht mehr so bald /dann noch eher ins Burgtheater /in diese permanente Schauerbühne” (293). Exaggeration is apparent in his resolute use of the adjective “permanente”: in his view, there is no potential for change, but his view is, of course, biased, because it enables him to continue his tirades. Herrenstein is, needless to say, unable to envisage an alternative to his dislike of this theatre. The term “Schauerbühne” projects the contrarian view of the eccentric, whose predictability lies precisely in the unpredictability of his verbal formulations.

The Burgtheater is mocked affectionately in Claus Peymann verläßt Bochum und geht als Burgtheaterdirektor nach Wien: “das Burgtheater ist ein tragikomischer Fleischwolf” (24); “einer[er] staatlich geführten Nervenheilanstalt” (60); “eine Kaffeerösterei /mit seinen zwei Kaffeeröstereikaminen” (61). The artifice of the theatre-making process can also be seen in the neologisms in Claus Peymann kauft sich eine Hose und geht mit mir essen. Rehearsal is ritualistic: “Shakespeareprobieren” (29); “ein richtiges Burgtheatertheater” (45); the actors are ridiculed as “Burgtheaterschafe” (20) in view of their routine performances. The creation of a play to end all plays is conceived as “eine richtige große alles verstörende Andernaseherumführkomödie” (45). In Claus Peymann und Hermann Beil auf der Sulzwiese, Peymann terms his absurd new concept of a fusion of Shakespeare’s entire work as “mein Alltheater” (66).

Herrenstein gives a carnivalistic view of the domestic ritual of playing the piano, which is conventionally seen as high art. He once again overturns and carnivalizes the norm by referring to it as an aural diversion, and thus stripping it of its habitual status: “Mißbrauch der hohen Kunst /Aber ich glaube nicht /daß das Klavierspiel hohe Kunst ist

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338 Thomas Bernhards Häuser, Erika Schmied (Photographie) /Wieland Schmied (Text), Salzburg, 1995, p. 50
/ein Ohrenzeitvertreib ja /aber nicht hohe Kunst" (306). It looks as if the reinstatement of
the ritual of Fräulein Zallinger’s piano playing has to do with Herrenstein seizing the
chance to perform one of his carnival reversals, this time at the expense of the classical
piano. Whether or not Herrenstein really appreciates Fräulein Zallinger’s recitals, they
again give him the chance to create himself as an eccentric.

Herrenstein, through using neologisms, trivialises his own fate in an attempt to come
to terms with it. To Richard in Scene 1, he declares his fate to be that of an Austrian
confined to a wheelchair: “aber ich habe immer noch Lust zu reisen /selbst mit diesen
Schwierigkeiten lein österreichisches Rollstuhlschicksal Richard” (301), categorizing
himself as a cripple rooted in Austria. Like the other eccentrics, Herrenstein may have
travelled widely, but like them, he cannot exist outside Austria. Herrenstein presents his
physical disability from a symbolic carnivalesque perspective. To live in Austria is to live,
like Herrenstein, as a cripple in a wheelchair. Austria maims and incapacitates: it makes
people cripples. This is reinforced in Scene 2 to Richard: “Ein Betrunkener hat mich zur
Puppe gemacht /eine fünfundzwanzig Jahre alte Lächerlichkeit /eine Alltagskarambolage
/nichts als eine Alltagskarambolage Richard” (320-1). Herrenstein was disabled by the
accident, which deformed him into a grotesque figure, a doll. Here, the neologism
“Alltagskarambolage” (an everyday car collision) is a form of carnival reversal, as it makes
a mockery of Herrenstein’s fate, turning it into a banality, not a tragedy. Herrenstein has lost
his feet in a car crash he sees as absurd, but his fate (to be confined to a wheelchair) is also
a typically Austrian (“Alltags-”) fate. From Herrenstein’s perspective, Austrians are
maimed and injured by their country every day, and he is no more or less disabled than any
other Austrian. He relativizes his situation by presenting himself as a representative figure.
Random circumstances may have led to this affliction, but his fate is common; carnival
laughter in self-parody (“eine fünfundzwanzig Jahre alte Lächerlichkeit”) implies a
resignation in acknowledging precisely those aspects of existence that limit possibilities of
change. He stresses the physical consequences of the car crash when referring to the ritual
of putting on shoes, the only ritual he insists on completing by himself: “An die künstlichen
Füße Schuhe anzuziehen /ist ja gerade die Lust /kein Mensch zieht lieber Schuhe an als der
/der nur Kunstfüße hat” (320). Theatrical symbolism is evident here, since putting shoes on
to artificial feet is a performance – but dressing himself as if he were human keeps him
human, allows him to act like a man even if he is only part man. He is aware of his deformity as central to his identity at all times: “Herrenstein der Großindustrielle mit den Kunstfüßen” (287). His obsessive, carnivalistic view of the world as “verkrüppelt” is also self-referential, in view of his prosthesis: “es gibt natürlich kunstvolles Verkrüppeltes /kunstvoll Verkrüppeltes” (290). And again, the ritual of putting on his shoes gives him the occasion to extemporize and to lift (his) life out of the ordinary by placing it in a different, inverted perspective.

In his dream he is a wax doll, deforming himself: “eine Wachspuppe /die auf den Herd gesprungen ist /auf einen Armeleuteherd” (287). Damerau interprets this neologism with reference to a social hierarchy between master and servant: “In seinem Traum verzweifelt Herrenstein am Alleinsein und stürzt sich in die Auflösung, in die Verflüssigung: in den Tod. Berücksichtigt man dazu Hegels Beschreibung, dann wird noch deutlicher, daß der Industrielle hier die Züge eines anderen trägt: eben die Züge seines weniger bemittelten Gegenübers, dem er sich annähert. Bernhard spielt mit Hegels Motiven aus dem Verhältnis von Herrschaft und Knechtschaft darauf an; und er gibt es zudem mit dem billigen Herd zu erkennen, der nicht recht zu einem Industriellen passen will […]. Im Grunde ereignet sich ein Rollentausch beim Herrn und seinem Knecht.” 340 Damerau’s argument is flawed in that it takes no account of the eccentric’s power over others’ existence. Physically, Herrenstein is Richard’s puppet – he is moved and lifted and in that sense manipulated by him, but “springen” suggests volition and physical strength, not helplessness. Herrenstein is a puppet who remains in control: he dictates the rituals by which he wishes to live, and those rituals allow him to dramatize and carnivalize his existence.

IV. 6 Bruscon’s verbal performance to the Wirt (innkeeper)

Self-preservation involves rhetorical distancing from a hostile environment personified in Bruscon’s perception of the innkeeper as a provincial type, to whom he performs an uninhibited derision of the provinces at large. Yet even though the audience is unworthy, the show must go on. This is the “Österreichfalle” (Heldenplatz; 163) in which all

339 “Es werden nur dumme Gedanken ausgeprochen /es wird nur Verkrüppeltes gesagt /wenn es noch so gut gedacht ist /ist es doch verkrüppelt gedacht /wenn es noch so gut gesagt ist /es ist doch verkrüppelt gesagt […] /die ganze Welt ist von Dummheit durchsetzt /die ganze Welt ist eine verkrüppelte” (290)
340 Damerau, p. 367
Bernhardian eccentrics remain; Austria is their stage. Bruscon also attacks what he perceives as the innkeeper’s lack of cultural interest, deriding him not as an individual, but as a culturally ignorant provincial type, this time with ordinary language that robs him of his individuality. The innkeeper’s abnormal behaviour lies in his inability to confront Bruscon, yet his silence faced with Bruscon’s scorn of the non-carnival world which the innkeeper represents is essential to Bruscon’s performance of disrespectful tirades. Bruscon’s carnivalization of the provincial world is a theatrical show. When Ferruccio holds the mask in front of the innkeeper’s face, the gravity of Bruscon’s violent reaction affirms that the carnival of “Das Rad”, which includes masks, is not intended as mere popular entertainment. Bruscon’s attack on cultural ignorance forbids the innkeeper to actively participate in the exclusive theatrical carnival of “Das Rad” produced by the family theatre group:

BRUSCON
Schlägt Sarah die Füße ins Gesicht
Sofort zurück die Maske in die Kiste
Was fällt dir ein
Das ist ja ungeheuerlich
solchen Leuten die Caesarmaske vorzuhalten
einem Nichtswürdigen
einem Wirt
einem Kunstfeind
einem Theaterhasser
eine Unverschämtheit
eine Ungeheuerlichkeit (52)

Bruscon does not address the innkeeper directly; he stigmatizes him as a provincial type. Similarly, when Bruscon comments on the innkeeper’s oral register (45), and goes on to belittle his lack of intellect, he addresses him not as an individual but generalises a provincial mentality and derides it as predictable using unimaginative language (“Gleich mit wem wir reden/es ist ein Dummkopf”), though he hereby refuses to pinpoint the innkeeper directly:

Kommen wir in einen Ort
ist es ein stumpfsinniger Ort
treffen wir einen Menschen
ist es ein stumpfsinniger Mensch
Ein durch und durch stumpfsinniger Staat
von durch und durch stumpfsinnigen Menschen
bevölkert
Gleich mit wem wir reden
es stellt sich heraus

341 Bruscon kicks Sarah away: See Appendix II, No. 42, p. 359
es ist ein Dummkopf
gleich wem wir zuhören
es stellt sich heraus
es ist ein Analphabet
sie seien sozialistisch
sagen sie
und sind doch nur nationalsozialistisch
sie seien katholisch
sagen sie
und sind doch nur nationalsozialistisch
sie seien Menschen
sagen sie
und sind nur Idioten (46)

To Bruscon, the innkeeper represents the state ("stumpfsinniger Staat […] stumpfsinnigen Menschen"). Bruscon lumps all groups across the political spectrum together, giving a fool’s perspective: his topsy-turvy carnivalesque logic equates “sozialistisch” with “nationalsozialistisch”, and “katholisch” with “nationalsozialistisch”, giving no rational differentiation; he hereby inverts norms of “official” political speech making and logical description. He also debases “Menschen” as “Idioten”. His tirade lacks any serious foundation. The passage foreshadows Robert Schuster’s tirade in Heldenplatz, in which he equates Socialists with National Socialists (HP 97-98). Klug comments on the above scene as follows: “Bruscon macht den Wirt zugleich zum Angeredeten und zum Objekt seiner Rede. Der Wirt muß sich sowohl als jemanden identifizieren, der sich selbst unweigerlich als ‘Dummkopf’ herausstelle, als auch als jemand, der wie Bruscon die bestürzende Erfahrung zu machen gefäbt sein müßte, immer nur mit Dummköpfen zu sprechen […] Die begriffliche Vagheit dieser hysterischen Herrschaftssprache erschwert es für den Angeredeten zusätzlich, angemessen auf die in der vertraulichen Mitteilung versteckte Beleidigung zu reagieren. Die Scheinobjektivität kaschiert den Handlungsaspekt.” 342

Herrenstein also gives a tirade which recalls Bruscon’s above monologue, one which prefigures the tirades in Heldenplatz, a carnivalesque perspective which categorically condemns, inverting the norms of “official” description of Austria’s image, since like the other eccentrics, he has no principles:

HERRENSTEIN
die Österreicher sind ein verkommenes Volk
die Österreicher hassen die Juden
und die aus der Emigration zurückgekommen sind am allertiefsten
die Österreicher haben nichts gelernt
sie haben sich nicht geändert

342 Klug, p. 212
Herrenstein's tirade is robbed of seriousness, given his unsubstantiated assertions; the fool's perspective is theatrical in its projection of "otherness".

In Scene 1 of Der Theatermacher, the ease with which Bruscon moves from one theme and level of acting to another further deepens the gulf between the innkeeper and himself. When faced with Bruscon in front of the stage, the innkeeper's amusement and constant quiet laughter stemming from perplexity and lack of genuine interest irritate Bruscon, who receives no more than virtually mute reactions. Yet he relies on the virtual silence of the innkeeper to give him the opportunity to perform his carnivalesque tirades throughout Scene 1. The banal issue of "Blutwurst" is the only moment in Scene 1 when Bruscon and the innkeeper enter into a dialogue, albeit a limited one. "Blutwursttag", which encapsulates the ritualistic dimension into a compound noun, becomes symbolic of a provincial mindset, and it bears absurd undertones since it gives no indication of any activity beyond the production of black pudding sausage on a fixed day of the week. Bruscon's conversation with the innkeeper graphically replicates, through its repetition of "Blutwursttag" (43-44; 47-48), the senseless, inescapable and banal routine of life in Utzbach, through the image of a sausage granted a day in the week: "Jeden Dienstag" (44). The absurdity inherent in the repetition also signals a limitation in outlook, since the conversation cannot extend beyond this topic and parodies the already existent lack of communication in Scene 1, in which the comic aspects in the setting and the innkeeper's quiet amusement and refusal to challenge Bruscon relativise the provocative impact of the virtual monologue of Bruscon's tirades. Bruscon is not interested in genuine communication, yet he is also stimulated to perform by the innkeeper's quiet presence. Repetition of the already limited topic of exchange reinforces the atmosphere of non-communication between Bruscon's carnival existence and the non-carnival world symbolized by the innkeeper, which Bruscon reacts against. Bakhtin's concept of free marketplace communication contrasts with the minimal direct verbal contact Bruscon has with the non-carnival world (the village of Utzbach). The scene with the innkeeper in Scene 1 in terms of its linguistic performance is a farce of non-communication that obliterates any possibility of authentic dialogue being established.
Critics have seen the absence of genuine dialogue in the plays as a central dramatic device. According to Winkler, the figure speaking the monologue dominates the other (mute) figure and there is a resulting absence of dialogue: “La vanité d’un dialogue coupé de toute conséquence dramatique se double de l’impossibilité du dialogue dans un univers dominé par la dichotomie logorrhée-mutisme, les citations et les répétitions.”

Eisner remarks that repetition prevents genuine exchange between figures: “The main point to note about the nihilism of Bernhard’s plays – as of his prose – is that it is derived essentially from a highly repetitive style of language, which does not allow the development of plot, character and genuine dialogue. In addition to a linguistic device, are the dramatic ones of portraying grotesque situations and of using visually oppressive settings.” The inkeeper is unable to explain beyond the ritualistic aspect of the physical task and the group effort in accomplishing it: “Am Blutwursttag müssen wir alle /zusammenarbeiten” (44). He merely names other chores, i.e. his daughter’s cleaning: “Dann kommt die Erna /zusammenkehren” (44). The inkeeper remains two dimensional because he cannot distinguish himself through language. Dronske states that language in Bernhard bears no genuine potential for communication: “Sprache besitzt in den Bernhardschen Dramen keine kommunikative Funktion, sie ist somit kein Medium des Austausches oder der Auseinandersetzung, sondern reine Verkündung: In ihr wird eine immer gleiche und absolut leere Wahrheit mitgeteilt.” Gomer points out that true insight is not possible for the figures, due to the repetitive structures: “Das Lernen findet sich außer Kraft gesetzt […] Diente bei Kierkegaard die Wiederholung der Erkenntnis, so erweist sie sich bei Bernhard als ein Mittel zum Verkennen.”

The frequent position of the inkeeper at the side of the stage in Scene 1 highlights Bruscon’s rejection of real conversation and the fact that the inkeeper physically repels him (as he mentions to Ferruccio – 80). The inkeeper’s position on the stage also turns him into an on-stage audience for Bruscon throughout Scene 1. Bruscon performs a long philosophical reflection on theatre as the only possible way for

343 Winkler, L’attente et la fête, p. 136
344 Nicholas Eisner, “Theaterspiele…”, p. 105
345 Dronske, “Sprach-Dramen”, p. 118-119
347 See Appendix II, No. 30, p. 347 & No. 37, p. 354
him to survive (30-31), and the innkeeper is silent throughout. Bruscon plays with his audience yet the innkeeper also plays along passively with the show, almost provoking Bruscon by his silence and visible amusement. He therefore has an essential role to play in the off-stage *theatrical carnival*, namely the role of virtually silent spectator to Bruscon’s carnivalesque monologue. The innkeeper's paucity of words, even when recounting his past (33-35) enables Bruscon to launch into a mocking account of the innkeeper’s environment and fate (35), in which he distances himself from the innkeeper’s ordinariness, consolidating his image of eccentricity as he recognises that the innkeeper has accepted his own fate:

[Bruscon]
Wirt in Utzbach
ewenn das nicht eine Verrücktheit ist
eine totale Verrücktheit
ruft in den Saal hinein
Die totalste Verrücktheit
aller Zeiten
Wer existiert
Hat sich mit der Existenz abgefunden
Wer lebt
Hat sich mit dem Leben abgefunden
So lächerlich kann die Rolle gar nicht sein
Die wir spielen
Daß wir sie nicht spielen (35-36)
V. Ritual and the eccentric

V. 1 Introduction

Previous research on ritual has focused on the habitual aspects of ritual, and its link to power. Schmidt-Dengler identifies several forms of ritual in *Ritter, Dene, Voss* and comments on the meal ritual in this play: “Das Essen verwandelt sich zum Aggressionsgeschehen, zum Herrschaftsritual.” He also refers to Josef Schuster’s shoe fetish in *Heldenplatz* and states that on the whole: “Die Figuren scheinen auf die Objekte fixiert, fixiert vor allem auf die Gewandung; deren Auswahl hat sich zum verstörenden Ritual entwickelt.” While Schmidt-Dengler mentions on-stage “Investiturrituale”, referring to costume ritual in *Ein Fest für Boris, Der Präsident, Vor dem Ruhestand* and *Einfach kompliziert*, he does not refer to its role in *Elisabeth II* or *Der Weltverbesserer*. Schmidt-Dengler’s statement: “Das Festritual ist auch ein Unterdrückungsritual”, which he uses with reference to *Ein Fest für Boris* and *Vor dem Ruhestand*, is of no real relevance to *Ritter, Dene, Voss* since Voss sabotages Dene’s attempts to impose tradition on him (as discussed in II. 6).

Damerau sees a parallel between the psychology of the characters and the rituals they develop to enable them to survive. On this reading, ritual is essentially defensive: “Bernhards Stücke sind zwar psychologisches Theater, weil es um Selbstbehauptung, um Ängste, Verzweiflung, Einsamkeit und ähnliches mehr geht. Aber diese Psychologie zeigt sich nur mehr als Mechanismus. Die Stücke sind psychologisch mechanisches Theater der typischen Rituale. Sie zeigen, wie der eine oder andere Menschentypus als Abwehrmechanismus entsteht oder sich auch einfach fortsetzt. Denn in ihrer psychologisch begründeten Typisierung fristen die Theaterfiguren genau aufeinander abgestimmt ihr Leben: Sie fristen es gemeinsam, mehr oder weniger panisch, am Abgrund der Fragen, wie lange wohl und warum eigentlich dieses Leben noch andauert. So ist die Identität der Figuren typische Identität als Schutzbehauptung.” Yet carnival depends on an inversion of norms and of (apparently) conventional roles. Neither the eccentrics nor their private

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349 ibid., p. 159
350 ibid., p. 158
351 ibid., p. 162
352 Damerau, p. 301
rituals can be characterised as instances of "Typisierung". Just as language asserts difference from the norm, so private ritual is a statement of indifference to the outside world, which allows eccentricity and Bernhard's form of carnival to take root, because the carnival itself relies on private rituals. The eccentrics are not governed by fear ("Ängste") and are not driven by a need to defend themselves from the outside world ("Schutzbehauptung"), since they scorn profound commitment to society, and they do not conform to pre-given social norms.

Damerau claims the eccentrics live in an unreal, illusory world of their own making: "Vielmehr behaupten sich die Theaterfiguren mit ihrem Schein gegen ein beunruhigendes Sein. Mit meinen Vokabeln gesagt: Sie wappnen sich mit ihrem jeweiligen typischen Ritual gegen eine Wirklichkeit, von der sie sich bedroht und infragegestellt sehen." But it would be truer to say that they challenge reality in the shape of the normal world because it seems to them absurd and contemptible, and they never weary of flouting its norms. There is no sense of capitulation to the conditions and demands of a normal life. Nor is there any sense of defeat at the end of the plays. Damerau sees the Bernhardian eccentrics as "angsterfüllte Marionetten des Typischen, deren Wirklichkeit Bedrohung ist." Yet private rituals are prescribed by the eccentric and symbolize his power over others in his group; the rituals are enacted in defiance of social pressures. Carnival is by nature ritualistic: the private rituals are best understood as a form of group theatre which allows the carnival way of life espoused by the eccentrics to flourish. The rituals may be compulsive, but their eccentricity does not diminish as a consequence. All carnivalesque private rituals liberate figures from pre-given social norms in terms of their eccentric relationships within the group. Although private rituals invert norms, however, they are not necessarily comic, as in Bakhtinian carnival. For the main eccentric figures, there is no life worth living outside their privately staged carnivals. The eccentrics cannot be "Marionetten des Typischen", since they regard themselves as being unanswerable to anybody for their own outlook and behaviour. Nor are the roles of the secondary figures fundamentally typical in the way Damerau claims, since he does not take into account their essential role in the carnival and the subordination of society at large to the private

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353 Damerau, p. 296
354 ibid., p. 371
arrangement: ‘Sie [die Theaterfiguren] wirken typisch. Das heißt, die früheren und noch
die späteren Figuren in Bernhards Stücken behaupten sich mit einer traditionsgemäßen
Identität: mit einer schon vorgefertigten und erneut eingefahrenen sozialen Rolle, an die
sie sich halten. Sie versuchen, den beängstigenden Bedrohungen und Abgründen zu
entkommen: sie retten sich ins typische Ritual.’ The point is that the role of the
supporting characters is not a social role as it is determined by the radically antisocial
eccentric. The roles of the servants in Elisabeth II and Heldenplatz are unconventional
because they form part of the carnivalistic domestic arrangement of the eccentric. In Der
Theatermacher and Ritter, Dene, Voss the seemingly traditional family arrangement is
marked by new, eccentric and entirely abnormal dimensions. The supporting figures do
not conform to accepted social standards in their relations and rituals. They show no
initiative in considering real alternatives to their roles in the carnival because their lives
are controlled by the eccentric.

Public social rituals which are secondary to the private carnival are a source of
boredom and irritation to the eccentric and his circle, although from one point of view these
rituals are ambiguous since they reveal the figures’ established position in the culture of
Vienna. But adherence to these cultural rituals clearly does not stem from a genuine interest
in them: the figures lead a dead-end, inescapable existence which offers no possibility for
fulfilment. Socio-cultural rituals (visits to the opera, Musikverein and theatres) in Elisabeth
II, Ritter, Dene, Voss and Heldenplatz; and sporadic performances in the theatre (Ritter Dene
Voss) indicate only a very superficial conformism to social norms or class; they represent
the figures’ participation in the non-carnival world. These rituals cannot fulfil because they
are fundamentally empty and serve only to kill time outside the private domain. Eccentrics
such as Herrenstein participate in socio-cultural rituals in order to stage a reaction against
them. Given the fact that bourgeois values are anathema to him, Herrenstein inverts the
conventional perception of the socio-cultural rituals he participates in. Socio-cultural
rituals therefore are never a form of personal reassurance or self-defence for the eccentric
because he rejects the bourgeois conventions of the non-carnival world. Even where figures
such as Voss’s sisters and the Schuster family passively participate in socio-cultural rituals,
they remain empty pastimes and reflect the meaninglessness of existence. In all cases,

355 Damerau, p. 277
socio-cultural rituals serve to interrupt the private eccentric rituals, which are of greater significance to the eccentric and his circle, as they project a sense of the eccentric’s individuality and reaffirm his control in the carnival arrangement. Damerau’s view does not do justice to the function of private rituals, which are not pre-defined; eccentricity is reflected precisely in the main figure’s language, which makes a virtue of deviant practice and inverts behavioural norms: “Die Worte der Figuren sind stets Schutzbehauptungen zur Selbstbehauptung, auch in den späteren, subtilen Stücke. Jeder wappnet sich mit seinem typischen Ritual und suggeriert sich damit eine Sicherheit, auch wenn alles eigentlich ganz anders ist.” 356 But private ritual is essential to the carnivalistic theatre of life, and precisely because it is eccentric and takes widely divergent forms, it is not typical, nor is it defensive; characters like Bruscon, Herrenstein, Voss and Robert Schuster are not shrinking violets, and none is intimidated by the decencies of conventional, non-eccentric, non-carnival life.

V. 2 Ritual and culture in Elisabeth II

Herrenstein’s existence is marked by a constant awareness of the tedium of life. In contrast to Voss, who refuses to participate in cultural ritual beyond listening to Beethoven, Herrenstein appears to tolerate socio-cultural ritual in his own group, albeit reluctantly. Yet the search for entertainment fails to deliver any satisfaction. An inability to initiate new experiences condemns Herrenstein to a comic performance of contradictions given his attachment to Vienna, although he claims to hate the city and its people: “Ich hasse Wien und ich hasse die Wiener /Was ist denn in der Oper heute” (292-3). In the production, the opera is visible just outside his window. He remains an “Ur-Wiener”, having spent his life there. Herrenstein’s love-hate relationship with the culture of Vienna signifies a dependence on the conventions there. Being in Vienna provokes his subversive perspective of these conventions. Herrenstein’s talk of the opera productions reveals that in practice he does not experiment culturally, unlike his parents, distinguished members of Vienna’s Mäzenatentum (314). Although he finds opera boring (“Schauspieler sind mir widerwärtig /da höre ich noch lieber die stumpfsinnigen Sänger /in einer Mozartoper /Wann wird denn Cosi fan tutte wieder gespielt”; 293), he has Richard take him to productions of Mozart and Wagner because this gives him an occasion to perform his tirades: “Richard schiebt mich

356 Damerau, p. 284
An aversion to the popular composer Verdi remains without consequence, although he debases him and subverts his standing by claiming his compositions pollute the ear canal: “Verdi mag ich nicht /diese Tränendrüsenitalianita /geht nur ins Ohr um die Gehörgänge zu verschmutzen” (294). The idea that opera is boring (Mozart) or characterized by sentimental kitsch (Verdi) is in itself a carnivalesque inversion of conventional ways of seeing classical music. Theatre is as predictable as the opera: Das ist ja der grosse Reiz am Burgtheater daß es immer verstaubt gewesen ist und immer verstaubt sein wird Jede Entrümpelung des Burgtheaters leitet nur eine neue Stauborgie ein (293).

Herrenstein depends on the cultural monotony in the Burgtheater, which offers him the stimulus he needs to perform a tirade. The staleness of the Burgtheater both pleases and irritates him. The Burgtheater will never get the spring clean it needs, but this gives the eccentric his chance to carnivalize it. Herrenstein asserts his carnivalistic perspective, whilst continuing to participate in an established social ritual, one which is as predictable as the productions of the Burgtheater itself, which he sees as having no capacity for regeneration. Despite frustration with what he sees as an institution incapable of regeneration, he does not reject it, as he knows no alternative to it.

V. 3 Social ritual in Elisabeth II

Characteristic of the eccentric is the performance of a series of social rituals, which expose an inherently comic inconsistency. Some of Herrenstein’s own phrases ironically portray him as performer in the social theatre he despises. Although he admits that people hate him, he claims that this is a matter of indifference to him: “es macht mir nichts aus /daß ich gehaßt werde /der Haß der Leute /ist mir zur Gewohnheit geworden” (284). He performs social rituals out of habit (“Wir handeln aus Gewohnheit”; 301), but with no pleasure or conviction; people when stripped of their hypocrisy are merely ugly: “Wenn wir ihre Heuchelei abziehen /bleibt von allen diesen Menschen nichts zurück /als ihre Häßlichkeit” (284). But despite the rituals of social falsity and insincerity, Herrenstein knows that he cannot survive without them: “alles heuchlerische Subjekte
/aber wir haben sie notwendig /ohne sie wäre schon längst alles zusammengebrochen” (301). In every sphere of his life he feels part of the false theatre that is society, he owns a house in Altaussee, just like the acquaintances he despises: “Dieses ganze Gesindel hat sich dort angekauft” (283). The party he throws on the occasion of the Queen’s visit to Vienna takes place against his will and in spite of his antisocial nature:

Und der Anlaß
ist dieser lächerliche
Aber ich kann mir die Leute
nicht vollkommen verscherzen
Ich muss mir einreden
daß es mir Vergnügen macht
Ich hab immer gedacht diese Leute
kommen nie wieder in mein Haus
schaut um sich
Alles wird nur beschmutzt
ist es nicht ekelaft (285)

Performing social ritual involves attending a funeral after the show of the Queen’s visit: “ausgerechnet heute /wo wir auf das Heldweinbegräbnis müssen” (285). In the ritual of attending funerals, he inevitably associates himself with those he classes as swine: “Diese Schweine /[…] /die gehen auch auf das Heldweinbegräbnis /Zuerst gehen sie zum Herrenstein /das alte Schwein wie sie sagen” (340). Here, his invective roots him in the very society he condemns.

It appears that he cannot remain cut off from society for a long period, given his curiosity, which is a typical characteristic of the Viennese (“Die Wiener sind ja so abstoßend neugierig”; 303). His desire to escape is not permanent, since although the eccentric hates being with people, he also hates being without them: “Auf dem Semmering komme ich mit diesem Gesindel /nicht in Berührung /andererseits ist das Abgeschlossen sein auch die Hölle” (295). In his own home he admits that he is an observer from the sidelines, when he desires in vain to be an outsider: “Finden Sie nicht auch Richard /daß ich völlig überflüssig bin /in dieser Angelegenheit /Aber ich will sie doch alle sehen” (307). At this moment, Herrenstein cannot be an outsider, as his interest, although superficial, indicates his need for this social group.

**V. 4 Ritual and death in Elisabeth II**

Herrenstein, faced with the possibility of imminent death, tries to uphold routine. He is unable to create satisfaction for himself as he finds it difficult to accept the human
condition of life and death. The eccentric is often overcome by self-pity: "Alle neiden mir mein Leben /diese armelige Existenz" (335). Life is absurd, in itself it is no cause for celebration (290), yet he does not want to die; the awareness of the imminence of death results in a desire not to submit to it:

Vor fünf Jahren hat mir der Doktor Friedländer drei Jahre gegeben
ich bin noch immer da
insofern habe ich mich schon zwei Jahre überlebt
ich will nicht sterben das ist es
ich sage zwar immer ich sterbe
aber ich will nicht sterben (317)

His survival instinct means keeping up routine, no matter how tedious or depressing existence is. Richard's role is to support Herrenstein's domestic ritual in practical matters. Richard helps to uphold routine, as in giving Herrenstein his tablets at fixed times, within an atmosphere of suffocation, whereas Herrenstein is aware of his state of being kept alive artificially, of being denied real "life":

Habe ich alle Pillen genommen Richard
RICHARD
Selbstverständlich
HERRENSTEIN
Die vor dem Frühstück
Und die nach dem Frühstück
Und die vor dem Mittagessen
Und die nach dem Mittagessen
Und die Abendpillen
Ist das ein Leben
RICHARD
Es ist eine Notwendigkeit
HERRENSTEIN
Eine Notwendigkeit
Wo doch alles ganz überflüssig geworden ist
Fahren Sie mich zum Fenster
Ich will hinausschauen
Ich will etwas sehen
Ich ersticke hier
Richard schiebt Herrenstein zum rechten Fenster (319)

Herrenstein's existence is empty and superfluous ("überflüssig"), and he is trapped inside the suffocating atmosphere in the flat, yet he can envisage no alternative to the mutual enforcement of this routine within four walls, which becomes a prolongation of life and consequently, the domestic arrangement. Private ritual offers no mental stimulation; Herrenstein's pastimes merely kill time: "ich glaube ich habe die Wahlverwandtschaften /jetzt schon dutzendemale von Ihnen gehört /Das ist ja Schwachsinn /aber zur Vertreibung der Langeweile /eine ideale Lektüre" (296).
At the beginning of the play Herrenstein declares that he went to Badgastein precisely because the climate was unsuitable for his heart condition: "Für Sie ist Badgastein tödlich haben Sie gesagt /wörtlich haben Sie gesagt tödlich /aber gerade davon war ich ja fasziniert /daß Sie gesagt haben tödlich" (282). He continues: "Kaum werden wir geboren /fliehen wir den Tod /die ganze Menschheit läuft nur dem Tod davon" (282). The preoccupation with death does not make it easier to live with; on the contrary, life for the geriatric becomes a permanent attempt to escape death.

Herrenstein’s existence thrives on routine, “Gewohnheit” (288; 301) and mental alertness: “Wir existieren ja nur /weil wir noch nicht alles vergessen haben” (286). There is no desire for change. Monotony is upheld with precision. Any change in Herrenstein’s routine is met with frustration. The symbolism of the bird outside the window demonstrates this. Herrenstein only complains of what is missing: “Der Vogel zirpt nicht /um diese Zeit /zirpt er doch immer /auch an Samstagen hat er immer gezirpt” (321). Ritual is considered to be tedious and senseless, but any thought of changing it is also perceived as senseless: “Das Frühstück liegt mir im Magen /seit Jahrzehnten ist es das gleiche /aber es hâtte keinen Sinn es zu ändern /mit den Nachtmahlem ist es dasselbe /Schließlich geht einem alles auf die Nerven” (298).

Herrenstein as director of his own theatre of life always determines the content of Richard’s performance of domestic reading rituals, and shows no initiative in daily existence, preferring by his own admission to live off monotonous pastimes. Given Herrenstein’s lack of intellectual endeavour, his entire existence is centred on a predictability and boredom upon which he relies:

aber es vergeht doch keine Woche
daß Sie mir nicht wenigstens ein Buch vorlesen
ein Buch vorlesen vorlesen vorlesen
und ich langweile mich doch tödlich dabei
aber mit dieser tödlichen Langeweile bin ich noch zufriedener
als ohne (296)

Bernhard himself preferred the mediterranean climate which benefited his lifelong incurable lung tuberculosis, following a near-death experience at the age of 18 in hospital and in the Lungenheilstätte Grafenhof (described in the autobiographical narratives Die Kälte and Der Atem). Illness is a major theme in Bernhard’s work. Equally, metaphorically speaking, he felt suffocated in Austria throughout his lifetime; his preference to travel south enabled him to distance himself from the hostility to his work and person in Austria: “wenn’s mir in Österreich den Hals zuschnüren” (Bernhard im Gespräch mit Krista Fleischmann, Monologe auf Mallorca, Österreichischer Rundfunk (ORF) Film Aufzeichnung, 1981)
Thriving on the regularity of ritual is a form of dependence. The repetition of the verb “vorlesen”, of “tödlich” and “langweile […] Langeweile” reflects the self-induced boredom in existence. Deathly boredom is preferable to nothingness or death. Mental routine perpetuates itself alongside a survival instinct (317), although life is characterised by a lack of purpose. In private, Herrenstein is an indiscriminate consumer of literature (310). There is a resignation in Herrenstein, who knows that literature cannot bring intellectual stimulation to him, despite there being no improvisation in the selection of books for Richard to read to him. He does not reject traditional writers, as the reading ritual becomes an occasion to stage his carnivalesque invective:

Sie lesen ja nicht
Sie glücklicher Mensch
Ihnen hat Goethe noch nicht die Welt verdorben
mir hat er sie nach und nach vererbt
überhaupt habe ich mir durch Literatur die Welt verfinstert (296)

Although he claims that Goethe has ruined the world for him, he continues to rely on this routine, whilst subverting the value of the enlightening prospect of literature.

Herrenstein’s love of ceremonial ritual reflective of his social status is a significant aspect of domestic life. The silver platter bearing Herrenstein’s dentures is a carnival image; it first becomes apparent with Herrenstein’s opening words:

Ich habe meine Zahne vergessen
[...]
Richard kommt mit einem Tablett herein, auf dem Herrensteins Gebiß liegt
Herrenstein nimmt das Gebiß und steckt es in den Mund
Richard gibt ihm einen schwarzen Stock mit Silberknopf (281)

At the end of Scene 1, he asks for his daily banana to be brought:

plötzlich hoch aufgerichtet
Jetzt hatte ich gerne meine Banane
[...]
Fräulein Zallinger kommt mit einer Banane auf einem Teller herein, und Herrenstein nimmt die Banane und beißt ein Stück ab (310-311)

The action of eating the banana, a usual ceremonial routine, runs parallel to talk of his desire to read familiar German, French, Russian or other European classics (311), a mental routine. As a consumer of culture, literature as a banal pastime is as predictable a ritual as the ritual of eating a banana. Herrenstein devours the banana as absentmindedly as he approaches literature, to fill the time.
V. 5 Cultural routine in Ritter, Dene, Voss

“Aus Langeweile /aus Lebensüberdrüß /ans Josefštädtler Theater gekommen” (Ritter, 139). Both Ritter and Dene came to the theatre given an absence of real initiative. Neither music nor theatre can provide any satisfaction for them: “Interpreten sind keine Genies /schon gar nicht Schauspieler” (Dene, 161). Dene and Ritter had originally taken up theatre in young years as a rejection of the family (“der Theaterhass war der größte in der Familie”; 139), not out of inspiration, since theatre lacks any spontaneity or creativity. Outside the home theatre remains a fruitless alternative, an ineffective escape from the family: “Die Theaterflucht /hat uns nichts genutzt” (Ritter, 155). The longing to escape a prescribed existence and to determine their own identity has failed. Non-ambition characterized the sisters’ early years: “Schauspieleri /das blieb uns /nichts sonst /Ich hatte nie etwas werden wollen” (Ritter, 138). Ritter turns to acting because she does not want to make anything of her life. Dene admits that her motive was fear of loneliness and isolation: “alles Professionelle hat mich immer abgestoßen /nur weil ich nicht vereinsamen wollte” (162).

Ritter’s sporadic performances lead to her doubting that she has any potential for “Selbstverwirklichung” (128), yet despite their lack of success, they cannot bring themselves to give up theatre: they continue an absurd activity because it gives them something to do.

Private performance mirrors the staleness of public performance. Dene’s domestic routine is combined with rehearsing for rare (minor) stage performances, and Ritter performs every couple of years, not to become a successful actress, but merely for a change of scene; performing in the theatre is peripheral to their existence within the family trio. Voss notes that they act “aus Langeweile” (212); performing on the public stage gives them no satisfaction. They in any case live off the profits of the Josefstadt theatre as “Parasiten” (192), as they appear to have a financial stake in the theatre which allows them to perform:

RITTER

Der Schauspieldirektor hängt sozusagen von uns ab
nicht wir von ihm
Und wenn wir jahrelang keine Lust haben zu spielen
spielen wir nicht
[...]
Die Theaterkunst ist nur da unabhängig
wo sie einundfünfzig Prozent Anteil besitzt
ehrlich gesagt
mich reizt es nur alle paar Jahre einmal
aufzutreten
aber das heißt nicht
däß ich auch nur einen einzigen Tag
mein Talent vernachlässige
seit zwei Monaten übt unsere Schwester die Blinde
vordem Fenster
und da sie in diesen zwei Minuten eine Minute
tz anzen hat
besucht sie einen Tanzkurs
wo sie erlernt
die eine Blinde tanzt
das ist gar nicht so einfach wie du denkst
wahrscheinlich sind wir die einzigen
die sich auf das exakteste auf ihren Auftritt vorbereiten
Wir haben Zeit uns zu intensivieren (194)

The sisters’ privileged background frees them from social responsibility, offering them an activity, even mere rehearsal, as a form of killing time: “Wir haben Zeit…”. Yet the public stage gives them no sense of excitement or fulfilment; only the private stage on which they act with Voss can do that. They find domestic theatre much more rewarding than public theatre.

Acting as a trivial pursuit cannot fulfil but cannot be renounced for want of other activities. Rehearsal is in itself a way of passing time. Koberg does not acknowledge this: “Dene legt ihren gesamten Ehrgeiz weiter in einen Kurzauftritt als Blinde, die zwei Sätze zu sprechen hat.” 358 Despite settling for minor roles, Dene continues with absurd dedication to an activity per se, not for the sake of theatre, since she does not see it as an occupation: “Ich bin gar keine Schauspielerin / ich habe nur unter Menschen gehen wollen” (162). Acting is denied its creative and dynamic status and has become a futile sporadic pastime. The private roles she plays at home with Ritter and Voss are Dene’s main motivation. Her official role makes a mockery of ambition.

Music is as much a pastime as theatre, and equally there is no inspiration, although unlike theatre, music was imposed during childhood (“Aufgezwungenes”; 136). Dene’s offer to Voss (“Ich habe eine neue Neunte gekauft”; 169) indicates the cultural staleness in their lives, the consumerism with which they approach culture, the absence of a desire for the slightest change or experiment and the lack of fulfillment. Ritter is more aware of their problematic approach to music: “bald können wir auch keine Musik mehr hören /wenn die Ohren aufeinmal und dann für immer / Musik hassen / weil wir sie mißbrauchen / für den Überlebenszweck sozusagen” (174). Genuine enjoyment of music

358 Koberg, p. 277
is surpassed by stagnant, obsessive ritual. Listening to music is a form of survival. As for Herrenstein, music cannot fulfil any role other than killing time. Survival is possible only through routine. Dene can only offer a routine which bores Ritter: “Wir setzen uns in die achte Reihe /auf unsere Plätze/ […] /Diese Musik kann doch immer wieder gehört werden” (132-3); and Ritter has the same response: “Es ist letztendendes alles gehört /und alles gesehen” (133). Rejecting music is part of Ritter’s carnival subversion of the family culture. Ritter’s dislike of the predictability of Viennese subscription concerts in the Musikverein is reactive: “ich hasse diese Konzerte /seit Jahren” (132). Dene is obviously rooted in regular concert visits and rejects Ritter’s exasperation as “dein Größenwahn” (133). Dene justifies the inclusion of Voss in concert visits as a necessity, which to her cancels out Ritter’s perception of the concert ritual as monotonous:

**Dene**
Aber mit Ludwig
ist es doch etwas ganz anderes
Der Direktor sagt
diese Konzerte sind notwendig
therapeutische Matineen sozusagen
wir können ihn nicht allein gehen lassen (132, my italics)

To Ritter, concerts are also a sporadic reminder of the normality of social ritual as the only alternative to private ritual apart from the public theatre in the Josefstadt. Despite the fact that the sisters have no one to answer to, are financially independent and are not committed to social involvement, public ritual is a sign that Dene is dependent on stale social pastimes to fill her life outside the family, and cannot envisage real alternatives.

**V. 6 Domestic ritual in Ritter, Dene, Voss**

Before the arrival of Voss on the stage, Ritter reflects on the nature of her and Dene’s existence:

**Unsere Frühstücke haben sich**
seit zwanzig Jahren nicht geändert
seit dreißig Jahren nicht
wir streichen seit dreißig Jahren
das gleiche auf das gleiche Brot
und wir trinken den gleichen Tee dazu
findest du nicht
daß wir uns umbringen sollten
allein aus dieser Tatsache heraus
Zwei Schauspielerinnen des Josefstadter Theaters
haben sich umgebracht
das wäre doch eine Schlagzeile (136)
This is a theatrical performance. The ritualised breakfast is a platform for “Ablenkung”. The thought that their suicide would make headlines offers the only release from repetition. Ritter acknowledges the staleness of the domestic routine, and its apparent inescapability, yet suicide is not seriously considered; Ritter uses the sisters’ status as actors in the Josefstadt to play with a possibility which is diverting because it is sensational. In Ritter’s sense, to be outsiders and extraordinary is to cling to the old and familiar, but routine cannot fulfil; the sisters regularly wait for their brother to return. The preceding references to the local news of the day, a combination of the trivial and the grave, are merely passing distractions from accounts of forms of incest: “Eine Postkarte /die im Jahr einundzwanzig /also drei Jahre nach Ende des Ersten Weltkriegs /in Linz aufgegeben worden ist /ist gestern in Wien angekommen” (136). The mention of this trivial item of news is followed by Ritter’s second account of Voss’s bath routine with Dene, and she then returns to banality: “Gasexplosion im Dritten Bezirk /zwei tote Hausfrauen /bis zur Unkenntlichkeit verstümmelt” (136). The outside world is meaningless and uninvolving; the sisters thus need carnival excitement in the home.

The private carnival in *Ritter Dene Voss* is not a comic or celebratory one, because although it is a carnival of liberation from social responsibility, the trio can never free itself from the bourgeois setting which is the foundation for their eccentric relationships and the permanence of their carnival. Despite the everyday boredom in the home, Ritter cannot break free of it. She focuses mainly on trivialities in conversation with her sister, who is far more preoccupied with Voss’s physical condition. To Ritter, there seem no possibilities for change. Her words are punctuated by reflections on this reality: “es ist letztenendes alles gehört /und alles gesehen” (133). Ritter sees that the past prevents change: “nichts verändert /seit die Eltern tot sind /ich hätte alles ausgeräumt /alles /du hast dich dagegen gewehrt /jetzt bist du schon bald erstickt hier” (142). Travel was an option never exploited, as Dene responds: “du hättest ja wegehen können /nach Rom beispielsweise /oder nach Amsterdam” (142). Ritter claims her sister forced her to stay in the family home: “aus Unfähigkeit /weil du mich immer gelähmt hast /angekettet hast” (142); Dene reproaches: “Du bist vollkommen selbständig /du hast immer tun können /was du wolltest /aber du wolltest ja nicht wegehen” (143). In fact, the sisters are both chained to the abnormal situation in the home by the eccentric, who has prevented them from realising new
experiences, although despite realising the extent of his power, Ritter cannot free herself: “Woher nimmt unser Bruder das Recht /uns zu besitzen” (150). Both sisters remain obsessed with their brother, and the trio’s carnival continues to exert fascination over them. Dene’s fastidiously upheld domestic rituals and neuroses are a reason to stay in the home, to serve and submit to the eccentric. The routine is accepted because it provides scope for eccentricity. Whilst Dene defends her mutually dependent relationship with Voss (“ich bin für Ludwig da /du nicht”; 143), Ritter claims that her eccentric brother acted to the detriment of her own individuality, yet this is all part of a game, since she is not genuinely interested in the theatre and spends most of the time in the family home for the sake of her brother, with whom she is as obsessed as her sister: “Die Josefstadt ist meine Rettung /Ich werde wieder spielen […] Dem Theater den Rücken gekehrt /das war nur eine verlogene Pose /wegen eines philosophischen Gewaltverbrechers” (150). The term “Gewaltverbrecher” defines her brother as a criminal who does violence to her and Dene’s lives; but the claim that theatre offers salvation is not to be taken seriously.

Dene is rooted in the family home for the sake of her brother; her apparently conventional domestic roles are mocked by Voss as obsessions: “Geschirrfetischismus /Porzellanerkrankheit” (215); his neologisms indicate his irritation with her neuroses, which Ritter warns her sister of before lunch: “das hat er immer gehaßt /andauernd vom Speisezimmer in die Küche /rennende Hausfrauen /die verrückt machen” (152). Unfortunately, Dene indeed clumsily drops the serving tray and breaks porcelain at least twice, after clearing the lunch table and before coffee, lending these neologisms accuracy with a comic dimension when she exclaims: “Mich macht alles verrückt” (223). Her own nervous reaction creates the humour evident in the scene when she drops the tray of coffee about to be served: “Schade um den Kaffee” (223); upon which Ritter reminds her wryly: “Achwas /um das Geschirr ist schade” (223). Dene’s clumsiness may appear comic, but in fact her domestic rituals foreground her compliance with her eccentric brother’s fixations, and the tense atmosphere in the home which they all put up with. She aspires to mastery of the domestic rituals, but never achieves it because of her nervous awkwardness which in itself symbolizes her subservience to her brother. In Scene I, laying the table for the meal is a direct sign of the trauma Dene feels in desperately

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359 See Appendix II, No. 43, p. 360
trying to satisfy Voss with immaculate table presentation, although this later backfires during lunch, when it vexes Voss as part of the family ritual. The production by Hans-Peter Cloos, Théâtre de l’Athénée, Paris (April 2003) gives visual emphasis to Dene’s pathological obsession with tasks performed in the domestic scene, in particular, her initial gesture in Scene 1 of laying the table, which is exaggerated when she re-arranges the service several times and changes the tablecloth, following Ritter’s spilling of wine on it, leading to another execution of this ritual, which sets the audience on edge. Dene also obsessively polishes the glasses and cutlery on the table for much of Scene 1, conforming to Voss’s phobia for cleanliness.

V. 7 “Eintönigkeit” (RDV, 166) and Voss’s ritual of rehearsed unpredictability

Voss’s presence in Steinhof and at home is marked by “Gewohnheit”, yet the ritual of returning to the past takes place regularly, since there is no real alternative to the two locations:

Die Minderwertigkeit des Lebens
sie kommt ganz klar zum Bewußtsein
wenn wir in ein solches Haus zurückkommen
das wir für immer verlassen haben
[...
ich habe mich an Steinhof gewöhnt
ich sterbe in Steinhof
nicht hier
es gibt nichts Abstoßenderes
als im Elternhaus zu sterben (179-80)

Steinhof has become a permanent reaction against the past, but Voss stages his own rituals there. Schmidt-Dengler argues: “Die Gewohnheit stellt keine Apparate bereit, die gegen Tod und Vernichtung ankämpfen könnten.” But actually accustomed rituals provide the eccentric with the trigger he needs to launch his tirades; the tirades and the theatre they create may be absurd, but they are better than death. By speaking, the eccentric performs himself. It is the fear of death which prompts Herrenstein and Voss to stage their carnivals:

VOSS
Es ist doch nichts anderes
als ein Verkümmerungsprozeß
unaufhaltbare Existenz
der Langeweile zu entkommen
aber es gelingt nicht

360 Schmidt-Denger, “Ohnmacht durch Gewohnheit”, p. 172
die Langeweile
die nur durch Todesangst
unterbrochen wird (180)

Life itself is no cause for celebration; it is a slow wasting process
(“Verkümmerungsprozeß”). Voss’s eccentric rituals are not spontaneous. Later, after
pulling off the laid table, Voss’s explanation indicates that this performance is likely to be
part of a carnivallistic pattern of behaviour despite its aspect of unpredictability on stage:
“Eine Etude mein Kind /damit ich nicht aus der Übung komme /nur eine Etude /[…]/Dem Leben einen Sinn geben” (192). “Übung” is a form of ritual. Every form of outburst is a
manifestation of carnival, an upsetting of bourgeois norms, which he is used to. The only
satisfaction in living is to stage the eccentric carnival with its inversion of norms. Voss uses
metaphors derived from art: the art of life is to keep practising/ staging carnival, senseless
in itself, but vital because it disrupts the dullness of repetition. Voss cannot survive without
“Übung”; however, there may be nothing new about his form of self-determined
“Gegenterror”. Boredom is combated by ritual and obsessive behaviour. Philosophising
as a life project is a way of fighting boredom, as meaningless as the domestic practicalities
others choose: “Die einen sticken /die andem philosophieren sich /durch das Leben /alle
haben nur eine Sinnlosigkeit /und natürlich eine Geschmacklosigkeit /als Vorwand” (189).
Life is pointless, and death cannot be evaded. Voss took up philosophy as a way of
asserting individuality of thought against his parents (“Wir sind ja nicht ihr
Geistesprodukt”; 183) and philosophy has become a dead end, a fixation, but equally a
stage upon which to perform and celebrate his eccentricity.

A desire to be different does not compromise individuality but it does generate
monotony:
Meine Idee war
weiter zu gehen
als alle Andern
über alle Andern hinaus
richtet sich auf
Wir sind an die Seltsamkeiten gefesselt
Verstehst du mich
an die Seltsamkeiten
und ersticken in Eintonigkeit (166)

361 “Ohnmacht durch Gewohnheit”, p. 158
Voss exists by perceiving extremes and going beyond limitations. He is obsessed with “Seltsamkeiten”, the “strange things” of carnival. Yet his rituals, even if eccentric and motivated by a drive to stand apart, have become over-familiar — “eintonig”.

V. 8 Off-stage praise ritual in *Der Theatermacher*

Bruscon’s praise ritual which in Utzbach takes place in front of the actual stage does not correspond to any typical social roles, but to Bruscon’s own self-centred illusions. It is a form of self-assertion rather than what Damer au sees as self-defence (“Schutzbehauptung”). As seen in chapter II, Bruscon’s family is subordinated to the carnival of the theatrical life, yet not as a form of self-defence against society, (i.e. the provinces), as Damer au argues: “Sein Leben für das Theater ist nicht weniger Theater: Selbstdenken als Schutzmechanismus.” On the contrary, even if the praise ritual unfolds on a public stage as an openly theatrical performance, all carnivalesque family rituals represent a rejection of social norms; moreover, Bruscon is not concerned about preserving the intimacy of the praise ritual. The praise ritual has become predictable in the family but this does not diminish its eccentric quality. Bruscon relies on the ritualistic praise of his family to celebrate his eccentricity and to crown himself king of his own carnival. Damer au notes: “In Bruscons Selbsteinschätzung und Herrschsucht ist die Sucht nach Bestätigung offenkundig [...]. Die großen Worte setzen ihm gleichsam die Krone der Bedeutsamkeit auf, die er entbehren muß.” His “Größenwahn” is fed by his demand for constant fixed formulae of praise from his family, stock phrases which have become a mere ritualised performance, undermining their effectiveness beyond the immediate moment. Bruscon uses praise ritual to uphold his status in the family and his self-proclaimed image as an actor, even if it is a farce based on self-delusion. He prescribes and enforces their precise performance. Höller claims that he tyrannizes his family for the sake of his art: “Bernhards Stück vom Theatermacher weiß aber auch um die innere Gefährdung der Welt des Künstlers. Die Kunst Bruscons wird von seiner ihm gänzlich ausgelieferten Familie getragen, sein Theaterunternehmen beruht auf despotischer Willkür, auf

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362 Damer au, p. 301
363 Damer au, p. 323
364 Damer au, p. 322
This is true, but Bruscon’s play “Das Rad” does not correspond to a traditional concept of “Kunst”; his play is entirely unconventional in form and content; and theatre for him is a stage for carnivalesque rituals.

Even if Bruscon has not been able to inspire his children with his self-declared status, their ritualistic praise is an indication of his control over them in everyday life, as they are his base for authority in the eccentric arrangement. In Scene 2 the rehearsals with Sarah take the form of teacher-pupil relationship. Once Bruscon has told Sarah she must continue to rehearse her lines in “Das Rad” with him after the official performance (64), he attempts to extract a different type of performance from her, a ritual of praise that has been perfected off stage, as a kind of alternative to rehearsal. He declares: “Ich dachte immer /ich bin ein vorziiglicher Lehrer /aber das war ein abwegiger Gedanke” (64) and asks: “Was ist dein Vater”. When Sarah does not utter the precise formula immediately, briefly provoking him with her mischievous reply: “Herr Bruscon” (64), he chides and threatens her: “Unverschamtes Madchen /was erlaubst du dir /Diese Frechheiten /werden dich noch teuer zu stehen kommen” (64); “Ich dulde keine Widerrede /und keine Gehorsamsverweigerung” (65), hereby forcing the patriarchal role into the family theatre. Ferruccio must also plead wearily with Sarah to play her role: “Sag ihm schon was er ist” (65). The ritualistic response is enforced. When Bruscon seizes her hand, hurts her, and then finally hears her unwilling stock phrase, which he has taught her (“Sarah widerstrebend /Der grüße Schauspieler /aller Zeiten”; 65), he kicks her away. His response exposes the artificiality of the ritual, given the absence of spontaneity within it: “Na also /das wollte ich hören /Schließlich ist es mir heute /noch nicht gesagt worden” (65). Once Sarah has responded with the prescribed formula, Bruscon justifies his dictatorial behaviour, at the same time revealing his vulnerability: “Da ihr selbst /nicht auf die Idee kommt /mir zu sagen /wer ich bin /muß es erzwungen werden /[…]/wir führen /[…]/eine entsetzliche Existenz” (65-66). Bruscon’s praise ritual has some comic aspects when seen on stage, in view of the absurd repetition of fixed lines that he demands daily. But in fact the praise ritual is a theatre of coercion, one which never liberates or truly inspires Bruscon, yet it is essential to the carnival of a theatrical way of life, which is the only form of existence possible for Bruscon. Reactions to Bruscon as a theatre director are vapid: out of indifference and

365 Holler, “Zur Poetik…”, p. 405
subservience his children’s words have become hackneyed. Their praise ritual is artificial because it is inauthentic; the theatrical existence he imposes on them may be torture, but he depends on it, and the children play their off-stage role in enabling Bruscon’s theatre to continue. Ritual enables him to maintain his position in the family.

Further, although the rituals with his children take place on a daily basis, they remain part of the private theatre and without social consequences. Bruscon may ask for the praise ritual in a public inn, but he is fundamentally indifferent to society and audience expectations. By playing along as puppet figures the children enable the continuation of the performance and of the carnivalesque arrangement he determines. There is no real detriment to the family in Bruscon’s words, nor any active reaction to the attacks. His commands are accepted as part of the family theatre and despite the weariness of his wife and children, the performance of ritual goes on, developing into an absurd comedy of unconditional submission. The children appear not to be upset by Bruscon’s criticism, but they are resigned to performing the carnival. In this respect Jürgens’ reading of the rituals with Sarah is over politicised, although Bruscon is certainly authoritarian: “Der Theatermacher Bruscon, der sich unter anderem über das immer noch ‘nationalsozialistische’ Österreic herregt, ist selbst als ein Träger bürgerlich-faschistischer Denkmuster ausgewiesen, wenn er seine Tochter dazu zwingt, ihn den größten Schauspieler aller Zeiten zu nennen.” 366 This view neglects the nature of the eccentric, the fantasy and absurdity of the ritual and private (family) eccentric relationships as it does not take into account the desire to keep up the eccentric’s carnival, which has no bearing on social reality. Bruscon’s monologues may inhibit dialogue and he will not be contradicted, but Der Theatermacher is not a political play. Notably in the praise ritual, Bruscon relies on a response; here, an illusion is performed as a ritual and he relies on theatrical illusion. Bruscon’s voice has no authority beyond the family, as Dronske states: “Die ‘Täter des Wortes’, diese ‘Geistetyrann(en)’ sind dennoch durchaus zu einer gewalttätigen, allerdings lediglich privaten ‘vita activa’ fähig. Ihre destruktive Energie tobt sich aus im begrenzten Kreis der eigenen Familie.” 367

366 Jürgens, p. 184
367 Dronske, “Sprache und Gewalt”, p. 71
V. 9 The absurdity of existence

The awareness of the futility of all human activity motivates the performances of Bernhard's figures on both private and public stages. They turn to carnival as a way of passing the time, but they derive no lasting fulfilment from their lives. The fact that the eccentrics uphold no true principles, and that they see no meaning in their own lives or in the universe as a whole, prevents tragedy, since an existence which is characterized by absurdity is trivialised. Esslin compares the private arrangements of Beckett's pairs of (male) characters with the mutually dependent figures in Bernhard's theatre: the professor and Frau Zittel in *Heldenplatz*; Herrenstein and Fräulein Zallinger *Elisabeth II*; the siblings in *Ritter, Dene, Voss*; and the family group in *Der Theatermacher*. The individuals, pairs and groups of figures know that there is no real lasting sense in existence, and perform their indulgent, self-centred eccentricities against what they perceive to be a wider scale of futility, as Esslin argues: "[...] the character concerned is trying to invent a reason to go on living, a task to be fulfilled, while at the same time he knows full well that all such projects are bound to be illusory, illusions we merely create to infuse some sense into a senseless universe [...] . Thus Bernhard and Beckett share the same paradox at the basis of one of the main themes of their work, the dilemma of the artist in a society without an accepted and acceptable philosophy, a solid structure of its universe." 368

The rituals of carnival are necessary, as they fill the time preceding death. According to Bernhard, the human being is powerless when confronted with death, since the meaninglessness of existence when death is contemplated relativises all human activity and exposes it as futile: "es ist nichts zu loben, nichts zu verdammen, nichts anzuklagen, aber es ist vieles lächerlich; es ist alles lächerlich, wenn man an den Tod denkt [...]. Wir brauchen uns nicht zu schämen, aber wir sind auch nichts und wir verdienen auch nichts als das Chaos." 369 Finding a way to pass the time amidst the chaos of the world is in itself absurd, since death renders all human activities ridiculous.

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Announcing the absurdity of theatre is a form of performance. To Bruscon, performing theatre in its absurdity is paradoxically a life-sustaining process/existence. It wards off actual suicide, since life itself is no cause for celebration, and life is empty without theatre. The eccentric sees theatre as the only viable form of existence, even though it is artificial and everything he does is “unehrlich” – dishonest. The acknowledgement that theatre is absurd encompasses all aspects of a theatrical existence. Theatre gives Bruscon an opportunity to perform his private carnival, thus making life tolerable. Bruscon says nothing which is not theatrical.

Bruscon questions the very nature of producing theatre from within theatre. He points to its fundamental lack of potential in terms of imitation: to imitate is not his aim in “Das Rad”. His theatre is not meant to entertain, and cannot bring long-term satisfaction to the producer. It is a selfish process of never-ending recommencement without fulfilment (Lines 12-13). Bruscon’s judgment of the theatre-making process is that it is a futile endeavour. In Der Theatermacher, all life is theatre, and Bruscon’s play within a play matters to him not as theatre in the conventional sense, but because it gives him the chance to keep him (and his family) performing.370

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370 “En théorisant l’échec du théâtre de l’illusion au sein de sa propre dramaturgie et en s’adressant directement au public, Bernhard renonce lui-même au théâtre de la mimesis.” Winkler, L’attente et la fête, p. 238
Actors, playwrights and audiences participate collectively in the spectacle of theatre, which has become a timeless human obsession: “das Theater ist eine jahrtausendealte Perversität /in die die Menschheit vernarrt ist /[…]/ und nirgendwo sonst in dieser Menschheit /ist die Verlogenheit größer und faszinierender /als auf dem Theater” (31). As Bruscon sees it, theatre is as old as humanity; it serves no honest or honourable purpose, but it does fascinate, and its power to fascinate is its sole justification. The old actor in Einfach kompliziert confirms that theatre is the only way to exist, because it is based on falsity. He differs from Bruscon in that he lives a hermit-like existence, but his conviction that theatre alone makes life possible echoes Bruscon:

Solange wir existieren machen wir etwas vor spielen wir Theater (266)

Performing as Bruscon sees it is absurd, but it is the only thing to do in the face of death:

Wir sind totkrank und tun so als lebten wir ewig wir sind schon am Ende und treten auf als ginge es immer so weiter (54)

V. 9. 2 The absurdity in fighting boredom in Ritter, Dene, Voss

Voss’s existence thrives on the desire to be different to prevent boredom and focuses, in his case, on a mad philosophical project which he has no interest in concluding because it enables him to perform the eccentric roles which make his life sustainable:

alles geht uns auf die Nerven schließlich nicht Denken wer denkt kann ruhig alt werden Oder lebenslänglich eine verrückte Idee haben eine einzige verrückte Idee Hören lesen schauen das ist alles nichts gegen diese eine einzige verrückte Idee das ist aber mein Problem (174)

Voss’s “Narrenfreiheit” (fool’s freedom) is taken to extremes: his crazy philosophising is a form of survival, a way of life: “eine einzige verrückte Idee” offers an excuse to make theatre in order to make life more interesting, but the eccentric outlets of self-definition, be they intellectual or behavioural, have become over-familiar. Voss is long used to living at the limits of sanity, but regards madness as death, because if he were to succumb to
madness, he would lose the freedom to perform: "immer an die Grenze der Verrücktheit
/niemals diese Grenze überschreiten /aber immer an der Grenze der Verrücktheit /verlassen
wir diesen Grenzbereich /sind wir tot" (142). As Damerau states: "Bernhard führt allerdings
mit Ludwig nicht einfach das Klischee von Genie und Wahnsinn fort, sondern banalisierst es
zugleich. Die Einstellung zum Typus des verrückten Genies ist ambivalent." Voss
desires repetition in the form of repetitive cycles of obsessive behavioural experimentation
(suicide attempts, violent outbursts), which have become routine in their theatricality; this
indicates that his eccentricity paradoxically becomes a self-imposed banality. Both in
Steinhof and at home Voss remains locked in stale patterns of self-definition.

371 Damerau, p. 332
VI.  Heldenplatz

VI. 1  The thematisation of Jews in Heldenplatz

It is clear that by making a Jewish émigré family the main focus of the play, Bernhard intended to attract attention and provoke audiences by foregrounding the issue of anti-Semitism in Austria. On one level, the Jews in Heldenplatz appear as vociferous defenders of a collective as well as individual identity. Their perceptions of the collective past are all the more justified as they belong to a very small group of Jews who not only survived the Holocaust due to emigration, but also returned to Vienna, proceed to tell their personal history and overturn the official image of Jewish survivors through their depiction of Austria and the Austrians. Robert Singer of the Jüdische Rundschau acknowledged the significance of the vilification of Austria put into the mouths of Jews:

Er wählt beabsichtigt die Juden als Sprachrohre seiner geballten Anklage, denn die meisten Österreicher wünschen sich immer noch servile und geduckte Juden, die ihre zeitweilige Duldung mit anspruchsloser Dankbarkeit quittieren. Die Juden, die aufmucken und ihre gesetzlichen Rechte im Alltag anfordern, die ihre selbständige Identität leben und ihrer Umwelt mit Selbstbewußtsein gegenübertreten, erschrecken die meisten Österreicher, weil sie 'die Juden' aus vielen Vorurteilen nur als Gottesmörder, als bolschewistische Revolutionäre, als entartete Weltverschwörer und als gierige, geizige Filzgeier kennen wollen. Welch ein Schock, welch eine blasphemische Provokation, gerade Juden über Österreich Gericht sitzen zu lassen. 372

Bernhard gives those who had managed to escape abroad to avoid persecution in the 1930s a strong voice, not only to demand the rights that had been denied them even on returning to Austria, but above all to assert a self-confidence which most of those who returned to Austria as survivors did not have, since they had been denied basic human respect from 1945 onwards and were expected to remain grateful for being tolerated and mute about poor compensation for past persecution. It was therefore seen as provocative to use Austrian Jewish survivors, because this contradicted the official image of Jews expected by audiences.

Bernhard undoubtedly wrote Heldenplatz with the intention of provoking conservative opinion in 1988, in which he succeeded. Some considered the play as an example of “Wiederbetätigung” and saw cause for it to be banned (c.f. Appendix I). But though anti-Semitism in Austria is one of the central themes in the play, Bernhard did

372 Jüdische Rundschau, 10.11.1988
not intend to take an objective or explanatory approach to the issue. Using Austrian Jews as the main figures may have been unexpected by the conservative audiences of Vienna in 1988, but for eccentric Austrian Jews to take centre stage and to judge Austria is also a carnivalistic inversion of the norm. Bernhard places their personal stories into a highly charged political context: anti-Semitism in Austria in 1938 and 1988. In doing so, he may certainly be termed an “Antiverdrängungskünstler”, because he uncovered uncomfortable issues in contemporary Austria. In addition, Schuster remains on the stage of Austria to carnivalize it; his unaligned perspective shocked audiences. Yet to the reader, Bernhard deliberately leaves many issues open to discussion in the dialogue between the figures. Overall, attempts to generate dialogue on the Jewish question end in banal responses on the part of Olga (83) and Anna (114). Bernhard employs his usual technique of exaggeration in the eccentric Jewish figures’ entirely negative portrayal of Austrians. Robert’s assertion that anti-Semitism is a peculiarly Austrian trait is based on his claim that all Austrians differentiate between Jews and non-Jews in the population – the sense of being excluded as an Austrian on the basis of race rather than culture (“der Judenhaß ist die reinste die absolut unverfälschte Natur /des Österreichers”; 114). But his perspective cannot be taken seriously, because it lacks any serious foundation: this claim is similar to Robert’s other perceptions of all Austrians as being anti-Semitic (c.f. HP 118 – see VI. 5). Bernhard does not allow his figures to commit to any serious principle; there is no factual exposition of Robert’s claim. For an Austrian Jew to denounce anti-Semitism so vehemently certainly involves the breaking of taboos, but the Austria projected by Schuster’s tirades is not the real Austria. Robert’s niece, Olga, was spat on in Schottengasse, the heart of Vienna (113) and Robert tells her it was “weil sie Judin ist” (112). Robert claims that Olga was perceived as Jewish, because this fits in with his view of Austrians, yet he does not condemn the nature of the attack in any other context, i.e. if Olga were from another group or had been spat on for other reasons, the act might not be seen as immoral (“was für ein Irrtum soll denn das gewesen sein /bespuckt man denn einen Menschen auf der Straße /wenn man ihn nicht einmal kennt /nur wenn man sieht er ist ein Jude”; 113). Ultimately, both the motives for and the

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family's reactions to the attack on Olga in Vienna remain ambiguous. It is not clear whether Olga was spat on because of her Jewish roots or for other reasons. The fact that in the Vienna of 1988 she is in any case not wearing a yellow star makes an interpretation of the incident difficult, because there is clearly nothing conspicuous in her physical appearance to single her out as a Jew. Anna, despite her earlier claim that all Austrians are Nazis (63), here refuses to acknowledge the provocative nature of the attack, and avoids re-igniting the debate, by stating: "Das war sicher irrtümlich" (112), whereas Robert's comments are an attempt to break the taboo of acceptable analysis by challenging the official image of Austrians. Robert appears to claim that Jewish appearance goes beyond his allusion to the enforced prominence of the yellow star during the Nazi era, which had become symbolic in the past decades and in 1988 ("nur wenn man sieht er ist ein Jude"; 113). In the Vienna of 1988, he insists that Jews will always remain different, even outsiders. But despite Robert's general view of Austrians, Bernhard portrays him as an Austrian himself, as will be discussed. Bernhard in his thematisation of the Jewish figures in Heldentag remains noncommittal towards the position of Austrian Jews in the present day. We only hear the perspective of a very untypical, eccentric Austrian Jew who enounces an anti-Austrian stance.

Honegger questions whether Robert has, as "a descendant of Vienna's quasi-aristocratic elite, so thoroughly absorbed the racism of his class that it undermines his own sense of identity?" 374 If he belongs to this Viennese quasi-aristocratic elite, then Robert's sense of identity is only in part Jewish; it is also Austrian. His identity as a Jew is stronger than his nieces'; he is not ashamed of his Jewish identity, because it is useful in attacking what he perceives as continued prejudice in Austrian society. The words of the late Professor Josef, his brother, repeated by Zittel, provide an interesting contrast, since he had used Nazi terminology employed against his own ethnic group, reflective of his misanthropy, following his demand that only his brother Robert should be allowed to go to his funeral:

der Gedanke ware mir unerträglich
daß diese Untermenschen alle an meinem Grab stehen (50)

According to Robert, his brother's nostalgia meant he was not prepared for the attitudes he was confronted with on his return:

374 Honegger, p. 297
Instances of hostility and malevolence towards Jews of course existed from 1945 onwards, in particular the general “Brotneid” on the part of non-Jewish Austrians in the postwar years as a result of the “Opferfürsorgegesetz” of 1947 which allowed a meagre state aid to be paid to a small proportion of survivors, following the inhumane treatment of Jews. Despite the Third Reich’s policy of seizing property and all other assets that had belonged to Jews (Arisierung), many were deliberately refused their human rights and died without receiving adequate compensation due to the failure of successive post-1945 governments to return their assets to them, even by 1990. Later, the official policy of Wiedergutmachung (compensation aimed at surviving victims) from the early 1990s onwards was a sham, because it was completely ineffective. But there is no indication whether and how the Schuster family suffered from the consequences of anti-Semitic policy upon their return to Vienna in 1955 (when the family had a choice of exclusive residential locations to move to – c.f. HP 80), or indeed in 1988. Despite having escaped persecution, Robert does not appear genuinely interested in the collective suffering of Austrian Jews. He does not refer to compensation or similar issues; this is further evidence that Heldenplatz should not be read in any narrow sense as a political play, as will be discussed in VI. 5. If Robert is also referring, as in other instances, to Vienna in 1988, he gives no explicit arguments or rational basis to support his claims, which even his niece Olga for once responds to: “Onkel Robert du übertreibst” (112); Robert’s deliberate inversion of descriptive norms can only be seen as a grotesquely exaggerated perception of Austria in 1988. Moreover, given the small number of Jewish intellectuals who returned to Austria, the Schusters are in no way representative of the Austrian Jewish Heimkehrer, particularly in view of the family’s academic and financial status;
they remain part of the intellectual and social élite in the Austria of 1988. Thus, Bernhard again refuses an unambiguous stance to the position of Austrian Jews on a general scale. Robert’s brother Josef had perhaps felt nostalgic for the bygone age of fin-de-siècle Vienna, and returned to Vienna in 1955, the year of the State Treaty; to Austrian audiences, his longing for the homeland must portray him as an Austrian. But in any case, latent anti-Semitism had existed towards Jews in pre-1938 Austria, and it certainly had grave repercussions, given that it was endorsed by government policies from 1938 onwards. Robert speaks of Josef’s disillusionment in Austria, claiming that the Austrians en masse (“die Österreicher”) are guilty of “Verlogenheit”; Jürgens sees this as recalling “die von offizieller Seite vertretene Ideologie des österreichischen Staates, der sich nach 1945 eine neue, auf einer Lüge aufgebaute Identität zulegte”. This new identity characterised many Austrians’ understanding of the National Socialist past, and prevented them from acknowledging any guilt. Heldenplatz provokes by uncovering some of the attitudes that lay beneath this ideology, because Robert claims all Austrians are guilty of living a lie – a Lebensläge. But even if Robert may be alluding to the fact that Austria had in retrospect officially declared itself to have been the first victim of Nazi Germany in 1938 – which contradicted the commonly held view in the post-war years that Austria had lost the war, a claim which revealed an identification with Germany – this does not make all Austrians in 1988 rabidly anti-Semitic. Robert may be referring to the Nazis by conviction remaining in Austria after 1945, who had anti-Semitic tendencies, but who were nevertheless required to lie low after 1945; but he equates the rest of the Austrian population with this group and so establishes the carnivalesque perspective. Undeniable manifestations of hostility to Jews upon their return to Austria in the postwar years (Robert’s condemnation that “die Osterreicher nach dem Krieg [sind] /viel gehässiger und noch viel jüdenfeindlicher [gewesen]”) cannot logically lead to Robert’s dramatic conclusion shortly afterwards that the principle characteristic of all Austrians is that they are mass murderers and racist: “in Österreich Jude zu sein bedeutet immer zum Tode verurteilt zu sein / […] /der Judenhaß ist die reinste die absolut unverfälschte Natur /des Österreicher” (114); Robert gives an image of Austrians in the present day living not in a liberal tolerant democracy, but a

375 Jürgens, p. 124
place where anti-Semitism is more rabid than ever; he thus produces a carnivalesque image of all Austrians.

Speaking to Anna, Robert’s eccentric view of the Viennese today is evident in his wild claims:

> aber du solltest dich nicht aufregen wegen etwas
das nicht zu ändern ist
die Wiener sind Judenhasser
und sie werden Judenhasser bleiben
in alle Ewigkeit

 [...] 
> aber du glaubst doch nicht
daß ich mir deswegen mein Leben vergrause

 [...] 
> ich lebe in Neuhaus und fahre wöchentlich in den Musikverein in die Stadt
ich will meine Ruhe haben (84)

Despite his exaggerated claims, this attitude of mock resignation to his vision of Viennese society fundamentally trivializes the central issue of anti-Semitism, as he does not let it get him down. Even if Robert appears to condemn the Austrians, he does not present himself as genuinely concerned with the plight of Jewish victims. The eccentric is, as always, self-absorbed. He claims of Vienna after 1945:

> Vor achtunddreißig hatten sich die Wiener
an die Juden gewöhnt gehabt
aber jetzt nach dem Krieg gewöhnen sie sich nicht
mehr an die Juden
sie werden sich niemehr an die Juden gewöhnen
Ich selbst wußte ja auch
Daß ich indem ich nach Wien gegangen bin in die Hölle gegangen bin (114, my italics)

If Robert believes antisemitism is worse in 1988 than it was before 1938, and that it will not get better, this can only be seen as the perspective of an eccentric and manifests a topsy-turvy logic. If the conditions in Vienna really were as awful as he claims, no one would want to live there, and Robert would not be able to demand “ich will meine Ruhe haben” (84) by remaining there, despite the perceived ills. Robert’s words are not those of a genuinely persecuted victim; he creates a stage for himself in Vienna. Robert later refers to his existence as “die Wiener Falle” (163), which may be likened to “Hölle”, since he is trapped in Vienna and cannot escape; but this fate has not been imposed on him at any time, least of all in 1988. Robert is a Jew living in hell (i.e.Vienna), but he chooses this because it enables him to stage his anti-Austrian diatribes. He is like Voss, who depends on the family home (“Worringerhölle” – RDV; 151) to perform as an
eccentric. Bruscon’s “Theaterfalle” (*DT*; 16), i.e. the provinces, is his stage to perform as an eccentric, but he is also condemned to a theatrical existence. Peymann terms his existence as “Wiener Hölle” (*Claus Peymann und Hermann Beil auf der Sulzwiese*; 70).

All eccentrics are by their own choice trapped in their environment to perform a carnival perspective of it. Similarly, Anna Schuster believes that being a Jew in Vienna today is more dangerous than in the countryside, but this absurd claim again relativizes the issue of anti-Semitism:

> In Neuhaus brauchst du dich nicht zu fürchten
> noch nicht
> auf dem Land wissen sie ja gar nicht
> was ein Jude ist (83)

In her view, Jewish identity is a specific issue only in Vienna.

Robert presents himself as an Austrian Jew. He is uneasy and restless at home in Vienna, and claims to feel threatened in public locations:

> sie begegnen einem doch nur
> mit Haß und Verachtung
gleich ob auf der Straße oder im Lokal
geraeum ein Jude kann nicht immer zuhause
> in seinen vier Wänden sitzen
> auch ein Jude muß hinaus auf die Straße
> und wird er als Jude entdeckt
> strafen ihn Haß und Verachtung
> in Österreich Jude zu sein bedeutet immer
> zum Tode verurteilt zu sein
> [...]
> der Judenhaß ist die reinste die absolut unverfälschte Natur
> des Österreichers (113-114)

Yet he, a Jew, chooses to live in Vienna, in an apparently hostile atmosphere, because it affords him the opportunity to stage his anti-Austrian tirades. Robert’s claims are theatrical; there is no reason to believe he wants to be taken seriously. Despite classing prejudice against Jews as a national characteristic, Robert remains in Vienna to revel in his own prejudices against fellow Austrians. He is not concerned with making his tirades well-founded; they make his life dramatic and interesting, and he is never seriously confronted. Robert delights in performing on the excellent stage that is Austria and remains there for this purpose. To make such absurd claims in 1988 inevitably portrays him in a negative light as a Jew. But Robert is nevertheless Austrian himself, and he in fact uses his personal eccentric identity to carnivalize Austria and its people. Bernhard intended his words to provoke Austrian audiences: it takes someone who is (and feels
himself) to be as Austrian as Robert to be so anti-Austrian. Despite refusing to acknowledge any emotional attachment to Austria, he remains there, because he has nowhere else to go: "Wir haben alle gedacht wir haben ein Vaterland /aber wir haben keins" (163); even if this declaration, given his apparent identification with anti-Semitic persecution, conveniently appears to evoke a collective sense of disillusionment on the part of Austrian Jews, through his inference that Austrian Jews have always in some way been treated as different, Robert’s claims cannot be taken seriously. Honegger remarks on Robert’s language in the context of history: “The language that speaks as Robert is a language whose historicity includes a past and a future that exceeds that of the subject who speaks.” But Robert chooses his language, just as he chooses to live in Austria.

Robert’s dramatic anti-Austrianism contrasts with his late brother’s attitude, who still felt a sense of nostalgia when he returned to Vienna. Josef appears not to have revelled in his disillusionment, but to have internalized it. His suicide took place just before his planned (second) emigration to England. Yet whether he died because of his Jewish identity, Austrian identity or psychiatric conditions remains a mystery. The prospect of once again leaving Vienna in 1988 after 33 years’ residence (109) brought a banal, almost absurdly ridiculous consideration to Professor Josef’s mind, but it is only one symbol of how familiar Vienna was to him. Zittel recounts his words:

Ihre Cremeschnitten werde ich vermissen Herr Handlos
In Oxford gibt es keine Cremeschnitten von Handlos (22)

Zittel recycles Professor Josef’s own words on his inability to find his place back in Vienna:

ZITTEL
Wenn wir aus dem Haus gehen
vergeht uns Hören und Sehen
In die Universität Frau Zittel ist es ja geradezu
Ein Spießrutenlauf durch den Haß
Wenn Sie sich eine Semmel kaufen an der Ecke
Ducken Sie sich hat der Professor gesagt (44)

"Spießrutenlauf", which means running the gauntlet, conveys a sense of the terror and persecution Josef claimed to have perceived in everyday life. Robert quotes Josef’s self-perception as having an Austrian identity which he felt ashamed of:

Franzose wäre ich gern gewesen
nicht Engländer nicht Russe

376 Honegger, p. 303
Franzose
daß ich Oesterreicher bin
ist mein grösstes Unglück (25, my italics)

All Austrians share a common fate too; just as all Austrians are condemned to “ein österreichisches Rollstuhlschicksal” (EII; 301), so the Jewish Josef thinks of it as his special misfortune to be Austrian, not Jewish. The mixture of identities is significant here. Both Robert and Josef legitimately feel themselves to be Austrian, and proclaim this whilst reacting to their condition in different ways. Both are sufficiently familiar with Austria to be able to denounce it in the way they do.

Anna’s carnivalization of the climate in Vienna is theatrical. Anna not only believes that Austria has witnessed a huge resurgence of anti-Semitism in the present day, but that a fundamental trait in the national character is antisemitism and brutal intolerance:

jetzt kommen sie wieder
aus allen Löchern heraus
die über vierzig Jahre zugestopft gewesen sind
du brauchst dich ja nur mit irgend einem unterhalten
schon nach kurzer Zeit stellt sich heraus
es ist ein Nazi
gleich ob du zum Bäcker gehst
oder in die Putzerei in die Apotheke
oder auf den Markt
in der Nationalbibliothek glaube ich
ich bin unter lauter Nazis
sie warten alle nur auf das Signal
um ganz offen gegen uns vorgehen zu können
[…]
In Österreich mußt du entweder katholisch
Oder nationalsozialistisch sein
Alles andere wird nicht geduldet
Alles andere wird vernichtet (63, my italics)

In Bakhtin’s terms, this contradicts the “official” self-image of Austria. The Austria of eccentric Jewish carnival is not an Austria that non-carnival Austria can feel comfortable with; the accusatory claims affected the reception of Heldenplatz – those who took Bernhard’s words literally either accepted them as a prophecy or were offended. Once again, the eccentric perspective is not contradicted; here, Anna’s wild, utterly negative assertions are entirely unsubstantiated. A genuinely persecuted person would not feel free to perform such melodramatic tirades. Anna’s claim that all Austrians in 1988 are Nazis waiting to set the Holocaust in motion again is manifestly exaggerated and theatrical. Even the Holocaust becomes an excuse for theatre. Austria is a stage: Anna
nonetheless remains in Vienna, just as Robert remains on it to judge it, not just as a Jew, but as an eccentric person who feels himself to be as much Austrian as Jewish.

The response to the thematisation of Jews in the play was varied. *Heldenplatz* ought not to be read as drawing significant, unambiguous conclusions on anti-Semitism. Scheit interprets *Heldenplatz* from a biographical perspective: if there is any identification with Jews it is because they are eccentrics, outsiders like Bernhard himself. The theme of emigration in the play is an interesting one, particularly in view of Bernhard’s own life history in Austria and difficult relationship with the nation. Antisemitism, which the figures refer to many times is, to an extent, as Scheit argues, a self-referential theme, given the hostility in Austria to Bernhard personally throughout his life: “Die Identifikation mit dem Judentum läßt den Antisemitismus, von dem ständig gesprochen wird, zu einer Schablone werden, mit der Bernhard sein eigenes Verhältnis zu Österreich aufzeichnen möchte.” Nonetheless, this view takes no account of the magnification of the scale of antisemitism in the carnivalesque perspective of Robert Schuster, and of Anna. Bernhard’s Jews are of course also different in terms of their personal eccentricities, which are only in part a result of the trauma of history.

According to Bernd Sucher, the Jews in the play are far from unusual compared to other Jews. He does not identify the eccentric aspects of the figures, and claims that Bernhard uses clichés in presenting the Schuster family, which do not liberate them from the past: “Bernhards Attacke bringt ihnen nicht die Emanzipation. Er arbeitet mit den Klischees, die Antisemiten für die Juden immer parat haben.” Yet what may be seen as clichés in Bernhard’s portrayal of the Jewish figures in *Heldenplatz* (for example, intelligence and wealth – aspects which were intended to trap audiences into an anti-Semitic, prejudiced reaction), are overshadowed by his inversion of the stereotypical Austrian Jew through Robert Schuster’s claims. Equally, although Bernhard’s Austrian Jews reveal themselves to be as rooted in Austrian culture and rituals as the other eccentrics, their carnivalesque perspective predominates, like that of other earlier Bernhardian eccentrics, and it distinguishes them from the norm. In his plays overall, Bernhard does not favour either Austrian Jews or other Austrians – neither are depicted

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177 Gerhard Scheit, “Heimat, Haß und Selbstmitleid” in *Der Heimatdichter*, P. Janke (editor), (Wien, Holzhause, 2000), pp. 81-93, (p. 89)
178 *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 7.11.1988
positively, for he is concerned above all with their eccentricities, and as individuals the figures therefore are never typical of a specific group, i.e. artists, philosophers or indeed, Jews. Indeed, Robert’s carnivalesque Austria is not the real Austria; Bernhard’s Jews are fixed on their own subjective fantastic visions of it. Despite having escaped the torture of the camps, the eccentric Jews in the play are not seriously interested in the fate of other Jews, nor are they concerned about other Austrians.

Olsen even goes as far as to say: “Bernhard’s Jews were essentially indistinguishable from other protagonists [...] His works are rarely directly critical of anti-Semitism; neither are they unequivocally philo- or anti-Semitic”. It is true to say that Bernhard does not defend or attack the position of Jews in view of their past; though they inevitably recall the burden of their collective past in Austria, one can above all recognise eccentricities and neuroses in their character and rituals similar to other Bernhardian figures. The figures in *Heldenplatz* are characterized by individual eccentricities which mark their sense of difference, whereas they are not very different from Bernhard’s other eccentric Austrians in the way they lead their lives. The eccentric traits are significant in the private lives of the figures and are characteristic of the anti-Austrian invective they stage in *Heldenplatz*; nonetheless, Bernhard’s explicit use of Austrian Jewish survivors made the play touch a raw nerve in Austria. But in Bernhard’s Austria, the figures’ Jewish roots and the trauma of the past are only one part of their identity.

To Singer, the situation is not exaggerated (“Das Stück selbst zeichnet ein erschreckend wirklichkeitsnahes Sittenbild Österreichs”) because he sees the message as an unambiguous exposure of the climate which provoked such a reaction (“Die Unmißverständlichkeit seiner Botschaft erregt Ärgernis und überträgt aufgestauten Hass. Die Schadenfreude obsiegt”). But none of Bernhard’s eccentrics, including Herrenstein, Bruscon etc., are able to be “wirklichkeitsnah”, because they are fixed on their carnivals. Carnivalized Austria is not the real Austria.

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380 *Jüdische Rundschau*, 10.11.1988
381 ibid.
Günter Grack sees the claims of anti-Semitism which the Jewish figures voice as a form of theatre: “Indem Bernhard die Behauptung eines fortexistierenden mörderischen Antisemitismus nicht belegen kann, aber aufstellen läßt, mißbraucht er eine möglicherweise latent drohende Gefahr als theatralischen Effekt.” Indeed, what matters to the eccentric is making theatre, and all eccentrics distort for this purpose. Iden sees the play as the dramatisation of a necessary collective recollection on the part of the victims which continues into the present day and has created a trap for the Schuster family in Austria (“Wir sind in die Österreichfalle gegangen”; 163): “Bei Bernhard ist das Erinnernmüssen ein Fluch, der auf dem Opfer, nicht auf den Tätern liegt […]. Für die Juden Bernhards, die in dieses Land zurückgekehrt sind, stellt es sich dar als eine Falle – der lange Fluch ist der Aufschrei Gefangener.” But they are no more the prisoners of Austria than the other eccentrics: they are all equally trapped, as Austrians.

Norbert Tschulik commented on Robert’s language: “Indem der Autor seine ganz persönliche […] manische Österreichattacke, die nun förmlich in einen primitiven Biertischton verfällt, einem jüdischen Heimkehrer in den Mund legt, so könnte dies […] zu einer Anstachelung antisemitischer Gefühle beitragen, die wir ja nicht wollen.” Tschulik is right to link the attacks on Austria in Heldenplatz with attacks on Austria in the other plays, even if anti-Austrian tirades put into the mouth of Austrian Jews did nothing to help bring about a constructive debate on Austria’s National Socialist past in the “Gedenkjahr” 1988. The “Österreichfalle” (163) leads all Bernhard’s eccentrics to rant against Austria and not to leave it because it is their stage. Their claims remain empty and unsubstantiated. Bernhard’s technique of putting carnivalistic language into the Jewish figures’ mouths characterises them as particularly Austrian, eccentrics who are outsiders in much the same way as Herrenstein and Bruscon. Austrian audiences cannot therefore distance themselves totally from these figures – which potentially affected them all the more: the Jews who speak on the Burgtheater stage are Austrians. If audiences reacted with offence to Heldenplatz, they had fallen into Bernhard’s trap: his technique would expose latent anti-Semitism and the self-delusion on the part of many Austrians concerning their past and their willingness to avoid it: “Die Übertreibung

382 Tagesspiegel Berlin, 7.11.1988
383 Frankfurter Rundschau, 7.11.1988
384 Wiener Zeitung 14.10.1988
belehrt nicht, sie fordert im Gegenteil den Rezipienten […] zu einem Nachdenken [auf], das nur dann zum Widerspruch werden kann, wenn man die historischen Fakten ignoriert." In the Austria of 1988, however, the Schusters perform their exaggerated tirades as a form of empty theatre, and the language of Bernhard’s Austrian carnival does not permit them to escape their social and cultural roots, which are Austrian and Viennese. Even if on one level Robert claims that being a Jew makes him an outsider, he participates in Viennese culture, which relativizes his claim and in turn enables him to carnivalize that same culture. In effect, by returning to Austria, Robert chooses persecution – so he claims, but if he really were persecuted, he could not stage his tirades. Honegger sees the figures’ language as distinct from their Jewish roots: “In Bernhard’s Austrian anthropology, Jews were Austrians; simple as that – and as complicated. They spoke the language that constituted Bernhard’s homo austriacus.” Indeed, Jews are seen to be Austrians through the language they employ. They hereby assert, like Herrenstein, Bruscon and Voss, a different identity as individuals. The language of Bernhard’s Austrian carnival is Austrian, not just Jewish – in bringing up what they perceive as widespread anti-Semitic characteristics.

Beyond the press reactions before and after the premiere of *Heldenplatz*, Werner Schneyder, a well-known cabaret artist, made a comment on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Bernhard’s death in February 1999. Schneyder described Robert as “einen jüdischen Faschisten”. An interview he gave a year later re-ignited the public debate on *Heldenplatz*, this time concerning the figures and their language: “Ich halte Thomas Bernhard für einen ungewollten, aber doch für einen Wegbereiter Haiders. Thomas Bernhard hat den Faschismus im Denken, in der Disqualifizierung salonfähig gemacht. Thomas Bernhard ist der größte Vereinfacher in der zeitgenössischen Literatur.” Schneyder’s own reading of Bernhard is a very literalistic one; but the eccentrics have “Faschismus im Denken” to the extent that they do not engage in open dialogue, they perform, and they never admit to being wrong. On the subject of what Schneyder perceives as fascist thought in the play, and an offence against the homeland,

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385 Jürgens, p. 126. The Austrian government did not acknowledge responsibility for crimes committed during the National Socialist era until 1991 (see Appendix I, pp. 305-306).
386 Honegger, p. 290
387 *profil*, 15.2.1999
Unseld, the head of Suhrkamp, Bernhard’s publishing house, argues that this perception is grotesque and that Bernhard addresses precisely those issues which Austria had been condemned for ignoring for decades: “Es gibt einen großen pauschalen Vorwurf gegen Österreich, das Land habe nach 1945 und bis heute versäumt, seine Vergangenheit aufzuarbeiten, und das heißt in erster Linie, die Nazi vergangenheit und den latent herrschenden Antisemitismus. Genau dies war die Absicht von Thomas Bernhard.”

Schneyder responded to Unseld: “Bernhard hat als erster nach dem Nazi-Regime wieder die Totalität in der Sprache eingeführt.” But the programme of Bernhard’s eccentrics is theatrical and self-dramatizing, not political. They do not seriously advocate a policy of genocide or similar. Schneyder claims: “Es gibt nichts Faschistisches in der neuen Literatur als den zweiten Akt des Stückes Heldenplatz.” Extremism in language does not characterize any one particular political affinity. In any case, Bernhard’s eccentrics have no specific political principle; they tend to scorn both the proletariat and National Socialism. Schneyder points out Robert’s prejudices: “Ein vermiester Schwachkopf urteilt pauschal, quasi rassistisch, wie es ärger nicht geht. Der Mann ist Jude. Insofern ist dieses Stück antisemitisch. Kluge Wiener Juden wissen das schon.” Schuster of course inverts the stereotypical image of an Austrian Jew, but by putting anti-Austrian abuse into the mouth of a Jew Bernhard was seen by some as (unintentionally) giving a negative image to Jews, thus further fomenting the controversy. Yet Schneyder does not emphasize that just as importantly, Robert is Austrian. Robert is a racist and rabidly anti-Austrian, but it is due to this that he chooses to live in Austria, and this in turn is part of his eccentric Austrian nature.

Uwe Mattheiss identifies the lack of democratic respect for the writer’s freedom in Austria, clear in Schneyder’s judgement, which has socio-political parallels: “Juden sind schuld am Antisemitismus, das Ausland an Österreich und eben Thomas Bernhard an Jörg Haider. Hätte Bernhard, dem das Land und seine Politiker es nach Kräften verwehrt hatten, jenes Österreich zu lieben, das Werner Schneyder zu lieben beansprucht, es doch nur unterlassen, schlafende Hunde zu wecken, dann wär das mit dem Haider nicht

389 Unseld, Frankfurter Rundschau, 19.2.2000
390 Frankfurter Allgemeine, 26.2.2000
391 Frankfurter Allgemeine, 26.2.2000
392 ibid.
passiert." But on the other hand, Haider rose up despite the fact that some people did not wish to give him undue importance. Schneyder retaliated by re-affirming a "Totalität in (der) Sprache", and clarified his analysis of the figures' viewpoints: "Wir sprechen [...] vom Faschismus totalitarer Denkungsart, totalitären Urteils." Finally, Dr. Adolf Haslinger, President of the Bernhard Gesellschaft concluded the debate by questioning Schneyder's definition of fascism: "Daß Thomas Bernhards Pauschalierungen als totalisierende Sprache 'faschistisch' seien, folgt einer fragwürdigen und politisch wenig brauchbaren Definition des Begriffs 'Faschismus'." Schneyder certainly ignores Bernhard's subtle nuances of perspective which defy politicisation of the debate. Haslinger argues: "Das Schimpfen auf Bestehendes, auch als literarische Form, hat sicher etwas zutiefst Österreichisches an sich. Vor allem aber darf Bernhards charakteristische (Selbst-) Ironie nicht übersehen werden. Denn gleichzeitig mit der Schimpferei wird bei ihm die Pose des Schimpfens stets ironisch relativiert." It is true that Bernhard follows a tradition of Austrian writers who are scathing of present conditions, and the "Pose des Schimpfens" is Bernhard's Austrian carnival.

VI. 2 The eccentric brothers Josef and Robert Schuster
Bernhard shows private history repeating itself, by transposing tragic family circumstances onto a historically significant timespan, 1938 and 1988, as the moment of the two suicides in the Schuster family, although the reasons for both suicides are unclear:

ZITTEL
Der jüngste Bruder vom Professor
hat sich in Neuhaus aus dem Fenster gestürzt
achtunddreißig
und ist gleich tot gewesen
mit neunzehn
noch als Student
darüber ist der Professor jahrelang
nicht weggekommen
Der Selbstmord liegt in der Familie (41-42)

A political reading would interpret the detail of 1938 as relating to Josef's brother's fate as Jew in Vienna. By contrast, Zittel’s unawareness is striking. She does not associate

393 Süddeutsche Zeitung, 4. – 5.3.2000
394 Süddeutsche Zeitung, 7.3.2000
395 Frankfurter Allgemeine, 11.3.2000
396 Frankfurter Allgemeine, 11.3.2000
the younger brother's suicide with the Anschluß, nor does she make the symbolic connection between 1938 and 1988 and suggest that Austria is as anti-Semitic as ever – she sees suicide as a (psychological) family matter. Bernhard certainly sends an ambiguous message: "Das Stück gibt keine Antwort, es stellt nur beunruhigende Fragen, an Österreich und Österreicher." It is not clear whether Josef commits suicide in 1988 because he is a (disillusioned) Jew or because he is an Austrian, or for other personal reasons. Josef’s ambiguous suicide motive is relativised by his brother Robert’s sarcastic statement on what he sees as a general national characteristic of Austrians. Robert thus refuses to take a decisive stand, even in the closing lines of the play:

*Da aber alle Österreicher unglücklich sind*

dass nur er ein unglücklicher Mensch gewesen ist (165, my italics)

Robert describes his brother as an Austrian. Thus, even the Holocaust and its possible consequences for the individual are relativized; Josef was no different from others on the stage of Austria and may have surrendered to mere unhappiness as an Austrian. Josef is seen to have led a life shaped by factors beyond those of political and social persecution, such as his own eccentric, neurotic nature, which Robert perceives as characteristic of the miserable Austrian mentality. His apparent mental illness (46) and early interest in suicide (80) further erode his concern with Jewish roots as a contributing factor to suicide.

Austria is significant in impact on the play’s setting, as Pfabigan points out: "Die Familie verständigt sich nur über die Chiffre Österreich, sie ist das einzige, was dem toten innerfamiliären Klima die Möglichkeit zur Anteilnahme, ja Dramatik gibt." Austria is one part of the issue; the other obsession is the absent (dead) brother/father/husband and his impact on the family. For the Schusters, Josef’s death is of no consequence, as it does not liberate them, despite the flat having been sold. They fall into a state of enforced rootless limbo upon his death. Hedwig Schuster intends to stay in the centre of Vienna (156). Her own theatre in the flat feeds off the very setting of the Heldenplatz which provokes recollection of a dark past. She is not liberated by her

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husband’s death or by the prospect of moving, and it is the past that ultimately destroys her, in the same setting she has remained in for three decades.

The theme of Jewish emigration is of course particularly poignant in the absent figure of Josef Schuster. Both Vienna and Oxford were equally dreadful to Josef (62), because he found neither worth living in, but despite this fact, to him there was no alternative to the two locations. He is contrasted with his brother Robert, who does not intend to leave Vienna for a second time. Josef’s sense of loss of roots is transferred onto his daughter Anna through insecurity. Anna considers going back temporarily: “Vielleicht bleib ich mit Lukas eine Zeit /in Oxford /das Haus ist ja nicht eingerichtet” (74). The house is empty, a symbol of a lost sense of belonging. The family cannot achieve inner stability, even in Oxford. Professor Josef had originally obtained a teaching post there through Professor Strotzka (47) who had emigrated to England in 1934 (140). Having decided to return to Oxford for a second time in 1988, Josef had accepted a new post, as he claimed, in the interests of his wife, who suffered from mental attacks in Vienna (33). He had hoped the change would cure her, but remained doubtful (35-36). All these considerations were made redundant by his suicide.

Everywhere is awful (“In Wien hat er es nicht mehr ausgehalten /aber nach Oxford wollte er nicht mehr zurück”; Zittel, 39), but he was attached to Austria as an Austrian. Given his early memories of Austria, the condition of being Austrian may have precipitated his suicide, even if it was not the main motive. Josef had originally returned to Vienna in 1955 despite his wife’s warnings (109) because he had tired of Oxford (110), and felt nostalgic for Vienna, the city he had grown up in, and its cultural heritage (111). Josef had perhaps felt nostalgic for fin-de-siècle Vienna; 1955 was the year the Second Republic was founded; to Austrian audiences, this portrays him as provocatively Austrian, given his longing for the homeland. Again, Strotzka, who had also returned to Vienna, found professorships for both brothers after the war (140). The mayor of Vienna personally asked Josef to come back to teach at the university, which according to Robert was the decisive factor in his return (80). Yet Josef was haunted by past memories of Austria, and being there turned out to be a slow death: “[er] hat sich in Wien ruiniert” (Robert, 81).
Regarding the eccentrics' lives, however, one factor must be taken into account, as Daviau states: "As human beings, the Schusters suffer from their own personality traits." Daviau hereby refers to the importance of seeing them not only as a collective group, but as individuals. Furthermore, Josef’s suicide was his free choice, possibly a statement on the persecution of the individual in society, but equally motivated by his individual personality: "he falls victim not only to the Anschluß, but also to his own personality and character." To analyse his character is to contrast the eccentric brothers, and to what extent the eccentric personality shaped possible suicide motives. The family situation was the foundation for the development of the brothers’ characters. Robert terms Josef’s intellectual capacities as "eine österreichische Geistesspezialität" (91), thus placing stress on his Austrian nature. Both favoured mental pursuits to define themselves as individuals, in opposition to the inheritance of material wealth and family identity. The eccentric’s independence of their family came early on:

Beide hatten wir uns sehr schnell
von den Eltern abgesetzt
[...]
ich war immer der Professor er der Philosoph
Großbürgererbe
Das belastete uns zeitlebens
unser Denken ist immer weit auseinander gegangen (92)

The eccentric brothers therefore also bear traits of the Wittgenstein figure, as does Voss ("Ludwig") in Ritter, Dene, Voss. Bernhard’s fictional Worringer and Schuster families share common traits with the Wittgenstein family: they all bear recognised philosopher/mathematician figures. To all three families, the Steinhof sanatorium is a familiar location and England a frequently visited destination; the families share a love of classical music. Ludwig Wittgenstein’s brothers committed suicide, and suicide is a central theme in Voss’s thought and in Heldenplatz. Factory ownership is common to the Wittgenstein, Worringer and Schuster families; likewise, the Wittgenstein and Schuster family have Jewish roots, and members of all three families experienced exile, whether voluntary and temporary or not.

\[399\] Donald Daviau, “Thomas Bernhards Heldenplatz”, in Monatshefte, Spring 1991, Vol. 83 (No 1), 29-44, (p. 36)
\[400\] Daviau, p. 37
The eccentrics’ intense relationship with each other was a solid one in the family, although Josef felt more of an outsider than his brother. Neither eccentric engaged in conversation with the other. Josef was entirely unapproachable:

[ROBERT]
Debatten haßte er
[...]
er unterhielt sich ja auch mit mir nicht über seine Arbeit
[...]
mit dir ist ja alles in Ordnung hat er immer gesagt
das war alles
Ein eigentliches Gespräch haben wir das ganze Leben
nicht miteinander geführt
er war ein unzugänglicher Mensch wie gesagt wird (143-144)

Robert recalls his brother’s withdrawal from recognition:

Innerhegelsensein war sein höchstes Glück
Wenn man bei ihm überhaupt von Glück sprechen kann (145)

Suicide could be seen as the end of a road of existential solitude. Some indications for the predisposition to suicidal tendencies are given in Josef’s definitions of his brother, spoken by Zittel:

Der Professor Robert ist ein Lebenskünstler
ein Existenzkünstler wie der Professor immer gesagt hat (23)

Here, the ironic nouns given to Robert by his brother contrast Robert as the brother who exists (as an Existenzkünstler), but for whom suicide is no option. The noun “Existenzkünstler” following “Lebenskünstler” expresses Josef’s tedium in life. Robert’s “Lebenskunst” consists of performing tirades.

On a private level, the setting of Vienna plays a role in determining the character of the eccentric brothers; the empty intellectual and cultural rituals root the surviving Robert in the perceived degeneration of society there and diminish any sense of difference as an intellectual. Anna sees her uncle as “der geborene Genießer” (69) of social rituals, whereas her father was entirely antisocial:

der Vater hat Gesellschaft und Gesellschaften gehaßt
er nannte sich ja selber einen Gesellschafts- und Gesellschaftenhasser
Der Onkel Robert ging immer ganz gern
auf Gesellschaften
selbst auf die widerwärtigsten (73)

Robert’s indulgence in cultural rituals (in the “Wiener Falle”; 163) characterizes him as particularly Austrian, as one for whom historical traumas are not an issue whereas, according to Anna, her father appeared to internalise aspects of the past:
ANNA
Leute wie der Onkel Robert
stürzen sich nicht aus dem Fenster
die werden auch nicht von den Nazis gejagt
die ignorieren die meiste Zeit was um sie herum ist
gefährlich ist es nur mit solchen wie dem Vater
die ununterbrochen alles sehen und alles hören
und dadurch immer Angst haben
[...]
der Onkel Robert kann Beethoven hören
ohne an den Reichsparteitag in Nürnberg zu denken (68-9)

Prof. Robert's willingness to socialise on a superficial level contrasts with his brother's misanthropy, even within his family. A nasty man, Josef abused and dehumanised his daughters; his misanthropy contrasts with Bruscon's playfully mocking stance towards his family. Zittel repeats his words:

ZITTEL
Wenn Sie eines Tages feststellen daß Ihre eigenen Kinder Unmenschen sind hat er gesagt
Wir glauben wir erzeugen Menschen
Und es sind dann nur fleischfressende Dummköpfe (37)

The daughters' preference for their uncle arises from a detached relationship with their father, whose remoteness and unpredictability made them mistrust him:

ANNA
schon in der Kindheit liefen wir wann wir nur konnten
zum Onkel Robert
weil uns der Vater zu gefährlich gewesen ist
Die Denkenden waren immer die Gefährlichen (69)

ANNA
der Onkel Robert war immer
ein gutmütiger Mensch das war der Vater nicht
der Vater war immer unberechenbar (72)

Josef's isolation is attributed to his self-declared status as "Geistesmensch":

ZITTEL
Ein Geistesmensch wird nie verstanden
Hat der Professor gesagt
[...] ganzein geht ein Geistesmensch
durch sein Leben
denn sie auch alle erfrieren an seiner Seite
hat der Professor gesagt (57)

Ultimately, he saw himself primarily as a "Geistesmensch", not a Jew (c.f. also HP; 81).
VI. 3 The omnipresent eccentric in Heldenplatz

Narrowly political readings of Heldenplatz cannot account for the fact that the family’s relations with each other and their domestic arrangements have been entirely dictated by the eccentric, and this dependence continues even after his death. Jürgens remarks that “die eigentliche Hauptfigur, der ‘Herrscher’, ist tot, aber seine Herrschaft besteht weiterhin fort. Alle Figuren, die hier auftreten, sind abhängig von einem Toten.” 401 The main figure’s authority in Heldenplatz is not only socially determined, but lies in his eccentricity. As in Der Theaternacher, Ritter, Dene, Voss and Elisabeth II, the secondary figures live their lives around the eccentric and accommodate themselves to his obsessions and rituals: Professor Josef determined the family’s geographical movements, he forced his wife to reside in a flat overlooking the Heldenplatz, and he defined Frau Zittel’s domestic rituals and her other eccentric duties to him, including verbal ritual. Huber identifies the prominence of the banal rituals in the first scene and their consequence for the play overall: “Aber auch in Heldenplatz ist ja nicht sofort von den ‘sechseinhalb Millionen Deilen’ die Rede, sondern es werden zunächst einmal ausführlich die Hemden gebügelt.” 402 The private arrangement of eccentric relations and rituals as recounted by Zittel predominates in the first scene, before other issues emerge in the second scene.

Abnormal family relations are central themes in the play. The atmosphere in the home is one of stagnation, as Pfabigan states: “Stillstand regiert in der Familie Schuster, nichts wird herergegeben, nicht einmal der uralte, zerrissene und blutbefleckte Anzug des Selbstmörders.” 403 Pail comments on the breakdown of positive relations in the family: “Vorgestellt wird auf der Bühne das Bild einer völlig zerrütteten und verstörten Familie mit kaputten Beziehungen untereinander.” 404 Pail identifies the figures’ mental state as defining their disturbed relations, which on one level has turned them into ex-centrics, namely outsiders: “Zurückzuführen ist dieser desolate familiäre Zustand […] auf psychische Grunddispositionen der Mitglieder, die somit von Haus aus nicht den üblich

401 Jürgens, p. 143
403 Pfabigan, p. 425
404 Pail, p. 40
The private family and domestic scene is one of rejection of norms, i.e. eccentricity, as seen in the Professor’s relationship with Zittel, his obsessions, Hedwig Schuster’s absurd imprisonment and theatre, and the daughters’ lives. This rejection of norms is very similar to the family relations in Der Theatermacher and Ritter, Dene, Voss, and the relationships with the domestics in Elisabeth II. In the aftermath of Professor Josef’s suicide, there is a sense of general inertia, given the enforced and now redundant departure from the flat, a change which nevertheless does not psychologically free his entourage from the family past.

Domestic life revolves around the dead eccentric’s influence and the past. Zittel does not figure prominently in the controversy about antisemitism, but she does foreground attention on the whole complex of eccentricity. Zittel’s life is lived around the eccentric Josef, even beyond his death. The absurdity of her domestic rituals has not been analysed before. As in Elisabeth II, the domestics’ existence is dominated by the influence of the eccentric. In Heldenplatz, however, the situation is taken to an extreme degree through citation and pointless domestic ritual. Zittel’s performance after his death is symptomatic of the hold his memory has over her. The rituals prescribed by the deceased eccentric are the foundation for Frau Zittel’s verbal performance in the first scene. Zittel re-enacts her role with the master in related discourse, a form of recycling theatre. Some critics, like Damerau, feel she has power in that she performs the monologue: “Die Macht, die der Tote nicht mehr hat, hat nun die Zittel umsomehr.”

Contrary to this thesis, Zittel’s performance feeds off the power the eccentric’s influence still holds over her. Citation is central to her speech and conveys the all-consuming force of his authority over her. She is unable to lead an independent existence even beyond his death. Dominated by him even when he is dead, she carries on repeating his words, as Damerau notes: “Der Tote spricht aus der Zittel.” It is important to see why this is so.

As Winkler points out, Zittel does not speak for herself, she merely cites Josef: “La signification de la citation découle de l’absence d’un locuteur dont les paroles préexistent à la situation évoquée. Le langage inauthentique ne permet pas à un citateur

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405 Pail, p. 40
406 Damerau, p. 371
407 ibid, p. 372. Similarly, the apparent social hierarchy which Jürgens focuses on in his study (c.f. Das Theater Thomas Bernhards, p. 143 f.) reveals other, entirely abnormal dimensions in the master-servant relationship.
d’exprimer son identité face à son interlocuteur.” Crucially, her language is inauthentic because it reflects the complete erosion of an individual identity. Zittel recycles Professor Josef’s words and so performs “an inherited language game”. The eccentric is an essential focus within her performance. There is a complete absence of independence in her life, given the power Josef wields over her existentially. Further, she merely relives her position of submission with the eccentric, rather than re-defining the hierarchy in the house beyond his death, since his influence is as powerful as ever, as can be seen in her rituals. She has no individual identity beyond that of servant. Zittel is Professor Josef’s puppet, whose only function in life has been to support and enable his eccentric rituals. According to Jang: “Im Akt des Zitierens wird sogar die Machtkonstellation der Gesprächspartner auf die Gegenwart übertragen: War Frau Zittel gegenüber Josef als Zuhörerin eindeutig unterlegen, übernimmt sie nun seine Position, indem sie vor der zuhörenden Herta ihre Überlegenheit demonstriert.” But Jang’s assessment of Zittel’s role as replicating the master-servant hierarchy with Herta is too simplistic, since there is no depth in Zittel’s relations with Herta, their mutual concerns are those of established employees, and Zittel is still under the spell of the eccentric. Whereas there is a social division between Professor Josef and Zittel, she herself and Herta are on the same level socially, they are both servants. Herta is largely silent since she did not have the same relationship with the Professor, and therefore has nothing of interest to recount, although her silence enables Zittel’s feverish performance. Zittel recounts the eccentric’s nature and power over her to Herta. The subject of the deceased eccentric dominates the minimal dialogue and his authority is symbolically shown to determine Zittel’s life though her repetition of his language: “Die Sprachgewalt erscheint unmittelbar als Herrschaftseffekt, das Schweigen mithin als Ausdruck sozialer Ohnmacht […]. Wir treffen hier auf eine Sprache, die von Anbeginn an an die Abwesenheit eines individuellen Sprechers gebunden ist […]. Im Heldenplatz ist folglich die allen Redenden gemeinsame Sprache als die zitierte Rede eines Verstorbenen direkt in den Bereich des Todes verschoben.” Zittel’s words are dictated

408 Winkler, L’attente et la fête, p. 136
409 Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity, p. 27
410 Jang, p. 200
411 Dronske, “Sprach-Dramen”, pp. 119-120
by the eccentric, but she is unable to reproduce his power ("Sprachgewalt") to Herta, so
that her voice lacks authenticity. Herta and Zittel are both victims of "soziale Ohnmacht"
as Dronske writes, as they have both remained in the same arrangement for years, and
have surrendered independence.

Furthermore, Herta and Zittel have a relatively superficial relationship based
purely on domestic tasks. Zittel may be superior to Herta in the household hierarchy (34)
but the relationship is one-dimensional, and the conversations, though dominated by
Zittel, remain unproductive. Herta in this way is Zittel's double; she re-enacts with Zittel
the passivity Zittel herself showed towards Josef. But Herta has no real insight into the
master-servant relationship between Professor Josef and Zittel. Herta is a sounding-
board for Zittel's obsession; she gives no genuine response to Zittel, apart from banal
commentary that pre-empts any possibility of dialogue, or exploration of issues. She
merely seems to accept the nature of the situation. Herta is unable to provide any
information of consequence: "Le dialogue se limite tout au plus à un échange de
citations [...]. Dans la mesure où les origines du langage cité peuvent être hétérogènes,
les discours des deux personnages ne pourront ni se fonder ni s'articuler
dialectiquement." 412 There is also ambiguity in Herta's performance. Both her frequent
silence and insignificant responses possibly reveal passivity or even indifference to the
Schuster family; equally, her silence could at times be a form of deference to Professor
Josef's memory.

When Zittel gives a feverish account of her master's insistence on her recitation of
a praise formulae of composers, Herta's silence allows her to perform; Herta then replies
irrelevantly: "In Neuhaus geht es der Frau Professor viel besser" (32). Following Zittel's
recitation of the Professor's radical description of his daughters ("Exaltiertes
Größenwahnsinniges Chaotisches"; 37), Herta again retorts with a banal response: "Gibt
es in Neuhaus auch keine Waschmaschine" (37). Zittel mocks Herta's ignorance, but
Herta, unprovoked, simply ignores her:

ZITTEL

[...]
Aber dubegreifstja nichts
in dich könntem man Jahrzehnte hineinreden
und du hättestnichts begriffen

412 Winkler, L'attente, p. 136
Following Zittel’s detailed account of Robert’s condition, Herta responds flatly:

Yet on the subject of Professor Josef’s death, which Zittel speaks of, Herta seems reflective and gives an absurd recapitulation of the Professor’s unfulfilled and now redundant promise to her:

Zittel’s monologue followed by Herta’s inane commentary suppresses any fruitful dialogue; at the end of the first scene, Zittel performs a long monologue on the Schuster family extending over seven pages (53-59) which Herta finally interrupts with a banal response on another of the Professor’s unfulfilled promises, which Zittel merely confirms as a typical trait of the eccentric:

As Zittel gives a second-hand portrait of the Professor, so her subordinate role in the carnivalesque arrangement becomes clear. The eccentric at times subjugated her to menial roles (scrubbing floors; 53), at others needed her to perform a fixed artificial dialogue in the form of a ritualised language game forced upon her, from which she was unable to escape. He denied her her own voice in the theatre he dictated. The eccentric’s obsessive questions and formulae which he compelled her to recite remain ingrained in her mind. Zittel therefore has no real identity outside her role of total subservience; she cites and hereby recycles the eccentric’s voice:
Das ist schon ein großer Vertrauensvorschuß
Hat er immer gesagt
Leuten die Sarasate nicht mögen
Traue ich nicht
Das sind immer entsetzliche Leute
Und wie steht es mit Glenn Gould
Mögen Sie Glenn Gould
Er fragte das immer wieder
Ich wußte immer ich muß sagen ich mag Glenn Gould
Hören Sie Glenn Gould gern Frau Zittel
Mögen Sie Sarasate mögen Sie Glenn Gould
Ja sagte ich immer darauf ich mag Glenn Gould gern
Ich höre Sarasate gern und mag Glenn Gould gern
Das sind fürchterliche Menschen wissen Sie Frau Zittel
Die Glenn Gould nicht mögen
Und die Sarasate nicht gern hören
Mit solchen Leuten will ich nichts zu tun haben
das sind gefährliche Menschen die Sarasate nicht mögen
und die Glenn Gould nicht gern hören
das verlange ich ja auch von meiner Frau
daß sie Sarasate gern hat
und daß sie Glenn Gould gern hört
da bin ich wie ein Besessener Frau Zittel was das betrifft
Ich wußte auch was Besseres
Als mir am Samstag Sarasate anzuhören
Oder den Glenn Gould
Ich mag Klavier gar nicht (31-32, my italics)

Zittel cannot cease to perform her fixed role in the ritualised language game dictated by
the eccentric; it is interrupted only by her repetition of his prescription for the ritual of
folding shirts. She needs to continue accurately re-enacting the inauthentic verbal rituals
which have filled her life, even if it means repeating Josef’s words and playing his part.
His dislike of the piano exposes the absurdity of the exchange which corresponds to his
absurd ritual of listening to precisely this instrument, although it is an uninspiring and
unfulfilling ritual, a form of killing time. The absoluteness of his control over her is
conveyed through her frantic recollection in the form of citation of his hysterical desire
to perpetuate a verbal game, a set formula which forbids divergence of opinion.

In the following passage, Zittel performs a form of verbal servility to the master:

Krawatten und Wintermäntel hat er gehaßt
ich bin der geborene Mantelhasser hat er gesagt
im tiefsten Winter ist er ohne Mantel gegangen
schon um halb acht um die englischen Zeitungen
die durfte ich ihm nicht holen
das einzige das die Menschheit wirklich fürchtet
ist der menschliche Geist hat der Professor gesagt
der Professor war kein beliebter Mensch
Am Dienstag ist die Mutter zweundneunzig
Für mich war der Professor sogar ein schöner Mensch
Ich bin froh daß wir schon gedeckt haben
Es gibt ja nur noch zweimal ein Nachtmahl in diesem Haus
Es ist ja schon alles eingepackt (40, my italics)

Whilst her monologue describes his idiosyncrasies, her own life has been sacrificed as she has little mental and practical independence. Mention of her mother’s birthday (Line 9) is flat, whereas she focuses on precision in the domestic ritual (11). Repetition of “hat [...] gesagt” (2, 7) again overshadows her own voice. There is a sense of an inability to move on, to develop own ideas, Zittel remains dominated by his memory (1-3, 6-8), and even admires him as a beautiful person using the cliché “schöner Mensch” (10), an aberration, given his terror over her. The intensity of the relationship and her strong sense of purpose and servility throughout her time as his employee (4-5) have resulted in a sense of disorientation in the aftermath, despite mechanical fulfilment of duty (11-13).

Zittel’s roles at times appear to reflect a personal attachment to her master, stemming from deep admiration, and even the family recognises her position beyond his practical dependence on her (HP 64; 106-7), but Zittel remains very aware of her subordination to her master. Karin Kathrein believes there are undertones of a love affair: “Interessant finde ich, daß die Liebe zwischen Mann und Frau immer sehr ambivalent behandelt wird, z.B. Im Heldenplatz. Es wird immer sehr viel ausgespart [...] Diese Beziehung zwischen der Haushälterin und dem Verstorbenen, das ist eine Liebesgeschichte. Das kommt meiner Ansicht nach auch bei der Inszenierung vom Peymann ein bissel zu wenig heraus.” Yet there is no evidence of an actual love story in the play. The eccentric’s influence is clear: Zittel is resigned to playing the roles in which Josef casts her which are founded not only on a deep loyalty to her master but also on an abnormal sense of compliance. She certainly continues to feel affection for her master (“Wenn wir uns auch von den geliebten Menschen trennen müssen /sie legt die Weste auf den Tisch /ihre geliebten Kleidungsstücke bleiben uns ja”; 58), but his power over her, given her lack of independence, leads her to cling to her domestic role beyond death, symbolic of an absurd submission to his system. At the beginning (12) and end (57-8) of Scene 1, she fingers (at intervals brushing, smelling, lifting up, buttoning up) the suit the Professor was wearing when he died, this action brings him

413 Maria Fialik, Der konservative Anarchist: Thomas Bernhard und das Staats-Theater, (Wien, Löcker, 1991), p. 82
alive in her memory. Through her gestures, she performs her attachment to and
dependence on him.  

Her misplaced sense of loyalty to the Professor is clear when she verbally
identifies herself with the other domestic victims at one moment, placing all on one level
through repetition of a verb symbolizing Josef’s abuse of power:

Nach Graz eingeladen
[...]
as Mantelträgerin
der Professor hat alle nur mißbraucht
mich hat er mißbraucht
die Frau Professor hat er mißbraucht
seine Töchter hat er immer mißbraucht
mich dich alle (35, my italics)

She recognizes that she has been used, and that he had no respect for others, but his
recognition does not cause her to rebel or assert herself; this attitude is like Bruscon’s
family and Voss’s sisters.

The Professor’s abnormal relationship with Zittel was based on a strict hierarchy
enforced from day to day. When she accompanied him to Graz, she was only allowed to
walk behind him carrying his winter coat (18). He took the best room in the hotel for
himself, and the worst for her:

ZITTEL
du hättest im Erzherzog Johann
in einem finsteren Loch übermachten müssen
mit einem Fenster in den Küchenschacht
da kannte der nichts
[...]
er selber hat das beste Zimmer im ganzen Haus gehabt (18-19)

At the same time, she admits she had to put up with the familiar torment imposed on her.
The memory of her submission to the eccentric’s theatre of dependence when nursing
him in Graz is vivid:

Zweimal hab ich den Professor in Graz
pflegen müssen
im Erzherzog Johann
mit Grippe
das kannst du dir nicht vorstellen
wie der mich traktiert hat
aber ich war ihm ausgeliefert
alle sind ihm immer ausgeliefert gewesen
Der Herr Professor Lukas ist ja auch sein Opfer
Und die Töchter hat er immer beherrscht (42, my italics)

414 See Appendix II, No. 56, p. 373
The eccentric Josef is the victimizer, and Zittel sees herself as the powerless victim along with the others. Within the family, he acted as control freak over his daughters. Zittel refuses to stand apart in acknowledging the power the eccentric character had over others in making them serve his needs, thus re-confirming his power in the private setting.

Zittel remains proud of her dependence on him as a person, and his apparent praise for her alone. But she knows that he was fundamentally uninterested in other people, including her, and manipulated everyone:

ein Mensch hat dem Professor nie etwas bedeutet
der Professor hat alle kujoniert
Die Einzige die etwas wert ist sind Sie Frau Zittel
Hat er einmal gesagt
So etwas merkt man sich (43)

Her domestic role was symbolic of an existential dependence on the Professor:

für den Professor hab ich alles getan 1
aber für sie nicht
sie kommandiert ja nur
HERTA
Er hat auch nur kommandiert 5
FRAU ZITTEL
Das war aber etwas anderes
HERTA
Wieso
FRAU ZITTEL 10
Das verstehst du nicht
Der Professor war ein feiner Mensch
der feinste Mensch
den ich gekannt habe (53) 14

She saw her role less as a subjugation to perform tasks as Herta perceives, but as motivated by her acceptance of his eccentric nature (Lines 1, 7) and her admiration for him (Lines 12-14). Zittel now refuses to serve Hedwig, his widow (Lines 2-3). The arrangement with Josef cannot be repeated with anyone else. Zittel re-performs Professor Josef’s violent instructions on ironing shirts, which he enounced neurotically:415

sie zeigt es Herta, die sich nach ihr umgedreht hat
So siehst du so
Legte er das Hemd zusammen
Dann rief er es in die Höhe
Und legte es wieder zusammen
[...]
Sieben oder achtmal rief er das Hemd in die Höhe

415 See Appendix II, No. 57, p. 374
Zittel admits she was often too nervous to perform the ritual accurately. She continues to live under his spell, dominated by the memory of his obsessions in his hysterical monologue, as the only voice she hears and relives is that of the Professor:

Nein nein Frau Zittel ich bin ja nicht verrückt
ich bin ja nur genau Frau Zittel aber nicht verrückt
ich bin ja nur genau Frau Zittel aber nicht verrückt
ein Genauigkeitsfanatiker bin ich Frau Zittel
ich bin nicht krank ich bin nicht krank schrie er
ich bin nur ein Genauigkeitsfanatiker
ich bin der berühmteste Genauigkeitsfanatiker
Professor Schuster ich kann es nicht ich kann es nicht sagte ich
unerträgliche Person schrie er unerträgliche Person
Er sagte so legen Sie das Hemd zusammen so (26-27)

He created the neologism “Genauigkeitsfanatiker” to describe his eccentric demands. Zittel’s re-enactment of her master’s neuroses becomes increasingly frenetic. Her own inability to fulfil the task does not detract from her obsession with the act. Schmidt-Dengler refers to the ironing scene as exemplary of Bernhard’s theatre: “Bernhards Vorliebe für ganz alltägliche Handlungen [...] ist mit dieser Dramaturgie des Banalen erkläbar [...] Die Handlungsfreiheit ist den Figuren genommen [...].” Yet the main motivation for her ritual is not, as Schmidt-Dengler claims, that she is obsessed with any one object (“Es scheint, als ob die Requisiten mit den Figuren handeln würden, und nicht umgekehrt, die Figuren mit den Requisiten“), but with the Professor’s demand on how to perform the ritual. The figures in Bernhard’s theatre who are in close contact with the eccentric have no scope and seemingly no wish for self-development. Zittel displays an absurd willingness to perpetuate the Professor’s neurotic demands beyond his death, but remains tormented by her incompetence in fulfilling them, and gives a banal re-enactment of this. Since she is now completing a futile ritual, its real purpose is thus totally negated:

So wollte der Professor
daß ich seine Hemden zusammenlege
sie reißt das zusammengelegte Hemd in die Höhe und legt
es wieder zusammen, während sie sagt
niemand konnte ihm die Hemden
richtig zusammenlegen
auch nach zwanzig Jahren konnte ich es nicht

416 See Appendix II, No. 58, p. 375
417 Schmidt-Dengler, “Es ist alles egal...”, pp. 147-8
418 “Es ist alles egal...”, p. 148
Sie reißt das Hemd wieder in die Höhe und lacht auf
siehst du so
sie legt das Hemd sorgfältig zusammen
Der Professor war ein Pedant
Sehr ruhig, das zusammengelegte Hemd zu den andern legend (38-39)

Although she accuses him of pedantry, she continues the nonsensical ritual of folding and unfolding the shirts for a dead man. Jürgens refers to the arrangement between Zittel and the Professor as symbolizing political inertia: “Frau Zittel steht für das autoritätshörige Bewusstsein jener Schichten, die bereits in der Vergangenheit stets jeden politischen Wechsel mitgemacht haben und auf denen sich auch weiterhin Herrschaft aufbauen läßt.”  419 But this view minimizes the influence of the eccentric. Zittel focuses on a pointless activity, by maintaining the regularity and precision of the rituals and so keeping up a fantasy theatre with the departed eccentric:

nimm ein Bügelbrett, klappt es auf und fängt an, Hemden zu bügeln (20)
sie nimmt die gerade gebügelten Hemden aus dem Koffer und zählt sie ab
[...]
sie legt die abgezählten Hemden in den Koffer zurück (54)

She continues to identify fully with her domestic ritual, inspired by her memory of his words:

sie legt das Hemd zusammen
Bügeln ist eine Kunst
Hat der Professor gesagt
Das Bügeln wird immer unterschätzt
Die Bügelkunst ist eine der höchsten Künste (44-45)

Other domestic tasks are also motivated by the powerful memory of the Professor, which dominates the performance of now redundant rituals, which seem petty and reflect an unwillingness to face the impending changes. What Webber sees as “the grotesque comedy of death [in] the ritualistic preparation of the clothing of a dead man” 420 is in fact an absurd ritual. Webber sees Josef Schuster as a theatrical figure: “the theatrical identity of Professor Schuster is ritually enacted by his servants in a litany of imitative acts of speech and clothing”; 421 it is Schuster’s eccentricity above all which gives him his status and his undiminished power over Zittel’s performance and existence. Her

419 Jürgens p. 138
420 Andrew Webber, “Costume Drama: Performance and Identity in Bernhard’s Works” in Matthias Konzett (editor), A Companion to the works of Thomas Bernhard, (Rochester, New York, Camden House, 2002), pp. 149-165, (p.154)
421 ibid, p. 154
actions seem to be provoked by a sense of guilt, failure and disorientation following the master's death, and a sense of loyalty beyond death:

sie riecht am Anzug
Ich hätte den Anzug nicht in die Putzerei geben sollen
Es ist meine Schuld
Ich werde den Herrn Professor Lukas bitten
Daß er mir den Anzug schenkt
Sie hebt den Anzug in die Höhe
Dreißig Jahre hat der Professor
Den Anzug angehobt
Sie richtet sich Zwirn und Nadel her, um das Loch in der Weste zu flicken
Wenn wir uns auch von den geliebten Menschen trennen müssen
Sie legt die Weste auf den Tisch
Ihre geliebten Kleidungsstücke bleiben uns ja
 [...]
sie hängt den Anzug ohne Weste wieder auf und knüpft die Jacke zu (57-58)

Her almost affectionate gestures with the suit Schuster wore for thirty years reveal the excessive obsession with her role of domestic ritual, symptomatic of her subordinate position in their relationship. Webber sees Schuster's clothes as having "a special status as props in a sort of necrophiliac theatre of mourning". But there is no indication of a sexual attraction on the part of Zittel; above all, the departed eccentric's authority still dominates Zittel's existence and is alive in her now absurd domestic ritual.

Zittel remains proud of her role as domestic, as it gives her a sense of purpose in the family, even if her sense of self is virtually non-existent and founded solely on subservience to the arrangement. This gives her an underlying sense of control in banal rituals:

ich hab immer größten Wert darauf gelegt daß die Socken in Ordnung sind
die Socken und die Hemden (55)
sie richtet sich die Weste zum Flicken her
sie schaut auf den Koffer
letztenendes bleibt alles
mir überlassen
kein Mensch außer mir
hat jemals etwas getan in diesem Haushalt
[...]
Schaut sich im Garderobenzimmer um
Vierzig Jahre und nur selten ein gutes Wort
Ich hab aber nie die Kraft gehabt Wegzugehn
Den Professor hätte ich auch nie allein gelassen
Er hat mich immer gebraucht (58-59)

422 Webber, p. 154
A sense of loyalty to a system allowed her to bear the burden of overwork for forty years. The final line asserts her belief in the Professor’s dependence on her which, given her own weakness of mind, chained her to the situation and ensured her compliance despite his ingratitude (“nur selten ein gutes Wort”). Since the dependence was obviously mutual, her ritual feeds off an eccentric private arrangement which was never broken, out of a fear of change. Perpetuating domestic ritual also bears a potential for illusory reassurance for her, since given the sale of the flat, her role may be sacrificed; domestic ritual thus becomes absurd, as it is to a large extent fixated on and motivated by the eccentric. Loyalty to the Professor beyond death and his power over her is manifested in a refusal to co-operate with his brother and create a new life:

ZITTEL

[...]
Der Professor Robert hat mich nach Salmansdorf eingeladen
mein Bruder ist tot hat er gesagt
jetzt können Sie ja im Sommer zu mir
nach Salmansdorf kommen
das will ich aber nicht (54)

Zittel’s adherence to prescribed domestic rituals symbolizes a fundamental compliance with a rigidly hierarchical domestic carnival determined by the eccentric who instilled a perverse deference in her. Zittel’s observance of these rituals reveals an abnormal preservation of old structures, and confirms the departed eccentric’s power.

VI. 4 Hedwig Schuster’s theatre

Hedwig is traumatised by the cries of the crowds on the Heldenplatz in 1938 which she alone hears. 423 Hedwig’s attacks appear to have become well-established as taking place in the dining room, often during meal times, and they may therefore be seen as representing a ritualized reaction to the cries she hears, which disturbs and so inverts the bourgeois norm. For dramatic purposes, to highlight the symbolism of the situation, Bernhard situates the flat and its dining room directly on the Heldenplatz, but the view the figures have of it in Heldenplatz is in reality a geographical impossibility, 424 given that government buildings encircle the Heldenplatz.

The theatricality of Hedwig’s performance is significant for a central issue in Heldenplatz – life as theatre. Some critics saw the final scene as re-affirming a central

423 See Appendix II, No. 59, p. 376
424 See Appendix II, No. 60, p. 377 & No. 61, p. 378
issue in the play, namely the theatricality of existence: "Dieses eindrucksvolle, enorm theaterwirksame Bild am Schluß war wohl der Grundeinfall und von diesem weg wurde das Stück geschrieben." 425 By staging her death at the end of the play, death is trivialised, as Häußermann argues: "Das Leben führt zum Tode – diese Erkenntnis ist im Grunde eine Trivialität." 426 Her fatal attack is a statement on the proximity of life and death and follows the empty speeches of the others in the group who are oblivious to her symptoms. Furthermore, Hedwig's death at that moment is significant as it closes the cycle of theatre, from the beginning of the play in the days following the death of Prof. Josef, to her own death; she had predicted both (109). The absurd nature of Hedwig's theatre has not been identified before; it is symbolic of the absurdity of life generally. The potential for tragedy is thwarted: her own fatal theatre is turned into a logical consequence of Robert's closing statement in the play, on the absurdity of returning to Vienna and of existence generally, which to an extent relativises the tragic aspect of the burden of Jewish persecution:

Das Ganze war ja eine absurde Idee
nach Wien zurückzugehen
noch lauter
Aber die Welt besteht ja nur aus absurden Ideen
Die Frau Professor Schuster fällt mit dem Gesicht voraus
auf die Tischplatte
Alle reagieren erschrocken (165)

Any consequences of Hedwig's final attack are also relativised as it takes place even though the family's fate has been decided, and departure from the flat is imminent. Despite her awareness of this, she is unable to prevent an attack during the meal.

Robert sees her attacks as a chronic illness: "Zuerst glaubten wir alle /Es ist ein einmaliger Vorfall /Schließlich hat es sich zu einer chronischen Krankheit entwickelt" (137). Robert's dehumanising judgement of her attacks as theatre and as an illness turns her into an outsider, as he refuses to discuss her condition further, i.e. the historical or personal dimension, considering her attacks to be an eccentric form of theatre, which appears to sideline the historical issues:

ROBERT
[...]
Schon gleich wie sie eingezogen waren
hatte sie schon am ersten Tag den ersten Anfall

425 Huemer, Der Standard, 7.11.1988
426 Hannoversche Allgemeine, 7.11.1988
Eine Marotte ist gedacht worden
Denn eure Mutter war ja immer eine Theatralikerin
Aber es saß doch tief
Es war kein Theater
Gerade sie die immer Theater gemacht hat
Schließlich ein chronischer Krankheitsprozeß (138, my italics)

The others do not respect her as an individual and trivialise her condition. Other family members also perceive her attacks as theatre:

ANNA
[...]
zuerst war es wahrscheinlich gar kein Theater
wahrscheinlich ist es auch jetzt kein Theater
und ist doch ein Theater
die Krankheiten dieser Art
sind wirkliche Krankheiten und doch Theater (68)

On the one hand, the perceptions of the attacks as theatre fits in with Hedwig’s theatrical nature (“eine Theatralikerin”), her obsession with theatre and her ritualistic visits to the theatre: “Wer einmal Blut geleckt hat im Theater /der kann ohne Theater nicht mehr existieren” (Zittel repeating Professor Josef’s judgment of Hedwig’s love of theatre; 25). But Hedwig’s attacks are more than a theatrical performance; they are in part caused by her relationship with her husband. Professor Josef spoke of being driven to the verge of insanity by the repeated attacks his wife had in the flat (27). His attitude towards his wife can only be seen as a gross cynical absurdity, as he deliberately imposed suffering on her by insisting on the location of the Heldenplatz (80) and refusing to move flat or even change the location of the dining room (29), where the attacks come on. In remaining in the same flat, the eccentric had authority over his wife for over thirty years by exposing her to a historical trauma. Even if by having refused to liberate her from the setting, her husband tried to overcome the past, he inevitably confronted the past directly by remaining in the same stagnant situation and rejecting change. Originally, he believed that leaving would imply surrender: “das hieß ja daß mich dieser Hitler zum zweitenmal /aus meiner Wohnung verjagt” (29). But eventually, he decided to go back to Oxford in 1988, apparently to benefit his wife (“die englische Atmosphäre wird dir gut tun /ich habe nicht gedacht daß dir Wien /so schädlich ist”; 33), claiming Oxford would cure her (36), before committing suicide. Anna sees her attacks as a weapon in a private power struggle: “Ihre Anfälle sind ja ihre Machtmittel /damit hatte sie den Vater
zwei Jahrzehnte in der Hand” (68). Yet her weapon was ineffective, since she had no real influence over her husband:

ANNA
Die Mutter wollte in Wien umziehen
nicht nach Oxford
es ist ja auch gleich was sie wollte
der Vater hat sich nie an sie gehalten
es war ihm immer gleichgültig was sie gedacht hat
sie hat sich ja nie durchgesetzt (62)

The daughters see the relationship between her parents as a mutually destructive one:

ANNA
Im Grund ist die Mutter vom Vater vernichtet worden
OLGA
Und der Vater von ihr (68)

Like Agathe Bruscon, Hedwig is a largely silent figure, and her reaction to the circumstances is mute, whereas Agathe’s cough regularly disturbs Bruscon’s play. The head of the family did not respect Hedwig (as Bruscon does not respect Agathe). Hedwig’s attacks are symptomatic of her marginal position in her family and her denial of a voice by the eccentric. As Dronske states: “Immerhin ist die Randstellung der Frau des toten Professors in ihrer Familie nicht allein durch die faschistische Geräuschkulisse bedingt – ebenso wie ihre Macht- und Wortlosigkeit. Sie ist ein Effekt jener in ihrem Gatten ihr entgegentretenden (Sprach-) Gewalt, die diejenigen, die nicht an ihr teilhaben, unnachgiebig zum Schweigen bringt.” 427 This aspect confirms Heldenplatz as a post-modernist theatre of non-communication and death in a nihilistic world. Given the fact that she appears on the stage late in the play, her attack is her main performance in Heldenplatz.

VI. 4. 1 The setting of Hedwig Schuster’s theatre and historical implications
Hedwig’s theatre is certainly a final reminder of Austria’s dark past, remaining with audiences as the final image of the play. National identity, however, is transferred to personal circumstances – Hedwig’s theatre was also provoked by her husband’s obsession to return to Vienna and insistence on taking up permanent residence opposite the Heldenplatz, thus setting the scene for her attacks: “Fünfundfünfzig war er von der Idee /wieder nach Wien zurückzugehen /nicht abzubringen /er war wie besessen davon” (109). Zittel closes the blinds towards the end of the meal (162), intensifying the

427 Dronske, “Sprach-Dramen”, p. 121
claustrophobic atmosphere in the flat and ultimately allowing Hedwig's attack to reach its deadly climax against the crowd's cries. Her collapse is accompanied by the crescendo of cries on Heldenplatz in March 1938, which only she hears, and has been seen to have historical-political implications for the interpretation of the play. Dowden refers to the role of her theatre in affirming the remembrance of a dark past today: “Frau Schuster embodies his [Bernhard’s] rejection of time”; and a need to remember its consequences in a society governed by political amnesia for decades: “From Bernhard’s perspective her madness is a form of moral sanity.” Pfabigan sees a symbolic function in her theatre: “Die Krankheit dient hier ohne Zweifel als Metapher.” From these perspectives, her silent attacks may symbolize the position of those Jews who returned to Austria but who were silenced by the hostility and indifference of non-Jewish Austrians; the Austrians’ Lebenslüge could be seen as a sickness in society. Hedwig’s ultimately fatal mute attacks may also symbolize the consequences of ineffective official government policy which sent many Jews to the grave without any compensation in the years before 1991.

Personal identities also play a role in determining the Schusters’ fate. The couple came back to Vienna given Josef’s nostalgia, were trapped in the “Österreichfalle” (163) and were condemned to die there – in their flat in front of the Heldenplatz. Hedwig’s eccentric theatre is thus also caused by their own personal history. Hedwig has no intention of leaving Vienna (156) following her husband’s death, even if circumstances impose a change of flat on her. Her death on the last day of residence in the flat overlooking the Heldenplatz refutes any possibility of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung” since, although personal, it has wider implications as it reminds audiences of the deathliness of the memory of the past. Robert claims that Austria cannot be seen as a “Vaterland” (163) because of its past, yet the figures remain there because it is the place they know best; it is their stage and it can be carnivalized. Robert and Anna carnivalize Austria as witnessing a widespread continuity of National Socialism (c.f. VI. 1; VI. 5).

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428 Steven Dowden, *Understanding Thomas Bernhard*, University of South Carolina Press, 1991, p. 8
429 ibid., p. 8
430 Pfabigan, p. 430
431 Daviau, p. 33
Attempts to mark a sign of individual protest are futile in a world of dissolution mirrored in the imminent departure from the flat and echoed in Robert’s language. Robert’s talk of death, funerals and mention of Neuhaus as a kind of “Endstation”, a place Hedwig loathes (“Neuhaus hat mich immer nervös gemacht / vor Neuhaus hab ich mich immer gefürchtet”; 160), runs alongside the onset of her theatre (159), and creates a sense of doom. Her marginalized position in the group is a microcosm of the individual’s position in society today. Hedwig’s theatre is ignored by the rest of the group, who continue voicing discontent (“Dieser kleine Staat ist ein großer Misthaufen”; 164) and nihilistic perspectives (“Der Tod ist das Natürlichste auf der Welt” – 159; cemeteries – 160; existential death in the countryside – 161), and her death is also a mirror on the world in which the individual statement is drowned as it has no impact. In a cold world, in which all the figures lead a life of inner isolation, Hedwig’s mute protest is crushed by the sound of the crowds and the group’s talk of banalities which begins to merge with the much louder sound of the crowd’s invasive crescendo of voices meant to convey a sense of foreboding.

Whilst Josef’s death was a desperate statement on the refusal to conform and to surrender to social falsity, Hedwig’s repeated attacks may be seen as her only expression of an inability to break out of a situation which is inextricably linked to the persecution of many thousands of Jewish citizens of Austria. As Damerau argues: “Die fatale Katastrophe, die oft am Ende barocker Trauerspiele steht, kehrt bei Bernhard ebenfalls wieder [...]. Bei Bernhard ist es allerdings kein höheres Verhängnis mehr, sondern ein historisches Schicksal, d.h. eine Vergangenheit, die sich im menschlichen Verhalten nach wie vor geltend macht [...]. Die Schlußkatastrophe ist in der Regel das Zeichen für die fatale Entwicklung einer Gesellschaft, die in ihren historisch angehäuften Übeln krankt.”

The final scene does give audiences a timely reminder of history, through a dramatisation of the past in the present. The Schusters’ private history takes place against the canvas of public history. Yet Hedwig’s death represents not only a reflection on the collective suffering of Austrian Jews following the hysterical reaction of many fellow citizens to the Anschluß proclaimed on the Heldenplatz. Her death could be seen as a reminder that despite all the victims’ efforts, the plight of the Jewish survivors of the

432 Damerau, pp. 297-8
Holocaust was inadequately compensated, even in 1988, and often met with a lack of respect and indifference by state representatives and bodies. The majority of survivors in or outside Austria died without receiving a just settlement. Likewise, Hedwig is ignored by her entourage today. Although theatrically speaking, her private theatre appears submerged by national history, audible to audiences of the Burgtheater, private circumstances have forced her to remain exposed to that past. Her death is denied dignity and any tragic impact: her attacks are of no consequence to the group, who never understood her trauma and are oblivious to the warning signs in the final scene. Although Hedwig's private ritualistic theatre unfolds in the light of the burden of the traumatic experience of public (national) history, it is equally a performance of individual protest.

VI. 5 Carnival and politics in *Heldenplatz*

Robert Schuster's tirades have been interpreted as political statements despite the absence of any distinctive political principle in the speeches. Critics referred to Bernhard's device of placing a base language, typical of the lower classes, into the mouths of figures from Austrian elites, which in their view created a fundamental lack of differentiation between sectors of society: "Bernhards Trick war, seinen vielfach im Künstler-, Wissenschafter- und Intellektuellenmilieu situierten Figuren die kleinbürgerliche, ressentimentbeladene Stammtischkonversation in den Mund zu legen. Damit ist es ihm gelungen [...] die Nation [...] über alle sozialen und Klassenschranken hinweg zusammenschweißen." In terms of their language, Bernhard's eccentric Jews certainly show themselves to be Austrian. But even if the lower sectors of society ("Kleinbürger") tend not to have any substantial form of political conviction, Bernhard's eccentrics cannot be equated with this group; the eccentrics are fundamentally indifferent to society and their tirades are not based on any genuine grievances. Despite elements of vulgarity, the eccentrics' language creates a carnivalesque logic which distinguishes their monologues from any rational analysis. Bernhard's eccentrics have no political affiliation; their carnivalistic perspective inverts norms of conventional speech-making through an absence of arguments to support their relentlessly negative image of

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431 *Profil* 37, 13.9.1999, pp. 148-9
the country and their refusal to differentiate between political categories. The eccentric's inability to break away from the very heritage he condemns affords his tirades an immediacy, despite the absurdity of the claims; his rootedness in Austria sustains them. Other critics interpreted the directness of the language as necessary in addressing Austrian audiences, because it showed nothing of the subtlety of earlier dramatists who criticised Austria. Robert's brutal words are heard on a public stage: "Bernhard ist der Raisonneur, der unsere Zeit braucht – grob und undelikat". But Bernhard refuses rational analysis of any issue: his figure Robert is not an analytical thinker – rather, a performer, whose political views are theatrical. Another critic of *Heldenplatz* saw Bernhard as employing a technique of hitting audiences hard by airing issues that once again publicly challenged Austria, a society governed by a respect for hierarchy and authority, in the tense climate of 1988 following several other scandals: "Der autoritäre Geist ist in diesem Land verbreiteter als anderswo. Gerade in den letzten Jahren quillt der unappetitliche Bodensatz der österreichischen Gesellschaft immer wieder machtvolll hervor. Die vielen Skandale um Waldheim, Tabori, Haider, Hrdlicka, Peymann – mit Ressentiments kann man in Österreich immer noch gut Politik machen. Thomas Bernhard ganselt diese Ressentiments bewusst hervor [...] Auf einen groben Klotz gehört offenbar ein grober Keil." But despite the political controversy surrounding *Heldenplatz*, generated by the play’s provocative statements, Bernhard’s eccentrics do not enounce a political programme, they draw attention to themselves by breaking taboos and refusing to differentiate rationally between conflicting political positions. Jürgens points out what he sees as political parallels in Robert’s language, but there is an absence of any political conviction: “Indem die Figuren in *Heldenplatz*, großbürgerliche intellektuelle Figuren, welche die Mißstände in der Gesellschaft zwar benennen können, gleichzeitig aber dieselben Herrschaftsstrukturen reproduzieren, die faschistische Sprache der zwanziger und dreißiger Jahre und gleichzeitig die pseudooppositionelle Sprache etwa eines rechtspopulistischen Politikers der achtziger Jahre imitieren, weist es eine Strömung, wie sie in Österreich von der FPÖ vertreten wird, als Beispiel für die Nähe von Faschismus und bürgerlichem Liberalismus aus.” As discussed in VI. 1,
Robert Schuster’s mode of speech shows certain traits which could be recognized in Fascism, in that it offers no potential for fruitful dialogue between figures; he is never contradicted, and he shows little interest in others’ point of view. Bernhard’s eccentrics do not engage in open debate, but perform monologues. Robert, however, is not concerned to expose any specific ills (“Mißstände”) in society, or propose any solutions, since he declares no specific principles; the “Mißstände” he rants about are not real, but are carnivalesque visions of the world. Heldenplatz ought never to have been interpreted as a lucid analysis of the conditions in Austria, although this was the trap Bernhard set for audiences using the technique of exaggeration and theatrical condemnation. Moreover, extremism of language is not characteristic of one single political affiliation. Siegfried Unseld, the head of Suhrkamp, even claimed that Austria was worse in reality than the play makes it out to be: “Man muß geradezu Angst haben, daß die Realität Österreichs die Realität des Stückes überholt. Denn meine Erfahrungen, die ich hier in Wien machte, zeigen ja, wie sehr dieses Stück von Thomas Bernhard die Realität trifft.”

Yet the tirades are a distortion of reality. Such a liberal view of the play fails to see the theatricality in the monologue, since it is not an accurate reflection of reality.

Robert Schuster inverts bourgeois norms in performing his tirades. He shocks by inverting, in Bakhtin’s terms, the “official” self-image of Austria with an eccentric, carnivalesque perspective. The theatrical quality of Robert’s performance is almost entirely verbal. The eccentric is not challenged by other figures, he performs his carnivalesque invective and his forceful statements are made to sound incontrovertible. His monologues derive their intensity from the lack of dialogue with other figures. Robert Schuster is untypical because he deviates from the stereotypical image of the Jew returning to Austria after the war, who tended to remain silent and ignored. As a survivor of the Holocaust, his verbal performance in Heldenplatz is on the one hand a refutation of “Vergangenheitsbewältigung”; on the other hand the absurdity of his monologues lies in the fact that they cannot be seen as bearing any serious moral or political conviction; in his blanket condemnation, which often breaks taboos, he does not ascertain any rational characteristics to contrast the specific political parties or nations. For these reasons, Robert Schuster’s monologues are not credible as political speeches, and should

437 Frankfurter Allgemeine, 15.10.1988
not be seen as such. His speech is characterized by a suspension of the norms of political speaking.

The refusal to engage in a logical debate robs the tirades of any serious principle. In a conventional political speech, there would be a logical exposition of the ills to be remedied; but Robert Schuster as an eccentric does not show himself to be genuinely interested in society; nor does he seem concerned about the reality of the supposedly depraved standards he rants about; there is no sense of regret, as the self-centred eccentric refuses to objectively engage with society, he refuses to debate his version of circumstances. He needs Austria as a stage; the eccentric’s monologues are a theatrical self-indulgence, the exaggeration turns Austria into an unbelievably awful place. To move away from Austria would deny him his stage: “[...] das latent Reaktionäre in Bernhards Sprache, auf das zur Kunstform geronnene österreichische Geraunze über die Verhältnisse, das nichts so fürchtet wie deren Veränderung.” 438 Robert grumbles, a typically Austrian trait, but not about the reality of social “Verhältnisse”; his verbal carnival feeds off Austria, which is why he remains there.

In Robert Schuster’s case, the fool’s licence is a verbal licence to carnivale the world. Indeed, the carnivalesque topsy-turvy logic of the fool’s perspective could be seen as a form of madness. Jürgens’s and Unseld’s literalistic readings of Heldenplatz as giving a serious depiction of genuine ills in Austria do not take into account the carnival perspective which denies any basis for serious analysis of an issue; Schuster never produces any arguments to support his unrelentingly negative image of the country; he never goes into specifics or details; he never adduces any facts. Nor can his monologue be seen as privileging any moral or political principle. Furthermore, a characteristic lack of focus blurs all distinctions between groups, leading to absurd exaggeration. Schuster projects his own misanthropy onto Austria: he gives his carnivalesque view of Austria and its people an absurdly exaggerated dimension. He does not substantiate any of his vague claims:

in Österreich ist immer alles am schlimmsten gewesen
dem Stumpfsinn sind immer alle nachgelaufen
der Geist ist immer mit Füßen getreten worden (88)
mich wundert daß nicht das ganze österreichische Volk
längst Selbstmord gemacht hat

The technique of magnification ("insgesamt als Masse") robs the above claims of any serious basis for rational differentiation and analysis of the precise groups in Austria, thus negating the credibility of the speech. The blanket condemnation gives no indication of what specific issue, if any, Schuster is aiming at: politics, culture, ideologies; he merely dismisses the Austrians as brutal and stupid. His attacks are at times comic, given their absurd elements: "In Österreich ist alles immer am schlimmsten gewesen" (88). He cannot be seen as a rational "Raisonneur"; facts are entirely lacking. Michael Cerha perceives the eccentric’s multiple carnivalistic perspectives as symbolizing the author’s trap, since Robert as a product of Bernhard’s “Fallensteller” and outsider status enounces no firm conviction, gives no analysis: “Der Fallensteller war nicht auf Beute aus, sondern auf sein Entkommen. Hemmungslos bediente er sich der Parodie, die durch das Insistieren auf einzelnen Wendungen alles ins Lächliche zog, und des häufigen, willkürlichen Standpunktwechsels [...]. Bernhards Bezug zur Realität liegt selbstverständlich nicht darin, sie verbessern zu wollen.” 439 Bernhard’s strategy offers no solutions. Robert is part of Bernhard’s universe in the way that he perceives the conditions. On the subject of socio-political issues, Sorg points out that the monologue offers no hope for renewal: “Das ständige Lamento […] hat ja keinerlei Erkenntniswert […]. Bernhard beschreibt das Sumpfland Österreich, aber er erklärt es nicht.” 440 Robert Schuster has no genuine personal grievances to lament; he remains in Austria by choice to perform an absurd description of Austria, a carnivalesque theatricality. The eccentric can only see the circumstances as degenerate because his tirades feed off such a carnivalesque perspective. The fool has no responsibilities; he is not interested in improving conditions; he merely performs: folly is the privilege of the eccentric. The fool sets the stage for Austria, upon which he remains. For these reasons, Bernhard’s late plays cannot be seen as satires. Some critics saw the tirades as a product

439 Der Standard Album, 5.2.1999, pp. 41-2
440 Bernhard Sorg, "Kunst ja, Politik nein: Thomas Bernhard in Österreich" in Metamorphosen des Dichters – das Selbstverständnis deutscher Schriftsteller von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart, Gunter Grimm (editor), (Fischer, 1992), pp. 302-311, (p. 306, Sorg’s italics)
of Bernhard’s court jester status: “Der Satiriker als Hofnarr seiner Gesellschaft.”

Another critic wrote: “Das Theater soll wichtig genommen werden. Der Hofnarr darf die Wahrheit sagen, darf mässlos übertreiben, denn er trägt ja keine Verantwortung.” As a “Theatermacher”, it is unclear to what extent Bernhard wanted to be taken seriously.

Robert Schuster presents himself as a man without any convictions. An absence of principles leads to eccentric opposition to all issues. His wild assertions are thus a form of nihilistic theatre:

ich protestiere gegen nichts mehr
das heißt ja nicht daß ich nicht dagegen bin
ich bin ja gegen fast alles (86)

If the literal meaning of protest is taken more generally, his life itself is a form of protest as he is resigned, yet a passive life is a useless protest:

Das ganze Leben ist ja ein einziger Protest (86)

Schuster claims that he has no political principles, which turns his tirades into a hollow performance:

das ist ja vollkommen gleichgültig was das für eine Regierung ist
es ist ja eine wie die andere (120)

As discussed in the analysis of the Schneyder controversy (VI. 1), Robert Schuster’s domineering monologue is not exclusive to Fascism. His emphatic condemnations do not make him a Jewish Fascist (“dann läßt er einen jüdischen Faschisten auftreten”

On the contrary, Robert’s language seriously calls into question the extent to which Heldenplatz has been perceived as a political drama, as his tirades bear no political conviction. The tirades’ foundation is purely theatrical; what they lack are facts, which the self-indulgent eccentric is indifferent to:

In diesem fürchterlichsten aller Staaten
haben Sie ja nur die Wahl
zwischen schwarzen und roten Schweinen
ein unerträglicher Gestank breitet sich aus
von der Hofburg und vom Ballhausplatz
und vom Parlament
über dieses ganze verluderte und verkommene Land (164)

Die Österreicher haben keine Wahl
Was der Österreicher auch wählt
Es ist niederträchtig (135)

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441 Arbeiter Zeitung, Tagblatt, 7.11.1988
442 Darmstädter Echo, 7.11.1988
443 Schneyder, profil, 15.2.1999
The tirades in *Heldenplatz* appeal to the emotions and instincts, which explains the uproar by the conservatives following the media’s publication of sections. The monologue certainly lacks differentiation: “Alles ist gleich, alles wird gleich gültig und gleich bedeuten.” In Robert Schuster’s eyes, Austria and its political system are characterized by degeneration, and there is no hope for improvement. Robert is not interested in change, because he sees voters as participating in the theatre of life in Austria. He enounces no solutions, no matter how radical; he refuses to engage in a conventional debate. Yet here, the eccentric goes further than a blanket condemnation: the merging of all political categories is characteristic of the madness of the fool’s perspective, which lumps all parties together as “Schweine” and “niederträchtig” for theatrical effect; the peculiar carnivalesque logic abandons any principle of logical distinction. The mad logic of carnival fuses opposing political parties into a single category – “schwarzen und roten Schweinen”; his carnival invective thus feeds off a base language; the use of the noun “swine” to describe all politicians indicates an absurdly low level of performance indicative of Bernhard’s technique of exaggeration. The absurdity of the claims is part of the eccentric’s right to be “other”, but this freedom may be seen as a nihilistic absurdity.

Pfoser reminded the public that the tirades have no single focus: “Beschimpfungen als politische Wechselbäder.” Another critic wrote: “Bernhards Gegner hätten ihren Autor besser lesen müssen – ein einäugiger Fluch-Apostel ist er nun gerade nicht.”

The tirades were seen as relatively harmless given their comic tone and the Viennese culture Professor Robert is so familiar with: “Bernhards Requiem auf den gemütlichen Faschismus der Sahnecremetorten- und Schlagoberswelt kommt streckenweise mit einem solchen Witz daher [...]” But these critics did not point out the lack of facts in Schuster’s tirades; he does not corroborate any of his opinions, a fundamental trait of the carnival perspective. According to Huemer, the attacks have no substance, merely “die

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444 Bernhard Sorg, “Kunst ja, Politik nein”, p. 310
445 C.f. Alfred Pfoser in “Thomas Bernhard: Scandal as an Artwork” quotes Bernhard’s article “Glückliches Österreich”, in which he described the people as puppets manipulated by the government.
446 Salzburger Nachrichten, 7.11.1988
447 Stuttgarter Nachrichten, 7.11.1988
448 ibid.
Another critic saw the anti-Austrian tirades “nur noch als karikierende Kolportage, dem Kabarett weit näher als dem Drama.” The tirades cannot be taken seriously as they are distortions of reality; they remain a theatrical performance.

When the attack on the President (102) was heard on the opening night, the silence in the audience appeared to give Bernhard and Peymann the victory. Some critics, failing to see the carnival perspective, even went so far as to claim that the tirades are accurate definitions of Austria: “Bernhard, dieser manische Moralist eines makabren Landes, liebt Österreich über alles. Er wird nicht müde, es zu geißeln und ihm die Schropfköpfe seiner reinigenden Monologe anzusetzen. Man kann nach der erfolgreichen Premiere von Freitag darüber streiten, ob Heldenplatz zu weitschweifig ist, aber nicht über seinen Gehalt an Wahrhaftigkeit.” But Bernhard is not a “Moralist”: it is difficult to see any principles in the blanket denunciations. A liberal reading neglects the theatricality of Robert Schuster’s viewpoint: “Thomas Bernhard ist ein Wahrheitsfanatiker, und wer ihn für einen Übertreibungskünstler hält, unterschätzt die rot-weiß-rote Wirklichkeit auf das fahrlässigste.”

Robert Schuster claims that “Österreich selbst ist nichts als eine Bühne” (89). In Scene 2, the dark, subdued setting of the pruned trees in the Volksgarten enveloped by fog contrasts with the violent tirades, and again emphasizes the isolation of the figures, who are unable to genuinely talk with each other. Schuster’s tirades in Scene 2 are ideally set against the proximity of the institutions he attacks. On the stage, the Burgtheater visible through the fog gives emphasis to the impact of the attack performed on Vienna’s Burgtheater stage during its centenary year, as well as highlighting the theatricality of the monologue. The surrounding Parliament, City Hall and University, and other theatres are all situated in the vicinity of the Heldenplatz, and are all institutions attacked in the course of the play. The Burgtheater is prominent in the background in Scene 2 (it can also be seen from the corner of one of the flat’s windows in Scenes 1 and 3) and is a symbol of one of the central themes in Heldenplatz, namely

449 Der Standard, 7.11.1988
450 Die Rheinpfalz, 7.11.1988
451 André Heller, Frankfurter Rundschau, 7.11.1988
452 Heller, Frankfurter Rundschau, 7.11.1988
453 See Appendix II, No. 62, p. 379 & No. 63, p. 380
the nature of life as theatre. But there is nothing of the gay celebration typical of Bakhtin's carnival. Hilde Haider-Pregler identifies the post-modernist mood in the setting: "[...] endzeitliche Abreisestimmung in ehemals hochherrschaftlichen Räumen, ein nebelverschleiertes Volksgartenbild mit erbarmungswürdig zurückgestutzten kahlen Bäumen und dem Burgtheater im Hintergrund." 454

Residing in Vienna gives Robert a platform on which to perform his tirades because it grants them immediacy. His tirades are not meant to be taken seriously as they represent the theatricality of life; standing in the Volksgarten in front of the Burgtheater, he is part of the theatre of life that is Austria, playing his part as passive performer and audience, since he does not react in any way against the present situation, he merely rails against what he sees as ills, which thrills him, and this alone is his reason for survival as a geriatric:

Was diesem armen unmündigen Volk geblieben ist
Ist nichts als das Theater
Österreich selbst ist nichts als eine Bühne
Auf der alles verlottert und vermodert und verkommen ist
Eine in sich selber verhälte Statisterie
Von sechseinhalb Millionen Alleingelassenen
Sechseinhalb Millionen Debile und Tobsüchtige
Die ununterbrochen aus vollem Hals nach einem Regisseur schreien
Der Regisseur wird kommen
Und sie endgültig in den Abgrund hinunterstoßen
Sechseinhalb Millionen Statisten
Die von ein paar verbrecherischen Hauptdarstellern
Die in der Hofburg und auf dem Ballhausplatz sitzen
An jedem Tag vor den Kopf
Und am Ende doch wieder nur in den Abgrund gestoßen werden
Die Österreicher sind vom Unglück Besessene
Der Österreicher ist von Natur aus unglücklich
Und ist er einmal glücklich schämt er sich dessen
Und versteckt sein Glück in seiner Verzweiflung (89)

The carnival logic once again inverts the official self-image of Austria by humiliating the nation (Lines 1-5), its people (Lines 6-8), and governmental authority representing the non-carnival world (Lines 12-15). Schuster sees the entire population of Austria as puppets constituting a theatre which makes a mockery of democracy (Lines 1-8). In this theatre, he is the "Regisseur" who condemns Austria (Lines 9-10). Schuster may ridicule the lack of democratic values in Austria, but he has Austrian characteristics: he makes no

454 Wiener Zeitung, 7.11.1988
use of his own right to protest (HP 77; 85-86) and is thus as “unmündig” as the rest of the population. He condemns Austrians as an unhappy people (Lines 16-19).

Robert Schuster has deliberately remained in what he terms as “die Wiener Falle/ [...] die Österreichfalle” (163) for a specific reason. He has remained on the stage of Austria because he relies on it to carnivalize Austria and the world. The only principle he privileges is transgressing norms of civility and decency. He is not interested in seeing any change in what he alleges a society in decline, because this would rob him of the fool’s stage – the opportunity to project his implausible images on to his environment. His words are not those of a persecuted victim; he does not hate the city enough to leave, and is certainly not genuinely fearful, but rather enjoys mocking what he judges as the uncultured nature, mindlessness and apparent latent brutality of his fellow citizens, as he proclaims at the beginning of Scene 3, in the flat:

Alle Wissensgebiete geschändet
Alle Kultur vernichtet
Den Geist ausgetrieben
Früher ist es ein Vergnügen gewesen
Auf die Straße zu gehen
Natürlich auch alles irrtümlich
Irrtümlich alles natürlich
_ Er schaut auf die Straße_
Redet man mit einem Menschen
Stellt sich heraus er ist ein Idiot
In jedem Wiener steckt ein Massenmörder
_ Aber man darf sich die Laune nicht verderben lassen_
Es ist die Logik ganz einfach in der Schicksalsgemeinschaft
Ersticken zu müssen
Wien ist eine kalte Stadt provinziell (117-118, my emphasis)

In this context, “Schicksalsgemeinschaft” refers to the Viennese citizens whom Schuster irrationally categorizes as mass murders, making a dark allusion to the Nazi era. But in 1988, the contradictory nature of his eccentric character has made him remain rooted in Viennese society, and he has condemned _himself_ to appearing to suffocate there out of choice, when in fact being there sustains him. Any concerns Schuster has been seen to have as Jew are undermined by his commitment to remain in Austria and to continue to participate in empty rituals (“Aber man darf sich die Laune nicht verderben lassen”); his status as Jew is overshadowed by his adherence to Austrian cultural rituals. But he inverts the received image of Vienna, describing the city as provincial (final line). The Austria Schuster chooses to portray is not a three-dimensional country; it is a fantastic carnival image. His carnival is one of entrapment: his logic “Es ist die Logik ganz
einfach in der Schicksalsgemeinschaft /ersticken zu müssen" means that Austria is the only stage he has to perform his carnival invective. His blanket condemnations are comic in their absurdity, they lack substance: "In jedem Wiener steckt ein Massenmörderei”. His tirades carry no conviction and are emptily theatrical, but he keeps on performing them because, like the other eccentrics, he is haunted by the need to perform and to dramatise his “otherness”; it is his only antidote to boredom. He claims “Alle Wissensgebiete geschändet /Alle Kultur vernichtet”: his antidote is mad in that everything in Schuster’s carnival is inverted.

To Robert, Vienna is no longer a stimulating city: “Wien ist ja keine geistige Stadt mehr” (163). But the intellectual stagnation he perceives of other academicians (“das Denken an unseren Hochschulen kommt ja seit Jahrzehnten /gar nicht mehr in Gang” – 146; “die Geistesbedürfnisse sind auf das absolute Minimum heruntergeschraubt” – 148) has not driven him away from Austria: “Das Österreichische frage ich mich immer /Was ist es /[...] /Es zieht uns an und stößt uns ab” (118). As an Austrian Jew, Schuster contrasts his solidly middle-class roots with those of the proletariat, whom he claims make up the majority of today’s academicians:

Der Hochgebirgsstumpfsinn wird gepredigt heute
Das ist die Wahrheit der Wendekitsch
Ein unerträgliches Banausentum unterrichtet
nur mehr noch den alpenländischen Schwachsinn nichts sonst
Früher kamen die Universitätslehrer aus dem Großbürgertum
Aus dem großbürgerlichen Judentum
Heute kommen sie aus dem verzogenen kleinbürgerlichen Proletariat
Und aus dem debilen Bauernstand (147, my italics)

A political reading would stress the perceptions of an individual surviving from another era as referring to the fact that the Jewish population in Vienna had been virtually eradicated during the Nazi years, and the wealth of diverse intellectual achievement, which had come mainly from the Austrian-Jewish intellectual élite, had dispersed with the surviving émigrés. But there is nothing in Schuster’s language to distinguish him as a Jew. He is, as previously stated, primarily an eccentric Austrian, and the language he uses to project his carnivalesque visions is Austrian. Jürgens sees Schuster’s language on the intellectual élite as reflecting the debased standards of contemporary society: “Die von Robert Schuster so heftig kritisierte Sprache der Eliten ist nur so gut und so schlecht wie die Sprache der gesamten Gesellschaft: auch der Professor bedient sich keiner
besseren Sprache.” 455 Despite Robert’s attack on standards, he shows no profound regret in remaining in Vienna, because this enables him to revel in his “otherness”, a refusal to give a balanced view. Schuster’s carnivalesque perspective is also disrespectful of and abusive towards the authority of the state and hierarchical institutions representing the non-carnival world. He creates a travesty of Austria; his monologue is not a rational “Abrechnung” but a self-indulgent theatrical performance:

Wie mich vor allem ekelt
Der Staat eine Kloake stinkend und tödlich
Die Kirche eine weltweite Niedertracht
Die Menschen um einen herum
Abgrundtief häßlich und stumpfsinnig
Der Bundespräsident ein verschlagener verlogener Banasse
Und alles in allem deprimierender Charakter
Der Kanzler ein pfiffiger Staatsverschachter
Der Papst gibt in seinen Gemächern
Ein sogenanntes warmes Essen für Obdachlose
Und läßt diese Tatsache weltweit verbreiten
Eine zynische Welt
Die ganze Welt ist ein einziger Zynismus
Größenwahnsinnige Schauspieler
Mißbrauchen die Sahelzone
Perverse Caritasdirektoren
Reisen mit dem Flugzeug erster Klasse nach Eritrea
Und lassen sich für die Weltpresse
Mit den Verhungerten fotografieren
Der Bundeskanzler tritt im Nadelstreifenanzug an das Podium
Und faselt von Genossen (102)

He inverts everything in Austria, and his carnivalesque vision also takes on a global dimension (“Die ganze Welt ist ein einziger Zynismus”), creating a topsy-turvy logic which is entirely unfunny. In Bakhtin’s theory, carnival time is a time when the normal conventions which apply in the non-carnival world are suspended; but Schuster’s tirades leave no space for an Austria which is not carnivalised; on his view of things, there are no normal conventions which might redeem the country; Austria is carnivalesque. Apart from his reference to the make-up of academic bodies (147), he gives virtually no indication of what was different in society in earlier eras. Schuster projects less his Jewish identity but his eccentricity through his language; he is “other” in the very precise sense that his is a world to which normality is foreign.

Austria is therefore only a particle of a degenerate universe; the global condemnation diminishes the impact of those tirades aimed at Austria specifically, and

455 Jürgens, p. 222
Furthermore, the predominant use of adjectives conveying degeneration gives his description an entirely incredible dimension. Like other eccentrics, he relishes in flatly denouncing what he sees as global ills, and his perspective is that of the topsy-turvy carnival logic:

Die Welt ist ja schon heute nurmehr noch eine zerstörte
Alles in allem unerträglich häßliche
Man kann hingehen wo man will
Die Welt ist heute nur noch eine häßliche
Und eine durch und durch stumpfsinnige
Alles verkommen wohin man schaut
Alles verwahrlost wohin man schaut
Am liebsten möchte man gar nicht mehr aufwachen (87)
Es herrschen überall chaotische Zustände (120)

His categorical condemnation of the scope of the decline in the world is clear when he pronounces his sweeping assertions through the magnifying adverbs “nurmehr noch”, “wo man will”, “wohin man schaut”, “überall”; the adjective “alles in allem”, and the pronoun “alles”. To him, the world is a perpetual carnival from which there is no return or exit. If everywhere is like Austria, there is no normality to be experienced. The eccentric foregrounds the ugliness in the world and celebrates his relentlessly negative, dark and destructive view of the world. Bernhard is an “Übertreibungskünstler” as Schmidt-Dengler termed him, and equally a “Nivellierungscharlatan”. Schuster perpetuates a nihilistic theatre; although he dramatises, there is a complete absence of principles, the monologue turns on its absurdly exaggerated assertions, none of which he retracts. The reversal of conventional logic is destructive because it denies progress in all areas – the mad view announces an epoch of regression everywhere, culminating in Austria:

In den letzten fünfzig Jahren haben die Regierenden
Alles zerstört
Und es ist nicht mehr gutzumachen
Die Architekten haben alles zerstört
Mit ihrem Stumpfsinn
die Intellektuellen haben alles zerstört
mit ihrem Stumpfsinn
das Volk hat alles zerstört
mit seinem Stumpfsinn
die Parteien und die Kirche
haben alles mit ihrem Stumpfsinn zerstört
der immer ein niederträchtiger Stumpfsinn gewesen ist
und der österreichischer Stumpfsinn ist ein durch und durch abstoßender (87-88)

The above claims are nihilistic in that nothing can redeem Austria. The tirade is preposterous in its theatricality, there is no apparent sense of regret at the perceived present conditions and he enounces nothing of substance, since there is no differentiation within categories ("die Regierenden", "die Intellektuellen", "das Volk", "die Parteien", "die Menschen die Kultur"), he merely revels in indiscriminate denunciations. The systematic refutation of Austria is comic in its absurdity and lack of detail (frenzied repetition of "Stumpfsinn"). In the present time, he claims not to reminisce or hold dear any values from past eras: "Jede Epoche ist eine entsetzliche" (101), but in view of his other condemnations this may be no more than a pose. The reductive language of Heldenplatz as "eine völlig homogenisierte Sprachwirklichkeit" \(^{457}\) allows for no principles, since universal condemnation diminishes the significance of any one issue: "Sprache reduziert sich hier [...] auf einen einzigen gleichförmigen Akt universeller Verwerfung, vollständiger Verdammung, absoluter Negation, der schon deshalb nichts mehr bezeichnet, weil in ihm (nahezu) alles gleich und damit gleichgültig bezeichnet wird." \(^{458}\) Unsubstantiated universal condemnations are characteristic of the carnivalesque perspective; his vision is entirely fantastic.

The production setting contributes to the dark postmodernist mood in the play. The large, almost bare "Garderobenzimmer" with its over-sized proportions in the first scene is the setting for Zittel's monologue and echoes the isolation of Zittel and Herta in the aftermath of their master's death. Zittel's domestic ritual performed here is now entirely absurd. As Scene 3 opens, Robert, Anna, Olga and the guests, waiting for Hedwig and Lukas, are seated around the dining room at a distance from each other, and the oversized interior reinforces the sense of non-communication in the exchanges here. \(^{459}\) The dining room is a faded pink colour, symbolic of the dissolution of old structures, and the marks remaining on the walls from recently removed paintings and cupboards are a sign of the stale atmosphere in the flat. The figures appear dwarfed by the dimensions of the walls, doors and windows. Hedwig and Lukas arrive much later in the

\(^{457}\) Dronske, "Sprache und Gewalt...", p. 73
\(^{458}\) Dronske, "Sprache und Gewalt...", p. 73
\(^{459}\) See Appendix II, No. 64, p. 381 & No. 65, p. 382
scene, for the meal, and the climax to the play follows shortly thereafter. The dated, slightly dilapidated interior of the flat gives an indication of the impending change in the lives of the Schuster family members. The atmosphere is one of departure and abandonment, given the almost bare rooms, the rolled up carpets and the boxes and suitcases in the corners. Pfoser refers to Heldenplatz’s stage producer Herrmann, and comments on his design of the setting of Ritter, Dene, Voss: “hier hatte Herrmann erlesene großbürgerliche Wohnkultur in Auflösung vorzuführen.” Yet despite the experiment with the furniture, the carnival in Ritter, Dene, Voss is characterised by adherence to stagnant domestic ritual, particularly emphasized at the end of the play, when there is no sign of change, as the siblings remain trapped within the same setting and the trio’s eccentric arrangement is upheld.

Norbert Tschulik referred to Robert as a “Raunzer”, the term for a compulsive, passive grumbler, who in his tirades displays a typically Austrian trait, revelling in a culture of complaint whilst desiring no real change in social conditions. In Austrian German, “Raunzen” and “Meckern” are synonyms. Braendle also saw Robert as an Austrian figure: “Thomas Bernhard schafft wieder eine Bühnenfigur, die das österreichische Wesen genial verdichtet.” The Austrian nature of Bernhard’s Jewish figures was of course meant to provoke audiences. This tendency to moan, recognisable in the work of other Austrian dramatists, notably Karl Kraus’s figure of Der Nörgler in Die letzten Tage der Menschheit, is taken to extremes in Heldenplatz, given the refusal to focus and argue rationally; Robert delights in vilifying Austria, but does not limit his tirades to Austria. Pfoser sees Robert as very human in his lament of society: “Noch nie hat es wohl einen sympathischeneren, menschlicheren Polemiker bei Bernhard gegeben.” Yet even if his readiness to complain seems in some ways reflective of the human condition, his humanity is eroded by his misanthropy, his refusal to defend any principle and the monologue’s absurdly nihilistic tone; his lament cannot be taken seriously. Huemer saw Robert’s attacks on the Austrian Church as exposing the weaknesses in the Austrian character which facilitated the Church’s imposition of “eine Blut- und

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460 Salzburger Nachrichten, 7.11.1988
461 Wiener Zeitung, 7.11.1988
462 Weltwoche, 10.11.1988
463 Salzburger Nachrichten, 7.11.1988
Schleimspur durch die Geschichte, ganz wesentlich für die Tradition des österreichischen Duckmäusetums.” These attacks, however, are again relativised by statements such as “die Kirche eine weltweite Niedertracht” (102) and “der Glaube ist nichts anderes als ein Pachtverhältnis /Milliarden Pächter zahlen jährlich den hohen Pachtzins /An ihre Kirchen /Und verbluten daran” (106).

Robert’s passivity is evident in his ritual of reading tabloids which reveals a fascination with sensation in society: “Der Abschaum ist das Sensationelle” (122). Reading rituals are thus debased as empty, theatrical rituals; they reflect the absurdity of life generally. Despite attacking debased standards, he revels in them because they enable performance. Newspaper rituals correspond to the intellectual void in the present time and are similar to the empty concert rituals (111), but he is resigned to reading “den Dreck” (123) as it is a way of killing time. Robert’s obsession with tabloids inverts the norm of the intellectual pursuits associated with his professional status: “ich würde ersticken ohne die österreichischen Dreckblätter” (123). Whilst realising the poor quality of tabloid journalism, Robert revels in its cheap print, because despite its lack of substance, it is perversely life sustaining (121-123) as opposed to what he sees as the boredom of reading serious newspapers, to which he subscribes purely out of habit (123).

In Heldenplatz, the absurdity of existence is a foundation for the perpetuation of social, cultural and intellectual ritual which, although it reveals the figures as Viennese, is upheld less because of an emotional attachment to any specific place, but out of a sense of emptiness: “Alles ist nur Ablenkung von der Katastrophe” (Robert, HP 132). Being alive has only one purpose: to stage life as theatre; his verbal carnival debases culture and the very rituals to which he is condemned. Keeping up rituals to prevent ultimate disaster or nothingness is a form of absurdity. Robert is rooted in Vienna for want of anything else to do, and because he is familiar with its culture. On one level, Robert may be seen, like his creator, as an “Ur-Österreicher”, because he is a passive grumbler, but sentimentality is entirely absent in his attitude. The eccentric sees a world without morality, which creates a sense of inner rootlessness. Since he carnivalizes the whole world as degenerate, there is nowhere else for him to go to. Robert Schuster’s

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64 Huemer, Der Standard, 7.11.1988
monologues reveal aspects of the old fool. But the “Altersnarr” in Heldenplatz is unlike the old fools in Bernhard’s other plays, whose performance, characteristic features and bodily incapacities have been interpreted as comic. By contrast, Schuster is not a comic figure, and his on-stage performance is entirely verbal: aspects of the “Altersnarr” are recognisable in his disturbingly negative outlook which is part of his carnivalesque eccentricity. He is an old fool to the extent that he sees the world as a stage upon which he reveals a destructive (subjective) truth. As an old man facing death, the fool’s licence is verbal, and he risks nothing in performing his absurd claims, because despite participating in rituals, in his mind he remains an outsider. A change in his circumstances (to move away from Austria) would deny him the chance to make such fantastic claims, which sustain him. Robert sees Austria as a society condemned to death (“Die Österreicher sind längst zum Tod verurteilt”; 100), but he too is waiting for death. He maintains that people have destroyed themselves and their surroundings through meanness and hypocrisy:

aber im Grunde alle Österreicher zusammen
sind heute die Totengräber ihres Landes
alles hier ist der Niedrigkeit ausgeliefert
und erstickt an jedem Tag in Gemeinheit und Heuchelei
Aber ich bin alt und habe keine Lust mehr
Mich irgendwo einzumischen
Es hätte ja auch keinen Sinn
Wo alles nach Auflösung stinkt
Und wo alles nach Zertrümmerung schreit
Ist die Stimme des einzelnen zwecklos geworden (99)

Although he appears resigned (“Wo alles […] ist die Stimme des einzelnen zwecklos geworden”), his ability to speak out defines him as the outsider he feels himself to be and who has nothing to lose: “Ich warte nurmehr noch darauf endgültig und ganz tot zu sein” (125). Dissolution (“Auflösung”) mirrors the terminal condition of old age. There is nothing worth holding on to in the world, although he continues to participate in insignificant socio-cultural rituals to pass the time, not because he is attached to them. Nevertheless, although he continues to observe, fatalistic in the face of dissolution, his proclamations lack substance. Professor Robert’s life is a statement on absurdity in a nihilistic world:

Ich lebe ja schon jahrelang nurmehr noch
ganz gleich wo ich bin in Neuhaus
man könnte sagen daß ich schon jahrelang tot bin (125)
Indeed, he is as passive as the Austrians he speaks of:

die Österreicher sind ein Volk volliger Gleichgültigkeit
gegenüber ihren katastrophalen Zuständen geworden
das ist ihr Unglück das ist ihre Katastrophe (100)
ich weiß auch daß die alte Schule abgerissen wird
aber ich protestiere nicht mehr (87)

Suicide may not be an option for Robert, but life is absurd since there are no principles
to form a basis for his statement:

aber ich gebe nicht auf
ich gebe nicht nach und ich gebe nicht auf (91)

In view of death, Robert does not take life seriously:

Die Zukunft schon die nächste Zukunft Herr Landauer
wird Ihnen recht geben
Für mich persönlich ist das alles kein Problem
Auf dem Döblinger Friedhof nicht
Mein Bruder Josef kann von Glück reden
Daß ihm ein so spontaner Abgang gelungen ist
Ich habe Selbstmörder immer bewundert
Ich habe nie gedacht daß mein Bruder dazu imstande sein könnte
Ach wissen Sie das Leben ist tatsächlich eine Komödie (135-136)

This phrase expresses the nihilistic outlook of the eccentric waiting to die in rather more
light-hearted, sarcastic tones. He remains resigned to inaction, waiting for death in
Vienna, and admiring his brother Josef's suicide as a courageous act, which he sees as
tragically comic (the understatement “spontaner Abgang”), an act which puts an end to
the theatre of life. “Komödie” here implies that, according to the fool’s perspective, life
cannot be a serious endeavour and that given that suicide is to be aspired to, there is no
hope for the future. The potential for tragedy is thwarted, because human life is stripped
of its value in a world without principles to fight for. Once again, Robert is not
challenged by other figures. In this final scene, the physical distance between the figures
seated around the dining room emphasizes their isolation from each other. The figures of
Heldenplatz create a world of existential bleakness. Professor Josef Schuster had
regretted not living a century earlier, not fitting into the present age, and his only
concept of the future was the coldness of death, as Landauer recalls:

HERR LANDAUER

[...]
Wir leben doch immer in der falschen Zeit hat er gesagt
Wir wollen alle nur in der Vergangenheit leben
die haben wir uns so schön eingerichtet die Vergangenheit
wie wir wollen
kein Mensch will die Zukunft
aber alle müssen sie in die Zukunft hineingehen
dahinein wo es nur kalt und unfreundlich ist (144-5)

An absence of belief or faith brings forth the only final knowledge before death – that life leads to death, but Schuster inverts the ugliness of death, seeing cemeteries as perversely beautiful:

ROBERT
es ist ja auch nirgendwo schöner als auf den Friedhöfen (142)

The figures of Josef and Robert Schuster both tend, in Erich Fromm’s terms, towards “nekrophiler Orientierung” in that they are obsessed with death. Robert’s nihilistic monologue refutes the value of life itself, because his sense of resignation is disturbing given his unremittingly negative outlook:

das Nichtmehrsein ist das Ziel
das ware ja fürchterlich
noch einmal auf die Welt zu kommen alles noch einmal
das ist doch der allerfürchterlichste Gedanke
das Aus ist das Ziel (105)

He has no vision of a future, a logical consequence of his renunciation of any principle:
es wird nichts mehr geben nichts (140)

Robert claims that despite the writer’s fool’s licence, reality as it stands is uglier than any writer’s portrayal of it, in fact it is indescribable:

Was die Schriftsteller schreiben
ist ja nichts gegen die Wirklichkeit
[...]
die Wirklichkeit ist so schlimm
däß sie nicht beschrieben werden kann
noch kein Schriftsteller hat die Wirklichkeit so beschrieben
wie sie wirklich ist
das ist das Fürchterliche (115)

Robert gives no indication of what that reality is apart from a carnival’esque travesty. The futility and senselessness of writing are not limited to Austrian circumstances.

Heldenplatz, therefore, is a historical play only to a limited extent, as it is a statement on the absurdity and futility of human existence, and even on the absurdity of such a carnivalesque judgment. His global attacks relativise the anti-Austrian diatribes and reveal a worldly cynicism in overall judgement, in view of the corruption of charities (102):

eine zynische Welt
die ganze Welt ist ein einziger Zynismus (102)

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Endre Kiss does not acknowledge the nihilistic tone which does not limit absurdity to Austria: “Ihre Welt [die der Sprache] ist doch nicht eine wirklich absurde Welt, denn das Absurde erscheint bei ihm nicht als eine condition humaine, sondern als eine CONDITION HUMAINE AUTRICHIENNE.” But microcosms of absurdity are found throughout the world and in the human condition itself. Generalisations give rise to a flat characterisation of all Jews, and of the nature of “Judenhaß” throughout Europe, even though Robert is an Austrian Jew:

ROBERT
[...]
die Engländer haben auch einen faschistischen Untersatz
das wird immer vergessen
auch die Engländer haben ihren Faschismus
in Oxford gibt es auch und gibt es noch
den Judenhat
In Europa ist es ganz gleich wo der Jude hingeht
Er wird überall gehaßt (90)

Robert Schuster provoked conservatives in the first instance by breaking the stereotype of the silent Jew and by alluding to the position of Jews who returned to Austria after the war, but the stance of a persecuted victim is unsubstantiated in his monologue which refuses a logical exposition of issues. He does not base his view of Austrians in the present day on any genuine or personal grievance; his flat condemnation of all Austrians as innately anti-Semitic and degenerate is a carnivalesque performance in its lack of differentiation. Moreover, Schuster’s carnival is not a carnival of liberation, but of imprisonment; he is trapped in Austria because it gives him a stage to perform his “otherness” as an eccentric. Schuster remains in Austria not because of a profound emotional need: nowhere else is any better. England is in his view just as fascist and anti-Semitic as Austria, so to return there would offer him no escape or release. On one reading of Heldenplatz, if fascism is present throughout Europe, it undercuts the controversy concerning Jews in Austria, and undermines the position of Jews in central Europe. Antisemitism is not a peculiarly Austrian trait after all.

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466 Endre Kiss, “Thomas Bernhard, Dichtung des Selbstbewußtseins oder Verösterreicherung des Absurden”, in Debrecener Studien zur Literatur, Band 1, (Lang, 1995), 207-216, (p. 216, author’s emphasis)
APPENDIX I

Theatre and Politics: the Heldenplatz controversy

The production of Heldenplatz generated the greatest theatre scandal of the Second Republic. “When Peymann approached Bernhard to write a play for presentation in conjunction with the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Austria’s annexation to Hitler’s Reich in 1938, he declined. He insisted that he had said it all before, at a time when there was general silence about the Nazi pasts of prominent politicians”. Yet he changed his mind and wrote Heldenplatz shortly after completing Elisabeth II at the beginning of 1987 (although Elisabeth II is set in Vienna, the theme was not considered appropriate to the occasion).

The premiere of Heldenplatz had been planned for the 14th October 1988, the precise day of the centenary of the Burgtheater, and the date Bernhard had specifically chosen for the first performance. Following Peymann’s interview in Die Zeit in May 1988, which provoked hostility against him, given his criticism of the Burgtheater Ensemble, many principal actors demanded his dismissal and resigned over the summer: “The veteran members of the Burgtheater demanded Peymann’s dismissal”. This led to a postponement of the opening night. Furthermore: “The majority of the Burgtheater’s company refused to participate in the special centennial celebration on October 14th”. The actors who had resigned were asked to return their scripts, yet not all complied, which resulted in the media gaining access to unauthorized copies of the play. Bernhard’s publishers had been instructed to release the play’s text no earlier than the morning of the first performance. All those involved in the production had been required to agree to secrecy. Nevertheless, the text was prematurely leaked to the press. As Sigrid Löffler pointed out, in an article in Profil (17.10.88): “Nichts macht einen Text interessanter; nichts reizt die Lust an der gezielten Indiskretion mehr; nichts fördert so sehr die Neugier”. Die Wochenpresse and the tabloid Neue Kronen Zeitung printed

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467 Honegger, Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian (Yale University Press, 2001), p. 270
468 Honegger, p. 286
469 Honegger, p. 285
extracts from the tirades in *Heldenplatz*, under headlines such as “Skandalstück”, “Bernhards neue Österreich-Beschimpfung” (*Kronen Zeitung*). These extracts resulted in a one-sided representation of the play and incensed the conservatives, leading to a concerted attack on Peymann and Bernhard. In the words of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, the tabloids’ onslaught was savage: “Die aus diesen Fragmentzitaten hineingerufene allgemeine ‘Österreichbeschimpfung’ hallt nun als ein grausiges Echo zurück, in einer wahren Explosion aus Wut und Hass [...]”.

The sensationalist features in the anti-Austrian tirades in the mouth of a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust gives a very slanted and distorted impression of the play as a whole, in that it led to the media taking no account of other passages in the play which relativise its political implications (c.f. *HP* 90). The media deliberately heated up the atmosphere, and the scandal was provoked by the tirades’ appeal to emotions and instincts. The uproarious reaction to the published extracts before the first performance allowed no light to be shed on other themes in the play. The fact that Robert Schuster, the author of the anti-Austrian tirades mentioned here, is a Jewish eccentric who produces a carnivalesque image of an anti-Semitic Austria is designed to create controversy, but although *Heldenplatz* is a play with political implications, it is not a political play, precisely because the Jewish eccentrics, like the other eccentrics, are also Austrian eccentrics – what ties them to Austria is much the same as what ties Herrenstein, Bruscon and Voss. The reaction to the published tirades also ignored the impact of Josef, the dead eccentric who lives on through Zittel. In an article printed in *Profil* (17.10.88) Beil, as “Dramaturg”, the head of the production team working with Peymann in the Burgtheater, condemned the media attack on Bernhard, the producer Peymann and the management of the Burgtheater. Beil criticized the exploitation by the media of the play and the resulting hostile reaction: “Diese aus dem Zusammenhang gerissenen Texte werden entstellt und verballhornnt, und jetzt bricht dann die ganze

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472 See Appendix II, Nos. 44-47, pp. 361-364
473 Razumovsky, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 15. 10. 1988
474 Pfabigan identifies the problem of seeing the tirades as the main message of *Heldenplatz*: “Eine solche Haltung gibt dem Stück eine Eindeutigkeit, die es nicht hatte, reduziert es auf eine Abfolge von quasi kabarettistischen Anklagen.” Alfred Pfabigan, *Thomas Bernhard – Ein österreichisches Wellexperiment* (Wien, Zsolnay, 1999), pp. 420-1
Erregung über das Theater herein. Die Erregung ist für mich wie eine Bestätigung des Stücks”.  

Jürgens analyses the denial of Austria’s recent history thematised in *Heldenplatz* as follows:


No post-1945 Austrian chancellor had raised the Jewish question until 1991. As Hella Pick noted: “Jeder österreichische Bundeskanzler seit 1945 hatte die Gespenster der Nazizeit umgangen”,  and Austria had not compensated its victims adequately: “Österreichs Umgang mit der Wiedergutmachungsfrage sei bürokratisch und unmenschlich”.  But the „Wiedergutmachungsfrage“ is not referred to in *Heldenplatz*; Robert does not address the issue in his monologues, and this is further evidence that *Heldenplatz* should not be read in any narrow sense as a political play.  

Even by 1988, no concrete statement of collective guilt had been made by any Austrian Chancellor. This policy of failing to face the past had dangerous consequences, as Fuest pointed out:

Besonders die Repräsentanten Österreichs scheinen nichts so sehr zu fürchten wie Kratzspuren auf dem schimmernden Lack ihres Landes […]. So sieht man sich mit der Tatsache konfrontiert, daß gerade die offizielle Verdrängung einer Mitschuld an den NS-Verbrechen die Persistenz faschistischen Gedankengutes im inoffiziellen Raum, das heißt in Teilen der Bevölkerung, begünstigt.  

Chancellor Vranitzky was the first chancellor to admit Austria’s collective guilt in Parliament in 1991: “Wir bekennen uns zu allen Daten unserer Geschichte und zu den Taten unseres Volkes […]. Viele Österreicher waren an den Unterdrückungsmaßnahmen und Verfolgungen beteiligt, zum Teil an markanter Stelle. Über eine moralische Verantwortung können wir uns auch heute nicht hinwegsetzen. Dieses Bekenntnis haben
österreichische Politiker immer wieder abgelegt” (Vranitzky, 8th July 1991). Previously, Austria had been termed a victim of National Socialism since the Moscow Declaration in 1943. On a state visit to Israel in 1993, Vranitzky repeated his confession of guilt, adding that: “Tatsächlich waren die meisten Gründungsväter der Zweiten Republik Überlebende der Konzentrationslager und der Gefängnisse des Dritten Reichs” (9th June 1993).

Vranitzky’s predecessor as Chancellor, Bruno Kreisky, had criticized Bernhard for having a Jew express the most extravagant anti-Austrian sentiments in Heldenplatz. But as Jiirgens points out, his criticism ignored the fact that after 1945: die in Österreich lebenden Juden eher stumm waren oder zumindest nicht gehört wurden. Kreisky selbst konnte – als Jude und Mitglied der Sozialistischen Partei – in der Zweiten Republik nur deshalb gesellschaftliche Anerkennung finden, weil er sich bedingungslos der Lebensläufe des österreichischen Staates unterwarf, der jene Juden und Sozialisten, die zwischen 1938 und 1945 ermordet worden waren, immer noch nicht als "seine" Opfer akzeptieren wollte.

Yet Robert Schuster does not conform to the stereotypical image of a Jew who returned to Austria because the one thing he is not is „stumm“; he inverts (and so carnivalizes) the normal behaviour of the Austrian Jew, and must be seen primarily as an eccentric Austrian Jew.

A furious public debate soon got under way. Whatever their political affinity, politicians, without having seen the full text, perceived the play as a political statement. Hawlicek, the Socialist Minister for Culture who had had a role in appointing Peymann as Director in 1986, the Green Party and other liberals defended Heldenplatz against Waldheim and other conservative politicians, including the head of the Freedom Party, Haider. Alois Mock, the leader of the conservative Volkspartei, argued against

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480 Pick, p. 280
481 ibid., p. 281
482 Jürgens, p. 125
Heldenplatz being performed in the Burgtheater. Democratic groups such as the
"Interessengemeinschaft Österreichischer Autoren" exposed the parallels with
undemocratic censorship, and also criticised the attacks on Peymann as xenophobic:

Eine Verfassungsgarantie wie die der "Freiheit der Kunst", die zugleich auch eine des Zugangs zur Kunst
ist, wird durch die Forderung nach Vorzensur zurückgeführt hinter die Zustände von 1918 [...] Die
Interessengemeinschaft Österreichischer Autoren erklärt sich solidarisch mit ihrem Kollegen Thomas
Bernhard und dessen Regisseur Claus Peymann, von dem man im Sinn und im Stil einer neo-nazistischen
"Ausländer-Raus"-Bewegung die Abdankung als Burgtheater-Direktor erzwingen will.

The reaction of conservative politicians posed a grave risk to Austria’s image, since a ban could be interpreted as an expression of anti-Semitism. As Sigrid Löffler put it:

Das Land, das dauernd von Europareife faselt, aber nicht nur in Sachen Burgtheater und Staatsoper
kulturellen Fremdenhass praktiziert, mag erkennen, daß die Welt es bemerkenswert finden wird, daß
Waldheim, Mock und eine Reihe anderer Politiker ein Stück verboten möchten, das mit Österreichs
Haltung gegenüber jüdischen Emigranten ins Gericht geht – und das ausgerechnet im Bedenkjahr. Was
das bedeutet, schwante sogar einem "Staberl" : "Dann würde das Bild wahr werden, das Bernhard von uns
entwirft. Dann erst wären wir ein Sumpervolk.

Pasterk, socialist Kulturstadträtin for Vienna, was the first politician to have read the entire text, and warned that the cancellation of the play would be a sign of a regression to a policy of earlier post-1945 governments: "die Ablösung gerade dieses Stückes gerade im Gedenkjahr 88 könnte für Österreich eine ‘internationale Blamage’ werden". The Socialist Minister of Culture, Hilde Hawlicek, refusing to remove the play from the theatre schedule, asserted that: "Kunst ist nicht nur zur Erbauung da. Sie hat immer schon die Aufgabe, auch zu provozieren". Löffler commented on the charged atmosphere in which lines in Heldenplatz rang true:

Österreich führt sich auf, als sei es eine Bernhard-Inszenierung. Tatsächlich: Thomas Bernhards
‘Heldenplatz’ ist in der Vorwoche uraufgeführt worden. Ganz Österreich ist die Bühne, alle Österreich
sind Komparsen, die Hauptdarsteller sitzen in der Hofburg und am Ballhausplatz, in den
Zeitungsredaktionen und in den Parteizentralen. Das Publikum ist aber die ganze Welt. Schließt man nach
deren Hohngleicher, so bietet die Waldheimat, gerade noch rechtzeitig zum Bedenkjahr, der Welt soeben
eine Sondervorstellung: Mehr ist auf Österreichs Kosten selten gelacht worden. Tobsüchtiger und debiler
hat sich der öffentliche Diskurs selten aufgeführt. Ganz Österreich hat sich aufs Stichwort in eine Thomas-


"Alois Mock meinte, wäre er Theaterdirektor, dann würde er das Bernhard-Stück nicht zulassen.
Solche Texte könnten nur auf "privaten Theatern" gespielt werden. Ungeklärt blieb hier, ob sich daher
Burgtheaterdirektoren an politische Direktiven zu halten hätten [...] Er riet Hawlicek, den Vertrag
Peymanns vorzeitig zu lösen. Dies sei eine "ministerielle Vernunftswahrheit". Es sei schließlich auch
verboten, Stücke aufzuführen, die eine NS-Wiederbetätigung enthielten". Der Standard, 12. 10. 1988

Interessengemeinschaft Österreichischer Autoren, 11. 10. 1988


Der Standard, 13. 10. 1988

Arbeiter Zeitung, 11. 10. 1988
“The opening was postponed to November 4, which brought it close to another heavily symbolic date, the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, November 9th.\(^{490}\) The relevance of bringing the play to an Austrian stage was further exposed by events just before opening night, when an incident perpetrated by a Neo-Nazi took place in Graz. “On November 2 [...] an arson attack by a Neo-Nazi on another controversial Holocaust memorial in Graz [...] seemed to validate Bernhard’s most dismal views of Austrians and further aggravated the situation”.\(^ {491}\)

The pre-premiere scandal was based on ignorance of the entire play or of its presentation on stage. Bernhard had been able to predict the attitude of conservative Austrians to the play. Löffler notes:


The focus on the Burgtheater itself reminded the public of Peymann’s role and collaboration with Bernhard. Some compared Peymann’s situation as a German Director of an Austrian institution, the Burgtheater, with Hitler’s march into Vienna. Such attacks called to mind animosity against foreigners which was also widespread in the Austria of 1988. Hostility was rife. Peymann had been hit with a walking stick outside the Burgtheater,\(^ {493}\) just as Bernhard had been abused in Billrothstraße, Döbling, his own neighbourhood in Vienna.\(^ {494}\) Peymann also received insults by mail.\(^ {495}\) Bernhard’s dramatic trilogy \textit{Drei Dramolette} later fictionalized Peymann’s sense of harassment as a


\(^ {490}\) Honegger, p. 287

\(^ {491}\) ibid, p. 290


\(^ {493}\) \textit{Volksstimme}, 6. 11. 1988 – See Appendix II, No. 48, p. 365


German Director of the Burgtheater: “Überall höre ich die Sagen/die an dem Ast sagen/auf den ich mich gesetzt habe”.\(^{496}\)

The extreme reactions in the public debate uncannily recalled the mood of the First Republic, according to a commentator in Kurier: “Die Erste Republik Österreich, dieser Unglückstaat zwischen 1918 und 1938, ist auch am Mangel an Maßigung zugrunde gegangen. Wer heute nachliest, welcher Ton in den Zeitungen und den politischen Reden herrschte, erschrickt […]. Hat in diesem Land keiner mehr genug moralische Autorität?”\(^{497}\) The Kronen Zeitung expressed populist xenophobic tendencies by accusing anti-nationalist groups at home and abroad of re-igniting the recent Waldheim affair, a particularly sensitive issue for conservatives in Austria: “Es handelt sich dort doch wohl wiederum nur um jene ausländischen (und inländischen) Kreise, die sich bis heute nicht schämen, daß sie mit gefälschten Dokumenten und Verleumdungen eine Anti-Waldheim- und Anti-Österreich-Kampagne inszeniert haben, und die bereits heute aus dem Peymann-Bernhard-Skandal eine “neue Waldheim-Affäre” konstruieren”.\(^{498}\)

The same commentator expressed outrage about the fact that the play was performed on the public stage of the Burgtheater at the taxpayers’ expense: “Der Normalbürger im Ausland hingegen bringt wohl wenig Verständnis dafür auf, daß in einem Staatstheater unter der Patronanz einer staatstragenden Partei und mit dem Geld der Steuerzahler eine nationale Selbstbesudelung inszeniert wird […]. So etwas ist auch nur eine österreichische Spezialität.”\(^{499}\)

Robert claims in Heldenplatz: “Österreich selbst ist nichts als eine Bühne” (89). Bernhard himself had used the metaphor of “Bühne” in his “Brief an das Komitee”, a letter which, given his position as the most controversial “fool” of the contemporary literary scene, almost foresaw the conditions leading to a possible ban of Heldenplatz:

Meine Existenz als Schriftsteller in Österreich, das meine natürliche Heimat ist, war von Anfang an von böser Verleumdung und Ignoration begleitet gewesen […] eine doch sehr starke Natur hat mich früh hellhörig und immun gemacht gegen die Gemeinheit meiner Landsleute, die nichts geringer schätzen als die Literatur und diejenigen, die sich der Literatur verschworen haben. Ich habe mich mit der totalen Geistlosigkeit dieser Gesellschaft abgeändert […] solange Leute, die sich Präsident des Kunstenates dieses Staates nennen und mit Fäusten auf Kollegen losgehen und sich nicht schämen, dem zuständigen Minister nahezulegen, Kollegen nicht aufzuführen, wird sich auf dieser perversen Bühne meines

\(^{496}\) Claus Peymann verläßt Bochum und geht als Burgtheaterdirektor nach Wien, Suhrkamp taschenbuch (17)
\(^{497}\) Kurier, 15. 10. 1988
\(^{498}\) Neue Kronen Zeitung, 15. 10. 1988
\(^{499}\) ibid.
Heimatlandes nichts ändern. Und ich habe naturgemäß keine Lust, auf diese Bühne zu steigen, auf welcher jeder, der an der Wahrheit hängt, zu einer lächerlichen Figur gemacht wird […]. Ich lebe hier in Österreich, weil ich nicht anders kann, weil ich an die Landschaft gebunden bin. (my italics)

Bernhard used the metaphor of “Bühne” to make a mockery of Austria, and to allege the narrow-mindedness and pettiness of officials who make themselves ridiculous on the Austrian stage. He also attacked the hostile reception of his works, which is based on ignorance (“Geistlosigkeit”). Bernhard nevertheless felt rooted in Austria, since, as he stated, he was attached to the country. Speaking out truths through his work created offence in conservative circles. Bernhard’s determination meant he had to distance himself from the enemies within his own country: “Aber ich will meiner Arbeit zuliebe mit meinen Feinden nichts zu tun haben. Und die Feinde sind überall.”

The success of bringing the play to the stage was a victory for Bernhard and all those involved in the production. Peymann commented on the atmosphere in Vienna:

PEYMANN: [...] Im übrigen ist es nicht die schlechteste Voraussetzung, wenn das Theater in einer Stadt wirklich im Mittelpunkt steht. In Wien ist das Theater niemandem gleichgültig. Der Grund dafür liegt natürlich auch darin, daß Wien als Hauptstadt und Kapitale eines Weltreiches dieses ganze Reich verloren hat. Das einzige Reich, das gebleiben ist, ist das imaginäre, ist die Welt der Illusion. Deswegen das Theater.

PEYMANN: Das ist ja das Herrliche! (Lachen)
Was ist aber die Illusion, die dort allabendlich geändert wird? Es war doch Ihre Art von Programm zu sagen: Kunst und Theater haben auch immer etwas mit Widerstand, mit Opposition, mit Reibung an der Wirklichkeit zu tun. Reibung war etwas, was bisher auf der Bühne, zumindest des Burgtheaters, nicht so sehr des Akademietheaters, fast um jeden Preis verhindert werden sollte.

PEYMANN: [...] Es kann ja sein, daß das Menschenbild, das für verschiedene Zeiten und verschiedene Arbeitsweisen am Burgtheater charakteristisch gewesen ist, tatsächlich nur eine sozusagen große Illusion vom Menschen war. Man kann das negativ sehen, dann sagt man: verzerkertes Menschenbild [...].

Peymann continued to provoke Austrian theatregoers with his productions in the Burgtheater. Curiosity meant that a boycott did not take place and could not be enforced by any means. The tabloid *Kronen Zeitung* published a sensational article on 4.11.88, the day of the first performance. The front page pictured the Burgtheater on fire with the headline: “Das Theater um die Burg”. These words could be taken to refer to the theatre outside the Burgtheater, on the opening night before the start of the performance. Likewise, the uproar that took place in the theatre during the premiere confirmed the

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500 Thomas Bernhard, “Brief an das Komitee”, in “Autoren Solidarität” – Komitee zur Fortsetzung des Schriftstellerkongresses” G. Ruiss (editor), (January 1982), pp. 20-22, (pp. 20-22)
501 ibid, p. 22
502 “Im Wiener Kulturkampf ist ein wichtiger Sieg gelungen” (Braendle, Weltwoche, 10.11.1988)
503 Peter von Becker und Michael Merschmeier, “Das Gespräch mit Peymann, Beil, usw.”, in Theater heute 6/1984, 1-7. (pp. 3-4)
tabloid's anticipating undertitle: "Uns ist nichts zu heiß". The Burgtheater is a fundamental part of the heritage of Vienna, as the theatrical tradition in the city evokes images of an imperial past. The atmosphere created during the Heldenplatz scandal was thus in part a consequence of the conservative attitudes to tradition. Heldenplatz ultimately provoked many levels of drama consisting of the Burgtheater cast’s reaction to Peymann’s interview, media exposure of the text and conservative reactions, and the reception of the play itself.

On the evening of 4. 11. 1988, right-wing activists placed a large pile of dung directly in front of the theatre, as their own showpiece, accompanied by performances of songs. Austria itself had become a stage for politically inspired performers. A. Pfoser compares the audience on the first night to the Viennese folk theatre audiences of the past: “so glich das Burgtheater bei der Heldenplatz Premiere einer Vorstadtbühne, bei der sich Applaudierer und Buhschreier, johlende und empörte Zwischenrufer abwechselnd oder gleichzeitig einmengten.” The audiences thus participated in a tradition. Audiences were finally trapped inside the Burgtheater: “Die Wiener feierten ihren Theaterskandal, und die Theaterfalle des Fallenstellers Bernhard schnappte endgültig zu”. Live reactions were part of the opening night theatrical spectacle; loud protests to key words in tirades were superfluous, as Bernhard forced self-exposure onto the audience through his monologue game, which refused focus on any one issue or principle, instead indulged in blanket condemnation: “Kaum meinten sie ein Reizwort zu hören und brüllten los, schon hatte er den nächsten ideologischen Haken geschlagen”. The audience was trapped: “Für die wild entschlossen ins Theater geeilten Vaterlandsverteidiger war’s wie eine Kneippkur. Verwirrt und orientierungslos ließen sie sich von Bernhard am Narrenseil führen, reagierten unüberlegt und emotional und

504 Neue Kronen Zeitung, 4. 11. 88
506 Salzburger Nachrichten, 7. 11. 88
507 Löffler, Württembergisches Sonntagsblatt, 13. 11. 88
508 ibid.
lieferten der schlauen Kapuzinerpredigt die Beweise für ihre Attacken". The „Narrenseil“ was Bernhard’s game: the fool’s monologues could not be taken seriously, given their theatricality, wild assertions and absence of serious foundation. The fragments from *Heldenplatz* which had been published in the tabloids were relativised by the relentlessly destructive, nihilistic monologues. Bernhard’s victory was to oblige his audience to confront the issues raised by the play through their own participation in the show.

509 Stumm, *Basler Zeitung*, 7. 11. 88
APPENDIX II

ILLUSTRATIONS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Der Theatermacher (Burgtheater production; first performed at the Salzburger Festspiele, 17. 8. 1985. First performance in Burgtheater: 1. 9. 1986)
Producers: Claus Peymann; Karl-Ernst Herrmann (Stage)

Ritter Dene Voss (Burgtheater production; first performed at the Salzburger Festspiele, 18. 8. 1986. First performance in Burgtheater: 4. 9. 1986)
Producers: Claus Peymann; Karl-Ernst Herrmann (Stage)

Heldenplatz (Burgtheater production; first performance in Burgtheater: 4. 11. 1988)
Producers: Claus Peymann; Karl-Ernst Herrmann (Stage)

Elisabeth II (Burgtheater production; first performance in Burgtheater: 30. 5. 2002)
Producers: Thomas Langhoff; Roland Gassmann (Stage)

Photographs of productions are with kind permission of Magister Claudia Kaufmann-Freßner of the Burgtheater’s Dramaturgie Department. The photographs have been selected to give the best possible insight into the settings of the plays. Each photograph refers either to a specific production detail (i.e. on the stage) or to an aspect within the play itself (i.e. the figures’ gestures or movements, or the theme of eccentric theatre) pertinent to my analysis of the text. The sequence of photos from one scene in Ritter Dene Voss (Nos. 8-13) is intended to illustrate my analysis of a series of gestures in the main figure’s performance. Other material is from programmes and documentation as listed.

24. Ohlsdorf's former fire brigade station, 1957. Provided by Herr Johann Maxwald of Obernathal, Ohlsdorf, Upper Austria.
42. Der Theatermacher, Burgtheater Production, 1985.
Surabhi Theatre
PIONEERING A UNIQUE TRADITION

Text & Photographs:
RAO CHANDRIR PATEKER

The stage is set, with the singing of invocatory verses on Ganesha and Saraswati. The notes of the harmonium announce that the play is about to begin. The venue is a college ground in Gadavanili, the coal mines town in Madhya Pradesh. Theatre is such an integral part of life for this family that most of their activities are conducted in and around the theatre. They live inside the theatre, cook their food there, with makeup on their faces and when the time comes, they dismantle it and move on to yet another destination.

Over a period of time, says Surabhi Venkteswara, the audiences have dwindled and life is a tightrope walk, but their enthusiasm for theatre has not waned. It is a way of life with them.

Chintumani is an erotic comedy, with not too many stage tricks, but Harelahari and Ghadchokhi have many tricks and are a big draw.
was invited to a village in the Gudlapah district to give a puppet show. Instead of the puppet show, the Vanaras family presented a stage-play "Kreechhikowadhur" which thrilled the audiences no end. All the members of the family played different roles and this marked the beginning of the Surabhi movement.

The secret of success of a Surabhi play is the troupe members' ability to present as many tricks on stage as possible. The rural audiences find it exciting to see Narasimha traversing the air, a waterfall emerging on the stage, a mace and arrow fight taking place most realistically in the air and a fire raging on the stage doused by water drawn by an arrow shot by none other than Arjuna. While the
The tempo of the play is kept upbeat by the musicians seated in a pit just below the stage. Keeping a close watch, they act as prompters for each scene. It is another matter that Surabhi artists never need prompting; they learn their parts and then live them.

Surabhi Theatres was established in 1855 by three brothers - Ramasah, Venkiah and Kachanah. Since they came from a village called Surabhi in Godavapah district in Andhra Pradesh, they called themselves "Surabhi Theatres". It is the only one of its kind in the world, run entirely by the descendants of a single family for such a long time. The forefathers of the present generation, hailing from a spirited people called Are Kapus, are said to have come from Maharashtra around the year 1880 and settled as agriculturists in Rayalaseema. Vanarasa Venkayava Rao, a noted member of one of these families, willed his property to his brothers, leaving his three sons and two wives paupers. The sons thereupon learned the art of puppetry for survival and started touring to earn a living. One of these sons was Venkoji, who was childless himself. He adopted an orphan whom he found in a state of distress and named him Govinda Rao. Not satisfied with puppetry, Govinda Rao ran away from home and joined a theatre troupe. He was brought back by his father and married off. Later, Govinda Rao was to attain eminence as Andhra Natasha Kshetrika (Play/Stage Artist of Andhra). The Vanarasa family
Logentheater
Tschauners Stegreiftheater in Wien-Ottakring, 1952
Bernhards Skandalstück „Heldenplatz“: Die „Krone“ veröffentlicht erstmals Teile des Textes „Österreich, 6,5 Millionen Deble!“

In einem Interview mit der „Krone“ bestätigt Thomas Bernhard das, was er über die „Heldenplatz“-Aufführung in Wien gesagt hat. Er nimmt sich auf die „Heldenplatz“-Szenen und gibt an, dass er sich von den Inszenierungen der „Krone“ beeindruckt hat.


Der Text „Österreich, 6,5 Millionen Deble!“ wurde in der „Krone“ veröffentlicht und beinhaltet eine beleidigende und beleidigende Kritik an der österreichischen Gesellschaft und den österreichischen Politikern. Der Text beinhaltet auch eine kritische Betrachtung der österreichischen Gesellschaft und der österreichischen Politik in der Vergangenheit und der Gegenwart.


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Riesenwirbel um Österreich-Beschimpfung!


Einige geplante Kontroverse bewirken mit welcher der pathologischen Abneigung der österreichischen Regierung gegen das Burgttheater einstweilen noch einmal nationale und internationale Aufmerksamkeit auf sich aufmerksam gemacht. Einige der österreichischen politischen Entscheidungsträger und führende Journalisten äußern sich in dieser Situation, der österreichischen Regierung und der österreichischen Intelligenz, die sich durch die diffamatorischen Angriffe auf die österreichische Nation im In- und Ausland beschäftigt.


Die österreichische Regierung ist von der Ausführung des Stücks „Heidenplatz“ als provokatorisch und verfassungswidrig betrachtet, da die Darstellung eine Schwäche der österreichischen Nation darstellt und die österreichische Regierung sich durch das Schauspiel in dieser Situation in die Defensive versetzt.

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Im Februar 1933 entschied Schuster, sich von der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung zu distanzieren und aus dem Land zu fliehen. Er fand Schützengräben in England, das die nationalsozialistische Bewegung nicht erreichte. Schuster war ein politisch engagierter, intellektueller und geistiger Führer, der mit seiner Familie aus Österreich floh, um seine Ideen und seine Arbeit weiterzuführen.

Der Erinnerung an Josef Schuster und die anderen, die in der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung kämpften, erinnert die "Österreich, sechseinhalb Millionen Debole"-Kampagne an die tapferen Menschen, die ihre Freiheit und ihre Ideen verteidigten, obwohl dies den nationalsozialistischen Machthabern nicht gefiel. Die Kampagne war eine Symbole der Widerstandskraft und der tapferen Haltung der Menschen, die in der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung kämpften und die ihre Freiheit und ihre Ideen verteidigten.
Nur die Wahl zwischen schwarzen und roten Schweinen


KULTURKAMPF

VOLKSSSTIMME, 6.11.1988 Seite 7

Die Österreicher

Bernhards Theaterstück "Die Österreicher" ist eine Stimme aus der Mitte, die kritisch auf die politische und gesellschaftliche Realität der Nachkriegszeit und der 1930er Jahre eingehen will. Das Stück hat eine komplexe Struktur, die sich aus verschiedenen Szenen und Diskussionen zusammensetzt, die auf die Thematik der Nachkriegszeit und der Vielfalt der österreichischen Gesellschaft hindeuten.


Im zweiten Teil der Szene diskutieren der Bruder und die beiden Töchter des To- tten über die Bedeutung der Familie und die Verbindung der Familienmitglieder. Hierbei werden verschiedene Perspektiven der Familie und der Nachkommen der Familie diskutiert. Die Szene setzt sich mit einer Reihe von Bekenntnissen und der Bedeutung der Familie und der Nachkommen.

Im dritten Teil der Szene versammeln sich die bereits genannten Personen in der leeren Wohnung — zusammen mit Sohn, Frau und einem befreundeten Ehepaar des Professors zum Leichenschmaus. Hier werden sich weitere Diskussionen und Auseinandersetzungen ergeben, die auf die politische und gesellschaftliche Realität der Nachkriegszeit und der 1930er Jahre hindeuten.

**KURIER und „Basta“ stellten den Autor des „Heldenplatz“ vor.**

**Herr Bernhard**

Was haben Sie gegen Österreich?

Alle Reden über den „Heldenplatz“. Nur der Autor hat bisher geschwiegen. „Basta“ und KURIER sprechen mit Thomas Bernhard.

KURIER: Das Land ist in welcher Aufregung, und Sie sitzen hier im Kärntnerhaus und Musik beiden.

Bernhard: Nein, ich bin überrascht, und immerhin ist es über dem Angesicht des Mannes, der mir das Wort selbst redend

KURIER: Werden Sie auf der Straße engagiert?


KURIER: Was denken Sie von der Öffentlichkeit so engagiert, ob oder nicht der Mann, der mich die Stimmung, die sich jetzt und auch schon einige Zeit nach der vorliegenden „Basta“ gezeigt haben.

Bernhard: Ja, mein Stuck ist schöner. Aber das bleibt auch schon einige Zeit nach der vorliegenden „Basta“ gezeigt haben.

KURIER: Über Sie die Scheu. Was denken Sie, wenn alles hier so erregt ist?

10 Oktober

Herr Claus Peymann

zieh Sie durch vom

Burgtheater!

Wie lieben alle das

Burgtheater!

Jeden Tag ist ein

neue Krach!

Ein die das Burgtheater

rücklich liebt.

Wien, den 10.10.1988
12 Oktober

Herrn Böhm u. Genossen!
Mit Ihrer Anwendung an Konzern haben Sie sich
nur lächerlich gemacht.

Thomas Bernhard ist ein Psychopath, doch kein großer
Dichter. Grillparzer ist ein großer Dichter. Was davon
wirklich sei, sei ja nicht.

Wir bräuchten an der Bay. auch einen Christ in
Psychopathen in der Direktion.

Sie eigenen sich allenfalls für die ARENA -
Schachtelholf St. Marx.

Postkarte

Zurück nach
Bochum! Hier mendicin
Sie fehlt von Peery!

An
die Direktion
des Bayreuther
Theatervereins im Bayreuth!

Poststelle

Wien 12

SEMPER
Herr Claus Peymann, Ms. Linge,

ihnen ein Schreiben von der

Kronen Zeitung bei, wegen

sie doch den Zeitungsartikel
durch das Persönliche Druck

öffentlichkeit den guten Leuten

von Österreich; und dan Peymann

gie Peymann, ob das Kultur ist,

oder Entdeckung der Kunst-

Ballettratten Tanken, die

Österreichs für immer so sich selbst

Ratten, und Tiersgeburt, es

fames auf der ganzen Welt niremand

die der Österreicher noch

Policies kommen. Wahr also Peymann

die sagen, dass dieses Volk mit seinen

Politikern das sind wahr Schwinder,

Schein unduchtige. Die Politiker ist eine

Wase Tiersgeburt, ob der V planted

hast oder Holz oder sonst wie,

des Primitiva Fresserlacker, das kommen

gie ihm wegen,

Abs: der Blaue Mensch.
Pfiffe!

Falls das Stück Felderplatz im Jüngstheater aufgeführt wird, garantieren wir eine öffentliche Stummschaltung auf offener Bühne für die Herren Degnan und Bernhard.

Eine kräftige 6-Kammersonde aus Braunschweig
Thomas Bernhard hat das erlebt, zwei Arme und eine Hand.

So ein Schwein (Thomas Bernhard)
in Österreich gibt es 6 Millionen 9.999 Tausend
normale Menschen und einen
101.010 (Grenzdepilier - Vollkoffer und)
zwar

Thomas Bernhard

Er erwähnt, aber in Österreich gibt es 6,5 Millionen Depile

er erwähnt, aber in Bundesrepublik Schwei

er sagt, Österreich ist das östereichische Loch in Europa.

Mario K. Wien
15 Oktober

SIE SCHUFT UND DEBILES SCHWEIN VERSCHNINDEN!
SIE AUS ÖSTERREICH!
MIT DEM SCHWEIN, DEM AUCH DEBILEN BERNHARD!
PFLUI!
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