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Gerald A. Fetz  
*University of Montana*

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# LIFE (AND DEATH) AFTER LIFE: THE PORTRAYAL OF OLD AGE IN THE WORKS OF THOMAS BERNHARD

Gerald A. Fetz

“Wenn wir der Wahrheit auf der Spur sind, ohne zu wissen, was diese Wahrheit ist, die mit der Wirklichkeit nichts als die Wahrheit, die wir nicht kennen, gemein hat, so ist es das Scheitern, es ist der Tod, dem wir auf der Spur sind...” “Der Tod ist mein Thema...” “...ich spreche, worüber ich auch spreche, selbst wenn ich über das Leben spreche, über den Tod...” “Wenn wir ein Ziel haben, so scheint es mir, ist es der Tod, wovon wir sprechen, ist es der Tod...”<sup>1</sup> Thomas Bernhard, arguably the most controversial and most important Austrian writer in the postwar period, is dead. Finally, one might claim, he has caught up with his major theme: death. Or, better perhaps, it has caught up with him.

From the time he began to write, as an eighteen-year old tuberculosis victim in an Austrian sanatorium, Bernhard confronted death head-on. He came so close to dying himself back then as a teenager, in fact, that he was given “last rites.” In a very profound sense, then, Bernhard lived in death’s shadow for forty years. I would even suggest that he lived those forty years in many respects “on the other side of death,” having experienced it once, only to fight his way back to life again, rather miraculously in fact, if one believes his autobiographical work *Der Atem*.

Bernhard reflected on his constant proximity to death in 1981 when he stated in a rare television interview:

Ich denk überhaupt nicht an den Tod. Aber der Tod denkt ständig an mich: wann soll ich den heimholen?...Ich spür ständig diesen Druck hier. Drum hab ich auch, wenn Sie genau schau'n, eine gesenkte Schulter durch diesen Todesdruck. Das kann mir niemand wegnehmen. Auch nicht wegoperieren. Das ist meine Angst. Die sitzt auf der rechten Schulter wie ein Todesvogel. Das hat sich da festgesetzt.<sup>2</sup>

This threatening but constant companion, this slightly Austrianized “bird of death,” finally claimed Thomas Bernhard, this time for good, on February 12, 1989. He was fifty-eight years old, but in many respects Bernhard had experienced, and constantly written about, both the predictable and vagarious features of aging and old age for almost forty years.

From the earliest stages of his phenomenal career as a writer, Bernhard created protagonists, who were usually but not exclusively men, and whose lives were being “lived out” in death’s shadow. Most of these central figures, from Strauch in *Frost* (1963) to Reger in *Alte Meister* (1985), have also attained the requisite number of years to place them in the “aged” category. These protagonists suffer under and confront, in a wide variety of ways, such afflictions as illness —both mental and

physical—, depression, suicidal inclinations, loneliness, isolation, anxiety, fragmented intellectual capacities, crankiness, and creative impotence. Many of them are clearly modelled after Bernhard's maternal grandfather, the Austrian writer Johannes Freumbichler, who, even though he lived into his early seventies, had also suffered from tuberculosis as a young man.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, though, these older protagonists are created out of Bernhard's own closeness to death, his *own* affinity to the qualities, problems, and predilections of "old age," and they are also the result of his very carefully developed world view and aesthetic intentions.<sup>4</sup>

These older characters in Bernhard's works, both plays and prose, represent and reflect almost invariably extreme situations in life, life which usually is nearing its end, both physically and emotionally, in postwar Austria. Typically, these are characters whose once lofty goals and objectives have not been realized, either because they have been trampled by the society and age in which they have tried to exist; because their hyper-awareness of contradictions, hypocrisy, and the inevitable proximity of death has rendered them psychologically (and often physically) incapable of fitting into society; or because they have chosen to reject society *and* its expectations for them in a very conscious and willful manner. From their positions *outside* of society, try as they might to produce or create (usually something of a scholarly or artistic nature), they simply cannot, in part because they have become so obsessed with and distracted by the concerns often associated with aging and old age: death, disease, the inability to concentrate, general anxiety, intellectual and creative impotence, and isolation from others. These characters (such as the Prince in *Verstörung*, Konrad in *Kalkwerk*, Caribaldi in *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, Kant in *Immanuel Kant*, Moritz Meister in *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh*, Bruscon in *Der Theatermacher*, or Herrenstein in *Elisabeth II.*) are all eccentrics, whose eccentricities and peculiarities generally fall far short of being delightful, but who instead are egomaniacal, neurotic, controlling, and sometimes, even, abusive and brutal.

On the surface, at least, the portrayal of old age in Bernhard's works appears to be extremely negative, a portrayal which seems to offer the aged little solace or satisfaction such as that which an older person might derive from looking back on a life lived in an essentially productive and positive fashion. These protagonists are also hardly the typical *gentle* and *wise* old men from myth and romantic tales. The apparent futility of life (especially in the face of death) seems to have turned life and its inevitable end in death into a kind of tormented absurdity. In this regard we are reminded of an often-quoted passage from a Bernhard speech of 1967: "...es ist alles lächerlich, wenn man an den 'Tod' denkt."<sup>5</sup> This is also the conclusion that is rather easy to reach from reading the earlier Bernhard works, both prose and drama; and this conclusion—that Bernhard sees *no* light in the dark of *either* life or death—is the one which most critics have reached in their observations and assertions about his works in general.

In contrast to those critics, however, I would assert that Bernhard has written and spoken all along about many things besides death and that death is *not* his only theme. I would also insist, and will attempt to substantiate my insistence in what follows, that there are numerous indications in the quite *differentiated* portrayals of "aged" protagonists, increasing especially by more recent works, that show many of



them waging remarkable battles *against* absurdity and *against* illness and death as well as *against* those other afflictions of aging which are present.

By looking more closely at several aspects of Bernhard's works which have received only very limited attention in the secondary literature and popular commentaries (such as the significance of irony, humor, and music; the importance of intellectual and artistic creativity; and the significance of friendship and even love); I intend to show that Bernhard's world-view, and his view of "old age," are not as one-sidedly negative or unambiguously gloomy as most commentaries on Bernhard's works have asserted.

Bernhard is a genuine master of irony, of ambiguity, of contradiction and paradox. Those who want to read him literally, to take him or his characters at their every word, *misread* him. For just about every assertion made by a character, one can find a contradictory assertion made by that same character as well. Critics, readers, and even public officials (witness the recent scandal surrounding the Bernhard's play *Heldenplatz* and its performance in Vienna's Burgtheater) often fail to see, for instance, the deep attachment, affection, and even love for Austria which stands behind, under, and between Bernhard's frequently wild and generally hyperbolic charges against his homeland. By failing to see the *love* portion of Bernhard's love-hate for Austria, by failing to see the complex reasons for his (or his characters') criticism, these readers oversimplify and miss much of the point.

Although I do not want to suggest that the aging and aged protagonists in Bernhard's works—and their situations—should be read too closely as symbols of present-day Austria, there certainly are compelling ways in which at least an analogy can be drawn between this "Rumpfstaat" Austria, merely a shadow of its former self, and several of these protagonists. Frequently, their "real" lives (where one can speak of "real" lives) lie clearly in the increasingly distant past. If such an analogy holds, then Bernhard's ambivalence and his complexly ambiguous feelings and sentiments about Austria, that "...geliebte, gehaßte Nähe..."<sup>6</sup>, as he once termed it, should be evident in a similar ambivalence toward these aged protagonists, their characteristics, and their situations. The fact that Bernhard portrays these protagonists at times in such negative terms while also granting them a great deal of sympathy and understanding, is a clear reflection that this ambivalence is present here as well. Perhaps the best illustration of this is to be found in the highly autobiographical work, *Wittgensteins Nefte*, in which Bernhard describes his complicated relationship with Paul Wittgenstein.<sup>7</sup> The analogy—Austria/Old Age—, and portrayals such as that of Paul Wittgenstein or of Bernhard's own grandfather, Johannes Freumbichler, found in the other autobiographical writings,<sup>8</sup> ought to put readers on warning that Bernhard's depictions of other aged protagonists and old age in general should not be read in a one-dimensional or simplistically negative manner.

A large number of Bernhard works—novels, shorter prose pieces, plays—could provide us with relevant descriptions and illustrations of aging and old age from Bernhard's perspective. The protagonists—in the novels, such as Strauch in *Frost*, Konrad in *Verstörung*, or Reger in *Alte Meister*; in the shorter works, such as the entire cast of characters in *Watten* and *Gehen* or the above-mentioned Paul Wittgenstein; in the plays, such as Caribaldi in *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, Minetti in the play of

the same name, Bruscon in *Der Theatermacher*, Herrenstein in *Elisabeth II.*, or Robert Schuster in *Heldenplatz*; all such protagonists offer excellent opportunities for examining and pondering Bernhard's attitudes toward old age. The portrayals of these protagonists display attitudes which show a great number of constants, but they also make clear a certain amount of diversity and, most notably, even a development. For the purposes of this article, I will draw most extensively on the novels *Frost*, *Das Kalkwerk*, and *Alte Meister*, as well as on the short autobiographical prose work, *Wittgensteins Neffe*, and on the play *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, to support and illustrate my comments and assertions, although, as stated above, numerous other works would serve the purpose just as well.

If one studies Bernhard's aging and aged protagonists, what, one might ask, are those constants which appear in the various works stretching from *Frost* in 1963 to *Alte Meister* in 1985? What are the characteristics they share with one another? To begin with, we can say that they are all outsiders of one kind or another, existing in varying degrees on the peripheral edges or margins of society. They are situated there either because they have been pushed or have fled there, as is the case with the painter Strauch in the novel *Frost*, or because of their often radical rejection of mainstream society, its institutions, its expectations, and of conformity in general. As outsiders, these characters usually exist in relative isolation from others. Where they do have substantial contact with others, their closer relationships—with friends or relatives—are marked by deep ambivalence and tension, as well as deep (and often perverse) bonds. Such is clearly the case with Konrad in his relationship with his crippled half-sister/wife in the novel *Das Kalkwerk*. With the exception of Strauch, perhaps, it should be noted that almost all of these protagonists enjoy considerable wealth (especially in the novels), so their marginalization cannot be equated with that of many older individuals in Western society.

Strauch, in *Frost*, has withdrawn, or better: retreated, to an extremely cold, dark, and isolated mountain valley—one suspects, in order to complete the job of dying. He lives totally alone in a small, depressing village, surrounded by all kinds of human depravity. Konrad, in *Das Kalkwerk*, has withdrawn with his half-sister/wife to a renovated house in an old limeworks that had once belonged to his family. His purported reason for doing so is to finish a long-standing study of hearing, *das Gehör*, a project for which he conducts experiments on his wife. Except for the rather tortured relationship with her (actually between them), which ends in his murdering her and his going completely insane, Konrad also exists in extreme isolation from the outside world. The circus director Caribaldi, in the play *Die Macht der Gewohnheit*, even though he is physically surrounded by the rather bizarre collection of people who constitute his circus troupe and his rather ludicrous quintett—including a granddaughter and a nephew—also lives solipsistically in emotional isolation, obviously ensnarled in his subjective obsessions and verbal repetitiousness.

These protagonists all suffer from some physical illness or affliction as well and are pre-occupied with it, sometimes to the point of extreme hypochondria. They all tend to arrogance in their treatment of others, are controlling, and, not infrequently—as with Konrad, Caribaldi, or Bruscon in *Der Theatermacher*—engage in outright tyrannical behavior. Their attitude toward the world in general, toward the society



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at whose margins they reside, toward Austria and even the contemporary world in general— is skeptical, often very cynical, and always hyper-critical. Their criticism is harsh and extreme, avowedly subjective, idiosyncratic, often contradictory, and expressed not infrequently in illogical hyperbole. These protagonists are often solipsistic and circular thinkers as well as monologic talkers. They either hold forth on anything and everything or they sit silently, observing and reflecting, noting carefully and critically the basic absurdity and little absurdities of the world around them.

To use everyday language, we can say that virtually all of these older men are eccentric cranks, misanthropic usually *and* loquacious always. They are men who, when they look back on their lives, do so with more than a little disappointment and frustration, yet also with a good dose of self-righteousness. In spite of the cynicism which exudes from them, though, there are hints that they look back at life and the society from which they are (or have been) excluded with some regrets, as an aged lover might look back on an earlier love that was not requited.

If one analyzes the language and the thought processes of a Strauch, a Konrad, a Caribaldi, or even a Reger (from *Alte Meister*), one is immediately struck by their strange mixture of sense and nonsense, sharp-sightedness and contradictoriness. Their verbal outbursts generally take place on a thin line between brilliant or at least lucid observations and assertions and ludicrous linguistic *and* epistemological fragmentation.

This all sounds rather negative, I suspect, and it is, at least in part and initially. With Strauch in the 1963 novel *Frost* and the Prince Saurau in the 1967 novel *Verstörung*, one senses that virtually all positive life forces are depleted and that these characters are merely waiting for physical death. The *frost* of death, as it were, has them completely in its grasp. Their isolation, both physical and emotional, is complete. They talk, but neither of them notices nor requires a listener. They confront what they see as the overriding absurdity of life—not only their own life, but life in general—with a bitterness and absolutism that are without relief. Life literally has no more claim on them.

Beginning with the novel *Das Kalkwerk* in 1970, however, a glimmer of light appears, even for the aged male protagonists whose “lives” clearly lie behind them. A difference one begins to observe, subtle at first in this work but increasing in the later novels, comes from the fact that these main characters have a project of some kind at the center of their activities. Usually, as with Konrad, these projects will end in failure (with Konrad, even in tragedy), but they are projects nonetheless. Konrad’s “scientific” and “musical” study of *das Gehör* provides him with a means of orientation, if not actually with meaning. Even if it is a constant source of frustration and even if he never manages to make order out of his chaotic notes, his study gives him a vehicle with which he can resist, at least temporarily, the sense of total absurdity and insanity which stand immediately outside his door.

From Konrad on—to the triple protagonists in the 1975 novel *Korrektur*, for instance, to the several artist/actor/theater director protagonists in the plays between *Die Macht der Gewohnheit* and *Der Theatermacher*, or to the eighty-year old

art critic Reger in *Alte Meister*— the significance and life-giving force of intellectual and artistic creativity in confronting (not to say: overcoming or banishing) absurdity and *death before life's end* grow considerably. The bitterness of Strauch, which is extreme and exclusive, yields in Reger to a far greater sense of irony, humor, and play, as he attacks various social ills, what he terms Vienna's "toilet culture," or cultural figures from Dürer to Stifter. Rather than succumb to the *Todesvogel* on his shoulder, as Strauch had done even before he wanders off suicidally into the cold, winter landscape, Reger defies it. Whereas Strauch and the Prince were resigned to death and therefore not merely threatened by its proximity but already firmly in its grasp, later protagonists such as Reger or Paul Wittgenstein display remarkable tenacity in keeping it at bay. They do so in large part by attacking head-on those aspects of life and their society which they find either offensive or laughable and which they hold at least partially responsible for the absurdity which surrounds them: conformity, complacency, ignorance, dullness, superficiality, deceit, security, money, stifling traditions, consumerism, and much more. They attack and condemn—through their art, their intellectual projects, their entire beings—, but they use irony, wit, and sharp humor as frequent tools for their subversive activities. Perhaps they are able to apply such tools and to maintain their sense of humor and irony, including self-irony, in postponing the inevitable *Zugreifen* of the *Todesvogel* because they, unlike their predecessors Strauch and Prince Saurau, have discovered friendship and are not as isolated. And that is the second major difference observable between the earlier works and the later ones. Reger, we learn, has even experienced profound love with his wife. Is this, one might legitimately ask, Thomas Bernhard?

Yes is the answer. These are not, to be sure, friendships or love of the romantic "they lived happily ever after" variety. In fact, Reger's beloved and admired wife has recently died. These are friendships and relationships which are born of shared marginality, shared artistic and intellectual endeavors, and shared subversive intentions. These are not easy friendships or relationships; friendships and relationships between eccentric individuals rarely are. These are the friendships of *Störenfriede*, as Bernhard called himself in his autobiographical writings and as we have learned to view him. These friends share in the delight derived from *stören*, from disruption, from irreverent and provocative actions and attitudes aimed at hypocrisy, pedantry, and stupidity. This is all quite *deconstructive*, to be sure, but it is not *destructive* in any sense.

So that we might both understand and enjoy this delight and the playfulness of such deconstructive attitudes as they are carried out by the narrator (Bernhard) and the protagonist Paul Wittgenstein in the book that carries his name, let us take a look at the description of how the two of them often would sit in a corner of the terrace café in front of the Sacher Hotel in Vienna and observe the world:

Im Sommer hatten wir unseren Stammplatz auf der Terrasse des Sacher und existierten die meiste Zeit aus nichts anderem als aus unseren Bezeichnungen. Gleich was vor uns auftauchte, es wurde bezichtigt. Stundenlang saßen wir auf der Sacherterrasse und bezichtigten. Wir saßen bei einer Schale Kaffee und bezichtigten die ganze Welt und bezichtigten sie in Grund und



Boden. Wir setzten uns auf die Sacherterrasse und setzten unsere eingespielten Bezichtigungsmechanismen in Bewegung, hinter dem Arsch der Oper, wie der Paul sich ausdrückte. Stundenlang saßen wir auf der Sacherterrasse und beobachteten die Leute, die da hin und her gingen. Tatsächlich gibt es für mich auch heute noch kaum ein größeres (Wiener)Vergnügen, als auf der sommerlichen Sacherterrasse zu sitzen und die Leute zu beobachten, die vorbeigehen.

Die Leute, die ihm unter die Augen kamen, waren niemals länger als nur die aller kürzeste Zeit ungeschoren, schon hatten sie *einen Verdacht* auf sich gezogen und sich *eines Verbrechens* oder wenigstens *eines Vergehens* schuldig gemacht und sie wurden von ihm gezeißelt mit jenen Wörtern, die auch die meinigen sind, wenn ich mich auflehne oder wehre, wenn ich gegen die Unverschämtheit der Welt vorzugehe...<sup>9</sup>

The portrayal of old age, especially as this relates to the numerous aged male protagonists in Bernhard's works, is not a static portrayal, in spite of the constants which are present between Strauch (*Frost*, 1963) and Reger (*Alte Meister*, 1985). Bernhard's portrayal cannot be taken as a universal depiction of people in old age, as I have suggested earlier, for there are very few women among these protagonists and there are very few who have any real financial concerns. And obviously, women in general and women and men with financial worries make up the largest groups in the aged category in Western societies. Nonetheless, an analysis of Bernhard's portrayal of old age remains instructive. In spite of the constants from early to later works, in spite of the many identical characteristics among the aged male protagonists, a noticeable and important development occurs along the way.<sup>10</sup>

*Bernhard bleibt Bernhard*, to be sure, but one should also be aware of the introduction of artistic or intellectual impulses and endeavors into the lives or the older—and virtually all of the younger protagonists, it should be added—as well as of the growing recognition of the possibility and perhaps even necessity of friendship, as bizarre and tension-filled as these friendships sometimes are. These new aspects of Bernhard's portrayal of his aged male protagonists restore to them a kind of *life after life*. They restore to them a vitality which enables them to be actively subversive, to offer resistance, at least temporarily, both to the ultimate absurdity of life ("in the face of death") and to many of the smaller absurdities of life. *Auflehnung* and *Wehren* and *gegen die Unverschämtheit der Welt vorgehen* are the words Bernhard used in the quotation above from *Wittgensteins Neffe*. Perhaps we would do well to offer, in light of this, a slight revision of one of the quotations from those 1968 speeches with which this article begins. While it may have been true for Bernhard to the end that "...ich spreche, worüber ich spreche, selbst wenn ich über das Leben spreche, über den Tod....," there is also ample justification, if one looks closely at the developments in these portrayals of both old and young protagonists, for understanding it in reverse as well: *...ich spreche, worüber ich spreche, selbst wenn ich über den Tod spreche, über das Leben...* Bernhard's later novels, *Korrektur* as well as *Beton*, *Holzfällen*, *Der*



*Untergeher*, and even *Auslöschung*, with their mix of older and younger main characters, indicate clearly that such a revision has as much validity as the original.

Bernhard's portrayal of old age is, as one must suspect, subjective, rather narrowly focussed, and quite idiosyncratic. But his sympathy and love for, as well as his appreciation of the importance of the older figures in his own life, figures on whom these portrayals are certainly in part based, show through in his work, especially after *Frost* and *Verstörung*. It is hardly exaggerated to assert that such individuals as his grandfather Johannes Freumbichler, his friend Paul Wittgenstein, and his admired actor friend Bernhard Minetti<sup>11</sup>, were constant inspirations to him for the ways in which they resisted, subverted, and lived life "against the grain," even, or especially, as old men.

One cannot help but sense the extent to which Bernhard identified with such individuals and with his various older protagonists, in part, perhaps, because he too in a sense was living *life after life*, with the *Todesvogel* perched firmly and constantly on his shoulder. The moral or lesson, if one can speak of such in Bernhard's work, is perhaps to be found here in the way his aged protagonists contradict another Austrian "moral" found in the well-known lines from *Die Fledermaus*: "Glücklich ist, wer vergißt, was doch nicht zu ändern ist." *Happiness*, at least in the traditional sense of the term and as intended here in the *Fledermaus*-quote, is in Bernhard's world nowhere guaranteed, nor is it shown to be a particularly desirable goal. But if older people would *defy* rather than *deny* or even *embrace* their *Todesvogel*; if they would *use* the (sometimes frightening) freedom which their marginality and unstructured time sometimes force upon them to cultivate their eccentricities, idiosyncracies, and inclinations to be critical, instead of suppressing them; if they could find *new* life —creative, ironic, even confrontational— near the end of life, then they perhaps could discover or re-discover the joys of resistance and subversion. And that, it seems clear to me, as it obviously seemed to Thomas Bernhard, is far preferable to accepting *Frost*, *Verstörung*, and *Verkalkung*, far preferable to giving in without a fight to the *Todesvogel* on our shoulders.

University of Montana

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Bernhard, "Der Wahrheit und dem Tod auf der Spur. Zwei Reden." *Neues Forum* XV/Heft 173 (May 1968): 347-9. These two speeches, one given as the acceptance speech for the Austrian State Prize for Literature, which Bernhard was awarded in 1967, the other intended as the acceptance speech for the Wildgans Prize, was not given because the ceremony was cancelled in the aftermath of the controversy caused by Bernhard's first speech.
- <sup>2</sup> For an account of the interview, given for Austrian television (ORF) in February, 1981, see the *Kurier*, 11 February 1981.
- <sup>3</sup> See the intriguing study by Caroline Markolin, *Die Großväter sind die Lehrer. Johannes Freumbichler und sein Enkel Thomas Bernhard*. Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1988, for details about Freumbichler's life. See also Bernhard's numerous references to his grandfather in his autobiographical works, *Die Ursache* (1975), *Der Keller*, (1976), *Der Atem* (1978), *Die Kälte* (1981), and *Ein Kind* (1982). These five short volumes have been published in English as one volume, translated by David McClintock, with the title *Gathering Evidence*, New York: Knopf, 1985.
- <sup>4</sup> See the article by Manfred Mixner, "Vom Leben zum Tode," in Manfred Jurgensen, ed. *BERNHARD. Annäherungen*. Bern: Francke, 1981, pp. 65-98, for a convincing analysis of the development of Bernhard's aesthetic intentions. Mixner makes clear that Bernhard's *Weltanschauung* is not merely the result of his illnesses and near-death experiences, as many critics have asserted, but at least in large part the result of a careful aesthetic philosophy and strategy.
- <sup>5</sup> "Der Wahrheit und dem Tod auf der Spur": 349.
- <sup>6</sup> "Was Österreich nicht lesen soll," in *Die Zeit* 17 February 1978.
- <sup>7</sup> *Wittgensteins Nefje*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982. (=BS 788)
- <sup>8</sup> See the five autobiographical volumes cited in note #3.
- <sup>9</sup> *Wittgensteins Nefje*: 99.
- <sup>10</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this development, see my chapter in Keith Bullivant, ed. *The Modern German Novel*. Leamington Spa, Engl.: Berg, 1987, "Thomas Bernhard and the Modern German Novel": 89-109.
- <sup>11</sup> Bernhard wrote the play *Minetti* for this distinguished German actor who has played the aged protagonists in the premiere productions of several Bernhard plays. Indeed, he has become in these roles the epitome of the quintessential aged Bernhard protagonist.

