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Thomas Bernhard:
Seeming Volatility, Innovation in Purity

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Abstract. Why doesn't Rudolf manage to start his musicological work on Mendelssohn-Bertoldi? Who is Anna Hertel? What floating card game is the protagonist running throughout Concrete? And what is so revolutionary about the misanthropic-musical writing of Thomas Bernhard in this novel? The following article seeks to answer these questions while examining the act of art re the technical and content aspects, while examining Bernhard's unique use of the "System of Gaps", the "Showing" against "Telling", and the reliability of the protagonist. These and other means are used by the author to lay out the cards of human existence in front of the reader with courage and true honesty. Along with a comparison between prose and music and visual art, the article aims to discover the secret of the novella's musical, poetic, and ethical grand pause.

Keywords. Thomas Bernhard, Concrete novella, Seeming Volatility-Innovation in Purity, System of Gaps, Showing-Telling, Grand Pause, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Ethics, Imperfection.

Thomas Bernhard:
Volatilidad aparente, innovación en la pureza

Resumen. ¿Por qué Rudolf no logra iniciar su trabajo musicológico sobre Mendelssohn-Bertoldi? ¿Quién es Anna Hertel? ¿Qué juego de cartas flotantes corre el protagonista por Concrete? ¿Y qué tiene de revolucionario la escritura misantrópica-musical de Thomas Bernhard en esta novela? El siguiente artículo busca responder a estas preguntas al analizar el acto de arte en los aspectos técnicos y de contenido, al examinar el uso único de Bernhard del "Sistema de brechas", el "Mostrar" contra el "Contar" y la confiabilidad del protagonista. Estos y otros medios son utilizados por el autor para exponer las cartas de la existencia humana frente al lector con coraje y verdadera honestidad. Junto con una comparación entre la prosa y la música y las artes visuales, el artículo pretende descubrir el secreto de la gran pausa musical, poética y ética de la novela.

Palabras clave. Thomas Bernhard, Novela concreta, Volatilidad aparente-Innovación en la pureza, Sistema de brechas, Mostrar-Contar, Gran pausa, Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Ética, Imperfección.

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"Everybody is welcome to see my hand" [1]

"Grand Pause" is the name for one of the dramatic moments in a musical work; this is a moment when the whole orchestra, as one - is silent. However, this silence is not due to a pause or a respite, but rather the opposite: a silent bubble in a sound environment - its power is electrifying. The grand pause is loaded with the last sounds that still echo in the ear and the silent anticipation of the sounds that will be heard in a moment's time.

If a musical composition indicates during its course small intermediate peaks that gradually accumulate one after the other, then the grand pause surpasses them all; like pulling the joker in a card game at the most precise and impressive moment. Following the discovery of the decisive card, the concertial play also undergoes transformation: after the tense moment of the grand pause there is usually a significant turn in the music, such as an important solo section or a return to a familiar melodic theme that appeared before, a harmonic relief that resolves the tension-relaxation relationship, a thematic-structural completion that balances the parts of the work and creates the feeling of the aesthetic entirety, and so on. The grand pause is reserved by the composer for the most strategic moment, for the climax of the work, and for that reason it is usually used only once.

Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989), the Austrian writer, also plays with cards, but unlike other writers he reveals all his cards in advance with deliberate poetic despair and invites us, the readers, to take a look at them and despair of everything along with him: of human existence, of life in general, and of course - of ourselves. However, in the novel *Concrete* (1982) it becomes clear in retrospect that Bernhard also holds one card upside down, which he reveals at the crucial moment with a spectacular grand pause technique. How does he do it?

Alternately volatility

Rudolph, the protagonist of the novel *Concrete*, tries in vain to create conditions for himself in which he can finally approach the writing of his life's work, that is, a research work on his most favorite composer - Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. He has been preparing this research work for about ten years, although according to him this type of work requires decades, if not generations, of preparation. Even the wording of the opening sentence - which must be perfect - is still being debated; after all, it is clear that he will not open the "Intellectual work" with words that have no taste and no spirit, such as: "On the third of February, 1809..."[2] and continue with a dreary chronology describing the composer's life[3].

This inability of his to write he first blames on his domineering older sister, that her forced visit to Peiskam finally ended, and the morning after her departure he got ready for work. However, despite the books, articles, mountains of notes and papers that he meticulously arranges over and over again on his desk, he is carried away by countless distractions, including debating whether to start writing after

[1] Bernhard, T. (1984). *Concrete* (p. 110). Vintage International.
[2] Bernhard, 1984, pp. 31-32.
[3] This is the year of the composer's birth. All emphases are in the original, unless otherwise noted.

breakfast or before; fear lest someone knock on the door, lest the neighbor shout or the postman ask for his signature; and other kinds of distractions that could sabotage his "spiritual enterprise". Thus, in an enthusiastic work of imagination and with a multitude of creative excuses, he manages to lose his energy and simultaneously develops anxiety when he remembers his previous unsuccessful works: "Is this the case with Mendelssohn Bartholdy? It almost drives me crazy, indeed demented, to think that I might have overworked the subject"[4], and he almost became paralyzed just by the thought that he would no longer be able to fulfill his life's work on paper.

For the hopeful among us, don't worry, the novel ends when the essay is not yet written. Rudolph's fickle nature is thrown onto everything around him and binds everything together in a skillful misanthropy, in a real masterpiece:

After accusing his sister of invading his home, he reveals to his readers that he invited her to stay with him on Peiskam, so that she would ease his loneliness, and it turns out that this is not the first time. Despite the apparent moral honesty in revealing the truth rather than clinging to his self-lie, the protagonist flees from the same truth as a teased child: "But what good is it now to argue with myself as to whether I sent for her or not? The facts are no longer in question"[5]. Furthermore, it turns out that the same sister who embitters his life - and deeply hurt him when she called his beloved Peiskam "a morgue" - is in fact an admired, educated and successful woman, and her brother's views sometimes turn into distinct admiration of her. However, the protagonist is "committed" to his inner truth, and therefore he naturally disapproves of this ambivalence, and even though the novel is saturated with unique names of places and characters, that "sister" (Elizabeth) remains without a proper name throughout the work, until her very last mention.

"Was it my steadily worsening condition that kept my sister in Peiskam for so long", he turns alternately with the feeling of estrangement-proximity, "and not, as I thought, a sudden onset of boredom with Vienna?" and in the same breath he continues: "If I were to ask her she'd reply with one of her charming lies".[6] and from there with a misanthropic take-off: "She came here [...] not only, as she would have me believe, to look after a sick man, possibly a mortally sick man – which in fact I probably am – but to look after a madman, though she couldn't bring herself to say it outright"[7].

In the next step, Bernhard perfects the zigzag technique, and that for-against obsession coalesces into one single card.

For and Against at the same time

A random visit to the neighbor makes Rudolph decide to leave Peiskam and go on a trip to Palma, the capital of the island of Mallorca on the coast of Spain.

[4] Bernhard, 1984, p. 31.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 25.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 109.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Although he perceives such a trip as megalomania in relation to his medical condition, he believes that it could benefit his artistic mania, since in Palma he might be able to ventilate and finally get around to writing the article on Mendelssohn- Bartholdy. But such a trip means leaving Austria - the homeland that he loves and hates at the same time - as well as moving even further away from the revered Vienna that he voluntarily abandoned when he moved to Peiskam: "I always think that if there is one place in the world I would like to live, then that place is Vienna – there's no other", a city "which admittedly I already hated and which I knew I'd always hated, but which I also loved like no other"[8].

In Vienna, by the way, at the Musikverein, Rudolf was exposed for the first time in his life to the wonderful work "Travelling Players" by Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. As a person who declares to himself that "It's always music that saves me",[9] his passion for musicological writing is understandable, but why Mendelssohn? Because both the work and the performance had an "elemental effect" on him, so he claims[10]. But doesn't the composer have more important works than "Travelling Players"? What about the violin concerto in E minor - the most magnificence of his work? And what about "A Midsummer Night's Dream", "Fingal's Cave" and the unforgettable "Songs Without Words"? Bernhard saves this card for the end of the novel.

Rudolph also loves and hates Peiskam - the house he inherited from his parents - at the same time. He sits on the iron chair at home and recalls his travels around the world when he was young, and especially his visit to Palma. As mentioned, he decides to visit his old neighbor in Niederkreut, whom he describes as a troublesome person who for some reason constantly uses the expression "Everything has turned though a hundred and eighty degrees", [11]and hopes that the visit will dissuade him from the horrifying idea of breaking out of his "morgue" at the last moment and going to Palma.

But it is precisely this random visit that excites him to go on the trip, for a seemingly whimsical reason, neither reasoned nor believable at all: the troublesome old man tells him that he has decided to bequeath his enormous fortune to an anonymous woman named Sarah Slother, on whose name his finger landed at random when he opened the phone book. He will not bequeath his fortune to his daughter who lives in England, neither to the church nor to the government relief bureau, but to the unknown Sarah Slother.

The protagonist returns home enthused by the old man's cunning, to which he testifies that "[He] had suddenly opened my eyes, which had for so long been

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 120. A detailed explanation for his abandonment of Vienna and his distaste for Austria appears in a kind of repetitious anti-nationalist manifesto, which he explains along pages 61-63 in a manner of: "If I go away... I shall simply be living a country whose... I shall be leaving a country in which ..." and so on and so forth. The wonderous thing is that Bernhard, who was considered a radical national slanderer, received a significant acceptance and even recognition.
[9] Bernhard (1984), p. 104.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 120.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

closed"[12], and enthusiastically approaches the work of packing: The mountains of paperwork essential to his writing about Mendelssohn-Bartholdy he reverently puts in a suitcase which he calls "intellectual", and the rest of the travel items he shoves in an "unintellectual" suitcase. When he is dressed and ready to travel, he of course regrets his trip again and again - especially because it is precisely when everything is packed that he feels the urge to write the article about Mendelssohn - and sentimentally enumerates all the virtues of his home: "Then I realise that Peiskam is by no means as frightful as I've been making it out to be for months, that it really is a marvelous, comfortable house which has everything to be said for it, and that it is not in the least like a morgue"[13]. And the "against" arguments are of course also confronted by the "for": "But I must get away, I told myself. Just because it may be the last time, I've got to get away"[14].

The same simultaneous contrast but in optical contexts can be found in art, in what is known as "Negative and Positive Space". The usual example is the illustration of the decorated black vase which, upon further inspection, reveals on the white background a side view of two faces looking at each other. In order to perceive an unequivocal shape, one must first decide what the background is and what the shape is: either the two sides are white shapes on a black background or vice versa - the vase is a black shape on top of a white background. The existence of both possibilities at the same time and the constant movement between them is deceptive and makes it difficult to determine[15].

The love-hate feelings towards his sister also coalesce in Rudolph into a single, childish and extremely dependent paradoxical card. Why didn't he start writing the morning after her departure, as he wished? "At first it was because she was there, and now it's because she isn't[16]. He believed that he needed his sister so that he could start his work, and when she arrived - he realized that he did not need her and that he could start writing the essay only when she was not there; now that she's gone - he can't start his work again.

The entire novel is a breathless monologue of linear volatility - synchronic and diachronic; it is a rambling verbal sequence of about a hundred and fifty pages, without division into chapters, not even into paragraphs; one long stream of consciousness of a funny or poor person, captive in the private tragic comedy of his life and ready to handle "a laughing matter or a crying matter", depending on how he feels[17].

About the "What" and the "How"

Let's leave for a moment Rudolph and his eternal vicissitudes and turn to examine Bernhard's poetic technique.

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[12] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] Mishori, A. (2000). *Art History: An Introduction* (p. 40). Ramat Aviv: The Open University. Clear examples of this type of illusion can be found in Salvador Dali's works.
[16] Bernhard, 1984, p. 29.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

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Despite the artificial separation, there is a tendency in the act of art to distinguish between the materials of meaning of the work and the way of they are organized aesthetically organization. In other words: the "what" is the content, and in the case of a story these are the narrative, the skeleton of the plot, the characters, etc.; the "how" are the choices on the formal dimension: from genre and structure to the level of sentence formulation[18].

Bernhard challenges the entire art game and denies these basic principles - each separately and all together. It is difficult to call the narrative described in his books a plot, and if there is a trace of it, then it is only bait for a character who conjures up curved and endless philosophical musings about human existence and its misery. Traveling from Austria to Spain, for example, must be a tedious event for a spoiled and critical character like Rudolph and cries out for a poetic description of the event: Did the train arrive on time? How much trouble was there in carrying the luggage – the spiritual and non-spiritual suitcase? Who was his neighbor on the flight? How was he greeted at the hotel desk? Was he satisfied with the view from his room?

The aesthetic choice of the "how" at this point - or rather: the absence of the "how" - is definitely defiant. The protagonist blatantly ignores any concrete dramatic stop, and without a shred of description of the travel experience, he continues the endless rumination in his self-pity-soaked mind[19].
Furthermore, Bernhard transforms and negates the basic playing cards that every author is aware of with his laughter, for example: avoiding excesses or duplications, exaggeration, vagueness or arbitrariness, and in contrast to them, strictness on clarity and precision, reliability, necessity, probability and so on.

In the following example, the protagonist exaggerates the intensity of the expression and increases the repetitions in a way that creates deliberate obscurity; the "how" and the "what" coalesce very well - in their negation of themselves. Like a child struggling to articulate, Rudolph repeatedly tries to clarify the paradox of his existential loneliness - including the distinction between "no one" (general) and "someone" (specific) - and as a result it gets more and more complicated, contradicts himself and gets even more complicated, until the reader comes out almost blurry eyed, eared and cognitive impaired:

[18] Menachem Brinker in his essay Aesthetics as a Theory of Criticism (1982) mentions the concept of the close unity of the work of art. This concept opposes the distinction between the element of content and the element of form and claims a universality that affects all the details and is affected by them (pp. 75-81).

[19] It is possible to note a brief respite in the obsessive journey of recollection, but even this landing, in which the protagonist connects to the concrete plot occurrence, appears as a kind of incidental ingestion. In the past-present interface, in the current example, Bernhard is helped by the use of space – Rudolph's home (the comments in parentheses are not in the original): "All in all I spent over twenty years in Vienna, and my only company was music. Suddenly I'd had enough and returned to Peiskam [so far in the past tense]. Naturally this was a step which led me into the impasse to which these notes bear witness [Glimpse into the present]. At two o'clock in the afternoon, when the car came to collect me [a moment of haziness], it was still eleven degrees below zero in Peiskam, but on my arrival in Palma [only here does the reader understand that it is the present], where I am writing these notes, the thermometer showed eighteen degrees above" (Bernhard, 1984, pp. 124-125).

> I'd always found it hard to have any relationship with another person [...] Even early in my life there were times when I had no one – I at least knew that I had no one, though others were always asserting that I did have someone. They said, you do have someone, whereas I knew for certain that I not only had no one, but – what was perhaps the crucial and most annihilating thought – needed no one. I imagined I needed no one, and this is what I still imagine to this day. I needed no one, and so I had no one [...] I always believed that I could get on with my intellectual work if only I were completely alone, with no one else around. This proved to be mistaken, but it is equally mistaken to say that we actually need someone. We need someone for our work, and we also need no one. Sometimes we need someone, sometimes no one, and sometimes we need someone and no one [...] We never know at any time whether we need someone or no one, or whether we need someone and at the same time no one, and because we never ever know what we really need we are unhappy.[20]

This is classic Bernhard with his deliberate ridiculousness and somewhat childish cuteness; it is as if he is frivolous with the letters, the words, the sentences, the reader, and especially himself. In his books written after *Concrete*, he intensified this repetitious-obsessive-misanthropic technique into entire pages until they became his artistic signature[21]. However, if we go back and read this paragraph, if we delve deeper into each sentence - without being tempted by the wonderful musicality that this colloquial prose creates - we will discover in it much of the truth about ourselves and the people around us, a truth that is not ridiculous at all[22].

As we've seen, as far as Bernhard is concerned, one shouldn't get one's hopes up, not even for a moment. Even when in the end Rudolph reached Palma - and we are nearing the end of the game - he is unable to make a decision whether to approach that spiritual writing, even though almost his entire existence depends on it. Even during the unloading of the luggage, he is still flipping the yes-no cards: "on the one hand I told myself it was senseless, on the other I told myself, *You must begin this project, whatever the cost* [...] I said alternately *nothing* justifies it and *everything* justifies it"[23]. And you guessed right, the chatter ends exactly as it began - he is determined: "I'll write my study", and immediately qualifies: "even if I can't start it straight away" (*Ibid.*).

Reverse Point out

Another fundamental rule in the "how" of writing prose is "Showing, not Telling". This means, an act of pointing that allows the reader to experience the happening

[20] Bernhard, 1984, pp. 28-29.

[21] However, despite the apparent anti-poetics, it can be argued that at this point Bernhard applies a wonderful aesthetic card: a fusion of content and form (as we will also see later). The excess of words and repetitions are a hallmark of the act of persuasion. In other words, the protagonist proves to us in black and white - literally - how he convinced himself that he really does not need anyone and applies the process of persuasion in real time in front of us, in terms of "saying and doing".

[22] On Bernhard's technique of musical poetics as an aesthetic-ironic means in the act of art I expanded in my essay "Thomas Bernhard: Seemingly Misanthropy, Pure Musicality" (*ITAMAR* 8, 2022: 379-385).

[23] Bernhard, 1984, p. 127.

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through actions, words, thoughts, senses and emotions and not only to understand what is going on through a narrative description or a purely verbal summary. For what is the purpose of the act of literature if not the aspiration to reach consciousness through the heart, through experience?[24]

Bernhard, as expected, knocks this principle as well, meaning, he ignores the "showing" and glorifies the "telling". And if that is not enough, he inflates the principle even more and gives the reader unnecessary duplication in the form of the showing plus the telling. Example?

The idea of a trip to Palma de Mallorca turns out in retrospect to be an idea that his sister slyly put to him to rescue him from his loneliness. She mentioned names of cities, scribbled the words "Adriatic", "Mediterranean", and of course the word "Palma". The reader understands the ruse from the course of occurrence, but the protagonist takes the pains to summarize it with a seemingly unnecessary explanation: "But now she had her triumph. Now I was following her suggestion and suddenly taking decisive action. I'm actually leaving [...] I was now pretending to her that it was my idea, my brainwave, my decision, to go to Palma"[25].

Bernhard crumples another card in the same poetic game and rises to a distinct unreliability: the showing itself, the very saying contradicts the meaning of the words. The text undermines his statements, the pointing out itself refutes its object - the form cancels the content.

Here's an example: Rudolph hates the chatter of those around him, who are able to "utter only banalities"[26], and he details his dislike in a long and rambling section of text in terms of "He does not practice what he preach"; he despised the company around him by stating that their words were always "second-hand ideas, never anything original" (*ibid.*), although a little earlier he did the exact same thing when he bragged: "We always spoke of clarity of mind, but never had it. I don't know where I got this sentence from, perhaps from myself, but I've read it somewhere. Perhaps it will turn up among my notes sometime"[27].

An extreme example is the contempt he has for that "intellectual crime", or "capital offence against the intellect",[28] meaning the publication of a work of art, which he says comes from haste. Despite his awareness of the creator's natural

[24] Inspired by Henry James' famous injunction "Show, don't tell!" The demonstration technique was placed as the ideal aspired to in the art of storytelling (James 1962: 265). It is common to attribute the distinction to the Russian playwright and writer Anton Chekhov who have said: "Don't **tell** me the moon is shining; **show** me the glint of light on broken glass" (emphasis not in the original). Meaning, give me, the reader, the information about the moonlight, but not as dry factual information like a history book, but through a detailed description of a sense, emotion, action or thought; that way I will be able as if to **see** the image in my imagination and **know** the closest way to verify that uniqueness of the moonlight.

[25] Bernhard, 1984, p. 89.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 114.

[27] *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

desire to share his artistic product with others, he attributes the desire for publicity to the artist's pure lust for fame and claims that it is foolishness and proof of bad character. In his modesty, unlike those "criminals of intellect", he of course shelved his essays on Nietzsche, Schoenberg and Reger and chose not to publish them. At the same time, he errs in dreams about the publication of the glorified essay on Mendelssohn-Bartholdy: "I'm not going to write it just for my own satisfaction after all, and then leave it lying around when it's finished. Naturally I intend to publish it, whatever the consequences"[29], and in fact refutes his (fake) modesty that he declared a moment before. It is true that he remembers that before he publishes the essay he must write it, and bursts into what he calls "self-laughter", behaviour which he has become prone over the years through being constantly alone, but - and this is the most principled demonstration - the essence of the showing-telling paradox is in the novel itself, which is placed in the hands of the reader: its very existence contradicts the concept of Rudolf, or actually Bernhard's. In other words, the *Concrete* novel **was** published, and it makes the reader experience the paradox in real time[30].

Grand Pause

So far, we have discussed some of the technique principles of the author, the master of words, whose sensitivity, talent and education enable him to convert the insights of life into an artistic text. And what is the reader's part in this array? How is reading a history book different from reading a novel or a short story?

A literary composition is made up of bits and pieces of information; words that join into a sentence that joins another, and those into an informative paragraph that adds additional meaning to the section that precedes it. The writer has all the necessary information, because the fictional or real plot is stored in his imagination or memory, but it is up to him to choose what to convey to the reader. The protagonist - in the author's voice - may be all-knowing who chooses to be not-all-conveying. When there is no reasonable explanation for any lack of information, it is most likely a planned gap, an ironic omission or a deliberate silence arising from other poetic needs. This is the reader's challenge: to percept the system of gaps, the silence that emerges between the lines, the coded massage, during the reading to fusion the "exists" next to the "missing", and to catch-experience that thing that the literary work seeks to activate[31].

An excess of words, a decrease in insignificant details, placing the subordinate as the main thing, events, names and apparently casual cases are all point out factors; it is up to the writer to shed light on his intentions through presence or absence. Every writer is aware to one degree or another of his choices, and a great

[29] *Ibid*., p. 34.

[30] It can be argued that Bernhard creates poetic credibility in the reader in the way that he manages to describe an incredible, fickle and contradictory character, as the protagonist indeed declares to himself: "I know myself too well not to realise how vacillating I can be" (p. 78). And in another place, he includes his sister as well: "This is what has [...] never ceased to fascinate them [others] and make them seek our company – fundamentally because we're capricious, erratic, vacillating, and unreliable" (p. 99).

[31] Perry, M. & Sternberg, M. (1986). The King though Ironic Eyes. *Poetics Today 7* (2), 275-322.

writer is well aware of his choices. The sensitive reader is invited to give aesthetic reasoning and to interpret the artistic intentions of the work in relation to its constancy.

How does the principle of the disparity system affect Rudolph, who is already in Palma?

The protagonist is sitting in a wicker armchair on the Borne, in front of the house of the Cañellas family, one of whose daughters is a musician. With his eyes closed, he recalls his last visit to the place about two years ago, and exposes to the reader the tragic story of a woman named Anna Härdtl:

It was when he was walking with the Cañellas daughter and during the conversation that he called aloud the name "Anna". To his surprise, a young woman dressed in mourning clothes turned to him, because she thought he was addressing her. After the initial embarrassment, a conversation developed between Anna and Rudolph in which the tragedy of her life unfolded.

It is important to note that at this stage the reader is in the last ten pages of the novel, and that this is apparently the right time to tie all the loose ends together according to the principle of the work's cohesion and unity. This is perhaps the opportunity to reveal some connection between Mendelssohn Bartholdy and "Concrete", or at least to give some justification that will shed light on the title of the work; this is too perhaps the time to expand on that "elemental effect" from listening to "Travelling Players" that made the protagonist dedicate the novel - if not his entire life - to writing about "his" Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. The meeting with Anna Härdtl plants new raw material that requires wide-scale development due to its narrative-tragic power. The author creates a strange, seemingly unreasoned turn, and chooses to report on its events relatively briefly within the framework of that stream-of-consciousness trace plot.

It turns out that Anna forced her husband, against his will and skills, to set up a small electrical shop in the suburbs of Munich and thus start a "career" as a businessman; she abhorred the idea of her husband sitting in some office - despite the fixed salary - and was fascinated by the idea of him being independent, even if he was a small shopkeeper and nothing else. However, the store ran into financial difficulties, her rich family abandoned her, and her illusions were shattered. "I did see it all and didn't want to see it"[32], Rudolph quotes the woman's words when he recalls the story with his eyes closed[33]. This is how the young couple - twenty-one-year-old Anna and her twenty-three-year-old husband Hans - travelled with their three-year-old child from Munich to Palma de Mallorca to try to recover from their financial, or rather relationship failure. Their stay also turned out to be a failure, starting with the choice of the hotel, which was built of concrete pillars as skins, and ending with the noise and the disgusting smells that arose from the surrounding area.

[32] Bernhard, 1984, p. 135.

[33] The "look" motif is interwoven throughout the novel. The external observation throws introspective and echoes instances of blindness-sobriety, illusion-reality, as we will see later.

The tragedy itself occurred on the fifth night of their stay in Palma: the young husband, who woke up and went out to the balcony perhaps to breathe air or to light himself a cigarette, doubtfully-fell doubtfully jumped from the railing below straight onto the concrete surface below the balcony where he instantly died.

A police investigation was not conducted for some reason, even though the railing was lower than the safety standard established by law; however, the funeral company made sure to send Anna the bill immediately after the funeral service. Later she was unsuccessful in her appeals to the German consulate; she fell into the hands of a cunning lawyer who cheated her; the shop was extorted in her absence; the insurance denied responsibility, and she was left with a claim of several million shillings and a huge debt to a bank in Munich.

Rudolph, who until now has been a confessional speaker immersed in his own artistic misanthropy, talks about the horror in a dry, objective and almost laconic language. The gap between the way things is delivered and the content of the horrifying occurrence creates an ironic tension. The protagonist seemingly tries to stick to the simple chronicle when he interprets the facts according to his purpose, and as usual in doubling the evidence and the narrative, he explains and emphasizes the lack of empathy that he and Miss Cañellas felt towards the young Härdtl.

"The situation could not have been more embarrassing or more distasteful, but this was what we had wanted; we ourselves had created the situation, less out of sympathy, I think, than out of curiosity, probably even out of a thirst for sensation"[34]. To his horror it was discovered that the husband was not even buried alone; his body was buried in the grave of an old woman, Isabella Fernandez, who had passed away a week earlier. In the absence of space, the two bodies were stored together in one of the concrete boxes used for graves; those concrete graves - seven stories above the ground - "which is often", Anna points out, "meant not just for two, but for three bodies"[35].

Near the cemetery in an interesting neighborhood there is an insane asylum and from there Rudolph ordered a taxi. For an unknown reason, the two also accompanied Härdtl to the scene of the disaster to recreate the act of jumping from the balcony, thus sealing - for the protagonist - the show of the tragedy for that day. The connection between Rudolph and Anna was ended. She, as mentioned, returned to Munich and to her spectacular bankruptcy, and he spent the rest of the evening eating and ballroom dancing[36].

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[34] Bernhard, 1984, pp. 142-143.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

[36] It is possible that Bernhard, who was also a playwright, echoes with intense frequency *Concrete* with Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (2008) on its various levels, starting with the choice of the Jewish composer Mendelssohn (Shylock), continuing with Niederkreut who refuses to bequeath his property to his one daughter who moved to England (Jessica), and ending with the The vote play that won someone else his property ("A gentle scroll" - Portia). And of course, it is impossible to ignore Bernhard's "Dog" speech (pp. 53-56) in which the "Dog comedy" is compared to a system of human relationships, echoing Shylock who slaps Antonio: "You call me misbeliever,

"She wants to move to Palma", the protagonist now recalls Härdtl's words, "in order to be as close as possible to her dead husband. But how will she live in Palma? What will she live on?"[37]

All this happened about two years before Rudolf's current visit to Palma, two years during which he returned to Peiskam and his attempts to write the article on Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. And now, after the tragic memory journey, he returned to his hotel room with a strong desire to finally write the article. But instead, he collapses on his bed for a sleepless night. He cultivates in his musings a magnificent list of justifications for the manner in which he let the poor woman's case pass him by; he opens with "We didn't make ourselves" and goes on to explain that "There are actually millions of such luckless creatures who can't be rescued from their misfortune". In general, he thinks, the young Härdtl may have overcome the tragedy and perhaps even forgotten it; and the image of the guilt-ridden child which he ends with a justification that contradicts his content: "In the end we don't have to justify ourselves or anything else"[38].

Well, Anna Härdtl's story does not give his conscience rest, and it goes without saying that on such a morning he is unable to begin his work on Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. And so already at dawn he orders a taxi and goes to the cemetery, but - and here comes the terrible moment: "To my astonishment I found that the marble plaque set in the concrete no longer bore the names **Isabella Fenandez** and **Hanspeter Härdtl**: instead, it bore, already engraved in the marble, the names **Anna** and **Hanspeter Härdtl**"[39].

Indeed, as she shared with him, Anna chose to move to Palma to be closer to her husband - to join him in his grave. In her act she occupied the third place in the common grave and appropriately placed herself next to her husband[40].

Now it is understandable why the story about the old man from Niederkreut, who decided to give his fortune to a certain Sarah Slother by chance, prompted Rudolf to remember Anna Härdtl, whom he met also by chance, to whom he did not give a penny. Now it is understandable why, as soon as he arrived in Borne, and as soon as he sat down in the wicker armchair in front of the Cañellas family house, instead of devoting all his resources to Mendelssohn, this tragedy appeared in

cut-throat, dog, and pit upon my Jewish gaberdine, [...] it now appears you need my help [...] 'Hath a dog money?'" (pp. 123-124), Bernhard composes his version in a broader generalization: "In this world the real question to ask about a person has long been, not how humane he is, but how dog-like, yet up to now, instead of asking how dog-like a person is – which is what they really ought to ask out of respect for the truth – people have always asked how humane he is" (Bernhard, p. 55).

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

[38] *Ibid.*, pp. 153-155.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[40] The novel concludes with the protagonist returning to the hotel, swallowing several sleeping pills, that is, trying to imitate Anna's act, but wakes up in a panic the next day and sits down to write these lists.

front of his eyes again, after two years of not touching his heart: "but all thought of my work was suddenly driven out by the tragedy of Anna Härdtl"[41].

Now it is understandable why the protagonist casually mentioned at the beginning of the novel a variety of obscure events such as a donation of eight hundred thousand shillings to the victims of the famine in Africa, or a sudden decision to give his nephew nine hundred thousand shillings to set up a clinic that meets today's requirements, and bothers to explain: "On the one hand it was stupid to give him what is after all quite a large sum for nothing, but on the other, what are we to do with our money?"[42].

But why did Bernhard leave this terrible tragedy to the end of the novel? Why does he dedicate barely a tenth of the entire work to it? What is the reason for this sudden frugality that distorts the internal proportions of the work?
Concrete.

The title of the novel points an accusing finger at the main point, while the novel itself and the essay on Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, which will never be written, are one big distraction from the heart of the matter. The "matter" the protagonist chooses not to hand over, or more precisely: hands it over in silence. The chilling silence of Rudolph, or of Bernhard, is covered with restless chatter about Mendelssohn, Bartholdy, and everything else, as long as one does not expand the talk about Anna Härdtl and the concrete tragedy that is somehow pushed to the end, and as long as one does not speak of himself, and as long as he does not stand in front of himself. But the title pulls out the joker, and it turns out to be empty!

The (Mendelsonian) form became the background, and the new (concrete) form that appeared in its place was revealed as a silent gap - the silent Grand Pause.

Backward logic

"Instead of writing about Mendelssohn, I reflect, I'm writing these notes"[43]. And maybe it's not for nothing that the **Härdtl** letters are also B**arth**o**ld**y letters, meaning I came to write about Härdtl, not about my Mendelssohn-Bartholdy[44].

To Rudolph's surprise, right next to the shards of conscience burning in him, brilliant opening sentences pop up in his mind. And again, he alternates between his reflections on the young Härdtl and Mendelssohn-Bartholdy until he consolidates them into one insight that resonates both frequencies at the same time: "Very often we write down a sentence **too early**, then another **too late**; what we have to do is to write it down at the proper time, otherwise it's lost"[45].

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[41] Bernhard, 1984, p. 147.

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 154.

[44] Also, the reversal of the letters in the secondary female characters - **Izabel**a-**Elizabe**th - may allude to the feeling of foreignness he felt towards his sister who burned his flesh in accordance with the burial of Anna's husband with a foreign woman.

[45] Bernhard, 1984, p. 151.

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That sleepless night he gets up from his bed intermittently and scribbles down important Mendelssohn references that must not be forgotten, such as: "1874, completion of the Violin Concerto in E minor"[46]. As mentioned, this is Felix Mendelssohn's most famous work, much more than "Travelling Players". However, the concerto was completed in 1844, and three years later the composer passed away, which betrays the deliberate anachronistic failure planted by Bernhard; an error he apparently hoped would be discovered. But if we reverse the last two numbers of 1874, we get the year of Mendelssohn's death: 1847. What is Bernhard trying to imply with this numerical reversal?

And what about "Travelling Players", that composition which Rudolf writes: "at the time I didn't know why the work impressed me so deeply, but I do know now. It was because of its brilliant imperfection"[47].

"Brilliant imperfection" is a strange and paradoxical reasoning, obviously the opposite of the yardstick for evaluating a work of art that strives for the perfection of the aesthetic act[48].

But more importantly: if you look for that wonderful imperfect music composition - you won't find a single note! It turns out that even the "elemental" work that gave birth to the desire to write the research on Mendelssohn did not exist and was not created! That is, the concrete pillars for writing the novel are not only fundamentally shaken, but do not exist at all; and not only do they not exist - but others are also invented in their stead. In other words, the existence of the novel as a whole is within the scope of the fiction, the lie of the imagination.

In his juggling, Bernhard declares those human weaknesses: the ambition for perfection, the blindness of illusion, the tendency to make mistakes, and the lack of courage to admit a mistake outright. With a human-artistic eye, the writer presents a fierce truth without bias: "When we really know the world, we see that it is just a world full of **errors**", and immediately after that, with a typical childish closeness: "What a good thing that I had my **eye**-pressure measured. Thirty-eight! We mustn't **pretend** to ourselves"[49], the emphasis is not in the original). And he turns these lessons first and foremost inward and puts himself on trial before his readers in terms of "Practice what you preach": "For years I have lived in this state of self-condemnation, self-abnegation and self-mockery", and

[46] *Ibid*., p. 153.

[47] *Ibid*., p. 120.

[48] Judging the "beauty" work of art - on the aspiration of perfection in it - examines the quality of the aesthetic work, i.e. the way of organizing meaning materials of all kinds: beautiful, casual, and also ugly. The aesthetic function - which defines the belonging of a work to the field of fine arts - is a unique form of organization of the content materials that is preferable to an alternative form of organization because it is perceived as more beautiful and perfect than ever. In this way, the "genius" artist succeeds - even in the period when the realist-decadent rot became artistic raw material - to overcome the ugly (in the organized materials), to create the beautiful (as a form of organization), and to come close to achieving artistic perfection (Brinker, 1982, pp. 88-94).

[49] Bernhard, 1984, p. 107.

straight to the misanthropy: "and immediately resumed my self-observation, self-calumniation and self-mockery"[50].

If we return to the brilliant imperfection in "Travelling Players", then perfection - that shows contempt for compromise in mediocrity - is the opposite of human. In a nature that is unable to achieve perfection, we fight all our lives, and thereby ascend to the rank of clowns or players in the traveling circus of life. And he himself, Thomas Bernhardt, is the main clown who exaggerates with a double and reversed joke, since the entire telling, this entire block of chatter is in fact one piece of showing with a double point; if we take another peek at the author's head and his pre-compositional planning, we could assume that Bernhard approached the writing desk thinking: I will write about what I cannot write - about Bartholdy and Härdtl; meaning, I will write about the human aspiration for inhuman perfection (Bartholdy) and the all-too-human mistake in the concrete tragedy (Härdtl) - when the two are enfolded into each other and owe their existence to their very negation, gaping at what is not said and empowering the truly human. The content imposes on the form, and the form throws itself on the content. In his "Backward logic" Bernhard creates one pure innovative entirety[51].

"My unhealthy craving for perfection had come to the surface again [...] It doesn't get us anywhere, except into the grave"[52], says the protagonist in a kind of existential manifesto woven into the artistical one, "We want to achieve everything, and we achieve nothing. And naturally we make the highest, the very highest demands of ourselves, completely leaving out of account human nature"[53]. And here is the volatile pendulum in action: "But on the other hand, I reflect, where would we be if we constantly set our sights too low?"[54].

And like a hidden inner lining, one can discover in *Concrete* thin and sensitive moments ensconced here and there, such as: "We see so much sadness if we care to look [...] We see the sadness and despair of others, and they see ours"[55]; and when Rudolph receives a telephone greeting from his sister before his journey to Palma, he stifles a sudden spasm of crying and wonders: "How fragile we are! I thought. We're full of such brave words and constantly go on every day about how hard and sensible we are, and then from one moment to the next we cave in and have to choke back our tears"[56]; because "I'm not at all the kind of unfeeling person that some people take me to be because they want to see me like that and because that's how I very often make myself appear, not daring to show myself as

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

[51] Bernhard also expresses that pretentiousness, covered in simulated or real modesty, which is the basis of every artistic creative act: "We say notes to avoid embarrassment, although we secretly believe that these sentences which we blushingly call notes are really more than that" (p. 112); And he persists in his paradoxical pendulum movement: "We constantly overrate and underrate ourselves; when we ought to overrate ourselves we underrate ourselves, and in the same way we underrate ourselves when we ought to overrate ourselves" (p. 30).

[52] Bernhard, 1984, p. 84.

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 85.

[55] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

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I really am";[57] and then he calls for a life devoid of illusion, hypocrisy and mask: "People are always talking about it being their duty to find their way to their fellow men [...] when in fact it is purely and simply a question of finding their way to themselves"[58].

With passionate scandalism, with the art of exaggeration and his skillful shuffling of the mind, Bernhard lays out before us the fragile, wrinkled and most reliable cards of human existence: delusion, illusion, conscience, pretension, vulnerability, arrogance, and vulnerability, as well as buffooning and madness; all of this melt in the aesthetic-existential gap and amplify the question of life, its meaning and purpose.

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After the silent grand pause, loaded with the sounds of the novel, comes the essential turning point of the work: those pensive moments, the insights from the power of absence that suddenly appears and echoes in the silence, with the last page, the sounds that will not break out; the undermining of the proportional balance in the structure of the work, which seemingly impairs the sense of aesthetic entirety, also demonstrates the lack of human completeness - in the act of art in particular and in human existence in general. Such a unity of the "what" and the "how" creates an aesthetic of a different kind of fracture, a kind of a "brilliant imperfection", it creates an aesthetic defect, and above all - a human one.

And if we turn over the novel and flip back, or better: if we read it from the beginning to end once again, we will understand that the this composition of literature is not Volatility or seeming Volatility, it is not justification or apparent justification, but rather the laying of the cards - all the cards - with fortitude and human honesty, for one's weakness, one's conscience and the lack of its perfection; and despite "the risk of being misunderstood"[59], Bernhard invites every reader and declares with sincerity: "Everybody is welcome to see my hand"[60].

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 106.
[58] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[60] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
Bernhard passed away in 1989 and in his will forbade the publication of his books and the staging of his plays in Austria for fifty years after his death. However, in analogy to his life, in his apparent - only apparent - denial of himself and his writing, his will was not fulfilled and his works that gained appreciation and sympathy continue to ironically chatter silent gaps and instructive insights into human existence.

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