

London Beckett Seminar

Wednesday 21 February 2007
30 Russell Square

Thomas Mansell, Laura Salisbury, Judith Wilkinson, Shaun Roberts

Our series of seminars on *Beckett and...* on this occasion considered *The Loser*, a late novel by the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931—1989). As with the presence of contemporary political situations in Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, one thing that intrigued us about *The Loser* was the inclusion of “facts”: Thomas Bernhard, like the narrator, did study music at the Universität Mozarteum in Salzburg, and there was a real pianist called ‘Glenn Gould’. Does a reader of *The Loser* need to know this? No – but, as one says of the desirability of clinical insanity in certain workplaces, ‘it helps’.

Glenn Gould (1932—1982) was a Canadian pianist famed for his astonishing debut recording of Bach's Goldberg Variations in 1955 and for his retirement from the concert stage in 1964 at the height of his career. He devoted the rest of his life what he called his love affair with the microphone, producing many more recordings and also some ground-breaking radio documentaries. However, it is fair to say that he was known as much for his eccentricities as for his brilliant virtuosity: a hypochondriac who noted minuscule details of his health, took a cocktail of pills, wore a hat, muffler, and gloves even in warm weather, refused to shake anyone's hand for fear of physical damage, dressed up as various fictional characters in his television programmes, traveled around the world with his own piano (Steinway CD 318) and ramshackle and decrepit piano-stool, and hummed along audibly and conducted himself when playing. As we shall see, these and other biographical details become relevant at various points in *The Loser*, though Bernhard diverges from historical accuracy where it suits his aesthetic purposes. His method is perhaps comparable to H. Porter Abbott's notion of the traces of “imaginary autobiography” in Beckett's late trilogy.

Gould's presence is established in the book's opening sentence:

Even Glenn Gould, our friend and the most important piano virtuoso of the century, only made it to the age of fifty-one, I thought to myself as I entered the inn. (p. 3)

Extracting similar subclauses from the rest of the book conveys the lack of action in the ‘present tense’; the plot doesn't really ‘go anywhere’: ‘[...] I thought as I entered the inn. (p. 7), ‘[...] I thought in the inn.’ (p. 9), ‘[...] I thought while entering the inn.’ (p. 14), ‘[...] I thought as I entered the inn.’ (p. 18), ‘[...] I thought as I entered the inn.’ (p. 18), ‘[...] I thought in the inn.’ (p. 21), ‘[...] I thought in the inn.’ (p. 28), ‘[...] I thought in the inn.’ (p. 31), ‘The inn struck me as rather shabby [...]’ (p. 33), ‘[...] that's what I was thinking about while waiting for the innkeeper.’ (p. 52), ‘[...] while still standing in the restaurant and waiting for the innkeeper [...]’ (p. 57), ‘[...] I thought while standing in the inn.’ (p. 62), ‘[...] I thought, standing in the inn.’ (p. 83), ‘[...] I thought, still standing in the restaurant [...]’ (p. 100). The whole book, in fact, is the narrator's thoughts and memories while he waits for the innkeeper. In fact, we later learn that we are reading the thought-processes behind his decision to write the book we are currently reading. The resulting self-consuming status of the book is somewhat reminiscent of Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. Initially this circularity, though interesting, seemed insufficiently self-defeating and destabilizing to be truly “Beckettian” – compare the effect of the opening and closing statements of Moran's narrative in *Molloy*. However, Michael Wood's notion of the “unfinishable work” itself argues against such supposed closure and confidence in our reading of Proust: although the beginning and end of his mammoth novel were plotted out, the middle was potentially infinite, and with each draft the sentences became increasingly long and complicated. The apparently simple circularity is also complicated by the fact that *The Loser* was the

title of the book that Wertheimer was attempting to write before his suicide, although the title derived from Gould's own nickname for Wertheimer.

He [Wertheimer] wanted to publish a book, but it never came to that, for he kept changing his manuscript, changing it so often and to such an extent that nothing was left of the manuscript, for the / change in his manuscript was nothing other than the complete deletion of the manuscript, of which finally nothing remained except the title, *The Loser*. (pp. 53—54)

The title prompted further discussion. *Der Untergeher* in someone is literally is someone who 'goes under' – or 'goes to ground', one might say – an 'underground' man (perhaps in the manner of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, a prototype for much that distinguishes the sensibility of the 'modern'). In that endearingly literal way that German has, the word also volunteers itself as the exact opposite of *überleben* – 'to survive', but literally 'to live over/above'. ('I'm the survivor! Now I'm alone, I thought, since, to tell the truth, I only had two people in my life / who gave it any meaning: Glenn and Wertheimer.' (pp. 32—33).) In this sense the most likely candidate for the book's eponymous loser is Wertheimer, a title bestowed on him at first by Gould himself.

The loser is one of Glenn Gould's brilliant inventions, I thought, Glenn just *saw through* Wertheimer the moment they met, he *completely saw through* everyone he met for the first time. (p. 42)

Like the narrator, Wertheimer cannot compete with Gould's indisputable mastery of the piano; but unlike the narrator, he is not able to choose for himself an alternative path, and remains haunted by Gould's demonstration of virtuosic domination, eventually committing suicide. The narrator seems to concur with Gould's instant verdict: '[i]n many respects more refined than me but, and this was his [Wertheimer's] biggest mistake, ultimately endowed only *with false feelings*, actually a *loser*, I thought.' (p. 103). However, the narrator himself could also be described as a 'loser' precisely in resigning his own claims so easily, and also in making such a mess in taking up Wertheimer's failed project of writing about Gould (assuming the present book to be the work in question). 'Glenn is the victor, we are the failures, I thought in the inn.' (p. 21). The title is also, however, relevant for Gould, who spoke in agonistic terms about concert performance, describing classical recitals as the last blood-sport. Gould himself might be adjudged a loser, then, for his decision to throw in the towel in 1964 and retreat to the womb-like security and seclusion of the recording studio – what Wertheimer at one point calls '*his desperation machine*' (p. 38)). However, to further complicate matters, we are told that 'Glenn had had the greatest affection for the word and the concept of loser [...]' (p. 32). Ultimately, all three figures are dependent on each other not only for their own perception of their friends' relative and related personalities, but also for their *own* self-image. All the views presented in *The Loser* are mediated through the implicated perspective of the narrator, a distortion most obviously problematic when most deliberately circumvented (the 'he said, I thought' *estranging* us from the other's direct speech rather than conveying it to us directly).

If I really have another go at my description of Glenn Gould, I thought, I will have to incorporate *his* description of Wertheimer in it and it's questionable who will be the focus of this account, Glenn Gould or Wertheimer, I thought. (p. 154)

Just as correct perception of distance is an illusory amalgamation of the distinct images captured by both eyes, the image of Glenn Gould afforded by the parallax of the narrator and Wertheimer's viewpoints can never be brought into focus.

There was also circularity on a smaller scale in the structure of *The Loser*, with certain themes, names, even key phrases returning intermittently (somewhat like musical motifs). Again, this reminded us of the way certain characters and situations recur in Beckett's works – but, again, the effect seemed markedly different. Perhaps the most frequently repeated phrase in the book is 'I thought', which creates a sense and a scene of epistemological doubt – particularly in the often repeated combination 'he said, I thought'. Ewa Płonowska Ziarek's book *The Rhetoric of Failure* considers repetition of

words and phrases as a childish strategy for undermining and evading the rationalism/skepticism duality, making fetish objects of chunks of language to suggest that the overall system is nonsensical. As an example, we discussed the passage from the last word of page 67 – ‘Mankind [knows how to protect itself against [...]]’ – to ‘death is the greatest misunderstanding of all, so Wertheimer, I thought.’ (p. 69), from which the following extract is taken:

But everything we say is nonsense, he [Wertheimer] said, I thought, no matter what we say it is nonsense and our entire life is a single piece of nonsense. I understood that early on, I’d barely started to think for myself and I already understood that, we speak only nonsense, everything we say is nonsense, but everything that is *said* to us is also nonsense, like everything that is said at all, in this world only nonsense has been said until now and, he said, only nonsense has actually and naturally been written, the writings we possess are only nonsense because they can only be nonsense, as history proves, he said, I thought. (p. 68)

Here, nonsense is considered not just on a thematic but also on a performative level, the numerous and congested repetitions of ‘nonsense’ serving to dissociate words from their signification. The sonic materiality of the signifier is stressed at the expense of its referential function – compare Steven Connor on the “pornography” of repetition and the repetition of pornography. It reminded us of the permutative passages in *Watt*, which some find virtually unreadable; but the strategy of *Watt* is to exhaust the ability or desire to understand through an unremitting enumeration of the possibilities suggested by logic and reason rather than through undermining the sense-making capacity of language itself. Both writers, however, may be considered as representative of a certain strain in late modernism, insofar as they seize on the tools of modernism in order to ruin it. (Incidentally, Bernhard’s novel *Wittgenstein’s Nephew* is also reminiscent of *Watt*, sharing a setting in some kind of asylum.) But perhaps we need not be so depressed at this apparently representative representation of the failure of representation. Perhaps all we are observing here is the inevitable distortion that happens when thought is translated into words. The project of conveying in writing the ‘stream of consciousness’ is necessarily doomed, since so much of consciousness is unformulated in linguistic terms.

We considered the allusive potential of the name ‘Wertheimer’, the third major figure in the book (with the narrator and Gould). His name and his suicide both point towards Goethe’s hero Werther, who was largely responsible for canonizing the cult of suicide in Romantic thinking. Another possible echo of the name is Werckmeister: Andreas Werckmeister (1645—1706) was a musical theorist, and is responsible for the “well-tempered” tuning of the chromatic scale used in western music, a compromise designed to avoid what is known as the ‘Pythagorean comma’ – the tiny but significant discrepancy between seven octaves (2:1) and twelve fifths (3:2) (or 531,441:524,288). While tuning according to these simple ratios enabled concordant music in a given key, harmonic writing and even homophonic writing in an unrelated key would result in unpleasant dissonances. Tempered tuning aimed to iron out the problematic intervals in order to regulate better each step of the twelve-note chromatic scale: this enabled transposition and modulation into any key, a wealth of harmonic complexity given its first complete demonstration in 1722 in J. S. Bach’s first book of twenty-four preludes and fugues for “Well-Tempered Clavier”, one for each major and minor key. Werckmeister’s harmonic theories were used as metaphorical, metaphysical underpinning to the film *Werckmeister Harmonies* (Hungary, 2000), where they are blamed by one of the characters for all aesthetic and philosophical problems.

The presence of Gould makes the otherwise distant echo of ‘Werckmeister’ in ‘Wertheimer’ more plausible. Gould’s revelatory performances of Bach on a modern Steinway grand piano pose a challenge to simplistic notions of authenticity. The ‘authentic’ instrument on which to play Bach’s keyboard works would be a harpsichord or clavier. It was not that Gould was dismissive of claims to authenticity: such arguments lay behind his decision to shun the use of the sustaining pedal when playing Bach. Furthermore, many listeners paradoxically feel that Gould’s undeniably idiosyncratic performances of Bach’s music brings them closer to its ideal state (the formal brilliance of which

renders the question of instrumentation utterly indifferent), such was Gould's unequalled control of voicings and his single-minded focus on contrapuntal clarity. In *The Loser*, the following words are put into the mouth of Gould:

Basically we want to be the piano, he said, not human beings but the piano, all our lives we want to be the piano and not a human being, flee from the human beings we are in order to completely become the piano, an effort which must fail, although we don't want to believe it, he said. The ideal piano player (he never said *pianist!*) is the one who wants to be the piano, and I say to myself every day when I wake up, I want to be the Steinway, not the person playing the Steinway, I want to be the Steinway itself. [...] All his life Glenn had wanted to be the Steinway itself, he hated the notion of being *between* Bach and his Steinway as a mere musical middleman [...] My ideal would be, *I would be the Steinway, I wouldn't need Glenn Gould*, he said, I could, by being the Steinway, make Glenn Gould totally superfluous. But not a single piano player has ever managed to make himself superfluous by *being* Steinway, as Glenn said. To wake up one day *and be Steinway and Glenn in one*, he said, I thought, *Glenn Steinway, Steinway Glenn, all for Bach*. (pp. 81—82)

In part this is a familiar exposition of certain ideals of artistic transparency; but the fact that it concerns *Gould*, and *Bach* complicates matters greatly, once one understands their place in the evolution of classical music in general, and keyboard music in particular, adding several layers of irony.

The narrator early on diagnoses the fundamental difference between Glenn Gould on one hand, and Wertheimer and himself on the other:

we never attained the inhuman state that Glenn attained, who by the way never escaped this inhuman state, who didn't even want to escape this inhuman state. (pp. 5—6)

However, this is later contradicted, when the narrator makes a distinction between his own attitude and Wertheimer's towards Glenn Gould's example.

In the end people like Glenn had turned themselves into *art machines*, had nothing in common with human beings anymore, only seldom reminded you of human beings, I thought. But Wertheimer continually envied Glenn this art [...] (p. 92)

Wertheimer's suicide, the narrator's struggles, and Glenn Gould's own brief life all contribute towards the deeply pessimistic attitude of *The Loser*, with these reflections on the mechanical or inhuman aspects of pianistic virtuosity – apparently standing as an image of all artistic achievement – perhaps summing up the book's dark take on the nature of art. Given the history of Austria in the twentieth-century, Adorno's question about the very viability of art in the wake of Auschwitz is never far from the reader's mind. But perhaps even more disturbing than the question 'is art possible after Auschwitz?' is the fear that there might be some innate connection between the great cultural achievements of western Europe and the horrors into which it was plunged at its apparent peak; and even that art itself is in some sense an act of violence or torture.

Bernhard's injunction preventing productions and publication of his works in Austria reminded us of the strictness and occasional severity of Beckett (and the Beckett Estate) regarding such matters, and perhaps most specifically of his decision in 1958 to withdraw his plays from performance in Ireland.

'After the revolting boycott of Joyce and O'Casey [as a result of Archbishop McQuaid's opposition] I don't want to have / anything to do with the Dublin Theatre 'Festival' and am withdrawing both mimes and *All That Fall*.' (Beckett to Alan Simpson, 17 February 1958, quoted in Knowlson, pp. 447—48)

‘I am withdrawing altogether. As long as such conditions prevail in Ireland I do not wish my work to be performed there, either in festivals or outside them.

If no protest is heard they will prevail for ever. This is the strongest I can make. I have therefore to cancel the permission I gave you to present *All That Fall* and *Endgame*.

I hope you will forgive me.’

(Beckett to Carolyn Swift, 27 February 1958, quoted in Knowlson, p. 448)

Bernard’s comparable instruction is found in his last will and testament:

‘Whatever I have written, whether published by me during my lifetime or as part of my literary papers still existing after my death, shall not be performed, printed or even recited for the duration of legal copyright within the borders of Austria, however this state identifies itself.’

(quoted in Mark M. Anderson’s ‘Afterword’, p. 173)

As before, in Bernhard the moment of mastery is more sadistic, more determined, more final, less flexible, less ironic, and ultimately less hopeful than anything that we find in Beckett.

Select Bibliography

Bazzana, Kevin. *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* [2003]. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2004.

Beckett, Samuel. *Watt* [1945]. London: John Calder (Publishers) Ltd, 1976, repr. 1998.

Beckett, Samuel. *Molloy* [1947]. In Samuel Beckett. *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*. London: Calder Publications Ltd., 1994: pp. 5—176.

Bernhard, Thomas. *Der Untergeher* [1983]. Munich: Süddeutsche Zeitung | Bibliothek, 2004.

Bernhard, Thomas. *The Loser*, trans. Jack Dawson, afterword by Mark M. Anderson. New York, NY: Random House [Vintage Books], 1991.

Grover, David S.. *The Piano: Its Story, from Zither to Grand*. London: Robert Hale Limited, 1976.

Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing plc, 1996.

Page, Tim (ed.). *The Glenn Gould Reader*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1987.

Said, Edward W.. *Musical Elaborations*. London: Vintage, 1992.

Wulf, Catherina. ‘La Quete de l’inexplicable: *Watt* de Samuel Beckett et *Marcher* de Thomas Bernhard’. In Marius Buning, Matthijs Engelberts, and Sjef Houppermans (eds). *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui 6. Samuel Beckett: Crossroads and Borderlines*. Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi ???, 1997: pp. ???.

Ziarek, Ewa Płonowska. *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.