Mastery and Mock Dialectic
in Thomas Bernhard's *Correction*

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Abstract

A central conflict in Thomas Bernhard's novel *Correction* (*Korrektur*) concerns the relation between the narrator and his deceased friend, Roithamer, for whom the narrator serves as literary executor. Although Roithamer is dead, the two men nonetheless appear to enter a conflictive struggle involving domination and mastery since the narrator understands Roithamer's bequest as an aggressive gesture intended to destroy him. Though the general form of the contest resembles the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, the dialectic is subjected to two types of critique. The first critical point concerns the theatricalization or staging of conflict in Höller's garret, the spatial focus of the novel; the second is connected to identity and the recuperation of meaning vis-à-vis correction in the special sense of the novel's title. Although the notion of dialectic as a process initiated by non-identity is already present in the special meaning of correction, by which concepts are ruthlessly subjected to negations of negations, correction also refers to suicide—Roithamer "corrects" himself out of existence. In this sense of correction, the struggle does indeed respond to internal contradiction but cannot be recuperated in sublation; the result is more akin to abstract negation, annihilation, and therefore an attack on the very conditions which make meaning possible. The question remains whether the narrator is compelled to function slavishly by extending recognition to Roithamer through his labor, or whether he can evade both the "restricted economy" of Hegelian negation without succumbing to Roithamer's extreme act of self-destruction. Several critics (Adorno, Deleuze, and Derrida) point the way through these two applications of Hegel—first, in helping to show how what is in fact happening, in the potential discursive reduction of Roithamer through the labor of the narrator, is either mock-dialectic or formal liquidation and second, in pointing up the significance of the narrator's laughter.

Keywords

Introduction

The critical activity around the work of Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) has grown steadily since the appearance of his first novel, *Frost* (1963), to become a significant scholarly industry, particularly in the German-speaking world. Certain tendencies are discernible within the corpus of Bernhard scholarship, for instance, a proclivity for biographical applications (prompted, no doubt, by Bernhard's autobiography, *Gathering Evidence,* and his memoir, *Wittgenstein's Nephew*); historical and socio-political studies with an emphasis on Hapsburg or Austrian history and relations with neighboring states; and, philosophically-oriented theoretical treatments. The first two categories naturally entail an Austrian emphasis, and to be sure, Bernhard's work cannot be entirely divorced from this contextual frame, given the narrow Austrian focus of his settings and characters.[1] But the philosophical questions permeating Bernhard, the third category, are certainly not so limited, and therefore it is surprising that very few of the critics who have engaged with his work have done so equipped with the full arsenal of critical and poststructuralist theory. Within the parameters of traditional literary criticism, the characterization of Bernhard's oeuvre as a protracted and repetitive discourse on death, disease, madness, and the absurdity of the human condition has reached its productive limits, especially when these themes are reduced to functions of Bernhard's chronically precarious health or his traumatic experiences under authoritarian political and religious regimes.[2] But we need not abandon the political or the German philosophical tradition, with which Bernhard was quite obviously concerned, to re-enliven the critical assessment of Bernhard's rapport with that

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[1] Despite Helms-Derfert's cogent warning prefacing his major Bernhard study, *Die Last der Geschichte*, that little is gained by an intense collation of a writer's life and writings (6), a sizable portion of Bernhard scholarship nonetheless takes this route. Critically engaging examples linking Bernhard's life to *Correction* include Erich Hinterholzer and Hans Höller's "Poetik der Schauplätze, Fotos und Texte zu Romanen Thomas Bernhards" (145-47; 163-66), which photographically presents the buildings and landscapes actually named and fictionally portrayed in *Correction* and other works, and Markus Kreuzwieser's "'Ich habe den Bau eingerichtet und er scheint wohl gelungen'" (167-72)—a compelling study of Bernhard's acquisition of property and the Austrian postwar *Behausheit* situation vis-à-vis similar transactions in his fiction. A more sustained parallel between life and literary activity is found in Joachim Hoell's biography *Thomas Bernhard*, including specific information about *Correction* (82-92; 105-110).

[2] An extreme example in English is found in Martin, who though offering an excursus questioning the fruitfulness of confining Bernhard to an Austrian specificity (8-16), nonetheless repeatedly posits one-to-one correspondences between Bernhard's life events and his fiction (e.g., 45, 49, 60, 97, 177, 189-90) and even remarks that "it is possible to interpret the entire oeuvre up to 1975 as a direct response to the traumas of the author's childhood" (135).

tradition. The engagement with German Idealist philosophy, as taken up by certain writers within critical theory and post-structuralism, not only opens new avenues into Bernhard's work, but also yields insights into Bernhard's public role.

Bernhard's public persona was, and to some extent continues posthumously to be, controversial—a consequence of the condemnatory invectives he delivered when accepting literary prizes, his affront to Austrian "dignity" in the accusation of lingering complicity between its citizens and leaders and National Socialism, and his attacks on cultural and religious institutions. The passage of time, however, has softened attitudes (Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard* 307-08), so that we are now in a better position to understand this Bernhardian persona in its historical character—to understand, that is, the essentially antithetical role he played. The words *persona* and *role*, suggestive of acting or theatricality, are appropriate in this context inasmuch as they resonate with an aspect of negation appearing in his novel *Correction* (1975), the focus of this essay. If we reflect upon Bernhard's adult life in relation to the novel's central conflict, we come to suspect that his social disruptions also fail to fall into neat oppositional categories. The novel in fact teaches us that if we are to speak of dialectical opposition at all, we must be critically sensitive to Bernhard's ironic self-portrayal.[3]

We can commence this inquiry by considering the conflict in an example, as it was represented by one of Bernhard's apologists in the popular press at the time of his death. In a eulogy, Alfred Pfoser queried: "Österreich ohne Thomas Bernhard, kann das sein?" [Can Austria be without Thomas Bernhard?] (25). Pfoser's question implies a straightforwardly Hegelian dialectic, namely, that positive being (Austrian identity, concepts of Austrian nationhood) relies upon its sublative mastery of the negative (Bernhard's implied role) to restore itself to itself.[4] Bernhard's death, then, was the disappearance of this useful reference point, and so he could no longer be

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[3] Honegger, in her biography of Bernhard, uses theatrical references in most of her chapter titles. Although she portrays Bernhard's actual suffering sympathetically, she presents Bernhard's public self as carefully constructed, intended to play off of the reactionary responses he typically was able to elicit. This portrayal is found in other studies, including Hens (88-106) and Cousineau (111-23), both of which consider the scandalous roman-à-clef *Woodcutters*.

[4] This claim is not purely philosophical but has its historical basis specifically in the rise of ethnic nationalist movements within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As members of the dominant culture, Austrian Germans did not develop an active identity because there were no major threats to their dominant cultural status (as opposed, for instance, to the Hungarians or Slavs). A new defensiveness arises first after the Franco-Prussian War, only to be exacerbated in the Austro-Hungarian territorial losses and, the establishment of the First Republic after World War I. A summary of these events is found in Jelavich (144-47), which traces how this identity crisis came into vision for Austrian Germans.

perceived or put to work as a foil—"playing against" as Honegger titles one of the chapters in her Bernhard biography—to shore up Austrian identity. But the theatrical metaphor indicates that Bernhard's role was not that of a true other, perhaps not even that of a contradiction; rather, he represented a certain kind of negativity, which to reverse Bataille's phrase, could be construed as negativity employed: his was a voice from the margins of acceptable but nonetheless intelligible discourse which in fact helped to define a discursive limit, thereby suggesting, but only suggesting, a form of Hegelian *Anerkennung* (recognition), albeit a no more than ironic kind of (self-)recognition (for Bernhard) in meeting extreme with extreme. This sleight of hand, however, is only clearly discernible from our vantage of detachment, which nonetheless might equally imply our taking Bernhard seriously enough to fit him firmly (or snugly) within a purely Hegelian dialectical framework. This tack would lead us to view Bernhard as an irritant and satirist working to bring about critical self-consciousness—certainly a problematic claim.

Matthais Konzett, a pioneer in English-language Bernhard criticism, expresses a related view without the Hegelian terminology, suggesting that Bernhard occupied a position "imagined from within mainstream culture" (18), one which was comprehensible to the mainstream imagination, so much so that Bernhard eventually was led to ironize his own position through his "realization that the critical dissent of the avant-garde had become a commodity and had turned into a mannerism in his own work" (19). Coming to a satisfactory conclusion on where Bernhard actually should be situated is difficult, though, since the public expectation around Bernhard's displays of contempt and his predictable nihilism were wholly within the horizons of the common Viennese expression that it's all an act. The critical goading embodied in Bernhard's intervention could thereby be reduced to a staginess dressed up in the trappings of a theatrical production—which amounts to a forestalled dialectic resisting synthesis and never entailing any significant threat to the status quo, in short, a mock dialectic [*Scheindialektik*], to borrow a word from critic Bernhard Sorg's analysis of Bernhard's novel *The Lime Works* (92).

Of course, by bringing these ideas to bear on Bernhard's public persona, we participate in the strong critical impulse to understand Bernhard as the autobiographical author *par excellence* and we concur with the notion that he was thinly disguising himself in his protagonists or narrators to dramatize his own position vis-à-vis Austrian society (instead of, as Martin has it, projecting his own chronic life-threatening illnesses into his physically and psychologically degraded

characters). We could, in turn, take this further by arguing that in his otherness Bernhard purposively enacted a mere ritual of Hegelian recognition, whether or not he was thinking in these terms, and thus conveyed an ironic attitude towards the preferred outcome of Hegel's struggle. Taking Bernhard in this direction, however, at first seems uncomfortably and paradoxically to limit what the critic may say or how he or she may say it for two reasons. On the one hand, Bernhard's works consistently point up naked brutality and oppression which cannot comfortably be liquidated (aestheticized) into mere metaphor or easily reconciled in a literary game, much less reduced to nostalgic reverie. On the other hand, Bernhard's trademark condemnations are so simplistic and extreme that they merely caricature the situations he decries, a point convincingly argued by Lorenz in respect to Bernhard's novel *Extinction* in conjunction with the protagonist Murau's "solution" to his family's participation in brutalizing Jews (40). Lorenz is correct to show Bernhard as unable to stand up to real sociological or historical scrutiny, as the style of the text taken at face value will not support rational dialogue; she suggests that he in fact creates characters who embody the same mindless extremism for which he condemns his ideological opponents.

To attempt a synthesis of these positions—Bernhard as the pricking of conscience or Bernhard as reveling in his role as *Nestbeschmutzer* [someone who dirties up his own place] may be irresolvable, since he both communicates within comprehensible satirical discourse and transgresses this discourse (by, for example, ironizing Nazi war atrocities). Conceptual resolution is threatened, perhaps decisively, by the suspicion that Bernhard simply is not all there, or not at all there, that in fact Bernhard is laughing at us as we engage the conflictive roles he himself has staked out. As I intend to show, this complex relation is in fact the situation facing us in *Correction*, a novel which constructs a conflict, projects it into a site where it is played out, undermines the promise of narrative resolution, and reaches its climax in laughter (a laughter that, to confuse matters further, appears half way through the book). My ultimate goal is to interrogate this laughter, to understand its relation to sovereign laughter, and to determine the function of representation in the narrator's conveyance of experience.

Although we will return to Bernhard's uneasy relationship with the Austrian public, our interest here extends beyond the particulars of the Austrian socio-political landscape. Therefore, we turn our attention to the more general issues of negativity and dialectic as they figure in *Correction*, probably Bernhard's most densely philosophical novel, in order to demonstrate the wide applicability of Bernhard's thought. The conflict between the novel's protagonist and narrator can

be read through Hegel, specifically through Hegel's treatment of negativity in the "Self-Consciousness" section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The central struggle between the protagonist, Roithamer, and the novel's unnamed narrator at once fulfils the conditions of and problematizes the master-slave dialectic and its consequences.

Two specific areas will be developed. The first concerns how the conflict is enacted, how the master-slave dialectic is treated theatrically as it is staged in the Höller garret, the spatial focus of the novel. The second point is connected to notions of identity vis-à-vis the problem of correction. Because these two sides of the problem fold back upon each other, it will be impossible to separate them neatly into two discrete sequential moments of an argument; even more importantly, the tools for analysis with which Hegel provides us must themselves come under scrutiny, which brings us into the province of modern philosophical criticism. Although the notion of dialectic as a process initiated by non-identity is already present in the special meaning attributed to the term *correction*, which refers to the activity of ruthlessly attacking the notion of identity between concepts and their correlates in the world, correction also refers to suicide—Roithamer "corrects" himself out of existence. In this sense of the term, the struggle does indeed respond to internal contradiction but cannot be recuperated in Hegel's notion of the same through sublation; the final outcome, the novel suggests, is abstract negation, which in this case amounts to (self-)annihilation. But the question remains at the end of the novel whether the narrator is compelled slavishly to extend recognition to Roithamer through his editing of the literary bequest, or whether he can find some alternative to his own self-correction, for which Roithamer serves as both model and other. Adorno and Derrida in particular point the way through these two applications of Hegel—first, in helping to show how what is in fact happening is a process of theatricalization, and second, in allowing us to mark out the possible escape route, so to speak, raised as a function of the narrator's laughter. Before commencing this investigation, some remarks on the novel itself are in order.

Plot and Theme in *Correction*

Correction, which a number of critics regard as Bernhard's central work (Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard* 39; Pratt 3) or as a significant turning point in his career (Damerau 197; Mittermayer 73; Long 64; Cousineau 62), is very much a novel filtered through memory and subjected to the vagaries of reported speech, a text consisting of elements assembled *après coup*. Much of the work arises either

out of the narrator's thoughts or his, ostensible, ordering of literary fragments written by Roithamer, his dead friend; these fragments are generally recorded without comment or context. A further complication concerns the narrative timeline, since the present of the work, conveyed at first reading as the meandering thoughts of the narrator, is actually constructed from a present post-dating the novel's represented present, a future present which we are never privy to in its immediacy but only clued in to through certain discursive tags.[5] Jonathan Long, Bernhard's most gifted commentator in English, concisely expresses the problem, which, significantly, he couches in theatrical language: "the drama of the confrontation between narrator and protagonist . . . is displaced from the level of action in the represented world into the narrator's consciousness; *Correction* thematizes both the attempt to recuperate the past through an act of memory within the framing narrative and the subsequent representation of this remembering though the act of writing" (65). The dramatic aspect is built into the very site of action since the restricted dimensions of Höller's garret, measuring only four by five meters (Bernhard 1), itself resembles a stage, a dramatic space.[6] The garret, which was central to the representation of Roithamer's mental processes, subsequently takes on the same function for the narrator, and this space in which thought becomes concrete also frames the confrontation of thought with thought. This site where Roithamer's concepts were generated and corrected is paralleled by the narrator's coming to terms with the editing process, a different sort of correction—but, the fact that this confrontation is itself represented and consciously removed from immediacy (since Roithamer is dead, the narrator writing from a present not represented in the present of the text) gives rise to suspicions. We, as readers, are witness to textual production directed from elsewhere and are manipulated in becoming absorbed in the drama and simultaneously losing sight of the script out of which it is enacted.

The disjunctive development of the first section ("Höller's Garret") demands that we piece together details about Roithamer, mostly through the narrator's

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[5] On more than one occasion, the narrator uses phrases like "but more of this later" (Bernhard 20; see also 1, 11, 56, 127). This deferral of completion is strange in that readers are accustomed unconsciously to assume narrative completeness. In *Correction*, Bernhard's narrator undermines the framing function of an indexical, thereby threatening what Bianca Theisen terms a "'reference system' or a perceptional frame" that lends stability to forms through a recognized "'gestalt'" (8).

[6] That the garret functions as a theatrical space has not been missed by critics; in addition to Long's remarks above, it is variously described as a "Bühne" ["stage"] (Mauch 213), a "Schauplatz" ["theatrical scene"] (Kohlenbach 10), and "die Selbstinszenierung der Sprache" [the self-staging of language] (Jeutter 365).

perspective, but also, we are given to understand, through ideas gleaned from Roithamer's writings. One of Roithamer's central interests, and an important focus of the entire work, is the conceptualization and realization of the Cone, a conically-shaped house built by Roithamer for his sister on an isolated plot in the Kobernausser forest. The narrator intimates that Roithamer's suicide was prompted by the sister's death, which occurred soon after she had moved into the Cone, an act which we later understand to have precipitated her indeterminate fatal illness (or, possibly, suicide). Other elements in this section include the narrator's reporting his interactions with Höller and his family, his reflections on the task of approaching the work bequeathed him by his friend, and his perceptions of his own volatile psychological states. As remembered events intrude into the represented present of the novel, we arrive at a complex and contradictory understanding of Roithamer, a gifted geneticist and professor at Cambridge and heir to Altensam, the manorial estate of his wealthy Austrian family. [7] Underneath his recounting of the relationships and precedents culminating in the suicide, the narrator's anxiety towards his task also builds, leading to a climactic scene in which he hopelessly confuses Roithamer's legacy, written out on thousands of slips of paper, by tipping over the knapsack containing the slips and stuffing them willy-nilly into the drawer of a bureau (Bernhard 120-21).

The novel's content is sufficiently involved that, in the interests of length, we must be selective in our critique, and so I will use the knapsack episode as my entry point into the narrator-Roithamer conflict. Even within the confines of this vignette, multiple readings are possible, but two stand out as important for us. First, the narrator's actions underline the precariousness of all notions of order, and, with malevolent humor, emphasize the potential tyranny of editorial order. Intention and the contrived stasis of totalization are mocked by the raising of questions as to whether there was any order to start with and how an editorial "re-construction" imposes structure that was never there. This reading is connected to the staging of conflict, staged because the terms of conflict entail only the travesty of a threat represented through the narrator's position of safety (his absence from the scene). The second approach, which corresponds to the second part of my inquiry, posits that the disarrangement of the legacy is a defense against the posthumous psychological abuse suffered by the narrator at Roithamer's hands. In this sense, the

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[7] Roithamer is clearly based on Wittgenstein, a point well-covered in the literature. Barthofer's "Wittgenstein mit Maske" remains the most intensive treatment. In addition to personal traits, Roithamer's act of building the conical house for his sister parallels Wittgenstein's erection of the Stoneborough House in Vienna for his own sister. See Endres' excursus to her chapter on *Correction* (69-71).

narrator's actions represent the culmination of a contest in which Roithamer attempts to assert mastery by subjecting the narrator to work—work which emphasizes the narrator's recognition of and domination by Roithamer. The dumping of the legacy is followed by one of the more curious passages in the novel in which the narrator, responding to his own actions, repeatedly bursts into laughter (Bernhard 121)—a point sufficiently outré to draw our critical attention. As I have already remarked, I will address this laughter in the last section of this essay to question whether it represents a turning out of a dialectical impasse.

Other details substantiate the conflictive theme, of which the knapsack disaster is but one instance. Despite the narrator's sustained homage to Roithamer in the first section, we also perceive his underlying hostility and fear, in that he portrays Roithamer's bequest as an attempt to bring about his derangement, debilitation, or death (Bernhard 105). The narrator admits that he is dominated by "Roithamer thoughts" ["das Denken Roithamers"] (Bernhard 12), brought about by the Höller garret, a space wholly dominated by the activities of the dead friend (so that "Höller's garret is Roithamer's garret" ["die höllerische Dachkammer ist die roithamerische Dachkammer] [12]); the garret [*Dachkammer*] space therefore is itself ambivalent: it is a "thought chamber" [*Denkkammer*] (Bernhard 12) but also a "thought-prison" [*Gedankengefängnis*] (Bernhard 22)—and in fact the notion of imprisonment resonates in the name Höller, connotative in German of *Hölle* [hell]. In light of the preceding examples, the ease with which one constructs compound nouns in German, as well as differences in genitives between German and English, points to losses when translating Bernhard, on top of the obvious impossibilities of translating certain nuances. This significant linguistic dimension will not be pursued here since it presumes familiarity with German.[8]

In the second section of the novel, the narrator's voice gives way to Roithamer's, though Roithamer only "speaks" through the medium of printed fragments. Again, we are struck by the gap between the narrator's praise and Roithamer's self-portrayal—petty, egotistical, and neurotic, and despite his friend's praise, curiously indifferent to the narrator's existence, failing even to make tangential mention of him. The contrast is striking in that the narrator's seeming dependency on Roithamer as a point of definition, one that is reconstructed (or

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[8] Accessible studies in English concerning problems in Bernhard translation are found in Honegger's "Language Speaks. Anglo-Bernhard: Thomas Bernhard in Translation" and MacLintock's "Tense and Narrative Perspective in Two Works of Thomas Bernhard". The stylistic function of repetition in Bernhard is discussed in Schmidt-Dengler (87-91) and Gleber (84-85); for a more detailed treatment of Bernhard's use of language, see Eyckeler's chapter "Sprachskepsis und Sprachkritik" from his *Reflexionspoesie*.

destroyed) after death is inversely represented by Roithamer's apparent indifference. Satisfied as he is by the level of recognition he has achieved—something that is indicated by the narrator's repeated admission of his enthrallment with this character (Bernhard 21, 49, 106)—Roithamer directs his concern elsewhere: philosophical reflections recounting plans for the Cone, his attitudes towards his family as they realize that he is using up the vast Altensam inheritance for this purpose, his, from our point of view, sinister machinations concerning the sister, and finally his reaction to her death. These events are given us piecemeal: no sustained, unified narrative development emerges even though the final twenty pages take on the appearance of diary entries in that they frequently bear dates.

What connects the sections most tangibly is the central function of the garret as a site in which events are staged. The subject portrayed here is more than a trivial family romance or a melodramatic send-up of the grieving process; rather, the garret is the staging of a struggle for mastery, and one which is rendered more complex in that it presents this struggle in a self-conscious manner. Self-consciousness is essential because it registers a spatiotemporal displacement from the immediacy of the action, a distance that could indicate the neutralization (mock dialectic) or liquidation (abstract negation) of the dialectical process. Both of these outcomes would prove destabilizing to what Derrida terms a restricted Hegelian economy. The struggle also enframes the discursive establishment of concepts and their successive correction since it is not only the place where Roithamer developed his Cone project, but also the site of his subsequent explanation of the Cone in progressively smaller, more concentrated, "corrected" approaches to that project. And, of course, it becomes the stage where the narrator wrestles with the Roithamer legacy. The key difference between the two men, though, is that Roithamer's struggle and correction is a process that ends in suicide, again, which we infer to be the final self-correction, whereas the narrator's conflict is the confrontation with Roithamer as he looms posthumously in the narrator's world, casting a determinative shadow over his actions and thoughts. The narrator's absence from the stage, the site of representation, raises questions as to whether the site of writing implies the narrator's discursive mastery through his scripting of the text, a controlled encounter which is neutralized by the fact that he is in a position to write at all, or whether his actions are indeed an expression—a somewhat ironic expression, given Roithamer's death—of the friend's mastery. Whereas the first question is related to the staging of dialectic, the mock dialectic, the second brings us within a more obviously Hegelian reading of the struggle which we will explore before giving further attention to the character relations.

A recognizable Hegelian outcome is perceptible in the novel's architectural symbolism, represented most cogently by the Roithamer family estate, Altensam, and its relation to the Cone. The former is depicted in a starkly negative way, as a symbol of oppression and abuse embodied in hostile family relations, restrictive traditions, and psychological domination. The Cone, on the other hand, is intended to liberate the sister, to anticipate all her needs. Despite Roithamer's stated intention, Gudrun Mauch adroitly points out that Altensam provides the "Grundstein und Baumaterial" ["cornerstone and building materials"] (207) for the erection of the Cone—an assertion that we should read metaphorically instead of simply in financial terms. In this sense Roithamer does not annihilate his Altensam heritage or thinking patterns; rather, they are sublated into the Cone project and thus a deadly Altensam primacy is preserved. Whereas Roithamer spends his life trying to escape Altensam and what it stands for, since, as the narrator tells us, Altensam was for him always a destructive principle (Bernhard 48-49, passim), he ironically re-establishes the oppressiveness he attempts to escape through allowing it to be reconfigured in the Cone, with disastrous results for the sister and himself. Escape from this dialectical process is impossible in that the limits are established by a first principle.

Cousineau argues a version of this position, with the reservation that he is concerned with what he terms mutations (a reference to Roithamer's scientific research) rather than dialectical negations per se. For Cousineau, the Cone in short is "an unconscious reproduction of the destructiveness to which Roithamer was exposed as a child" (76). Shifting attention to the narrator, as I do in this essay, does not remove us entirely from Cousineau's theoretical understanding of the text. That is to say, the narrator's attempt at evasion on one level keeps us within the purview of René Girard's remarks on Hegel concerning novelistic structure. Girard suggests that the conflicts in novels, particularly those which result in "that hostile dialogue between Self and Other" (112), is a contained, and therefore neutralized conflict on the level of the novelist's activity—or in this case, we could say, in terms of a second-level report from the narrator. The deployment of the conflict originates in slavishness, which in the end only "parodies the Hegelian struggle for recognition" (111), presumably in lieu of actually engaging it—an outcome in which a life or death situation is aestheticized into a source of pleasurable recreation. Because the master-slave dialectic, in its actual Hegelian form, depends upon a real gamble, the stakes of which are absolute, any containment of this conflict proceeds in bad faith—"the novelistic dialectic rests on hypocrisy. Violence, far from serving the interests of whoever exerts it, reveals the intensity of his desire; thus it is a sign of

slavery" (112). Indeed, we could stop with this reading; however, as I remarked in relation to the knapsack disaster, two readings emerge—the second is related to the Hegelian "blind spot," which Derrida locates in laughter.

Dialectic and Mock Dialectic

Correction, in the sense of the novel, involves the breakdown of identity between a concept and its object, and so it shares with dialectic an engagement provoking disunity or otherness. Hegelian dialectic and Roithamerian correction must nonetheless be distinguished from each other by examining how identity is or is not validated. Hegelian dialectic, though entailing otherness, nonetheless recuperates concepts under the rubric of the same, for, in Hegel's words, "what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself" (10). And so, the negation of a negation must be held distinct from "the correction of a correction" (Bernhard 222) since correction is more in line with Adorno's sense of refusing to stop short. Adorno's revisionism in *Negative Dialectics* makes this point clear: "Against [the positive], the seriousness of unswerving negation lies in its refusal to lend itself to sanctioning things as they are. To negate a negation does not bring about its reversal; it proves, rather, that the negation was not negative enough" (159-60). The progress of this radical negation is best understood in Roithamer's treatise on the construction of the Cone ("About Altensam and Everything Connected with Altensam, with Special Attention to the Cone"), which, according to the narrator, Roithamer "[corrects] out of existence" (55) by reducing it from 800 to 300, and finally to 80 pages (118), adding that only Roithamer's death prohibited its further compression. We infer, however, that the correction process was indeed continued by Roithamer's suicide. What the narrator understands to be Roithamer's oversight in not burning his writings (Bernhard 56) is in fact its further correction by an act of self-annihilation, which of course jeopardizes the entire Hegelian enterprise by disallowing a return to and recognition of a concept at all—Adorno's "unswerving negation" is evident not only in absolute terms in the suicide, but also in the systematic reduction of the manuscript under Roithamer's critical eye.

Thus, we depart from Hegel, who suggests that the return to self—to identity as the same (11-12)—is effected by means of negation. Hegel is taken to task over this point by philosophers like Deleuze, who understand Hegelian difference to be subsumed under the primacy of identity, wherein it manifests itself as resemblance, opposition, and analogy. The centrality of identity for Hegel and others is the

presumption that it serves as the foundation for stable and recuperable judgments. For Deleuze, though, the difference of being is that which escapes representation to give rise to the conditions by which representation per se becomes manifest, but the power coincident with this reality cannot be evaded. The notion that contradiction is tied to difference is the notion that a stable reference point—the identical—can be established, and that its substrate need not come under scrutiny. Here we find the usefulness of post-structuralist applications to Bernhard in that the narrator-Roithamer conflict is tied to an irreducible non-identity and to representation.

As I intimated at the beginning of this essay, this set of problems seems to be operative at a number of levels—for one, in the irritation arising out of Bernhard's antagonistic public activity, Bernhard as the negation which incited responses with calculated aplomb. But these public disruptions only bring into sharp relief what was already known to be there; Bernhard was not so much a position but the light falling upon the stage, illuminating the actors already present. But this illumination originates from off-stage—and so a question arises as to whether Bernhard was in fact master of the situation in his manipulation of public response. Bernhard the writer, a propos *Correction*'s unconventional plot, brings the agency behind representation into our range of vision through a narrative displacement, a function of the narrator's present and site of writing being outside the represented present and the represented site.

Does the narrator's activity thereby demonstrate his complicity with this Hegelian notion of identity, and moreover, what is Roithamer's relation to this identity? We may approach the problem through Melissa McMahon, who, treating Deleuzian difference, remarks, "the 'regime of representation' is the system whereby the concept of identity—whether general or individual—forms the meeting point between a *nature of things* and a *nature of thought*" (44). With respect to the novel, the breakdown of this assumption in fact applies both to Roithamer and to the narrator, though in different ways. Roithamer radically corrects, spurred on by his hyper-awareness of non-identity, and he does so to the point where self-consciousness cannot be maintained (in suicide). The narrator's situation is more complex in that he uses the garret to represent the dialectic between the unthinkable and discursively unrecuperable (correction to the point of annihilation) and the reconstitution of a self that could, logically, not exist (since it is wholly absent). Bernhard therefore problematizes this sense of identity, which Deleuze (and, as we shall see, Derrida also) philosophically calls into question, and in doing so "challenges the notion that the aim of thought is to re-present, to make explicit or conceptualize what already exists in a non-conceptual form" (McMahon 45). In

light of these remarks, the *Dachkammer* (garret) makes sense as both *Denkkammer* (thought chamber) and *Gedankengefängnis* (thought prison): it is a site of thought's confinement, the place where thought is discursively fixed, the idea (Roithamer's Cone) schematized as plans, and thought processes relegated to their bits of paper (fragments and testament).

The staging within the garret turns out to be the false proposal of totality. Correction's n^{th} term, which ends all processes ("ultimate correction," that is, suicide), does not take place there. Neither can the narrator encapsulate the confrontation within the garret's boundaries—only project this conflict through memory from elsewhere. Of course, as I discuss below, the outcomes reflect different stances towards this critique of totality. The identity of concept with non-concept belies the underlying assumption that only through the concept of the totality itself can the principle be discovered fueling the movement of dialectic, what Adorno terms the "antagonistic entirety" (10). Totality poses false questions, whether the assumption of the same, of a locatable agonistic substrate, a conservationist economic principle, or an unconscious. The mastery implied by totality is illustrated in the attempt to reconcile the perspectivist aspects of the master-slave dialectic with the detached and exterior master-perspective of the Sage (Hegel) documenting the pathway of the World Spirit.

Jean-Luc Nancy recognizes this paradox when he remarks that the problem of vantage in dialectic is not a regress since it is irreducible. The "non-phenomenal substrate" is not some thing or some place; rather, the happening is the "eventfulness" of the event which, "when comprehended in terms of the truth of the thing, distinguishes itself from the Appearance, and indeed, opposes itself to it: but it does so only insofar as this eventfulness is the non-phenomenal truth *of the phenomenal itself* as such" (93). Hegel's intention then is to comprehend "*beyond* the truth, the taking place of the truth" (Nancy 93) though we should note that this beyond does not constitute an escape from discourse, which would still be a totalizing gesture (the promise of exteriority), but a glance at the authoritative pronouncement on the event that discourse guarantees. Returning to Adorno on this point, "dialectics means to break the compulsion to achieve identity, and to break it by means of the energy stored up in that compulsion and congealed in its objectifications" (157). In its simplest dimension, the narrator resists being mastered by Roithamer thoughts, cognizant as he is of their self-destructive power and their compulsive nature to correct unto death. The writing out and laying bare of this fear then is the expenditure by which the confrontation with the objective aspect (i.e., Roithamer's legacy) is therapeutically annulled. Roithamer appears

neutralized in this reading, serving merely as a negation that returns the narrator to himself. But this reading is undermined by Derrida's understanding of negativity as a resource, dealt with in the subsequent section, so that the conservation of energy is no more than a bourgeois enactment of what should be the life-or-death struggle.

We may draw one more related conclusion from this reading. If Roithamer is the master, his *Nachlaß* then becomes the establishment, through discourse, of primacy or positive identity, which in turn functions to negate the world. And in fact, he enacts Adorno's spin on the problem in that his corrections are ruthless. Correction is unresting, unsatisfied; its negativity is negativity that has not gone far enough. So radical is this correction-negation that life itself is at stake, though paradoxically in what appears to be self-destruction. The narrator, in contrast to Roithamer, documents this negation once removed from the locus of action, and in doing so, he recognizes the other. At the same time, this relation is intrinsically unstable, not only in the narrator's rebellion but also in the fact that we cannot distinguish clearly the discursive boundaries established by Roithamer in the text of *Correction*.

Abstract Negation and Laughter

Hegel investigates the mutual recognition process from the perspective of the self alone as it confronts the other (113), though of course we could problematize this perspectivism as a function of narrative form. From the perspective of the unfolding struggle, the death-wish directed at the other is the need for certainty for the self, but actual death eclipses the possibility of this truth, or in Hegel's words, "death is the natural negation of consciousness, negation without independence" (114), something which, in any case, would be absurd since it would disallow the participant's narrative in the first place. But even from outside, death leads to a confrontation between things, or "an abstract negation, not the negation coming from consciousness, which supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession [*Aufhebung*]" (114-15). So, in the life-or-death struggle, the optimal outcome is the survival of both parties, that is, if we are to end up with master and slave, since the death of one or both does not provide for recognition. It does not preserve in sublation, and it thereby threatens the very frame of action, an outcome remarked by several critics (Kojève 15; Derrida 255; O'Connor 40).

Roithamer's "ultimate correction" is a dialectical process which points beyond the Hegelian dialectic even while acting within its purview; that is, correction points

toward what Michael Hardt, writing in the context of Deleuze, refers to as "nondialectical negation" in which "the magical resurrection implicit in the dialectical negation [i.e., sublation] appears merely as superstition" (xii).[9] Hardt's "pure death," what Derrida terms "death pure and simple" (255), is in fact Hegel's "abstract negativity," since it entails "risk[ing] the absolute loss of meaning, in the extent to which meaning necessarily traverses the truth of the master and of self-consciousness" (Derrida 255). To correct, in the end, is an affirmation of mastery in that it vindicates the will to death, but it also potentially means to correct out of existence, so that the absence of Roithamer's final correction of his Altensam-Cone testament implies a negation which leaves no trace, abandonment, the severing of process.

Even though Roithamer threatens the system by not observing Hegel's rules of play, his practice of radical negation is nonetheless ideologically enmeshed in what O'Connor terms, in reference to Adorno, "a normativity of correctness" (33). The "normativity of correctness" is the impulse to break through the negation of mere skepticism (stopping where judgment breaks down), to dispense with the implied limit of skepticism since the skeptic retains a tangible, shared limit in the self and the radical attack on the object within what we might term the *glissement* into discourse. This self must in fact be posited to the degree that skepticism can function even though there is no chance for the skeptic to overcome an internal contradiction (Hegel, sections 204-206). The reason why Roithamer is more Adornoan than Hegelian is that Adorno does not think that pushing the process to its nth term will result in the identity of concept with object, that "unsatisfactory judgments are overcome until finally concept and object agree" (O'Connor 33) since this is only a Hegelian myth (or, using Hardt's term, superstition), as contrived and theatrical as the master-slave dialectic itself as it is stage-managed by the Sage-cum-director.

We are now in a position to return to our focus from the previous section—the idea of the staged or mock dialectic, which projects the conflict into a site or scene of action—to compare those ideas to this notion of the reality of Roithamer's death. At first, it might seem that the narrator's memory exercise is really the opposition of action and thought (echoed in the Altensam-Cone relation [Bernhard 130-31]), which indeed is itself a sort of false or mock dialectic inasmuch as negation becomes, as Horkheimer and Adorno would say, merely formal. This "conformity to

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[9] This point is also made by Kimmerle, writing in the context of Adorno, Derrida, and Bataille; he asserts of Hegel that "destruction is always at the same time a preserving, a resurrection always follows death" (229).

reality, adaptation to power," as they write in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is "no longer the result of a dialectical process between subject and reality. . . . The process is one of liquidation instead of sublation, of formal instead of determinate negation" (170). Horkheimer and Adorno, passionate as they are in their critiques of power, are, as is well known, fundamentally pessimistic, cognizant of how theatrical the inquiry has become. The last pages of "Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment," from which the last quotation is taken, is in fact built around a theatrical conceit in which the representatives of power sell tickets [*Ticket*]—to be sure, political or ideological tickets in the text, but just as much tickets for admission—to a show enacted before a passive audience, which, like in the real theater, does not dream of intervening in the events transpiring on the stage. Participation in this system is "to practice adaptation to illusion petrified as reality" (170); this is the collapse of dialectic into a scripted plot and the reduction of difference to a managed Sameness so radical, that it out-Hegels Hegel.

At this point we might pause to outline the stakes of this complex problem before concluding with Derrida's critique of Hegelian abstract negation and an interpretation of the narrator's laughter near the end of the novel's first section. The antagonism between narrator and Roithamer takes an unusual form in that Roithamer's suicide apparently removes him from dialectical involvement with the narrator. At the same time, from the narrator's perspective (and Hegel is a perspectivist thinker in this sense), Roithamer clearly still does exert influence; Roithamer threatens his life or mental stability through the literary bequest, thereby subjecting the narrator to work and demanding recognition as the master. Roithamer, though, has also engaged in a dialectical exercise which he has taken to a "logical" conclusion, namely, suicide. As we have seen, his notion of dialectical movement differs from Hegel's in a couple of key, but related, ways. First, he understands negation not as some means to establish an identity that recuperates (or "resurrects," to use Hardt's or Kimmerle's term) the self through sublation, a process to ensure the validity of judgments and the correspondence between concept and object; rather, he is closer to Adorno, in that correction proceeds through perpetual attacks on the concept, so that identity is either indefinitely deferred or comes up against difference that cannot refer to a ground of identity subtending the dialectic itself (Nancy's "non-phenomenal substrate" cited above). Second, the text does not exclude abstract negation from the rules of play, which is indicated by the suicide, but, in addition, it calls into question the meaning of real death—a seemingly absurd point, but one which we cannot overlook. Correction is negation, but it does not yield Hegel's optimum result since it ends in annihilation. This curious outcome,

however, is understandable through Derrida's Bataillian reading of work, death, and the master in "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," an essay which also points to the absence of laughter in Hegel, and therefore which is suggestive in reading the narrator's laughter in our novel.

The passage in question, though appearing only half way through the novel, nonetheless suggests a climactic point in the narrative. The dumping of the Roithamer legacy is followed by the shock of the narrator's laughter: "I sat on that old chair and again said sort and sift, sift and sort, several times, until I had said it so often that I burst out laughing, suddenly I was laughing out loud, very loud" (Bernhard 121-22). The narrator certainly understands the shadow under which he might be set to work—his belief that Roithamer has bequeathed this work to destroy him, to make him stake his life and thus to negate him. Paradoxically, this negativity sustains the master's consciousness, which, as Derrida writes, cannot "*present* itself, because in doing so it would start to work again" (256)—this means that the master cannot resort to work in that by doing so he ceases to be the master, and therefore, his death is at once the preservation of his mastery (his obvious inability to work after death) and the sustaining of this mastery in his resurrection through the work of the other (the activity of the narrator).

What remains to the narrator is that realization which Derrida demonstrates in Bataille's contestation of Hegel, how lordship or mastery [*Herrschaft*] functions within a system in which meaning itself is not at stake, despite the demand that in the master-slave dialectic, the very conditions of possibility for meaning (that is, for Hegel) must be wagered. What would it mean, then, to laugh at this system, or specifically to laugh at the attack upon order suggested by the knapsack episode? Following Derrida, it would not mean that laughter is simply another negation, for that would bring it back within the Hegelian fold (252), but neither could it mean that the narrator is unaware of the system in which he is implicated.[10] In fact, a first response may be to say that the narrator's laughter stems from complete awareness, and that, to use Bataillian language, it refuses to serve. The negative refusing to perform its role as negative is the bringing into vision of an "economy of life

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[10] Laughter, for Adorno, is the deflation of the concept as reified thing, the safety and the dependency generated out of that enslavement to the concept as pure identity. The reification of the concept is its "insulation" from a whole which is itself non-conceptual. This shift is Adorno's emphasis: "To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward nonidentity, is the hinge of negative dialectic. Insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection. Reflection upon its own meaning is the way out of the concept's seeming being-in-itself as a unit of meaning" (12).

[which] restricts itself to conservation, to circulation and self-reproduction as the reproduction of meaning; henceforth, everything covered by the name of lordship collapses into comedy" (Derrida 255-56), or later: "Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity" (Derrida 256), which, of course, is excluded as nonsensical in that it lies outside the boundaries of how meaning means, the disappearance of the subject of knowledge. Thus, sovereign laughter would exceed the system in that its otherness cannot be relegated to a place in that system, which can guarantee meaning at all. Laughter is that which illuminates the stage by which the comedy of meaning is revealed for what it is; it moreover reveals the usefulness of the negative, which carries a dividend in meaning. Abstract negativity, however, is "negativity without reserve" (Derrida 259), which again, places it in line with correction, since in this sense of this negativity, it moves to "the point of no return of destruction, the instance of expenditure without reserve which no longer leaves us the resources with which to think of this expenditure as negativity. For negativity is a "*resource*" (Derrida 259). To premise the dialectic via sublation upon a notion of conserved identity is, as Derrida suggests, blindness to the destructive power of negation, which once freed from this faith in resurrection, functions "to tear apart the negative side, that which makes it the reassuring *other* surface to the positive" (259). And so, it seems that we come to an end, despite the fact that the narrator's laughter comes half way through the novel, that we reach a conclusion, but this is illusory in the context of several other points, some raised in the preceding section.

Derrida compares sovereign writing with the writing of lordship, noting that sovereign writing stands against "*Erinnerung*" and "the avarice which assimilates meaning," that, "as the ultimate subversion of lordship, it must no longer seek to be recognized" (265). This is all well and good on the level of the novel's represented present, but it is just that, a projection from elsewhere, and through the act of reading, we are party to an act of memory and possibly one of mastery through the re-inscription within discourse. The narrator's self in crisis is projected from a self which encapsulates that crisis, but to renounce recognition, particularly in writing, the writer must avoid the sustaining of that self within discourse. Here again, we confront ambiguities: Bernhard's reliance on reported speech converts the self to the speaking instrument channeling something else—this is characteristic of some novels; *Correction*, however, takes this somewhat farther in that we must confront the confusion between the narrator and Roithamer as discrete entities (Sussmann 192) as well as the editorial unobtrusiveness in the absence of contextualization for

the Roithamer fragments. Perhaps the death of the narrator is his confluence with Roithamer: not the fear of his own thought displaced by the Roithamer thoughts (the recognition of Roithamer as more meaningful than an assertion of self or realization of self-consciousness) but the indistinguishability in communication (Bataille's "like water in water" [19]) by which the recognition is renounced because no longer meaningful.

If this conclusion is unsatisfying for us, we may speculate that Bernhard felt that he had also reached a limit, and that this laughter could not be pinned down, that it was situated somewhere between joy and anguish (as Derrida understands Bataillian laughter). It is both inside and outside; it is captured in its ambiguity by Horkheimer and Adorno, who conceivably could be writing about the narrator's situation:

> There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about. Laughter, whether reconciled or terrible always accompanies the moment when a fear is ended. It indicates a release, whether from physical danger or from the grip of logic. Reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from power; wrong laughter copies with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it. It echoes the inescapability of power. (112)

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