

Alte Meister

Th. Bernhard

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The book consists in a series of diatribes given by the music critic Reger and relayed by the narrator, the autodidact Atzbacher. The whole thing takes place in the *Kunsthistorische Museum* in Vienna, in fact Reger has the habit of every other day visiting the museum to sit on the bench in the Bordone -Saal ostensibly contemplating Tintoretto's *Weissbrütigem Mann*. It is good for me to sit there and think of music, he explains, the temperature at 18C intended for the protection of the paintings is ideal for that purpose. During the year he has befriended the guard - Irrsieglers, who looks out for him, and if needed admonishes people to leave the bench when Reger punctually is approaching, and in fact at times even closing the room altogether to leave Reger in peace. We learn that Reger is a successful music critic who writes regularly for the Times in London. Furthermore that he is 82 years old and recently widowed after his 87 year old wife fell on her way to the Museum, a tragedy for Reger, who holds the city of Vienna, the Art history museum, and the hospital responsible. It transpires that his wife was quite wealthy leaving him in comfortable circumstances with a huge centrally situated apartment, whose main disadvantage, apart from its huge size, is the tastelessness exhibited in its furnishing including the paintings. But Reger, uncharacteristically forgives his spouse this lack of taste. He loves her dearly and life after her death has almost become pointless to him, but with an effort of will he has decided to live on nevertheless sticking to his routines, without which he would be lost.

Reger denounces everything, or almost everything. The problem with such comprehensive denouncement is that it invariably becomes contradictory, but mere logic is of course incidental to the whole project, which then becomes highly entertaining. It is clearly written tongue in cheek and labeled by the author as a comedy.

What does Reger inveigh against? Almost everything, as noted, once he gets heated up, everything takes care of itself, one thing leading to another, each digression inspiring a new one in an almost breathless dance. Once you get started there is no way you can stop. And of course there is plenty of things that rubs you the wrong way. Take such a thing as the museum itself. It has plenty of visitors, but what do all those multitudes get out of their visits to the temple of art? To study music you need to study painting, Reger muses, and to study painting you conversely need to study music. Thus Reger firmly believes in the sanctity of art and high culture, so what could provoke his ire more than all those hordes of people, including noisy school classes of children, that are herded through the collections. What do they see, what do they understand, what do they grasp at all? Does it have any emotional or intellectual effect of any kind? And all those museum guides giving pointless explanations to mindless audiences. They point out merely the obvious, drenching the paintings in pointless verbiage. Irrsieglers understands more about art than all those academic art experts, he knows, because he has taught him during all those years, words of wisdom indeed which Atzbacher initially have had regurgitated and

indigested from the accommodating guard himself prior to the session of the day. Classes of school-children makes him think of teachers and hateful memories from his days in school. Teachers are due for censure, worthless narrow-minded creatures who deserve all the scorn he is capable of. But this is of course only the beginning. The next step is to disparage the old masters themselves, the object of the general veneration. They are not worthy of the attention they receive. They are not true to themselves and their crafts. They are not as perfect as they are made out to be. And so on. What is general becomes specific. What is specific is sharper. He goes on and on about how worthless Stifter is. The writer who everyone in Austria admires, and who, he hates to admit, he used to admire himself until he saw through him. There is nothing to admire in Stifter. He is a fake. A pretentious fake, in fact, and he exhibits a certain relief at hitting upon the right, if somewhat expected word - Kitsch. Stifter is Kitsch. He repeats it over and over again to emphasize the fact. In fact repetition is one of the hallmarks of Bernhard's prose style. Elaborate, affected, intentionally ridiculous. And it works. It is like being carried by a wave breaking in the surf, only to be picked up again, and again, thrown to the sand. There is hardly time to catch your breath. Relentlessly matters are hammered into you. After he had exhausted himself on Stifter, a veritable tour de force of diatribism, with Reger (or the author) getting in stride, it is the turn of Heidegger to get his due. He is ridiculous of course. *Lcherlich* (laughable) in his funny hat, playing the role of the rustic thinker. It is incredible that people take him seriously, that he himself may have taken him seriously, he has nothing to offer, not an original thought, not a thought at all, for that matter. Just the empty charade of being a rustic philosopher, posing while baking bread or chopping wood, all the time wearing the same stupid hat. Not a single ounce of philosopher in him. In fact Reger find him even more detestable than Stifter, who after all could write a letter, and whose fatal shortcomings had something tragic about him. Nothing tragic about Heidegger, nothing at all. Just comic failure. Utterly kitschy and laughable.

And so and so he goes on. He lets Reger shake his fist against the Austrian newspapers, the politicians in Austria, the peasants in Oberland, or whatever region in Austria, does not matter. Against the wife of his friend Irrsieglar, the museum guard, against his children. Against the dirty toilets in Vienna, so dirty you can hardly use them, although he admits that after the renovation at the hotel Ambassador, his other haunt, the toilets are quite presentable and offer a sanctuary. And so on and on. Bernhard is a master of the diatribe. Doing it with aplomb. Tongue in cheek, going wild with suppressed laughter. Good fun, not to say great. Still in all diatribes there is a significant element of sour grapes. There must be some overwhelming motivation for it. You cannot just get going on nothing. There has to be a strong element of frustration. There is exaggeration of course, but there has to be some real issues to start to process. And then, bravado apart, there is an undercurrent of serious criticism, which may be hard to detect under all the flow. When the author lets Reger inveigh against the old masters, he is inveighing against the kind of mindless veneration we bring to them. A veneration that takes on a life of its own and is not so much addressed to the ostensible object as to the impression it will make on others. It can so easily take the form of collective hysteria. There is an element of paranoia as well in all diatribes, and like all paranoids, there is a heightened sensitivity to what is false

and 'verlogen'. He also lets Reger point out that if you study a passage in say Goethe or Shakespeare too long and too intently it starts to dissolve and become laughable and absurd. It loses the meaning it once had and becomes empty and dead. One could see this as a criticism against conscientious humanistic study. What is beautiful, what is uplifting, what is profound, loses all those attributes when studied too hard, taken too seriously for too long. Maybe the thoughts of men, unlike phenomena of nature, do not stand up to prolonged sustained inquiry? We put so much meaning and comfort in the classics, but after all, when all is said and done, they cannot give us solace, not like a real person can do, when all is said and done, they are nothing but dead letters, no longer able to generate any meaning. Just like a painting is no nature, but just paint on canvas, so with literature and philosophy, just words on paper. Nothing more. ...[sie] lassen uns genau in dem Augenblick im Stich, in welchem wir sie so notwendig gehabt hatten.¹ Reger (along with the author?) thus becomes a species of a moralist. We cannot live without other people. This is the fate against those who inveighs, they have ultimately a moral message, hence the urgency of their appeals. Ultimately they may seem to be banal. We cannot live without other people, yet it has consequences. Reger berates the narrator for writing without publishing. The basic instinct of any writer is to present his work to the outside world to get comments.

There is another aspect to art, or rather to the appreciation of it. The idea that the artist speaks to you and no one else. That you and the artist are alone together in the world, and that there is an exclusive communication. *Ich bin ein Besitzdenker*² Reger confesses *Ich wre gern in dem Glauben, Goya habe nur fr mich allein gemalt, Gogol und Goethe htte nur fr mich allein geschrieben, Bach habe nur fr mich allein komponiert*.³ The sentiment is, I believe, not unusual. Furthermore, even less original maybe, Reger admits to enjoy the past not the present. The latter he founds to be an affront (*Beleidigung*). Reger, this lover and connoisseur of music, complains of its ubiquity. *Die Welt ist durch und durch von totaler Musik durchdrungen*⁴. Not that it is bad music, mindless muzak so to speak, it is good music, perfect music, which becomes intrusive and threatens to drive you crazy. People of today are overtaken by a music-consumption whose effects are far more dangerous than the usual garbage heap that results from material consumption. This music without any cessations is the most brutal thing that people of today have to put up with.

The novel ends by Reger inviting Atzbach to a performance of the *Zerbrochenen Krug* at the *Burgtheater*. Reger pleads with his friend the narrator to join him. This is why he made an appointment to see him at the museum. Just to tell him this. The narrator accepts of course. Predictably the performance is dreadful. The last words being indeed *Die Vorstellung war entsetzlich*.

¹ [they] leave us in the lurch when we need them the most.

² I am possessive

³ I would rather believe that Goya had only painted for me, and Gogol and Goethe written only for me alone, that Bach had only composed for me and no one else

⁴ The world is through and through penetrated by music

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