

THEATRICALITY AND SPECTACLE: A STUDY OF THOMAS BERNHARD'S *OLD MASTERS* AND JACOPO TINTORETTO'S *WHITE-BEARDED MAN*

by

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ABSTRACT

Thomas Bernhard's 1985 novel *Old Masters* is theatrical in style and experimental in form. *Old Masters* is an exploration of the role of the spectator and spectacle in twentieth-century theater. Bernhard examines the imperfections of art, politics, and religion in postwar Austria, through the protagonist Reger who observes Jacopo Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*. Bernhard's setting of *Old Masters* in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum and his use of multiple positions of spectatorship challenge the traditional concepts of dramatic performance, narrative voice, and prose writing. Upon examination of the importance of experimental aspects of theater, Friedrich Dürrenmatt is useful to Bernhard's ideas. Arthur Schopenhauer provides important viewpoints of objective and subjective perspectives, and art theorist Julius Held's ideas strengthen Reger's position as spectator-spectacle in a museum and in an entire world. Ultimately Reger suffers from a language damaged by Holocaust guilt, Nazi leaders' invention of an abstracted power, and an ambiguous rhetoric, emerging optimistic in a postwar twentieth-century Austria.

INDEX WORDS: Bernhard, Tintoretto, Vienna, Performance, Spectacle, Theatricality, Twentieth-Century Theater, Tragicomedy, Tragic Hero, Guilt, Subjective, Objective, Experimental, Classical Canon

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To my parents who introduced me to Vienna and Thomas Bernhard.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I examine the theatricality of Thomas Bernhard's novel, *Old Masters: A Comedy*, and the role of the spectator, which the protagonist Reger plays. Reger acts as an audience member in an imaginary theater, the actor on stage, and the socio-historical voice, which provides foundations for much of Bernhard's political and religious criticism. Reger's multiple positions as a spectator unfold in Bernhard's novel to contribute to the experimental substance of contemporary theater. *Old Masters*, written in 1985, four years before Bernhard's death, takes place in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna.¹ The novel shares elements with the theater, while Bernhard's prose often recalls an actor's monologue. The three main characters engage in the act of observation and reflection in a theatrical atmosphere. Reger, the main character, observes Jacopo Tintoretto's painting, the *White-Bearded Man*; Atzbacher, the narrator and pupil of Reger, observes Reger observing the painting; and Irrsigler, the museum guard, observes Atzbacher observing Reger. Irrsigler helps Atzbacher go unnoticed by Reger and guards Reger from visitors to the museum as if Reger is a piece of the museum collection. Reger, completely unaware of Atzbacher observing him for the whole hour, is, in a sense, a showpiece himself, because every other day (except Mondays) for thirty-six years, Reger has visited the museum. Reger, a musicologist who writes articles for the *London Times*, sits directly in front of the Tintoretto painting, while Atzbacher arrives at the museum one hour early in order

¹ The Kunsthistorisches (Art History) Museum in Vienna faces the Naturhistorisches (Natural History) Museum and holds many paintings by old masters. The museum contains paintings by Pieter Bruegel, Hieronymus Bosch, Peter Paul Rubens, Diego Velázquez, Jacopo Robusti called Tintoretto, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Tiziano Vecellio (Titian), Paolo Veronese, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Rogier van der Weyden, Hans Memling, and Caravaggio. In her book entitled *Vienna*, Caroline Bugler writes specifically about the Kunsthistorisches Museum collection and its Habsburg history: "As the former private collection of the Habsburgs it has very particular strengths and weaknesses. It was not formed to present a balanced view of art historical periods, but reflects the personal tastes of its founders as well as links with those countries that the Habsburg dynasty ruled for over 500 years" (67). Bugler continues by describing the gallery devoted to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings "from Flanders and Venice, with two rooms devoted to Rubens and one to Titian" (67). Bugler writes, "The architects Karl von Hasenauer and Gottfried Semper worked on both buildings (Kunsthistorisches Museum and Naturhistorisches Museum), and no expense was spared during the period of construction, which lasted from 1871 until 1891" (68). Luckily, the interior of the Kunsthistorisches Museum survived the bombings of WWII.

to observe his musicologist mentor, who is observing the Tintoretto painting, before he actually meets with him. Irrsigler, a guard in the museum who has, throughout the years, become friends with Reger, blocks the Bordone Room (the room that holds the Tintoretto) so that visitors to the museum may not enter the room and disturb Reger.

In *Old Masters*, Thomas Bernhard arranges a situational “comedy,” a seeming infinity of acts, which challenges the traditional concepts of narrative voice and prose writing. *Old Masters* is unusual in that Reger, the main focus of attention, is not heard speaking directly. Through Atzbacher’s narration, the reader familiarizes himself with the man whose voice dominates the Bordone Room “stage,” so to speak. Reger, who, according to Atzbacher’s recollection and writing, performs a dramatic monologue through his never-ending tirade on German and Austrian philosophers, artists, musicians, becomes the main actor in the comedy. Reger’s penetrating voice and persistent desire to draw mental caricatures vocally contribute to turning his action into a dramatic performance. This “play” with perspectives and voices is experimental in that it suggests a revolutionary move away from the more traditional form of theater and novel. Bernhard stages experimental theater in the classical theater--the museum--but with exaggeration. By “classical,” I mean the interest in the old masters, the canonized artists, musicians, and philosophers, all of whom Reger thinks about in the museum. For Reger, the Kunsthistorisches Museum becomes the playground for critics and intellectuals. He feels comfortable and protected in this canonized environment where the classics are treasured relics. Through Reger, Bernhard addresses the problem of the heavy (influential and restrictive) weight of the classics in contemporary art and turns the problem into an experimental play which demands from us, the readers of his novel, critical distance, commentary, and the intellectualizing of observation.

The three characters in the novel, all taking different positions both in and outside the room, observe Tintoretto’s painting. To the left of Reger stands Atzbacher in a corner of the Sebastiano Room (also known as the Titian room), which lies just outside of the Bordone Room,

which holds the Tintoretto portrait.² As Reger contemplates the portrait of the *White-Bearded Man*, Atzbacher observes the “side profile portrait” of Reger. Bernhard’s choosing the *White-Bearded Man* for the centerpiece of his “theatrical production” encourages an examination of the relationship between the portrait and the three main characters. The portrait of the old man in the painting projects visual arrows, so to speak, to the three characters. The various gazes are, therefore, received and returned between the painting and each of the three characters, and also among the three characters. The body of the man in the portrait is turned, exposing his left side, as well as his illuminated face and left hand. His torso addresses Atzbacher and Irrsigler, but he directs his gaze towards Reger, who sits directly in front of the painting. As a result of his gaze and expression, one assumes that the man in the portrait is addressing the three main members of Tintoretto’s audience, assuming a liveliness of his own.

The Atzbacher-Reger-Tintoretto triangle of observation inspires Atzbacher, the narrator, to make various reflections upon the past. Atzbacher narrates, recalling past conversations with Reger (his meeting “yesterday” and his 11:30 meeting “today”). While Atzbacher recalls Reger’s reflections upon the Austrian state, French and German artists and philosophers, his wife, and death, he creates a complex network of past and what one could refer to as “double past.” Atzbacher’s recollections of his past conversations with Reger are occurring in the present. Atzbacher’s narration revitalizes the words spoken in the past by Reger and makes the dialogue appear to occur in the present. Atzbacher wears Reger’s mouthpiece; he dons Reger’s character and assumes the role of a main actor.

Arriving at the Kunsthistorisches Museum early--half-past ten instead of half-past eleven--gives Atzbacher one hour to view his friend Reger without interruption. Atzbacher, standing, observes Reger, sitting, in perfect profile. Atzbacher sees Reger’s left side clearly, but not his whole face, which is seen only in profile, while Reger observes the whole of the bearded

² Sebastiano del Piombo (c.1485-1547) came from Venice and was a portrait painter, worked on decorative frescoes, and was said to be part of the Raphael circle. Some famous paintings include *Dorothea* (c. 1512) and *Cardinal Pole* (c. 1537). Paris Bordone (1500-1571) born in Treviso and later trained and lived in Venice, where he developed into a portrait painter. Bordone painted *Portrait of a Man*, which may be found in Paris at the Louvre.

man's left side. Irrsigler, the guard of Reger and the Bordone Room, stands at the door, connecting the Tintoretto and the Titian room, knowing all the while that Reger's student wishes to observe his musicologist friend, Reger. In a conversation with Irrsigler concerning the secrecy involved in allowing Reger to observe the Tintoretto painting and how the museum management is most likely not aware of Reger's thirty-six year attendance to the museum, Atzbacher emphasizes the intricate web of observation shared between the two rooms: "Discretion, that is your very strong suit, I said to Irrsigler, I reflected, while regarding Reger who was in turn regarding Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man* and who, for his part, was being regarded by Irrsigler."³ As Atzbacher, Irrsigler, and Reger are deeply involved in the act of observation, they also become aware of their own position as it relates to other visitors in the museum. The position of Atzbacher, Irrsigler, and Reger in the museum assumes a new role--that of an audience member. Reger, who is observing the Tintoretto portrait, is being observed by Irrsigler and Atzbacher. The boundaries distinguishing (and sometimes separating) the spectator and audience are now blurred and have become permeable.

In the following chapter, I will analyze how Bernhard's prose writing relates to Friedrich Dürrenmatt's idea of "audience as he himself," which addresses how the actor takes on multiple personalities, one of them being a member of the audience. Bernhard, a director and actor himself, is interested in self-observation in the theater and how an actor or, in Reger's case, a main character with theatrical attributes, is constantly viewing and judging himself from different angles. Reger seems to be both an actor and the audience. His multiplicities allow him to observe himself from various positions. In this respect, Bernhard's *Old Masters* is an ideal example of Dürrenmatt's idea of theater as a museum.

In his 1955 essay entitled "Theaterprobleme," Dürrenmatt notes that the notion of "perfection" that is read into the classics controls expectation in the theater and literature. Ideally, for Dürrenmatt, contemporary theater would consist of elements of the canon and experimentation. Dürrenmatt proposes that the "experimental" theater (as Dürrenmatt refers to

³ Bernhard 9

it) of Bertolt Brecht and Thomas Bernhard, for that matter, presents new styles, is distinct from what occurs in traditional theater, and can create an atmosphere in which “each play confronts the author with new challenges, new questions of style.”⁴ To ignore or repress the new possibilities of the experimental would be a denial of Dürrenmatt’s modern world. This is precisely what frightens him.

Dürrenmatt argues that the contemporary fear of the experimental and avant garde in theater on the part of the audience and directors is in great part due to literary scholarship and criticism. Experimental theater is risky because it is still relatively new. There has not been enough time for perfection or the “ideal” to be read into experimental theater, as there has been for classical theater. The classics provide one with intellectual safety because there has been a history of reaction and critics’ acceptance. The classics appeal to the intellectuals, directors, and audience members because of their familiarity with the material and public response.

Dürrenmatt writes about a difference between a scholar and artist in the way they view theater, painting, and literature:

Literary scholarship looks on the theater as an object; for the dramatist it is never something purely objective, something separate from him. He participates in it. It is true that the playwright’s activity turns drama into something objective (that is exactly his job), but he then destroys the object he has thus created, forgets it, rejects it, scorns it, overestimates it, all in order to make room for something new.⁵

A concern for Dürrenmatt is the survival of experimental art amidst literary scholarship and criticism. The question is whether the “museum’s treasures” can make room for the twentieth-century characters created by Brecht, Bernhard, and Dürrenmatt? The issue of the critical

⁴ Dürrenmatt, on page 240 of *Theaterprobleme*, continues by writing, “Today style is no longer a common property, but something highly private, an individual decision.” The continual shifts from collective to individual create a manic atmosphere in which Reger seems to exist.

⁵ Dürrenmatt 234

demand for perfection and expectation in art is dealt with in Chapter One. Specifically, I will investigate how, in *Old Masters*, the critic establishes a theatrical dialogue between the spectacle-spectator and the actor-audience. If, according to Dürrenmatt, contemporary theater should be, in part, museum and, in part, experiment, then what in Bernhard's *Old Masters* is museum and experimental theater?

Some of the related questions that I will investigate include how theater and Tintoretto's painting are used in examining classical and contemporary concerns, why Tintoretto, himself, is a subject for contemplation, and what aspects of the historical period of Mannerism in the geographical setting of Venice relate to the theater. A primary concern in this study involves the right side of the man in the portrait's body. Veiled in shade, the body raises a question as to how the hidden half symbolizes the "truth," which can never be fully reached in art and in life. Jacopo Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*, dated circa 1570, shows the man sitting sideways. This is relevant to the irony of placement of both Reger sitting in the Bordone Room and Atzbacher standing in the Sebastiano Room (which holds many paintings by Titian⁶). This irony becomes important as one familiarizes oneself with the novel's situation and historical commentary. The Bordone-Sebastiano positioning corresponds to the competitive relationship in reality between Tintoretto and Titian. The corresponding relationships between Reger, Irrsigler, the *White-Bearded Man*, and Atzbacher create a complicated atmosphere. Tintoretto's style of painting challenges the High Renaissance tradition of space, light, and form and corresponds to the revolutionary spirit of Bernhard's novel. However, Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man* is a conventional portrait--not innovative like his religious paintings. Reger's interest in a conventional portrait is both contrary and fitting to his personality.

In Chapter Two, I will examine *Old Masters* in light of the shift from tragedy to comedy in twentieth-century theater. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century classical interest in the tragic individual is contrasted with the twentieth-century focus upon the collective mass. As a result of the "tragicomedy" shift, a tragic hero is no longer applicable in contemporary

⁶ Titian's full name is Tiziano Vecellio in Italian.

Germany and Austria, and the individual has become less a focus of attention, for in place of the individual there is now the “collective.” Generally, according to Dürrenmatt, the twentieth-century audience is no longer relating to Othello’s tragic flaw but is responding to the idea that the people, as a result of guilt, are connected to one another. This changing sensibility is due to guilt which results from WWII. It is Dürrenmatt’s idea that in twentieth-century Germany, power and guilt dominate creative writing and have affected the relationship between the individual and the collective, creating an interesting dynamic within the world of art.⁷ In the theater, there is more of an interest in comedies, in which families and groups face societal and existential issues. The Holocaust and the Nazi regime are major creators of the Western notion of guilt--specifically in post World War II Austria and Germany. The Fascist leaders created a new breed of power, which is partially obscured by ambiguity and abstraction. No one individual is able to claim responsibility for the guilt from which society is suffering. The twentieth-century feeling of guilt is a collective phenomenon. As a result, the masses carry the burden of postwar guilt. Dürrenmatt compares the state of modern man to that of an iceberg that is partially submerged in water. In Bernhard’s case, this state is shown by the man in Tintoretto’s painting who is partially obscured in “painterly shade,” and by Reger’s pose and his inaccessible thoughts, revealing only partial truths and containing the shadowed intrigue of what lies hidden.

In *Old Masters*, Reger experiences the characteristically contemporary feelings of isolation and guilt. The Austrians’ and Germans’ obsession with hereditary guilt has, in effect, caused a societal shift in concentration from the individual to the collective. Since no one person will claim responsibility, we all become, as Dürrenmatt believes, “collectively guilty.” The weight of the sins of our fathers and forefathers bear down on us, causing the voice and power of the individual to weaken. The notion of the individual versus the collective corresponds to the relationship between the spectator as individual and audience as collective. This shift also

⁷ In “Theaterprobleme,” I focus on the contemporary theater problems in Germany and Austria as both German-speaking countries pertain to Dürrenmatt and Bernhard.

corresponds to the relationship between painting and the theater, in that they are both exercises involving the evaluation of position--position of object and subject, spectacle and spectator, actor and audience. Understanding the reasons for this twentieth-century shift helps one to understand Reger's philosophical and existential concerns.

In Chapter Three, my main task is to analyze the phenomenon of distance as observed in Reger's action, in relation to serenity and pleasure in existence. When one observes art, distance is required.⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer influences Reger's ideas concerning perspectives and intellectualizing the act of observation. Reger is attracted to the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer who is one of the few minds with which he agrees. In lieu of Schopenhauer's ideas concerning the objective look and the subjective gaze, I will examine Reger's position as spectator in the museum and how one's position as observer can change the object in view. According to Schopenhauer, the subjective gaze assumes a certain familiarity with the object in view, and the objective look requires what Schopenhauer refers to as "alienation" in order to view it without references. I will argue that the Tintoretto painting acts both as a painting and a mirror for Reger. I will call into question Reger's ability (as well as one's ability in general) to view something or someone objectively. My central question is: Is it at all possible to view an object without a subjective viewpoint? Reger's tendency to view the Tintoretto portrait subjectively, as one would when looking in a mirror, for example, allows him to view another as well as himself.⁹ As a result, he adopts varying subjective points of view, which encourage his varying opinions--oftentimes contrary in nature. Taking Schopenhauer's idea of intellectual

⁸ Twentieth-century German philosopher Hans Blumenberg inspires my analysis of the actor and audience member in Bernhard's characters. The "doubleness of life," of which Blumenberg writes, provides a certain existential calm, much like Arthur Schopenhauer's idea of spectatorship as a way to avoid boredom in life (Blumenberg 64).

⁹ In *Essays and Aphorisms*, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) writes about the objective gaze and the direct look, which are telling with regard to the viewer's relationship regarding the mirror or "unknown" subject. When one looks in a mirror, any possibility of objectification is lost because of the subjective influence. One cannot have an alienated view of oneself, when looking in the mirror. The "gaze" is characterized by the "play of the eyes," which is lost when subjectivity is introduced (174). A gaze may be "playful," however, when one perceives an "alien" object--in Reger's case, a portrait of an unknown person. As I would argue, Reger views the portrait with both an objective gaze and a subjective look. He recognizes himself in the portrait but also views a stranger in the portrait. Both Schopenhauer's *Essays and Aphorisms* and *The Pessimist's Handbook* will be useful with regard to Bernhard.

activity being like a spectator at a play,¹⁰ I will describe Reger as Schopenhauer's ideal example of spectator and intellectual and how this "activity" of observation is a method of survival.

Using an art historical perspective as a means to study the fine details of the Tintoretto portrait, I will also analyze in this chapter how art theorist and historian Julius Held's analysis of the painting *Artistotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* relates to Reger's "silent dialogue" with the *White-Bearded Man*. This "dialogue" between Reger and the painting concerns not only Tintoretto and sixteenth-century Venice, but morality, politics, art, music in Viennese society. In both Rembrandt van Rijn's and Tintoretto's paintings, the object of contemplation acts as a springboard, inspiring thoughts outside the world of the painting. In the case of Rembrandt's painting, the viewer observes not only the bust of Homer but also Aristotle studying the bust of Homer. Just as we, upon analysis of Rembrandt's painting, find ourselves undertaking the scrutiny of Homer's beard and Aristotle's jewelry and torso, we discover increasing thoughts pertaining to philosophical, social, and political issues. Similarly, in Tintoretto's painting of the *White-Bearded Man*, Reger not only contemplates the beard, mouth, moustache, and jewelry of the man in the portrait but also Vienna's political, religious, and social problems. The subject of Tintoretto's painting inspires Reger to reflect upon the notion of postwar guilt in Europe and the unfathomable amount of power created under Adolph Hitler's and Joseph Stalin's leadership. In many ways, Held's observations complement those Bernhard made in *Old Masters*. Upon examination of the two paintings and of the similarity of action existent within each, the effect of distance in theater emerges as a necessary part of the examination. Acknowledging the relationship between subjective and objective points of views, and recognizing the importance of value associated with Bernhard's notion of "doubleness of life," ultimately suggests the influence of the art of observation upon Reger and his existential satisfaction.

I will argue that the idea of the utopian perspective Dürrenmatt finds amidst twentieth-century pessimism appeals to Reger. Rather than following a nihilistic frame of mind, Reger accepts the chaos--that is the world--and actively pursues "utopia." In theory, he is pessimistic,

¹⁰ Quoted in Schopenhauer's *Essays and Aphorisms* 54

but, in practice, he is optimistic. Reger continuously intellectualizes art, caricaturing famous writers and philosophers, and writing his newspaper articles, in order to survive. This point is proved when, in the last moment in *Old Masters*, Reger invites Atzbacher to attend a play at Vienna's Burgtheater. Reger's decision to see *Der Zerbrochene Krug* (*The Broken Pitcher*) by Heinrich von Kleist, who is very much a part of the German literary canon, demonstrates Reger's hopefulness and willingness to continue his pursuit of high art and culture.¹¹ Despite his inevitable disappointment with the play's production, which he shows before he even sees the performance, Reger makes the courageous act to attend the theater. His long dramatic tirades on Martin Heidegger, Adalbert Stifter, and Anton Bruckner, introduce him as a revolutionary character that performs long monologues indirectly. Recalling the relationship between the orator Socrates and the writer Plato, one may notice similarities between the musicologist Reger and the narrator Atzbacher. It is Atzbacher, who resembles Plato and always presents us with Reger's voice through writing. Reger's "speeches" are recorded only through Atzbacher's writing. Atzbacher records his mentor's rants with no paragraph breaks. Reger's impassioned speech knows no real conclusion. He is an actor who refuses to leave the stage. He is also a spectator who refuses to abandon his position as audience member. In this way, Thomas Bernhard, in his "performance prose" of *Old Masters*, challenges the classic forms of theater and creates a microcosm of a postwar world on stage.

¹¹ Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) was a German writer famous for his short novel *Michael Kohlhaas* and his plays *Kaethchen von Heilbronn*, *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, and *Der Zerbrochene Krug*.

CHAPTER 1
THE STAGE REVEALED:
THEATRICAL ELEMENTS IN THOMAS BERNHARD'S PROSE AND JACOPO
TINTORETTO'S PAINTING

“...from the formless rising *thing* of desire, along known fibers and through ordered centers, I *follow and am* myself, answer myself, reflect and echo myself, and quiver to infinity in my mirrors—I am glass.”

--Paul Valéry, *Monsieur Teste*

“Strictly speaking, every original is a forgery in itself.”

--Reger

In *Old Masters*, Thomas Bernhard illuminates the theatrical aspects of his position as author, his prose itself, and Tintoretto's painting. Bernhard is interested in the idea of self-observation in literature and the theater. That is to say, regarding prose, the narrator is both the writer and the spectator-witness, and in the theater, the actor is often the presenter and the one who performs another character's part. In this way, at least two roles of a character are exposed, allowing for self-observation and reflection. This phenomenon is of such significance to Bernhard that Bernhard's character Rudolf in his 1984 novel *Concrete*, says, “I've actually been observing myself for years, if not for decades; my life now consists only of self-observation and self-contemplation, which naturally leads to self-condemnation, self-rejection and self-mockery.”¹² Bernhard's interest in self-observation in the theater corresponds to the importance he places on the actor-audience relationship. Just as an audience member watches an actor

¹² Bernhard quoted in Honegger 230

perform on stage, the actor can, according to what Bernhard writes in *Concrete*, observe himself perform his role. Bernhard's world of writing is also a world of performance, influenced by Schopenhauer's philosophy, for "it is based on the philosopher's vision of the world as representation of the thinking subject, who simultaneously projects himself into his imagined world, where he performs and watches himself in performance perched in the private box of his mind."¹³ Bernhard's technique of self-observation and interest in *Vorstellung* (performance or show) enables him to emphasize the theatrical elements of his writing, by making his work into a string of performances. This particular appeal manifests itself in *Old Masters* and many other novels and plays of Bernhard. His interest in the theatricality of art helps one to understand how Bernhard sees the inexorable bond between a spectacle on stage and a spectator in the audience.

In this chapter, I will focus on Bernhard's relationship with the theater, his interest in the notion of self-observation in *Old Masters*, and the significance of a Tintoretto portrait as a centerpiece of the narrative setting in *Old Masters* and what it means for this novel to take place in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. To do so I will use Friedrich Dürrenmatt's 1955 essay entitled "Theaterprobleme" and his idea that the "audience is he himself" corresponds with Bernhard's notion of an actor's self-observation in the theater and how self-observation can explain an actor's dual role of belonging to the stage and audience. For both Tintoretto and Bernhard, the actor-audience dynamic plays an integral role in their art.

By setting his novel in an old masters' museum, in which classical relics are cherished and contemporary invention, for the most part, is disregarded, Bernhard makes a powerful statement on experimental and postmodern theater. In my analysis of *Old Masters*, Dürrenmatt's essay "Theaterprobleme" addresses the problems associated with the canonized classics and the contemporary state of theater.¹⁴ Reger's observation of the old master Tintoretto's painting inspires him both to reflect upon the past and consider the problems of the present, such as the state of the theater in post World War II Germany (especially Austria, for Bernhard) and the

¹³ Honegger 233

¹⁴ Dürrenmatt, in his essay entitled "Theaterprobleme," is written circa 1955, which he refers to as contemporary. "Contemporary theater," for Dürrenmatt, refers to his current time--the post World War II era.

political, religious, economic, and social issues in twentieth-century Europe. In *Old Masters*, Bernhard creates a setting in which these problems of twentieth-century Europe are addressed.

Bernhard was not only a writer and director, but also an actor and thus had a strong background in performance. As a preteen, he began his life on the stage by singing. When he was seventeen, he began to take private singing lessons; however, the lessons were interrupted by the beginning of what turned out to be a lifelong struggle with tuberculosis and weak lungs. Throughout his lifetime, Bernhard alternated between time in the hospital bed and at the theater. His first hospitalization was for pleurisy at the age of eighteen; this began a lifetime of recurring visits to tuberculosis sanatoriums and various hospitals.

As a result of his weakened health, Bernhard became obsessed with themes of sickness, death, and disease. Later in his life, in 1982, he published *Wittgensteins Neffe* (*Wittgenstein's Nephew*), a novel involving the mentally ill Paul Wittgenstein and the physically ill “Bernhardian” protagonist. Set in a hospital, the two characters engage in continuous dialogues concerning death, life, and physical and mental health. The reality of death never seemed to leave Bernhard’s mind.

At the age of twenty-four, Bernhard began to study acting and directing at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. In her biography of Thomas Bernhard entitled *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian*, Gitta Honegger examines Bernhard’s early years and writing and that he spent much of his time in his farmhouse in Upper Austria and Vienna’s various theaters. His early creative works were poems and short plays. At thirty-two, his first prose work entitled *Frost* was published. This signaled the beginning of dozens of other theater and prose projects.

Bernhard collaborated with Claus Peymann, a famous Austrian director, on at least a dozen of his plays--*Heldenplatz* (lit. *Hero's Place*), opening in Vienna in 1988, being their most critical and controversial project. The opening of *Heldenplatz* was scheduled for the hundredth birthday of the new Burgtheater on the Ringstrasse in Vienna. The timing was methodically arranged so that “the coinciding anniversaries of the theater and Austria’s annexation to Hitler’s

Reich produced an unprecedented preproduction drama.”¹⁵ The play itself is controversial in that it criticizes the masses’ adoration of Hitler upon his arrival in Vienna. The Heldenplatz is where Hitler and his army stood and where Bernhard’s play takes place. The play begins soon after the suicide of the main character’s husband, who jumped from his apartment overlooking the Heldenplatz.¹⁶ Bernhard’s manipulation of historical details for the controversial setting and his interest in the disastrous effects of the weight of Austrian guilt quickly made him a hero as well as an object of disapproval for many conservative Viennese, who thought him to be irreverent.

Claus Peymann, Bernhard’s main theater director, was just as radical as Bernhard. Peymann was known for often making offensive remarks. He criticized almost every aspect of Viennese theater, including the Burgtheater, where *Heldenplatz* was to premiere. In one radical statement, Peymann called “the Burgtheater so full of shit that it should be wrapped by the artist Christo and torn down.”¹⁷ Together, Bernhard and Peymann represented a critical and, oftentimes, extremist voice that the majority of the post World War II Viennese public were not ready to accept. The cynical playwright and outspoken director worked together until Bernhard’s death in 1989.

As critical as he was about the conservative city of Vienna and the “tainted” country of Austria, Bernhard had conflicting feelings of loyalty, disapproval, and shame towards his homeland. Despite the country’s numerous faults, Bernhard offers no definitive escape from Austria. Both Bernhard and Tintoretto, the old master who painted the *White-Bearded Man*, are unique products of their time precisely because of this connection to their homeland. Tintoretto, Bernhard, and Bernhard’s autobiographical character Reger are all genuinely attached to their homeland. However, they have radically different ways of expressing their connection. Reger, highly critical of Austria yet remaining a permanent resident in the country, says, “Undoubtedly, my dear Atzbacher, we have nearly reached the peak of our age of chaos and kitsch, adding: the whole of this Austria is nothing but a Kunsthistorisches Museum, a Catholic-National-Socialist

¹⁵ Honegger 282

¹⁶ Honegger 282

¹⁷ Honegger 285

one, an appalling one.”¹⁸ Reger complains about Austria’s political and religious issues in a most radical tone. In Tintoretto’s case, however, the native land is not Upper Austria, but Venice, Italy. Tintoretto was dedicated to the Venetian state and faithful to his Catholic religion. He was not political but had an intense patriotism for Venice. His commission for the Scuola di San Rocco, beginning in 1564, which took twenty-three years to complete, led him to become active not only as an artist but as an administrator. Tintoretto was not only considered far more religious and spiritual in comparison to his artistic contemporaries, but he also dedicated a substantial part of his life to “the hearth and the studio.”¹⁹ Tintoretto’s approach to Christianity tended to be mystical and optimistic, whereas Bernhard’s Reger has a sacrilegious and an irreverent edge, so to speak. While Reger and Tintoretto are both physically and mentally attached to their homeland, a tremendous contrast exists between the actions that Tintoretto and Reger take in their respective homelands.

Bernhard furthers Reger’s connection with Tintoretto and his skills as a painter by making the *White-Bearded Man* Reger’s sole focus of study throughout *Old Masters*. By doing this, Bernhard makes an innovative move. By having his “performance” take place in a museum, the storehouse for classic treasures and idealized relics--the precise place in which Dürrenmatt believes the modern state of theater to be--Bernhard creates an ideal arrangement for the critique of the post WWII contemporary theater. The main character, Reger, has been sitting in front of a conventional portrait by Tintoretto every other day for thirty-six years; Irrsigler,²⁰ the museum guard, watches over not only the paintings but also Reger who demands solitude without interruption. As a result, Reger himself becomes an exhibition piece. A museum, already resembling a theater and stage, with art as spectacle and visitors as spectators, becomes another stage for Reger as a showpiece and the visitors as the audience. Reger’s requested red rope

¹⁸ Bernhard 154

¹⁹ Newton 67

²⁰ Taking Irrsigler’s name into consideration reflects another instance of the absurd. In German, “Irre” means, in the masculine and feminine, a madman or madwoman, a lunatic, or a mental patient; the verb “siegeln” means to seal or close off; and a definition of the noun “Siegel” is a seal. A “Siegler” would be a keeper of seals. Irrsigler could be the combination of these two words, for he keeps Reger’s madness sealed off from the visitors to the museum; and through this out-of-the-ordinary job, Irrsigler, the sealer and keeper of madness, receives his name.

separates the “actor” from his “audience.” As the visitors to the Kunsthistorisches Museum pass by the Bordone Room, Reger, expecting no intrusions, sits in his “sacred space” and observes the *White-Bearded Man*.

Reger’s, and for that matter Bernhard’s, fascination with the *White-Bearded Man* is a focal point of interest in the examination of *Old Masters*. Tintoretto, inspired by the theatricality surrounding a miracle (of the birth of Christ and St. Mark rescuing a slave), painted with the spectacle and the audience in mind. However, in *Old Masters*, Reger chooses to observe a conventional portrait of an unknown person by Tintoretto. In his mid-forties when he first began to view the portrait of the elderly man, Reger, for thirty-six years, has built relationships with and stemming from the painting. Reger is committed to Tintoretto’s portrait and the museum itself because he met his wife while looking at the painting, and also because his wife died at the museum--more specifically, on the museum steps. Reger examines an anonymous man in the portrait who, in a sense, returns Reger’s address with his sideways gaze.

At the age of eighty-two, Reger continues to observe a portrait of an old man, who appears to be in a similar age group as Reger. To what extent could Tintoretto’s *White-Bearded Man* be a self-portrait of Tintoretto himself? The painting, with dates ranging from 1570-1580, would have been completed by Tintoretto when he was in his mid-fifties or –sixties (see pages 92-93). The *White-Bearded Man* bears striking similarities to the *Self-Portrait of Tintoretto* (1588), which was painted when Tintoretto was in his seventies (see page 94). The nose, eyes, moustache, beard, cheekbones, hairline, and shape of head closely resemble Tintoretto’s 1588 self-portrait. All of these details concerning ages and dates encourage one to compare the time of Bernhard’s writing *Old Masters* to Tintoretto’s painting the *White-Bearded Man*. When Bernhard wrote *Old Masters* in 1985, he was fifty-four. This leads one to the conclusion that both Bernhard and Tintoretto were creating their respective works in their mid-fifties. With the knowledge of these dates and how the artworks correspond to the painter’s and writer’s history, one can then propose connections existing between the autobiographical and the fictional information. Bernhard, in his mid-fifties, writes a novel about an older man looking at a portrait

of an older man. Tintoretto, in his mid- to late- fifties, painted the painting that Bernhard later chose as the main focus for his protagonist. The connections, having been made, strengthen the relationship which exists between spectator-spectacle and the creator and his work. Bernhard, in *Old Masters*, creates a theatrical environment in which the main character and the visitors to the museum correspond to the actor in a play and the audience.

In “Theaterprobleme,” Dürrenmatt examines various realities existing both on stage and in the audience in contemporary theater. He believes that it has become harder, if not impossible, for the modern author to know his audience, because of the questions of style in experimental theater. The numerous styles are created just as quickly as contemporary art undergoes experimentation. Instead of studying under one dramaturgy, there are many ways of practicing theater and theorizing about art. According to Dürrenmatt, style is no longer “common property, but something highly private, an individual decision. We have no style, only styles, to describe the situation in art today in a nutshell.”²¹ Consequently, the modern author or playwright no longer knows what the audience desires or expects from the theater. As a result, he turns to himself to look for an idea of what people or a community is like. Dürrenmatt notes that, with the existence of numerous styles and “highly private” individuals in the audience, the sense of community has been lost. He believes that the modern author no longer knows his audience and, in turn, has become just the “paying public,” who can be understood most easily in terms of money. He points out the problem of ambiguous identity in twentieth-century play production: “A playwright has to imagine his audience; but in truth the audience is he himself...”²² An author of a play or prose piece, ultimately, but not exclusively, writes for himself, for he assumes the role of the spectator. In an age in which the audience has become difficult to know and the sense of community seems to have vanished, the author, director, or producer reveals the audience inside himself.

²¹ Dürrenmatt 240

²² Dürrenmatt 241

If, on a fundamental level, the language of the author exists as series of cryptic dialogues between the multiple personalities of the creator, then what roles exist for the audience itself? How important is the audience to the actors on stage? Are the actors viewing themselves as if they are members of the audience? Because of the difficulty of a contemporary author understanding or knowing what to expect from his audience, there are increasing reasons to argue that an author ultimately writes to please himself, just as the actor performs in order to watch himself. But an author or playwright never loses hope for audience response. The audience, public, and spectator are intrinsic elements of the dramatic dialogue. Dürrenmatt and Bernhard recognize the shifting roles of spectatorship that are developing between an author and audience within the state of modern theater as well as the interrelated connection between playwright, actor, and audience.

Similarly, Reger believes that when one writes, he is writing for himself. While Dürrenmatt sees the public as ambiguous because of the change in the notion of style in contemporary art, he also notices a change in the individual as a result of the power created before and during WWII and the guilt resulting from the Holocaust.²³ Reger thinks that the public is intellectually unreliable and its interest in art is superficial, although the reasons for this he does not explain as precisely as Dürrenmatt. Reger, in a critical but humorous portrayal of the European visitors to the Kunsthistorisches Museum, says:

The French tend to walk through the museum rather bored, the English act as if they knew and had seen everything. The Russians are full of admiration. The Poles regard everything with arrogance. The Germans at the Kunsthistorisches Museum look at their catalogue all the time while they go through the rooms. . . .”²⁴

²³ The latter reason will be discussed in Chapter Two, which will focus upon the power and guilt associated with post WWII Europe.

²⁴ Bernhard 22

Reger has an opinion on every nationality entering the museum. This means that not only are the French, English, Russians, Poles, and Germans Reger's audience and visitors to the museum, but they are also Reger's subjects for observation, just as he is a subject for their observation.

Bernhard manipulates spectacle and audience expectation in a theatrical setting.

Even though Reger finds the public to be at times laughable and ludicrous, he recognizes the importance of its existence. After all, what would Reger be without *his* audience? Reger, in a conversation with Atzbacher concerning Atzbacher's hesitations about publishing, says, "I just do not understand you not publishing your writings at least in excerpts, if only to discover for once what the public, or, as it were, the competent public, thinks about them, even though at the same time I have to admit that there is no such thing as a competent public..."²⁵ Reger seems to have a cynical view of the public, just as Dürrenmatt believes that the public's desires and interests are, in many ways, too ambiguous at his present moment. However unresponsive the public is, one continues to write for the masses and oneself. In *Old Masters*, Reger believes that writing is meant to be read, all the while respecting the presence of the reader and audience member. Reger says, "You have been working at your opus for decades now and you say you are writing this work *solely for yourself, that is appalling*, no one writes a work for himself."²⁶ One writes as the ultimate spectator, knowing, of course, what images he wants to see, and at the same time one writes in order to receive emotional and intellectual response from the public. Therefore, it is important for Reger to have Atzbacher and the museum visitors as his audience or public, just as Atzbacher needs an audience or readers for his writing.

Continuing along his thoughts on the importance of audience, Bernhard is never unaware of his position as spectator of his own writing. Consequently, one should not ignore the fact that Bernhard's writing contains autobiographical elements, for he often stages varying aspects of himself when he writes prose works and plays. For Bernhard, the author is the ultimate spectator, who is continuously observing himself from different angles. In *Old Masters*, Reger,

²⁵ Bernhard 89

²⁶ Bernhard 89

Atzbacher, and Irrsigler could be varying aspects of Bernhard's personalities. All three characters are Austrian men representing various stages of life. They are either engaged in observing the painting or observing the other person in the room. As a result, the characters assume various angles of self-reflection and self-observation. In her biography on Bernhard, Honegger emphasizes the element of performance in his writing. She compares Bernhard's writing process to a dividing of oneself into numerous parts. She explores how he, fully aware of his position as a writer, might observe himself while writing. For example, Bernhard, writing a novel about a main protagonist who is writing at his desk, is all the while aware of his own writing. Bernhard observes himself outside of himself and experiences a variety of characters within his personality. Honegger states that Bernhard, "dramatized in the fictional writer observing himself, all under the watchful gaze of the 'real author,' who occasionally asserts his presence with autobiographical details, resembles an actor in a performance."²⁷ The author assumes the role of a commanding spectator, who is able to view himself as a writer and performer as well as the creator of all the characters. As the ultimate spectator, Bernhard achieves numerous levels of awareness--awareness of himself as author, spectator, and actor. The multiple roles allow for multiple perspectives and, ultimately, more freedom of speech, thought, and dialogue.

The more possibilities of perspective that one has in a performance, the closer one is brought to a "truth."²⁸ Truth, in this sense, comes to be recognized as a result of discovering falsehoods on stage. Bernhard, like Arthur Schopenhauer,²⁹ is interested in the paradox of the

²⁷ Honegger 230

²⁸ Finding truth and "morality" through display of spectacle and layers of falsehood is of interest to Thomas Elsaesser, as revealed in his article entitled "Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Exile: A Counterfeit Trade?" His ideas concerning the spectacle and the audience shed light on Bernhard's notion of experimental Austrian theater. Elsaesser writes about German filmmakers in Hollywood, but his ideas about film also correspond to action occurring on stage in a theater. Elsaesser writes the following concerning "Viennese decadence," falsity, and the spectacle: "For what some émigrés achieved was to make out of make-believe a morality; only by piling up the falsehoods could they get closer to a truth. Highly self-conscious and self-referential, their (for example: Lubitsch, Lang, Wilder, and Preminger) films play with appearance and the many levels of irony involved in make-believe" (121). Elsaesser's ideas recall Schopenhauer's philosophy that every discovery of a falsehood is a piece of truth. Bernhard felt similarly and proved it by including these precise issues in the staging of his prose works and plays.

²⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer and his influence upon Thomas Bernhard and Reger will be addressed in Chapter Three.

discovery of a truth through recognition of multiple falsehoods or, in the case of the theater, the multiple perspectives of the “make-believe” on stage. Bernhard’s characters often judge, observe, and criticize objects and people, adding layers of perspectives and personalities to his diegesis.

Bernhard’s characters in later works correspond to the author’s age, for his main characters are often older men--critical Austrian bachelors--who isolate themselves from society and gain energy through incessant complaint. This tendency is crucial in the analysis of *Old Masters* in that Reger, who takes center stage, so to speak, is being observed by Atzbacher, Bernhard’s fictional writer. Irrsigler, the museum’s and Reger’s guard (and to an extent Atzbacher’s guard because it is Irrsigler’s job to make sure that Atzbacher goes unnoticed in his secret observation) is another representative for Bernhard of everything outside the world of the critical intellectual. Bernhard criticizes the *Burgenland* (the Austrian countryside), the lower class Austrians, and anything “non-Viennese,” all through Reger’s voice. In this way, one discovers various aspects of Bernhard’s personality in his main characters. As a result, his theme of self-observation in the theater gains credibility and significance. Honegger comments on the numerous personalities on a Bernhard stage: “What the Bernhard reader sees is a virtuoso performance of a solo mind reflected through several mirrors.”³⁰ The varying personalities in a performance embody the varying perspectives in a human mind--notably Bernhard’s.

The importance of the setting for this “virtuoso performance” in Bernhard’s novel becomes clearer once one begins to examine the problems associated with contemporary theater. For both Bernhard and Dürrenmatt, a major problem with contemporary theater in Austria and Germany is the heavy reliance upon the classics--the canonized plays. Dürrenmatt believes that the classics are overwhelming the stage, allowing little room for experimental theater. He believes that the theater of today resembles “a museum in which the art treasures of former golden ages of the drama are put on exhibition.”³¹ The dilemma of contemporary theater is

³⁰ Honegger 222

³¹ Dürrenmatt 239

caused by its inability to escape the idealized influences of the past: “It is only too natural at a time like ours—a time which, always looking towards the past, seems to possess everything but a present.”³² This hesitation to perform and direct experimental plays is due to conservative theater directors who behave more like businessmen, who are more concerned with the commercial profits than the directors and artists, who are unwilling to take the risks associated with staging a relatively unknown work. The classics, even if performed poorly, provide the business managers of the theater with less of risk than a controversial play by Brecht, Dürrenmatt, or Bernhard.

In the case of the recurring performances of the classics, Dürrenmatt believes that monotony is taking the place of experimental theater. During repeated performances of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, and William Shakespeare, the audience members are “relieved of the task of thinking and passing judgments other than those learned in school,” whereas the actors, after years of performing the same canonized play, feel as if they are losing spontaneity as their job has become more routine (Dürrenmatt 239). The actors become more like civil servants and less like interpreters, creators, and artists. Dürrenmatt, who is writing “Theaterprobleme” in the 1950s, and Bernhard, who is writing *Old Masters* in the 1980s, both see problems of identification within the world of the actors and audience members. The combination of the aftermath of WWII guilt and the explosion of power and the fear of performing experimental plays which could lose money and lead to financial ruin, guide both Dürrenmatt and Bernhard in their writing. As a result of such stagnation of contemporary theater, the audience members identify less with the actors, and the actors care less both for their performance and audience. The modern theater has discouraged any hopes for actor-audience interaction and creativity, which are key elements in the development of drama. Dürrenmatt argues that there ought to be room made in 1955 for experimental theater, which would introduce freshness and inventiveness to the otherwise stagnant stage and audience.

³² Dürrenmatt 239

In *Old Masters*, Reger's dilemma regarding the so-called classics recalls Dürrenmatt's complaints concerning the predictable devotion to and reception of classic theater. In the following, typical piece of "Bernhardian" prose, Atzbacher recalls what Reger, in a rather long-winded manner, has said about survival and the classics:

I do in fact believe that the Kunsthistorisches Museum is the only refuge left to me, I have to go to the old masters to be able to continue to exist, precisely to these so-called old masters, who have long been abhorrent to me, because basically nothing is more abhorrent to me than these so-called old masters here at the Kunsthistorisches Museum and old masters generally, all old masters, no matter what their names are, no matter what they have painted, and yet it is they who keep me alive.³³

Even though Reger chooses to view only one work by an old master, he reflects upon all of the old masters to whom he owes his life, so to speak. Amidst all the Kunsthistorisches Museum's old masters, there is only one that he observes, scrutinizes, and examines. According to Dürrenmatt, "the theater lives on the interest of the well-invested intellect, to which nothing can happen any more and for which no royalties need be paid. Assured of having a Goethe, Schiller, or Sophocles at hand, the theaters are willing now and then to put on a modern piece—but preferably only for a premiere performance."³⁴ In some ways, Reger's dilemma is Dürrenmatt's fear, for Reger commits himself to the abhorrent old masters because only they among artists are accessible to him, and he needs art to maintain life. Reger suffers from the heavy weight of the old masters (the classics), which in part appeal to him, and in part aggravate him. He cannot resist the old masters because they ensure his "survival," yet weaken him with disgust. Art simultaneously saves and destroys him.

³³ Bernhard 104

³⁴ Dürrenmatt 261

Reger seems to be, in some sense, a product of the increasing aesthetic demand which critics make of artists. Reger expects perfection of the old masters even though he understands that perfection is impossible. He says, “All these so-called old masters are really failures. . . . Quite apart from the fact that of all these so-called old masters each one invariably only painted some detail of his pictures with real genius, not one of them painted a one-hundred-per-cent picture of genius. . . .”³⁵ Here, the problem lies within the notion of the classic as an aesthetic ideal; as Dürrenmatt argues, “what is wanted is the perfection that is read into the classics.”³⁶ For Reger, even the classics are flawed, because perfection of the imagined object cannot be actualized in solid form. Compared to contemporary art, the classics possess a longer history in which they were read, watched, and admired. From this point of view, contemporary creations represent a newness which can be misinterpreted as inadequacy and vulnerability. Reger continuously battles between the idealized and actual artwork; these notions are represented by the perfection projected onto the classics and what he actually sees in the classics, in this case Tintoretto’s portrait.

For Reger, a painting’s appeal is juxtaposed with its unforgettable flaw; it is an old master or, even worse for Bernhard, Austrian in origin and, as a result, possesses an unavoidable “kitch.” Reger, commenting on Madrid’s world-famous Prado museum, states that “. . . even the Prado contains only imperfect, unsuccessful, ultimately only ridiculous and dilettantish things. Some artists . . . are quite simply inflated to world-rousing monstrosity. . . .”³⁷ For Reger, some of these “world-rousing monstrosities” include Diego Velázquez, Rembrandt, Giorgione, Blaise Pascal, and Francois Marie Arouet Voltaire. Reger shows, after commenting on Spanish, Italian, and French artists and intellectuals, that art does not have to be exclusively Austrian for it to be flawed; however, he never hesitates to criticize his addictive yet abhorrent Austria. The aesthetic expectations that Reger continuously reveals and criticizes in his dialogues with Atzbacher and Irrsigler seem flawed. Expectation itself appears to be tainted or

³⁵ Bernhard 152

³⁶ Dürrenmatt 261

³⁷ Bernhard 33, 34

exploited to such a degree that the objects become distorted in meaning and value. In the following statement, Reger contrasts the attractiveness of an Austrian pastry with the stench of the Austrian café's restroom: "On the one hand this megalomaniac cult of gigantic *gateaux*, and on the other these frightfully dirty lavatories."³⁸ It is precisely the co-existence of an aesthetic idealism and what he refers to as the repulsive and "kitchified" reality that creates such a variety of critical and unsatisfied voices in Reger.

Reger commits himself to the Tintoretto painting in the Bordone Room for sentimental as well as metaphysical and philosophical reasons. The *White-Bearded Man* appeals to Reger because he met his wife in front of the painting, on the very settee upon which he sits every other day. Her persistence enabled her to share a place next to Reger in the Bordone Room; and both her dislike of the painting and her aggressive personality attracted Reger. The woman's contrary nature, which perhaps reminded him of his own behavior, appealed to Reger. He also enjoyed their conversations, which were not dissimilar to a philosophical debate. Reger states that "[he] was interested not in [the conversation's] content but in the way it was conducted."³⁹ To Atzbacher, he recalls the moment with his wife and reveals his own contrary position: "As you see, I owe a lot to the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Maybe it is actually gratitude that makes me go to the Kunsthistorisches Museum every other day, but of course it is not that."⁴⁰ Reger's is a searching mind--a mind searching for mistakes, intellectual challenges, and contradictions. He is a philosopher, who enjoys questioning the difficult and, often, unanswerable issues.

In addition to not really knowing why he repeatedly returns to the museum, Reger finds every painting to be imperfect and has chosen this Tintoretto and not the other old masters' work because he finds it the most agreeable of all the old master painters. Reger says, in fact, that nothing is perfect and that man discovers his happiness in fragments. In one of Atzbacher's many reflections, he recalls Reger saying, "There is no perfect picture and there is no perfect book and there is no perfect piece of music, that is the truth. One's mind has to be a searching

³⁸ Bernhard 81

³⁹ Bernhard 98

⁴⁰ Bernhard 98, 99

mind, a mind searching for mistakes, for the mistakes of humanity.”⁴¹ Reger acknowledges the imperfections in all things and this realization inspires him to investigate further his surrounding culture and society and to make more adverse criticisms about art.

Reger obsesses over the inevitability of death lurking behind everything and the imperfect state of the Tintoretto painting--and life for that matter. His fixation with death is due to a personal and a societal tragedy: his wife's death and the Holocaust.⁴² Reger is unable to escape the persistence of death's shadow because the Kunsthistorisches Museum is not only where he met his wife but also where she fell to her death. Likewise, Reger cannot disassociate death from Vienna because of Hitler and the other Nazi leaders' speeches and demonstrations in the city. For Reger, death is an integral part of this focus upon imperfection. A work of art created by the hands of a mortal cannot escape the reality of death and captures the tragedy and history of the time in which it is painted. Thus, Reger's interest in the imperfection of the Tintoretto painting, such as the unavoidable reality that, in his opinion, every original work of art is a forgery, ironically reveals his fascination with the writers, artists, and philosophers whom he attacks and criticizes.⁴³ Moreover, the portrait's imperfections inspire Reger to evaluate the imperfections of his Austrian homeland as well as the products of Austrian and German high culture.

Reger reads the anonymous man's posture in Tintoretto's painting as hiding the reality of death and life's finitude. The *White-Bearded Man* assumes a lifelike, if not actually a lively, quality as the old man presents himself to Reger, Irrsigler, and Atzbacher. Because of his twisted position, the figure in the portrait excludes no spectator. His body faces Atzbacher in the Sebastiano Room and Irrsigler at the door connecting the two rooms; his eyes gaze towards Reger, who sits directly in front of him. The man in the painting assumes a life and real presence of his own. The various gazes addressing the different characters, including the *White-Bearded Man*, arrive and then send the message back to the other characters in the two perspective-

⁴¹ Bernhard 20

⁴² This issue of death and the Holocaust will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

⁴³ Bernhard 57

triangles: the Reger, Atzbacher, *White-Bearded Man* triangle; and the Reger, Atzbacher, Irrsigler triangle. In this way, all of the main characters are included. No one can escape the man's piercing eyes in the painting, which remind one of one's own mortality--Reger's metaphysical concerns. For Reger, "illusion and self-deception alone offer relief; true redemption is out of the question."⁴⁴ For Reger, one discovers a method of survival when one loses oneself in art.

Through his acknowledgement of death in all things and his admiration of the Tintoretto portrait, Reger finds his sustenance and drive, for he chooses courage over capitulation. Reger's ultimately optimistic tendency⁴⁵ recalls Dürrenmatt's, when he writes, "The world (and thus the stage that represents the world) is for me something monstrous, a riddle of misfortunes that has to be accepted but before which there can be no capitulation."⁴⁶ The portrait's painterly details encourage a philosopher like Reger to keep pursuing these metaphysical concerns. The problems associated with the portrait and its environment provide Reger with the energy, required for his "survival."

The dynamic between the *White-Bearded Man* and his spectators, as well as the theatrical relationship between Reger and his spectators, emphasizes the importance of theatricality in Tintoretto's art. A central or favorite theme of Tintoretto's was the spectator's relationship to the object(s) in view, as can be found in the *White-Bearded Man* (c. 1570), the *Miracle of St. Mark rescuing a Slave* (1548) or *The Nativity* (1576-1581). In these three paintings by Tintoretto, the techniques of foreshortening, the use of light and shade, and the distortion of scale and perspective are all devices that may be attributed to the High Renaissance and Mannerism. Tintoretto's use of deep space and reversal of light and shade in the *Miracle of St. Mark rescuing a Slave* is innovative and experimental, whereas the *White-Bearded Man*, with face and left hand illuminated, is an example of a conventional Tintoretto portrait (see page 96). Reger's choice to observe the conventional portrait is a paradoxical move on Bernhard's part. Tintoretto challenges the positions of his spectator in his paintings and proves to be influenced by the

⁴⁴ Dowden 63

⁴⁵ Reger's optimistic tendency will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Three.

⁴⁶ Dürrenmatt 255

theater in paintings such as the *Last Suppers* (1547, c. 1560) and the *Presentation of the Virgin* (1551-1552). This dynamic between the audience and the “actors,” is precisely one of the major intrigues for Bernhard and his character Reger. Tintoretto, inspired by religious optimism, implicitly challenges Reger’s attacks upon Austria’s Catholic religiosity in *Old Masters*. Reger, in one of his anti-religious tirades, says, “This *Catholic* state has no understanding of art and hence the teachers of this state have none, that is what is so depressing. The teachers teach what this Catholic state is and instruct them to teach: narrow-mindedness and brutality, vileness and meanness, depravity and chaos.”⁴⁷ Perhaps Tintoretto’s dedication to the Venetian state intrigues Reger because his relationship to the Austrian state is so different. Nevertheless, Reger chooses Tintoretto as a painter to observe, and, in turn, incorporates these tendencies into his modernist dilemma.

Just as Bernhard’s biographical information plays an integral part in understanding his fiction, details of the Venetian Mannerist painter Jacopo Tintoretto’s life should be included in examination of his painting technique. Tintoretto, the son of a clothes dyer, was born in 1518 in Venice. Tintoretto, whose name means “the little dyer,” began drawing at an early age through the use of his father’s charcoal and dyes. When one thinks of Tintoretto, one does not immediately think of his portrait painting of the *White-Bearded Man*. One is more likely to think of the *Miracle of the Slave* (1548), *Susanna and the Elders* (1555), *Finding of the Body of St Mark* (1562), the *Last Supper* (1592), or the *Crucifixion*, *Christ before Pilate*, and the *Road to Calvary*, all of which are included in Tintoretto’s commissioned project of 1564 at the Scuola of San Rocco. According to Tintoretto, the twenty-three year Scuola of San Rocco commission became a principal period in his life. Tintoretto’s painting occurred on the two floors and in the three rooms of the Scuola of San Rocco. All other work during that time, from 1564 to 1587, was done so to speak, “in parentheses.”⁴⁸ The *White-Bearded Man* painted in the 1570s would fall into this period “of parentheses.”

⁴⁷ Bernhard 24

⁴⁸ Newton 60

Tintoretto was a unique member of the Mannerist movement in sixteenth-century Italy. The first phase of Mannerism began in Florence, Italy, and later the movement spread to Rome and Venice. Distortion of proportion and space are key elements of this style. Exaggeration and contortion of body, twisted in shape and restless in movement, are representative of the unconventionality of Mannerism. The technique of foreshortening, a way of “achieving the illusion of forms projecting into space,” and the use of bold colors contribute to the Mannerist space.⁴⁹ Tintoretto’s “energy of invention” singled him out as a painter who had the talent of educating himself. S.J. Freedberg notes, “He seems to have been essentially autodidact, possessed by a voracious appetite for anything he could gather that implied novelty or radicalism, which for him included everything accessible of contemporary non-Venetian styles.”⁵⁰ He was said to be “anti-classical,” “libertarian,” and “explosive” with regard to his color technique. It was in his 1540 work entitled *Sacra Conversazione* that his uniqueness of style first stood out.

The *Sacra Conversazione* contains the “opulence of surface of its native school and effects of Mannerist *disegno* are achieved with a free-moving painter’s brush. But the colour, like the Mannerizing form, is libertarian, stressing that its prime sense is far more aesthetic and expressive than descriptive.”⁵¹ He combines the Mannerist tendency towards energy and movement in his use of color but retains an elegance and gracefulness associated with the *Maniera* form.⁵²

In *The Nativity*, which is included in his work in the Scuola di San Rocco in Venice, Tintoretto proves to be challenging traditional techniques of painting with his use of deep space in the upper section of the painting (see page 95). Mary and Joseph hover over the infant Christ, who is proportionally much smaller in comparison to Mary, Joseph, and the two women who are

⁴⁹ Barnes, *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002*

⁵⁰ Freedberg 518

⁵¹ Freedberg 519

⁵² Mannerism developed in Central Italy, where *Maniera* and Counter-*Maniera* also developed. From 1540-1600 Venice was known for its Mannerist styles and native artist Tintoretto, who was growing increasingly famous. “From about 1540 onwards all the more important phenomena in Venetian painting carry the mark on them of contact with the Mannerism that had its origin in Central Italy” (Freedberg 503).

sitting to the right of the parents. In the lower section of the painting, two men on the left side raise their right hands. The man standing--his back illuminated with light--corresponds to the man sitting--his chest exposed and his face in shade. On the right side of the painting, two figures (one woman, who faces the viewer, and a figure kneeling, his back to the viewer) correspond to the two figures on the left side of the painting. The woman's shoulders are illuminated in Tintoretto's light and the head of the kneeling figure is touched by light. The painting is nontraditional in that the Christ child is not immediately the center of attention. The crowded space is filled with adults whose bodies are angled in a way that emphasizes the vanishing point. The viewer is not on ground level, but is rather stationed above, looking into the basket in the foreground of the painting.

In sixteenth-century Italy, Titian⁵³ and Tintoretto were both esteemed portrait painters, and in Venice the art of portraiture was increasingly in demand. As early as 1894, Bernhard Berenson in his book *The Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* emphasized the aesthetic expectations beyond physical likeness in Venetian portrait painting. He writes, "The Venetian portrait, it will be remembered, was expected to be more than a likeness. It was expected to give pleasure to the eye, and to stimulate the emotions. Tintoretto was ready to give ample satisfaction to all such expectations."⁵⁴ Tintoretto's artistic style left a great impression on the Venetian art world of the sixteenth century.

Mannerism is a "style that displays the skill of the artist and demands knowledge of the viewer," according to Francis L. Richardson.⁵⁵ The *White-Bearded Man* differs from the more classic portrait styles of the middle to late sixteenth century in that the entire right side of the body is obscured in shade and darkness. The illuminated face, beard, gold buttons, and left hand sharply contrast with the rest of the body, which remains in the dark. Examining Tintoretto's portrait painting style, Berenson remarks that Tintoretto's portrait painting makes the subject

⁵³ Titian (c.1487-1576) famous for his portrait entitled *Young Man with a Glove* (1520), *Bacchus and Ariadne* (1522), *Emperor Charles V with his Dog* (1532), *Venus of Urbino* (1538), and *Presentation of the Virgin* (1538).

⁵⁴ Berenson 59

⁵⁵ Richardson, *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia* 2002

look as if he is healthy and full of life.⁵⁶ Berenson believes that Tintoretto's portraits give the viewer a kind of pleasure similar to the one experienced from jewels.

Reger seems to be intrigued by some information that the *White-Bearded Man* contains. Details regarding the placement of the ears in the Tintoretto portrait are discussed by Gregor Hens, who notices details in the painting that are not common in other portraits of his. These qualities of the portrait could further contribute to Reger's lifelong fascination with the piece. In his book *Thomas Bernhards Trilogie der Künste*, Hens writes that the *White-Bearded Man's* right eye should vanish somewhat behind the nose due to the man's twisted stance and gaze (147). Hens's notice of this detail brings up the various controversial aspects of the sixteenth-century painting. Behind the near ear in the *White-Bearded Man* continues the bearded man's head. One sees the parallel curve of the ear with the curve of the back of the head. The extreme contrast of light and dark between the hands and face and the rest of the body, the appearance of movement in the eyes, the strong twist in the body's torso, and the placement of the ear contribute to the admirable qualities of Reger's favorite and most objectionable painting.

Many of Tintoretto's works reveal his express interests in both the theater and the dramatic elements of painting. The theatricality of painting became a most noticeable convention in the Renaissance art. Tintoretto, in his paintings, stressed the dynamic existing between the spectator and spectacle. He was involved in the theater as a costume designer and would often experiment with shadow, light, and boxes to create a theatrical setting, which inevitably provided ideas for his paintings. Both painting and theater "shar[e] basic structures on a phenomenological as well as formal level, both arts are concerned with mimetic fiction, which involves spectacle and public, *palcoscenico* and *cavea*, actor and audience, miracle and witness."⁵⁷ As painting and the theater became increasingly important for Tintoretto, the popularity of painting's and theater's bond likewise inspired and intrigued later artists in the Renaissance. Some of the conventions of theater architecture and stage spectacle introduced in

⁵⁶ Berenson 59

⁵⁷ Rosand 139

many of Italy's large cities such as Florence, Venice, Parma, Rome, and Milan include "the picture-frame (*proscenium*) stage; perspective scenery, which gave the illusion of depth, elaborate machinery for scene shifting and producing special effects; and artificial lighting."⁵⁸ Tintoretto's interest in the dramatic spectacle was influential on later painters in Italy, and his "preference for diagonal compositions that plunge or zigzag into deep space, the commanding theatricality of his lighting, and the overall dynamism were emulated by the Baroque style painter Peter Paul Rubens."⁵⁹ Tintoretto's emphasis upon perspective and depictions of architecture in his painting brings the viewer's eyes to the stage. Tintoretto's architecturally sound scaffolding depicts the created stage and provides the space for a religious theater.

The determination of Tintoretto to make the act of viewing a painting a religious and faith-confirming moment sheds a new light on the significance of Reger's sitting in front of a Tintoretto portrait, for not only is Tintoretto's portrait non-religious, but so is Reger himself. He chooses not to sit in front of *Susanna and the Elders* (also in the Kunsthistorisches Museum), but commits himself to a conventional portrait of an anonymous man painted by a devout Catholic, who is known for his innovative Manneristic paintings depicting religious scenes.

Reger is drawn to the unexpected elements in Tintoretto. He is genuinely attracted to the Tintoretto portrait. Reger, displaying the difficulties of his obstinate nature, says, ". . . I have always really loved the *White-Bearded Man*. I never loved Tintoretto, but I have loved Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*."⁶⁰ The portrait appeals to Reger because he met his wife in front of the painting, yet he claims to approve of the painting more than the painter himself. His fascination with the portrait is both contrary and fitting to his own personality. Perhaps he admires combination in Tintoretto of a revolutionary spirit with religious reverence. What could be a better setting for Bernhard's "prose stage" than the eighty-two year-old Reger, the musicologist and art connoisseur, committing himself for thirty-six years to the relatively

⁵⁸ Barranger, *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002*

⁵⁹ Richardson, *Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002*

⁶⁰ Bernhard 150

unknown portrait of the *White-Bearded Man*? Reger exists amidst the irony of his situation as a non-religious spectator, who is also the non-religious spectacle.

Reger engages most seriously in the ritualistic activity of observing a lesser-known Tintoretto portrait in the Bordone Room, which shares a door with the Sebastiano Room, the room containing Titian's *The Bravo* (c. 1520) and *Madonna of the Cherries* (1516-1518). Reger's choosing a portrait by Tintoretto over Titian, the supposed master of portraits, is a typical "Bernhardian" paradoxical motif. Atzbacher, in order to observe Reger without interruption, must stand in the Sebastiano Room and look into the Bordone Room. Atzbacher writes, "I was compelled therefore, entirely against my inclination, to submit to Titian in order to be able to observe Reger in front of Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*. . . ." ⁶¹ Reger has chosen Tintoretto over Titian, who seemed to have been the more aggressive and jealous of the two artists.

For Reger, one's point of view is crucial for his or her "survival." According to Reger, his position in the Bordone Room in the Kunsthistorisches Museum is ideal for contemplation and reflection. The lighting and temperature in the Kunsthistorisches Museum suit him, while, more specifically, the Bordone Room has the "best conditions for meditation. The Bordone Room is [his] thinking as well as [his] reading room." ⁶² Dürrenmatt stresses the importance of "retain[ing] one's human point of view" and the danger of becoming an outsider in this world. Reger might superficially appear to be an outsider because of his elitist and separatist nature, but he is very much engaged in the "human" perspective. His space is the space of this world. Regarding his relationship with the portrait, Reger says, "The *White-Bearded Man* has stood up to my intellect and to my feelings for over thirty years, to me it is therefore the most precious item on show here at the Kunsthistorisches Museum." ⁶³ Reger retains his humane point of view when he chooses to observe Tintoretto's anonymous portrait of a man, marked with experience, age, and wisdom.

⁶¹ Bernhard 1

⁶² Bernhard 17

⁶³ Bernhard 151,152

The man in the painting is part of the Venetian nobility but anonymous. The white beard indicates his old age, as his eyes show signs of experience. According to Freedberg, Tintoretto managed to capture the intimacy and gentleness of old age in his portraits. Freedberg remarks, “In his mature years there are examples of high merit, almost challenging Titian’s dignity and elegance. But it is a special aspect of the portrait genre that best suits Tintoretto’s sensibility: the portraiture of old or ageing men, whose faces wear the imprint of their humanity more deeply.”⁶⁴ Reger, at eighty-two, not only finds a likeness in the age of the man with the white beard, but it is quite possible that, on a philosophical level, he also recognizes, at his elderly age, their common humanity. The distinguished features that Tintoretto gives to his anonymous elderly man attract Reger.

If Reger at all personalizes his relationship with Tintoretto and the subject of the painting, he will feel compelled to “side with” Tintoretto. It is possible that Reger, quite aggressive and confrontational himself, chooses to “honor” the Tintoretto portrait by undergoing a mental exchange or debate with Tintoretto, as if the painter himself was the man in the portrait. Reger, when not attacking the Catholic Church, complains about the Austrian state, the corrupt figureheads, and governmental workers. Reger, all the while, directs his gaze upon his silent confidant, the creation of Tintoretto, a deeply religious and non-political Venetian. Reger’s relationship with the painting is indeed paradoxical. Reger is attracted to a conventional (not experimental) painting and he claims to love the painting and not the artist himself.⁶⁵ The interest in such differences helps one to evaluate Reger’s often perverse nature.

Reger and Tintoretto do, however, have an important quality in common. As much as Reger’s contrary discontent, this previously mentioned shared characteristic is their unique attachment to their respective homeland. Tintoretto’s religiosity and his devotion to Venice contrast with Reger’s sacrilegious attitude and his continuous attacks on Austria. Tintoretto’s fervent romanticizing of Venice contrasts with Reger’s apparent suffocation within his native

⁶⁴ Freedberg 531

⁶⁵ Bernhard 150

Austria. Reger, as much as he despises Austria and all that Austria stands for, makes no escape from his native Austria. This love-hate relationship with Austria fuels Reger's passions and his inventive voice. Tintoretto, very much at home in Venice, desired to decorate the walls of Venice with his paint and brush strokes. He wanted to make Venice his masterpiece. Unlike Reger, who is ashamed of Vienna but commits himself to the lifelong paradox of loving and hating it, Tintoretto felt proud of his city and wanted to remain there. Tintoretto, unique in comparison to other major painters of Cinquecento Venice because he was actually born in the city, "dedicated himself with remarkable loyalty to his native city."⁶⁶ He enjoyed living and working in Venice, whereas Titian, not having been born in Venice, did not have that inner tie to the city. Reger might feel more like an outsider in his native city than Tintoretto in his native Venice. Perhaps this is another reason why Reger chooses the gaze of the Tintoretto portrait, for he is intrigued by the loyalty of Tintoretto towards his native land.

These views of Tintoretto's art parallel Reger's paradoxical notions of doing and saying what might seem unexpected. Reger, in *Old Masters*, admires Tintoretto's work and considers it to be anarchist and rebellious to the classical school of painting. Tintoretto does not follow the rules of painting, so to speak, and this aspect of the unconventional sixteenth-century painter appeals to Reger. Reger's paradoxical interest in the Tintoretto portrait is, however, suitable to the connoisseur of high art who chooses the conventional and virtually unknown portrait by a deeply religious old master.

Reger is, at once, an admirer of an old master's relic and an eighty-two year-old relic on display in the Bordone Room. Likewise, Atzbacher performs multiple roles as a narrator, writer, and "enactor," dividing himself into actor and spectator as he "becomes" Reger through his narration and writing (Honegger 229). Bernhard, in using this theatrical technique, establishes a dynamic on stage that recalls Dürrenmatt's idea of "audience as he himself."

The setting for *Old Masters* is important, not only for its resemblance to Dürrenmatt's idea of contemporary theater as a museum, but for its existence as an attempt towards a solution

⁶⁶ Rosand 161

to the problem of the domination of the classics and the canon in postwar Europe. *Old Masters* is revolutionary because Bernhard stresses the need for experimentation and originality amidst the problems in the theater. The problems of the classics which Bernhard recognizes include the limiting nature of the classical canon, the amount of time that the classics have had for acceptance into society's culture, and the classics' longer history of criticism. While addressing the problems of the classics, he also recognizes the complexity in the reception of contemporary experimental theater. Bernhard stages an experimental prose play by exploiting the status quo, security, and conservatism of the classics. The setting of *Old Masters* contains elements of both the classical (hence the "requirement" of a museum as location) and the experimental: it is thus a good example of Bernhardian theatrical production involving both old and new ideals. Bernhard creates a contemporary theatrical environment in which old masters and forthcoming artists, such as himself, can simultaneously exist and be appreciated.

CHAPTER 2

POWER AND GUILT OF A HERO IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY THEATER

“Actually, I have never, ever since childhood, hated anything more than museums. I am by nature a hater of museums, but it is probably just because of this that I have been coming here for over thirty years, I indulge in this doubtlessly mentally determined absurdity.”

--Reger

“Perfect plays do not exist except as a fiction of aesthetics, which is the only place perfect heroes may be found.”

--Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Thomas Bernhard is concerned with the changes occurring on stage and within the practice of theater itself. In *Old Masters*, Bernhard experiments with the concept of hero in tragedy and comedy, which are directly relevant to the shifts of genre in his contemporary period. At a time in which, according to Dürrenmatt, a tragic hero no longer exists, does Bernhard's character Reger represent a contemporary comic hero? How has the notion of a hero changed over the centuries? The hero of post WWII German theater differs from those of the late sixteenth-, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century in that Friedrich Schiller's tragic hero did not experience the eruption of power and guilt unique to twentieth-century Germany. Directing a play which focuses on the traditional tragic hero is, according to Dürrenmatt, no longer suitable for the twentieth-century audience, because the impact of power and guilt on people's relationship to one another and to art can no longer be ignored. The eruption of Hitler's and Stalin's power spurred anxiety that led to feelings of guilt, which the generations during and after WWII were unable to shake after such a loss of power. While this unfathomable political power was a cause of the war, a product of the war was the widespread enormity of guilt. Together,

power and guilt altered the relationship of people within society to one another and the individual's sense of responsibility to himself.

In this chapter, I will discuss the development of the comedic form in contemporary theater and Bernhard's portrayal of Reger as an example of the emerging tragicomic hero that is most fitting for post WWII Germany and Austria. Reger's tragic spirit operates within a comedic mode; in other words, tragicomedy is a developing theatrical genre. Although a main focus will be the reasons why the tragic hero is no longer suitable for postwar Germany and Austria, there will be a brief examination of comedy and tragicomedy as they figure in *Old Masters* and how comedy and tragicomedy have become interchangeable expressions to many postwar playwrights, including Thomas Bernhard and Friedrich Dürrenmatt. I will examine how the twentieth-century eruption of power and the feeling of guilt have contributed to creating a new breed of hero as well as altering the state of postwar theater and theatrical writing. Reger is not only an example of the hero of twentieth-century tragicomedy but also proof that history has a direct impact upon one. The shifting movement in twentieth-century theater has produced hybrid characters like Reger. Reger, is a product of the times, so to speak. In analyzing Reger as a new hero, I will refer to Dürrenmatt's "Theaterprobleme," which addresses the powerful shift from tragedy to comedy in the twentieth-century and its effect upon the collective (the audience) and the individual. Lastly, I intend to examine Bernhard's view of language in literature and theater after WWII and the Holocaust, and also ways in which theater has revitalized language that was corrupted by Nazi and Fascist rhetoric.

There is a significant shift from Shakespeare's and Schiller's tragedy to Brecht's, Dürrenmatt's, and Bernhard's contemporary comedy. What sort of comedy do these writers create and what protagonists are required to represent contemporary drama? Thomas Bernhard's theatrical background helps to explain the significance of the subtitle to *Old Masters*. Even though Bernhard includes the word "comedy" within his novel's title,⁶⁷ one might ask oneself the question, are there elements of tragedy within his comedic work? Reger focuses upon the

⁶⁷ *Alte Meister: Komödie*

details of WWII and its effect on postwar Austria and includes, in his novel, elements of tragedy as well as comedy. What tragic aspects may then be included in a contemporary hero? Reger is an important figure to study because he is a vulnerable product of contemporary Austria who does not fear exposing his postwar neuroses. Continuously recalling the aftermath of WWII and the conditions within postwar Austria, Reger proves to be a war survivor reacting to the changes in his environment.

Reger is obsessed not only with the Tintoretto portrait and the status of the other painters' works in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, but he is continuously plagued by and concerned with the reputation of Austria and all that it produces. Reger believes that many of the country's problems stem from the Austrian state figureheads. Reger complains about the Austrian state regarding the education system when he says, "The state in fact gives birth to the children, only state children are being born, that is the truth. There is no free child, there is only the state child, with whom the state can do what it pleases, it is the state that brings the children into this world. . . ."⁶⁸ Bernhard recognizes the lack of freedom within the Austrian state, the state educators, and the children, and explains how this brainwashing, rigid state mentality has produced a "devastating effect" on the country and its possibilities for freedom (26).

Reger is appalled by the Austrian state's treatment of the old masters who, like the children, find no freedom from the state's control. Whereas the lack of freedom associated with a child's education is the focus of one attack, the state's religious influence over the old masters, which stunts the artists' creativity, is another. Reger says, "The so-called old masters only ever served the state or the Church, which comes to the same thing, they served an emperor or a Pope, a duke or an archbishop. Just as so-called free man is utopia, so the so-called free artist has always been a utopia."⁶⁹ Reger resents state control in politics, religion, and especially art, because it paralyzes artistic creativity.

⁶⁸ Bernhard 26

⁶⁹ Bernhard 29

In *Old Masters*, Bernhard presents a character who struggles and suffocates within a restricted area. Reger confines himself to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in the mornings and in the Ambassador Hotel in the afternoons and complains about the country of Austria that stifles him.⁷⁰ In this way, Reger is doubly constricted, for, as long as he remains in the museum, he exists within a microcosm (museum) of the microcosm (Austria) that is Europe. D.A. Craig writes the following about Bernhard's previous use of the image of a microcosm in a seven-paged story written in 1966 entitled *Jauregg*: "Austria becomes, as it were, a microcosm of the decay and disintegration of Europe as a whole."⁷¹ By restricting Reger to the museum and the hotel Bernhard demonstrates the constrictive atmosphere present in modern man's native city, country, and Europe. One cannot even escape the suffocating environment of a space as large as one's own country. Bernhard often concentrates upon an individual's relationship with society, especially in postwar Europe where, according to Dürrenmatt, an individual's concerns are often overshadowed by the needs of the collective. A.P. Dierick highlights several of Bernhard's concerns with post WWII Austria and possible reasons for his interest in the theme of isolation: "Social ostracism is a pervading phenomenon in Austria, according to Bernhard, and it is largely due to a failing educational system, an ineffectual jurisprudence and an immobile bureaucracy."⁷² After the atrocities of WWII and the Holocaust, Bernhard and Reger have mostly the state and its figureheads to blame.

As is the case with Dürrenmatt, Reger believes that there is a great misfortune in contemporary Austria: power created as a result of Fascism, Nazism, and Catholicism. This larger misfortune overwhelms modern man and has changed politics, government, and the arts (with an emphasis upon theater, language, and writing) in post World War II Europe. Fascism and Nazism changed the vision of the people as well as the existence of the tragic hero in theater, while Catholicism, also one of the leading controllers of the Austrian state, has altered the minds

⁷⁰ Vienna is Reger's place of residence, yet he spends a majority of his time in a museum and a hotel. He claims that at the Ambassador Hotel the temperature of 23 degrees Celsius is his ideal afternoon temperature, whereas the temperature of 18 degrees Celsius at the Kunsthistorisches Museum is his ideal morning temperature (Bernhard 49).

⁷¹ Craig quoted in Dierick 83

⁷² Dierick 75

of many Austrians. Reger, emphasizing the danger of Austria's educators, says, "There is nothing the pupils can expect from these teachers other than the mendacity of the Catholic state and of the Catholic state's power."⁷³ Given the weight of Fascism and Nazism's past and the continued control of the Catholic Church over Austria, how much freedom of language, thought, and action may each individual have? Bernhard stresses in his novels, particularly *Concrete* (1982) and *Old Masters*, and in interviews that this question is a major concern of his.⁷⁴

Reger believes that the state of Austria suffers from its history of political and religious power. Concerning Bernhard's interest in the pattern of history's influence over Viennese society, Dierick writes that Bernhard often invokes death and decay when he traces the timeline of Austria and his Viennese homeland. Dierick believes "that history mirrors nature and obeys its laws. Decaying Vienna demonstrates the death-sentence which history suspends over civilization."⁷⁵ Reger recognizes the burden of guilt that Austria and much of Europe bear as a result of the gross power created during WWII, when he interacts with the Viennese policemen and government officials, but he is also concerned with his individual role in relation to the whole of Austria. Recognition of this detail makes Reger's character particularly interesting because he is demonstrating individual concerns at a time in which the focus is no longer upon the tragic individual. Examining Reger's traits helps one to understand the type of hero existing within the comedic genre of post WWII Austria and Germany.

As mentioned before, the eruption of Fascist and Nazi power was the cause of WWII while guilt and blame resulted from the war. Reger recognizes the conditions under which he feels pressure. Before and during WWII, the notion of power became so massive that it developed into something incomprehensible, mechanical, and abstract. Dürrenmatt writes about the increased power associated with the Fascist leaders of WWII: "Hitler and Stalin cannot be made into Wallensteins. Their power was so enormous that they themselves were no more than

⁷³ Bernhard 24, 25

⁷⁴ The Bernhard interview which is referred to here occurred in 1981 and is entitled *Thomas Bernhard—Eine Herausforderung: Monologe auf Mallorca*.

⁷⁵ Dierick 80

incidental, corporeal, and easily replaceable expressions of this power. . . .”⁷⁶ After World War II, man’s relationship with himself and others drastically changed in Germany. The effect of Fascism and the Holocaust filled the individual with a complex and intense feeling of guilt, which affected language and dialogue with others. After the war, the feelings of guilt which were shared by the majority of citizens brought people together, ultimately forming a group collective and the desire to have a comedic genre within the theater.

In postwar Germany, when the group collective gained a powerful voice, comedy appealed to the public, because the comic hero differed very little from the public as a whole. In comedy, the hero is usually an ordinary citizen, a beggar, or a peasant, whereas in tragedy, the hero tends to be a king or a member of the nobility. According to Dürrenmatt, the tragic hero must be able to rouse the audience’s sympathy with the right mixture of guilt and innocence, virtues, and vices (252). Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the notion of the tragic hero changed along with his audience. The tragic hero is no longer a member of the nobility. Instead, he often represents an even lower class than that of his spectators. Dürrenmatt writes the following about Georg Büchner’s character Woyzeck, who represents the “primitive proletariat”: “But it is precisely in this extreme form of human existence, in this last, most miserable form, that the audience can also see the human being, indeed itself.”⁷⁷ Comedy distanced the audience intellectually but enabled it to relate to the hero as a social equal.

According to Dürrenmatt, within tragedy itself there was a secondary fodder which contributed to the emergence of the new genre. The existence of the comical characters awarded these people, playing the role of the beggar and peasant, the exposure that later granted them principal fame. Dürrenmatt writes, “Nowhere in Shakespeare do we find a comic king; in his day a ruler could appear as a bloody monster but never as a fool. In Shakespeare the courtiers, the artisans, the working people are comic. Hence, in the evolution of the tragic hero, we see a trend toward comedy.”⁷⁸ With this brief historical background, one can see not only the

⁷⁶ Dürrenmatt 252

⁷⁷ Dürrenmatt 251

⁷⁸ Dürrenmatt 252

audience's changing desire and expectation, but also the complementary features of tragedy and comedy. There exist comedic features within tragedy and, as in the case of *Old Masters*, tragic elements within comedy.

After WWII, the need for political and social commentary became increasingly important as did the desire to communicate postwar concerns to the masses in the theater. The way to reach the public by way of theater was no longer through tragedy but comedy. According to Dürrenmatt, it is through the idea of conceit, through comedy and invention, that the "anonymous audience" can become an audience at all: "The conceit easily transforms the crowd of theatergoers into a mass that can be attacked, deceived, outsmarted into listening to things it would otherwise not so readily listen to."⁷⁹ The audience members cannot afford to become lost intellectually in a fictitious present created by tragedy. The more they appeal to the character of Hamlet or Othello, the less likely they will be to step outside themselves and view their surroundings. Distance is required in order to reflect upon one's reality.

Whereas tragedy overcomes distance, comedy creates distance, which is needed in order for the crowds to engage in critical reflection and intellectual challenges. One needs not the trance-like state encouraged by tragedy, in which everyone submits to the power of pity, but Brecht's "alienation technique," in which the distance that divides the audience and actors promotes intellectual contemplation. Brecht believed that an audience's emotional involvement in the play's action and characters distracted them from understanding the deeper meaning or message of the play. In his "so called *epic theater* style, he tried to shatter traditional stage illusions of reality by using various visual techniques and an unemotional acting style."⁸⁰ One of his techniques was to read the lines in a script with as little emotion and expression as possible. According to Brecht, "such a device allows the audience to focus on the lessons that are to be drawn from the play. The lessons in Brecht's plays advocate changes in middle-class society."⁸¹ The "alienation technique" was employed by Dürrenmatt and Bernhard. Dürrenmatt writes the

⁷⁹ Dürrenmatt 256

⁸⁰ Mews 601

⁸¹ Mews 601

following concerning twentieth-century guilt and why comedy is the suitable form for contemporary theater of the Western world:

In the Punch-and-Judy show of our century, in this backsliding of the white race, there are neither guilty nor responsible individuals any more. . . . Indeed, things happen without anyone in particular being responsible for them. Everything is dragged along and everyone gets caught somewhere in the sweep of events. We are all collectively guilty, collectively bogged down in the sins of our fathers and of our forefathers. We are the children of our forebears. . . . Comedy is the only thing that can still reach us.⁸²

The audience members need to distance themselves from the fiction on stage, so to speak, in order to understand their reality. Dürrenmatt compares comedy to a mousetrap in which the public is continuously caught. Tragedy, on the other hand, for Dürrenmatt, “is predicated on a community, a kind of community whose existence in our day is frequently an embarrassing fiction.”⁸³ The public should be challenged and “outsmarted,” as Dürrenmatt writes, not stare trance-like in their seats, empathizing with every character trait of the tragic hero.

Despite the requirement of distance for comedy, one may still experience the tragic within comedy. A common genre in post WWII European theater is referred to as tragicomedy. Within this genre, elements of both tragedy and comedy are combined, ultimately ending on a comedic note rather than with a tragic death or suicide. Bernhard and Dürrenmatt contributed to the genre of tragicomedy as well as Samuel Beckett, Tom Stoppard, and Harold Pinter. Even some of Shakespeare’s plays were considered tragicomedies although the genre was not codified during his time. Some of these tragicomedies include *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, and *The Winter’s Tale*. Dürrenmatt states, “The tragic is still possible even if pure tragedy is not. We can achieve the tragic out of comedy, we can bring it forth as a frightening moment, as an abyss

⁸² Dürrenmatt 254, 255

⁸³ Dürrenmatt 256

that opens suddenly. As a matter of fact, many of Shakespeare's tragedies are really comedies out of which the tragic arises."⁸⁴ The individual, aware of the seriousness and ridiculousness of his existence, struggles against despair and with courage, hoping to survive amidst so much ignorance and misinformation. These concerns are apparent in Dürrenmatt's and Bernhard's characters; they recognize them but refuse to submit fully to them.⁸⁵ They create stories and invent new possibilities under even the most deplorable conditions of the state and community.

Reger is an example of the tragic within comedy. Despite his comedic caricatures of Austria and its artists, he is very much involved in the tragic within the individual. In criticizing Austria, he uses the comedic absurdity of repetitive statements but, along with them, introduces tragic elements when he acknowledges his concerns regarding existence. As Reger says, "[i]n Austria one has to be mediocre in order to be listened to and taken seriously, one has to be a person of incompetence and of provincial mendacity, a person with an absolute small-country mentality."⁸⁶ In his speech, Reger alternates between comedic criticisms concerning society and its flaws and the existential tragic dilemmas concerning an individual. Dierick analyzes Bernhard's interest in the dynamic existing between an individual and something much larger, for instance, Austria. Dierick writes that Bernhard "uses the individual's fate to suggest the fate of Austria. Unlike Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse, Bernhard refuses 'essayism' in his analysis of culture and society; instead, the individual acquires an almost allegorical significance."⁸⁷ Bernhard creates characters such as Reger, who are cut off from society, just as Austria, with its legacy of an eccentric and hermetically sealed Habsburg ruling family, is often seen as isolated from the rest of Europe.

Reger finds integration into society impossible and furthers the feeling of estrangement by intentionally isolating himself from society. While observing the paintings of the old masters,

⁸⁴ Dürrenmatt 255

⁸⁵ Characters of Dürrenmatt that I have in mind are Romulus from *Romulus der Grosse*; characters of Bernhard include Reger, of course, Strauch from *Frost*, and the narrator from *Woodcutters*. All of these characters show courage and individuality amidst seeming hopelessness and despair.

⁸⁶ Bernhard 8

⁸⁷ Dierick 75

he comments, “All these pictures are an expression of man’s absolute helplessness in coping with himself and with what surrounds him all his life. That is what all these pictures express, this helplessness which embarrasses the intellect and bewilders the same intellect and moves it to tears.”⁸⁸ He isolates himself and his personal problems, because his personal quest is tragic. For Reger, the tragedy exists in his pursuit of something unreachable, which is the perfection in art, yet he exists at a time in which tragedy is no longer a suitable form of expression.

From Reger’s point of view, the ideal picture for modern man to stare at, so to speak, is Tintoretto’s *White-Bearded Man*, for he is the anonymous representative for the age. In observing the portrait, Reger is concentrating on an individual amidst the contemporary focus upon the masses. Perhaps, for Reger, the *White-Bearded Man* is a representative of the lost tragic hero. Despite Reger’s biting sense of humor typical of the contemporary comedic stance, he has retained the tragic elements of pre WWII Austria. Reger’s ambition to observe the *White-Bearded Man* comes, in part, from his desire to know “the other,” yet he is disappointed because of his idealized expectation of the Tintoretto portrait.⁸⁹ Honegger, in her biography on Bernhard, writes about Bernhard’s interest in the philosophical challenge of understanding another person or figure perfectly. This, according to Honegger, may occur upon complete penetration or discernment of the other person’s being (164). She writes that “the question is a Wittgensteinian one: how to verify one’s perception of the other. The quest is the stuff of tragedy; its performance produces farcical excess.”⁹⁰ Reger struggles with the complications in perceiving

⁸⁸ Bernhard 151

⁸⁹ Paul Valéry, as well as Ludwig Wittgenstein, encouraged Bernhard’s interest in “the other.” Valéry’s *Monsieur Teste* (1896) was one of Bernhard’s favorite works, in which M. Teste represents pure consciousness, “the high priest of the idol of intellect” (Agnes Ethel Mackay 90). M. Teste thinks and observes himself while he thinks. He is unaffected by thoughts, which lie outside of his pure intellect. Bernhard repeatedly refers to Valéry’s “comedy of the intellect” as a model for his own dramas and prose works. Valéry writes the following concerning the recognition of the other, something that forms the base writing of Valéry, Bernhard, and Wittgenstein: “No one could accept himself as he is if some miraculous circumstance offered him a full knowledge of what he was and what he is.” Gitta Honegger continues, “For Valéry as for Bernhard, however, that ‘other’ is yet another role he has constructed for himself in order to recognize himself in his ‘comedies of intellect.’” Bernhard was very much influenced by Valéry’s writing and ideas concerning comedy and philosophical observation (Honegger 218-219). One can notice similarities between *M. Teste* and Bernhard’s Reger in that they are both deeply involved in intellectual activity, isolated thinking and observation.

⁹⁰ Honegger 164

the other. In many ways, he represents the “classic,” the sixteenth-century man in the portrait, but this anonymous, white man lives at a time in which people yearn for the “experimental,” the twentieth-century Abstract Expressionists, and the collective. In many ways, Reger represents, much to his dislike, the stereotype of conservative, rigid Austria amidst inevitable and radical changes. Reger resembles Austria in his stubbornness and resistance to change. Austria and its inhabitants, weighed down by the Habsburg traditions, the bureaucratic power current of the Ringstrasse, Kaiser Franz Joseph, and Empress Maria Theresia, cannot escape the suffocating memories of its past golden age. Reger, a product of this glorified era, resents the pressure and, ultimately, disagrees with the manipulation of past memory. He is complicated and oftentimes contradictory, because he recognizes his progressive nature and his attachment to his despised and beloved Vienna and Austria. In this way, Reger represents both the classic and the experimental, which is what Dürrenmatt and, as I argue, Bernhard, desire for the state of modern theater.

He is disappointed with the modern state of man and his interaction with others. Reger says to Atzbacher that “a person today is at everyone’s mercy, unprotected, totally at everyone’s mercy. They can no longer hide, there is no hiding place left, everything has become transparent and thereby unprotected.”⁹¹ Bernhard portrays the modern man whose language, perception, and being have been altered by WWII and Holocaust guilt. Reger is fueled by the tragic quest of perceiving an individual as genuinely as possible.

Reger, representing one of European culture’s last relics, is obsessed with death and the persistent ridicule of old masters and high art. This is both comic and tragic, since Reger is such a melodramatic figure. Reger, talking about comedy and tragedy, says, “The things we think and the things we say, believing that we are competent and yet we are not, that is the comedy, and when we ask how is it all to continue? that is the tragedy, my dear Atzbacher.”⁹² With his continuous commentary on the doomed intellect, absence of perfection, overwhelming amount of

⁹¹ Bernhard 150

⁹² Bernhard 154

failure, and the incompetent Austrian workers, Reger fuels the existence of comedy. On the other hand, the tragic question for Reger surrounds the notions of “decadence and decay of Austria, which in turn serve to cause despair about Western Civilization and even the human condition.”⁹³ In this sense, Reger inserts tragic elements into comedy. Reger acknowledges that he exists amidst both questions. He embraces the existence of both the comic and tragic.

If Reger wishes to be the classical ideal of the tragic hero, he is living a tragic existence, for there is no proper place for a tragic hero in post WWII theater. According to Dürrenmatt, the classic hero of Goethe’s and Schiller’s time can no longer be the hero of post World War II Germany or Austria, because “we no longer have any tragic heroes, but only vast tragedies staged by world butchers and produced by slaughtering machines.”⁹⁴ The notion of power has become so ambiguous and abstract that the development of a tragic hero is virtually impossible. As a result of this problematic of power, “true representatives” are no longer possible and the tragic heroes lack names.⁹⁵ Once power became not only ambiguous but also mechanical, people lost their identity and began to work like machines. A tragic hero is no longer unique, for his identity is overwhelmed by the power of mass production and the atom bomb, for “power today becomes visible, material, only when it explodes as in the atom bomb. . . . The atom bomb can no longer be reproduced artistically, since it is mass produced.”⁹⁶ The enormity of power that was created during Hitler’s and Stalin’s leadership changed art and the people’s minds.

With the rise of this unfathomable power and the legacy of guilt, anonymity reigns and individuality is lost. Language becomes tainted; there are no longer “true representatives,” because power has become so strong and has covered up many possibilities of having an individual voice. Reger recognizes the contemporary breed of power and its influence upon society: “The so-called housekeeper is no better than the so-called mistress, as indeed everything nowadays is the other way round, surely the housekeeper is the mistress nowadays. The so-

⁹³ Dierick 81

⁹⁴ Dürrenmatt 252

⁹⁵ Dürrenmatt 253

⁹⁶ Dürrenmatt 253

called powerless are the powerful today.”⁹⁷ The emergence of power leading up to WWII has taken an abstract shape and, because of its ambiguity, has influenced people’s characteristics, identity, and their own culture. Dürrenmatt writes, “. . . .[P]ower as we know it today can only be seen in its smallest part for, like an iceberg, the largest part is submerged in anonymity and abstraction. . . . Any small-time crook, petty government official, or policeman better represents our world than a senator or president.”⁹⁸ In post WWII Europe, there are no certainties, and there is infinite ambiguity. The individual cannot find himself in the abstractness of the modern age. Regarding the theme of individuality and the modern world in Bernhard’s work, Dierick writes, “In Bernhard’s vision the total absence of individuality is universal and not dependent on alienation in the strict sense of the word.”⁹⁹ Dierick highlights Bernhard’s interest in the loss of individuality in the twentieth century, which, according to Dürrenmatt, other contemporary theater directors also experienced. Dürrenmatt notices that these theater directors do not know what kind of play the audience prefers. The audience’s taste has changed because of the power of ambiguity and abstraction, and, as a result, the directors do not know what to expect from them. Consequently, they are focusing more upon the theme of alienation and isolation in the contemporary world. According to Dürrenmatt, everyone is suffering because of post WWII guilt and the abstraction of power.

The Kunsthistorisches Museum, which houses state art and state artists, is the appropriate setting for the novel despite the destruction and disruption of art and culture by the Holocaust and Nazism. Reger says, “But what else is this art hanging on these walls but state art, it seems to me.”¹⁰⁰ Reger believes that everything that surrounds him is owned by the state. He cannot escape the power of the Austrian state. He commits himself to the old masters because the museum owns the paintings. Ingeborg Hoesterey, interested in Bernhard’s use of “old masters” as a metaphor, explains that it “signifies the burden of the tradition that every artist has to face

⁹⁷ Bernhard 149

⁹⁸ Dürrenmatt 252

⁹⁹ Dierick 82

¹⁰⁰ Bernhard 28

whether he paints or writes.”¹⁰¹ Reger makes his repetitious trips to the museum and the old masters because of his inability to escape the influence of the artists of the past.

Reger, caught in a love-hate relationship with the past, also runs in an endless turning wheel of criticism and “perfection.” When Reger observes the paintings in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, he cannot escape the religious and political history of the artwork on display. For Reger, these historical imperfections lead him to see the flaws in Vienna’s famous museum. Atzbacher recalls Reger saying, “Pleasing Catholic state art, nothing else. Always only a visage, never a face. All in all always only the aspect without the reverse, always only lies and mendacity without reality or truth.”¹⁰² The paintings in the Kunsthistorisches Museum represent political history and the pressure for perfection.

Modern man cannot escape the sin and power of the past generations--the legacy of guilt and the influence of Austrian monarchy. People are, in large part, a product of their history. Dierick emphasizes this point when he writes, “More than geography, institutions of justice and education, bureaucracy and decaying cities, more than pressures to conform, more than mistrust and dehumanization, the factor that leads to oppression and alienation in Austria is the weight that history and tradition exert on the individual.”¹⁰³ In Bernhard’s *Old Masters*, Reger is fully aware of the influence of history and the state on Europeans, with particular attention to the Austrians. Reger, unable to escape his Austrian identity and the powerful influence of the royal Habsburg family history, sits in the museum, which holds many of the Habsburg treasures. Reger says, “Well, the Habsburgs have exactly this dubious Catholic taste which is at home in this museum. The Kunsthistorisches Museum is exactly that dubious Habsburg taste in art, aesthetic and repulsive.”¹⁰⁴ Reger believes that there is no escaping the poor taste of past Austrians in a high position of power. The power of Catholicism has influenced and continues to influence many aspects of Austrian taste in art. In Tintoretto’s Venice, as in Bernhard’s Vienna,

¹⁰¹ Hoesterey 118

¹⁰² Bernhard 28

¹⁰³ Dierick 83

¹⁰⁴ Bernhard 14

the Catholic Church commissioned artists to produce paintings for their respective cathedrals or chapels. Painting, whether it is displayed in the churches of sixteenth-century Venice or postwar Vienna, is a vehicle of communication. It is an artful, influential, and creative way to convey ideas to the masses. Reger also criticizes and attacks the Austrian taste in art, which is so influenced by powerful political figures. The Kunsthistorisches Museum, for example, is filled with political-state art, which is owned by the Austrian Habsburg family. In this sense, no one can escape the aesthetic and religious “sins” of the past generations. Reger’s criticism and commentary leads one to examine his or her position in society.

When Reger criticizes Austria’s deep commitment to Catholicism, he recognizes the two sides of religion that correspond to the two sides of the human face: one side exposed and the other hidden. The exposed side is ripe for deciphering, while the hidden side contains a darkness or void. Using Tintoretto’s *White-Bearded Man* as an expression of his idea that there is never perfection in an image or in writing encourages Reger to be inspired to scrutinize a universal concept embedded within Tintoretto’s anonymous portrait. Reger’s criticisms regarding the Catholic faith recall Schopenhauer’s view of religion. Philalethes (the supporter of the truth) in his dialogue with Demopheles (the supporter of the people) comments on the similarity existing between the face of humanity and religion:

As long as [religion] lives it has two faces: one the face of truth, the other the face of deception. You will love it or detest it according to whether you keep one or the other face in view. You have to regard it as a necessary evil, its necessity deriving from the wretched imbecility of the majority of mankind, which is incapable of understanding truth and therefore, in this pressing case, requires a substitute for it.¹⁰⁵

The face that Reger chooses to observe for over three decades represents the major moral, philosophical, and ideological concerns that he has. These concerns include the issues

¹⁰⁵ Schopenhauer 107

surrounding the search for perfection in art and the religious hypocrisy in the Catholic Church and the bureaucratic world. The Austrian state, its religiosity, and its politics all have the double-sided nature that the face of humanity wears.

Reger's blame of the state for everything creates a comical effect. At a time in which, according to Dürrenmatt, no individual is guilty and no one is able to claim responsibility, Reger blames the state for everything: the corrupt politicians, the incompetent teachers, even his wife's death. The seriousness associated with Reger's many criticisms produces a reverse reaction. His wife, whom he first met in the Bordone Room on the settee, fell to her death on the steps in front of the museum. Reger believes that the Austrian state is guilty of killing his wife, because the state workers failed to salt the sidewalk and steps that day: "We lose the person we have loved most devotedly of all people solely through the negligence of the city of Vienna and through the negligence of the Austrian state and through the negligence of the Catholic Church."¹⁰⁶ He blames the whole of Austria, the policeman, the politicians, the workers who are responsible for salting the slick and slippery streets for the death of his wife. Reger assigns blame to specific groups of people in society, perhaps in hopes of obtaining some sort of relief. This pattern of assigning blame to specific groups of people, however, is a tragic move on Reger's part. According to Dürrenmatt, in postwar Germany, everyone is responsible, because everyone experiences the "legacy of guilt" and the "sins of the forefathers."

Reger, in a tirade of patronizing words, quickly turns a highly influential literary and artistic figure, a famous figure in history, into a miniscule and ridiculous being. He degrades the artists whom he dislikes and pays no serious attention to the admiration of another viewer. Honegger writes about the comedy in Reger's tragic outlook:

Paradoxically, his acceptance of death enables him to go on living. If death is tragic, its ongoing repetition makes survival comic. Comedy stands for life itself—as a repetition

¹⁰⁶ Bernhard 124

of survival acts. The awareness of it makes life a comedy—a theatrical experience for the subject observing itself in the act of living.¹⁰⁷

Despite Reger's repetitive ridicule of artists, he recognizes, through repetitive observation and scrutiny, comedy and therefore the timelessness of the old masters. He discovers, with the aid of comedy and the "theatrical experience," the energy and eternity inherent in the Tintoretto portrait. He learns to accept death and the comic absurdity that accompanies the tragedy. Reger, while he observes the Tintoretto portrait, reminds himself of the eternal life of art.

After establishing the role of power, guilt, blame, and Reger's own as well as many other postwar Europeans' obsession with death, it is important to examine the nature of language and art after WWII and the Holocaust. For Bernhard, language and writing have been corrupted as a result of the false rhetoric of the Nazi and Fascist leaders. This postwar taint inherent within language has affected action on stage and in the audience. Bernhard wishes to escape the confines of postwar language, which suffers from Hitler's and Stalin's polluted rhetoric. Bernhard wants his words and the characters speaking their words to break free from the confines of language. He shows that this is possible within contemporary and experimental theater and language.

The need for a revitalization of language is important to Bernhard, because the enormity of power and guilt that Nazism created overwhelmed the Austrian state and its people to such a degree that no one had an individual voice (Honegger 174). Both Nazism and Catholicism have bred the dominating destroyers of the freedom, and, for Bernhard, the Austrian state in particular has ruined every element of humanity. The characters in Bernhard's plays "are pulled by the strings of language and gestures, with their long problematic history of both greatness and guilt."¹⁰⁸ Honegger writes, "Bernhard's perception of cultural consciousness as a mausoleum would provide him with a refuge in which to stage his ghostly spectacles of reconstituted

¹⁰⁷ Honegger 269

¹⁰⁸ Honegger 174

language after the catastrophe (the Holocaust).”¹⁰⁹ The language of the Nazi leaders, misleading and full of false rhetoric, damaged language itself and the culture that is inexorably attached to it. The Austrians’ legacy of guilt and suffering for the “sins of the fathers,” so to speak, paralyzed their confidence, causing the world of artistic ability to stagnate.

Bernhard is committed to revitalizing language, which he claims was destroyed during WWII. He is interested in studying the power of language in prose writing--the printed word--and as it occurs orally on stage. For him, there is a major difference between the two and in the ways that they are represented in their respective environments. In his *Understanding Bernhard*, Stephen Dowden illustrates Bernhard’s views on truth and power: “Bernhard’s memoirs, like his fiction and drama, are predicated on the assumption that language and art can only approximate truth. Truth is elusive and cannot be captured with certainty and finality.”¹¹⁰ For Bernhard and Reger, the power of the Nazi past has damaged language and culture to such an extent that whatever is left is void of any true meaning. Bernhard believes that a farce exists in postwar writing and history. Germany and Austria, its culture, language, people have been damaged by the “certainty and finality” of Nazism and Catholicism and require, in Bernhard’s mind, a way of revitalizing the language. Writing assumes a certainty which Bernhard and Reger approach with caution and skepticism, while words spoken in a theatrical environment assume an authority which appeals to Bernhard as a playwright and influences him as a novelist.

Bernhard believes that there should be more emphasis upon theatrical expression, in which language can continuously renew itself. The actors or narrators speak the written words and bring the “rigid” words to life and, as a result, arrive closer to language’s truths. The words that the actors repeat night after night can never be the same or have the same meaning. In this sense, “they are closest to the truth, at least a truthful representation of the impossibility of ever getting at the truth.”¹¹¹ Bernhard escapes what he calls the “unalterable rigidity” of writing by making his prose writings theatrical.

¹⁰⁹ Honegger 156

¹¹⁰ Dowden 51

¹¹¹ Honegger 227

On stage, life is replicated in performance. Bernhard finds that within the world of theater, lines which are spoken on stage undergo change and, as a result, develop an alternate meaning to the original. As a result, dramatic language assumes an authority which might, as Bernhard hopes, rejuvenate a disrupted, damaged postwar German language. Without the theater and theatrical writing, the world is seen, as Bernhard sees it, as extinct, just as Reger, in *Old Masters*, attacks the art of reading: “Once you read more intently you ruin everything for yourself,”¹¹² Strauch, Bernhard’s main character in *Frost*, attacks the art of writing, comparing language itself to the “dark undercurrent” (Honegger 223). Strauch is a frustrated painter who no longer paints and has destroyed all of his canvases. Bernhard shows the obsessive process and maddening qualities of language.

Bernhard avoids the permanence associated with writing by emphasizing the spoken words in the theater. He believes that dramatic language has the ability to change continuously upon the actor’s every utterance. In *Frost*, Strauch comments on the act of writing: “And how differently everything will present itself when I’m reading what I am writing down just now. Completely different. Because what’s written down isn’t right. Nothing that’s written down is ever right. It has no claim to anything.”¹¹³ Strauch finds freedom in fragmented language. Bernhard believes that writing “suggests an authenticity of meaning that doesn’t exist,” and the only way to overcome this pretense is found in theatrical expression (Honegger 227).

Reger, in *Old Masters*, is tightly bound to the spoken words in the theater and prose writing since he is an intellectual and critic. He must write as a way of living.¹¹⁴ However, he can escape the constriction of his own and Atzbacher’s written words by expressing himself in a theatrical setting. Reger, emphasizing the importance of having an audience and actors, says, “We need listeners and a mouthpiece. All our lives we wish for an ideal mouthpiece and do not

¹¹² Bernhard 32

¹¹³ Bernhard quoted in Honegger 227

¹¹⁴ Similarly, Valéry writes the following about the limitations of writing: “Neither was he (M. Teste) a philosopher, nor anything of that kind, nor even a litterateur; that is why he did a great deal of thinking—for the more we write, the less we think” (71). This statement could be something that would exit the mouth of Reger. Reger and M. Teste have corresponding existential qualities of being. *M. Teste*, Bernhard’s favorite book, influenced his ideas about the intellect, self-observation and the theater.

find it, for there is no ideal mouthpiece.”¹¹⁵ Reger is both the main actor in his museum performance and the spectator, who observes the Tintoretto spectacle. Bernhard attempts to escape the permanent elements of writing by expressing himself dramatically and theatrically; however, one might argue that total escape from the rigidity of writing is impossible in the same way that Reger cannot avoid being written about. Nevertheless, Bernhard, in his theatrical prose, escapes the constrictive elements found within the traditional narrative form.

Reger discovers a certain relief from the strictness of what is expected from language and freedom in the ability to mock and caricature figures in history. In addition to having a certain sort of freedom in assigning blame to members of the Austrian government and churches, Reger finds a certain relief in abusing very specific places in Austria as well as influential figures in history. Reger, in his ability to caricature theatricality presents another way to view a distorted representation of reality. Atzbacher recalls the following statement made by Reger, concerning the art of exaggeration and distortion: “We can only stand a great, important picture if we have turned it into a caricature, or a great man, a so-called important personality, neither can we bear a person as a great man or as an important personality, we have to caricature him.”¹¹⁶ Reger turns

¹¹⁵ Bernhard 14

¹¹⁶ Bernhard 57

Martin Heidegger, Adalbert Stifter, and Anton Bruckner into caricatures.¹¹⁷ The caricatures provide a kind of theatrical distance, which allows one to discover both reality and the exaggeration of that reality inside the caricature. In this case, representation masks various realities with layers of falsity; therefore, the multiple dimensions of the spectacle-audience relationship are created both in the theater and by way of caricature.

Reger asserts a certain freedom in language and criticism and, through obsessive meditation on these figures, simultaneously attaches himself further to Austria, the old masters, and the museum, which is indirectly responsible for his wife's death. He does this by attacking the museum and painters, calling Stifter a "philistine living a cramped life," a "musty petit bourgeois," and a "schoolmaster writing in a cramped style," (Bernhard 35). Reger, aware of the popularity of Stifter, the "feared school official," who demonstrated his tyrannical nature in the classroom by filling students' papers with red pencil marks, calls his writing "sentimental and pointless" and also in need of severe editing with a red pencil (36). He attacks Heidegger, the "women's philosopher" in similar ways (43). In fact, Stifter reminds Reger of Heidegger, in that they have both, "in the most shameless manner, kitschified great literature" (Bernhard 41). In Reger's description of Heidegger, he creates an absurd figure, dominated by his wife, who

¹¹⁷ In the following tirade, Reger attacks and mimics Heidegger and his everyday movements: "And as for the Austrians, they are a lot worse still in all these respects. I have seen a series of photographs which a supremely talented woman photographer made of Heidegger, who in all of them looked like a retired bloated staff officer; in these photographs Heidegger is just climbing out of bed, or Heidegger is climbing into bed, or Heidegger is sleeping, or waking up, putting on his underpants, pulling on his socks, taking a nip of grape juice, stepping out of his log cabin and looking towards the horizon, whittling away at his stick, putting on his cap, taking off his cap, holding his cap in his hands, opening out his legs, raising his head, lowering his head, putting his right hand in his wife's left hand while his wife is putting her left hand in his right hand, walking in front of his house, walking at the back of his house, walking towards his house, walking away from his house, reading, eating, spooning his soup, cutting a slice of bread (baked by himself), opening a book (written by himself), closing a book (written by himself), bending down, straightening up, and so on. Enough to make you throw up" (Bernhard 45). Concerning Stifter, one of Austria's most prized authors, Reger proclaims the following: "Stifter is merely an example of an artist being venerated as great for decades, and indeed loved, by a person, in fact by a person addicted to veneration and love, without ever having been great. In the disillusionment we experience upon discovering that the greatness of the one we have venerated and loved is no greatness at all and never was such greatness, but only an imagined greatness and is in fact pettiness, and indeed baseness, we experience the merciless pangs of the deceived" (Bernhard 39). Reger attacks both Stifter and Bruckner together, when he says, "But whereas Stifter today is only the dead paper of German literary scholars, Bruckner is moving everyone to tears. Bruckner's surge of sound has conquered the world, one might say, sentimentality and false pompousness are celebrating triumphs with Bruckner. Bruckner is just as slovenly a composer as Stifter is a slovenly writer, both of them share that Upper Austrian slovenliness"

continuously “knits winter socks for him from the wool she has herself shorn from their own Heidegger sheep” (42). Reger discovers a certain relief and method of survival through the art of ridicule and the caricature.

Bernhard believes performance and caricature could bring language and art, which were devastated, back to life. Bernhard found salvation of culture and language on stage--in a theatrical setting. On this point, Honegger writes, “In a world that is extinct, life is simulated in performance. Performance is imitation and repetition. Bernhard’s characters are marionettes on the tattered strings of language, hanging on to the ruptured memory of culture.”¹¹⁸ Providing creativity, invention, and imagination in a theatrical setting became Bernhard’s method of sparking debate and providing useful commentary in hopes of enlivening a frightened state.

Reger is an ideal representative for postwar theater. Reger has been affected by the enormous abstraction of power created by Hitler, Stalin, and other Fascist leaders, as well as the resulting feelings of guilt, obsession with death, and assignment of blame toward educators, artists, politicians, and priests. Despite his unfavorable remarks towards most of Austria, he recognizes the need for creativity and experimentation. Reger fills this need through the theater, caricature, and the recognition of the simultaneous existence of both tragedy and comedy. He represents the tragic elements within comedy when he emphasizes the individual’s existential isolation and the darkness of history which looms over the alienated individual. However, Reger also finds freedom in theatrical language and the invention of repetitive complaint and sarcastic caricature. Bernhard’s Reger manages to revive a corrupted language after WWII and the Holocaust. He acknowledges the changes in postwar theater and proves that a hero still exists but no longer in terms of tragedy. The contemporary tragicomedic hero simultaneously embraces the complexity of history as well as the creative conceits of his present.

¹¹⁸ Honegger 156

CHAPTER 3
EXISTENCE THROUGH DISTANCE:
REGER AS A SPECTATOR AT A PLAY AND IN LIFE

“ . . . it was not music that was my salvation, it was Schopenhauer, again and again a few lines of Schopenhauer, Reger said. It was not Nietzsche, only Schopenhauer. I sat up in bed and read a few lines of Schopenhauer and reflected on them and again read a few Schopenhauer sentences and reflected on them. . . . Only and solely Schopenhauer helped me, because quite simply I abused him for the purpose of my survival. . . .”

--Reger

“In some amphitheatre, like a wing of human infinity, the multitude divides, startled in front of the abrupt abyss made by the god, man, or type.”

--Stéphane Mallarmé, “Variations sur un sujet,” *Œuvres complètes*

In the last few pages of *Old Masters*, Reger says, “Art altogether is nothing but a survival skill, we should never lose sight of this fact, it is, time and again, just an attempt - an attempt that seems touching even to our intellect - to cope with this world and its revolting aspects. . . .”¹¹⁹

This passage addresses the idea that one comes to appreciate art through one’s ability to distance oneself from life. This “Schopenhauerian” idea of stepping out of life encourages one to observe actions as if one were a spectator at a play. The theatrical dynamic of recognizing one’s existence and relationship to the object is an important theme as well as an effective technique of

¹¹⁹ Bernhard 151

Old Masters. In this novel, Reger experiences “withdrawal into reflection.”¹²⁰ In this chapter, I will analyze *Old Masters* in light of this idea of “doubleness of life.” Recalling the notion of “audience as he himself,” which was discussed in a previous chapter, I will examine how, for Reger, this “doubleness of life” is a way of survival as well as evidence for his ultimately optimistic outlook on life and the world.

The influence of Schopenhauer’s philosophy is evident in several aspects of *Old Masters*: the existence of objective and subjective views of the Tintoretto painting, the object of Reger’s gaze as both mirror and painting, and the ways in which the combined activities of looking in the mirror and observing a painting contribute to multiple perspectives (and a paradoxical nature) for Reger. Reger is observing a Tintoretto painting, but, as I will argue, also the painting as a mirror. Viewing the painting as it is--a painting--and as a mirror are both subjective. Does Reger view the Tintoretto portrait with any objectivity? Is it no longer possible to view a painting, sculpture, human objectively? Are all of Reger’s views subjective? I plan to address these questions in my analysis of Reger as an observer and spectator. The interplay between these two ways of viewing a piece of artwork (objectively and subjectively) allows for Reger’s unique existence.

Old Masters reminds the reader of art theorist Julius Held’s ideas concerning the viewer and the object being observed. Held believes that the object being observed encourages thoughts within not only the world of the creation but also the world outside the museum or painting. The artwork can promote social, political, or religious thoughts pertaining to the viewer’s present. In

¹²⁰ Hans Blumenberg writes about the dual position of actor and audience and the objective and subjective points of view. In his 1979 philosophical work *Shipwreck with Spectator*, Blumenberg states, “whatever serenity is possible for human beings proceeds from this doubleness of life” (Blumenberg 64). There is a parallel between reflexivity and theatrical “doubleness.” In his *Shipwreck with Spectator*, Blumenberg examines the position of the spectator and spectacle and writes about the ability to embrace both positions and the ultimate emotional satisfaction that results from this ability. Blumenberg mentions Schopenhauer when discussing the spectator-spectacle dynamic and integration. Blumenberg, in writing about an actor’s “withdrawal into reflection,” quotes Schopenhauer who believes that a man is similar to “an actor who has played his part in one scene, and who takes his place among the audience until it is time for him to go on stage again, and quietly looks on at whatever may happen, even though it be the preparation for his own death (in the piece), but afterward again goes on the stage and acts and suffers as he must” (Schopenhauer quoted in Blumenberg 64).

his article entitled “Rembrandt’s Aristotle,” Held analyzes the painting *Aristotle Contemplates the Bust of Homer* (1653), and many of the issues Held discusses, including the spectacle-spectator relationship, may be applied to Reger’s relationship to the *White-Bearded Man* (c.1570). Just as Aristotle contemplates the bust of Homer, Reger contemplates Tintoretto’s portrait. Moreover, as in the case of Aristotle, Reger steps out of the life of the painting and uses the painting as a springboard for thoughts pertaining to social and political issues. From this “regarding from the outside,” a spectator-spectacle dynamic is established.

I will argue that Bernhard and his character Reger, despite the recurring complaints and attacks on Austria, are undergoing a utopian challenge. In relation to the spectator-spectacle dynamic pertaining to *Old Masters* and Held’s article, I also analyze the significance of the last moments of *Old Masters* in which Atzbacher recalls the visit that Reger and Atzbacher make to the Burgtheater to see a performance of Kleist’s *Der Zerbrochene Krug*.¹²¹ I will return to the idea of Reger as a spectator in a theatrical setting, for Bernhard thought that there is performance within every aspect of existence. I will recall Bernhard’s and Dürrenmatt’s ideas that provide the base support of *Old Masters*: theatricality of art and the spectatorship of intellectualism. As an actor and audience member with regard to Tintoretto’s painting, Reger, as mentioned in the first chapter, again finds himself in the audience, viewing the action on the Burgtheater stage. This “doubleness of life” provides, as Blumenberg suggests, a serenity of life as well as a method of surviving the mistakes made in life and art. Tintoretto, inspired by religious optimism, indirectly challenges Reger’s (and Bernhard’s) countless attacks upon Austria’s Catholic churches and his seemingly nihilistic slant. Ultimately, Reger hits the nail on the head, so to speak, when, at the end of *Old Masters*, Atzbacher recalls their visit to the Burgtheater to see *Der Zerbrochene*

¹²¹ Vienna’s Burgtheater is one of the city’s most famous landmarks. It is one of Vienna’s major theaters, constructed between 1874 and 1888. Caroline Bugler writes, “The building opened in 1888, only to close for further modifications nine years later when it was discovered that several seats had no view of the stage and the ceiling cupola made for appalling acoustics. Bombing during WWII destroyed the central part of the theatre, which has been totally reconstructed” (47). The Burgtheater is financially supported by the Austrian government. This factual detail becomes, of course, a reason for criticism by Reger, for he consistently attacks and searches for reasons to attack the Austrian government and politics.

Krug. The last moment in the novel, which shows Reger's visit to the detested Burgtheater reaffirms not his nihilistic or anarchic nature, but his utopian tendency.

Reger admires Tintoretto's energy and inspiration and, in turn, incorporates the Mannerist tendencies into his modernist dilemma and state of being. This type of existence proves that theater is, as Bernhard always suggests, an integral aspect of life and that continued interest in this "doubleness of life" is proof, as Dürrenmatt points out, that amidst so much negativity, guilt, and power, there is a fundamental optimism and utopianism which drives one to continue questioning, searching, complaining, and critiquing. In *Theaterprobleme*, Dürrenmatt writes: "to talk about plays, about art, is a much more utopian undertaking than is ever appreciated by those who do it most."¹²² Reger is an ideal example of Dürrenmatt's point. Criticism and complaint give Reger energy and stimulate him to pursue art, music, and philosophy. Every trip to the Kunsthistorisches Museum and Burgtheater is a sign of hope and continuation.

Losing oneself in the intellectual activity of recognizing the actor and his relationship with spectacle and audience creates what Blumenberg refers to as the "doubleness of life" (64). In *Old Masters*, Reger is an actor who withdraws from life and into reflection; however, the "play" being performed is a theatrical prose piece that tends toward tragicomedy. Reger does not die at the end of *Old Masters*. Instead, he attends a play with Atzbacher. Not only does Reger continue to live on stage in his theatrical existence, but he also lives again through Atzbacher's writing about him in the novel. As Reger withdraws into contemplation, the audience in the museum, the museum guard, and Atzbacher observe him as a performer. Regardless of whether Reger is lost in thought or not, the comedy continues through Atzbacher's act of narration. Reger's ability to distance himself from the spectacle of the Tintoretto painting and Kleist's play becomes important when one relates it to Blumenberg's notion of "serenity," Schopenhauer's idea of "pleasure in existence," and Dürrenmatt's "utopian undertaking," all of which pertain to the appreciation of art, distance, and the recognition of the spectacle.

¹²² Dürrenmatt 251

Among all the philosophers, artists, and musicians he dislikes, Reger finds that the greatest moment to sneak off into art is when he opens the books of Arthur Schopenhauer. While reading Schopenhauer on the settee in the Bordone Room, he met his wife. Reger, recalling the moment to Atzbacher, says, “It was a gloomy day, I was in despair, I was studying Schopenhauer very thoroughly at the time, having lost all interest in Descartes, as indeed, then, in French thought generally.”¹²³ In pessimism and discontent, Reger meets his wife and then finds joy. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer writes that human beings come to know pleasure and satisfaction only through previous feelings of suffering. Pain and desire remain a constant, while the feelings of pleasure always come from the “remembrance of preceding suffering and want” (Schopenhauer quoted in Blumenberg 62). Reger’s description of Reger in the Bordone Room with a work of Schopenhauer in hand and his future wife sharing the settee with him is ironic and perverse, because Reger is critical of most things, including the woman sitting next to him who later becomes his wife and one of the central driving forces in his life.

Reger admits paradox into his life as a means of survival. Through his ability to engage in contradictory activities, such as attending plays that he knows he will not enjoy, he is able to distance himself and take pleasure in the theatrical aspects of life. Reger is committed to his wife and his love affair with paradox and contradiction. Reger observes the *White-Bearded Man*, which could, in a sense, be a portrait of himself or a mirror reflection that he has been observing for thirty-six years. He reads Schopenhauer, who believed that the non-existence of human life represents an ideal state, yet his solipsistic relationship to high art and culture is contradictory with a selfless attitude, which is reminiscent of Schopenhauer’s ideas of the selfless sage. Reger’s selfishness allows him to accept his strange attitude toward life, wanting his favorite artists to himself. Reger states, “Most probably I also suffer from what I call art selfishness: where art is concerned I wish to have everything for myself alone, . . . I can scarcely bear the thought that someone else, apart from me, possesses and enjoys the products of these

¹²³ Bernhard 98

geniuses. . . .”¹²⁴ He meets a woman who likes neither Tintoretto nor the painting, and soon marries her. He goes to see a play at the Burgtheater, knowing all the while that he will not enjoy it. Reger, aware of his love of paradox, uses it as a means of survival when he invites Atzbacher to the Burgtheater by saying, “Take the second ticket and come with me to the Burgtheater this evening, share my enjoyment of this perverse folly.”¹²⁵ Even though Reger knows that he will not enjoy the performance of *Der Zerbrochene Krug*, he decides to go despite his inevitable disappointment. Through his ability to distance himself from life, Reger is able to be both part of the audience and spectacle, gaining much assurance and possibility amidst much reason for despair.

As Reger achieves distance from life through reflection and intellectual activity, he becomes a spectator. He is able to make pronouncements on the object at which he is staring and finds this theatrical dynamic in the Tintoretto painting, as well as in Kleist’s *Der Zerbrochene Krug*. Reger reflects on his reading of Schopenhauer:

I sat up in bed and read a few lines of Schopenhauer and reflected on them and again read a few Schopenhauer sentences and reflected on them. After four days of nothing but drinking water and reading Schopenhauer I ate my first piece of bread, which was so hard I had to chop it off the loaf with a meat cleaver.¹²⁶

Reger emphasizes the ascetic, ritualistic notions which arise as one devotes oneself to becoming Schopenhauer’s ideal of a moss-covered sage or saint. The ritual involves the abandonment of all selfish notions in order to begin the process of self-annihilation. While reading Schopenhauer, Reger claims to undergo the physical process of turning outward (fasting, suffering, denying any personal cravings) that is often associated with Schopenhauer’s

¹²⁴ Bernhard 128

¹²⁵ Bernhard 155

¹²⁶ Bernhard 142

philosophy. However, he cannot escape his solipsistic selfishness, which results in his demand to be left alone with *his* painting.¹²⁷

Reger's position as an observer in the Kunsthistorisches Museum is noteworthy in light of Schopenhauer's thoughts on the theatricality of art and on intellectual activity as a pleasurable escape from the boredom of existence. In the chapter entitled "On the Vanity of Existence," in *Essays and Aphorisms*, Schopenhauer explains that one enjoys life when one has a goal of some kind. Boredom is more or less non-existent once "we are striving after something - in which case distance and difficulties make our goal look as if it would satisfy us (an illusion which fades when we reach it) - or when engaged in purely intellectual activity, in which case we are really stepping out of life so as to regard it from outside, like spectators at a play."¹²⁸ Being aware of one's position as spectator and part of an audience is, according to Schopenhauer, integral to experiencing pleasure in existence. The ability to separate oneself from one's immediate environment in order to see oneself as an observer of life is also a way to avoid boredom and dissatisfaction in life. Reger--a critic, musicologist, and intellectual--commits himself to the Tintoretto portrait in order to escape the boredom of existence. Reger, commenting on the role of the critical artist and his ability to become aware of and sensitive towards his own surroundings, states that the "critical artist is the one who practices his own art in all the arts and is aware of it, utterly and totally aware of it. This awareness makes me happy. . . . A thinking person is by nature an unhappy person . . . But even that unhappy person can be happy time and again, in the truest meaning of the word and of the concept *as a diversion*."¹²⁹ Engaging in

¹²⁷ In his *Shipwreck with Spectator*, Blumenberg writes the following concerning Schopenhauer's views on genius and the ascetic sage: "The will—and this is already its classical determination—goes into the infinite and can end only by transcending itself; this occurs, as great passion or as pure cognition, in the genius. Schopenhauer's formula of the 'life of the genius' is a paradox, for genius is distinguished precisely by not belonging to life, since it is completely filled with pure cognition as distance from life" (62). Concerning reason and the sage, Blumenberg later states, "It is expressed in the fact that 'in accordance with previous reflection, or a formed determination, or a recognized necessity, a man suffers or accomplishes in cold blood what is of the utmost and often terrible importance to him.' There at last, one might truly say, 'reason manifests itself practically.' The fullest development of practical reason is represented, Schopenhauer says, in the ideal of the Stoic sage" (64).

¹²⁸ Schopenhauer 54

¹²⁹ Bernhard 52

intellectual activity serves as a diversion or distraction from boredom and the general displeasure of existence.

Reger, engaged in a highly elitist activity of defining his intellectual likes and dislikes, creates the stage on which he performs and thereby distracts himself from the displeasure of existence. He dedicates himself to a sixteenth-century portrait (that he both likes and dislikes) as well as to the criticism of Austrian and German writers, philosophers, and painters. His list of dislikes (El Greco, Velázquez, Giotto, Stifter, Bruckner, Heidegger) far outweighs his likes (Francisco Goya, Michel de Montaigne, Pascal, Voltaire).¹³⁰ For the most part, he tends to prefer French, Russian, and German writers and philosophers to Austrian ones. However, he also ridicules Heidegger (German) and Stifter (Austrian), but praises Goethe (German) and Egon Schiele (Austrian). In this sense, it is often difficult and challenging to detect a pattern in Reger's seemingly inconsistent taste and judgment. Reger's way of escaping the problems of existence by stepping out of life, so to speak, and into an illusory world, corresponds to what Schopenhauer proposes.

Bernhard experiments with the ways in which his plays and theatrical prose appear and are perceived. In *Old Masters*, Reger battles with both the objective and subjective views of Tintoretto's portrait. When examining Bernhard's methods of writing and directing, one should find Dürrenmatt's ideas on theater and observation helpful. Dürrenmatt contrasts scholarship with directing plays and stresses the importance of the process of creating something new. Perhaps this "something new" that the playwright creates, after the destruction of the object, is a product of subjective observation or planning. As a theater director, writer, and producer,

¹³⁰ Reger's dislikes continued: Nicolas de Largilliere, Lorenzo Lotto, Albrecht Dürer, Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*, Andrea Mantegna, Giovanni Biliverti, Giulio Campagnola, Ludwig van Beethoven, Arturo Toscanini, Gustav Mahler, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Johannes Brahms, Paul Hindemith, Otto Klemperer, Bernard Bolzano, Guido Reni, Capuchin Tomb, Hofburg, Museum der Stadt Wien, Burgtheater, Gustav Klimt, Adolf Loos, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Kleist's *Zerbrochene Krug*. Reger's likes continued: Johannes Kepler, Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frideric Handel, Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*, Joseph Haydn, Goethe, Kleist, Novalis (Georg Friedrich Philipp von Hardenburg), Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner, Anton Webern, Mozart, Alban Berg, Arnold Schoenberg, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Denis Diderot, Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka, Nikolai Gogol, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, Auguste Renoir, Leos Janáček, Bohuslav Martinů, René Descartes, Christoph Martin Wieland.

Bernhard is aware of the subjective and objective viewpoints. Reger faces both of these points of view as he is both the spectacle and part of the audience. He struggles with the difficult, if not impossible, task of taking a purely objective point of view and challenges himself when he sees the painting for what it is (a painting) and for what it is not (a mirror).¹³¹ This difficulty allows him to discover things about himself and human activity which accord with his favorite philosopher.

Reger observes the Tintoretto painting as if it were something both familiar and alien. As a result, he shows two very different reactions to the painting. Whether Reger looks at the portrait's subject as a stranger or himself, the painting inspires different thoughts in Reger. In the following paragraph from *Old Masters*, notice the effect of the verbs to "look" and "gaze" and how the manner in which he views the painting influences his train of thought. Atzbacher, describing Reger's viewing position in front of Tintoretto's painting, writes, "Reger again looked at the *White-Bearded Man* and said: forty years after the end of the war conditions in Austria have again reached their darkest moral low, that is what is so depressing. Such a beautiful country and such an utterly brutal and vile and destructive society."¹³² According to this passage, when Reger "looks" at the portrait, he takes a somewhat objective view of the painting, which inspires thoughts pertaining to Austria and its history.¹³³ Reger, when he is "looking" at the painting, does not relate it immediately to his personal life. Whereas when Reger "gazes" at the portrait, he begins to personalize his experience with the old man in the painting as if he is engaging in a dialogue. Atzbacher continues to write when he recalls what Reger has said about society, "What is so appalling about it is that one can only be a perplexed spectator of the catastrophe and is unable to do anything about it. Reger gazed at the *White-Bearded Man* and said: "every other day I visit my wife's grave and I stand there by her grave for half an hour and

¹³¹ Whether or not a "purely objective point of view" is even possible will be discussed in this chapter.

¹³² Bernhard 132

¹³³ Ewald Osers, in his English translation of *Alte Meister*, translates "schauen auf" with the English equivalent "to look at or upon." Later, Bernhard uses "schauen an," (to look at) which Osers translates as "to gaze." Osers' use of "look" and "gaze" is interesting when one has Schopenhauer's philosophical notions of the objective look and the subjective gaze in mind.

I feel nothing.”¹³⁴ Gazing at the portrait encourages personal remembrances of his wife’s death. For Reger, the Tintoretto painting “speaks to him” on both formal and informal levels.

It is no surprise that, according to Atzbacher, who records these “monologues,” Reger feels a connection with the portrait and at the same time recognizes the distance and difference between himself and the *White-Bearded Man*. He discovers connections between himself and the painting when he compares the age of the old man in the painting to his own age. However, Reger becomes isolated from the painting when he observes the painting as a riddle because he is no longer seeing similarities but details on the face of a stranger that had not been previously noticed. In *Essays and Aphorisms*, Schopenhauer writes about the observation of the face and various presuppositions, involving the first appearance of a face. He notices how much is revealed in the way a face appears and how, oftentimes, the “countenance expresses and reveals the whole essence of a man.”¹³⁵ One likes to see for oneself how one appears to be, or one would like a detailed description from someone else in order to create a mental picture of oneself as the object. Schopenhauer continues: “Likewise, in everyday life, everyone inspects the face of anyone he meets and silently tries to discover in advance from his physiognomy his moral and intellectual nature.”¹³⁶ Reger relies upon his own observation and the observation of others to determine what constitutes his subjectivity. In this case, others have much influence upon the mind of the observer.

According to Schopenhauer, the human face is a hieroglyph which may be deciphered. How things appear is an entranceway into the body. He believes that one’s face is more telling than one’s mouth, because the face “is a compendium of everything his mouth will ever say, in that it is the monogram of all this man’s thoughts and aspirations”¹³⁷ Concerning the revealing aspects of the face and mouth, Schopenhauer writes that “the mouth, further, expresses only the thoughts of man, while the face expresses a thought of nature: so that everyone is worth looking

¹³⁴ Bernhard 132

¹³⁵ Schopenhauer 232

¹³⁶ Schopenhauer 232

¹³⁷ Schopenhauer 232

at, even if everyone is not worth talking to.¹³⁸ For Schopenhauer, the human face is of prime interest because it expresses the details and sensitivity of existence. The mouth is only part of the whole--the whole, in Schopenhauer's view, being that of the face. The face is a hieroglyph, while the mouth is language, which reveals one's thoughts. The mouth facilitates the deciphering of the code, because it acts as an entranceway into the nature of man.

When one applies Schopenhauer's comments to Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*, the portrait becomes an ideal object for Reger's contemplation and an ideal working example of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Tintoretto clearly highlights the face of the man in the painting and conceals his mouth with a heavy moustache and beard. In contrast to the obscured mouth, the eyes of the *White-Bearded Man* are not concealed. They in fact return Reger's gaze. The man in Tintoretto's painting, by returning his gaze to Reger, asserts a sense of power and authority over the viewer.¹³⁹ The contrast between the illuminated face, chest, shoulders, arms, and torso that are darkened by shade reveals the importance of the face as the center of focus. The mouth of the man in the portrait is obscured by the moustache and beard, making it difficult to read the man's thoughts clearly. The mouth, in addition to all other aspects of the face, is a part of the whole of what has been said.

Reger's art of observation raises the challenging problem of truth and falsity in art, to which one continuously returns even after battling to decipher the hidden aspects of Tintoretto's portrait. This dynamic between truth and falsity becomes a crucial source of inspiration for Reger. In *Old Masters*, there is a scene in which Reger must share the Bordone Room settee and the Tintoretto portrait with an Englishman, who has come to view the portrait and examine its forged details, for the Englishman is convinced that either the portrait in the museum or his copy at home is a "perfect forgery."¹⁴⁰ Reger, while observing the Tintoretto portrait, must also observe the Englishman observing the portrait. Reger, who, after thirty-six years, is familiar with the details of the *White-Bearded Man's* face, begins to familiarize himself with the

¹³⁸ Schopenhauer 232

¹³⁹ Barnett 46

¹⁴⁰ Bernhard 79

Englishman's face when he says, ". . . as I was watching him from behind, I could not see his face, but I knew of course, even though I was watching him from behind, that he was staring at the *White-Bearded Man*. . . . For a long time the Englishman did not turn round, and when he did his face was as white as chalk."¹⁴¹ Reger observes the Englishman's face, which pales upon his imaginative discovery of the possibility of his own favorite painting being a forgery. This discovery recalls Schopenhauer's following comments on the face:

Yet the face does not lie: it is we who read what is not written there. In any event, the deciphering of the face is a great and difficult art. Its principles can never be learned *in abstracto*. The first precondition for practicing it is that you must take a purely objective view of your man, which is not so easy to do: for as soon as the slightest trace of aversion, or partiality, or fear, or hope, or even the thought of what impression we ourselves are making on him, in short as soon as anything subjective is involved, the hieroglyph becomes confused and corrupted.¹⁴²

One might say that what Schopenhauer writes concerning the problems of subjectivity corresponds to Reger's problems with finding perfection in the Tintoretto portrait. Reger cannot avoid taking a subjective view of the Tintoretto painting, for he relates to the figure in the portrait. When he encounters the Englishman who has also come to view the Tintoretto portrait, Reger faces the challenge of sitting on the Bordone Room settee *à deux*, observing the same painting as well as a live human piece.¹⁴³ Since the Englishman is at first a complete stranger, Reger's first view of him is objective, according to Schopenhauer, but the longer the Englishman stays within Reger's view, the more subjective the view becomes; the more Reger learns about him and the less the Englishman remains a stranger.

¹⁴¹ Bernhard 77,78

¹⁴² Schopenhauer 233

¹⁴³ Bernhard 72

How is it then possible to view a face objectively? Is Reger's view of the Englishman, who is, in essence, a stranger, objective? In his book *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, Sylvan Barnet suggests that it is no longer the "innocent eye" with which we look but a more creative and selective process.¹⁴⁴ Barnet believes that we are not looking objectively: "Inevitably, we see from a particular point of view (even if we are not aware of it)—for instance, the view of an aging middle-class white male, or of a second-generation Chinese-American, or of a young Chicana feminist in the early years of the twenty-first century."¹⁴⁵ Barnet goes on to explain that we as viewers and observers are, indeed, the products of our environment: "Our interpretations of experience certainly feel like our own, but, far from being objective, they are (it is widely believed) largely conditioned by who we are—and who we are depends partly on the cultures that have shaped us."¹⁴⁶ The eye, instead of mirroring or passively perceiving, "selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs" (Barnet 23). Viewing is very much a creative process. Reger's view of the Englishman cannot be objective.

To apply Bernhard's idea to Reger's relationship to the Tintoretto portrait, one would agree with the idea that Reger is unable to view the portrait with pure objectivity because he is a product of his Austrian surroundings. The man in the *White-Bearded Man* lacks a proper name in its title and, as a result, is a stranger to Reger at first glance. Even though the figure in the portrait is a stranger to Reger in the sense that the two men do not know one another, there are things about the portrait that Reger becomes familiar with upon first glance. For instance, Reger is, doubtless, familiar with the style of Tintoretto. Since Reger is a lover of museums and supporter of high art, it is reasonable to assume that Reger has seen other paintings by the Venetian painter. Reger's home is Vienna and, in many ways, so is the Kunsthistorisches Museum, the place in which the Tintoretto portrait hangs. When Reger goes to the Kunsthistorisches Museum, he is aware not only of the old masters' artworks but also of the Habsburg treasury. He knows Irrsigler

¹⁴⁴ According to Barnet, the "innocent eye" "simply perceives" in contrast to the "constructionist view," which "holds that the eye is selective and creative" (23).

¹⁴⁵ Barnet 23

¹⁴⁶ Barnet 23

(the museum guard), the Bordone Room (which holds the Tintoretto portrait), and the Sebastiano Room (containing Titian paintings) all quite well. In addition to having spent time in and around the museum, Reger understands the strained relationship between Titian and Tintoretto and the irony in the placement of the two painters' paintings next door to one another. Given all of these reasons for Reger to feel familiar with his environment, it becomes clear how it is impossible for him to view the portrait objectively.

Reger is not without personal emotions--what Schopenhauer calls aversion, partiality, fear, and hope--when he looks at the painting. Everything surrounding the painting is familiar to him. He is aware of his placement, surroundings, and environment. One should assume that this is not the first Tintoretto painting that the eighty-two year-old Reger has seen. For Reger, as a viewer of the Tintoretto portrait in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, "anything subjective *is* involved" and the potential of any objective view becomes "confused and corrupted," according to Schopenhauer's thoughts on the likelihood of objective points of view. Schopenhauer believes that "just as we can hear the sound of language only if we do not understand it so we can see the physiognomy of a man only if he is a stranger to us: consequently one can receive a purely objective impression of a face, and thus have the possibility of deciphering it, only at first sight."¹⁴⁷ One must remain a stranger to his or her viewing object in order to view the object objectively. After the first sight, the object becomes familiar, and outside influences corrupt the image. In this way, Schopenhauer's philosophy sheds a poignant light on Reger, who can never meet the bearded man in the portrait. On one hand, he will always remain a stranger to Tintoretto's character in the painting. On the other hand, Reger is not a stranger to the bearded man because he knows the superficial aspects of the bearded man quite intimately, after his continuous visits to the museum. Reger, commenting on his ritualistic viewing of the Tintoretto portrait, says, "I have looked at this painting for over thirty years and I still find it possible to look at it. . . . The old masters tire quickly if we study them scrupulously and they always disappoint us if we subject them to closer scrutiny, if we make them the ruthless object of our critical

¹⁴⁷ Schopenhauer 233

intellect.”¹⁴⁸ Reger has been observing the face in the portrait so long that no “true” objective deciphering is possible. Even though the subject in the painting remains anonymous, Reger, influenced by historical, political, religious, and Viennese surroundings as he looks at Tintoretto’s *White-Bearded Man*, views the painting with the intensity of a person who has had some prior relationship with the subject in the portrait. With every repeated visit, Reger not only becomes more familiar with the qualities of the painting but also with the stranger, who shares similarities of age and gender with Reger. Reger’s view cannot but be subjective. He is a product of Viennese high culture, a viewer and critic who has not the “innocent eye” but the eye that creates and critiques. Therefore, it could be said that Reger views the bearded man as if it were a reflection of Reger himself.

Schopenhauer’s discussion of the objective view, which requires alienation from the perceived focus, and of the subjective view, in which surrounding influences cannot be separated from the viewer, corresponds to previously mentioned ideas regarding the painting and mirror. The view required when one gazes into a mirror differs from that required when one observes a portrait. Reger’s situation in the Kunsthistorisches Museum corresponds to Schopenhauer’s concepts of an alienated gaze:

The condition under which objective comprehension of something perceived is possible is *alienation* from that which is perceived; but when we see our own reflection in a mirror we are unable to take an alienated view of it, because this view depends ultimately on moral egoism, with its profound feeling of *not me*: so that when we see our own reflection our egoism whispers to us a precautionary ‘This is not not-me, but me’, which has the effect of a *noli me tangere* and prevents any purely objective comprehension.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Bernhard 150, 151

¹⁴⁹ Schopenhauer 172

Clearly, there is a distance between them Reger and the man in the portrait, but the distance does not lead to the conclusion that Reger's view is objective.

Reger is, in a sense, a stranger observing a stranger, but Reger does not and cannot separate his life experiences from his portrait viewing. On Reger's appearance as an observer of the *White-Bearded Man*, Atzbacher recalls Reger, in an overcoat with "his black hat on his head the whole time." Reger is then "supporting himself on a stick wedged between his knees, [and is] totally absorbed in viewing the *White-Bearded Man*. . . ." ¹⁵⁰ Reger, with his black hat and overcoat covering his body, chooses to observe a Venetian stranger with a heavy white beard and black coat. Reger is not able to experience the portrait with alienation because he is never truly alone in the Bordone Room and cannot seem to separate his life experiences from the subject of the painting. Elements which prevent any "pure" or isolated environment in the guarded Bordone Room include the steady influx of European visitors to the museum, the guard himself, Atzbacher, and the Englishman from Wales. Therefore, contrary to Schopenhauer's position concerning the possibility of viewing something or someone objectively, Reger belongs to what Barnett describes as the "constructionist view," in which one creates, classifies, and associates. Reger, always aware of his own existence when he observes the *White-Bearded Man*, cannot engage in any objective view of the painting.

The painting, as I would argue, appeals to Reger as a mirror reflection, causing his "moral egoism" to take notice of the similarities in the face which gazes directly at him. Reger notices that the face in the portrait wears a beard and is of an older man. Perhaps he identifies with the image, relates the image to himself, and is no longer able to be objective. Regardless of whether the subjective and objective views simultaneously exist for the viewer or not, Reger considers both views and is able to use his varying perspectives to make multiple and, often, contradictory observations, which correspond to the emphasis that Bernhard places on multiple perspectives in writing and theater.

¹⁵⁰ Bernhard 2

Reger's "tragic quest" or desire for isolation when observing the Tintoretto painting recalls Julius Held's article "Rembrandt's Aristotle," which, as pointed out in the previous chapter, features Aristotle engaging in a "silent dialogue" with the bust of Homer (see page 97). In this article, Held emphasizes the importance of Aristotle's privacy and inner quiet while he contemplates the bust of Homer. Held's recognition of the existence of the undisturbed moment with Aristotle's solitary mood recalls Schopenhauer's ideas on the "man of intellect" and his ability to perform: "A man of intellect is like an artist who gives a concert without any help from anyone else, playing on a single instrument—a piano, say, which is a little orchestra in itself. Such a man is a little world in himself; and the effect produced single-handed, in the unity of his own consciousness."¹⁵¹ A man, alone and desiring no company, performs the show himself; he is like a one-man-band, who is both the soloist and orchestra. Reger fits in with Schopenhauer's idea of the "man of intellect" and Held's notion of the man who engages in a "silent dialogue" with another and oneself. He contains a world of characters within himself. He is simultaneously a solo performer, engaged in his monologue, and an entire audience, who continuously is watching his own performance.

Reger notices the details in the portrait as well as the details pertaining to the world outside of the Bordone Room and Kunsthistorisches Museum. Reger undergoes a type of observation and reflection similar to that Held examines. Held argues that in Rembrandt's painting Aristotle is holding a "silent dialogue" with the bust of Homer. The thoughts from Aristotle's silent dialogue "are both more general--dealing with far-reaching problems and moral choices--and more concrete--deriving from specific historical situations. The bust plays a most important part in these thoughts, but is not, in itself, the object of the sage's contemplation."¹⁵² In *Old Masters*, the Tintoretto portrait inspires Reger's contemplation. Atzbacher, describing Reger who observes the Tintoretto painting, comments, "He was still sitting on the settee, with his black hat on his head, quite motionless, and it was obvious that for a long time now he had

¹⁵¹ This quote appears on page 681 in Schopenhauer's *The Pessimist's Handbook: A Collection of Popular Essays*

¹⁵² Held 40

been contemplating not the *White-Bearded Man* but something entirely different behind the *White-Bearded Man*, not Tintoretto but something far outside the museum. . . .¹⁵³ The painting stimulates Reger's intellect as he begins to think of famous Austrian composers, German philosophers, French authors, and the Holocaust. The *White-Bearded Man*, like the bust of Homer, acts as a springboard for its spectator, inspiring him to recall moments from the past, existential problems, and ideological issues.

Other details Held recognizes in Rembrandt's painting also correspond to details in the Tintoretto painting. For one, both Aristotle and Tintoretto bear the mark of a serious expression. The serious expression of the *White-Bearded Man* influences Reger's interpretation of the painting as well as his way of thinking. While sitting in front of the *White-Bearded Man*, Reger comments on his peculiar pattern of observation:

Every other day I sit on the Bordone Room settee, naturally not every day, for that would be destructive, I mean if I sat on the Bordone Room settee every day, that would destroy everything within me that I value, and nothing of course is more valuable to me than thinking, I think therefore I live, I live therefore I think. . . .¹⁵⁴

The seriousness of the expression in the painting influences Reger's intellectual relationship with it. Held, commenting on the seriousness of expression in *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, writes, "Rembrandt adopted not only the external physiognomic details but the model's serious, if not actually tragic, expression as well."¹⁵⁵ The serious expressions in both portraits inevitably affect the thoughts of their respective viewers in that they all become more contemplative and sensitive to painterly techniques in the world of the artistic creation and to existential issues emerging in studying the painting.

¹⁵³ Bernhard 20

¹⁵⁴ Bernhard 70

¹⁵⁵ Held 29

Another similarity existing between the Rembrandt and Tintoretto paintings is the anonymous identity of the models for both of the portraits. Held takes note of the following details of the anonymous man in the Rembrandt painting:

This bearded man with [the] deep-set eyes, [who] probably belonged to the artist's small circle of friends. Not knowing his identity in terms of historical fact, it is impossible to say whether there was something in the character, the intellectual capacity, or the activity of this man that qualified him for the role of the ancient sage.¹⁵⁶

The same is true for Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*. The serious, if not melancholic or tragic, expressions worn on the face of the anonymous and elderly men can be read as signaling a fundamental existential condition. This interpretation is carefully articulated by Held:¹⁵⁷ "studying these later works (of Rembrandt) attentively, one becomes aware of the recurrence, in ever new variations, of one pervasive theme: man's inevitable isolation, the ultimate loneliness of our entire existence."¹⁵⁸

Held draws attention to the spectator's seclusion from the spectacle: "when Rembrandt painted the Aristotle, he painted it to be seen alone."¹⁵⁹ Reger, who shares qualities with an isolated spectator and an actor, is quite alone, but his situation recalls Dürrenmatt's notion of "audience as he himself" or spectator as actor. One may also recall Schopenhauer's description

¹⁵⁶ Held 29

¹⁵⁷ In addition to Held's observation concerning Rembrandt's display of man's melancholy and isolation, Titian, Tintoretto's predecessor, seemed to be interested in a similar type of emotional condition in his early sixteenth-century portraiture. Erwin Panofsky comments specifically on Titian's 1515 portrait entitled *Vanitas*. He examines Titian's use of shadow and a mirror, representing a woman's isolation. By the look of her glance, one senses sadness. He believes that the mirror represents vanity, death, and theatrical aspects that so interest Bernhard. Panofsky quotes G.F. Hartlaub who writes the following concerning Titian's painterly interest in vanity, death, and self-observation: "Small wonder that the mirror—that awe-inspiring device which could symbolize self-awareness as well as self-indulgence, and was credited with magic powers from times immemorial—was the standard attribute not only of Prudence and Truth but also of Vanity—in the sense of being inordinately pleased with oneself as well as in the more terrible sense of the Preacher's 'Vanity of vanities; all is Vanity'; and it is not surprising that it came to be associated with death" (Hartlaub quoted in Panofsky 93).

¹⁵⁸ Held 30

¹⁵⁹ Held 22

of the solitary man as soloist in a performance. Alone, the character performs multiple roles. For Schopenhauer's soloist becomes many performers; again, Dürrenmatt's idea of "audience as he himself" works in a similar description of isolation. The truthfulness of one's isolation in reality is depicted in both the Rembrandt and Tintoretto paintings, and corresponds to the isolated spectator, the voyeur, and, certainly, for Bernhard, the actor.

Tintoretto's and Rembrandt's anonymous models share deep-set eyes and beards, and both wear black gowns and gold jewelry. The thick beards worn by both models may be associated with intellectual seriousness. Held notes that "eminent scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often appear to have cultivated a stately beard, preferably combined with a drooping moustache, in contrast to the popular tonsorial fashions for men."¹⁶⁰ The beards provide a certain sense of experience and wisdom that are acquired with age. Bernhard, in his 1981 Mallorca interview with Krista Fleischmann, plays with the notion of the Freudian greatness of one who wears a beard. When Fleischmann asks him whether he has anything against beards, Bernhard responds, "No, but most people call men with big beards—well, let's say relatively big beards—great; the bigger the beard, the greater the man."¹⁶¹ In *Old Masters*, Bernhard creates Reger, an influential man, who has a beard and observes Tintoretto's bearded man. The two signify a greatness of humanity, which is admired by Atzbacher, Irrsigler, and the spectators. The black gowns worn by both men provide a nice contrast to the shimmering gold chain that is draped across the chest of Aristotle and the gold necklace, buttons, and ring that the *White-Bearded Man* wears.

The placement of the models' hands is of special interest as well. Rembrandt's depiction of Aristotle's hands is sensitive. The illuminated right hand rests upon the head of Homer, while the left hand remains in shade and rests upon Aristotle's left waist. In contrast to Rembrandt's painting, the *White-Bearded Man*'s right hand is completely hidden in the shade, whereas his left hand is illuminated and bears a golden ring on the index finger. According to Held,

¹⁶⁰ cited in Held 15

¹⁶¹ Bernhard quoted in Honegger

It surely is meaningful that Aristotle touches the bust of Homer with his *right* hand, favored in theology, symbolism, and ceremonial; it is his *left* that fingers the chain. His right hand is lifted up while the left hand is lowered. And it is a characteristic thought of an artist famous for his deliberate and meaningful use of light and dark that the right hand is in the full light, the left in shade.¹⁶²

Both Rembrandt and Tintoretto subvert the viewer's expectation and encourage a revolutionary perspective in their respective paintings. Tintoretto's deliberate exposure and illumination of the left hand *sinistra* intensifies the severity and seriousness of the gaze. As mentioned earlier, Schopenhauer is influential to Reger with regard to matters concerning truth and discovering imperfection. Schopenhauer, writing under the name Philalethes, in a dialogue on religion states, "To free a man from an error is not to deprive him of anything but to give him something: for the knowledge that a thing is false is a piece of truth. No error is harmless: sooner or later it will bring misfortune to him who harbors it."¹⁶³ Reger's interest in imperfection leads him to valuable comments on art and scholarship. Finding imperfection in art gives him a voice as a musicologist, a writer for a newspaper, and, above all, a critic.

Despite Reger's repeated disgust with and his admiration for the Tintoretto painting, the Austrian state and its workers, sympathy for the pessimist philosopher Schopenhauer, who considers annihilation to be the ideal human condition, Reger proves that he is not without hope but inspired to persist through continuous visits to the museum and theater and repeated discussions concerning artists, musicians, and philosophers. Paradox inevitably remains with Reger and Atzbacher until the end of their day together (which is also the end of the novel) when Reger invites Atzbacher to go see Kleist's *Der Zerbrochene Krug*. Given this ending, I would

¹⁶² Held 39

¹⁶³ Schopenhauer 108

argue that Reger, even though he is predominantly pessimistic in attitude and belief, is not a true nihilist but a utopian in action and, as a result, closer to Tintoretto's ideology of optimism rather than nihilism.¹⁶⁴ Revealing occasionally instances of tender and positive views on the world, Reger admits his interest in people: "I have always exclusively concerned myself with people, nature as such has never interested me, everything in me was always related to human beings, I am, you might say, a fanatic for human beings, naturally not a fanatic for humanity but a fanatic for human beings."¹⁶⁵ Clearly, Reger appreciates human contact and interaction. Just as he experiences existence as a showpiece and, at the same time, an observer, he admires people as part of the audience as well as he spectacle.

Even though the pessimism of Schopenhauer attracts Reger, the courage continually to pursue Austria's disappointing cultural opportunities amidst such inherent flaws and imperfections manifests itself in Reger. He has hope in its Schopenhauerian sense that it is the only thing left remaining in Pandora's box.¹⁶⁶ Reger's hope manifests itself in his repetitive ranting on philosophy, music, and theater. Giving up ranting, so to speak, would be a nihilistic move. Reger, in his total dedication to the arts, follows Dürrenmatt's belief in the courageous and much admired action that is what Dürrenmatt refers to as the "utopian undertaking."

Despite Reger's pessimistic attitude, he is indeed utopian in his actions. This is best exemplified when Atzbacher concludes his recollection of the time with Reger in the Kunsthistorisches Museum after a disappointing trip to see *Der Zerbrochene Krug*. Not until the last few pages of the book does Atzbacher reveal why Reger had invited him to the museum that

¹⁶⁴ In Dürrenmatt's *Theaterprobleme*, he writes about the contemporary state of art that is being gratuitously marked with the overused term--nihilism: "We writers are often reproached with the idea that our art is nihilistic. Today, of course, there does not exist a nihilistic art, but not every art that seems nihilistic is so. True nihilistic art does not appear to be nihilistic at all; it is usually considered to be especially humane and supremely worthy of being read by our more mature young people. A man must be a pretty bungling sort of nihilist to be recognized as such by the world at large. People call nihilistic what is merely uncomfortable. People are now saying that the artist is supposed to create, not to talk; to give shape to things, not to preach. Certainly. But it becomes more and more difficult to create 'purely' or however people imagine the creative mind should work. Mankind today is like a reckless driver racing ever faster, ever more heedlessly along the highway" (259-260).

¹⁶⁵ Bernhard 49

¹⁶⁶ In *Essays and Aphorisms*, Schopenhauer writes the following concerning the legend of *Pandora*: "It is not all the evil but all the good things of the world which Pandora had in her box. When Epimetheus rashly opened it the good things flew out and away: Hope alone was saved and still remains with us" (219).

day. Reger dreads going to the play even though he has invited Atzbacher and leaves the theater disgusted and horrified by the performance. If art can never reach truth, then most other aspects of life “dwell in the chaos of self-conscious truth” (Dowden 52). In his *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard*, Charles Martin states, “Repeated contradictions and oppositions are used as a metaphor for isolation and repression.”¹⁶⁷ With art, literature, and music constantly hiding the truth, one will forever feel dependent upon the intellect and creative imagination as a distraction from the imperfect state and ultimate knowledge of death. The act itself of going to see a play that he will most likely despise is what Dürrenmatt would call utopian; like the talking and thinking about art, literature, and music, the act of never giving up is a sign that there will always be the possibility of the positive renewal of hope.

Reger’s decision to see Kleist’s comedy *Der Zerbrochene Krug* (1811) demonstrates his playfulness. As a *Lustspiel*, this play does not center around tragic elements. Instead, the play has moments of slapstick comedy and religious and social irreverence. Of course, Reger’s decision to see the performance of a classic play at Vienna’s classic Burgtheater is based on his usual problematic expectation of “perfection” and the classics. Reger, in his disappointment, graciously accepts the play’s imperfection. He will forever feel dependent upon the intellect and creative imagination as a distraction from the imperfect state and ultimate knowledge of death.

Another reason for Reger’s decision to see Kleist’s comedy is because Kleist’s work is a foundation piece in the theatrical canon. In this sense, Reger’s attending Kleist’s conventional play reverses the reader’s expectation. Reger’s criticisms of the play’s problem recall some of Dürrenmatt’s ideas in “Theaterprobleme”: “There is always the saving convention by which all classical things are accepted as perfection, as a kind of gold standard in our cultural life. . . . The theater-going public streams to see the classics, whether they be performed well or not; applause is assured, indeed it is the duty of the educated man.”¹⁶⁸ If the classics that are occasionally executed “horribly” still win the approval of the masses and are, thus, supported by the scholars,

¹⁶⁷ Martin 18

¹⁶⁸ Dürrenmatt 239, 240

then what could be the fate of experimental theater? It is quite likely that few directors and dramatists would be willing to experiment with such risks; the classics serve as a security blanket, while, as Dürrenmatt stresses, people refuse to look anywhere but to the past.

Dürrenmatt believes that “contemporary art is a series of experiments, nothing more nor less, just like all of our modern world.”¹⁶⁹ Denying the experimental part of contemporary theater and art is like denying the realities of the present and, thereby, idealizing the past. Nostalgia for the classics of the past results from sentimental emotion, which has then become a way of denying the present. Kleist’s play is a canonized classic comedy. Conservative and harmless, the play proves successful with the masses.

Kleist’s story focuses on the deceitful and corrupt existence of a gluttonous and overweight court judge named Adam. He is hiding the secret that he is, in fact, the one responsible for breaking a jug which belongs to Martha. Adam is reluctant to confess this secret, because he does not want people to know that he was heavily intoxicated on the night of the accident and does not even remember the details of that evening. He lost his judge’s wig, threatens Eva, who, as an honest member of the court, remembers the events of the evening. Adam lies to the district judge and the whole court. In opposition to honest Eva is “sinful” Adam, who wears the guise of responsible and righteous judge, yet refuses to take the blame for his mistakes.

Adam’s refusal to take the blame recalls the post WWII phenomenon of collective guilt as it is described in Dürrenmatt’s “Theaterprobleme;” no individual is responsible or willing to take the blame for mistakes. Adam in Kleist’s play is responsible for the twentieth-century “legacy of guilt.” In *Der Zerbrochene Krug*, Adam is the individual at fault, and shows that this focus on the individual represents the “tragic,” which appeals to Reger. The notions of the responsible individual, original sin, and tragic flaw are of interest to Reger. The “tragedy” is

¹⁶⁹ Dürrenmatt 240

also Reger's intense dislike for Kleist's comedic play. The tragic theme in a comedic form supposes Reger's ideal position, which is tragicomedy.

Another aspect of appeal for Reger in Kleist's play is the relationship between the spectacle (Judge Adam) and the audience (the members of the court). *Der Zerbrochene Krug* is, in a sense, a play within a play. Bernhard's interest in the idea of "performance is all" applies to the Kleist drama (Honegger 192). Just as the corrupt Judge Adam is put on trial in *Der Zerbrochene Krug*, Reger puts art on trial in *Old Masters*.¹⁷⁰ The corruption of a judge mirrors the corruption of the old masters' art. At one point in Kleist's play, the desk separating the members of court from Adam is destroyed by the townspeople who realize Adam's guilt. The barrier is torn down, and the distance between audience and actor is, so to speak, eliminated by the masses. This moment in Kleist's play brings to the fore the permeability existing between the actors on stage and the viewers in the audience. In this case, a moment of chaos reveals truth and restores order in the community.

Upon examination of *Old Masters*, the study of Schopenhauer's philosophy of subjective and objective viewpoints proves vital when one is addressing the notion of multiple perspectives in a theatrical setting. The actor is aware, on the one hand, of the distance desired between actor and audience when he or she performs in the theater; on the other hand, the audience member, as he or she is perceiving what occurs on stage, realizes that the walls, thought to be separating the world on stage from the world in the audience, are penetrable after all. According to Held, the viewer on stage, in the audience, in front of a painting or the bust of Homer is not confined to the world surrounding himself, herself, or the object in view. In fact, it is oftentimes that object or that which is being viewed that inspires thoughts pertaining to the world outside. In this way, the viewer truly becomes a dreamer, a creator, and a constructive critic of the world around him. Ultimately, Reger's desire to attend the Burgtheater, even though he has doubts, is an act of

¹⁷⁰ In his article "Publikumsbeschimpfung: Thomas Bernhard's Provocations of the Austrian Public Sphere," Matthias Konzett writes about the authority of a corrupt judge and the art of the old masters: "The bulk of the work, made up of Reger's relentless critical dissections of the icons of culture, points to their commodification in a present era of consumerism and their absurdity as a cultural heritage" (263).

courage in the sense in which Dürrenmatt describes it in “Theaterprobleme.” For Dürrenmatt, the modern man requires courage to avoid capitulating under the disrupted world order. Courage and distance are required in order to avoid submitting to the abstraction of power, for distance allows for the enjoyment that exists in the intimacy of the actor-audience and spectacle-spectator relationship. Distance can be found in the theater, in comedies, for they require a separation of the spectacle and audience in order to provide commentary and allow one to reflect.

CONCLUSION

Dürrenmatt and Bernhard see the world as a stage and human actions as performance. Reger, who observes the Tintoretto painting, is observed by Atzbacher, Irrsigler and any of the international guests who decide to visit the Bordone Room. Reger and Atzbacher continue to discuss art, literature, and theater, which, in Dürrenmatt's view, is a "utopian undertaking." *Old Masters* closes with the dramatic spectacle of *Der Zerbrochene Krug*. The situation of Kleist's comedy itself is centered about the spectacle of a court trial and a town's corrupt judge. Bernhard deliberately plays with the notion of audience, spectacle, spectator, and actor until the final pages. Bernhard's staging of his dramatic prose work exposes the "ultimate reader" and the audience to important issues concerning observation, perspective, and the standards of what is expected of spectacle-spectator in the theater. He creates a unique narrative voice as well as a new meaning for the "dramatic monologue." As a result of his continuous manipulation of narrative voices, Bernhard produces an infinite number of performance acts in *Old Masters*, reinforcing his idea that "all is performance." This notion of "all is performance" assumes a new meaning in his "performance prose," in which every character is the actor, part of the audience, and, according to Dürrenmatt, both simultaneously. Bernhard's revolutionary Reger is not a main character in the traditional sense; rather, he becomes the center of attention through the narrator's written voice. Bernhard honors Dürrenmatt's "Theaterprobleme" when he stages the precise issues regarding actor-audience expectation and the dangers that the heavy weight of the museum's classics have on experimental ideas, which are of concern to the Swiss playwright. Bernhard draws attention the problems associated with contemporary theater by staging an experimental performance in one of Vienna's most conservative and traditional locations. In many ways, the Bordone Room is the world, a microcosm representing "the larger," which is made up of audience members and actors.

Reger remains faithful to Schopenhauer's philosophy, which supplies him with various methods of observation and perception. Reger recognizes himself in his Tintoretto mirror as well as in the Venetian stranger in the portrait. He experiences the overwhelming subjective views and the difficulty of objective viewing. The ability to recognize the existence of the subjective and objective perspectives allows him to examine paintings, visitors, and Viennese society from different angles. As a result of this "tackling of all subjects," Reger often makes contradictory statements, which further expose his contrary nature.

Reger, in his thirty-six years of observing the Tintoretto painting, attracts an audience who is interested in the interaction between the two old men. Reger, like Aristotle who contemplates the bust of Homer, observes the *White-Bearded Man*, who inspires thoughts related not only to painting and high art but also to social, political, and philosophical issues pertaining to the world outside the Kunsthistorisches Museum. The connections between the characters found in and outside the Bordone and Sebastiano rooms in the museum, as well as the rooms themselves, fall in and outside of reality. The fictionalized characters with fictionalized problems correspond to the reality of the Kunsthistorisches Museum and Tintoretto painting and the reality of Bernhard's and Tintoretto's philosophical fixations with death, life, truth, and falsehood.

Reger enjoys the monstrous perversity in life, because the persistence of death and guilt leaves him with no other choice but to love and hate everything. He must focus upon imaginative creation in order temporarily to push death's inevitable presence to the sidelines. The legacy of guilt prevalent in the twentieth century weakens and manipulates the public, but Reger discovers a way to survive and continue to exist through the recognition of imperfection, Nazi rhetoric, the ambiguity and abstraction of power, and the corrupted speech of postwar Germany contributed to what Bernhard believed to be a damaged language. Bernhard recovers a devastated language by way of the stage and dramatic performance. Reger, caught up in his productive intellectual criticism and admiration, confirms the purpose of art. The Tintoretto painting simultaneously contains, on the hidden right side, the reality of death and, in its

darkness, the distraction from death. The *White-Bearded Man* is like Dürrenmatt's iceberg, which hides the greater part of the modern world's power and ambiguity underwater or, in the case of the painting, in shade. The serenity found in the "doubleness of life" ultimately allows Reger simultaneously to retreat from the outside world that is Europe, Austria, and Vienna, and to engage, by way of reflection, in the outside world from which he is secluding himself. Bernhard, by incorporating a tragic figure into a comic form, offers the theater-going public his ideas of an experimental theater. Despite Reger's disappointment with the imperfections of the Tintoretto painting, the remaining old masters in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Viennese culture and society, and the problems of power and guilt in postwar Austria, he emerges from the Burgtheater courageous and hopeful, not tragic or nihilistic. After every visit to the Burgtheater and Kunsthistorisches Museum, Reger remains dedicated to high art, and to his position as spectator and spectacle, and critic. Without his dedication to culture and the arts, Reger would capitulate (to use Dürrenmatt's term) under the contemporary postwar world order, discouraging hope, creative inspiration, and intellectual stimulation as a way to overcome Holocaust guilt and the power of the Nazi leaders. Reger's dramatic monologue and Atzbacher's inspired recording of such a fury of critical and opinionated words combine, complement each other, as one enlivens dramatic language on stage and the other invigorates the printed word in written form. Reger's repeated visits to the museum and opera house demonstrate his desire to continue his pursuit of art--an experience both energizing and inspiring. Illusion offers relief to Reger, allowing him to continue creating, observing, and supplying the hidden aspects of life with more meaning.

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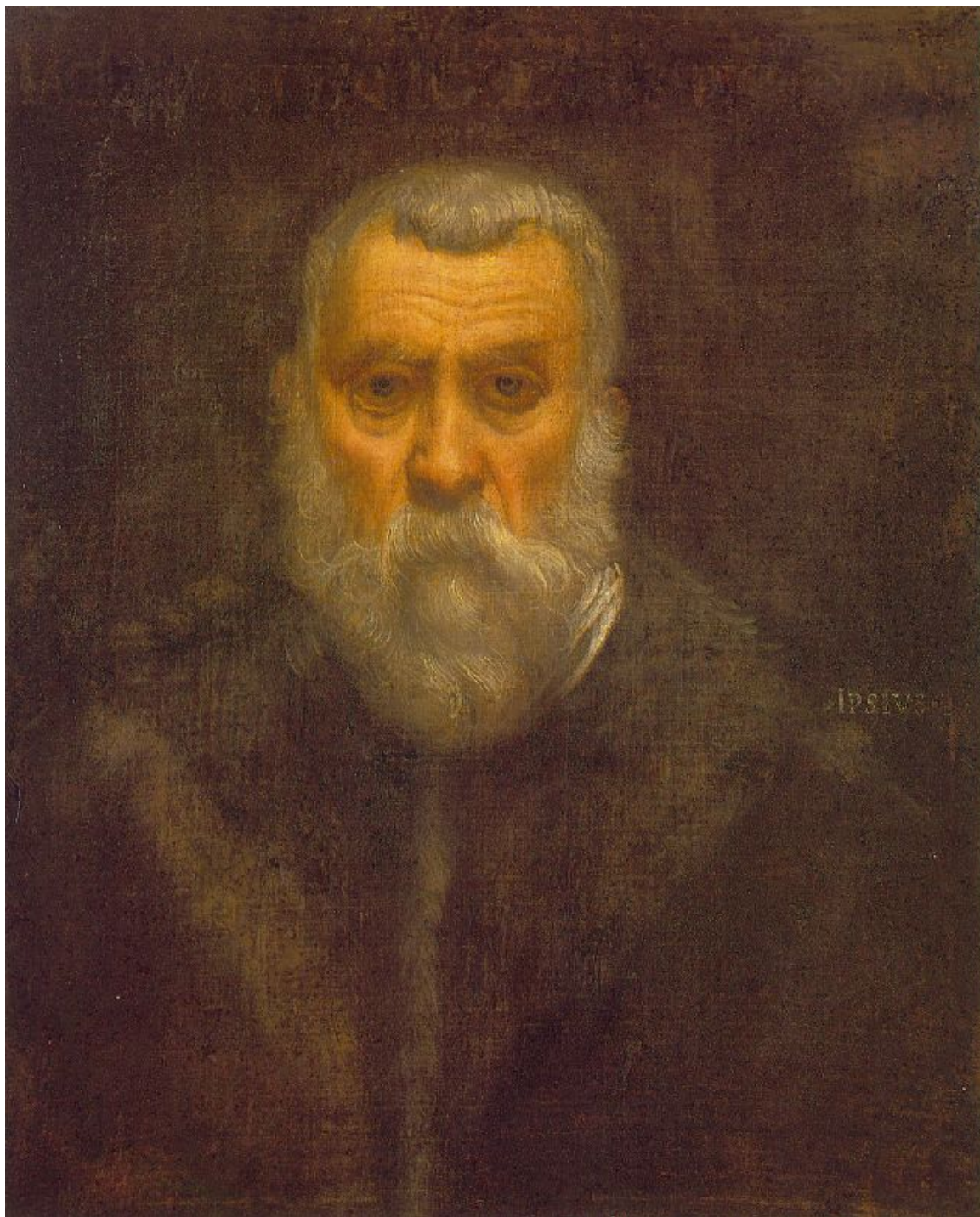
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APPENDIX

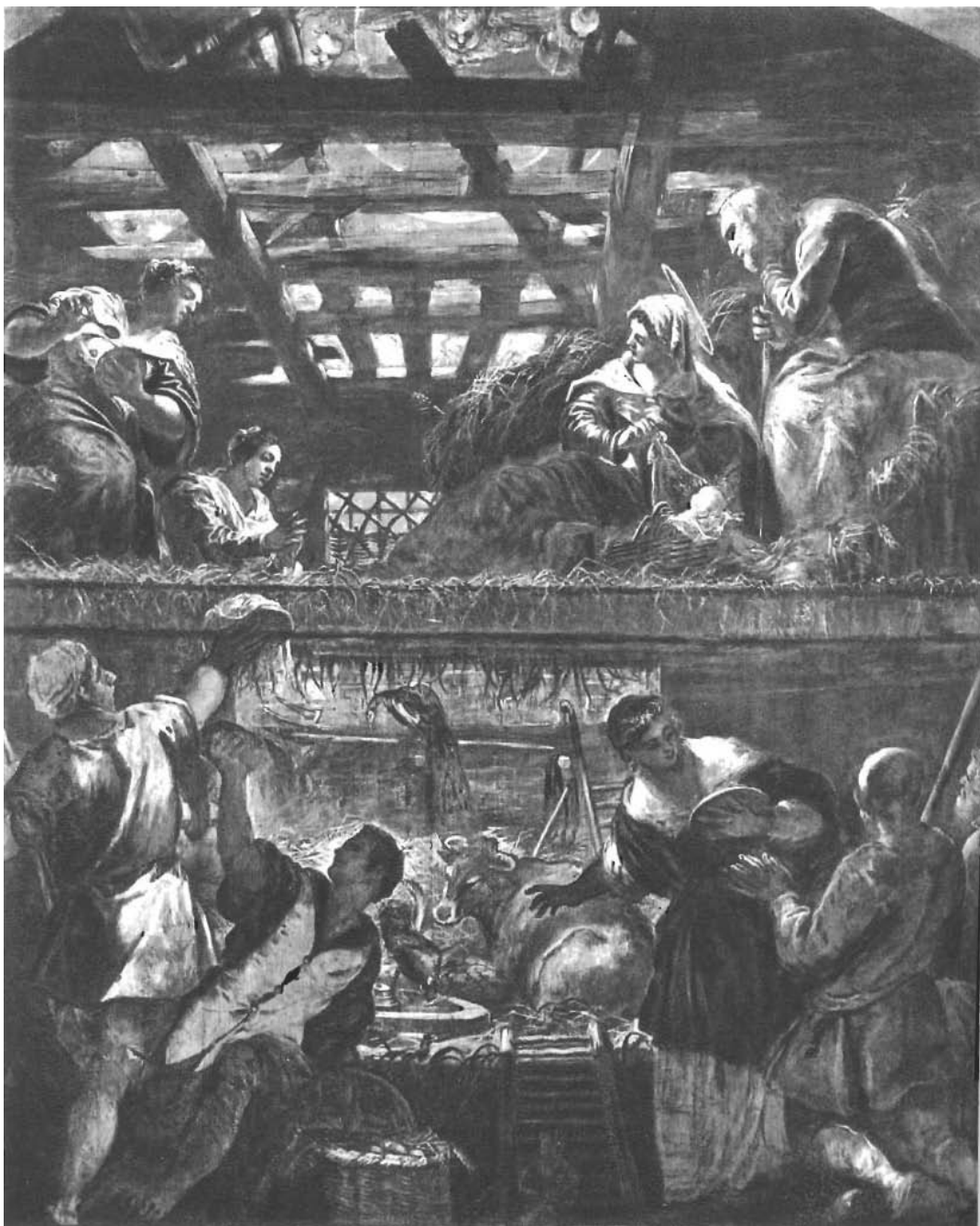


Jacopo Tintoretto, Ritratto di vecchio con pelliccia, intero e particolare. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum





Jacopo Tintoretto, Autoritratto. Parigi, Louvre.



Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Nativity*. 1576-1581. Venice, Scuola di San Rocco.



Jacopo Tintoretto, St. Mark Rescuing a Slave. 1548. Venice, Accademia.



Rembrandt van Rijn, Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer. 1653. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York