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The nature of things : the positioning of the reader in Thomas Bernhard's *The voice imitator*

Sean Patrick Magee
Lehigh University

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Magee, Sean
Patrick

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“The Nature of Things: The Positioning of the Reader in Thomas Bernhard’s *The Voice Imitator*”

by

Sean Patrick Magee

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Thesis Advisor

Graduate Coordinator

Chairperson of Department

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I examine narration and the use of newspapers in Thomas Bernhard's *The Voice Imitator*. Applying Wolfgang Iser's work in reception theory, I contend that narrators and newspapers in these stories, whether they are unified forces or in conflict with each other, attempt to move the reader to a resistant position, one where textual authority must be disregarded. While the majority of Bernhard's narrators veil their attempted manipulations of the reader, several narrators move beyond this hidden manipulation, demonstrating that the act of writing becomes an attempt to keep hold of reality when that reality is horrifying. I suggest that through these narrators and functions of journalistic text Bernhard expresses an undying faith in his audience to move beyond textual manipulation and accept that the written word cannot be trusted.

I. Introduction

For Jonathan Long, the narrators in Thomas Bernhard's *The Voice Imitator* do not take an active role in the transmission of their stories. Long claims: "The first point to note is that although the narrator is "character-bound" (that is, present at the level of story), he is never an important actant in the story and exists almost exclusively in the capacity of witness" (344). Such an interpretation of the narrators of Bernhard's text is a tremendously misleading one; Long's reading is one that reduces the narrator to a powerless messenger, a witness and recorder who simply sees events and makes these events known to the reader. Iser's work in reception theory asserts that the narrator's position in the text, whether he is in what Long calls an "actant" capacity or the role of recorder, is the sole source of power in the relationship between reader and text. The narrators, as tellers of the stories, take the role of author, a position Iser believes comes with a great deal more command than readers recognize:

Are we then, to trust the author when he makes his comments? Or are we not, rather, to test what he says for ourselves? Frequently the author's own comments seem to contradict what we have assumed from the events he has described, and if his comments are to make sense to us, we may feel we need further information. Has one perhaps read inattentively there? Or should one, solely on the ground of the reading, correct the comments of the author in order to find by oneself the evaluation of the events? Unexpectedly, then, the reader finds that he is dealing not only with the characters in the novel but also with an author who interposes himself as a mediator between the story and the reader. Now he demands the attention of the reader just as much as the story itself does (13).

I would venture that Bernhard's narrators, particularly those who incorporate the newspapers into their stories, are in a position of power, a power they frequently exert upon their audience. They, without the fear of penalty or repercussion, choose

evidence, determine positions in the text, and pressure the reader through their choices and agendas. Rather than limiting these narrators to the title of witness, I offer that they are advocates and strategists, trying at all times to move the reader to a desired position, usually of resistance. Where a witness only sees and recounts events, these narrators produce other witnesses, supply themes, and attempt to overthrow an opposing belief system. The goal of this paper is to show that Bernhard, through these authorities, pressures the reader to question and disregard textual authority. These attempts to push the audience make objectivity a difficult, even impossible aim. These concepts of resistance culminate in “Disappointed Englishman” and “Example,” where the readers discover the ones in charge of conveying fact have no hope of remaining objective since the occurrences of daily existence are so horrible. We are left with a frightening reality, a world where the facts and objectivity we depend on are controlled by forces that care nothing for fact, while those who attempt objectivity pay terrible consequences. Through these narrators Bernhard urges the readers to resist the textual authority being thrown at them.

II. Underhanded Narrations: Positioning the Reader against the Text

In the first group of stories where Bernhard pushes the reader toward a resistant position are ones in which the narrator employs the newspapers as a deliberately alarming source, implying that to accept the newspaper as a trustworthy authority is unsafe. These stories push the ideology that textual authority cannot be trusted, making narrator and newspaper weapons of an unknown power. In “Character Assassination” the narrator employs the newspaper as a means of destruction, a danger the reader must

be leery of in order to function in the world of the story. The mention of the newspaper marks a line between friendship and rivalry, where, because of the newspaper, the two philosophers realize they are in competition with each other and, therefore, cannot be friends:

When, however, one of them said he would give an account of his meeting in the Goethe House in the newspaper that was, in his opinion, the best and would do so, in the nature of things, in the form of a philosophical essay, the other immediately resisted the idea and characterized his colleague's intention as character assassination. (3)

The narrator forces the newspaper into the role of scapegoat, a designation of which the narrator is certainly aware. Until the mention of the newspaper the philosophers share "a mutual respect and admiration," a bond broken by the involvement of the newspaper (3). At this point the act of writing becomes dangerous, making well-intentioned communication between the two philosophers impossible. The newspaper is made a weapon in what has degenerated into a duel between the philosophers, where the attempt to compliment becomes the attempt to destroy.

Though "Speleologists" mentions a newspaper only briefly, the newspaper serves as a tool of the narrator to frighten the audience, positioning the reader where he must either be timid or resistant. The story, of a cave in Salzburg which the authorities wall up after several speleological teams and their would-be rescuers are never seen again after entering, is one meant to frighten. The speleologists are trained and capable, so that when three experienced and capable teams are never seen again, the reader is made to feel that, as with all of the stories in the collection, something is wrong. The narrator's selection of newspaper text, along with the use of the first person plural,

emphasizes a consensus among authorities that the cave is dangerous long before the explorers disappear: "...the cave between Taxenbach and Schwarzach, which, as we learned from the newspaper, had until then been totally unexplored" (10). The narrator applies the newspaper text as sole authority on what has previously happened in the cave, and the narrator emphasizes the troubling dearth of authority that exists on the cave's history. Sources, insisted upon by any newspaper editor, are blatantly omitted. But the narrator's majority accepts this omission, and so nothing more is said of the newspaper's power as sole authority. The use of "we" pressures the audience to accept the newspaper as authentic, since questioning whether the cave was unexplored before the disappearances places the reader outside of the narrator's circle.

Through subtle narration "Inner Compulsion" also identifies the newspaper as a cumbersome authority, making clear to the reader what his position should be without passing judgment on journalistic text. The story depends on several different accounts, none apparently reliable. The narrator, as with several stories in the collection, serves as a courtroom reporter, explaining the fireman's defense: "The youngest of the firemen stated in court...that he had run away, without letting go of the safety blanket, when he saw that the suicide had carried out his threat" (9). But for the rest of the action the narrator takes the focus off himself as the source of truth, relying on the newspaper: "an unhappy student according to the newspaper, had smashed onto the square in front of the house to which he had been clinging for so long" (9). Yet, though order is questioned, the placement of the newspaper in this order becomes ambiguous. The narrator instructs the audience that through the acquittal of the young man an

atrocious act is being committed. The audience is told to spare the rest of the crew because the one with whom we are supposed to find fault is “as we said, ...the youngest and strongest of them” (9). But the narrator later convinces his audience that the defendant’s acquittal is an atrocious act: “The court...could not deny the responsibility of the chief defendant and acquitted him together with the other five Krems firemen although, in the nature of things, not convinced of his innocence” (9). This question of order becomes a much larger problem with the chilling reminder from the narrator that “The Krems fire department has for decades been reported to be the best fire department in the world” (9). But the newspaper, usually a tool of the keepers of the sense of order the narrator is at odds with, has taken pity on the victim of this order, the unhappy student who held on “clinging for so long” (9). Through a selection of newspaper texts the narrator creates an alliance with the newspaper to force the reader to refuse to see the suicide as an accident. As usual, the essential truth, the source that can tell the audience what possible reasons the firemen may have for wanting the unhappy student to fall to his death, is silenced. The reader is forced to question without hope of answer. This timid narration also exists in “Presence of Mind” where the narrator attempts to move the reader towards a resistant position. Strangely, the narrator pulls out of the report early, appearing to leave the tale to the newspaper: “Presence of mind was displayed by a man in Rutzenmoos who saved a three-year-old boy from a mad bull, as the *Linzer Tagblatt* reports” (72). The victim’s firm, what should be of minor importance, is given a great deal of attention early:

The man, a cement worker [is] employed by the firm of Hatschek, which has for decades furnished employment to thousands of workers and is

constantly showing examples of civic-mindedness in the whole area by building children's homes and hospitals and giving financial support to old-people's homes and lunatic asylums... (72)

The narrator directs the focus of the story off the man who was killed by the bull, and onto what the newspaper focuses upon after the tragedy. The newspaper attempts to construct the tragedy as nothing tragic, a construction it may be pressured to make by the powerful firm in Hatscheck:

Today the *Linzer Tagblatt* has a picture of the boy from Rutzenmoos, a picture of the rescuer's wife, a picture of the red cardigan that the woman had knitted her husband for Christmas, a picture of the site where the event occurred, and a picture of the bull whose attention had been drawn by the Rutzenmoos cement worker away from the boy from Rutzenmoos and to the cement worker from Rutzenmoos. The vicious bull has, as the *Linzer Tagblatt* writes, been slaughtered. (72)

If we accept the narrator's selections of newspaper text, we are meant to assume that the newspaper text is influenced by a power determined to keep the reading public complacent. The slaughtering of the bull along with the images in the newspaper lends what the newspaper hopes will be closure to the accident. But the narrator, without laying open blame on the newspaper, is not comfortable with the reader seeing the incident as over and moving on. The newspaper is hopeless to resist the power structure so that, if the newspaper is trying to call for help as the narrator suggests may be happening, the text must covertly convince the reader that more is going in the story than a cement worker playing hero and his community moving beyond his death.

These selections, stories where Bernhard's narrators depict newspapers as reflecting a problematic order, move the reader by pressuring him to ask questions where there are no available answers. Though we can be sure the suicide's death is no

accident, we can never know what reasons the firemen have for moving the instrument that would surely have saved his life. Who the speleological specialists were, what happened or is happening in the cave, and whether there is a cover up at work is certainly suggested by the narrator, but never proven. How the bull's looking over the child and killing the cement worker could be ignored to the point of celebration is mysterious, but the reader has none of the information to research further. This troubling use and denial of evidence makes the reader uncomfortable, a suggestion by the narrators that much more evidence would be given if there were not (apparently) dangerous consequences for such gifts. The reader should not be looking at newspapers as objective mechanisms, but troubled agents attempting to move the reader to think for himself, becoming an agent for the change that the newspapers cannot.

III. Singular Authority: Narrators as Sources of Truth

In many stories the narrator becomes his own authority without any help whatsoever by a newspaper, forcing the reader into a position of weakness in stories that reveal an alarming problem through murder or political conspiracy. In "Fear" the narrator assumes a role of omnipotence, excluding any source of fact. The narrator, depending on nothing else for corroboration, tells the story of a Tyrolean typesetter who kills a child. He is the news source, and his audience's only option is dependence. The reader cannot question the inclusion and omission of several important details of the text, such as why the Tyrolean is afraid of the schoolchild. The narrator makes a silent claim here, that he knows why the jury came to such a verdict:

...The jury did not believe him, for the typesetter, who was actually born in Schwaz, and whose father had earned great respect as the master of

Tyrolean guild of butchers, was six foot two tall and, as a jury determined in the courtroom, was capable of lifting a three hundred pound ball six feet off the ground without faltering. (7)

The account instructs the reader to accept the narrator's assumption that the typesetter is a brute who could not possibly be afraid of the schoolchild. But the narrator fails to explain any possible motives the typesetter could have for killing the child. If the audience accepts the narrator's account as accurate, the grounds for conviction are that the typesetter is physically capable of killing the child, an assertion the typesetter never denies. But brute strength fails to explain what motive the typesetter could have had, a problem the narrator attempts to mask by showing that the jury convicted the typesetter regardless of motive. The reader is now thrown into a position of opposition, one where he must question events though he has no other source of truth, or side with an audience that is naïve.

In "Double" the narrator takes the role of activist working as a journalistic source, revealing the dangers of a power structure and the resistant majority the narrator edges the reader into. The narrator points to a conspiracy on all sides, from the government of Yugoslavia willing to label several as slanderers to the disappearing double from Terbinje willing to work as president for free. The resistance of the narrator is shared by all Yugoslavians, which "would make all Yugoslavians slanderers" (90). The newspaper is unnecessary here since the media is being placed into two groups, a conspiring government or a helpless but informed public. If the narrator places the newspaper with the government the newspaper becomes pointless since it is part of the group maintaining power, adding nothing the narrator can use. If the

newspaper is part of the public, citing newspaper contributions defeats the purpose since the narrator then relies on the newspaper for validation. The narrator instead takes full authority on information, showing a confidence useful in convincing the reader of his stance.

“Pisa and Venice” also addresses the issue of narrative and journalistic control, embedding a fear of existence in which narrative tone attempts to shape a world with a sense of order. Such a misleading representation of fact displays the control and subversion of truth and fact at work in both cities. The narrator here also attempts to take a journalist approach, but forces a stance that the terrifying themes at work are not so. Though the narrator addresses the attempts to switch the monuments as “scandalous,” the actual taking of the mayors into the lunatic asylums is not met with any such judgments. The fact that the mayors are committed in neighboring towns makes a morbid kind of sense to the narrator, “the mayor of Pisa in the nature of things to the lunatic asylum in Venice and the mayor of Venice to the lunatic asylum in Pisa” (6). Inferring that how and where the mayors are committed is how things are meant to be not only absolves the reader from being alarmed, but pressures the reader into accepting these circumstances as part of the way problems are handled. In challenging the narrator’s implications that the reader need not be shaken by what has transpired, the reader risks going against what the narrator insists is supposed to be. The mayors make the penalties for going against that order clear.

The final sentence adds an equally frightening concept, implying that the more silent we can keep these late night kidnappings the better. The narration ends the

account assuring the reader, "The Italian authorities were able to handle the affair in complete confidentiality," conveying to the reader that since whatever problem there was has been handled, there is no longer anything to worry about (6). If the reader is upset or uncomfortable, he is going against the idea that what has transpired is nothing out of the ordinary, and if the mayors were indeed thrown into lunatic asylums the penalty is warranted. To question what is unproven shows a paranoia the reader would never consciously admit. There's an implied threat here, one that Bernhard is pushing on the reader through a narrator who represents the establishment.

Narration and journalism in both groups of stories show a manipulation of meaning working through various audiences. Newspaper readers depend on these journalists for truth, so the established authorities secure an omnipotent role. They control what the reader sees and feels. If the audience is difficult to influence the story is suppressed, and meaning is destroyed. Since there apparently is no way for the journalists to work the arrest of the mayors to manipulate their readers, the story simply is not printed. The meaning that matters is not truth, but what the tellers want from their audiences. Narrators, whether supporting reactions from media or attempting to counter them, instill a sense of truth in their audiences that pressures readers to think as the narrators wish them to. Audiences, whether listening to journalists or narrators, are instructed on what to believe. If there is a chance the reader can think for himself, he is denied the information on which to base his judgment. But the same reader, through picking up on these systems of omissions, is meant to recognize that fact is blurred to suit a purpose, leading the reader to a cynical reception of what is in front of him.

IV. The Nature of Things: Newspapers as Narratorial Validation

Bernhard's narrators apply the newspapers as a means of validation, pushing their influence on a reader where the narrator's own influence seems inadequate. These narrators, attempting to move the reader to their way of thinking through media sources that confirm narratorial stances, force a decision on the reader to submit to narratorial authority or reject what has been asserted as fact.

In "The Panthers," in which a group of panthers attacks their trainer while sparing the mayor who has come on as a guest trainer, the narrator brings in newspaper text at the end of the story to verify his stance. The narrator points to the mystery of why the trainer is "torn limb from limb" while the mayor goes unharmed (51). The newspaper reaffirms the mystery, pushing a conspiracy theory which has now gone public: "Why they didn't fling themselves onto the mayor, who managed to escape to safety, completely unharmed by the panthers, is what the Polish newspaper is asking" (51). In this case the newspaper is integrated into narratorial opinion, making the cooperative effort of narrator and newspaper difficult to resist. A similar narrator employs the same strategy in "True Love," but in this case the narrator employs several other corroborative sources outside of the newspaper to inspire negative responses toward the target. "True Love" focuses on an Italian in love with a mannequin, an abhorrent relationship that makes him an outcast. The first sentence makes objectivity for the reader impossible as the narrator highlights the strangest facts about the Italian, a sudden, shocking introduction: "An Italian who owns a villa in Riva on Lake Garda and can live very comfortably on the interest his father left him has, according to a

report in *La Stampa*, been living for the last twelve years with a mannequin” (67). Having created a consensus between narrator and newspaper, the public confirms the suspicion of the narrator, “The inhabitants of Riva report that on mild evenings they have observed the Italian, who is said to have studied art history, boarding a glass-domed deluxe boat, which is not too far from his home, with the mannequin to take a ride on the lake” (67). Since the narrator and newspaper’s contact are not as direct, the incorporation of the inhabitants as a third authority is a powerful influence on the reader. Now the partnership between the public and the newspaper becomes official, each helping the other to slander the Italian, now making him incestuous and sacrilegious: “Described years ago as incestuous in a reader’s letter addressed to the newspaper published in Desencano, he had applied to the appropriate civil authorities for permission to marry the mannequin but was refused. The church too had denied him the right to marry his mannequin” (67). In what becomes a mission to turn the reader against the Italian, the narrator covers all possible areas. To sympathize with the Italian goes against narrator, newspaper, a public that has an element of control over the media, and church. The newspapers become the communication through which the reader discovers how much those around the Italian hate him, making the reader a potential victim of that hatred if he sympathizes with the Italian.

In “Prescription” the narrator is certainly pushing an agenda, but he cannot separate the relationship between himself and the newspaper. A divided authority holds up the two-sentence story. The narrator is the source of truth for the first and more shocking sentence, “Last week in Linz 180 people died who had the flu that is currently

raging in Linz, but they died not from the flu but as a result of a prescription that was misunderstood by a newly appointed pharmacist” (26). In the second sentence the narrator diverts authority to the newspaper, “The pharmacist will probably be charged with reckless homicide, possibly according to the paper, *even before Christmas*” (26, Bernhard’s Italics). The narrator, deliberately blurring accountability, advances three agendas through the passage: intimidation of the reader, discovery of a flaw in the system, and exoneration of everyone through making the pharmacist responsible for the tragedy sympathetic. The flu, a common illness in the Austrian climate, becomes a fatal disease where risk increases with attempts to treat it. The construction of a safe practice such as medicine as a potentially dangerous act indicates that living is always a perilous condition, and so no one is safe. The narrator characterizes the pharmacist’s mistake as pitiable, making the pharmacist a victim of a society that demands vengeance for human error. Even though society is blamed, the narrator successfully employs the newspaper to make clear this is a tragedy without villains, a world where living is simply dangerous and human error cannot be controlled. The story is a manipulation of readers’ emotions, and truth is applied only when using it helps in the manipulation.

The tragic state of affairs in “Prescription” is juxtaposed with a similar society in “Claim.” The man from Augsburg is portrayed as a conspiracy victim for questioning a saying of Goethe: “[The man] is said to have so frayed the nerves of those with whom he came into contact that they banded together to get this Augsburger, so unhappily obsessed with his claim, committed to a lunatic asylum” (34). The seventh doctor, if we accept the narrator’s implications, sends the Augsburger to the asylum

knowing he was not insane. In this sense, the newspaper becomes a means of validation for the narrator, supplying the authoritative agreement that an injustice is occurring: “It is reported that six doctors refused to commit him to a lunatic asylum but that the seventh immediately arranged to have him committed” (34). This doctor was, as I learned from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, decorated with the Goethe badge of the City of Frankfurt” (34). The selected newspaper text forces the reader to believe that he should feel frustrated and terrified by what he has been shown.

“Suspicion” reveals a frightening irony between a sense of journalism that incites tragedy and a narrative that tries to convince the audience of the objective integrity expected of journalists. The newspaper at the heart of the story is blatantly biased. The narrator addresses two newspaper stories that seem to move the characters toward ends the papers desire for them. In one newspaper selection the Frenchman denies molesting the chambermaid; in the other the newspaper finally condemns the woman, leading to her suicide. The motive of the newspapers is clear, to exploit the Frenchman’s denials, making readers believe he is innocent. If the reader takes the side of the chambermaid, he accepts being part of “a base and malicious Alpine calumny” (17). But there is no such subtlety in the second piece, making clear that we must all believe the chambermaid is “A Disgraceful Kitzbuhl Woman” (17). The attack is blatant, relentless and effective. The newspapers dictate to the reader that they must hate the chambermaid, while they tell the chambermaid her existence will forever be an ignominious one. The chambermaid’s suicide becomes a testament to the horrifying power of the newspaper, a statement that objectivity need not be followed to achieve the

desired result. The narrative voice, however selective of the facts being conveyed, attempts the appearance of factual anecdote, something the newspaper of the story never attempts. The first sentence reveals that the Frenchman is simply “arrested” (17). None of the judgments or leading adjectives are implied here. Research is impressive, highlighting the Frenchman’s background, the circumstances of the incident and the stances all parties (including the journalists) are taking. While the newspapers are quick to proclaim the Frenchman’s innocence along with the authorities, the narrator reserves judgment, at least overtly. Instead of making opinion sound like truth, he stresses that “it was taken as proven that the Frenchman lacked all the preconditions for seducing the chambermaid” (17). But the narrator skews the facts, attempting to make the story a tragedy and the journalists villains. Two newspaper pieces are mentioned, though the reader cannot be certain these are the only two pieces that cover the story. The narrator assumes the knowledge that the chambermaid’s suicide is the direct result of seeing her caption in the newspaper. The final sentence becomes an order to pity the chambermaid: “The body has not been found to this day” (17). The intent is to pass blame on the newspaper as the paper passes blame on the chambermaid. There exists no middle ground between the paper and the narrator and so the nature of truth degenerates into a question about whose side of the representation we find ourselves.

Through “In Lima” Bernhard reminds his audience that this conflict between truth and reporting is justified by the dependence of the people on newspapers to give them something they can believe. There is no apparent conflict between the narrator and the newspaper in this story, creating a union so the reader has no chance to question

what is presented to him. The narrator's information seems completely dependant on the newspapers, being the only source the narrator cites: "Our newspaper gave no further details" (11). Since the newspaper is the sole authority on truth, the narrator remains confident that the criminal "stubbornly maintained" his innocence (11). He enjoys the criminal's "state of total neglect" (11). The narrator enjoys these insults, writing the criminal as someone who deserves to be insulted. He is judged untrustworthy, a label reinforcing the pressure on the reader to hate the criminal as the narrator does. The end of the report becomes a final attempt by the reporter to instill a sense of hatred in the reader. Manipulating fact to make the criminal look false and ridiculous, the newspaper convinces the narrator that the criminal cannot be trusted, nor can the report be questioned: "The man who was arrested was actually born in Ferlach in Carinthia and was a wealthy Austrian who ran a flourishing gunsmith's business in that town" (11). Whether or not the narrator is directly quoting the newspaper, judgmental words such as "actual," "wealthy" and "flourishing" attempt to mold the narrator's audience to his opinion, one the newspaper dictates.

Such a dependence on the newspaper is more threatening than the actual incident. The narrator cites no other source than the newspaper, and so the newspaper is the only authority on information. The narrator sets himself and the newspaper above the police officers, making clear that they are the highest source of intelligence the reader has available:

But since the Tauern and, in the nature of things, the Tappenkar too lie in the Salzburg Alps, as even the police officers in Lima knew, it is not surprising that the Peruvian police officers asked the man, whom, in a state of total neglect, wearing only a pair or ragged trousers and so called

Carinthean peasant shirt, they arrested in downtown Lima because he has appeared suspicious to them, what he was really after in Peru. (11)

Bernhard's phrase "in the nature of things" serves a dual purpose here. Firstly, the phrase makes clear that the police, by pressuring the criminal, are serving a supposed natural order defined as scorning a peasant under questionable circumstances.

Secondly, the narrator and newspapers set themselves up as supreme authorities, the head of the natural order they describe. It is so obvious to these higher intellects that the geography involved makes the criminal worthy of everyone's ignominy that "even the police officers" know it (11). The newspaper and journalist have created a unanimous opinion they believe is as it should be. The reader does not dare question the opinion he is ordered to believe, since he will be exposing himself as someone even less intelligent than ordinary policemen.

When the narrators in this group of stories move the reader to resist the blind acceptance of authority through the amalgamation of narratorial and journalistic text they are, in essence, creating a double standard. In these stories Bernhard's narrators, employing the media as witnesses and instruments, urge the reader to resist the order while simultaneously accepting narratorial authority. In these stories particularly, the narrators become their own power structures. Through the communication of circumstances by writing, these narrators release themselves from accountability, destroying the possibility of defending themselves since they control interaction with the reader, denying the reader the interaction by which the narrators' positions could be further defended or refuted. This communication through writing, as Iser suggests, is a

very difficult position for the reader, who can never have his problems and questions about circumstances of the text answered. The reader remains dependent on one source:

An obvious and major difference between reading and all forms of social interaction is the fact that with reading there is no face-to-face situation. A text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with. The partners in dyadic interaction can ask each other questions in order to ascertain how far their images have bridged the gap of the inexperienceability of one another's experiences. The reader, however, can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate his views of it are. (32)

Reading these stories with Iser's resistant understanding of text in mind, these inclusions of newspaper text become suspicious. In questioning the narrator's stance against authority, the reader remains in danger of blindly accepting the mysterious force the narrators demand we should question. The reader's position is an impossible one; a state where what Iser calls dyadic interaction is necessary but hopeless.

V. Textual Warfare: Narrators in Open Conflict with the Newspapers

Stories in which Bernhard's narrators are in clear opposition to journalistic authority minimize narratorial power, making the reader's position in the text judge or convert, and making clear that objectivity in any indicated text is impossible. "Almost" takes an unpassionate stance against the authority of newspapers, characterizing the newspaper as a goal and stigma simultaneously. The narrator, a member of an unspecified party speaking with a group of journeyman masons, notices that what makes his account notable is the fact that the newspaper would have recognized his death: "I *almost* fell to my death, said the journeyman mason, and he expressly emphasized that because of this he had *almost* appeared in the newspaper" (12, Bernhard's Italics). The narrator constructs the newspapers as an authority, and a very

dangerous one. The narrator's implications, through his conversation with the masons, are that part of the human condition is to want fame, that fame can only come through the newspaper, and the only way to be recognized by the newspaper is through negative or painful achievement, either by an accident or suicide. The journeyman's stress on the newspaper is uncomfortable to the narrator and his group, who apparently do not consider the power the newspaper can have over the individual. The newspaper becomes an agent of destruction, supplying the reward of notoriety to those willing to commit destructive acts. Such violence, particularly self-negating violence, is also affirmed in "In Earnest," where the narrator takes on the newspaper's responsibility and gives recognition to a destructive act. The comic actor, either suicidal or the victim of a tragic accident, is a tool of amusement until he jumps off the ledge. At that moment the narrator's tone changes and a report begins: "But the actor is reported to have been in earnest and to have immediately thrown himself off" (24). The narrator's change to a journalistic approach marks the beginning of bad news, a suggestion that journalistic tone implies tragedy. Such a connotation vilifies the newspapers, claiming that tragedy and journalistic tone are interwoven. This narrative strategy of vilifying the newspaper through subtlety is also at work in "Unworldly," where the narrator constructs the newspaper as unnecessarily merciless. Before introducing the newspaper text the narrator moves the reader to a sympathetic stance: "The cabinetmaker drowned himself in the Langsee on his twenty-second birthday in despair at being so unappreciated" (38). The obituaries contradict the sympathy pushed on the reader: "The newspaper that published a short account of the unappreciated young man emphasized above all else

that he [the suicidal cabinetmaker] was unworldly” (58). The reader, much closer to the narrator than the newspaper, must either refute the newspaper, or endorse the narrator’s implications that the newspaper has cruelly attacked and mocked the cabinetmaker.

“Returned,” while clearly belonging to a group of stories where the narrator positions himself against the newspaper and urges the reader to join the narrator in that position, introduces us to a text where objectivity is now completely ignored and the reader is in the middle of open textual warfare. The narrator separates himself from other narrators who, at the very least, attempt to seem objective, and attacks the newspaper directly. The opening attack is among the most acidic passages in the collection:

If the newspapers in this country bother to say anything about an outstanding artist who is born in this country and who is already of international importance and enjoys international fame, they always talk about a *certain* artist, because in this way they can do him much greater harm in his native land than if they were simply to write down what they really and truly think of this artist, who, because he comes from their own land and belongs to their generation which has not produced much that is notable—incur their hatred as nothing else on earth does and is punished by their hatred to the end of his life and theirs. They never forgive him for giving up on them, at a certain point, for the sake of his art and his science and for continually demonstrating his greatness and their pettiness with work that was always at “the cutting edge.” (104, Bernhard’s Italics).

Ironically, through the complete omission of newspaper text, the narrator is one of the more believable in the collection, certainly for this type of story. The attack is clear and bitter, but not veiled. The narrator’s bias is unquestionable and, while the narrator does not seem to mind if the reader joins him in his position against the newspaper, neither does he seem to care. The narrator’s primary mission is to slander the country’s

newspapers, not to move the reader to his way of thinking. Nor can the narrator's motivation be in question, since he gives the reader his reasons for wanting to slander the newspapers immediately after his diatribe:

With their envy and their hatred they drove my friend to Newcastle in Australia, where he sacrificed himself for his science. When, tormented with homesickness, he told me years ago that he was going to leave Newcastle and return to his native land, I immediately sent him a telegram warning him about returning to his native land, drawing his attention to the fact that this native land was, in truth, nothing more than a common hell in which the intellect is incessantly defamed and art and science are destroyed and that his return would mean his end. He did not follow my advice. He is a terminally ill man, for whom the lunatic asylum *am Steinhof* has for years been his regular though hideous dwelling place. (104, Bernhard's Italics)

The explanation of motive sets this narrator apart from the other journalistic narrators in that this teller admits his biases, answering essential questions that remain unanswered in the other stories. The narrator's friend, whose insanity the narrator blames on his local media, is the catalyst of the attack, a fact that clarifies the narrator's bias and reduces the subtlety of the manipulation of the reader. This admission bolsters the relationship between reader and narrator, eliminating a major gap in narratorial motives, motives that are veiled in the majority of these stories. For Iser, such a staggering inclusion of motive energizes the reader by providing him with new, unexpected dimensions: "Another way, for instance, of involving the reader in a greater degree of composition is the abrupt introduction of new characters or even new threads of the plot, so that the question arises as to the connections between the story revealed so far and the new, unforeseen situations" (9). Through this transparent tone and inclusion of

important evidence the reader is not being pushed to a resistant position, but is being asked to be a sounding board. The narrator needs a listener, not a convert.

VI. Examples of Madness: Narrators and the Admission of Insanity

Bernhard's narrators in the stories I have examined are exposing the reader to a dangerous reality, one where those in power cannot be trusted and existence is never safe. However, two stories in the collection of journalistically focused stories move beyond the conflict of a defensive reader forced to evaluate narratorial position. "Disappointed Englishmen" and "Example" employ narrators who question their own realities through their accounts, showing the burden on those who must report reality to an audience that does not witness the experience first hand. These stories are the culmination of Bernhard's narrative approach, a style that insists the reader abandon the pressures of the narrators who are trying to work through a universe they cannot accept.

The narrator of "Disappointed Englishman" struggles to work through the facts in front of him, a struggle that takes place in front of the reader. While telling the factual account of the story, the narrator does not embellish the stories, sticking closely to the actual event:

Several Englishmen who were inveigled by a mountain guide in eastern Tyrol into climbing the Drei Zinnen with him were so disappointed, after reaching the highest of the three peaks, with what Nature had to offer them on this highest peak that then and there they killed the guide, a family man with three children and, it seems, a deaf wife. When, however, they realized what they had actually done, they threw themselves off the peak, one after the other. (27)

The event is a tragic one, a catastrophe both narrator and reader cannot make sense of.

The Englishmen, angry at nature, making a deaf wife and three children victims who

must now live with the events. The Englishmen's realizations after the murders disclose that the deaths are the result of insanity, a rage it is difficult to imagine could come merely from unsatisfying sight seeing. There is a collective insanity at work in the story, one the narrator is not prepared to handle. The newspaper now serves as a source of validation, proof for the narrator that he is not fabricating events that are impossible to believe. Both the newspaper report and the involvement in the murders by a newspaper editor also add to the madness: "After this, a newspaper in Birmingham wrote that Birmingham had lost its most outstanding newspaper publisher, its most extraordinary bank director, and its most able undertaker" (27). The narrator is not veiling his authority through the newspaper, but is instead relying on the newspaper to maintain reality. The narrator is not moving an agenda on the reader; he is trying to maintain sanity by sharing an account he cannot understand or accept.

Through "Example" these troubling issues come to the forefront as Bernhard shows whom this sort of journalism affects the most, the journalist. Throughout the piece are shifts in narrative stances that show a journalist losing focus in a world where he has grown tired of trying to maintain objectivity. The narrator begins by trying to sound impartial by speaking in the third person. Though there are hints, the narrator is certainly trying to set himself up to the reader as martyr while trying to make martyrs of courtroom correspondents in general. If we change "he" and "him" in the first section to "me" and "I" the difference is striking. The narrator does not consider himself in a position of power, but as a slave to the horror of daily existence in the courtroom:

I am the closest of all to human misery and its absurdity and, in the nature of things, can endure the experience only for a short time, and

certainly not for *my* whole life, without going crazy. The probable, the improbable, even the unbelievable, the most unbelievable are paraded before *me* every day in the courtroom, and because *I have* to earn *my* daily bread by reporting on actual or alleged but, in any case, in the nature of things, shameful crimes, *I am* soon no longer surprised by anything at all.

For this narrator reporting to a reading populace is not an act of power, but an act of enslavement. His daily routine consists of recreating events in the courtroom for people who otherwise would have no knowledge these things happened, yet the traumatic experiences inherent in this position threaten his hold on reality. His place in the nature of things is a miserable one, where he must experience “shameful” crimes as they are brought to the court, then relive the experience as he recreates his ordeals for his readers. Being in a position where he can (and must) give the populace a sense of reality they can hold on to is no blessing. The terror of witnessing and recreating without choice is a double-edged sword, and the narrator is sharing a wound. His only choice is to talk in the third person, attempting to convince the reader that he is not one of the correspondents in danger of losing his mind.

When the narrator shifts his tone to that of the actual correspondent, the opening is an arrogant one. Though we, the audience who depend on the correspondent for truth and fact, will no doubt be shocked and appalled by his account, the message becomes that this is just one of the many disturbing accounts the correspondent has sorted and given to his public, “from which, as I said, I reported everything conceivable” (13). But there is a subtle change in tone in the account of the suicide, a change that reveals the judge has shaken an otherwise unshakable correspondent. At first the reporter clings to the facts. The sentence is twelve years in prison. The fine is eight million francs. The

correspondent refuses to take responsibility for the word “vile,” making clear that such a judgmental word is “in the judge’s summation” (13). But once the suicidal sequence begins, objectivity gives way to emotional response. The judge’s announcement is deemed “unusual” (13). The narrator, rehashing the incident, neglects to mention that he is only making the judgment as a courtroom correspondent. The writing now becomes more charged, more explosive. The correspondent’s writing becomes a narrative rather than a report. The judge reaches into his pocket “as quick as lightning” (13). The suicide occurs to the “horror” of the courtroom (13). But what makes this strange is that the reporter no longer separates himself from the group, “all those present in the courtroom” (13). The courtroom correspondent of the first movement would never let himself be associated with that group since he could not possibly be horrified. But at the very last instant of the story he regains his composure, going back into the non-emotional, completely objective tone, “he died instantly” (13). The correspondent tries desperately to keep the report from being about his horror, yet he still exposes himself as unable to handle the pressure of translating horror into acceptable fact. Where the readers have the luxury of reading about these events second-hand, the correspondent must live through them at least twice. In an equation where no one wins, the narrator may be the one who loses most. The effects of giving an audience an appearance of truth is staggering here, both as the one narrating a story and as a journalist struggling to report objective fact. Trying to perform both tasks takes meaning away from the actual event. Instead, what has transpired in the courtroom becomes an exploration of what happens to a narrator doomed to transcribe

the horrific. The subject matter becomes not what triggered the judge to commit suicide, but how the correspondent can possibly remain objective after having borne witness to the tragedy, forced to relive his pain for an audience who will never know what he endures.

“Example” and “Disappointed Englishmen” pass final judgment on the conflict between truth and voice, showing the trial the reader goes through of being told what and whom to believe is a daunting task even for those at the top of the power structure. The reading audience of “Suspicion” may figure out the newspapers’ agenda, but they will surely never see the struggle the newspapers go through to absorb the facts in front of them and use them to manipulate the reader. Those who know the events that have taken place in Pisa and Venice will take the experience with them for the rest of their lives, while those who read their pieces every day will have no idea what has been seen but kept unknown. If we accept the correspondent’s implication that many reporters have come before him but had to leave the courtroom because they have seen things which make objectivity and sanity impossible, their stories may be more inconceivable than the one in front of us. Whether inside the courtroom or out of it, whether or not we see the Englishmen kill the tour guides, truth becomes an unattainable crusade, and the price of the endeavor is suppression, manipulation, and insanity.

VII. Conclusion

The narrative voices throughout these stories reveal that conveying information and truth to a reading audience is a transaction where no one wins. The audience must

accept narrator and journalist as omnipotent, since no other version of facts exists. These omnipotent forces are also controlled, either by more powerful forces or by their own prejudices. When audience opinion may not be swayed to the side of narration, the story is denied existence. The toll may be highest on these voices, who must endure both the horror of what they are reporting as well as the political and personal agendas they push upon audiences as they write. The results are gruesome for everyone; subject, reader and writer. The nature of communication becomes a cold art, a skill where even if perfected, no one wins.

But what makes these stories such skillful accomplishments is the faith Bernhard puts in his own audience to fight the conformity being pushed on the reader through the text. Through these uses of narrative voice, Bernhard assumes the reader will discover and question gaps in the text that narrator and newspaper cannot or do not fill. Such readings coincide with Iser's claim that text, no matter what its appearance, cannot recreate experience without bias: "Literature reflects life under conditions that are either not available in the empirical world or are denied by it. Consequently, literature turns life into a storehouse from which it draws its material in order to stage what in life appeared to have been sealed off from access" (244). For Bernhard's readers it is, "in the nature of things," the reader's duty to recognize and challenge the power of conveyors of text. Without this mistrust the reader is in a position of powerlessness, contributing to the dangerous manipulation narration is capable of, and the indifference that makes such a manipulation possible.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean Patrick Magee was born in Sellersville, Pennsylvania on 24 December 1975 to Dr. James H. Magee and Earlene Magee. He attended Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales in Center Valley, Pennsylvania where he received a B.A. in English and graduated Magna Cum Laude in 1998. Currently, Sean is finishing his M.A. in English at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, where he teaches composition. He currently resides in Allentown, Pennsylvania, with his fiancée, Christina.

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