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## Shipwreck with a Witness: Music and Fascism in Thomas Bernhard’s “The Loser”

### Abstract

“Shipwreck with a Witness: Music and Fascism in Thomas Bernhard’s ‘The Loser’” is an attempt to think the multifaceted relations between music as an art and practice, and fascism as a desire as well as a political, existential, aesthetic, etc. condition and phantasm. These relations are explored through a close reading of Thomas Bernhard’s novel “The Loser” which is a fictional account of a doomed friendship between Bernhard’s unnamed narrator, a fictionalised version of Glenn Gould, the infamous piano virtuoso, and Wertheimer – a caricature of the equally infamous philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. It is through them that Bernhard addresses the problems of madness, desire for eternity and totality, the hatred of diversity and the Other, etc.

By unpacking the dense logic and meaning of the above through ideas by Deleuze, Brassier, André Michels, etc., the text addresses the crucial figure of witnessing a transcendental trauma (fascism) qua event. Finally, the article engages with the theoretical and practical (ethical) importance of examining not just the relation between fascism and music but also the problem of the return of fascism within contemporary culture.

**Keywords:** fascism, desire, witnessing, transcendental trauma, music, non-philosophy

### Introduction

“We must tremble when we hear this: those naked bodies entered the chamber to the sound of music.” (Quignard 2016: 131)

The quote above from Pascal Quignard’s “The Hatred of Music” sums up the subject of this short text because the chamber alluded to is a gas chamber. Thus, we can articulate the problem of this text as follows:

It is an attempt to think the (im)possible relation between music and fascism.

To think music's violence and power, its ability to harm bodies (Quignard 2016: 144), to order bodies, to make subjects obedient (Quignard 2016: 153), etc. Therefore, the task is to explicate the inextinguishable desire for totality qua radical particularity, for possessive fusion with an idea (One), and to show how the latter trap music and give the very ground for thinking the (im)possible relation between fascism and music. An (im)possible relation which actually did take place.

Of all the arts, music is the only one to have collaborated in the extermination of Jews organized by the Germans between 1933 and 1945. It was the only form of art to be specifically requested by the administration of the *Konzentrationslager*. (Quignard 2016: 129)

But most importantly, this is an attempt to conceptualise the figure of witnessing transcendental trauma<sup>1</sup> (fascism and consequences), to trace the ambivalences contained in such a witnessing, and through them to outline a possible line of resistance (ontological, aesthetic, existential). This is a resistance centred on concepts such as non-affirmation, non-judgement, non-conclusion, and non-horizon as the gesture of "re-gained time" (Deleuze 2007: 304). What these concepts will try to do is work through (*durcharbeitung* in a psychoanalytic sense) strange surfaces, folds, and cracks within the desire for a pure idea, for totality and fusion, etc. In other words, this is an attempt to think witnessing in a quasi-Deleuzian (and to a certain extent quasi-Larruellian) manner, which is a strategy that will be explicated as the arguments develop.

The material for the outlined procedure will be a late novel (published in 1983) – "The Loser" ("Der Untergeher"). The reason for choosing the piece is Bernhard's well-known obsession with music<sup>2</sup> stemming not just from his autobiography (he studied music and singing<sup>3</sup>), but also from his conceptual (literary) explorations of the relations between music and literature as well as those

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<sup>1</sup> "Transcendental trauma" is borrowed from the philosophy of Ray Brassier (his thought will be discussed further into the text) where the concept is defined as a "conceptual transposition of a physical phenomenon which undoes the phenomenological resources through which the manifest image would make sense of it" (Brassier 2007: 234). In other words, transcendental trauma is a concept articulating a thought that undoes sense, representation, and purpose. A thought that acknowledges a real outside and an outside of a real. The wager of Brassier's thought is precisely the recognition of the latter. A recognition that (un)binds thought not to/from an ideal but to/from the horror of an objective reality – in our case fascism and consequences – that paradoxically is (im)possible to think of objectively. It is this paradox that Brassier sees as the crux of thought itself. A "binding [that] coincides with the objectification of thinking understood as the adequation without correspondence between the objective reality of extinction [of extermination and the powerful phantasm of the One in our case] and the subjective knowledge of the trauma to which it gives rise" (Brassier 2007: 239).

<sup>2</sup> In the novels "Gargoyles" and "Concrete" in particular.

<sup>3</sup> The bigger portion of Bernhard's 5-volume autobiography "Gathering Evidence" is dedicated to his musical studies in Vienna and Salzburg. More specifically, see Bernhard

between music and fascism. And the latter is the very subject matter of “The Loser” as we will see.

Finally, there are contextual and ethical motifs for deciding to engage with the mentioned themes through the work of Thomas Bernhard. We could define the contextual motif as the return of fascism within the contemporary psychosocial *millieu*. By the latter I mean fascism’s technological, mediological, psychological scaling and the virulent pulverisation<sup>4</sup> of its ideas. In other words, the contemporary situation is a situation where the multifaceted spectres of fascism – from grandiose (symptomatically particular) visions for making countries or even continents great again<sup>5</sup> through insurgent uncensored antisemitism<sup>6</sup> to everyday exclusions of otherness (fascism’s historic banality) – are advancing. How to resist these advancements of fascism is the ethical wager and decision of the present text. And it is a decision that goes through reading closely a seemingly unrelated novel about music, madness, suicide, and of course – about the hyperbolic hatred of everything Austrian.

### 1. The Loser’s Context

As we said “The Loser” is one of Bernhard’s late pieces. Now, such early/late divisions are questionable at best, but with “The Loser” they could offer some conceptual insight. The reason being that the novel comes right after the last volume of Bernhard’s autobiography, i.e. after a 7-year-long five-volume creative experiment with the memoir form. Or as Mark A. Anderson notes in his afterword to the English translation of the novel, “The Loser” is part of something that “might be termed Bernhard’s imaginary autobiography [along with narratives such as “Wittgenstein’s Nephew”, “Woodcutters”, “Old Masters”] – his own life story rewritten according to the lives of his artistic and philosophical doubles” (Bernhard 2006: 127).

In our case it is an imaginary autobiography that snatches the name, body, and work of Glenn Gould in order to distort them through Bernhard’s own equiva-

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1985: 143 – 215.

<sup>4</sup> By “pulverisation” I mean the process of diluting, the hollowing out of a concept. Fascism in a contemporary context is precisely a hollowed-out concept used to describe anything from mild conservative stances to radical alt-right positions. The latter makes fascism all the more dangerous since to hollow out a concept means to cease to understand it. Therefore, this text uses fascism in a precise way. “Fascism” here means a grandiose totalising phantasy for a One (an absolute, be it a race, a nation, an idea, etc.), that composes itself through excluding the various forms of otherness (bodies, languages, affects, etc.) which always already fracture from within the realities under the sign of said totalising phantasies.

<sup>5</sup> I refer to the slogans MAGA (Make America Great Again) and the newly formed MEGA (Make Europe Great Again), courtesy of Musk’s recent ideological endorsement of Germany’s AfD.

<sup>6</sup> The most hyperbolic and cartoonish example of it is Ye’s (Kanye West’s) recent rants on X where he proclaimed “I’m a Nazi”. The New York Times 2025: Ye Takes Back Apology. – The New York Times. [online] <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/07/arts/music/ye-takes-back-apology.html> [accessed on 10.02.2025].

lents. A distortion with examples that range from giving Gould a lung disease to placing him along with a Wittgenstein double<sup>7</sup> and the key unnamed narrator in post-WWII Salzburg where the three study music under Vladimir Horowitz<sup>8</sup>. And as can be expected, the bodysnatching procedure is coupled with the author's well-known obsessions (phantasms) – suicide, madness, creative and existential failure, hyperbolic (self)-hatred and unrelenting hatred of everything Austrian, tragic buffoonery, philosophical and musical name-dropping, etc. Phantasms that haunt virtually every hyper-monologic composition of Bernhard's and are here radically inscribed within Gould's, Wittgenstein's (only to a certain extent since the latter is not a character of "The Loser" per se) and the unnamed narrator's bodies.

However, the purpose of these autobiographical body-snatches and distortions is not exhausted by the triviality of expressing the splitting self, i.e. the decentred subject of modernity (as Anderson seems to claim)<sup>9</sup>, nor is their usage limited only to amplifying the effects of an already breached border between fiction and non-fiction<sup>10</sup>. The actual conceptual purpose of Bernhard's "inventive schizophrenia" (Bernhard 2006: 130) in "The Loser" is to reveal the very core of the novel's subject. And the latter is nothing other than the subject of an impossible working through (*durcharbeitung*) of fascism as a political, cultural, existential, somatic, artistic condition. In other words, the conceptual wager of brutally breaching the fiction/non-fiction divide, and of radically splitting one's own biography by wearing the bodies and names of figures such as the virtuosic Gould and to some extent the one of Wittgenstein (a principal presence in Bernhard's work) is to confront the impossible task of judging (for the three alter-egos meet on Judge's Peak<sup>11</sup>) the event and consequences of fascism. It is the task of exposing its drives and traversing its constitutive phantasy. Finally, the force behind Bernhard's threefold split and body-snatch (Gould, unnamed narrator, Wittgenstein double) is to offer a highly ambivalent and therefore productive trajectory for thinking the figure of the witness to the transcendental trauma. This witness is, in other words, the sonorous and spectating subject of both the shipwreck and what comes after, i.e. of the event and consequence of fascism, both in its grandiose inhuman totality (political, ontological, aesthetic) and possibly in its everyday quality, i.e. its evil banality. And one of the keys to the latter is precisely the relation to music, to sound in general, to hearing and listening and to the orders they produce. But before we could flesh out said relation let us examine in detail Bernhard's threefold split for it engenders a specific conceptual topology without which we could not think the scandal of "The Loser" and therefore the relation of music and fascism.

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<sup>7</sup> The second character of the novel, named Wertheimer, who is also the actual loser.

<sup>8</sup> I.e. the famous Russian pianist.

<sup>9</sup> See Bernhard 2006: 130.

<sup>10</sup> Bernhard's memoirs already operate on the border between fiction/non-fiction. Also, Bernhard's "Wittgenstein's Nephew", i.e. a similar quasi-autobiographical tale of a friendship with Paul Wittgenstein (also a pianist), was published in 1982.

<sup>11</sup> See Bernhard 2006: 10.

## Shipwrecked Subjectivities

The threefold split, that generates the topology of “The Loser” confronts us with a difficulty from the very start. This is not because of its uniqueness but quite the contrary – due to the genericity of such a split. A genericity that offers too many interpretative possibilities, too many theoretical apparatuses that could unpack most of its logic, movement and overall meaning. Therefore, we will simply postulate the general apparatus used (already a charged decision) here for thinking the triadic split forming Bernhard’s novel. It is one taken from Deleuze’s “Logic of Sense” and more precisely from the “Eighteenth series of the Three Images of Philosophers” (Deleuze 2015: 131 – 139), i.e. the segment where Deleuze offers a tripartite schema for conceptualising the organisation (and speculative history) of western thought. The latter could be presented according to three desires. A desire for luminous ethereal heights or for “Platonic wings” (Deleuze 2015: 136); one for obscure material depths and movements or for pre-Socratic hammers (ibid.); finally, a desire for the surfaces (Deleuze’s own position), for the “discovery of incorporeal events, meanings, or effects, which are irreducible to “deep” bodies and to “lofty” Ideas.” (ibid.). This last one is, in other words, a desire for perverse thought. One that uses the staff and the mantle as its conceptual tools and has Diogenes, Hercules, the Stoics at its perverse side (Deleuze 2015: 135 – 136). To put the latter more rigorously, a thought apt for our task of tackling Bernhard’s unnamed narrator and his traversal of transcendental catastrophe and trauma which is the fate of his two named friends.

Moreover, as we will see Deleuze’s highly stylised topology would prove to be not just crucial for understanding the unnamed narrator but for explicating “The Loser”’s own highly stylised tripartite topology of shipwrecked subjects, i.e. the threefold of ambiguous witnesses to fascism, its consequences and its music. Thus, let us operationalise the French philosopher’s apparatus and see both its compatibility and how it gives Bernhard’s novel an unwanted child which in the end is the very task of thinking with and against a text and an author.

### 2.1. Gould or the obscene ascent

He never gave up the piano, I thought, of course not, whereas Wertheimer and I gave up the piano because we never attained the inhuman state that Glenn attained, who by the way never escaped this inhuman state, who didn’t even want to escape this inhuman state. (Bernhard 2006: 7)

The scandal of bodysnatching Glenn Gould’s name, body and work lies in the ambivalence and amplification of the concepts (real and fictional) his personage is infused with in “The Loser”. From the very start the Gould name functions as a code for absolute beauty, technique and discipline that neither the unnamed narrator, nor Wertheimer could ever have reached. Gould therefore stands for a type of desired inhumanity centred on the pure idea of music. On an all-consuming One

of music – “we get inside music completely or not at all, Glenn often said” (Bernhard 2006: 61). A totality/One that uses everything around it, that is radically unapologetic and indifferent to anything human (or subjective), anything that could resemble nature, the organic or the material. “Basically I hate nature, he [Gould] said again and again” (Bernhard 2006: 59). Put differently, we are confronted with Gould as the name for the almost cartoonish violence of a pure spirit desiring the annihilation of mediation, i.e. of the player’s body so that the only thing left would be the unmediated (pure and full) contact between a perfect machine (the Steinway) and a perfect albeit particular composition, i.e. Bach and only Bach<sup>12</sup>

All his life Glenn had wanted to be the Steinway itself, he hated the notion of being between Bach and his Steinway as a mere musical middleman and of one day being ground to bits between Bach on one side and his Steinway on the other, he said, I thought. All my life I have dreaded being ground to bits between Bach and Steinway and it requires the greatest effort on my part to escape this dread, he said. My ideal would be, I would be the Steinway, I wouldn’t need Glenn Gould, he said, I could, by being the Steinway, make Glenn Gould totally superfluous. But not a single piano player has ever managed to make himself superfluous by being Steinway, as Glenn said. To wake up one day and be Steinway and Glenn in one, he said, I thought, Glenn Steinway, Steinway Glenn, all for Bach. (Bernhard 2006: 59)

### **Thus, let us repeat:**

We are confronted with Gould’s dread of mediation, with his fear of contaminating the absolute idea (music). Furthermore, we are exposed to his desire for possessive fusion with the latter. This is a desire for total consumption, occultation and destruction and/or isolation of every bad copy (of the absolute) – be it one’s own body, or the bodies of others<sup>13</sup>, be it even a highly-symbolic ash-tree which we shall address later. Therefore, it does not take much to recognise in this hyperbolic depiction the contours of an equally hyperbolic idea of fascism. The idea of Gould being the conceptual stand-in for an unbridled desire for totality. A stand-in for a radically deformed (stolen) version of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*. Lastly, a stand-in for a hatred of the Other which is nothing more than a hatred for the figure of the Jew. For it is Gould who names Wertheimer (the Jew) the loser<sup>14</sup>. The one that has drowned (*untergegangen*)<sup>15</sup> and is constantly sinking. The one who is always already excluded from the “lofty” heights of pure music.

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<sup>12</sup> “At bottom Glenn played only the Goldberg Variations and the Art of the Fugue” (Bernhard 2006: 26).

<sup>13</sup> “All our lives the three of us have shared the desire to barricade ourselves from the world. All three of us were born barricade fanatics. But Glenn had carried his barricade fanaticism furthest” (Bernhard 2006: 15). Here we could also recall Gould’s infamous aversion to concerts which he stopped giving in 1964 in order to focus entirely on recording.

<sup>14</sup> “My dear loser, Glenn greeted Wertheimer, with his Canadian-American cold-bloodedness he always called him the loser...” (Bernhard 2006: 15).

<sup>15</sup> “*Untergegangen*” is the past participle of “*untergehen*” which means to go under, to

Wertheimer – the enemy of the unobstructed (radically purified) idea of music. The enemy of the One of music.

However, the truly obscene moment in Bernhard's bodysnatch of Gould's name and body as the name and body of fascism is the moment of Glenn's laughter. For Bernhard's Gould is "capable of unbridled laughter" (Bernhard 2006: 58). An inhuman laughter that occurs only once in the novel when the three characters are confronted with the actual remnants of Nazism. The latter appears in the hyper-stylised form of cretinous monumental sculptures (perfect for acoustics) created by a Nazi collaborator in whose villa the friends reside during their musical studies.

When we learned that we had moved into the house of a famous Nazi sculptor Glenn burst out laughing. Wertheimer joined in this resounding laughter, I thought, the two of them laughed to the point of total exhaustion and in the end, they went down to the cellar to get a bottle of champagne. Glenn popped the cork right in the face of a six-meter-high Carrara angel and squirted the champagne at the faces of the other monsters standing about, leaving only a little bit which we drank from the bottle. Finally, Glenn hurled the bottle at the emperor head in the corner with such fury that we had to duck for cover. (Bernhard 2006: 58)

It is through this early scene that we can articulate the first tragic conclusion of Bernhard's novel. Glenn's unbridled laughter is not parodic, nor does it designate a kind of stoic (joyous) affirmation articulated from within the depths of a tragic witnessing. Glenn's laughter is one bearing the mark of his own impasse. The impasse of an inextinguishable desire for the inhuman, for the One, still operating even after seeing and hearing the consequences, i.e. after witnessing the violence of cretinous monumentality, of exemplary fascism. Glenn laughs and his laugh becomes a fury because it is the laughter of his own thrown destiny in "The Loser." Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Gould's death would come by the very thing he tries to annihilate and overcome. Glenn is struck by "a natural death" (Bernhard 2006: 5) as opposed to Wertheimer who commits suicide. Thus, what ends the virtuoso's desire for the inhuman, for pure music, is exactly his body. What kills Glenn is a stroke. A radical immanent blow that takes place amidst a virtuosic recording of his "Goldberg Variations". As to the meaning of such a conceptual choice we could say that Gould's death is a farce in a double sense. Farcical in its high stylisation, in the highly expressive almost Wagnerian image of a genius stricken at his Steinway, and farcical in the literal sense<sup>16</sup>. Because the latter articulates a simultaneous im/ex-plosion of the pure idea, of totality through the revenge of the body Gould tried to annihilate.

Thus, to sum up: The concept functioning under the name of Gould ("the last

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perish, to sink, etc. Also, the German translation of Primo Levi's "The Drowned and the Saved" is "Die Untergegangenen und die Geretteten".

<sup>16</sup> Farce comes from the Latin "farcire" which means "to stuff". It is still used as a name for the stuffing of sausages. Harper n.d.: Harper, Douglas. Farce. – Online Etymology Dictionary. [online] <https://www.etymonline.com/word/farce> [accessed on 10.02.2025].

puritan”<sup>17</sup>) is the idea of a violent desire for totality, for an extreme ascent towards perfection and a One that results in a simultaneous im/ex-plosion.

Yet the radical obscenity of Bernhard’s judgement of fascism lies in the following:

Even though Gould’s death is farcical; even though it signifies the very failure of the pure Idea; and most importantly, even though it has been recognised as a failure and farce by its very stand-in Gould<sup>18</sup>, it is something that still lingers as desire, as a fascination beyond knowledge. And the *point de captation* of the latter is Wertheimer. A Jew who cannot bear the absence of Gould, who can neither forget, nor not forget, who can neither work through, nor not work through totality’s death and his own desire for it. Wertheimer – a survivor who cannot survive. A loser constantly busy losing and thus sustaining Gould’s phantasy of absolute music.

## 2.2. Wertheimer or the shameful descent

He [Glenn] was an athletic type, much stronger than Wertheimer and me put together, we realized that at once when he went out to chop down an ash tree with his own hands, an ash tree in front of his window, which, as he put it, obstructed his playing... Glenn had barely cut down the ash that supposedly obstructed his playing when he had the idea of simply drawing the curtains in his room, closing the shutters. I could have spared myself the work of cutting down the ash, he said, I thought... (Bernhard 2006: 57)

There is only one instance in the Old Testament where the ash tree is mentioned<sup>19</sup>. The passage is from the Book of Isaiah (44: 12 – 19) and it is related to the practice of crafting and worshipping idols. In those verses a carpenter nurtures an ash tree and then uses a part of it for warmth and cooking and a part for creating a “detestable thing” (44: 19), i.e. an idol.

Now, it is from this almost imperceptible and risky analogy that we can start to reveal Wertheimer’s position and meaning within the novel. For Gould cuts down the body of the Other so as to use it (unapologetically and with inhuman discipline) precisely as the material for the moloch of a pure Idea. The rest Glenn stacks probably for burning (Bernhard 2006: 57). However, this early gesture in the novel is more complex. For it is not just the stand-in for totality (Gould) that creates its idol by destroying the Jew body. It is also the loser who creates himself as a detestable thing, thus becoming an obscene worshipper of the very thing that excludes him (Gould’s virtuosity and desire for the One). Wertheimer as Jew does not want to exist without the violence of the totality that creates him. He cannot exist without an

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<sup>17</sup> Gould liked to call himself “the last puritan” (Bazzana 2003: 22).

<sup>18</sup> “All our lives we want to be the piano and not a human being, flee from the human beings we are in order to completely become the piano, an effort which must fail, although we don’t want to believe it, he said” (Bernhard 2006: 59).

<sup>19</sup> We could say that the ash tree is a *hapax legomenon*, i.e. a singular trace (it is mentioned only once) within the context of the Book of Isaiah. Symptomatically, the ash tree also only appears in one scene in Bernhard’s novel.

absolute that he hates vigorously and at the same time wants to take the very place of.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the first crux of Wertheimer's decent into the "so-called human sciences" (Bernhard 2006: 33), and subsequently into madness and suicide hinges on his doubling the very thing that he is not. It hinges on his becoming a non-Jew Jew (an agnostic). It is here where "The Loser" becomes brutal. For Wertheimer is revealed as the caricature of the Jew. On the one hand, he is incestuous<sup>21</sup>, weak, parasitic (economically and emotionally on his family), insecure, and indecisive (for he continues to play the piano even after being fatally wounded by the One, i.e. excluded from music by the genius), but at the same time – he is arrogant, intelligent, erudite<sup>22</sup> a prolific writer, and an almost virtuosic player. In other words, in Wertheimer we encounter the hyperbole of the paradoxical subject of Nazi propaganda<sup>23</sup>. What is more, we encounter the latter not just as seen by Gould qua stand-in for fascism, i.e. from the excluding inside of pure music, but as something already internalised, as a crippling two-fold shame and guilt within Wertheimer. Shame and guilt engendered by the *jouissance* of his own doubling (by his desire to be an outsider) as well as by surviving pure music and at the same time not being able to work through it, i.e. to be the very witness he is. That is what actually makes the non-Jew Jew "pre-ordained for suicide" (Bernhard 2006: 46).

Finally, there is a crucial characteristic of the loser qua non-Jew Jew that sums up the above and fully reveals Wertheimer's tragic decent. This characteristic is the loser's blabbering. His inability to be silent. His need for constant apologies and unending questions. "... Wertheimer was also perfectly capable of being silent and perhaps could even be silent longer than Glenn and myself, but in our midst, he had to talk, I thought" (Bernhard 2006: 64). Why is this inability to keep silent so important for understanding our loser and his constant losing? Because Wertheimer's blabber names the depth of his failure and impossibility. It names a crucial repression of his body and from there its destruction via suicide. The blabber develops Gould's act of cutting down the ash tree, i.e. Wertheimer's body, to its ontological

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<sup>20</sup> "Wertheimer had put all his eggs in his piano virtuoso career, as I have to call it, I hadn't put any eggs in such a piano virtuoso career, that was the difference. For that reason, he was fatally wounded by Glenn's Goldberg bars, not I." (Bernhard 2006: 62).

<sup>21</sup> One of the reasons the unnamed narrator gives for Wertheimer's suicide is the marriage of his sister who he tried to enclose in his own madness, envy, and impotence (Bernhard 2006: 39 – 40).

<sup>22</sup> "Wertheimer was the reader" (Bernhard 2006: 31).

<sup>23</sup> In his "The Sublime Object of Ideology" Slavoj Žižek describes precisely the paradox of Nazi anti-semitism we are encountering in the figure of Wertheimer:

How then would our poor German, if he were a good anti-Semite, react to this gap between the ideological figure of the Jew (schemer, wire-puller, exploiting our brave men and so on) and the common everyday experience of his good neighbour, Mr Stern? His answer would be to turn this gap, this discrepancy itself, into an argument for anti-Semitism: 'You see how dangerous they really are? It is difficult to recognize their real nature. They hide it behind the mask of everyday appearance – and it is exactly this hiding of one's real nature, this duplicity, that is a basic feature of the Jewish nature. (Žižek 2008: 77 – 78)

threshold. For as can be clearly seen from the quoted ash-tree passage Glenn cuts down the ash impulsively. His cut is just a cut. A cut without a why. An unmediated work of destruction only amplified by its retroactive recognition as unnecessary. And following such a cut to its threshold we could not articulate it as anything but the radical (in both senses of the term) severance of the very principle of transference, i.e. of the very principle of knowing and of witnessing. In other words, here we encounter an imperative to remember (Zakhor<sup>24</sup>) which is “a real that is forever incommensurable” (Мишелс 2024: 373) for it is precisely inscribed in the body.

See this exposition [of Zakhor], which might seem a bit unconventional, brings forth a very important lesson: because it turns out, that in some intuitive way, the nazis understood it. They knew that the question is not to fight the Jews on an ideational or on a spiritual plane but that they had to take out the bodies, all bodies, and therefore those of the women and the children in order to strike [*toucher*] the principle of transference and the transcending of the text. (Мишелс 2024: 385)

It is the above that unlocks Wertheimer’s truly tragic descent. For as we said it is not only Gould who strikes the Jew body; it is the loser who also rejects his own body, who reads, and writes, and blabbers, and even starts playing the piano again in the end but without transmitting anything. Without ever becoming a body or at least a book.

And as a final instance of the loser’s brutal and tragic decent, he kills himself. And we are told that suicide is the only decision Wertheimer has ever made (Bernhard 2006: 63). But it is an effete decision, because it is the self-destruction of an already absent body. It is neither an act of defiance, nor of a working through. It is a deeply cynical act of acceptance – of the violence of totality, of a double impossibility (to talk/write and to be silent), and lastly – of a shameful *jouissance* in being forever (self)-excluded from music. Thus, what is left from the loser is his burned Zettel<sup>25</sup>. The ash of an absent book.

He had taken out hundreds and thousands of notes from all his drawers and closets and with his, Franz’s, help had dragged them down to the dining room to burn the notes, solely for the purpose of burning the notes he’d had Franz light the dining room stove at five in the morning that day, said Franz. When the notes were all burned, *all that writing*, as Franz expressed himself, he, Wertheimer, called up Salzburg and ordered the piano... (Bernhard 2006: 120)

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<sup>24</sup> “Zakhor” literally means “remember”. It designates the strange ethical imperative of remembrance as a traversal of history which in its very traversing constitutes it (Мишелс 2024: 384). And the crucial moment is that Zakhor is an imperative of memory which is based on a conception of the body as text. The body as an ethical demand (Мишелс 2024: 385).

<sup>25</sup> According to Mark A. Anderson, Wittgenstein referred to his late philosophical works as “Zettel” (Bernhard 2006: 130).

### 2.3. The Unnamed or Deleuzian surface(s)

We have now come to the question of who or what tells the story of this mutual destruction, borne through the obscene nonsensical relation between a desire for the pure idea (Gould) and the desire of a body rejecting itself (the designated loser). Furthermore, we have arrived at the question of what does this unnamed voice both inside and outside Bernhard's text designate? How are we to think its insistence, its being the seemingly real witness (the third) of the destructive event and the desolate post-evental landscape of death, madness, and suicide (again inside and outside for we must not forget the autobiographical dimension of the work)?

First of all, true to our choice of a Deleuzian schema, we could say that in Bernhard's unnamed narrator, we encounter the animal of the surface. We experience the oscillations of a tick's voice caught somewhere in between the cretinous monumentality of an excessive (hyperbolic) ornamental One-All and the chaotic divergences (the material depths) of the deadly work. In other words – it is a voice caught between the ascent of Gould qua the pure fascist, reaching its kitsch crescendo in the image of Gould dying at his piano in the middle of Bach's Goldberg Variations, and Wertheimer's burnt Zettel as well as the unnamed narrator's own "writer's inanities" (Bernhard 2006: 62), both of which brandish their respective existences throughout "The Loser"'s hyper-monological traversal. In other words, we do see the deterioration process of a witness caught between fascination and hatred, and most importantly – caught in the trenches of an impossible decision, i.e. the paradoxical imperative (the impasse) of having to judge what cannot be judged (transcendental trauma).

Wertheimer, Glenn, myself, all cripples, I thought. Friendship, artistry! I thought, my God, what madness! I'm the survivor! Now I'm alone, I thought, since, to tell the truth, I only had two people in my life who gave it any meaning: Glenn and Wertheimer. Now Glenn and Wertheimer are dead and I have to come to terms with this fact. (Bernhard 2006: 25)

However, as we said the crucial moment is not the suspension of the third in between Glenn's and the loser's deaths and their consequences. It is the insistence of the paradoxical imperative of having to make the impossible judgement and the procedure that articulates the latter. And even the short quote above gives us a clue to this procedure of the unnamed. Because it is evident that in the passage there is a parasite. The parasite of the "I thought (*dachte ich*)". For there are 677 instances of the "I thought"-parasite in the English translation of "The Loser" and 701 in the original German text. As to the conceptual importance of this quantitative fact – it expresses nothing other than a radicalisation of an empty form (Deleuze's Aion). The voided "I thought" traverses the text of "The Loser", so as to fill every one of its cracks. But it does not fill these discursive cracks with meaning, with the possibility for a name or decision (judgement) that would dissolve the impasse we have just described. The "I thought" fills almost every sentence with more emptiness,

with the repetition of a nothing. It layers and layers the speech of the unnamed until the dumb insistence of the “I thought” comes to articulate the very predicament of trying to come to terms with the obscene fusion of Glenn and Wertheimer. A fusion through which their mutual destruction and the destruction of a world (the transcendental trauma of fascism) is effectuated. Put differently, the “I thought” gives us the radical refrain and rhythm of “The Loser”. And “if one takes on the rhythm and refrain [of this parasite]... if one holds up, all this northern fog which lands on top of us starts to dissipate and underneath there is an amazing architecture.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus, let us ask:

How are we to make the amazing architecture revealed by the “I thought”-parasite more concrete? What does its empty repetition and repetition of emptiness actually mean and/or achieve in Bernhard’s novel?

The 677 instances of the “I thought” in “The Loser” construct what we can call an unnamed subject-(of)-judgement, meaning a subject through which a crucial immanent transformation (a desublimation) occurs. Thus, what occurs is an effectuation of the impossibility to judge an event. Moreover, it is the effectuation of the impossible task as an impossible task. This is the conceptual crux of the novel. Furthermore, it is through the construction formed by an incessant empty repetition and repetition of emptiness that we encounter an IT or the crucial operation of the unnamed narrator. For IT qua unnamed is nothing other than “the universal non-human subject of unconscious – the unconscious subject with which I am identical in the last instance” (Brassier 2003: 429).

Moreover, desublimation means that death [judgement of the impossible] is already in effect: my subjectivation as IT puts death [judgement of the impossible] into effect as thought. Thus, since I am IT, the subject as universal unconscious organon, then I am the subject-(of)-death [subject-(of)-judgement]. Thought is not labor of the negative but organon of death [judgement]. As organon, IT, the subject-(of)-death [subject-(of)-judgement], inhabits the non-thetic universe of the autistic unconscious: IT is deaf, dumb and blind. (Brassier 2003: 429)

And if we further unpack this rather heavy non-philosophical idea (subject-of-death qua subject-of-judgement) that works through Ray Brassier’s thoughts on the death-drive, we could see why it is important for us in revealing the amazing architecture of “The Loser”.

Because the construction of this deaf, dumb, blind (and repetitive) IT-body outlines a radical trajectory for effectuating judgement but a judgement without a horizon (Brassier 2003: 429). For sublimating judgement under some political, ethical, ontological instance (a filled “I thought”), i.e. under a horizon, would mean the very death of judgement. It would mean destroying the present of tes-

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<sup>26</sup> Deleuze 1978: Gilles Deleuze. Kant: Synthesis and Time – The Deleuze Seminars. [online] <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminar/kant-synthesis-and-time/> [accessed on 10.02.2025]

tifying. Put differently, sublimation would make transcendental trauma (Gould's and Wertheimer's mutual destruction) an agent of affective, ethical, ontological, political, etc. autopositionings. And "The Loser" attempts to work precisely against such autopositionings. Against fusion and obviation of the present of testifying. For the very wager of the novel is the radical working through of transcendental trauma which – we can repeat – is the paradox of operationalising the impasse. Of constructing an IT-body capable of traversing the impossible as impossible in order to keep testifying, i.e. to keep judgement-of-judgement ("the death of death" as Brassier puts it), alive.

Furthermore, there is one more crucial idea contained within the operation of the IT-body qua "I thought"-parasite. An idea that not only concretises the former but also articulates the full conceptual force of keeping testifying alive. The construction of an IT-body reveals a key point within the relation between fascism and music. And the reason for the latter is that to keep testifying alive (its recommencing as impossible judgement) also means opening the problem of time. Since in the last instance what attempts to universalise music by being its crucial subject, is precisely the orders (in a dual sense) of time.

Therefore, given all we have said so far, we could point out that the construction of Bernhard's IT-body is basically an attempt to create a different time (and for that matter a different space qua surface). An immanent always (re)commencing time that tries to unbind music from the orders of fascism, from the orders that bind time as music either to the pure totality of unmediated communication between a piano and a composition (Gould), or to the effete decent into the materiality of hideous sounds dispersed by an already absent body (Wertheimer)<sup>27</sup>. To put it differently; it is question of ontological and existential bindings that, in the end, destroy the expressive force of time by measuring it against the horizon of a stagnated eternity, i.e. a One.

Finally, from here we can fully flesh out what we meant by resisting the orders of fascism. For the construction and deployment of an IT-body is a precarious attempt to outline a present, a zone of a different time. It is an attempt to give expressive force to the gesture of testifying by binding the former to the transcendental trauma in a way that resists the temptation of creating and subsuming it under a horizon of judgement. In other words, we speak here of an attempt to open a spacetime for a witness of a non-affirmative force capable of keeping the impasse of judgement. The almost unbearable 677 instances, their empty repetition inscribed in the textual body are the traces of exactly this paradoxical imperative.

Having said that, let us conclude this short reading of "The Loser" with some remarks that could generalise the ideas we have just presented. A generalisation that would both strengthen the proposed reading of the novel as one exploring the

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<sup>27</sup> Right before his suicide Wertheimer stages a highly stylised theatre of his repression and descent into madness (a carnival in the Bakhtian sense) by tormenting a group of guests he hates with hideous musical performances on a totally corrupted piano. "Wertheimer actually drove his guests crazy with his piano playing... piano was an Ehrbar and worth nothing. And it was, as I noticed right away, totally out of tune, an amateur's instrument

complex relation between fascism and music; the impossible task of testifying; and also – a novel that has the potential to open a discussion on how to think the encounter of music and text.

### **Gesture and Witness(ing)**

Let us turn to the finale of Bernhard's "The Loser". More precisely – to its very last sentence. "I asked Franz to leave me alone in Wertheimer's room for a while and put on Glenn's Goldberg Variations, which I had seen lying on Wertheimer's record player, which was still open" (Bernhard 2006: 120). Here even the constructed IT-body is left behind. The reason for this is that even IT has come too close to becoming the horizon (of judgement), i.e. IT has come too close to what IT has spent so much time resisting through its empty repetitions. Thus, what happens is a gesture. IT puts a record on a player. Then IT abandons itself and the text. To what? To Glenn's Variations? To the initial screeches of Wertheimer's recorder? To silence? Or better yet, to a literalisation of deafness and muteness, i.e. to an autistic testifying machine (a record player)? One cannot be sure. That is the rather trivial and at the same time ambivalent idea of abandoning a work, a text (especially on the subject of transcendental trauma and fascism) in the last instance.

In summary, at the very end of "The Loser" we encounter even the gesture (not just the discourse) of non-conclusion, non-judgement, and non-affirmation of what has taken place and its consequences. Therefore, we must address at last the real of the question that is what does remain? For there is always a remnant of sorts and Bernhard's non(s) make no exception since as was demonstrated from our comments above (in 3.3) a "non" does not designate negation or an absence but an effectuation, i.e. a working through, of the impasse itself.

In a short essay on Pierre Boulez and Marcel Proust (i.e. on the encounter of music and text), Deleuze defines precisely this remnant of sorts articulating itself through the many non(s), empty repetitions, constructed IT-bodies, etc. He writes: "... then there is "re-gained" time; identified, but in the instant. It is the "gesture" of time or the *envelope of fixed*" (Deleuze 2007: 304)<sup>28</sup>. Thus, we could say that what remains in that last instant where abandonment (as non-judgement, non-affirmation, etc.) takes place, is the identification of a rather strange force of a "some time" (Deleuze 2007: 303). A force of the abandoning gesture itself that unbinds "some music" qua some time from the orders of the particular Ones that try to repress, eternalise, and ultimately destroy it.

So, there is an important lesson contained in this unbound and non-determi-

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through and through, I thought" (Bernhard 2006: 118 – 119).

<sup>28</sup> What Deleuze means by "envelope of fixed" is the identification of difference as such, i.e. the strange force of "some time". "Even in repetition, the fixed is not the Same and does not reveal an identity beneath variations. The contrary is true. It allows the identification of the variation, or individuation without identity. That is how it extends perception... Instead of bringing difference to the Same, it allows the identification of difference as such" (Deleuze 2007: 297).

nate music (what remains) engendered by the abandoning gesture. In it there is a conceptual and an aesthetic wager capable of developing further the lines of resistance to fascism as found in Bernhard's novel, i.e. to the (impossible) imperative of witnessing transcendental trauma. For the gesture of this unbound and non-determinate music is "making language fail" (Bonnet 2020: 49). It is a music made all the more intense since it is born of traversing an entire textual surface (a novel), that has tried to capture it. A surface that has tried to say it (677 times) – "music does not say itself" (Bonnet 2020: 49); to regulate it by giving it a moral, existential, or political horizon; to molar/moral-ize the act of its witnessing even when that same surface has tried to save it from the One of fascism.

In other words, Bernhard's gesture in the last instance is the uncertain attempt to unbind music from language itself. To produce an (im)possible literature outside of literature. A non-literature perhaps? That is – it tries to reverse what the musician and musical theorist Francois J. Bonnet in his manifesto "The Music to Come" identifies as the constitutive repression of music.

Any art that mobilises language, or for which language serves as an axis, is literature. To speak of musical writing, even in a diffuse sense, is to claim a literary status for music... the music to come dissolves the territory, abolishes the protocols. It frees itself from literature, its future unfolds outside the realm of the letter. (Bonnet 2020: 42)

However, such a reverse is not meant as an attempt to order literature under the logic of music, under its techniques, problems and desires. Otherwise, this would amount to what Bonnet explicitly rejects, i.e. to a repression of literature through music. To reverse the relation of music and literature then means to construct a place, to regain "some time" and use it not for binding music and literature but for unbinding them. In other words, to create the instance of their distance. That is what the abandoning gesture in the end of "The Loser" achieves. It unbinds the last One trying to capture it. And through the gesture of such an unbinding "The Loser" achieves its (im)possible task. It achieves the figure of witnessing transcendental trauma.

In the end, witnessing is creating the place and time for thinking distance. It is the precarious attempt to produce some non(s). And to witness is to at least attempt resistance. To resist is to unbind. The literature to come is unbinding.

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