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**The Aesthetics of Literary Ressentiment in the Works of Thomas Bernhard and
Christine Lavant**

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Abstract

This thesis identifies what I term an ‘aesthetics of resentment’ in the works of Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) and Christine Lavant (1915-1973). Resentment, the philosophical term developed by Friedrich Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887) identifies a negative-psychological state that originates amongst the disenfranchised in response to historic oppression, playing a pivotal role in conceptions of moral justice and ethical revaluation. Though well studied within social sciences, psychoanalysis and political philosophy, resentment has received scant treatment across literary discourse. This thesis rectifies this neglected remit by resituating the concept of resentment as a deployable mode harnessed by Bernhard and Lavant, one that alludes to a form of post-war resentment specific to Austrian culture, and the nation’s desire to rewrite its troubled past. Via close literary analysis, this project explores resentment as a key to understanding how both writers address questions of morality, identity, memory, religion and generational guilt, showing how resentment generates specific types of cultural representation, (e.g. creative expressions of rage, negation and envy). Accordingly, this project establishes resentment’s role in the creation of literatures with a distinctively recalcitrant sensibility, updating the term in light of recent developments in the fields of memory studies, trauma studies, affect theory, feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and ecocriticism.

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Introduction

Better a whole-hearted feud
 Than a friendship that is glued.
 —Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

In *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), Nietzsche provides an historical account of the genesis of Western morality, in the form of rancorous polemic. His central thesis is that moral values are born from what he calls ‘ressentiment’, ‘that most dangerous of blasting and explosive materials’.¹ This Nietzschean term identifies a negative-psychological state that originates amongst the disenfranchised in response to historic oppression. Defined by its ‘poisonous and hostile feelings’,² it attempts to ‘sanctify revenge with the term justice’,³ thereby inverting moral standards as a process of self-affirmation. In short, it psychologically reinvents weakness.⁴ This sense of deep-seated grievance is distinguished from its counterpart ‘resentment’ (which is considered a transitory emotion⁵), as ressentiment (from the French ‘ressentir’, ‘to feel again’) is historically constituted and refers to a more permanent sense of injury, engrained deep within the psyche, illustrating its imbrication with memory, pain and identity, even violence and transgression.⁶ Nietzsche was the first to apply ressentiment as a term for philosophical and psychological inquiry, using the French term in his original texts.⁷ As Walter Kaufmann observes, ‘ressentiment constitutes one of [Nietzsche’s] major contributions to psychology’.⁸ While resentment is considered ‘a generic moral emotion’,⁹ ressentiment is, in Jameson’s words, ‘the true source of all revolutionary vocation’¹⁰ imbuing it with a crucial justice-seeking

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* [1887], trans. by Carol Diethe, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 93.

² Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 21.

³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 48.

⁴ Nietzsche advocated for a moral psychology based on introspection and individual growth. Given his interest in the ‘will’, he is also seen as an early pioneer of drive psychology, anticipating Freudian psychoanalysis. See Paul Katsafanas, *The Nietzschean Self: Moral Psychology, Agency, and the Unconscious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵ Guido Vanheeswijck, ‘Resentment and Ressentiment, Dignity and Honour: A Genealogical Analysis’, in *The Polemics of Ressentiment*, ed. by Sjoerd van Tuinen (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 107-129 (p. 109).

⁶ Translators of Nietzsche often use the two terms interchangeably, see Robert C. Solomon, *Living with Nietzsche* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Stefano Tomelleri, *Ressentiment: Reflections on Mimetic Desire and Society* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015).

⁷ Kaufmann suggests that this is partly due to there being no close equivalent in the German language, and because Nietzsche saw himself as the ‘heir’ of the French *moralistes* (such as Michel de Montaigne and François de la Rochefoucauld), espousing the German-nationalist rhetoric of his one-time ally Richard Wagner. See Walter Kaufmann, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in *On the Genealogy of Morals; Ecce Homo*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989), pp. 5-10. N.B. Kaufmann’s alternative title translation.

⁸ Kaufmann, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in *Genealogy*, p. 7.

⁹ Nicolas Demertzis, *The Political Sociology of Emotions: Essays on Trauma and Ressentiment* (Oxon: Routledge, 2020), p. 113.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* [1981] (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 258.

aspect. Thus, despite their emotional kinship, the two terms are not identical, as resentment does not adequately express the protracted nature of ressentiment as a reaction to historical grievance.

Though well studied within social sciences, psychoanalysis and political philosophy, ressentiment has received scant treatment by literary scholars. This thesis will rectify such omissions by resituating the concept of ressentiment in relation to the work of Austrian writers Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) and Christine Lavant (1915-1973), each of whom employ an idiosyncratic literary style that incorporates rage, invective and literary negation to generate their own form of negative truth-telling, specifically within the social and historical context of post-war Austrian society.

Bernhard, the ‘Beckett of the German language’,¹¹ is a writer known for his provocative stance. His unique, vituperative prose lambasts the hypocrisy of post-war Austrian politics, drawing attention to its complicity in National Socialist atrocities. Though lesser known, and with few English translations of her work available, Lavant is similarly a major post-war Austrian writer whose trenchant, theologically inflected verse highlights the failure of religion and the patriarchal infrastructure that plagued her. This project will explore ressentiment as a key to understanding how these writers have addressed questions of morality, generational guilt, victimhood and memory, showing how the ressentiment mode generates specific types of cultural representation, (e.g. creative expressions of rage, negation, shame and envy). Via close literary analysis, this project will trace what I term an ‘aesthetics of ressentiment’ in the works of Bernhard and Lavant, exploring ressentiment as both a psychological and aesthetic strategy that plays a dynamic role in the creation of works of literature imbued with a distinctive recalcitrant sensibility. I wish to suggest that this project is particularly timely, given the increasingly fraught debates in the public sphere regarding issues of identity, nationalism, secularism and social and economic precarity; therefore, I propose that ressentiment offers a critical framework for tracing manifestations of grievance politics in the aesthetic sphere.

My analyses will show how both writers offer representations of social and subjective malaise, specifically in Bernhard’s first novel *Frost* (1963) and Lavant’s selected poetry collection *Shatter the Bell in My Ear* (1948-1978), both of which display the uniquely negative textures of their writing, before going on to compare their respective

¹¹ Alfred Hornung, ‘Fantasies of the Autobiographical Self: Thomas Bernhard, Raymond Federman, Samuel Beckett’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 1.12 (1989), 91–107 (p. 91) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44783063>>, [accessed 12 June 2023].

memoirs, Bernhard's *Gathering Evidence*,¹² and Lavant's *Memoirs from a Madhouse*.¹³ By tracing thematic parallels and stylistic affinities related to resentment in their work, this project will argue that resentment operates as a potent mode of critique, raising questions as to whether it offers an appropriate vector for social inquiry when harnessed in a literary capacity, and indeed, the extent to which it is morally justifiable.

In order to consider the ways in which Bernhard and Lavant weaponise their resentments and their attendant negative affects, I develop the term 'aesthetics of resentment'. This mode recognises the presentation and strategisation of resentment in a literary context, that deploys the hallmarks of resentment typology: negation, disavowal and seething emotion and which incorporates resentful affects that articulate innovative and dissenting responses to cultural inequity. While Nietzsche is the figure most often recognised for spearheading a theory of resentment, it has since been addressed most notably by the likes of Max Scheler (*Ressentiment*, 1915), Gilles Deleuze (*Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 1962), Jean Améry (*At the Mind's Limits*, 1966) and Wendy Brown (*States of Injury*, 1995), all of whom I will draw upon throughout this project. Other writers of resentment include Fredric Jameson (*The Political Unconscious*, 1981) Peter Sloterdijk (*Rage and Time*, 2006) and Pankaj Mishra (*Age of Anger*, 2017), each of whom traces the intersecting roles of morality and rage across literary and cultural spheres.

Though well studied as a cultural phenomenon within the social sciences, by the likes of Mikko Salmela (*Ressentiment: A Complex Emotion or an Emotional Mechanism of Psychic Defences?*, 2022); Didier Fassin (*On Resentment and Ressentiment: The Politics and Ethics of Moral Emotions*, 2019); Nicolas Demertzis (*The Political Sociology of Emotions: Essays on Trauma and Ressentiment*, 2020), and political philosophy Guy Elgat (*Nietzsche's Psychology of Ressentiment*, 2017); Paul Hoggett (*Ressentiment and Grievance*, 2018); Sjoerd van Tuinen (*The Dialectics of Ressentiment*, 2023), my proposed project will be the first to apply it systematically to the work of Bernhard and Lavant. The theoretical breadth of resentment is far-reaching, and while it could be considered in light of developments in critical race theory, postcolonialism, gender theory and Alt-Right politics, these territories deserve distinct projects in their own right, and are beyond the scope of this analysis.

Previous accounts of resentment have painted it in an unfavourable light, typifying it as a condition of vengeance. Jean Améry, the Austrian-born essayist and

¹² Translated by David McLintock in 1985, *Gathering Evidence* collates *Die Ursache: Eine Andeutung* (*An Indication of the Cause*, 1975), *Der Keller: Eine Entziehung* (*The Cellar: An Escape*, 1976), *Der Atem: Eine Entscheidung* (*Breath: A Decision*, 1978), *Die Kälte* (*In the Cold*, 1981) and *Ein Kind* (*A Child*, 1982).

¹³ This text was written in 1950 and posthumously published in 2001.

Holocaust survivor, has called it a ‘psychic condition that has been condemned by moralists and psychologists alike’,¹⁴ while Max Scheler describes resentment as ‘a self-poisoning of the mind’,¹⁵ an ‘inner venom’.¹⁶ It is likened by Nietzsche to an inability to heal,¹⁷ and a failure on the part of the individual for this affective retention of hurt. Though Scheler focuses on a vengeful, vindictive reading of resentment, he neglects the possibility that resentment might represent a call for equality and justice: ‘the modern doctrine of equality [...] whether it pretends to be a statement of fact, a moral “postulate,” or both—is obviously an achievement of resentment’.¹⁸ Such charges have left gaps in the understanding of the nuances of this enduring and culturally pervasive term, not to mention its lack of critical attention in the aesthetic sphere. It therefore lends itself to a timely critical refashioning, to refine theories of the resisting text in our current ‘age of anger’.¹⁹

One of the primary goals of this thesis is to resituate Nietzsche’s foundational concept of resentment, to reclaim it from these conservative political conclusions, by reframing it as a force of justice that is delimiting, rather than limiting, outlining the ways in which resentment is conveyed and expressed in the works of Bernhard and Lavant. I argue that the term needs redressing, developing a contemporary reading that reactivates the term considering innovative critical theories within the fields of memory studies, trauma studies, affect theory, feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and ecocriticism. I will focus specifically on renditions of negative affect in these writers and the ways in which they employ literary resentment to circulate such sentiments. While recognising the history of the term and its historical pedigree, my analysis will depart from Nietzsche’s formulation of resentment to update the theoretical parameters of resentment, structuring an argument that frames resentment as a neglected form of aesthetic interrogation and socio-political expression.

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche traces the genesis of resentment through Judaeo-Christian morality: he refers to the ‘man of resentment’, as the ultimate purveyor of ‘reactive sentiment’.²⁰ As a result of his subjugated status, the ‘man of resentment’ must counteract feelings of worthlessness by re-evaluating certain qualitative categories, namely the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, to justify his existential

¹⁴ Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits* [1966], trans. by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 64.

¹⁵ Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* [1915], trans. by Louis A. Coser (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2007), p. 4.

¹⁶ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* [1908], trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 45.

¹⁸ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 68.

¹⁹ Pankaj Mishra: *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 49.

reality. Nietzsche explicates this adaptation by way of the Master-Slave dynamic, and what he calls ‘the slaves’ revolt in morality’.²¹ Though the terminology is highly questionable from a contemporary standpoint, this existential, intellectual adaptation exhibits a psychological strategy of self-preservation, taking its cue from Hegel’s Lord-Bondsman dialectic, which describes an encounter between two self-consciousnesses (Lord and Bondsman), each one dependent on recognition by the other in order to affirm their selfhood and their respective positions of freedom and bondage. Taken to its logical extreme, this dialectical struggle for recognition ensues in a fight to the death: while they are dependent on one another to affirm their worldly status, both simultaneously recognise the threat the other poses to their being.²²

In Nietzsche’s framework, the oppressed seek to justify their weakened position by way of an existential-intellectual adaptation: ‘The oppressed, the downtrodden, the violated say to each other with the vindictive cunning of powerlessness: ‘Let us be different from evil people, let us be good!’.²³ Nietzsche draws the distinction between two ‘types’: the ‘nobles’ and the ‘slaves’, each with their own value system. The nobles are life affirming and *active*, the slaves are life denying and *reactive*. The Slave class devalue the status of the Master by denouncing the Master morality and its will to dominate (its ‘evil’), a designation that renders the Master morality deficient, as an act of righteous vengeance against a stronger enemy.

Through the application of moral cunning, creative revolt is enacted to overcome oppression, as the Slave class, who are in possession of a more virtuous ethics, undermine the established order of the Master class by valorising their own moral code. Nietzsche calls this a ‘radical revaluation’ of values’,²⁴ which restructures personal and collective morality to promote self-affirmation, albeit premised on an inverted value system. He observes that this mechanistic, moral inversion entails the ‘true womb of ideal and imaginative events’²⁵ and ‘turns creative’, by giving birth to values.²⁶ Therefore, resentment presents the individual with the possibility of cultivating agency in the face of hardship. This theorem offers a key conceptual rubric for my project and provides the groundwork for the literary analysis that I undertake in what follows, as I seek to reinterpret resentment as a register of moral imperative and creative power. By focusing on this contradictory aspect of Nietzsche’s thought, my analysis will investigate the

²¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 18.

²² Georg W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807], trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 111-119.

²³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 26.

²⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 17.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 60.

²⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 20.

counterintuitive potential of resentment as a mode of radical negation and wilful resistance, arguing for its potential as a conceptual tool that harnesses conflict to create its own aesthetic-moral register. This position is defiant of generalising summaries that apply a pathological index to resentment, associated with thinkers like Scheler, as it invokes resentment's contradictory, yet salutary forces.

While my position is deeply indebted to Nietzsche, this thesis will re-evaluate wilful resentment as a condition of initiatory, intellectual power; my rationale being that both Bernhard and Lavant employ a rhetoric of negation that relies on the appropriation of resentment's oppositional force. I take my lead from Sara Ahmed's *Willful Subjects*, specifically her theorisation of the Will, which will allow me to explore the possibility of resentment as a mode of subjective agency. As Ahmed writes, 'To be identified as wilful is to become a problem'.²⁷ The notion of will as a negative is explored by Ahmed as a fallacy, a catch-all term that is used pejoratively to challenge individuals whose behaviour contravenes socio-political norms: 'Willfulness is used to explain errors of will—unreasonable or perverted will— as faults of character'.²⁸

A complementary term to willing, and one that I employ throughout is 'obstinacy', a key term for developing an aesthetics of resentment. As a form of emotional and cultural labour that that can be strategised to draw attention to, and critique relational forms of power, resentment represents an antagonistic mode of being, displaying evident crossovers with the notion of wilfulness, both being strident subject positions. Of the resentimental individual, Nietzsche writes, they know all about 'not forgetting',²⁹ as they display an 'active desire not to let go'.³⁰ He suggests that 'a race of such men of resentment will inevitably end up cleverer than any noble race, and will respect cleverness to a quite different degree'.³¹ In recognising what he calls 'the will's memory',³² Nietzsche outlines the self-affirming power that resides within the intentional retention of hurt which is characteristic of resentment.

This refusal to forget, in the context of Bernhard and Lavant's work, alludes to a form of post-war resentment specific to Austria, expressed by both writers as a literary broaching of historical and subjective crisis, in response to global atrocity and the nation's desire to rewrite its troubled past. Moreover, it offers me a vital conceptual marker with which to analyse the motivating factors of literary resentment and to explore the

²⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 3.

²⁸ Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 4.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 21.

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 36.

³¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 21.

³² Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 36.

interconnections between individual and collective grievance. In recognising literary resentment as an ethical mode that refuses to let wrongdoing be forgiven, I will demonstrate how both writers harness the galvanising force of a targeted, moral anger, as I situate them within a broader context of Austrian politics, history and culture.

Literary resentment reworks the Nietzschean and Schelerian assertion that resentment is a condition of ‘imaginary revenge’,³³ resulting from natures ‘denied the proper response of action’,³⁴ as the act of writing embodies a gesture that seeks to displace one’s suffering, redistributing the injuries of oppression in the aesthetic sphere. In this sense, literary resentment reflects a process of self-overcoming that serves to redefine our understanding of resentment as a frustrated agency or will, rather, it employs contradictory or marginalised emotions as an aesthetic strategy defined by its obstinacy. By extending the scope of aesthetic engagement, it holds up a mirror to society, revealing deeper truths about humanity’s morally decrepit underside. As Jameson observes, ‘What is most striking about the theory of resentment is its unavoidably autoreferential structure [...] wherever it appears, will always itself be the expression and the production of resentment’.³⁵ What is clear then, is that resentment is much more than a condition of retaliatory vengeance; it is a complex socio-emotional phenomenon that responds to instances of painful memory, subjection and injustice by creating its own moral coordinates. The act of writing therefore appropriates and activates resentment’s affective forces.

Thesis Structure

Chapter One will focus on Bernhard’s *Frost* in order to investigate the nuances of his resentment in relation to Austrian politics and the ways in which he exploits psychotopographical allegory to address legacies of guilt and trauma inscribed upon the Austrian landscape. In my reading, I will address the possibility of an ecologically inflected mode of resentment that describes the legacies of human destruction inflicted on the natural world. This text offers a compelling case for illustrating resentment’s literary modality, as it emphasises inversion, negation and critical introspection, while alluding to a deferred violence contained within the landscape itself, demonstrating the ways in which resentment can be understood as both an individual and historical condition, in the vein of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*. Via a close reading of the text, I will develop an argument that suggests Bernhard’s aesthetics of resentment, evinced by his excoriating prose and

³³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 20; Scheler, *Ressentiment*, pp. 3-4.

³⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 20.

³⁵ Jameson, *Political Unconscious*, pp. 189-190.

articulated therein through the novel's protagonist Strauch, is defined by a fundamental need to communicate the perils of cultural hypocrisy and false morality, helping me make the case for a specifically Bernhardian resentment.

Chapter Two will explore Lavant's resentment-infused verse, that investigates a profane and blasphemous strand of negative theology, conveying dominant themes of betrayal, anger, suffering and self-doubt, that as I will show, comprise her aesthetic domain, and that define her praxis of critical worldmaking. I will argue that Lavant's poetry is imbued with distinct feminist intentionality, that bravely challenges the patriarchy of the Catholic church and Austrian society, with her poetry acting as a vehicle for her own psycho-social conflicts. I will compare Lavant's religious poetics with Nietzsche's castigation of Christian values, using this comparison as a point of departure for an exploration of theological resentment, considering how the confessional mode operates as her method of protest.

In Chapter Three, I will ask how both writers offer us new ways to understand and rethink resentment in the context of life-writing, delineating the ways in which the selected texts reframe stereotypical understandings of resentment as a social pathology, while demonstrating its potency in the context of institutionalisation and the body in pain. Focusing on formative resentment in the context of biographical and historical experience, this chapter will explore the relationship between resentment and literary representations of the self, considering resentment's structural interdependence on memory, a core component of resentment's psychic character. Exploring autobiography as the documentation of subjective experiences and affects, I will compare renditions of literary resentment across the multiple genres of novel, poetry and memoir in an attempt to identify the extent to which resentment is tied to notions of self-knowledge and self-display. And so, begins my investigation into the 'psychological dynamite'³⁶ that is resentment.

³⁶ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 7.

Chapter One

Ressentiment, Ecological Melancholy and Base Materialism in Thomas Bernhard's *Frost*

Theoretical Contexts: Bernhardian Ressentiment

In this chapter, I trace uniquely potent manifestations of resentment in Bernhard's first novel, *Frost* (1963).³⁷ Bernhard's writing is tied to notions of disavowal, negation and self-questioning: the rancorous hallmarks of Nietzsche's 'man of resentment', as outlined in the *Genealogy*. *Frost* exemplifies the relationship of resentment to socio-cultural and historical contexts, as expressed in Bernhard's writing, specifically in relation to the post-war Austrian politics that formed the cultural backdrop to his early literary career. In what follows I argue that resentment is a transmissible and politically resonant affect.

Thomas Bernhard is an icon of European literary iconoclasm. As a novelist, playwright and poet, much of his oeuvre sought to expose the hypocrisy he saw as endemic in Austrian society due to its political involvement with Nazism. Intent on defaming his nation's cultural institutions, he ridiculed its political parties, the Catholic Church, as well as its citizenry, condemning their moral bankruptcy in the form of vituperative prose. He scandalised the country with his depictions of a degenerate populace controlled by an even more abominable state. Despite the controversies related to his dramatic acts of truth-telling,³⁸ Bernhard became a writer of enormous renown and is now considered one of the major literary figures in European literature. He has been called the 'Alpen-Beckett', and 'Alpen-Kafka',³⁹ showing the extent to which his writing has permeated into the mainstream literary consciousness. Bernhard's life ended amidst enormous drama, as he left a will revised two days before his death stipulating that no further productions or publications of his work were to be permitted within Austria until the expiration of their copyright. This was his final, theatrical act of vengeance, and as I would argue, a gesture intrinsically linked to the psychology of resentment.

Employing Nietzsche's concept of resentment allows me to frame resentment as both a literary modality that captures the energy of the *resisting* artwork, as well as a critical device that encompasses aesthetic and psychological nuance. Through this perspective, resentment represents an embodied, willed approach of conceptual and

³⁷ Thomas Bernhard, *Frost* [1963], trans. by Michael Hofmann (New York: Vintage, 2008).

³⁸ Bernhard was no stranger to scandal: publication of his 1984 novel *Holzfällen* resulted in a libel suit, while the release of his final play *Heldenplatz* (1988), released three months before his death, lambasted Austrian nationalism and antisemitism, underscoring the country's complicity in the Anschluss, provoking uproar.

³⁹ Gita Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard: The Making of an Austrian* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 227.

practical opposition that renounces engrained socio-cultural mores by way of its persistent belligerence, for which *Frost* makes a strong case. Its resentful thematic tenor demonstrates Bernhard's characteristic denigration of Austrian nationhood, while addressing attendant themes of failure, abjection, memory and cultural polarity; all of which exist as touchstones to analyse the conceptual interconnectedness between Nietzsche's *Genealogy* and expressions of Bernhardian resentment. Accordingly, throughout this project, I shall investigate the possibility of resentment as a psychological vehicle for radical subjectivity, one that in line with Ahmed's figure of the 'willful subject',⁴⁰ asks how wilfulness,⁴¹ negation and resentimental obstinacy might be considered aesthetic or literacy strategies for recording personal and historical injury.

Ressentiment and Nietzsche's *Active Bad Conscience*

Nietzsche's *Genealogy* traces the development of what he considered to be the 'bad conscience' of Western morality,⁴² one predicated on an adherence to the ideals of Christian asceticism and doctrines of self-denial, resulting in resentment. Nietzsche asserts that the 'bad conscience' occurs when individual urges are repressed.⁴³ He argues this restricts humankind's ability to flourish, impeding their Will to Power, resulting in a life of spiritual torment defined by passivity rather than action.⁴⁴ Instead, Nietzsche argues for the existence of the 'active bad conscience' of resentment, which brings with it a 'disconcerting beauty and affirmation'.⁴⁵ It is this conceptual nuance that I use as a springboard for my investigation of Bernhardian resentment in *Frost*. In order to analyse the ways in which Bernhard's writing reflects this, I use the term 'literary resentment' to reflect the subjective feelings contained within resentment psychology, as relayed in literary form, and that performs within the wider model of an aesthetics of resentment.

The emphatic expression of negative affect contained within this literary mode offers a means of activating the potency of these schismatic emotions, harnessing what Sianne Ngai calls 'ugly feelings', those which are 'experientially negative' and 'saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values'.⁴⁶ Ngai asserts that literary criticism's attention to emotion is often centred around the effects it has on the reader, rather than to

⁴⁰ Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 2.

⁴¹ For consistency, I maintain the American English spelling 'willful' for direct quotations from Ahmed (per the original), whilst otherwise reverting to the British English spelling 'wilful'.

⁴² Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 35.

⁴³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 59.

⁴⁴ Similarly, he distinguishes between passive and active nihilism, the former being a diminished power of the spirit, the latter, an increase. See, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* [1901], ed. by Walter Kaufmann, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 17.

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 60.

⁴⁶ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 11.

textual representations of emotion analysed in conjunction with wider social forms. In this sense, she argues, the critical value of literary emotion as a diagnostic category is often overlooked. She argues in favour of ‘tone’⁴⁷ as an object of analysis, what she calls ‘objectified emotion’,⁴⁸ which offers a holistic approach for analysing *expressions* of emotion in cultural and political discourse. In this way, cultural affects (specifically those that are tonally negative) offer a means of investigating moral, social and political questions, as well as where and why they originate.

For Bernhard, the communication of such negative affects represents a sustained, antagonistic non-reconciliation with Austria’s past. As Ahmed notes: ‘The willful character is the one who “stands out”’,⁴⁹ reflecting Bernhard’s perennially adversarial stance, as he sought to inveigh against the generation of Austrians that preceded him who championed fascist ideologies. His persistence thus becomes his act of resistance: ‘I am always dragging Austria in the dirt, they say, denigrating my own country in the most outrageous fashion’.⁵⁰

Positioning resentment as both a recognisable character trope in *Frost*, as well as a critical-aesthetic category that can be actively deployed in the literary sphere, allows me to show the ways in which Bernhard incorporates aspects of Nietzschean resentment to summon the galvanising force of a focused, moral rage. Bernhard’s literary style is often furiously repetitive, monologic and bitter, targeting the moral and social ills he sees as endemic to Austrian culture and society. In Martin Esslin’s words, his narratives reflect a ‘universe of characters caught up in the prison house of their own consciousness’.⁵¹ For Bernhard, being Austrian is inextricably attached to a shameful and troubled past; his characters therefore are not only confined to the ‘prison house of consciousness’, but to the prison house of history itself, to their unavoidable and tortuous lineage.

Transcending Scheler’s designation of resentment as an ‘impotence’ and ‘inability to retaliate’,⁵² we can understand Bernhard’s active application of resentment as a subversive power and uncompromising literary technique that incorporates social and historical nuance. Bernhard’s resentment is fuelled by personal grudges and feelings of victimhood that intersect with wider political history: his narratives, while touching on the country’s previous legacies of Habsburg grandeur, slander the Second Republic

⁴⁷ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 28-29.

⁴⁸ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 28.

⁴⁹ Sara Ahmed, ‘Willful Parts: Problem Characters or the Problem of Character’, *New Literary History*, 42.2 (2011), 231-253 (p. 245) <doi:10.1353/nlh.2011.0019>.

⁵⁰ Thomas Bernhard, *Extinction* [1986], trans. by David McLintock (London: Faber and Faber, 2019), p. 9-10.

⁵¹ Martin Esslin, ‘Beckett and Bernhard: A Comparison’, *Modern Austrian Literature*, 18.2 (1985), 67-78 (p. 68) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24647557> [accessed 16 June 2023].

⁵² Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 4.

administration which had the gall to claim its own victimhood in its attempt at post-war restoration.⁵³ Bernhard's raging protestations therefore offer a genuine moral perspective that oppose the superficial state narrative of Austrian victimhood promulgated in the post-war aftermath, observing the matrix of personal and socio-cultural events that engender resentment. As a willed antagonism, resentment's literary-aesthetic expression represents a theoretical and practicable mode of dissent that becomes a necessity in the face of moral dereliction.

Frost: Inhabiting Resentment

The narrative of *Frost* follows an unnamed medical assistant who, as part of an internship, is sent to observe the reclusive and self-professed 'failed' painter Strauch, who is self-exiled in the remote alpine town of Weng in the Pongau region of Upper Austria. Strauch is the brother of the assistant's employer, 'the Doctor Strauch'. For undisclosed reasons they are estranged, having not seen each other for twenty years. The reader accompanies the assistant-narrator on his covert 'mission to observe the painter Strauch',⁵⁴ which entails numerous interactions with a varied cast of provincial characters, each offering alternative existential-rural perspectives, that to a greater or lesser degree are compounded by the combative, phantasmagorical landscape that forms their narrative backdrop:

"Unexceptionally malignant ravines, cracks, stains, dishevelled shrubs, split trunks. All hostile" (206). Written in diary form, the novel sees the narrator attempt to record Strauch's misanthropic musings, as Bernhard incorporates direct quotation that establishes the narrator as witness and archivist simultaneously. The young student eventually succumbs to the painter's nihilistic worldview, as he begins to adopt Strauch's idiosyncratic, vehement tenor, relinquishing his own selfhood in the process. In this way, narrative, memory and experiences interlock in a conjunction of subjective uncertainty and negative-affective fervour, mirrored by an incoherent, and decidedly non-chronological narrative structure. Timothy Machlow notes that 'the narrative of *Frost* can be read as a fragmented account of the narrator's initiation into Strauch's chaotic mental state';⁵⁵ in other words, the reader is confronted with the inner workings of the resentment mindset.

⁵³ This ideological invention sought to rewrite Austrian history by claiming that the Anschluss of 1938, which saw Hitler annex the Federal State of Austria and subsume it into Nazi Germany, was an act of military aggression, rather than a political manoeuvre that had enormous national support.

⁵⁴ Bernhard, *Frost*, p. 4. Henceforth, page numbers will be indicated in parenthesis in the main text, with double quotation marks conveying direct quotations from Strauch.

⁵⁵ Timothy Machlow, 'Thomas Bernhard's *Frost* and Adalbert Stifter: Literature, Legacy, and National Identity in the Early Austrian Second Republic', *German Studies Review*, 28.1 (2005), 65–84 (p. 65) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30038069>> [accessed 19 April 2022].

The relationship between Strauch and the Assistant offers a negative version of the mentor-mentee relationship found in Adalbert Stifter's classic Bildungsroman *Der Nachsommer* (*Indian Summer*, 1857). While Stifter's novel shows an older man imparting his wisdom to a younger man, Bernhard inverts this trope, showing the older man imparting his depression and mental disarray to the younger man. It may be argued then, that Bernhard uses *Frost* to expose and dismantle certain tropes from the humanist Bildungsroman tradition represented by Stifter, as a means of critiquing Austria's troubled post-war identity. Indeed, Machlow suggests that *Frost* 'can be read as an inverted Austrian Bildungsroman',⁵⁶ while for Sean Ireton, *Frost* is an 'anti-bildungsroman'.⁵⁷ For Bernhard, Stifter represented the antithesis to his own style and creative agenda. By channelling the bourgeois sentiments of the Biedermeier movement (associated with the nascent growth of the middle classes in the early nineteenth century), Stifter embodied an overwhelmingly domestic, depoliticised approach to literature and art that stands in contradistinction to Bernhard's.⁵⁸

Strauch is a man riddled with angst, bedevilled by haunting memories. He is bitter, spiteful and 'hates so much' (335), epitomising the resentment-mindset, based on Nietzsche's assessment of the 'man of resentment':

Neither upright nor naïve, nor honest and straight with himself. His soul squints; his mind loves dark corners, secret paths and back-doors, everything secretive appeals to him as being his world [...] he knows all about keeping quiet, not forgetting, waiting [...] abasing himself.⁵⁹

The narrative charts the interactions, and fledgling, if not tense relationship between Strauch and the narrator. Strauch is described as a 'misanthrope', who 'lives, as they say, in his head' (9). In his attempts to fraternize with Strauch, the narrator finds himself drawn into his negative-aggressive psychological territory of 'vice, shame, awe, reproach' (9). Troubled by his deceptions, and unnerved by Strauch's physical and mental state, the narrator simultaneously reviles and empathises with him. Contaminated by this profoundly cynical worldview, the narrator begins to exhibit his own self-doubt. The brutal environment contributes to a heightened state of existential turmoil, with a panoply of

⁵⁶ Machlow, 'Thomas Bernhard's *Frost*', p. 65.

⁵⁷ Sean Ireton, 'National Inveective and Environmental Exploitation in Thomas Bernhard's *Frost*', in *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene. Literatures, Cultures, and the Environment*, ed. by Caroline Schaumann and Heather Sullivan (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2017), pp. 205-207 (p. 213). Palgrave Macmillan ebook.

⁵⁸ Nietzsche in fact celebrated Stifter's writing in *Human, All Too Human*, in Aphorism 109, 'The Treasury of German Prose'.

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 21.

bizarre and grotesque scenes of degradation and violence punctuating the loose narrative arc, some of which I will sample in what follows. Strauch's agitation develops as he becomes increasingly distanced from reality. He details various painful memories, offering disquisitions on illness and varieties of pessimistic philosophical inquiry, before his physical and psychological collapse at the close of the novel, when he is reported missing, having walked into a blizzard.

Steeped in the biographical, historical circumstance of the *Heimat*, or homeland, Bernhard's monomaniacal invectives led him to be known as the *Nestbeschützer*, one who dirties his own nest. His entire oeuvre might indeed be summarised as an unwavering disavowal of Austrian nationhood and what Gita Honegger identifies as its 'pathology of denial'.⁶⁰ By exhibiting the hallmarks of what Bozzi has called a 'beleaguered subjectivity',⁶¹ that reflects the jaded condition of post-war Austrian culture, Bernhard's aesthetics of resentment bears witness to the dark corners of twentieth-century history, maintaining an oppositional stance that challenges the political apparatus and cultural posturing that sought to obfuscate this troubling legacy. As Strauch fittingly declares in *Frost*, "We were preceded by a reputation that killed us" (86).

Throughout *Frost*, Strauch invariably serves as the vector for these critical reflections: "Our country sat heavily in Europe's gut, completely indigestible [...] the state itself is cretinous, and the people are pitiful [...] we are at a stage of absolute degradation" (288–289). The notion of inheritance is vital to an understanding of Bernhard's deployment of literary resentment, as it encompasses the tainted cultural legacy of Austrian statehood due to its complicity with the National Socialist project, tapping into the deep root of societal mistrust and national resentment that developed out of this period of Austrian history. One of the conditions for Bernhard's resentment therefore is that of shame, connected to one's forebears. This illustrates the capacity for resentment to be both a psychological state that is both generational and generative, as both a psychological and cultural condition that is intertwined with the notion of inheritance and one's resistance to it.⁶² Bernhard's literary resentment acts wilfully, subversively and even theatrically, as compulsive-obsessive verbiage that shatters Austrian *totschweigen*, the conspiracy of post-war silence. Indeed, a large part of this subjective disaffection stems from what Dagmar

⁶⁰ Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard*, p. ix.

⁶¹ Paola Bozzi, 'Homeland, 'Death and Otherness in the Early Lyrical Work'', in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Matthias Konzett (New York: Camden House, 2002), pp. 71–85 (p. 76).

⁶² This legacy is addressed most notably in *Frost* and *Extinction*, Bernhard's first and last novels, illustrating the centrality of the theme within his oeuvre. *Extinction* (1986) centres on the self-exiled narrator Murau who is faced with the bequeathment of Wolfsegg, his family estate that symbolises a tainted ancestral heritage, due to his family's proud National Socialist associations. The house acts as a site of memory and performs the metaphorical groundwork for Bernhard's situation of national trauma and individual pathos within the Austrian cultural consciousness.

Lorenz identifies as his ‘inability to escape his background’,⁶³ resulting in a lifelong contempt for his cultural heritage,⁶⁴ a sentiment encapsulated by the figure of Strauch.

In staging his opposition to Austrian society and its historical wrongdoing, Bernhard situates himself as an outlier, illustrating the centrality of self-will to a conceptual understanding of resentment. Gilles Deleuze observes that ‘resentment is always a revolt’,⁶⁵ insinuating it into a schema of moral and psychological antagonism. He describes resentment as a reaction that ‘ceases to be acted, in order to become something felt (*sentit*)’,⁶⁶ referencing Nietzsche’s assessment that resentment is premised on ‘reversal of the evaluating glance [...] it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all, – its action is basically a reaction’.⁶⁷ Such recalcitrance is mirrored by Bernhard’s own reactionary gestures as a writer, as well as the incessantly antagonistic characterisation of Strauch within *Frost*. As Matthias Konzett notes, Bernhard’s ‘iconoclasm remains constant to the point of turning into a mannerism’.⁶⁸ Bernhard’s stance, without doubt, is one of revolt, as his writing reflects a dissident social engagement by way of its refusal to serve the interests of Austrian culture,⁶⁹ and performs metaphorically for a collectivised, horrific interiority resulting from the aftermath of Austro-fascism. Bernhard stages his resentment by refusing to assimilate himself into the Austrian cultural framework and refusing to allow ‘old wounds’ to heal. Konzett further suggests that Bernhard’s language ‘provides a unique critical mirror to a culture of resentment that made possible enormous acts of administrative violence’.⁷⁰ Bernhard’s resentment is therefore uniquely correlated to his disavowal of Second-Generation Austrian politics, which sought to whitewash the errors of its past. In turn, resentment itself becomes a form of critical truth-telling, in the vein of the Austrian tradition of *Sprachkritik* (language criticism), advanced by writers such as Johann Nestroy, Fritz Mauthner and Hugo von Hofmannsthal at the turn of the century, and later by Karl Kraus,

⁶³ Dagmar Lorenz, ‘The Established Outsider: Thomas Bernhard’, in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Matthias Konzett (New York: Camden House, 2002), pp. 29-51 (p. 44).

⁶⁴ While Bernhard relentlessly criticised Austrian culture, he was nonetheless patronised throughout his career by members of the bourgeois elite, such as the the Lampersbergs (as documented in his roman à clef, *Holzfällen (Woodcutters)*, 1984) and was very much a part of the Viennese cultural scene, keeping friends such as Paul Wittgenstein, descendent of one of the wealthiest families of Habsburg Vienna. This is indicative of Bernhard’s complex relationship with his native country, and of his typically contradictory character. See footnotes in Chapter Three, p. 84.

⁶⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* [1962], trans. by Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 109.

⁶⁶ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, p. 110.

⁶⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 20.

⁶⁸ Matthias Konzett, ‘National Iconoclasm: Thomas Bernhard and the Austrian Avant-Garde’, in *A Companion to the Works of Thomas Bernhard*, ed. Matthias Konzett (New York: Camden House, 2002), pp. 1-21 (p. 15).

⁶⁹ Ironically, Bernhard came to be one of the most celebrated writers of his age, and it was only after recognition from international audiences that the Austrian state eventually celebrated him.

⁷⁰ Konzett, ‘National Iconoclasm’, p. 18.

founder of the satirical literary review *Die Fackel*. These writers proliferated a theoretical scepticism regarding the expressive capacity of language itself,⁷¹ one that was later manifest in the psychoanalytic tradition of Freud, and Wittgenstein's philosophy of language outlined in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), leading to the development of what Marjorie Perloff has called 'Austro-Modernism'.⁷² This crisis of language reflected a broader crisis of identity within the Austrian nation arising from the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, which represented a historical caesura. Bernhard was the inheritor of this literary and artistic culture, and evidence of this critical tradition is foregrounded by Strauch's disquisitions on subjective and linguistic uncertainty. The assistant observes his 'notions and subterfuges' (148), asking:

Can it still be described as language? Yes, it is the false bottom of language, the heaven and hell of language [...] he rips the words out of himself as from a swamp. The violent ripping out of words leaves him dripping with blood. (148-149)

In this passage, Strauch's equivocal, near-mystical utterances are equated with acts of enormous violence, hinting at a fundamental rupture between reality and illusion. Strauch's expository monologues become spaces of reflection, and the narrator observes his conceptual discursivity: 'Colours that are nothing but extrusions of flesh narcoticise him philosophically... the word "ear of corn" may acquire the same meaning as "the whole of our welfare state"' (250-51). This semiological dislocation gives a nod to Wittgenstein's metaphysics, which explicates the ineffability of truth and human dependence on language as a vehicle for expression as contingent and flawed.⁷³ Such meta-critical queries are channelled through Strauch, who seemingly resents his own inability to convey his lived experience and cognition through language:

I'm unable to explain myself, the truth, the propensity for the truth is so difficult, that human faculties aren't sufficient... it's all a matter of fragments, suggestions, all of thought is just one never experienced clarity [...] a blizzard is certainly a deathly process... but what is a blizzard? (194)

In questioning the authority of language, Bernhard highlights the fundamental applicability of negation as a mode of critical inquiry. As Jeanne Riou states 'ressentiment involves,

⁷¹ Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973).

⁷² Marjorie Perloff, *Edge of Irony: Modernism in the Shadow of the Habsburg Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

⁷³ Bernhard's autobiographical novel *Wittgenstein's Nephew* (1982) details his relationship with Paul Wittgenstein, Ludwig's brother. His novel *Correction* (1975) is purportedly based on Ludwig's process of writing the *Tractatus*.

above all, hatred and criticism of that which is desired or envied, but out of reach'.⁷⁴ For Bernhard, as for Strauch, what is out of reach is the authentic expression of historical truth, and indeed, of language itself, expressed herein as an existential quandary that, on a wider scale, reflects the uncertainty of Austria's identity in the post-war aftermath.

Ressentiment's Imperative: Counter-will, Memory and Nature

Nietzsche contends that resentment occurs in the individual through a failure to forget; he argues that 'forgetfulness is not just a *vis inertiae*, as superficial people believe, but is rather an active ability to suppress, positive in the strongest sense of the word'.⁷⁵ This active forgetting, rather than the 'active desire not to let go',⁷⁶ allows the human-animal to thrive. Bernhard instead employs an active remembrance, one that is sustained and principled, evidencing resentment's constitution as a self-conscious memory act. His refusal to forget is a stance which must be actively maintained. Strauch ominously contends that "memory is a sickness" (43). This statement mirrors Nietzsche's 'memory is a festering wound',⁷⁷ connoting the virulence of resentment's smouldering affects and their co-dependence on the active psychological retention of hurt. Jack Halberstam has noted that 'memorialisation has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories (of slavery, the Holocaust, wars, etc.)',⁷⁸ and Bernhard refuses to let Austria forget its crimes, endeavouring to keep its past culturally visible, perhaps as a tacit means of distancing himself from his forbears by highlighting their culpability, thereby absolving himself from inherited guilt.⁷⁹ This approach chimes with that of Améry, for whom, Victoria Fareld notes, resentment represents 'adopting an attitude of non-reconciliation with the past',⁸⁰ instantiating a vicious circle of memory that is affirmed by Strauch: "Memory stayed behind and carried on producing itself everlastingly" (44). Taking Nietzsche's transvaluation as a building block, Améry postulated that resentment was not a condition of weakness, either physical or psychological, but a moral standpoint that retains hurt and injury as a measure of 'moral resistance',⁸¹ one that displays a 'scant inclination to be conciliatory'.⁸² His departure from Nietzschean resentment represents a vital means of

⁷⁴ Jeanne Riou, 'Introduction', in *Re-thinking Resentment*, ed. by Jeanne Riou and Mary Gallagher (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016), pp. 1-24 (p. 1).

⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 35 (original emphasis).

⁷⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 36.

⁷⁷ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 45.

⁷⁸ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 15.

⁷⁹ Nietzsche contends that guilt (*schuld*) descends from the material concept of debt (*schulden*), as a moral concept cultivated by Christian doctrine (*Genealogy*, p. 39).

⁸⁰ Victoria Fareld, 'Resentment as Moral Imperative', in *Re-Thinking Resentment*, pp. 53-70 (p. 57).

⁸¹ Améry, *Mind's Limits*, p. 38.

⁸² Améry, *Mind's Limits*, p. 71.

renewing resentment's critical energies by emphasising its ethical imperative to memorialise wrongdoing from the perspective of the victim. When understood as an awareness-raising discourse, rather than what Nietzsche described as 'the degenerated instinct which turns against life with subterranean lust of revengefulness',⁸³ one begins to recognise the critical productivity of resentimental writing, and its capacities for subjective and historical evaluation. As the assistant notes of Strauch, 'History investigated him, and he returned the compliment' (79).

The novel's environment suggests a symbiotic relationship between Strauch's fractured subjectivity and the dilapidated space of the novel's literary topos. Bernhard's figuration of the devastated landscape that comprises *Frost's* narrative backdrop becomes synonymous with Strauch's own existential collapse and becomes symbolic of a nation's wrongdoing: "The depredations of the forest are spoiling the balance of nature," he said [...] Each time I look at it, this landscape looks uglier to me. It's ugly and menacing and full of wicked memory particles" (206). Memory is thus inscribed onto the topography, and it is apt to note that the verb 'remember' features thirty six times throughout the novel, while the noun 'memory' is included twenty nine times.

Bernhard's resentment represents a perverse wilfulness *to* remember and *to* resent, that acts as a driver for his writing, which I suggest is indicative of what psychoanalyst Otto Rank called a 'counter-will'⁸⁴ or what Nietzsche calls 'a personified will to contradiction and counternature'.⁸⁵ This psychological mechanism allows for markers of personality and character to be defined, as the counter-will represents a will that reacts to the will of others, by asserting its oppositionality. Indeed, the assistant describes Strauch's 'countercurrents' (322) of thought. Such wayward intentionality, when extrapolated into the social, or political realm, may thus signify or operate on the level of dissent. Counter-will is then expressive of a deviant psychological process, exhibited through Bernhard's perennially disavowing diatribes. This intersects with a literalised understanding of Nietzsche's 'counternature', via depictions of a subversive natural world in *Frost* (arguably possessive of its own will) whereby those same structural tenets of negativity and vengeance are bestowed upon a seemingly autonomous landscape, capable of violent destruction, and-mirrored in Strauch's violent utterances:

The cold is eating into the centre of my brain [...] the insatiable cold, the cold that insists on its bloody nourishment of cells, that insists on my brain [...] One's forces

⁸³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 80.

⁸⁴ Otto Rank, *Will Therapy* [1936], trans. by Jessie Taft (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1950), p. 103.

⁸⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 86.

are attacked, the cold bites into my forces [...] [it] penetrates my brain [...] everything is just *frigor mortis*. (275)

Counternature in this sense, as an offshoot of counter-will, can be understood as a mode of ecological agency, in which resentment's negative sentiments permeate into an ostensibly objective literary backdrop. Understood in this way, literary resentment, as applicable to human and nonhuman formal representation, evokes the wilful, or obstinate sustenance of painful memories as a tool for social and cultural critique, and corresponds with Ahmed's assertion that wilful behaviour enacts a kind of intentional deviancy,⁸⁶ but one that is also embodied in the natural world. It is here that we can identify the use-value of obstinacy, as a form of emotional and cultural labour that that can be strategised. As an antagonistic mode of being, it displays evident crossovers with the notion of wilfulness. Bernhard's novel suggests that Strauch's obstinacy is admirable, yet also potentially fatal, as it eventually overwhelms him. There is an ambivalence here, exemplified by the reserved, distanced narration of the assistant, which points to the double bind of resentment, for though it desires moral justice, it too has the potential to be all consuming, evinced by Bernhard's characterisation of Strauch: 'He is dominated by himself, as by a lifelong injustice' (120).

Elizabeth Murray Morelli argues that resentment contains an inherent logic, as it represents an embodied state of hurt that presupposes a sense of dignity: if you have been wronged, you address that wrong.⁸⁷ This position is alluded to by Strauch: "The way the past is put together from vindictiveness is something that's worth considering" (312), suggesting a time-worn cycle of cause and effect that is mediated by an urge for justice. In recognising this, my argument frames resentment not simply as a seething condition of impotence, or what Nietzsche at best describes as 'imaginary revenge',⁸⁸ but as a catalyst for creative counterforces premised on a profound sense of moral righteousness, one that teeters atop a psychological precipice of negatory oblivion. As Wendy Brown notes, resentment is 'a practice that reiterates the existence of an identity whose present past is one of insistently unredeemable injury',⁸⁹ such a feeling of injury however 'reopens a desire for futurity',⁹⁰ a longing to see things improve. It might be pertinent to analogise this sentiment in light of current climate debates and humanity's responsibility to the planet and

⁸⁶ Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, pp. 10-11.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Murray Morelli, 'Resentment and Rationality', in *Paideia Project Online* (1998) <<https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Anth/AnthMore.htm>> [26 November 2022].

⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 20.

⁸⁹ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 73.

⁹⁰ Brown, *States of Injury*, p. 75.

its future generations – many of which will come to feel resentment at their lot when the global temperature soars and sea-levels inevitably rise. By focusing on resentment's moral and temporal imperative, its desire for futurity, I suggest that resentment represents a practicable and potent mode of social critique that can be applied within ecological discourse, contributing to discussions on the relevance of the humanities to social and ecological justice.

Ecologies of Resentment: Allegory, Morality, Landscape

Frost is a text that, though not defined by its ecological tropes, does nonetheless utilise representations of the natural world as a philosophical mise-en-scène within which to investigate the juxtaposition of external, often hostile forces with psycho-existential experience. Depictions of an overwhelmingly virulent nature illustrate Bernhard's concern with inverting traditional literary tropes pertaining to the natural world, used to reflect the perceived dissolution of a rural populace defined by acute social malaise and moral degeneracy. The symptomatology of dissolution is performed through representations of a rural landscape that aggressively counters (and inverts) the notion that the mountains constitute a site of symbolic purity. The narrative space of *Frost* is therefore charged with an implicit moral schema, with the rural adjunct of Weng indicative of an existential, as well as ecological sickness. Nietzsche dubs resentment 'the most terrible sickness ever to rage in man'.⁹¹ Bernhard engages with this concept of sickness by contrasting human and environmental affliction to generate a language of negative vitality that governs his prose, typified in the characterisation of the painter Strauch:

Everything, every smell, is chained to a crime of some sort, an abuse, the war, some piece of infamy or other [...] you know nothing about the war. You know nothing, period [...] these people, all of them on the lowest level, often the lowest level of character [...] "Those smells," he says, "the smells of unworthy humanity". (55-57)

Recognising this mesh of human and nonhuman forces highlights the often-troubled relationship between humans and the natural world, as well as raising the timely question of how best to resolve it. Strauch probes at the very concept of nature itself, questioning the boundaries between human and nonhuman. He refers to his own state as "inhumanly human" (251) and presents the narrator with a conceptual cul-de-sac: 'The painter says it's all incomprehensible because it's human, and the world is inhuman' (138). Bernhard uses the landscape as a space for philosophical inquiry that mirrors Strauch's inner disposition,

⁹¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 64.

while delineating a profoundly negative-aesthetic register that explores differing ‘scales’ of moral and social transgression. Arnold Berleant describes negative aesthetics as that which is ‘perceptually distressing, repellent, or painful, or [that which] has effects that are harmful or destructive’.⁹² Bernhard thus describes a domain infused with a distinctly negative-aesthetic sensibility to reflect notions of moral, physiological and psychological dissolution.

Ecological concerns are raised in *Frost* by way of Strauch’s repeated references to the devastating effects of human intervention on the land: “‘This whole landscape”, he said, “used to be simply a wild, wonderful biotope”” (156). His prophetic observations of environmental pillage rebuke the hubris of humankind and its recurrent tendency to exploit the natural world, pointing to the afflictions derived from human megalomania. By speculating on the possibility of a nonhuman, or ‘organic resentment’, we can read *Frost* as a text that draws attention to the necessity for a perspectival shift in our understanding of our relationship to the natural world, and the adaptive approaches we might take in confronting ecological destruction. Though it might seem counterintuitive to apply the tenets of a hitherto uniquely psychological condition to a nonhuman (i.e. environmental) context, Stacy Alaimo observes that one must ‘acknowledge the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems [...] and other actors [to necessitate] rich, complex modes of analysis that travel through the entangled territories of material and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual’.⁹³ It is such an approach that leads me to consider the importance of analysing the ‘entangled’ nature of social and organic systems and their significance on the individual, as exemplified in *Frost*. This position is supported by Alaimo’s ‘trans-corporeal’ theory, which reflects the need to understand nature not as detached from the human realm, but as deeply interconnected, as ‘the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from “nature” or “environment” [...] where corporeal theories and environmental theories meet and mingle’.⁹⁴ Trans-corporeality presupposes the enmeshing of human and earthly forces, as well as the mechanisms and ideologies that determine our understanding of ecology.

The environs of *Frost* can be read as possessing ecological autonomy by way of their aggressive manifestations of force: “The frost is all-powerful... [it] owns everything” (41). This landscape can be read as demanding repayment for injustices, historical and

⁹² Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), p. 158.

⁹³ Stacy Alaimo, ‘Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature’, in *Material Feminisms*, ed. by Stacy Alaimo and Susan J. Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 237-265 (p. 238).

⁹⁴ Alaimo, ‘Trans-Corporeal Feminisms’, p. 238.

present; as a retributive force that collects its debt in the form of human life: “Every year there are a couple of hundred who lose their lives in the rocks somewhere,” said the engineer [...] Even today there were people lying around there with smashed limbs in the Klamm’ (135). As Strauch notes, there is “a hellish serfdom that is taking its revenge, taking its revenge on its grim devisers, on me, on you” (162-163). This retribution can be understood as debt owed to the land after its sustained mistreatment, recalling Nietzsche’s assertion that the concept of debt is ‘the breeding ground’ of our ‘moral conceptual world’,⁹⁵ as he identifies the conceptual origin of resentment’s bad conscience in the creditor-debtor relationship, one that in the context of Christian theology, can never be paid off.⁹⁶

In an eco-critical gesture, *Frost* details the interlinkage of human and nonhuman proximities, and repeatedly references the changing nature of the land due to human intervention: “Half the country has already been wrecked by the building of power plants. Where there used to be flowery meadows and rich farmland and first-growth forests, there are only these concrete lumps now” (98). When viewed through an ecocritical lens, Bernhard’s figuration of the landscape as a symptomatic aggregate of human as well as environmental trauma and loss allows us to reflect on the limits of human exceptionalism, showing another of the various ways in which his resentment is mediated.⁹⁷

Honegger writes that ‘though [Bernhard] insisted that nature did not interest him [...], his writing was all about nature, albeit not as the alpine haven Austria struggled to project in its longing to sanitise its image after World War II’.⁹⁸ With this in mind, Alaimo’s theory of interconnectedness might usefully be applied here alongside Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*. Resentment itself is an entangled condition, consisting of subjective disposition, emotion, memory, as well as historical and social precedence. By recognising resentment as a willed state which responds to social and historical injustice across both human and extra-human territories, I argue that resentment rightfully belongs in the critical lexicon; for it represents a debunking strategy that responds to instances of moral, cultural, and even ecological-violation. Therefore, we see *Frost’s* value as a highly prescient ecological work, as it offers an alternative schema for understanding the nuances of Bernhard’s resentment, one that is inextricably linked to a shameful cultural heritage uniquely grounded in the novel’s landscape.

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 41.

⁹⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 62.

⁹⁷ Bernhard began his literary career as a poet in the 1950’s, writing highly lyrical, Expressionistic poems redolent of Georg Trakl, in which the natural world and the Austrian landscape play a significant role. See Thomas Bernhard, *Collected Poems*, trans. by James Reidel (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2017).

⁹⁸ Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard*, p. xii.

Violent Natures, Violent Urges

Human intervention, as described in *Frost*, seeps deep into the earth, permeating the social and ecological substrate of the land, to be described by the painter as “an inexpungible inheritance” (56), underscored by and literalised as traces of Austria’s fascist history, alluding once more to the notion of an inherited cultural and political legacy. Such traces become physicalised in the novel as vestiges of war that have left a permanent imprint on the land, an aide-memoire for acts of barbarity. Such remnants are analogous to the multiplicity of layers understood as the subconscious mind in relation to what Freud called ‘memory traces’,⁹⁹ which constitute the layered strata of our unconscious memories. *Frost* physicalises the space of resentment, insofar as Bernhard incorporates psychotopographic metaphor to memorialise violent depredation of and within the landscape, as a consequence of human intervention:

“Every stone here has a human story to tell me”, says the painter... “Everything, every smell, is chained to a crime of some sort, an abuse, the war, some piece of infamy or other... Even if it’s all buried under the snow”. (54)

In this sense, Bernhard constructs a figurative Pandora’s box of social and political affect, the result of ‘the intrusion of Schrecken, of terror and horror, into everyday reality’.¹⁰⁰ In its indexing and preservation of historical violence, the social and environmental abjection explored in *Frost* is expressive of the deviant, earthborn autonomy that I have already referenced. Bernhard’s deployment of ecological allegory warrants the question as to whether *Frost* may in fact be read as an ecocritical text per se, as opposed to the landscape simply being utilised as a vehicle for expressing human concerns. If the landscape is indeed agential, it might be apposite to suggest that one of Bernhard’s literary-aesthetic intentions for *Frost* is to highlight the landscape’s refusal to perform through a traditional aesthetic schema of beauty. Arguably, Bernhard’s depiction of this topographical space is indicative of a formalism that denies such agency. By framing this allegorical imperative however in the context of resentment, which is premised on a conceptual reversal, I suggest that Bernhard’s representation of nature is defiant, inverting conceptions of the land as receptive to human intervention, while also challenging any suppositions that the land might be claimed for any didactic function.

⁹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1899] (New York: Dover Publications, 2015), p. 329, <<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/detail.action?docID=1963750>> [accessed 24 January 2023].

¹⁰⁰ Bozzi, ‘Homeland, Death, and Otherness in the Early Lyrical Work’, p. 76.

The question of autonomy thus becomes central to the concept of resentment in its Bernhardian iteration, both in terms of a human and nonhuman application, and channels the post-war critical theory of Theodor Adorno, apropos the question of the autonomous artwork, namely his identification of a certain necessity for art to be irreducible to commodification and social instrumentalism, in order for it to function independently from ideological utility and ‘refuse[s] definition’.¹⁰¹ As Adorno puts it, ‘[i]n its autonomous forms art decries domination’.¹⁰² This resonates with Bernhard’s depictions of the natural world as being inherently resistant to human co-option. Accordingly, we can understand Bernhard’s agential framing of the landscape as a representational strategy that highlights the limits of the human, while recognising the ontological power of certain nonhuman agencies.

The natural world of *Frost* is indicative of a perverse biology (“The drive of nature is criminal” (29)). Despite references throughout the novel to environmental despoliation engendered by anthropogenic interference, the landscape’s retributive agency seemingly counteracts human attempts to master it. Its abysses and ravines subsume the processes of human action, causing and provoking regular death (“four hundred mountain people [who] were abruptly killed in catastrophic storms” (121), the landscape “full of cadaver smells” (106)). Such denotation of environmental autonomy might best be understood as demonstrating an injured and injurious ontology that reflects resentment’s prerogative to harbour ill-will. In his study of environmental exploitation in *Frost*, Ireton has observed that while the alpine landscape may be replete with exploitable resources such as ‘water, timber, snow, and glaciers—inventoried for mass consumption and recreation’, maltreatment of the landscape comes with the continued risk of profound ‘human peril’.¹⁰³ The weather has a ‘mind of its own’, manifest in the “all-powerful” frost: “the discovery that frost owns everything is nothing terrifying” (41). Such personification here attests to the idea that the environs are uniquely autonomous and openly hostile to humanity. This poses an interesting question, specifically considering Strauch’s role as an artist, for he remarks, “I discovered that my surroundings didn’t want to be explained by me” (27), corroborating the assertion that the novel’s landscape is inherently resistant to artistic or linguistic representation. Moreover, Strauch’s admission challenges the symbolic role of the artist as mediator of the landscape (and its perversions), which implicitly emphasises human mastery of the natural world. The landscape of Weng thwarts attempts at such

¹⁰¹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* [1970], ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 2.

¹⁰² Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 49.

¹⁰³ Ireton, ‘National Invective’, p. 206.

mastery. Bernhard's figuration of natural phenomena as inherently unruly thereby challenges mechanistic and illusory assumptions that the natural world represents a territory for human conquest and aestheticised consumption.

Such natural, retributive agency represents organic rebellion, a Will to Power, following Nietzsche's assertion of a vital, active force channelled through all beings – an inner dynamism that is fundamentally life affirming. This antagonism is suggestive of Schopenhauer's violent and anguished state of nature in *The World as Will and Representation*,¹⁰⁴ which posits that all natural forces are inherently suffering. In this sense, ecological ressentiment represents a negative-vital force that situates nature as the site of a 'horrifying struggle for existence'.¹⁰⁵ As Strauch puts it, "the abattoir is the only essentially philosophical venue... the smell of blood is the only parity" (276).¹⁰⁶ This violent philosophy of life represents a radicality of vision and dissident, even nihilistic selfhood. Strauch perversely seeks solace in the brutal mountain landscape, which seemingly can remediate just as much as it can alienate. In one scene, Strauch walks the narrator through a wood, divulging his knowledge and passion for botany:

"Here, you see," he said, "the spruce, *Picea excelsa*, the aristocratic sister to the spruce that is called the spruce fir, wrongly also silver fir [...] this one is a durmast oak, this one a pedunculate oak... The oak has a growing season of two hundred years. The name is derived from the Old Indian word *igyā*, which means, roughly, veneration". (158)

It is significant that Strauch is a painter, for this detail creates a subconscious awareness in the reader of a distinct visuality and imbues the text with an illustrative register. Indeed, Bernhard's language is vivid and highly figurative. When the narrator examines Strauch's swollen foot, it is described as '[p]allor, shading into grey. The cells translucent. Disintegrating in places. Splotches of yellow, rimmed with blue. The surface structure reminded me of overripe pumpkins left lying on forgotten fields' (51). This macroscopic syntax contains an ekphrastic quality, with Strauch's painterly eye attuned to the nuances of aesthetic distinction regarding his unique capacity for observation: "The blanket of snow covers the earth like a sick child" (75). His speech, laden with imagery and metaphor,

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* [1818], trans. by E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969) <<https://philocyclevl.files.wordpress.com/2016/10/schopenhauer-world-as-will-and-representation-1of2.pdf>> [accessed 19 April 2022].

¹⁰⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 164.

¹⁰⁶ Recalling both the work of Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch, whose violent performance art often included the ritualistic butchering of animal carcasses in front of live audiences, and the photographs taken by Eli Lotar of the La Villette slaughterhouse in Paris, recorded by Georges Bataille in the surrealist review *Documents*, in 1929: see, Georges Bataille and Annette Michelson, 'Slaughterhouse', in *October*, 36 (1986), 11–13 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/778539>>.

describes the harsh optics of the landscape, conveying a psycho-topographical diorama that inverts stereotypical associations of the alpine landscape as congenitally remedial.

Strauch's characterisation operates in marked contrast to traditionally romantic conceptions of the artist as an emblem for unbridled and exuberant creativity. Instead, his individuality rests upon his destructive and bitter insights. In this sense he is an echo of Walter Benjamin's 'destructive character': he who 'has no interest in being understood' and who 'has the consciousness of historical man, whose deepest emotion is an insuperable mistrust'.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Strauch's negativistic, affective synergy with the bitter, icy landscape chimes with Benjamin's summation that, 'The destructive character is always blithely at work. It is nature that dictates his tempo'.¹⁰⁸ Strauch's instinct to denigrate is also reflective of Nietzsche's summary of resentment's negative impulses, those of '[a]nimosity, cruelty, the pleasure of pursuing, raiding, changing and destroying'.¹⁰⁹ As the assistant observes of Strauch, 'He is dominated by [...] lifelong injustice. By his destructive apparatus' (120), suggesting this urge is compounded by resentful bitterness.

Bernhard's characterisation of Strauch thus positions him as a world-weary cynic and misanthropic visionary, whose artistic temperament and creative conditioning endows him with a critical acuity, and an apparent access to deeper truths:

The studio suddenly appeared [...] I saw my windows blocked up with the rottenness of people who didn't know why they were there [...] Those evenings still disgusted me years later [...] static orgies of philosophizing [...] Everything came to me like a whirlwind that left behind only despair. (221-222)

One might infer from this that Strauch's resentment is a result of such depth of vision. The parameters of his resentment are illuminated by his critical insight, and informed by acknowledgement of his limitations, leading to my suggestion that resentment reflects a clarifying, expository mode of being, albeit an antipathetic one. Strauch is a man blighted, yet also buoyed by failure. He confesses to the narrator early in the novel that he burnt all his paintings, describing them as "a perpetual reminder of my worthlessness" (33).¹¹⁰ Strauch's failure is indelibly marked upon him. He observes "I was never a painter [...] at the most, I may have been a decorator" (13), echoing Bertolt Brecht's favoured put-down

¹⁰⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 302.

¹⁰⁸ Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 301.

¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 57.

¹¹⁰ Failure is another leitmotif of Bernhard's, whose novels often centre on a single-minded protagonist rendered impotent by their own creative paralysis. Notable examples include *The Lime Works* (1970), *Correction* (1975) and *Concrete* (1982).

of Hitler, calling him ‘der Anstreicher’ (‘the house painter’).¹¹¹ This derisory aesthetic distinction calls attention to Strauch’s piercing self-criticism: “my paintings were always well reviewed, except by myself” (142), showing Strauch not as a passive thinker or follower of Nietzsche’s ‘herd’,¹¹² but as a critical ironist akin to Kraus, who explores the creative possibility of failure and suffering via an embrace of fatalistic ambivalence. “Nature is bloody”, Strauch notes, “but bloodiest toward her own finest, most remarkable and choicest gifts” (14). He is not immobilised by resentment, he is strengthened by it. He is what Nietzsche would have dubbed a ‘practical pessimist[s] [...] directed by a presentiment of coming disaster’;¹¹³ embodying the very inverse of the self-affirming ‘yes to life’.¹¹⁴ His own supreme affirmation resides conversely in his ability to negate life, offering instead a reactive ‘no’ that harbours a pessimistic perspicacity: a negative affirmation that luxuriates in the primacy of negation, reflecting a Schopenhauerian disgust at life. “The man who gets to the top of the tree” he declares “is forced to realise there is no top and no tree” (18). Such epistemological doubt is fundamental to Strauch’s art of introspection, analogous to Nietzschean resentment’s interiorisation: ‘All instincts which are not discharged outwardly turn inwards – this is what I call the internalisation of man’.¹¹⁵ Strauch’s characteristic disavowal correlates with Nietzsche’s assertion that resentment, ‘says “no” on principle to everything that is “outside”, “other”, “non-self”: and this “no” is its creative deed’.¹¹⁶ Despite this, he is not wholly restrained by a past of embitterment: “I am principally interested in new ideas... *what will come tomorrow*, the future” (232, original emphasis), in a highly Nietzschean turn of phrase. This facet supports my assertion that resentment contains a self-reflective, creative-critical capacity, what Reginster has termed ‘reflective revaluation’.¹¹⁷

Strauch’s observations of the titular frost and its “white canvas of snow” (299) recall the evocative paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), specifically *The Sea of Ice* (1823-1824),¹¹⁸ in which huge shards of ice are framed as the focal point within a radically unforgiving landscape, reminiscent of Strauch’s “shards of memory” (291) and

¹¹¹ Bertolt Brecht, ‘Bad Time for Poetry’, in *Bertolt Brecht: Poetry and Prose* ed. and trans. by Reinhold Grimm and others (New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 95.

¹¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [1886], ed. by Wilhelm Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 86.

¹¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* [1873], ed. by Daniel Breazeale, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 100.

¹¹⁴ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 80.

¹¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 57.

¹¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 20.

¹¹⁷ Bernard Reginster, ‘Nietzsche on Resentment and Valuation’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 57.2 (1997), 281–305 (p. 288) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2953719>> [accessed 14 June 2022].

¹¹⁸ Caspar David Friedrich, *Das Eismeer (The Sea of Ice)*, 1823/24, Oil on Linen, 96.7 x 126.9 cm <<https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/sammlung-online/caspar-david-friedrich/das-eismeer>> [accessed 20 May 2023].

Weng's "icy silence" (68). Friedrich, a pioneer of German Romantic aesthetics, sought to embed the artist's phenomenal experience into visual representations of the natural world, thereby evincing an understanding of 'art as experience'.¹¹⁹ This painting can be interpreted as a metaphor for the inevitable tragedy that results from humanity's hubristic attempts to dominate nature, while Friedrich's paintings more broadly convey archetypal examples of the painterly sublime, capturing both the grandeur and terror of the natural world.¹²⁰ There is a pathos in Friedrich's painting that mirrors Bernhard's engagement with themes of ecological destruction, articulating a sense of human aggrandisement which Nietzsche foretold: 'Hubris today characterizes our whole attitude towards nature, our rape of nature with the help of machines and the completely unscrupulous inventiveness of technicians and engineers'.¹²¹ This anti-modern purview became common within German Romanticism, leaving the movement indelibly linked to the *Heimat*.

The Burkean sublime equated violent, dramatic representations of nature with profound feelings of awe and danger, connecting the viewer to their own mortality via what Burke called a 'delightful horror'.¹²² Burke noted that 'terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the sublime'.¹²³ The 'iron frost' (267) that dominates Weng is connotative of such terror, for it is both 'implacably majestic' (41) and "pitiless" (41). It is the "death of men" (120). In this sense, the violent, all-consuming frost represents an example of the literary sublime that circulates within the novel's narrative, instilling a latent sense of dread that offers little in the way of aesthetic delight or pleasure.

Bernhard structures a paradoxical relationship between 'human' and 'environmental' (or 'animal') nature that redresses ontological distinctions between human and nonhuman, applying human characteristics to the land, and vice versa. Strauch points to an "exhausted nature" (159) and "the human animal[']s... false state of consciousness" (178), echoing Nietzsche's belief that resentment stems from humanity's 'obstructed' instincts', resulting from a 'forcible breach with his animal past'.¹²⁴ Humanity's sickness, Nietzsche claimed, arose from 'the prospect of an animal soul turning against itself'.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Joseph Leo Koerner *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), p. 13 (original emphasis).

¹²⁰ See, *Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer (Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog)*, 1817, Oil on Linen, 94.8 x 74.8 cm <<https://www.hamburger-kunsthalle.de/en/nineteenth-century>> [accessed 20 May 2023].

¹²¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 82.

¹²² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1756], in *Internet Archive* [online] <<https://ia800208.us.archive.org/16/items/philosophicalinq00burk/philosophicalinq00burk.pdf>> [accessed 19 April 2022] (p. 99).

¹²³ Burke, *Philosophical Inquiry*, p. 75.

¹²⁴ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 57.

¹²⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 57.

Strauch observes what he calls “unnatural” instances, thoughts or feelings, creating a discord between human and nonhuman essentialisms, repeatedly using the words “inhuman” and “inhumane” to reflect an almost cosmic, supernatural pessimism. Strauch’s metaphysical premise that “the end is nothing more than the nausea that a decomposed human causes” (316) gestures towards Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausée* (*Nausea*, 1938) and its concern with the fundamental contingency of human experience, otherwise known as ‘facticity’. Sartre defines this as ‘being in the world’,¹²⁶ or ‘being for itself’,¹²⁷ reflecting the objective contingency of human experience, while Martin Heidegger refers to facticity as ‘thrownness’,¹²⁸ eliciting the arbitrary nature of being thrown into a world beyond our control. Strauch’s facticity activates his resentment; while his existential conundrum, one of self-doubt and metaphysical anguish, is further aggravated by his natural surroundings, or in Heideggerian terms, his *Umwelt*.¹²⁹ The ‘criminal drive’ of nature, however, operates on a different scale to that of the human, which is foreclosed by the stain of Nazi atrocities. In a gesture that resonates with eco-critical thinking, as I have noted above, Bernhard reinvests the national-natural site (and implicitly, the Heideggerian *Umwelt* too) with cultural, psychic and environmental degradation.

Frost and Resentment as Posthuman Terror

Strauch exists in an almost abstract state of mental anguish, and as a result, builds an impenetrable cerebral fortress around himself that paradoxically denies the reality of the novel’s environs:

Oceans appeared to him as dark lunacy [...] drawing a line that mocks infinity [...] Abysses, black and hostile, causing a ripple down the spine [...] “pride,” “abandonment,” “strictness,” and “deadly solitude” were formed from his unconscious gestures. Memory [...] spurred him to astonishing mental feats. (78-79)

Strauch’s constitutional morbidity reflects the tenets of Nietzsche’s sufferers of resentment, indicating a type of grief or mourning that refuses to be assuaged. Strauch’s language and characterisation can be read through Nietzsche’s analysis of pain, and his

¹²⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* [1943], trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 68.

¹²⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 241.

¹²⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927] trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 174. Heidegger, a thinker renowned for his contribution to existential-phenomenological thought, but also for his support of the Nazi party, is lambasted in Bernhard’s novel *Old Masters*, referred to as ‘that ridiculous Nazi philistine in plus-fours’; ‘a feeble thinker from the Alpine foothills’, see *Old Masters* [1985], trans. by Ewald Osers (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 66-67.

¹²⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 84.

assertion that it performs as ‘the most powerful aid to mnemonics’.¹³⁰ Such ‘mnemotechnics’ are presented in *Frost* by way of the surrounding landscape, with reminders of human failings entombed in the earth. As noted above, Bernhard’s detailed descriptions of the upper Austrian landscape lead the reader to infer that the natural world depicted therein comes to represent an independent entity or body unto itself, one that bears the historical inscriptions laid upon it, one that has borne witness to historic brutality and horror. The mountains of Weng represent the final outpost of humanity, insofar as they represent subjective aporia, one only compounded by the existential, environmental and anthropomorphic ‘will to death’: “The river roars like a cow with its throat cut” (166). In an expression of what might be termed ‘posthuman resentment’, Strauch declares the pointlessness of the human, as it represents no source of immanent value in the consumptive processes of capital: “The human race was the unfruitful thing... it can’t be eaten. It isn’t raw material for some process outside itself” (264) and is simply determined by a wilful process of “self-extinction” (17). The umbrella term ‘posthumanism’ challenges notions of anthropocentric and humanist assumptions that originate in Cartesian dualism, which posits that meaning necessarily arises from human thought and language. Such thinking ultimately results in a hierarchy that establishes logic as superior to all other material phenomena,¹³¹ a logic that posthumanist thought works to oppose. It is a noticeably ecologically conscious mode of discourse and reflects the need to challenge assumptions about humanity’s place in the world. As Strauch puts it:

You just try to work out the big connections. Suddenly you look into the macro-structure of the world, and you discover it: a vast ornament of space [...] Where it takes art is to think small as well as big, to be present on every scale ... (23-24)

A posthuman resentment in this sense might describe a radical understanding of nonhuman subjectivities, through which the vector of resentment is applied as a means of interpreting the ways in which the natural world responds to human intervention, and the ways in which the human and nonhuman overlap.¹³²

The blurring between human and nonhuman agents is further expressed in Bernhard’s use of zoomorphic and chremamorphic language, in addition to his attribution of anthropomorphic qualities to the landscape, by way of pathetic fallacy: “The frost eats

¹³⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 38.

¹³¹ Howard Robinson, ed., ‘Dualism’, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online] <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/> [accessed 2 May 2023].

¹³² Jane Bennett argues that political economies must take nonhuman forces into account, spurring an analysis of nonhuman agency and the cultivation of a more ecologically aware mode of politics. See *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

everything up” (267). Workmen are described as “crawling around like ants” (81); people “running around this way and that (are) like vermin” (243); dead children are found in “petrified formations” in the ravines (73); and the glacier wind whirls people away “like a pile of dead leaves” (72). Strauch observes that “the humans are like animals” (71), though “the animals are better off: after all, what people would really like is a pig, not a kid” (29). Such grotesque irony reflects an ontological disparity between the human and nonhuman. He too, is described in such language by the narrator: ‘In the ravine, the painter often starts to skip. I notice canine qualities about him’ (247); a chance encounter with an unknown observer describes him thus: ‘the way you walk, it’s as though you were on deer hooves’ (256). Moreover, he himself equates his physical being with animality, “I look like some sort of grotesquely swollen insect!” (93).¹³³ In one scene, he is fully subsumed into the landscape: ‘The black of the tree stump... shaded into the black of the painter’s jacket, and... picked up by the black of the mountains’ (153). This process of subsumption hints at the profound effect of the physical environment on Strauch and alludes to a profound syncretism between his mental state and his surroundings. This image is replicated at the close of the novel, when, having left Weng, the assistant discovers via a local newspaper that Strauch is reported missing amidst ‘heavy snowfalls’ (342), thus intimating his icy demise. Strauch thereby enacts the ultimate existential denouement, as he is swallowed up by the landscape.

In the town of Weng, the categories of human and animal become interchangeable. Strauch refers on multiple occasions to the “primitive” drives of the local inhabitants and their tendency towards animality, while he himself is described as doglike by the landlady: “[s]he talks about me as if I were a dog” (20). This is compounded by the fact that the landlady is known to cook with dogmeat, an unspoken taboo. Moreover, Bernhard makes the reader aware of a threatening canine presence, as noted by the assistant in increasingly Strauchian language: ‘the long-drawn-out howling of dogs [...] [t]he endlessly drawn out howling and the sound of barking biting into it’ (146); a “canine hyperdespair” (162). Bernhard’s repeated descriptions of the sound of barking attest to the region’s primacy and the unpredictable force of bestial unreason, while perhaps intimating to the well-worn proverb ‘let sleeping dogs lie’.¹³⁴ Delving into this motif further still, the reader is

¹³³ This detail is reminiscent of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and alludes to Bernhard’s interest in the precepts of philosophical absurdity and absurd humour.

¹³⁴ This proverb has cognates in both German and French. See ‘Let sleeping dogs lie’, in *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* [online] <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199539536.001.0001/acref-9780199539536-e-2020>>, [accessed 16 June 2023]; and ‘Schlafende Hunde soll man nicht wecken’, in *The German-English Dictionary* [online] <<https://www.dict.cc/?s=Schlafende+Hunde+soll+man+nicht+wecken>> [accessed 16 June 2023].

reminded of Cerberus, the hound of Hades, guardian of the underworld, as well as the proverbial ‘black dog of depression’, figured in Albrecht Dürer’s *Melancholia I* (1514). With Bernhard’s continued references to the hellish landscape and its infernal naturalism, this reference seems apt; indeed, Cerberus is known as an allegory for the earth itself, as the insatiable ‘devourer of flesh’, the grave that is ‘ever ravenous, but never satisfied’.¹³⁵

Ecological Trauma: Landscape as Repository for Memory

Frost is set in the ‘hollow’ of Weng. It is described as an infernal, frozen abyss, a landscape that has been ‘buried among blocks of ice for millions of years’ (13), pocked by industrial pillage and human conflict, it is a cultural and moral lacuna. The village is described by the narrator as ‘the most dismal place I have ever seen’ (7), the “dirtiest corner of the world” (304). It is a mountainous landscape that can be read as a container of both human and nonhuman experience, with the valley existing as a wound upon the region that festers with raw, brutalising memory, one highly suggestive of a repressed subconscious. Thus, the environment acts as an allegorical pivot for my investigation into Bernhard’s expression of resentment, a concept premised on the retention and reactivation of negative affects.¹³⁶

In *Frost*, resentment’s psycho-specific apparatus corresponds figuratively to the burying of and repression of emotion, correlating with Bernhard’s descriptions of the buried and emergent remnants of history that are discharged from the landscape throughout the novel, including bodies and weaponry: “This war will never be forgotten. People will continue to encounter it wherever they go” (150). Katya Krylova, employing a psychotopographic approach, observes that Bernhard construes the landscape ‘as a symptomatic body that preserves the often-traumatic history of the communities and individuals that inhabit it’.¹³⁷ This topography represents a figurative outpost for the limits of the human and its dubious morality, while serving as a mnemonic for suffering and degradation. The topography is imbued with a corporeal substance, with its “mountains like rigid brains” (12) indicating a figurative counterpoint to Alaimo’s notion of trans-corporeality which defines ‘the corporeal substance of the human... [as] ultimately inseparable from “the environment”’.¹³⁸ The environs of Weng, ‘brutal’ (18) and ‘irregular’ (37) are pocked with ‘scraps’ of human limbs and organs that horrifically dot the

¹³⁵ David H. Brumble, *Classical Myths and Legends in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: A Dictionary of Allegorical Meanings* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997), p. 69.

¹³⁶ Of note here is the etymology of resentment which originates in the French *ressentir* which translates as ‘re-feeling’, suggestive of a return of memory and sensation, correspondent to Bernhard’s obsessive syntactical repetitions and thematic refrains.

¹³⁷ Katya Krylova, “‘Eine Den Menschen Zerzausende Landschaft’: Psychotopography and the Alpine Landscape in Thomas Bernhard’s ‘Frost’”, *Austrian Studies*, 18 (2010), 74–88 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41201232>> [accessed 31 January 2022].

¹³⁸ Alaimo, ‘Trans-Corporeal Feminisms’, p. 238.

landscape, ‘stiff hands and feet poking out of the pond’ (150). The human and nonhuman are thus conjoined in a grotesque union.

The bitter frost and snow simultaneously subjugate and preserve the landscape and its horrors, creating a sense of foreboding that corresponds to the deleterious effects of trauma and memory, evoking an atmosphere replete with “malevolent memory particles” (202). The snow is described as a ‘sea’, covering the barren landscape, reminding us once more of Friedrich’s inhospitable arctic scene. It conceals and reveals traces of its past at will, while its atmosphere ‘causes the heart to tighten, if not to stop altogether’ (12). Krylova states that it is ‘a landscape that is brutal and brutalising, pathological and pathogenic, provoking the same kind of behaviour in its inhabitants’.¹³⁹ This landscape represents a regional specificity constructed analogously as a site of both individual and collective experience, aiding in the construction of what Ireton terms an ‘allegorical locality’.¹⁴⁰ The topographical substrate intermittently peels back to reveal layers of historical memory, traces of past lives, and also, of war; regularly offering up physical traces of its past:

They stumbled across two hundred shot horses in the larch wood, which for several days had been spreading a nauseating smell that they hadn’t been able to trace, because the wind must have come from the opposite direction... “I had to work day and night. To separate the shot soldiers from the shot horses”. (106)

Krylova notes that such layering is suggestive of Freud’s understanding of the psycholinguistics of buried trauma and its inevitable resurgence.¹⁴¹ Ressentiment, as a ‘below the surface’ or subterranean affect might be analogised within the context of geology and the layering of experiential and historic substrate, as well as animal, vegetal and mineral life, denoting nature’s non-human subconsciousness. Strauch seemingly wishes to infiltrate this deep vein of pre-human history: “I want to try and plumb the thinking of the infernal tempest, the confusion of eras, Cambrian, Silurian, Carboniferous, Permian, Triassic, and Jurassic” (163). Relatedly, Améry describes ressentiment as an ‘involuntary resurgence’,¹⁴² suggestive of instances of repressed memory, mirrored perfectly in *Frost* when Strauch describes memory as “hundreds and thousands of ulcers, continually swelling up” (54-55). This metaphor for historical affliction is helpful in conceiving ressentiment as a form of redistributed, localised pain.

¹³⁹ Krylova, *Psychotopography*, p. 88.

¹⁴⁰ Ireton, ‘National Invective’, p. 210.

¹⁴¹ Krylova, *Psychotopography*, pp. 79-80.

¹⁴² Améry, *Mind’s Limits*, p. 59.

Instances of suffering are contained within the ice, emerging haphazardly within the narrative topos: “The war had left its grisly traces up and down the valley. Even today you keep encountering skulls or entire skeletons, covered over by a thin layer of pine needles” (149). Strauch details these findings to the narrator throughout the novel, drawing his attention to an almost endless cache of gruesome discoveries hidden within the valley: “‘Look!’ he said, and he lifted up the brushwood. There lay four or five deer, pressed together, frozen, with glazed eyes. ‘You’ll find refuges like this all over the place, they are always death traps when it’s as cold as it is this year’” (208). This habitat encourages perverse, ‘unnatural’ occurrences: babies in the town are born malformed, the region is “sodden with disease” (72) and strange environmental phenomena denote a morbid legacy of trauma in Weng’s inhabitants and a resentment towards nature itself. Even its atmospheric composition is described as deadly: ‘a climate that engenders embolisms’ (12), in which “frost disfigures all men” (120). This mutilated and mutilating nature compounds Bernhard’s resentment-inflected preoccupation with Austria’s wounds, metaphorical and physical.

Kehrseite: Inversion as Aesthetic Strategy

The literary topos of *Frost* is an inversion of the *locus amoenus* (‘pleasant place’), the rhetorical trope pertaining to the pastoral idyll. This conception of an idealised landscape is premised on a sentimentalised, even Edenic conception of nature. The *locus amoenus* epitomises a space of safety and comfort. In his depiction of Austrian rurality, Bernhard conversely frames a *locus terribilis*, which represents a site in which threat is ever-present. The landscape is incessantly aggressive, countering the classic pastoral notion of passive, bucolic space. The landscape is made conscious through its ability to engulf and consume life; it becomes vampiric, crushing the notion that nature might offer a space of reprieve. Instead, the landscape of *Frost* is untrustworthy, maleficent and perpetually deadly. Moreover, the symbolic purity of snow becomes violently tainted: “In the countryside, the paths are always sodden with blood” (203), inferring a moral and physical despoliation, in which this graphic image becomes symptomatic of human beings and their proclivities for violence:

I couldn’t trust my eyes, but the entire stream was full of blood! [...] ‘a wonderfully hurried rhythm of blood’ [...] (it was a first-class spectacle), the blood-red stream running through the white snow blanket. (297-298)

This image offers a stark visual contrast to what Lebert had previously called the ‘Nazi-brown landscape’¹⁴³ in his 1960 novel *Die Wolfshaut* (*The Wolf’s Skin*) which bears a striking resemblance to *Frost* in its treatment of the Austrian provinces. In this passage, like many in *Frost*, Bernhard is not simply ‘channelling the disturbed moral spirit of his time and place’,¹⁴⁴ as Stephen Dowden has suggested, but instead he is actively *challenging* it by distancing himself from what he sees as the brutality and failure of humanity, and its seemingly infinite urge to impose itself upon, and thus tarnish the beauty of the natural world. His disdain for humanity’s hubris reflects yet another facet of his expression of literary resentment.

The cryogenic temperature described renders the landscape barren and desolate, where “Everything has died. No minerals, no crops, nothing” (11). Such an environment represents a violent metaphysical state in which “everything turns into its obverse” (272). Bernhard employs the term ‘obverse’ three times throughout the novel, while he uses the word ‘opposite’ sixteen times. *Kehrseite*, in German, translates as the ‘turned side’, ‘reverse’ or ‘backside’. It can also refer to the darker, unpleasant aspects of one’s nature.¹⁴⁵ The use of this phrasing is significant in the context of resentment, which depends on a perspectival reversal, concerning the psychology of the Master-Slave dynamic, as well as Nietzsche’s broader theory of transvaluation, which is premised on the assertion that Christian religious practices are ‘hostile to life’,¹⁴⁶ and should be relinquished in order for the human drives to flourish, the result of his proposed ‘revaluation of all values’.¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche speculates on the value of generating a deeper understanding of morality by upturning the Western moral tradition, encouraging the embrace of ‘resolute reversals of familiar perspectives and valuations with which the mind has raged’ in order to ‘use the difference in perspectives and affective interpretations for knowledge’.¹⁴⁸

In *Frost*, the theme of inversion is evinced by Strauch’s assertion that everything in Weng is “inhumanly bestially elevated” (325). He refers to the mountain landscape as hellish, inverting notions of alpine purity, as well as the Christian cosmological assumption that elevation necessarily implies closer proximity to God: “Everything is hell [...] Above and below are hell here” (178). Bernhard develops this conceit by way of pathetic fallacy:

¹⁴³ Hans Lebert, *Die Wolfshaut* [1960] (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993), p. 112.

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Dowden, ‘Introduction: The Master of Understatement, or Remembering Schermaier’, in *Thomas Bernhard’s Afterlives*, ed. by Stephen Dowden, Gregor Thuswaldner and Olaf Berwald (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020) pp. 1–22 (p. 21). Bloomsbury ebook.

¹⁴⁵ ‘Kehrseite’ in The German-English Dictionary [online] <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/german-english/kehrseite>> [accessed 19 April 2022].

¹⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ* [1889/1895], trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 131.

¹⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Anti-Christ*, p. 135.

¹⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 87.

“The mountains, you see, are great witnesses to great pain,” said the painter... People always say: the mountain reaches up into heaven. They never say: the mountain reaches down into hell” (178). In this inverted semantic schema, there is a figurative corollary with Nietzsche’s ‘higher man’ Zarathustra, who after ten years living atop a mountain, declares ‘I must descend into the depths’,¹⁴⁹ before descending into the nearest town to deliver his revelation that ‘God is dead’. In this respect, descent symbolises intellectual and spiritual emergence.

Strauch contemplates the transposition of the corporeal and the spiritual: “human organs, which are the organs of heaven and hell [...] the infernal organs of the heights and the celestial organs of the depths” (163), offering an image of profane sublation. This infernal inversion relies once again on the use of pathetic fallacy, with which Bernhard blurs the distinctions between human and nonhuman, moral and non-moral, as the reader comes to understand this hostile, resisting terrain as a territorial outpost in which civilisation and its ethical moorings are decrepit, where “the moral becomes immoral... the forked tongue of nature you might say” (16), as Strauch proclaims. This is reflected in the assistant’s observation that ‘the ugly approaches the beautiful, and vice versa’ (12). Furthermore, Strauch recounts his own blasphemous inversion of the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father, who art in Hell, unhallowed be Thy name. No Kingdom come. Thy will not be done. On earth, as it is in hell” (225).

Bernhard’s thematic refrain of inversion corresponds to Georges Bataille’s notion of ‘base materialism’, which describes a theoretical system that celebrates the overlooked and the squalid, i.e. the ultimate anti-ideal. Such a praxis is tantamount to ‘the obstinate negation of idealism’,¹⁵⁰ by lowering all that is typically understood to be elevated. This theory too, is based upon an inverse logic that extolls the virtues of the ugly and the abject. Benjamin Noys suggests that base matter ‘remains to torment the high, to bring it back down into the low’.¹⁵¹ Bataille’s ‘base matter’ reflects a radical concept of opposition that challenges foundational thought resulting in a ‘terminal subversion’,¹⁵² that upends traditional hierarchies of value by way of a ‘disfigured dualism’.¹⁵³ Base materialism is therefore analogous to resentment’s conceptual invention of the slave revolt in morality which makes a virtue of weakness, as resentment’s transvaluative framework asserts

¹⁴⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1883], ed. and trans. by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ Georges Bataille, ‘Base Materialism and Gnosticism’, in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. by Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 45.

¹⁵¹ Benjamin Noys, ‘Georges Bataille’s Base Materialism’, *Journal for Cultural Research*, 2.4, (2009), 499-517 (p. 501) <DOI: 10.1080/14797589809359312501>.

¹⁵² Allan Stoekl, ‘Introduction’ in *Visions of Excess*, pp. ix-xxv, (p. xiv).

¹⁵³ Bataille, *Visions*, p. 47.

itself by negating the elevated master morality. As Bataille writes, base materialism ‘only submit[s] to what is lower, to what can never serve [...] a given authority’,¹⁵⁴ echoing resentment’s wilful drive.

Considering resentment as a theoretical framework for critical re-evaluation highlights the potency of negation as a means of subverting systems of power. In a cautionary note however, Helen Finch argues that ‘the recursive action of resenting can destroy the individual at the same time that it asserts individual dignity’,¹⁵⁵ illustrating the paradoxical capacities of resentment. A reclaiming of the negative does not logically necessitate a positive result – as Ahmed writes: ‘to claim willfulness might involve not only hearing the negativity of the charge but insisting on retaining that negativity: the charge after all is what keeps us proximate to scenes of violence’.¹⁵⁶ In this sense, we can understand the violence of resentment as that enacted upon the self, as a result of perennial negativity and gestures of negation (the logical and absolute conclusion to which would be nihilism).¹⁵⁷

By dwelling in the subjective territories of negative affect, and by repeatedly deploying certain characteristics that are indicative of the resentment-mindset, the individual is at risk of succumbing to what Scheler describes as ‘psychological contagion’;¹⁵⁸ this mode of being, however, comes to represent its own form of subversion, it being antithetical to accepted norms of Western morality. In this respect, we might understand resentment as a form of psychological base matter, given its traditional associations with a weak or enfeebled morality,¹⁵⁹ but one that revels in the power of the ‘lowly’ and the abject.

Bernhard explores a narrative panoply of ‘base’ matter and materials throughout the course of *Frost*. His keenness to describe blood, filth and squalor shows an embrace of the base qualities that comprise Bataille’s formation of base materialism, ‘an eternal reminder, and remainder, of all that threatens to drag down and ruin the ideal’.¹⁶⁰ We see this most keenly in Strauch’s obsession with the violence and crime committed in the region. His

¹⁵⁴ Bataille, *Visions*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁵ Helen Finch, ‘*Ressentiment* beyond Nietzsche and Améry: H. G. Adler between Literary *Ressentiment* and Divine Grace’, in *Rethinking Resentment*, pp. 71-87 (p. 73).

¹⁵⁶ Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 158.

¹⁵⁷ While Bernhard is certainly a pessimist, it would be remiss to suggest that his work is nihilistic (as suggested by Charles W. Martin in *The Nihilism of Thomas Bernhard: The Portrayal of Existential and Social Problems in His Prose Works* (Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 1995)), given his preoccupation with exposing moral wrongdoing, his iterations of aesthetic negation serving a heuristic function.

¹⁵⁸ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁰ Noys, ‘Bataille’s Base Materialism’, p. 500.

detailed explanation of a chance witnessing of livestock rustling is redolent of such base materiality:

What I now saw... was so horribly ridiculous: the heads and tails and midsections of cows... the chewed and shattered and sliced anatomy of dehumanisation... in among the scraps of meat, the stains of blood, the bone and cartilage and bowel, were signs of footsteps made by men and women. (299)

Further references to a base materiality can be seen in the subsidiary characterisation of the Knacker, who also ‘works as an undertaker [...] responsible for burying dogs and the cadavers of cattle and pigs, but also people’ (61). Here we see Bernhard exploring the notion of abjection and base matter through a visceral syntax. The intermingling of sacred and profane perfectly symbolises a Batailleian baseness, and is a workable aesthetic throughout the novel, epitomised by the Knacker’s grotesque song:

Through mouth and anus
The devil pulls his rope
The beast so pulled
Can give up hope. (145)

This celebration of the vulgar and the abject reflects Bernhard’s interest in what Bataille calls the heterogeneous,¹⁶¹ subjects and matter considered repulsive, other and expressive of forbidden impulses: ‘the *heterogenous* thing is assumed to be charged with an unknown and dangerous force [...] a certain social prohibition of contact (taboo) separates it from the *homogenous* or ordinary world’.¹⁶² Bataille seeks to liberate heterogenous impulses, those that ‘force or shock’,¹⁶³ as a practicable means of ‘overturning [...] the established order’.¹⁶⁴

Bernhard’s characteristic propensity to shock (and perform the role of social dissident) is performed through the character of Strauch. Strauch is a reveller in Batailleian heterogeneity and the monstrous: “When I saw the grisly chopped-up animals, I had to burst out laughing... Do you know what that means? It means horror demands laughter!” (302). Such an episode illustrates the emotional power and theatrical nature of abjection, the continued performance of which Strauch embodies. He is symbolic of a performative disavowal of the ideal: “where there is putrescence, I find I cannot breathe deeply enough” (277), recalling Nietzsche’s description of resentment as ‘man’s will to baseness,

¹⁶¹ Bataille, ‘The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade’, in *Visions*, pp. 91-105.

¹⁶² Bataille, *Visions*, p. 142 (original emphasis).

¹⁶³ Bataille, *Visions*, p. 143.

¹⁶⁴ Bataille, *Visions*, p. 100.

abasement, levelling, decline and decay'.¹⁶⁵ Strauch embraces this baseness willingly: "One keeps descending, among the low"... the finer traits of humans have always been repugnant to me... Periodically throughout my life, I have descended into the low, squalid world" (263). This imbues base materialism (and perhaps resentment) with a certain delight in provocation, and indeed, negation.

A Psychology of the Heimat: History and Its Taint

The bitter conditions and rural hardship represented in *Frost* invert typical pastoral tropes of a sacrosanct, aesthetically idealised landscape. In Weng, where "all the reference points have shifted" (164), a Nietzschean 'animal morality' takes over, unleashing the primal instincts of the human-animal. I suggest that resentment too, incorporates such notions of taboo, as a psychology or state of mind premised on questionable or unsanctioned morality that responds to existential crisis.

Ultimately, Bernhard's work is a provocation of the 'Catholic National Socialist spirit', that he identifies as 'a peculiarly Austrian form of mindlessness',¹⁶⁶ and what Lorenz calls 'the psychological wound of the Austrian mainstream'.¹⁶⁷ By constructing a rural space of alienation, catastrophe and violence, Bernhard upends idealised characterisations of the homeland, that were so deeply entwined with attempts to reframe Austrian national identity in the era of post-war reconstruction. The *Heimat* genre generally consists of idealised depictions of the homeland that glorifies rural life and morality, extolling the virtues of nature and cultural conservatism, and in the case of writers like Karl Heinrich Waggerl, was used as a tool to propagate Nazi sentiment.¹⁶⁸ Honegger equally refers to Bernhard's 'radical reaction against his rural environment, which had been exalted by Nazi poets for its "natural" beauty and healthfulness'.¹⁶⁹ In this sense, *Frost* represents what might be considered in the schema of post-war Austrian literature, the quintessential anti-*heimat* novel in the sense that Bernhard undermines the perceived safety of the rural idyll (in the case of *Frost*, the alpine town of Weng) by portraying a radically violent, resisting landscape that challenges parochialism and cultural fetishisation of the countryside, as well as broader ideological implications of a restorative, plentiful landscape associated with Austrian nationalism.

¹⁶⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 33. We observe here Bataille's debt to Nietzsche.

¹⁶⁶ Bernhard, *Extinction*, p. 145.

¹⁶⁷ Lorenz, 'The Established Outsider: Thomas Bernhard', p. 44.

¹⁶⁸ Joseph McVeigh, 'Das Bin nur Ich. Wenn Ich Es Bin: Politics and Literature in Austria after 1945', *The German Quarterly*, 61.1 (1988), 5–21 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/407113>>.

¹⁶⁹ Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard*, p. xiv.

Alpine-pastoral fetishisation became a symbolic trope for Austria's cultural regeneration and served as an opportunity for the Austrian government to reinvent international opinions of Austria in the cultural imagination as an 'Alpine Republic',¹⁷⁰ while also representing a commodifiable space open to tourism,¹⁷¹ the logic being that the alpine locus, one of great beauty and vitality, if branded correctly, might contribute to the shedding of Austria's negative reputation regarding its Nazi past.¹⁷² As Machlow notes, *Frost* was 'written at a time when the discursive construction of a uniquely Austrian national identity distanced Austrians from collective responsibility for German Nazism'.¹⁷³ This national self-deception is addressed recurrently in *Frost*, which defiantly rejects such narratives by 'soiling [Austria's] cherished Alpine region',¹⁷⁴ as Bernhard draws attention to Austria's 'climate of selective and deleterious amnesia'.¹⁷⁵ Deploying imagery pertaining to human-environmental pillage, as an analogy for nationally perpetrated atrocities, he performs as Judith Beniston puts it, a 'de-sublimation of public memory'.¹⁷⁶

Throughout *Frost*, Strauch berates the rural populace. Such hostility was not simply an expression of metropolitan elitism on Bernhard's part, but a critical response too to the *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil) ideology of Nazism that maintained farmers and rural peasants were the purveyors of racial purity and a unified national stock:¹⁷⁷

It's a grave mistake to assume that people in the country are of greater worth: country people, ha! Country people are the underclass of today [...] the country is degenerate, debased, so much more debased than the city! [...] Country people are just trash! And tell me now, what was ever so great about country people, about farmers? Were they so incomparable? Soil and inheritance, was that it? (165)

Nazi propaganda called for a return to the rural, as a corrective to the perceived threat of the city as a locus for multi-ethnic diversity. In portraying 'country people' as delinquent and dissipated, Bernhard is dismantling the symbolic propaganda of the *Heimat*, that co-opted rural space and morals as a political tool. As noted, Bernhard depicts a landscape that

¹⁷⁰ Katya Krylova, *Walking Through History: Topography and Identity in the Works of Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 9.

¹⁷¹ See Jon Hughes, 'Austria and the Alps', *Austrian Studies*, 18 (2010), 1-13 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41201228>> [accessed 22 June 2023].

¹⁷² Gundolf Graml, "'We Love Our Heimat, but We Need Foreigners'": Tourism and the Reconstruction of Austria, 1945–55', *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 46.3 (2013), 51–76 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24048738>> [accessed 19 April 2022].

¹⁷³ Machlow, 'Thomas Bernhard's *Frost*', p. 65.

¹⁷⁴ Konzett, 'National Iconoclasm', p. 13.

¹⁷⁵ Judith Beniston, "'Hitler's First Victim'? — Memory and Representation in Post-War Austria: Introduction." *Austrian Studies*, 11 (2003), 1–13 (p. 3) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27944673>> [accessed 24 January 2023].

¹⁷⁶ Konzett, 'National Iconoclasm', p. 11.

¹⁷⁷ Clifford R. Lovin, 'Blut Und Boden: The Ideological Basis of the Nazi Agricultural Program', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 28.2 (1967), 279–88 <doi.org/10.2307/2708423>.

is resistant to ideological and instrumentalist co-option, yet one that bears the mark of human atrocity. In an eerily apposite statement highly resonant with twenty-first century readers, Strauch notes:

The depredations of the forest are spoiling the balance of nature... If these human assaults continue in their present exploitative fashion for another hundred years or so, then wherever we look in the world, we will only see these ghastly scenes of dying forests. (206)

In his observations of environmentally destructive behaviours across the rural landscape, Bernhard is portending the *Waldsterben*, or ‘forest die-back’ that became a critical concern within Austria and Germany in the 1970s and 80s, which inspired an ecological movement of its own, bringing ecological disaster into the mainstream.¹⁷⁸ This subtext of ecological damage, by way of human intervention (“spoiling the balance of nature” (206)) imbues the text with an additional, if tacit suggestion of absent morality. In this sense, the landscape of *Frost* represents a threshold site, in which Weng is both a psychological and environmental outpost – a space between the human and the wild, one that is both wounded and wounding.

¹⁷⁸ Frank Biess, *German Angst: Fear and Democracy in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Online: Oxford University Press, 2020). Oxford ebook.

Chapter Two

Christine Lavant: Poet of Radical Negation

Ressentiment in the Lavant Valley

Christine Lavant was born Christine Thonhauser in St. Stefan in 1915, taking her literary pseudonym from her native Lavant valley in the Austrian region of Carinthia.¹⁷⁹ The ninth child of a miner and a seamstress, her early years were marked by poverty and illness.¹⁸⁰ She left school at the age of fourteen, and despite briefly enrolling at a local agricultural college, was unable to commit herself to schooling and physical work. She spent much of her life in varying stages of isolation as a result. Lavant was an avid autodidact with a profound cultural awareness despite her rural existence. She had access to a local lending library in the neighbouring town of Wolfsberg, where she discovered the works of Rilke, Hamsun, and Dostoyevsky.¹⁸¹ Due to lifelong ill health, she was excluded from the traditional roles associated with a woman of her position. She relied on knitting and repair work to earn a meagre living, until cementing her reputation as a writer upon publication of her collection of poems *Die Bettlerschale* (*The Begging Bowl*, 1956) at the age of forty-one. This followed her encounter with, and subsequent patronage by the prestigious literary publisher and writer, Ludwig von Ficker, who was the first to promote the work of Austrian poet Georg Trakl, a key influence on Lavant.

As Alexander Stillmark suggests, Trakl's work 'ran counter to the classical idea of beauty [and] derived inspiration from what is decadent, corrupt and morbid'.¹⁸² Lavant's work is similarly guided by a morbid inner logic that evokes powerful representations of rural tradition and Austrian cultural heritage. Appropriately, Lavant would go on to win the Georg Trakl prize for poetry twice, in 1954 and 1964, as well as the Austrian State Prize for Poetry in 1970, before her death at age 57. Despite these accolades, her name is little known outside of the German speaking world.¹⁸³

Lavant is often compared with Ingeborg Bachmann and Ilse Aichinger, both of whom were a part of the prestigious *Gruppe 47*, a circle of avant-garde writers writing in German between 1947-1967, who sought to challenge the literary and cultural patriarchy

¹⁷⁹ She adopted this moniker when publishing her first prose work *Das Kind* (*The Child*, 1945).

¹⁸⁰ Lavant suffered from scrofula, tuberculosis, pneumonia, insomnia, depression, impaired eyesight and near deafness.

¹⁸¹ Christine Lavant, *Werke in vier Bänden: Band 1: Zu Lebzeiten veröffentlichten Gedichte* (Work in 4 volumes, vol. 1: Poems published during her lifetime), ed. Doris Moser and Fabjan Hafner, with Brigitte Strasser (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014), p. 652 (Translated by Ernest Schonfield).

¹⁸² Alexander Stillmark, 'Introduction', in *Georg Trakl: Poems and Prose*, trans. by Alexander Stillmark (London: Libris, 2021), pp. xi-xx (p. xii).

¹⁸³ As a result, I have had to rely on the scant translations of Lavant's work into English for this research project, using Chorlton's *Shatter the Bell in My Ear* as my primary source for translations of Lavant's poetry.

of post-war Austria, using wit, irony and acerbic observation to critique the conservative politics of the Second Republic and its struggle to reinvent itself globally. Unlike these writers, Lavant was little known and often reluctant to make public appearances, as Waltraud Mitgutsch notes:

[She] did not belong to any contemporary literary school [...] She was not and did not want to become a public figure [...] she gave the impression of being a living anachronism [...] an ‘einfache Kräuterfrau vom Land’ (‘a simple herb woman from the country’).¹⁸⁴

This ‘simple herb woman’ lived a largely isolated existence, reading and writing poetry that captured the vivacity of her own inner world. She was married to the painter Joseph Habernig, thirty-six years her senior and a divorcé, making her something of a social pariah. Following her association with von Ficker, Lavant began to shed what might be described as a certain provincial naivety. In 1950, she met the painter Werner Berg, with whom she would enter into a tortuous love-triangle, and who would immortalise her in a series of striking portraits.¹⁸⁵

Lavant experienced intense phases of depression, attempting to take her own life in 1935. Following this episode, she was admitted into the Klagenfurt mental institution, an experience detailed in her prose work, *Memoirs from a Madhouse* (posthumously published in 2001), and which is analysed in my final chapter. Little is known of Lavant’s earliest work, for after a rejection from a publishing house in Graz in 1932 at age seventeen, she burned her poetry and took a hiatus from writing.¹⁸⁶ Shortly after the end of the war, she began writing again, often in feverish bursts that resulted in a vast output. The notion of rejection was to inform much of her later work, which is largely defined by raw expressions of subjective despair, angst and melancholy, and, as I will show, is manifest in her renditions of literary resentment. Her rural Catholic milieu was staunchly traditional and contributed to an overwhelming sense of confinement and frustrated agency that she funnelled into her writing. In her own words, ‘I considered my writing rage to be an illness that I had survived and that I never wanted to let arise in me again because it is not

¹⁸⁴ Waltraud Mitgutsch, ‘Hermetic Language as Subversion: The Poetry of Christine Lavant’, *Modern Austrian Literature*, 17.1 (1984), 79-107 (p. 79) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24647284>> [accessed 18 May 2022].

¹⁸⁵ See, Werner Berg, ‘Christine Lavant’, 1951, Oil on Linen, 55 x 35cm.

<https://www.wernerberg.com/werk/1951-christine-lavant-5-2369?tx_wbpictures_werkschau%5BbackPid%5D=57&cHash=041d30269f6296c026f52f638d2fee21> [accessed 3 June 2023].

¹⁸⁶ This detail is reminiscent of Strauch’s choice to burn all his artworks in *Frost*, and points to the ‘suffering artist’ trope.

appropriate for a poor person'.¹⁸⁷ This self-critical awareness that underpins her work (and which resonates with my analysis of ressentimental writing as a critical, rage-fuelled mode) stands as a rare expression of female working class subjectivity, a demographic rarely given voice in the cultural canon.

Lavant's poetry can superficially be (mis)interpreted as a naive, if not archaic example of devotional Christian verse. On the surface, her work is replete with references to theological piety, but this chapter will show that her writing challenges the inscriptions of rural-Catholic dogma by eliciting a profound and singular voice that challenged the social infrastructure of her community, to articulate 'the tormenting patience demanded by rural Catholic existence'.¹⁸⁸

There is a profound sense of destitution and disaster that permeates Lavant's work, one that is inarguably indebted to the cataclysmic imagery associated with Austrian Expressionism.¹⁸⁹ Her verse is infused with melancholy, mysticism and pastoral nostalgia, drawing heavily on an inherited Christian consciousness, that, as I argue herein, is intertwined with the theological concept of negative theology, which attempts to understand the divine by way of negation. By situating Lavant's defiant aesthetic praxis in the context of Nietzsche's philosophy of overcoming and Will to Power, I aim to show how Lavant channels her aesthetics of ressentiment by way of a defiant poetic schema of mystical pessimism, informed by her disillusionment with a God unable, or unconcerned with relieving her physical and mental suffering. Ressentiment therefore offers an appropriate model for analysing Lavant's expressions of theological anguish and spiritual resilience.

Lavant's Progressive Discourse and the Austrian Provinces

The Southern Austrian province in which Lavant resided was a space of rural, socio-economic deprivation and a predominantly agricultural landscape. The Catholic church was the focal point of provincial communities such as Lavant's, and throughout her life, the symbology and iconography of this religious tradition would remain evident and hugely influential in her work, as indicated by her repeated allusions to Christian symbols

¹⁸⁷ Lavant, *Werke*, p. 651 (Translated by Ernest Schonfield).

¹⁸⁸ Geoffrey C. Howes, 'Madness in the Landscape: Christine Lavant's Provincial Modernism', in *Beyond Vienna: Contemporary Literature from the Austrian Provinces*, ed. by Todd C. Hanlin (Riverside, California: Ariadne Press: 2008), p. 112-144 (p. 134).

¹⁸⁹ The Expressionist movement developed as a reaction to twentieth-century modernity, employing sentimental, pessimistic and sometimes violent themes to articulate a heightened sensitivity to the subject's interior world. Trakl was a leading figure of Austrian-Expressionist lyric style, and such themes are strongly conveyed in Bernhard's early verse (as noted on p. 23). As a register, lyrical *Schwermut* (melancholy) can be traced through German Romanticism and back to the early Christian tradition, describing a state of theological ennui.

such as the dove, the apple, the serpent, the bowl and the crucifix. This may explain why Lavant's work has therefore been described as aesthetically conventional,¹⁹⁰ rehashing traditional Christian poetics. For example, Margaret Littler describes Lavant's writing as 'fundamentally conservative, merely perpetuating repressive images of femininity reinforced in the Third Reich and subjected to no significant revision in the post-war years'.¹⁹¹ I would argue, however, that this is a reductive position, for despite what might be a superficial appearance of staidness due to the employment of certain generic motifs of traditional Catholic verse, she subverted this literary tradition typified by writers such as Christine Busta, Paula Grogger and Gertrud Fussenegger,¹⁹² to construct instead a highly nuanced interpretation of the subjective self-consciousness and its articulation as a site of resistance by way of her resentment-charged lyric. Such a position was a highly prescient, if not prognostic account of the aesthetic expression of historically repressed female identities. Clearly aware of the rigidity of rural class-consciousness, and what that meant for women, she remained both aesthetically and psychologically within the confines of the Carinthian peasant lifestyle.

Lavant gave herself the moniker of the 'root lady' ('Wurzelfrau'),¹⁹³ describing her lyric as a 'language of roots and stones',¹⁹⁴ a testament to the significance of the landscape within her mystical-aesthetic cosmos. This is worth considering in the context of Austria's social history, for the very idea of rootedness became tied to the National Socialist ideology of *Blut und Boden*, described in the previous chapter. A setting down of one's roots in the Heimat was inextricably tied to rural-agrarian communities, and inevitably conjoined with rural Catholicism. In contrast to this nationalistic notion of rootedness is Simone Weil's concept of *l'enracinement*, whereby she uses the metaphor of roots to convey the human need to grow a 'spiritual core'.¹⁹⁵ In contrast, *déracinement*,¹⁹⁶ or 'up-rootedness', refers to a specific type of social malaise that she saw originating in a collective detachment from one's sense of history and community. Rootedness in this sense

¹⁹⁰ Alysson Fiddler, 'Post-War Austrian Women's Writers', in *Postwar Women's Writing in German: Feminist Critical Approaches*, ed. by Chris Weedon (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1997), pp. 243 - 286 (p. 245).

¹⁹¹ Margaret Littler, 'Restoration and Resistance: Women's Writing 1945–1970', in *A History of Women's Writing in Germany, Austria and Switzerland*, ed. by Jo Catling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 169-189 (p. 172).

¹⁹² In contrast to these writers, Lavant's work shows no support for the National Socialist project. Those mentioned supported Hitlerism and authors such as Enrica von Handel-Mazzetti advocated book burnings and ethnic-nationalism.

¹⁹³ Lavant, 'The root lady crouches in the leek bed', in *Shatter the Bell in My Ear, Selected Poems of Christine Lavant*, ed. and trans. by David Chorlton (Fayetteville, N.Y.: The Bitter Oleander Press, 2017), p. 33. (Referred to hereon in as *STB*).

¹⁹⁴ Lavant, 'Among withering apple trees...', *STB*, p. 21.

¹⁹⁵ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* [1949], trans. by Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 295.

¹⁹⁶ Weil, *Roots*, p. 41.

is spiritual and social; and reflects the inseparability of the rural lifestyle from Lavant's cultural identity.

Lavant's adoption of a literary pseudonym implies a wish for anonymity, reminiscent of Nietzsche's 'every profound spirit needs a mask',¹⁹⁷ while her choice to cultivate the persona of the outcast Carinthian 'root lady' (despite her later trajectory into the Austrian literary establishment), illustrates both an unwavering adherence to her provincial identity, and the performative nature of self-display, which I discuss further in my final chapter.

Lavant's poems rarely allude to the wider world beyond what David Chorlton calls her 'personal orbit',¹⁹⁸ bearing out the assertion that her poems express her personal, defiant autonomy in spite of the forces of life stacked against her. One of the most intriguing aspects of Lavant's oeuvre is her evident endeavour to keep cultural and contemporary referents from entering this 'orbit'. Given that she lived and wrote through WWII, 'the modern world [...] is strikingly absent'¹⁹⁹ in her work, Howes observes. Indeed, Lavant's works are largely free from explicitly political impetus. Her avoidance of outspoken political commitment recalls Konzett's analysis of Bernhard, whose political stance is 'post-ideological in attributing social responsibility or irresponsibility to a society as a whole thereby avoiding complacent projections of ideological deficiency onto limited and clearly defined adversarial groups'.²⁰⁰ As Chorlton notes, Lavant 'learned the Christian message largely isolated from the social and political upheaval that followed World War I'.²⁰¹ Despite refraining from incorporating specific contextual socio-historic conditions, Lavant's work nonetheless politicises the domain of personal experience, as Mitgutsch remarks:

The society that Lavant grew into [...] did not have any role models for women other than those of being a housewife and mother [...] The only other acceptable function a woman could fulfil was religious devotion [...] Writing poetry in this environment was a self-conscious, self-indulgent preoccupation with herself [...] an act of rebellion, a no to the social demands prescribing a woman's activities.²⁰²

Lavant's poetry can therefore be understood within the context of a nascent gender politics that challenged socio-historical and religious conditioning. In other words, despite the

¹⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, p. 39.

¹⁹⁸ David Chorlton, 'Christine Lavant's Twisting Road to Heaven', in *STB*, pp. xi-xiv (p. xiii).

¹⁹⁹ Howes, 'Madness in the Landscape', p. 114.

²⁰⁰ Matthias Konzett, *The Rhetoric of National Dissent in Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, and Elfriede Jelinek* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2000), p. 26.

²⁰¹ Chorlton, 'Lavant's Twisting Road', in *STB*, p. xi.

²⁰² Mitgutsch, 'Hermetic Language', p. 81.

apparent apoliticism of Lavant's work, I would argue that it was inherently subversive due to its preoccupation with themes such as bodily insecurity, mental health, patriarchal oppression and the expression of female subjectivity. One might therefore consider that her work in the vein of proto-feminist discourse, as a precursor to modern feminist thought. Lavant's poetic voice rejects the subordination of women and the biblical prescription of woman as the source of 'Man's downfall', derived from the Edenic myth and the biblical narrative of original sin. Lavant instead explores gendered persecution, placing her own biographical narrative centre stage and resituating the levelling of guilt by confronting her tormenting creator.

At the same time, it is helpful to understand Lavant's work more broadly as a response to epochal crisis: her work sits at a juncture between late and post-modernity, borne from a period of increased secularisation, technological advancement and the atrocity of the Holocaust. This decisive shift saw centuries of human development being called into question, simultaneously challenging and offering a departure from her Catholic upbringing. In this respect, her work sits within the framework of critique mounted by writers including Adorno, Celan, Beckett, and certainly, Bernhard, who developed strategies to relay notions of profound existential pessimism through their own theory and poetics. In a similar vein, Howes posits that Lavant's poetry displays a conflict that 'mimics on an individual scale [...] one of the broad upheavals of European modernity: the failure of religion to provide comfort or make sense of the word and its suffering',²⁰³ resulting in a sense of spiritual alienation. Following Didier Fassin's view that, 'ressentiment results from a historical alienation',²⁰⁴ I too would argue that Lavant's resentment is just as much temporal as it is subjective, insofar as it is predicated on the social erosion of Christian faith in twentieth-century Europe. We might also observe the existence of a uniquely Austrian resentment that occurs due to national alienation from historical tradition and culture in the post-1945 cultural sphere, an alienation that is both subjective and social, and that recalls Bernhard's brutal, alienating landscape in *Frost*, his allegory for cultural and moral isolation.

Lavant's poetry expresses the anguish of her self-doubt and crisis of belief. As she put it: 'As long as I write I am happy, even if it often entails such difficulties that few can imagine [...] But writing is the only thing I have. It is my painful spot and at the same time the healing ointment. I laugh and weep about it, I worship and mock'.²⁰⁵ Such

²⁰³ Howes, 'Madness in the Landscape', p. 115.

²⁰⁴ Didier Fassin, 'On Resentment and *Ressentiment*: The Politics and Ethics of Moral Emotions', *Current Anthropology*, 54.3 (2013), 249–67 (p. 260) <<https://doi.org/10.1086/670390>>.

²⁰⁵ Lavant, *Werke*, p. 654.

metaphysical inquiry enshrines the tenets of Nietzsche²⁰⁶ and Bataille, while developing what Howes has called her ‘provincial modernism’.²⁰⁷ Although not *programmatically* modern, Lavant was a marginalised modernist who read and understood Trakl and Rilke, and whose poetic investigations and insights correspond to what might be considered archetypal modernist themes, such as loss, existential isolation, an emphasis on symbolism and the articulation of social-subjective fragmentation.

Blasphemous Poetics: Lavantian Ressentiment

Emphasising spiritual torment, Lavant’s poetics evoke a non-idealised vision of religious faith, its potential for disappointment and the attendant feelings of resentment that manifest in her ‘writing rage’, a phrase that encapsulates Lavant’s self-reflexive aesthetic loci. Her verse is solipsistic, employing an almost incantatory rhythm to highlight the suffering inflicted on her by a vengeful God. ‘[M]y memory sharpens all knives / on the memory stone’,²⁰⁸ Lavant writes, mirroring Nietzsche’s ‘a thing must be burnt in so that it stays in the memory’,²⁰⁹ describing the systematic willing of memory to retain a sense of hurt, a key aspect of resentment.

On a technical level, Lavant’s poetry is free from pretension, offering a stark contrast to the Austrian-Baroque tradition of Habsburg Regency, defined by its artistic ostentation, lavish grandeur and overstatement. She employs coarse language that reflects the microcosm of rustic existence, referring to her project as ‘Ein erzähltes Stück Leben’ (a narrated piece of life).²¹⁰ This biographical detail speaks to her evident tendency towards self-deprecation, a theme reflected throughout her oeuvre. Lavant represents a unique demographic when considered in the context of civil or religious disobedience due to her gender, ruralism and class-based situatedness. Accordingly, it is important to note the stridently recalcitrant ethos in Lavant’s writing. Her poetry, which appropriates and inverts clichéd conventions of devotional Christian verse, is transgressive, in as much as it contravenes social boundaries. For Kerstin Hensel:

The world of Christine Lavant is not wide, but deep: a point that is drilled to the very core of the creature. Having arrived in the depths, the creature stands before

²⁰⁶ Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* is a polemic against Christian morality itself, as the *root cause* of resentment.

²⁰⁷ Howes, ‘Madness in the Landscape’, p. 115.

²⁰⁸ Lavant, ‘I hear the heavy moon approaching’, *STB*, p. 47.

²⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 38.

²¹⁰ Francis M. Sharp, ‘Review of *Aufzeichnungen aus dem Irrenhaus*, by Christine Lavant’, *Journal of Austrian Studies*, 50.1 (2017), 193-195 (p. 194) <doi:10.1353/oas.2017.0035>.

God, who is absent. She desperately prays for his return, but what comes out of her mouth is shrill blasphemy.²¹¹

The implicit sense of helplessness and vulnerability is frequently counteracted by a sense of righteousness, conforming to the affective impulse of resentment, which follows a psychological pattern of reactive emotion in response to injustice. As Nietzsche puts it, ‘the seat of justice is found in the territory of reactive sentiment’.²¹² It is through this sometimes contradictory, if not paradoxical schema that Lavant’s performance of resentment is tied to expressions of autonomy and rebellion.²¹³

By activating affectively resonant biblical symbols, Lavant was able to tap into a profoundly accessible well-pool of poetic expression that can easily be misconstrued, and at the risk of being considered ‘merely religious poetry’.²¹⁴ Her resentment, as a focused psychic dynamic, allows her to revisit details and aspects of her life as a process of self-overcoming, with her poetry addressing a fundamental preoccupation with expressions of spiritual uncertainty, human finitude and theological contradiction. As Chorlton notes, ‘there was always tension and the realisation that spiritual reality was not the same as the version once broadcast from the pulpit’.²¹⁵ Through her vociferous opposition to a vengeful God, who is unforgiving and inordinately callous, Lavant was battling with the inherent contradictions of a religious framework that she had been taught to accept and that continually taunted her. Katrin Kohl has noted that Lavant’s poetry ‘does not strive for a secular teleology but enacts the failure of abstract teleologies to engage with human suffering’.²¹⁶ Her resentment recognises the absence of mercy, reflecting an embattled subjectivity (‘nobody can stand / going home with bruises on the brow / every night from the hill of prayers’²¹⁷). The expression of her resentment is performed through the negation of theodicy and attests to divine failure. Thus, her poems articulate her dissent.

²¹¹ Kerstin Hensel, ‘Die Gespenster der Lavant’, Afterword, in Christine Lavant, *Kreuzzertretung: Gedichte, Prosa, Briefe*, ed. by Kerstin Hensel (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992), pp. 113-22 (p. 113). (Translated by Ernest Schonfield).

²¹² Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 48.

²¹³ Lavant’s poetry in many ways was a precursor to what Sharp has called the ‘*Neue Subjektivität*’ (New Subjectivity) of the 1970s, when life-writing became prevalent in German-speaking literatures and authors began to address interiority and lived experience. See Francis Sharp, ‘Literature as Self-Reflection: Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke’, *World Literature Today*, 55.4 (1981), 603–07 (p. 603) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/40136299>>.

²¹⁴ Kerstin Hensel, ‘Er Schöpfung: Gedanken zu Christine ‘Lavant’, in *Profile einer Dichterin*, ed. by Arno Russegger and Johann Strutz (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1999), pp. 73-82 (p. 74).

²¹⁵ Chorlton, ‘Lavant’s Twisting Road’, p. xiv.

²¹⁶ Katrin Kohl, ‘Crying from the Depths: Religion and the Poet’s Voice in the Poems of Christine Lavant’, *Austrian Studies*, 12 (2004), 155–71 (pp. 170-171) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27944721>> [accessed 18 May 2022].

²¹⁷ Lavant, ‘Come closer, nobody can stand...’, *STB*, p. 109.

This instinctive pull towards critical analysis in Lavant's work reflects her engagement with negative theology (or apophasis), which describes a vein of theological thought that approaches the divine by negation, logically determined by what God is *not*. This concept represents a radical break from Christian orthodoxy, as it presents the believer with the absolute unknown, and subsequent possibility of ontological freefall. As William Franke and Chance B. Woods argue, 'since God is metaphysically anterior to the world of intelligible beings, no predicate deployed within human language is capable of circumscribing him within the limits of signification'.²¹⁸ Lavant's beleaguered invocations perform a defiant act: she articulates what her God isn't, but she takes the negation further still by transmuting these anxieties into vexation. The divine absence that so perturbed Lavant, led to her adoption of a style of negative poetics, that expresses the innate uncertainties of a negative theological remit, as seen in 'Help me sun, for I am almost blind!' (1959):

Come closer, take on shapes,
That we can yet grasp and recognise
By using our crude senses,
Even if praying is only desire.²¹⁹

What Lavant cannot obtain, she refutes: 'all the signs I once believed in / have long since faded inside me [...] I could follow through spiritual terrain / which has grown very stony and steep'.²²⁰ Recalling Nietzsche's revaluation of inherited moral values, Lavant expresses a renunciation of doctrinal thought that re-evaluates the conditions of her faith.

Lavant's Theological-Subjective Cosmos

Lavant repeatedly revisits certain themes, motifs and subjects in the same way Bernhard does; consequently, we can understand repetition as a formal feature of resentment, as a type of obsession, a preoccupation with a negative gesture that an individual preserves for the purposes of self-identification. When channelled productively, this resentment, per Lavant, becomes a potent awareness-raising exercise of the self, insofar as she revisits scenes from her lived experience, utilising them as a psychic tool for processing trauma, insecurity and doubt. Lavant does not simply wallow in negative affect, but employs her feelings of emotional distress to tap into a singular perspective that critically responds to personal woundedness. In short, it is subject forming, offering Lavant the possibility to

²¹⁸ William Franke and Chance B. Woods, 'Negative Theology', in *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, ed. by Anne L. Runehov and others, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), pp. 1443–1450 (p. 1443). Springer ebook.

²¹⁹ Lavant, *STB*, p. 69.

²²⁰ Lavant, *STB*, p. 69.

invert the Christian notion that believers must give themselves up to God, as Lavant reclaims *herself*.

Lavant's poetry oscillates between obstinacy and demoralisation, expressing the realisation of a faith-based moral vacuum, which, as Mitgutsch claims, is defined in relation to a God who is 'too often a cruel and demonic tyrant who takes rather than gives life'.²²¹ Lavant's emotional and spiritual battle with an absent father figure is highly redolent of the Freudian 'father complex'.²²² In Freudian psychoanalysis, this term refers broadly to negative impulses directed towards a male role model, though Lavant's paternal address might be more accurately conceived in relation to James Herzog's conception of 'father hunger',²²³ or longing for an absent father, linking Lavant to Sylvia Plath. Both Lavant and Plath address themes of social entrapment, depression and victimisation. In fact, Plath too might be described as a poet of resentment, insofar as she employs a form of 'writing rage' as a modality of her poetic voice, one that originated in a profound sense of hurt, and that subsequently acted as a motivating force in her own struggle for autonomy. Their respective works display a synergy: both inhabit the tropological voice of the angry daughter, pivoting between love and hatred, dependency and independence, responding to the restrictive authority of the domineering father figure: in the case of Lavant, this is God the Father; for Plath, it is her family patriarch.²²⁴ This pattern emphasises resentment's constitutional relationship to power, indicative of the 'entrenched hatred and revenge [with which] the powerless man attacks his opponent'.²²⁵ Ensnared in a cyclic process of rejection and acceptance, this dialectic reflects a complex psychology of contradictory forces, and in psychoanalytic terms, reflects a regressive tendency, a return to the state of childhood, as a willed defence mechanism through which the individual returns to an earlier stage of development, often one associated with childhood innocence. I would hasten to add, however, that this study does not aim to psychologise Lavant, nor does it claim that resentment offers any kind of cure to emotional woundedness: resentment does not represent a reductive, simple path to recovery, rather, it represents an open-ended embrace of the psychological territory of negative affect. This project recognises the motivating force of rage, its relationship to

²²¹ Mitgutsch, 'Hermetic Language', p. 79.

²²² Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* [1913] (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1919), pp. 233-259, in *Internet Archive* <<https://ia800909.us.archive.org/4/items/totemtabooresemb00freu/totemtabooresemb00freu.pdf>> [accessed 13 June 2022].

²²³ James Herzog, 'Father Hunger and Narcissistic Deformation', *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 73.4 (2004), 893-914 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2004.tb00187.x>>.

²²⁴ See Plath's poem 'Daddy' from the posthumously published collection *Ariel* [1965] (London: Faber & Faber, 2010), p. 48.

²²⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 20.

dignity and justice, and the ways in which affect's relationship to power constitutes and regulates the psyche. Hence, resentment can be understood as both an ethical injunction, a 'self-will' that operates in the grey area between agency and subjection. Both Lavant and Plath explore the psychological mechanisms of anger, and how they might be reclaimed in the name of personal sovereignty. Judith Butler states, 'power not only acts on a subject but [...] enacts the subject into being'.²²⁶ Situating woundedness as a space of vulnerability and possibility, Lavant and Plath explore the psychological damage inflicted by an oppressive male figure, severing their attachment by way of symbolic patricide, their literary method of revenge.

Referring once again to the poem 'Help me sun, for I am almost blind!', Lavant generates a dialogic intimacy via conscious use of the first and third person pronouns, with her supplicatory diction alluding to a latent, incestuous eroticism, emblematic of her incorporation of a Christian-mystical register: 'Come closer, take on shapes / that we can grasp and recognise / by using our crude senses / even if praying is only desire / I desire now [...] nothing but sleep, in which you hold me'.²²⁷ Christian mysticism has long been associated with erotic subcurrents, as seen in the writings of Margery Kemp for example,²²⁸ whose sensual visions of her entwinement with Christ denote a deep spiritual connection, representing marriage between God and the soul. We can see a similar eroticism in Lavant, whose God becomes the unattainable object of her desire. This inflects her resentment with a kind of perverse obsession that twinkles with a sublimated sexuality. A 'Holy-Fatherly' *lack* however, is realised when her prayers go unanswered, and is tied to the intense feelings of humiliation and abandonment of a toxic relationship. This love-hate dynamic casts her existentially adrift. This results in a Nietzschean internalisation and sharpening of her negative affects, manifested in a latent sense of frustrated desire, resulting from divine rejection – as she writes in 'Then don't wake me up, send me every nightmare!': 'only my own heart gives me trouble / it is like lead since you no longer desire it'.²²⁹ The notion of desire is twofold in Lavant's poetry, correlating to both a desire for recognition, and the eroticism evinced by her construction of imaginary, intimate encounters with a divine presence. Lavant's poetry therefore articulates the gap between divine and corporeal selves, emphasising the unbridgeable gulf between body and spirit, between idealised faith and harsh reality. Her poetry can be understood, then, as

²²⁶ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 13.

²²⁷ Lavant, *STB*, p. 109.

²²⁸ Tara Williams, 'Manipulating Mary: Maternal, Sexual, and Textual Authority in The Book of Margery Kempe', *Modern Philology*, 107.4 (2010), 528–55 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/652270>>.

²²⁹ Lavant, *STB*, p. 105.

striving for theological-existential symbiosis, while ironically emphasising the gap between the human and the divine.

As we have seen, Lavant's work contains an inherent contradictoriness, one that reflects the paradoxical nature of resentment, as evinced in the poem 'I hear the heavy moon approaching...', from her 1959 collection *Spindel im Mond (Spindle in the Moon)* in which Lavant deconstructs traditional gender categories to convey a uniquely female agency. In this tightly constructed poem, Lavant addresses the notion of spiritual violence that she equates with the male creator she is beholden to:

I hear the heavy moon approaching,
I hear shallow sleep departing,
My memory sharpens all knives
On the memory stone.

Five crows pick the poppyhead empty,
A viper drags its crown away
And resting in the heart's hollow
The seeds carry sleep.

Piously and steeled, the little knives sing:
We will slaughter the fat moon,
We will skin the insolent snake
And clean the sorrowful bowl.

I hear the heavy moon approaching,
I hear the thin creature hiss,
Five brave birds transplant
The heart in memory.²³⁰

Manipulating linguistic nuance to evoke an allusive scene of illicit love, Lavant employs metaphorical imagery of both a personified viper and poppyhead to evince a disturbing sexual union, with resounding biblical echoes. The serpent represents Satan in Catholic scripture and his capacity to infect the mind and soul with doubt, connoting corruption and defilement. Lavant exploits this motif to invoke a sacrilegious union that contravenes the doctrinal notion of sex as a unitary act. Lavant toys with the gender of German nouns to invert the stereotypically gendered roles of procreation: the image of the snake, associated symbolically with the phallus, is feminine: ['eine Kreuzotter'], whereas the poppyhead ['den Mohnkopf'], with its seeds ['den Samen'] is male.²³¹ The fact that the viper strips the male poppyhead of its petals, rendering it bare, represents a subterfuge of female agency,

²³⁰ Lavant, *STB*, p. 47.

²³¹ See original: 'Fuenf Krähen fraßen den Mohnkopf leer / seine Krone schleppt eine Kreuzotter fort / und beschläft in der Herzmulde träge / den Samen des Schlafes', *STB*, p. 46 (translated by Ernest Schonfield).

one capable of undermining the male agent, by liberating its crown. By assigning uniformly male qualities to the female stand-in (the viper), Lavant inverts normative gender dynamics, to evince the strategy of inversion, recalling Bernhard's topographical inversion in *Frost* 'the moral becomes immoral... the forked tongue of nature you might say'.²³² The poem begins with 'the heavy moon approaching', suggesting nightfall. The female viper represents a dark and mysterious force, capable of deflowering the male poppyhead, as it 'drags its crown away', the reader becomes aware of a sinister logic of images. Such binaristic imagery sets up a dialectical freeze-frame of power and submission, emblematic of resentment's structuration as a dynamic predicated on a power imbalance between Master and Slave. The viper, emblematic of sin and temptation, penetrates 'the heart's hollow', conveying a perverse eroticism. Chorlton's translation renders the viper as 'resting in the heart's hollow', though the verb 'beschläft', which, when translated literally means 'to sleep with', conveys a more explicit sexual coupling. The viper commingles with the 'seed of sleep', with Lavant drawing allusions to the procreative act, and germination, as well as her own chronic insomnia.²³³

'The heart's hollow' in the second stanza represents a void, mirrored in the following stanza by the 'sorrowful bowl' of Chorlton's translation,²³⁴ and represents a spiritual chasm that opens within the self, a spiritual aporia and a mark of theological disbelief. This ravaged space where the heart should be, denotes a physical and spiritual emptiness, symbolising Lavant's deific abandonment, one of the primary coordinates for her resentment. Lavant lifts the veil from spiritual fidelity by making visible the contradictions of religious devotion, revealing the mercilessness of an absent god who has refused to make himself visible to her. This suffering is conveyed in the form of painful, combative memories: as 'shallow sleep' departs, her memory 'sharpens all knives', as 'the little knives sing', implying a sharp pricking of painful recollection, corroborating the assertion that resentment is premised on the revisiting of sites of (painful) memory.

Deus Absconditus and the Reclamatory 'I'

Confronting the absent presence of *deus absconditus*, or hidden God, Lavant's poems exist as a vector through which she seeks to *restore* her spirituality, but one that is increasingly secular, as she reconsiders the importance of the self. This renders her poetic output as a

²³² See Chapter One, p. 36.

²³³ Her poems frequently convey a liminal state, one that perhaps represents a purgatorial space of suffering, whilst also alluding to the subconscious world of dreams, suggestive of the surrealist canon. Other examples include her poems 'Do not ask, what cuts through the night' (*STB*, p. 93), and 'Because I leave my spirit...' (*STB*, p. 53).

²³⁴ Which may also be translated as the 'sorrowful' or 'pitiful hollow' [die klägliche Mulde].

form of world-making, one that defies the divine absence by making meaning for herself outside of Christian orthodoxy. As Lavant feels unseen in the eyes of God, her resentment is invoked in the form of poems that take on the tone of imprecatory psalms, religious verse traditionally used to challenge and invoke judgement against non-believers. These imprecations challenge and curse her absent God, while simultaneously appealing to his higher power, creating an intentional paradox that evokes ontological insecurity.

It is the tone of imprecation however, that I most identify with Lavant's deployment of a willed, or wilful resentment, an active defiance that resituates negative affect and heightens it, as a negative-aesthetic strategy; *psalms of qualm*, so to speak. This imprecatory voice embodies a Schelerian 'expression of vengeance against the agent held responsible',²³⁵ and operates as an invective that denotes Lavant's agency in the face of divine cruelty, establishing her poetic voice as an oppositional force in an ongoing appeal of contestation. Her resentment can be understood as a critical gesture of subjective resistance: a recognition of the self that repurposes grievance, the genesis of which, I argue, springs from her faith-based resentment, indicative of a spiritual and subjective reawakening found at the core of her poetic creation. The praxis of Lavant's aesthetics of resentment is distinctly captured in the title of her posthumously published collection '*Kunst wie meine ist nur verstümmeltes Leben*' ('Art like mine is only mutilated life').²³⁶ Referred to frequently within this chapter, this collection takes its title from a letter written to her friend Gerhard Deesen in 1962,²³⁷ and reads like a statement of her poetic intent, signalling a kind of manifesto for her aesthetics.

If Lavant's declaration of divine negligence and cruelty is to be understood within the context of resentment, as a lack of spiritual assurance, and the realisation that spiritual subservience as a de facto means to salvation is untenable, she nonetheless continues to explore the possibility of *deus revelatus* (the revealed god) as her unfulfilled desire, and as the apotheosis of subjective vindication and divine compassion. This resonates with Lauren Berlant's definition of 'cruel optimism', as the state in which 'something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing', cruel because 'the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially'.²³⁸ In this sense, the thematic trajectory of Lavant's oeuvre alludes to the impossibility and insecurity of theological belief systems, that can leave the individual decentred and misguided. This existential predicament is one that she ultimately seeks to overcome, in favour of a defiant

²³⁵ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 29.

²³⁶ Chorlton's translation opts for 'stunted' rather than 'mutilated', somewhat detracting from the violence of the sentiment.

²³⁷ Lavant, 'March 27th of 1962 to Gerhard Deesen', in *STB*, p. 117.

²³⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 1.

and wilful *becoming*, cultivated through the activation and exploration of her resentment, as evinced in the poem, ‘I want to share bread with madmen’: ‘For so long, I lived as a stone / at the foundation of things / but I heard the bell speak / quietly of your secret / among flying fishes / I shall learn to fly and swim / and leave stone among stones’.²³⁹ This moment describes a radical transformation. The shift in imagery from a figurative heaviness to one of weightlessness describes a juxtaposition, one that reflects her desire to escape from the physical confines of the body and its limitations, and from the socially restrictive impositions of her class and gender, representing a violent but defiant self-abnegation.

Lavant displays a tendency to self-deprecation, manifest in her frequent use of self-abasing language across her poems (she describes herself as ‘a little tuber’,²⁴⁰ who wishes to ‘achieve rank nowhere’;²⁴¹ who ‘tossed my heart above me / it was still worth feeding to the dogs’.²⁴² This emphasis on self-minimisation is related to the Christian-philosophical doctrine of Quietism, which espoused passivity and self-shrinking in order for the soul to dissolve into unconditional spiritual union with the divine. This philosophy worked towards a dissolution of the will as the ultimate sacrifice. Lavant’s poetry might be interpreted as an aesthetic attempt to dissolve the self into verse, similar to Simone Weil’s notion of *decreation*, an act of subjective dissolution in which the self necessarily sheds the ego to amalgamate with God. Lavant inverts this figurative display of Christian humility, however, reiterating her singularity, making emphatic use of the first-person pronoun. Her ‘I’ instils in her work a blasphemous streak, as it circumnavigates hubristic expressions of pride that renounce Christian humility. Lavant’s embrace of the ‘I’ represents a strategic emphasis on her individual agency: ‘But even blind, I would still / know everything’.²⁴³ For Weil, ‘[w]e possess nothing in this world other than the power to say ‘I’. This is what we most yield up to God’,²⁴⁴ Lavant contrarily retracts her devotional ‘I’ as a means of reclaiming her subjective sovereignty: ‘I no longer wish to sleep thirsty / I never wish to train / my cursing throat with vinegar to pray’.²⁴⁵ Her ‘I’ is often indicative of a one-sided, resenting dialogue with a non-responsive Other. The ‘I’ exists as an immanence of self and becomes Lavant’s existential domain, through which she explores her woundedness,

²³⁹ Lavant, *STB*, p. 65.

²⁴⁰ Lavant, ‘The root last crouches in the leek bed...’, *STB*, p. 33.

²⁴¹ Lavant, ‘What a panic-stricken night!’, *STB* p. 57.

²⁴² Lavant, ‘Ever closer to the Milky Way’s edge...’, *STB*, p. 55.

²⁴³ Lavant, ‘Who will help me starve tonight’, *STB*, p. 51.

²⁴⁴ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* [1947], trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 26.

²⁴⁵ Lavant, ‘Buy us a grain of reality!’, *STB*, p. 101.

anxieties and vulnerabilities, while at the same time holding patriarchal authority to account. She shifts shape, changing from the victim into the accuser.

Lavant was able to construct a unique poetic critique that harnessed her negative affects, relaying them as an act of wilfulness and theological subversion. Her subversive power, I argue, lies in this recurrent, wilful application of the first-person singular, the lyrical and individuated ‘I’ that rejects social custom, thus reflecting Adorno’s assertion that ‘the lyric work is always the subjective expression of a social antagonism’.²⁴⁶ By framing the wilful ‘I’, Lavant asserts her intentionality. Lavant’s resentment is thereby constructed within the remit of the confessional mode, operating simultaneously as self-therapy and spiritual rebellion, embodying a poetic antagonism that articulates her beleaguered subjectivity.

Howes contends that ‘[t]he “I” in many of Lavant’s poems finds in madness an intimation of transcendence, a whiff of secular ecstasy’.²⁴⁷ Indeed, much of the existing literature on Lavant fixates on the ‘poet’s madness’ (a trope that has its own aesthetic genealogy),²⁴⁸ exploiting her illness to construct an image of the mystical madwoman. This reductive stance undermines Lavant’s work, implying a lack of autonomy and connoting a poetic voice that comes not from within, but from an external, even divine space. As Ursula Schneider puts it, ‘da man Gottes Willen nicht logisch erfassen kann, ist das Schaffen der Mystikerin [...] nicht logisch erklärbar’ [‘since one cannot grasp God’s will logically, the creation of the mystic is [...] not logically explainable’].²⁴⁹ Schneider’s statement is echoed by Howes, for whom ‘Lavant’s lyrical alter-ego yearns to go mad, for this would mean a loss of painful individuation and isolation’.²⁵⁰ This stance undermines Lavant’s literary dexterity, for even though she presents a vulnerability within her works, she explores it as an expression of existential displacement, and self-reflective investigation. In her memoirs she writes ‘My subject matter will be the art of going crazy’.²⁵¹ Thus, her ‘painful individuation’ is wilfully harnessed, her isolation utilised as an expression of her lived experience, and therefore not something passively endured that coincidentally led her to create such powerful work: ‘Although Heaven turns into a coffin

²⁴⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1* [1958], trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 45.

²⁴⁷ Howes, ‘Madness in the Landscape’, p. 117.

²⁴⁸ See Chapter Three, p. 82.

²⁴⁹ Ursula Schneider, ‘Christliche Dichterin oder Hexe? Christine Lavant in der Rezeption’, in *Das Geschlecht, das sich (un)eins ist?* ed. by Sieglinde Klettenhammer and others (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2000) pp. 142-159 (p. 150) <<https://www.uibk.ac.at/brenner-archiv/mitarbeiter/links/schneider/christliche-dichterin-oder-hexe-2000.pdf>> [accessed 5 August 2022].

²⁵⁰ Howes, ‘Madness in the Landscape’, p. 120.

²⁵¹ See Chapter Three, p. 97.

of lead / and the Earth is made stone to your behest / my soul maintains its strength'.²⁵²
This strength resides in her wilful protestations, manifest as a rage that never abates, and that demands justice.

Ressentiment: Psycho-Mechanics

By interrogating the cause of her suffering, Lavant's resentment produces a surplus of affective force, akin to what Julia Kristeva describes as a form of 'excess', a 'torrent of passion',²⁵³ formed from the cathexis ascribed to her creator. In the poem 'An die Ahnen', ('To the Ancestors'), Lavant uses the phrase 'dunklen Übermächten' (dark powers),²⁵⁴ evidencing the primacy of resentment's psychic underside. Redirecting her moral compass, Lavant turns towards the gates of hell. Catholic spiritualism refers to the 'dark night of the soul': a sense of existential anguish that accompanies a profound sense of meaninglessness in spiritual crisis. Lavant occupies this volatile emotional territory, inscribing herself with the wounds of her past, in order to seek vengeance rather than mercy, dwelling in what Nietzsche calls 'the evil zone'.²⁵⁵ She is not *becoming* evil, rather, she is channelling theodicy-based doubt by inhabiting a deviant space of pure negation, as she writes 'Und ob ich der Engel dunkelster würde'²⁵⁶ ('and if I would become the darkest angel'). Her poetry is sourced *de profundis*, out of the depths of misery and dejection, but in a transvaluative shift, transforms this pain into a profane gesture. This profane inversion from subjective supplication to retaliatory threat shows the immanence of what Bataille called the 'dark and malefic sacred',²⁵⁷ the antithesis of a redeeming holy sanctity. In 'Come and lay scourge in the grass', Lavant writes, 'I will teach you to play with my bones!'/ [...] / Never say I didn't warn you!'.²⁵⁸ This defiance becomes Lavant's self-constitution, harnessing what Lee Spinks identifies in Nietzschean resentment, as the 'reactive and resentful denial of higher life [that] begins to create its own moral system and vision of the world'.²⁵⁹ Her challenge to a supposedly omniscient Other is based on her refusal to accept her circumstance; instead, she indicts the architect of her plight. She destabilises the hierarchy that elevates the divine from the human, leading von Ficker to

²⁵² Lavant, 'Although Heaven turns into a coffin of lead...', *STB* p. 91.

²⁵³ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 177.

²⁵⁴ Christine Lavant, *Gedichte*, ed. by Thomas Bernhard (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), p. 17.

²⁵⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 35.

²⁵⁶ Lavant, *Gedichte*, p. 11.

²⁵⁷ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* [1973], trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989), p. 72.

²⁵⁸ Lavant, *STB*, p. 113.

²⁵⁹ Lee Spinks, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 96-97.

term her poetry as ‘Lästergebete’ (blasphemy prayers),²⁶⁰ reflecting the dialectical tension that exists between prayer and cursing, the latter of which becomes one of her key registers. For Lavant to commit her insecurities and doubts to paper was to partake in iconoclasm: ‘Lay the whip in the grass / and never tease me in the name of hope!’.²⁶¹ In other words, Lavant’s presentation of resentment is indelibly tied to the notion of blasphemy, generating a form of resistance that challenges the traditional spiritual *modus operandi*, one that dares to question, and to hold a grudge.²⁶² Lavant referred to her poetic practice as ‘a sin against the spirit, unforgivable’,²⁶³ showing the extremity of internal conflict that she felt when expressing her authentic self. It is this dialogue of blame that constitutes the resentment tenor of moral injury, insofar as it ‘rehabilitates the will not to forget and not to pardon’,²⁶⁴ per Fassin, one that illustrates both Lavant’s bravery and the ferocity of her anger.

An understanding of Lavant’s profanity, could extend to the notion that there exists a certain pleasure in hating: the joy of violating the divine contract that equates to the Catholic-theological notion of *delectatio morosa*, or pleasure taken in sinful thoughts. In ‘Although Heaven turns into a coffin of lead...’ (1962), she unmasks her forbidden knowledge:

Inside my solitude, a secret has long
been in circulation
And disguises its various lights
[...]
Illuminated, surely, there remains
Only the place where you set up a purgatory
Foreign to both Heaven and Hell
And where God never meddles.²⁶⁵

Lavant’s poetic *jouissance*, as we might call it, thus points to a certain taboo, a transgressive delight taken in her divine resentment; a certain delight in hating, even a masochistic pleasure taken in suffering. It is in this sense that resentment, as the inhabiting of a deviant psychological habitus, becomes most evident, and within is located a form of libidinal investment or cathexis: an allocated emotional fixation on the *deus absconditus*. In this sense, I read Lavant’s resentment in the context of abjection,

²⁶⁰ Kohl, ‘Crying from the Depths’, p. 157.

²⁶¹ Lavant, *STB*, p. 113.

²⁶² Indeed, Taylor suggests that her poetry is ‘closer to Lucifer than to God’: see Andrew Taylor, *Miracles of Disbelief: Selected Poems from the German of Ingeborg Bachmann, Christine Lavant, Ursula Krechel, Sarah Kirsch*, ed. and trans. by Andrew Taylor and Beate Josephi (Canberra: The Leros Press, 1985), p. 2.

²⁶³ Lavant, ‘Letter to Gerhard Deesen’, in *STB*, p. 117.

²⁶⁴ Fassin, ‘On Resentment and *Ressentiment*’, p. 253.

²⁶⁵ Lavant, *STB*, p. 91.

evidencing what Kristeva calls ‘voluptuous suffering’.²⁶⁶ Lavant repossesses her traumas, creating a poetic output for her anguish, from which an embodied, transgressive pleasure emerges; in Kristevan terms, ‘a power, a sensual pleasure’.²⁶⁷ This notion evokes the words of Dostoevsky’s subversive ‘underground man’, who in the biting *Notes From Underground* (1864), observes ‘the pleasure of despair [...] it is in despair that the most burning pleasures occur, especially when one is all too highly conscious of the hopelessness of one’s position’.²⁶⁸ This theme is particularly evident in Lavant’s poem ‘Shatter the bell in my ear’ (1959). Here, Lavant uses a tight verse structure consisting of three quatrains, linked by a thematic echo in the concluding line of each stanza that refers to the notion of arrested development. The violent onomatopoeia of [‘Glocke’]²⁶⁹ (bell) and aggressive diction of the opening line mirrors Lavant’s psychological state, engaging the reader in a resoundingly sensory poem that describes the elemental destruction of Lavant’s corporeal faculties: ‘Shatter the bell in my ear / slash the knot in my throat’. In doing so, Lavant explores a correspondence between subjective and objective attributes to outline an inherent tension between the metaphysical and the corporeal:

Shatter the bell in my ear,
slash the knot in my throat,
warm my strangled heart
and ripen my eyeballs.

I came stunted from the womb.
O, had you thrown me to the sun
and to the dogstar at night! - Your tenderness was to blame,
that I hastily rummaged where the fire had been.

Who has extinguished my Earth too early?
There the bell would have been melted down,
the knot burned and my heart set aglow;
my eyeballs would now have a core.²⁷⁰

Each line reads as a demand, and the poem oscillates between melancholy and defiance, as desolation gives way to an outpouring of vituperative passion, emphasised by her appeals to a higher power, her *cri de coeur*. Lavant’s tone here is staunch: in highlighting her proximity to emotional and psychological vulnerability, she is nonetheless proclaiming her

²⁶⁶ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 179.

²⁶⁷ Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p. 177.

²⁶⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* [1864], trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 9. The ‘underground man’ is in many ways a forerunner to Nietzsche’s ‘man of resentment’.

²⁶⁹ See original, *STB*, p. 62.

²⁷⁰ Lavant, *STB*, p. 63.

selfhood, what Ahmed labels the ability ‘to turn a diagnosis into an act of self-description’;²⁷¹ in Christian parlance, a ‘rebirth’, and in Nietzschean terms her own Will to Power.

Lavant uses alliteration and syllabic stress to emphasise her fevered sentiment [‘Glocke/Gehör’, ‘Knoten/Kehle’, ‘Glocke/geschmolzen’]. She deploys surrealistic grotesquerie and a condensed image logic to articulate her suffering, as seen in lines three and four of the first stanza: ‘warm my strangled heart / and ripen my eyeballs’. This graphic diction conveys both an impotent gaze and an asphyxiated lifeforce; there is a sort of inverse vitalism at play, with Lavant constructing a dialectical interplay between inner and outer realities, creation and destruction. The very nature of her commands illustrates a self-assuredness in abjection. As an embattled figure fighting to survive, she remains authoritative.

Lavant’s linguistic nuance evokes a conscious artifice that toys with words and their meaning. She employs the properties of German language, exploiting the peculiarities that exist within it, specifically with reference to [‘Augäpfel’], the German for eyeballs, which literally translates as ‘eye apples’, implying that she lacks insight as her eyes have not ripened. She puns in the final line: [‘meine Augäpfel hätten jetzt Kerne’] (my eyeballs would now have a core’). The metaphor of ripening is recurrent throughout the poem, with each stanza concluding with reference to it: [‘Und mache die Augäpfel zeitig’ (make my eyeballs ripe), daß ich notreif...’] (that I, prematurely ripened [translation modified] ...),²⁷² [‘meine Augäpfel hätten jetzt Kerne’]. Chorlton’s translation misses this nuance regarding the concluding line of the second stanza, and therefore misses the thematic refrain of each quatrain, each of which refers to fruit as a metaphor for personal development. Moreover, in religious symbology the apple signifies guilt, shame and melancholy (due to loss of innocence), while also being indicative of forbidden knowledge, desire and human disobedience.

Repeated references to physical and spiritual stuntedness emphasise her self-perceived exclusion from the generative rites of motherhood, instilling her poems with multiple thematic registers of fairy tale, myth and tragedy simultaneously. In stanza two, Lavant describes how she came ‘stunted from the womb’, engaging with the notions of frailty and impotence. This line implies she was withered before she was even born, alluding to a cursedness and a life of privation. The concept of cursedness corresponds

²⁷¹ Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 134.

²⁷² Chorlton in fact mistranslates the word ‘notreif’, opting for the adverb ‘hastily’, rather than prematurely: ‘Notreif’, in *The English-German Dictionary* [online] <<https://www.dict.cc/?s=notreif>> [accessed 20 February 2023] (Translated by Ernest Schonfield).

with her reference to the Dog Star (Canis Majoris or Sirius) the brightest star in the sky that signals the ‘dog days of summer’. The rising of Sirius has historically been associated with meteorological disturbance and misfortune, with its attendant cultural significance as a bad omen within folk culture. Lavant’s intimate knowledge of rural patterns also meant her having an intimate knowledge of such alternative religious beliefs, evinced by her repeated usage of the image of the dog as representative of unruly nature, and that mirrors the wild dogs figured in Bernhard’s *Frost*. The dog represents both madness and natural cycles, bringing forth the implication of an unknown, mysterious lifeworld that exists beyond human reason. This motif can operate as a metaphor for Lavant’s worldly situatedness, as an individual who sat outside the boundaries of society. The concept of a ‘troubled’ nature that does not conform to logic represents an antithesis to the divine order and denotes an alternative universal force.

Lavant’s poetic resentment represents the raw material of the psyche, manifest as profound declarations of resilience in the face of suffering: ‘So many pains in the lungs / when I take a breath / one at the crown of my head / but no more in my heart’.²⁷³ Sjoerd van Tuinen calls resentment ‘a symptom of [a] negative pathos that is deeply interwoven into our reason’.²⁷⁴ It is this enmeshed, correlative aspect of resentment that is so intriguing, for emotionally, socially and pathologically, it represents the substratum of political affect, and despite its supposed genesis in weakness, comes to represent self-fashioning through struggle; a means of establishing the self in opposition to the Other, that paradoxically finds strength in diminishment.

The genesis of resentment reminds us of the emotional mechanics of Nietzsche’s ‘bad conscience’, that occurs when one’s ‘true’ (namely, cruel and hostile) instincts are denied. By liberating these affective drives, Lavant and Bernhard reappropriate resentment’s negativity by way of invective. In Nietzschean parlance, they ‘change its direction’ from inside to outside.²⁷⁵ This process, which is analogous to my reframing of resentment as a productive, critical force, represents a strident reaction to hostile forces, *against* victimisation, as both writers channel their negative affect towards an aggressive Other. This response parallels the transvaluation of the Slaves class, who define themselves by their difference, by what they are *not*, once more evoking negative-theological logic. In highlighting her distance to the divine, Lavant highlights the spiritual aporia of faith that relies on recognition and validation by the Other, one that is precluded.

²⁷³ Lavant, *STB*, p. 85.

²⁷⁴ Sjoerd van Tuinen, ‘The Irenics of Resentment: From Good Sense to Common Sense’, in *The Polemics of Resentment*, pp. 67-89 (p. 69).

²⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 93.

Though Lavant's poems revolve around a divine absence, she replenishes this void with her radical individualism that promotes heuristic literary expression as an antidote to abandonment. As we have established, Lavant's poems elicit a distinct sense of personhood, one in which she is continually investigating the critical substance of her spirit. In 'Father, you gave me weak hearing', she admits: 'Even as a child, I never trusted you / Because my ears never heard you'.²⁷⁶ Though she is denied respite, she works to remake herself within a schema of negative affirmation, exemplified in her poem 'I want to know all about suffering at last!' (1959):

I want to know all about suffering at last!
 Smash the bell jar of devotion
 and carry off my angel's shadow.
 I want to go where your hand is withering;
 into the lunatic's brain, into the horror
 of atrophied hearts which, bitten by rage,
 shred themselves to spread
 a wild rage through the blood of the world.
 My angel leaves, wearing the tent of mercy
 on his shoulders, and out of your embers
 a spark has melted all glass.
 I am filled with pride and chew up
 the proud crazy courage, my last piece of bread
 from all harvests of devotion.
 You were very gracious, Lord, and very clever,
 for I would have long since broken my bell jar.
 I want now to have dogs hunt my heart
 and let it be torn apart, to spare
 death the loathsome work.
 I thank you - I have learned enough.²⁷⁷

In this poem, Lavant is once more exploring the notion of tortured female subjectivity. With an apparent nod to Plath, Chorlton's translation of ['Glassturz'] (glass case or vessel) in the second line of the first stanza ['Zerschlag den Glassturz der Ergebnisheit'] is interpreted as 'bell jar', alluding to the notion of claustrophobia and confinement. Lavant employs the first-person pronoun to evoke frank self-disclosure. The application of a free-verse structure with liberal enjambment shows her eschewing formal metre and rhyme to induce an amplified sense of illogic and emotional disorder, heightening the impression of poetic sincerity. By abandoning the patterns of formal verse structure, Lavant is renouncing the harmony and balance associated with religious verse, exploring a fractured aesthetic order that exists in contrast to that of the divine realm. Her candour reminds us of Adorno's

²⁷⁶ Lavant, *STB* p. 43.

²⁷⁷ Lavant, *STB*, p. 73.

observation that '[g]enuineness is nothing other than a defiant and obstinate insistence on the monadological form which social oppression imposes',²⁷⁸ though evidently, Lavant's 'genuineness' is the product of her incontrovertible spiritual abjection.

The image of the glass receptacle offers a figurative synchronicity in Lavant's self-referential logic of imagery, in which she often references the metaphor of the bowl, which operates metonymically as a container for the heart's affects, for spirituality and even love. This reflects Lavant's desire for both *kenosis* (self-emptying), as well as a paradoxical desire for wholeness and fulfilment ('courage drips into my glass heart').²⁷⁹ Furthermore, the glass case or covering suggests presentation, as well as preservation and memorialisation. From this, the reader can infer the theme of observation. Lavant wants to 'smash' the 'bell jar of devotion', implying a desire to escape; and to 'carry off' her 'angel's shadow', evoking an embrace of wretchedness or descent into the 'poet's madness'. This idea is supported by lines four and five, in which she writes: 'I want to go where your hand is withering / into the lunatic's brain, into the horror'. These lines denote both derangement and the impression of spiritual damage, recalling the 'derangement of the senses' sought by Arthur Rimbaud (and echoed by Trakl),²⁸⁰ while simultaneously alluding to the dark mysticism of limit-experience and an understanding that her corporeal form represents a literal and metaphorical prison of the flesh. The shadow here represents a blind spot in faith and corresponds to Jung's archetype of the 'shadow self',²⁸¹ indicative of the darker side of the psyche, the embrace of which he encouraged. This negative side, or *Kehrseite*, of one's character, represents primal urges and fears, and might reasonably be understood to encompass the negative affective psychological territory of resentment, which Lavant productively mines. The dreamlike, near-surrealistic imagery within this poem reflects Lavant's visionary sensibility that self-consciously plays into the archetypal contrivance of the tortured artist ('into the lunatic's brain, into the horror').

There is an explicit thread of grotesquerie that pervades this poem, with references to 'atrophied hearts', 'blood of the world', and disfigurement. Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that the grotesque represents the destruction of logic, a 'lowering of all that is high'.²⁸² Lavant uses grotesque descriptors and representations of the body as a poetic strategy to

²⁷⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* [1951], trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), p. 154.

²⁷⁹ Lavant, 'Through one of the many...', *STB*, p. 27.

²⁸⁰ See Rimbaud's 'Letter to Paul Demeny, May 15th 1871': 'The poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious and rational derangement of all the senses' [translation modified], in *Lettre du Voyant & Other Writings*, trans. by J. J. Loe, in *Internet Archive* [online] <<https://archive.org/details/ArthurRimbaudLettreDuVoyantOtherWritings/page/n7/mode/2up>> [accessed 21 June 2023]; and Trakl's poem 'Dream and Derangement', in *Poems and Prose*, pp. 102-103.

²⁸¹ Carl G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, (London: Anchor Press, 1964), p. 85.

²⁸² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* [1965], trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Mass.: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 19.

reconstruct the human form and its affects, undermining the notion of an infallible creator and the theoretical understanding that the world reflects an unequivocal perfection of godly design. At the same time, Lavant subverts assumptions of an immutable and perfect being, instead detailing personal calamity, physical decay and instances of human suffering as testimony to a failing deity. This dichotomy represents the split between the irreducible physicality of the body and its associated materials, with the ineffability and abstractedness of spiritual communion ('my last piece of bread / from all harvests of devotion'). By employing this mode, Lavant is evoking the uncanny nature of religious faith, while simultaneously highlighting its more sinister character. The fact that these hearts are atrophied suggests lack of use or love, compounding the sense of moral and spiritual aridity. The fact that they are 'bitten by rage' implies an internalised, reactionary vengeance, emblematic of resentment.

By channelling the energy of her 'wild rage', Lavant is entering into the forbidden zones of human nature, entertaining the sin of wrath, made evident via the vociferousness of her resentment. The unconditional love of Christian *agape* is not felt by Lavant. Nietzsche's position that 'all religions are, at their most fundamental, systems of cruelty',²⁸³ comes to mind here. Fundamentally, this links to Jeanne Riou's assertion that resentment occurs when 'vitality is curbed by a submission to belief systems that are hostile to life'.²⁸⁴ The title of Lavant's posthumous collection 'Art like mine is only mutilated life' not only encapsulates the literal and metaphorical woundedness of her aesthetic praxis (as noted), but also evidences Lavant's frequent allusions to her own emotional and physical deformity ('I came stunted from the womb';²⁸⁵ 'my eyes [...] opalescent with leprosy').²⁸⁶

Similarly, the image of the hand in religious iconography often serves as a metonym for divine strength, yet in this poem, Lavant's hand is withered, employing figurative inversion to undermine Christian symbology and the perfection of divine order. This is a theme shared with Trakl, whose doomed lyricism often employ motifs and symbols that contain psalmic potency; often devoid of figurative consistency, they represent the anxieties of inhabiting a godless universe.²⁸⁷

²⁸³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 38.

²⁸⁴ Jeanne Riou, 'Towards a History of Resentment: Early Theories, from Nietzsche to Scheler', in *Re-thinking Resentment*, pp. 1-24 (p. 3).

²⁸⁵ Lavant, 'Shatter the bell in my ear', *STB*, p. 63. Chorlton's translation employs 'atrophied', though the original poem uses the adjective ['verkümmert'], which translates literally as stunted, illustrating Lavant's exploration of thematic, self-referential image logic.

²⁸⁶ Lavant, *STB*, p. 95.

²⁸⁷ Trakl, 'Psalm I' / 'Psalm II', in *Poems and Prose*, pp. 16-17;150-151.

Replete with strident verbs and adjectives ('smash', 'shred'; 'crazy', 'torn') the poem 'I want to know all about suffering', from *Spindle in the Moon* reflects Lavant's lyrical self-torture. The poem's remorseless expression of theological doubt raises the possibility of the Christian faith as a ruse. Lavant's poetic persona observes the deceptiveness of her God, stating 'You were very gracious, Lord, and very clever / for I would have long since broken my bell jar', implying a realisation of falsehood, having inhabited a rarefied spiritual vacuum. 'I want now to have dogs hunt my heart / and let it be torn apart, to spare / death the loathsome work'. Lavant is suggesting that it would be less painful to have dogs tear apart her heart than it would be to endure the afflictions of unrequited faith. The concluding line bitterly lambasts religious devotion, and with explicitly blasphemous irony, states: 'I thank you - I have learned enough'. Here, Lavant's poetic voice is perhaps at its most insubordinate. Her previous faith made her the subject of a cruel and vengeful tyrant. By resisting this external force, she is resisting the will to be subjugated further, yet there is a bitter irony, in that the 'lesson' God has taught her, is through subjecting her to the cruellest of suffering. This 'education' can be understood as a form of torture, one that Lavant masochistically wills in the title line 'I want to know all about suffering'. And her wish is sadistically granted to her. This concluding line, however, implies that her resentment responds as an ironic tool for self-recovery, as she seeks to occlude the possibility of experiencing further pain. Thus, this poem represents the archiving of her spiritual agony, illustrating the 'teaching' she has received from her torment.²⁸⁸ This poem is resonant as a document of the negative imprint of her traumas and the inherent agency connoted by her desire to overcome them.

Lavant's Mystical Ecology

Lavant's imagery, which pertains to birds, plants, seeds and roots, shows her indexical knowledge of the natural world, while playing into the archetypal image of womanhood that is defined by its proximity to nature, as maternal and nurturing. Foregrounding this mystical-matriarchal trope is the figure of Eve, the gendered embodiment of womanhood and nature itself, 'mother of all the living'.²⁸⁹ As such, the biblical essence of womanhood is defined by a dual state of daughterhood and that of the wife-cum-mother, which I consider later in this section.

²⁸⁸ A biblical corollary to this notion of the 'painful lesson' is seen in the punishment inflicted upon Eve as a result of her disobedience, as God bestows upon her and womankind the pains of childbirth as a reminder of the original sin, commonly referred to as 'Eve's curse'.

²⁸⁹ See, 'Genesis 3.20', in *Bible Gateway* [online]

<<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%203%3A20&version=AMP>> [accessed 21 February 2023].

Nietzsche contended that ‘Christianity is a rebellion of everything that crawls on the ground against everything that has height: the evangel of the “lowly” makes things lower’.²⁹⁰ By grounding the reader in an overtly ‘worldly’ register, one of dirt, pain and sorrow, Lavant uses language as a means of addressing theological inconsistencies. In making reference to an imbricated space between humanity and animality, she emphasises the importance of earthly presence and knowledge as a panacea to metaphysical aporia (‘To have the evening red behind you / makes the moment better’).²⁹¹ It is therefore pertinent to observe Lavant’s repeated employment of ‘base’ tropes, reminding us of Bataille’s declassifying²⁹² concept of base materialism, used as a theoretical compass for dissolving hierarchies and liberating ontological classifications. Incorporating themes of spiritual wretchedness, Lavant channels a matrix of themes related to baseness, such as abjection, profanity and taboo, which interlock with the debilitating nature of spiritual pain and melancholy; the raw phenomena of daily struggle are interposed with supernatural aspects, conveying the dichotomous beauty and callousness of nature itself.

By engaging in a transvaluative, symbolic debasement of the divine order, Lavant’s unruly nature alludes to an alternative universal system, a mystical, occultist lifeforce encompassing the traditions of witchcraft and herbalism. In ‘The root lady crouches in the leek bed’, from her collection *The Begging Bowl* (1956), Lavant channels the persona of the ‘root lady’ to re-evaluate her marginality, using it as a vehicle for self-expression:

The root lady crouches in the leek bed,
counts little onions and toes.
What will happen to me?
She is very particular.

I can’t get my head anymore
out of the bewitched trellis.
She is already counting shadows
and glances suspiciously my way.

Hey! - she says - there is still room,
one has to be thrifty with soil! -
and pulls at my hair,
I do not risk a scream.

So now I am buried
Among onions and leeks
Which encompass
And comfort me too.

²⁹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 40.

²⁹¹ Lavant, ‘A bird bathes in the gutter...’, *STB*, p. 37.

²⁹² In the sense of the French verb déclasser, ‘to bring down’.

They share with me day and dew
 And juice and the strength of the earth,
 So that I become a little tuber
 In the root lady's bed.²⁹³

This is an ambivalent poem that balances a morbid sense of entrapment (embodying a root vegetable in the 'witch-like' root lady's garden) with a sense of partaking of, and communion with the natural world. Writing from the perspective of the 'little tuber in the root lady's bed', Lavant addresses the tension between high and low in the Christian cosmological order. In enacting her own earthly transubstantiation, her self-abasement evokes the subordinate stature of Eve in the Genesis narrative: daughter both to God and Adam,²⁹⁴ while alluding to an inverted *élan vital* (life force),²⁹⁵ one defined by moral and spiritual anguish: 'All the signs I once believed in / have long since faded inside me / and rotted, roots, seeds and all'.²⁹⁶ These emblems therefore act as totems to her resentment-subjectivity.

Lavant's version of nature is oppressive and fevered, indicating a perverted natural order. As we have seen in the previous chapter, nature is often used as a device to mirror the internal register of tortured creativity, with the employment of pathetic fallacy as a trope for conflating human and non-human participants. Despite the clichéd assumption that nature and femininity are invariably entwined, Mitgutsch suggests that 'the strongest influence on her writing was her rural environment and its life patterns, a peculiar, almost magical closeness to nature, and Catholicism, which in some parts of rural Austria still has the power to pervade every aspect of life'.²⁹⁷ Lavant folds these natural patterns into a female symbolic register which is suffused with phenomenal, eco-mystical imagery that is highly personal to her. This is reflected in her recycling of everyday motifs derived from the natural world.

By cementing her identity in a distinctly material ontology, she can be read as defining her own *Lebenswelt* (Lifeworld). Her fixation on the symbolic power of objects and their description helps draw attention to the gap that exists between spirituality and materiality. Lavant plays with the fixity of objects and the slipperiness of signficatory language as an expression of theological and existential certainty, recalling Jane Bennett's 'vital materialism', that seeks to detect 'a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating

²⁹³ Lavant, *STB*, p. 33.

²⁹⁴ This detail bears another Plathian resonance.

²⁹⁵ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* [1907], trans. by Arthur Mitchell, (New York: Random House, 1944) p. 140.

²⁹⁶ Lavant, 'Help me sun, for I am almost blind!', *STB*, p. 69.

²⁹⁷ Mitgutsch, 'Hermetic Language', p. 80.

around and within human bodies'.²⁹⁸ In speculating upon animate forces that exist outside of the sphere of the human, Lavant's poetic lifeworld explores a non-hierarchical universe that exists outside of the deeply rigid laws and hierarchies of society and the church: 'the stars, which helped me / as long as I was still full of hope',²⁹⁹ 'Even deathly tired, the sun / always finds the right position / to rise above the mountains'.³⁰⁰ The personification of natural entities in her work serves to illustrate the human proximity to nature while conveying a longing for a more enchanted universe, evoking what Alaimo refers to as 'more capacious epistemologies'.³⁰¹ Lavant's preoccupation with a mystical imaginary is contrasted with the earthly physicality of her suffering; her lyrical imagination becomes her salve.³⁰² Moreover, the archetypal 'Mother Earth', or *Gaia* trope (which intimates a gendered representation of the natural world) represents an alternative space for female subjectivities to dwell, one that is transcendental and restorative. In Lavant's negative schema, that which is earthly is indicative of the dereliction of divine duty.

Lavant's exploration of feminist agency is intertwined with the articles and practices that correspond to the industry, craft and customs of her local area, particularly those within a traditionally 'female' sphere, such as embroidery and knitting. She repeatedly employs descriptions of spindles, oil-lamps, patchwork and earthenware, as well as motifs derived from the natural world, recycling certain literary ornaments such as the sun, the moon, spider webs, roots, stones, flowers and herbs. Oftentimes, these objects represent stand-ins for human subjectivity in her symbolic register, emphasising human interlinkage into the mesh of natural cycles (phases of the moon, for example). The spindle motif most notably represents the passing of time and is suggestive of weaving the 'thread of life': 'Who winds our time between Father and Son / who weaves dying hours in hemp'.³⁰³ Roots, as we have seen, express a rhizomatic connectivity and connectedness to the earth, while plants and flowers represent *materia medica* and naturopathic remedies that can balance and cleanse the body. Lavant's references to natural symbols and cycles, imbued as they are with an aura of Bergsonian vitalism, by which all objects and creatures contain their own integral, organic force, attest to the non-hierarchical system of objects and signs which comprise her poetic universe. This object-oriented universe is made yet more significant when considering the Eucharist and the transubstantiation of food and objects into symbols of worship. For Lavant, each object serves a symbolic function in her

²⁹⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. ix.

²⁹⁹ Lavant, 'The moon's halo was never so large', *STB*, p. 23.

³⁰⁰ Lavant, 'Even deathly tired, the sun...', *STB*, p. 77.

³⁰¹ Alaimo, 'Trans-Corporeal Feminisms', pp. 238-239.

³⁰² Echoing resentment's conceptual inventiveness.

³⁰³ Lavant, 'Hidden spindle in the moon', *STB*, p. 59.

mystical-aesthetic realm, conveying a newfound sacrality that offers an alternative, spiritual habitat that is enchanted, and free from the pain of everyday suffering. In emphasising the belief that all material phenomena have agency, she generates her own aesthetic, spiritual heterodoxy.

By applying gender-based characteristics to these ecologically oriented forces, Lavant exercises an aesthetic praxis in which the Mother, or female figure, is recentred as an indomitable force, capable of penetrating a schematic male hubris: ‘the lioness of my weakness / she will guard the desert for me’.³⁰⁴ Interestingly, despite the importance of the Virgin Mary as an intermediary within Roman Catholicism, there is scarcely any mention of her within Lavant’s oeuvre. It is as if Lavant assumes this identity by inserting herself into the Holy Trinity: ‘but today hemp grows around my neck / and fastens the Father, the Son and time there’.³⁰⁵ This emphasis on the fundamental power of the feminine underpins Lavant’s reflexive struggle against a misogynistic social infrastructure buttressed by rural Catholic dogma, one that she combats via the construction of an idiosyncratic poetic voice that staunchly challenges the lived conditions of social oppression.

Alaimo has suggested that female thinkers and writers have often turned to nature as a ‘habitat for feminist subjects’.³⁰⁶ There are two versions of ‘nature’ that exist in Lavant’s work: there is the cruel, hostile nature of degenerative illness and rural poverty, and there is the redemptive nature of the mystical natural world, a source of inspiration, medicine and personal reprieve.³⁰⁷ She might superficially be read as a ‘nature poet’, though Taylor argues that ‘She never wrote nature poetry. Nature to her was neither consoling nor gentle; it was burdensome, like the weight of snow or the stones in the field’.³⁰⁸ I would posit that like the rest of Lavant’s work, there is no clear distinction to these taxonomic generalisations, for indeed much of her work seems to deconstruct encultured dualisms; while she emphasises ecological themes, she maintains a lyrical, subjective distance that blurs the line between what might be deemed ‘nature’ and ‘human’. She even presents herself as a rival creator who can reshape nature: ‘But the moon had its claw in you / I had sent you to Hell yesterday’.³⁰⁹ This point is linked to her adopting the identity of the sorceress, in which she seeks to reclaim her marginal status.

³⁰⁴ Lavant, ‘Because I leave my spirit to the moon’, *STB*, p. 53.

³⁰⁵ Lavant, ‘Hidden spindle in the moon’, *STB*, p. 59.

³⁰⁶ Alaimo, ‘Trans-Corporeal Feminisms’, p. 240.

³⁰⁷ There is a burgeoning movement known as Ecopsychology that seeks to synthesise ecological and psychological thought in order to dissolve the human-nature divide, see Andy Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*, (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2013); Peter H. Khan and Patricia H. Hasbach, *Ecopsychology: Science, Totems, and the Technological Species* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).

³⁰⁸ Taylor, *Miracles of Disbelief*, p. 1.

³⁰⁹ Lavant, ‘In the sky it was high time’, *STB*, p. 61.

By asserting ownership of this aesthetic territory, she enacts a self-bolstering transvaluation that imbues her with an altered, radical self-image.

Correspondent to the notion of marginal status is the notion of exclusion, felt so keenly by Lavant. In the poem 'I was never inside your temple' (1956), we see a concern with the notion of social ostracism. This may be understood as a literal and metaphorical exclusion, due in part to her reputation as an outsider. Her self-perceived exclusion from the 'good life' (*eudaimonia*) represented a profound sense of alienation, one that was exacerbated by her increasing disconnect from the ethos of the Catholic teachings that offered social and spiritual community:

I was never inside your temple.
 But for a few months
 out there in the forecourt
 you let me sell doves.
 My red, red doves!
 There were wild ones among them too
 and those with yellow beaks.
 Some probably cried a little
 before they were sacrificed in there.
 But most of them were happy
 and placed, before they died,
 the soft banners of their message
 full of tenderness on your knee.
 Oh my red, red doves!
 How good that none will return
 to count the lashes on my arms and shoulders.
 It would be hard for them to understand
 how these banners that flow so gently
 can be plaited into whips of martyrdom.³¹⁰

This poem typically elicits a dialogue with a divine 'You', addressing the absent Father, the divine architect of her suffering. These dialogues are often one-sided, implying an unanswered invocation. She states, 'I was never inside your temple', 'but for a few months, out there in the forecourt'. This construction of a material and spiritual territory of which she is denied access denotes conditionality: she inhabits an almost liminal space that is out of reach from the unconditional warmth of divine love, an almost purgatorial realm represented by the 'forecourt', from which she is outside looking in. Lavant situates herself at a moral and spiritual terminus, one in which she wrestles with the questions of selfhood that pertain to the existential conditions of her spiritual exclusion. 'You let me sell doves. My red, red doves'. This metaphor combines the symbolism of the dove, the archetypal

³¹⁰ Lavant, *STB*, p. 41.

image of salvation and the messenger of love, with the (red) blood of redemption and sacrifice, and hints at her sense of failure in securing her inclusion into the Kingdom. The ‘banners’ represent the dove’s message, but are ‘plaited into whips’, transmuting them into instruments of torture. God’s love itself here becomes a form of torture.

Lavant’s exclusion derived in part from her physical ailments. Healthy body and thought represent symbolic constructs in the Christian imaginary, associated with Christ’s material embodiment made in God’s perfect image. Lavant views her ailments as a failure to conform to this ideal. Further still, her self-perceived failure to conform to societal expectations regarding the role of motherhood is reflected in a letter dated 1962, she is quoted as follows:

Our mother could never eat herself full, had only half a lung. Gave birth to 9 children and worked almost all day and night and kept her anxiety hidden with superhuman courage [...] Poetry is altogether so embarrassing to me. It is shameless... if I were healthy and had 6 children, to be able to work for them: that is living! [sic].³¹¹

This confession implies a sense of embarrassment at her inability to perform the physical work associated with the family. The potency of this affect ultimately ties the psychic to the physical, and links the corporeal, human desires of the body, with those of metaphysical, spiritual transcendence. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam suggests that ‘alternatives lie in the murky waters of a counterintuitive, often impossibly dark realm of critique and refusal’, by dismantling the ‘logics of success’,³¹² exhorting the reader to recall Michel Foucault’s ‘subjugated’ and ‘hierarchically inferior knowledges’.³¹³ Halberstam also acknowledges the territories of failure that encompass ‘futility, sterility, emptiness, loss’,³¹⁴ as well as self-subjugation and passivity. It is through these internalisations of wretchedness however, those that bred her resentment, that Lavant mobilises these negative affects as a psychic, phenomenological force expressive of social antagonism.³¹⁵ Writing became for Lavant a mode of self-encounter, as well as self-torture - a metaphorical mortification of the flesh that reflected a masochistic, yet defiant response to being denied the opportunity for an active, affirmed life. Confession, in this way, was

³¹¹ Lavant, ‘Letter to Gerhard Deesen’, *STB*, p. 117.

³¹² Halberstam, *Queer Art*, p. 2.

³¹³ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College De France, 1975-1976*, trans. by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

³¹⁴ Halberstam, *Queer Art*, p. 23.

³¹⁵ Beckett and Bernhard are two other writers who notably employ an aesthetics of failure, see Marcin Tereszewski, *The Aesthetics of Failure: Inexpressibility in Samuel Beckett’s Fiction* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013) and Kata Gellen, ‘Two Writing Failure: Geoff Dyer, Thomas Bernhard, and the Inability to Begin’ in *Thomas Bernhard’s Afterlives*, pp. 45–70.

Lavant's mode of protest, and she interrogated the conditions of what she saw as her 'mutilated' life, using poetry as a means of reclaiming her selfhood in the face of trauma, illness and spiritual rejection. Though it may be the beleaguered incarnation of a painful absence, Lavant's resentment allows her to transfigure herself in her own self-image and inhabit the existential substance of her earthly life, exulting in the spiritual and mental possibilities that lie in these 'murky waters' of doubt.

Chapter Three

Life, Writing, Ressentiment

Ressentiment's Will to Remember

This chapter puts Thomas Bernhard's memoir *Gathering Evidence* (1985) in conversation with Christine Lavant's *Aufzeichnungen aus einem Irrenhaus* (*Memoirs from a Madhouse*), written in 1950 and not published until 2001. The aim of this chapter is to sketch out theoretical approaches to life-writing in the context of resentment, asking how autobiographical recollection intersects with the affective retroactivity of resentment, that Nietzsche calls 'the active desire not to let go'.³¹⁶ I analyse how both writers deploy the genre to depict what is in essence, the testimony of their resentments.

Rooted in subjective experience and marking decisive periods in the lives of both writers, these rehearsals of autobiographical resentment give us a tool to explore the ways in which resentment operates as a form of literary worldmaking that draws from lived experience. The texts raise the question of how these writers examine what is (arguably) the most intense form of literary resentment, namely personal experiences of pain, abandonment and trauma. The texts lend themselves to comparison due to their aesthetic, thematic focus on illness and institutionalisation, which serves as a metaphor for resentment's inverted power dynamics, and its will to prevail in the face of suffering. By figuring their personal experiences of sanatoria and the asylum respectively as spaces of physical and psychological contestation, Bernhard's and Lavant's texts channel their negative affects into the creation of a resilient psychic inner world. The act of recollection thereby acts as fuel for autobiographical resentment's protestations, specifically evoking forms of troubled memory.

Autobiographical resentment allows us to explore the close relationship between resentment and formative experience. We can observe similarities between Nietzsche's assessment of resentment as a condition of the slave revolt in morality, that is, a creative reinvention of morals and memory, and the ways in which autobiography allows the writer to enact their own form of self-display. This chapter will draw on theories of memory, psychoanalysis and trauma theory, in order to explore the inextricable connection that exists between autobiographical memory and resentment, specifically the urge to revisit and reframe. I equate the genre's preoccupation with memory retrieval with resentment's tendency to dwell upon negative memory, and how this activates resentment.

³¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 36.

While both works offer what is perhaps a more restrained, reflective portrayal of literary resentment that indicates the potentially cathartic, if not purgative effects of the literary act, they maintain a thematic consistency, suggesting that the voice of resentment is still present. This raises the question: does this form of autobiographical reflection defuse some of resentment's bitterness and the potency of its rage? And if so, does the form generate a more tempered voice that is ultimately testament to the healing power of self-writing? While autobiography or life-writing purports to relay a certain degree of factual veracity, this hybrid genre tends to dissolve the boundaries between fact and fiction, thereby offering an analogue to Nietzsche's supposition that resentment constitutes the 'true womb of ideal and imaginative events', in which the person-of-resentment creates their own conditions of action in order to remove themselves from their suffering, thereby creating their own form of truth.

Memoirs in Conversation: Self-Styling Exclusion

In 1965, Bernhard took up residence in the remote Upper-Austrian hamlet of Ohlsdorf-Obernathal, buying a derelict fourteenth-century farmhouse where he would produce much of his published work. He also kept a flat in Vienna, dividing his time between the city and the country. This allowed him the necessary distance to write, as well as easy access to the mountain air that alleviated the symptoms of chronic lung disease which ailed him. In the autobiographical *Wittgensteins Neffe (Wittgenstein's Nephew)*, 1982), which documents his friendship with Paul Wittgenstein (nephew of Ludwig), he writes: 'I accustomed myself to the lifesaving rhythm of constantly switching between the city and the country [...] going to Vienna at least every other week, and at least every other week to the country'.³¹⁷ As Honnegger observes, this move was both a deliberate rejection of bourgeois society, as much as it was part of Bernhard's wider endeavour to enact his 'transformation[s] from peasant outcast to cosmopolitan country squire'.³¹⁸ This move is a typical example of Bernhardian contradiction, and points to his fundamental need to adopt different guises throughout his life. This oscillation between the city and the country confirms a certain ambivalence between his family's humble country roots and his development of more metropolitan cultural tastes, as a result of his later acceptance into the Viennese elite. Bernhard cultivated an image of himself as a rural outcast and cultural outsider, and despite his anti-establishment rhetoric, he was both an insider and a 'rebellious outsider par

³¹⁷ Thomas Bernhard, *Wittgenstein's Nephew* [1982], trans. by David McLintock (New York: Vintage, 2009), pp. 75-76.

³¹⁸ Honnegger, *Thomas Bernhard*, p. ix.

excellence’,³¹⁹ in Lorenz’s words. He paradoxically displayed his desire for the lifestyle of the successful Viennese writer and of the ‘peasant outcast’ turned gentry. Such contradictoriness is typical of resentment’s affective, psychological structure, which Scheler identifies thus: ‘A is affirmed, valued, and praised not for its own intrinsic quality, but with the un verbalized intention of denying, devaluating, and denigrating B. A is “played off” against B [sic].’³²⁰ This notion of ‘playing off’ suggests resentment’s will is highly intentional, deliberately antagonistic, as it alludes to a keen self-awareness. It also confirms that Bernhard’s behaviour is in some ways attributable to resentment’s endless dissatisfaction, and as a mode of being that is perennially desiring better. By contriving a self-mythologising persona that he could modify at will, and that played locales and identities against one another, Bernhard fomented his unique persona as the great Austrian negator or *Nestbeschmutzer* (one who dirties his own nest), allowing him to perform his own vein of trenchant, pseudo-satirical truth telling, and that secured his position in the historic canon of Austrian Sprachkritik, as well as the Dostyevskyan and Nietzschean tradition of the suspect thinker and iconoclast.

Bernhard’s self-mythologisation, while partly tied to aspirations to social status, also affirms his lifelong affinity with a certain regional Austrian identity, establishing a kinship with Lavant, another writer for whom the engagement with aspects of her provincial lineage provided her with pliable aesthetic material with which she was able to practice her critical worldmaking. Bernhard was a noted admirer of Lavant’s verse and would edit a posthumous collection of her poems published in 1988 shortly before his death. In the epilogue to this anthology, Bernhard describes her work as:

Das elementare Zeugnis eines von allen guten Geistern missbrauchten Menschen als große Dichtung, die in der Welt noch nicht so, wie sie es verdient, bekannt ist [‘the elementary testimony of one abused by all good spirits as great poetry, not yet known in the world as it deserves’].³²¹

When interviewed in 1959, he declared that she was ‘Die einzige deutschsprachige Dichterin von Rang (‘the only German-speaking poet of note’),³²² while correspondence between them shows Lavant’s support for Bernhard’s early poetic endeavours, as he too began his career as a lyric poet:

³¹⁹ Lorenz, ‘The Established Outsider’, p. 29.

³²⁰ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 20.

³²¹ Lavant, *Gedichte*, p.1. (Translation my own).

³²² Michel Borner, *Das leidende Ich Eine Ethik des autobiographischen Erzählens am Beispiel von Christine Lavant und Thomas Bernhard* [‘The Suffering Ego: An Ethics of Autobiographical Storytelling in Christine Lavant and Thomas Bernhard’] (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2020), p. 17 (Translation my own).

‘Jedenfalls Thomas bitt ich Dich, Dich selbst nicht aufzugeben. Du kannst viel Du bist ein Dichter und wirst immer einer bleiben’ (‘In any case, Thomas, I ask you not to give up on yourself. You can do a lot, you are a poet and will always remain one’).³²³

Born sixteen years apart, Bernhard and Lavant shared experiences of rural, impoverished upbringings. Besides recognising certain personal and thematic affinities existing between them, Bernhard was perhaps drawn to Lavant’s authorial mystique. Her conscious shaping of an outcast identity and poetic persona may have captivated Bernhard, given his own precise cultivation of his public image. Similarly, both writers display an aesthetic and moral prerogative to draw attention to uncomfortable truths, employing their resentments to explore the institutional and political failures that brought their grievance into being.

Bernhard consciously performed his own brand of personal theatre, fulfilling the self-professed role of ‘trouble-maker’ and outspoken social dissident. The influence of the theatre upon his work is evident, manifested in his preoccupation with self-staging, artfully exemplified in his memoir. This lifelong performance was always adumbrated by a highly tactical self-portrayal. As he writes in *Wittgenstein’s Nephew*: ‘nothing could be left to chance or carelessness - everything had to be thought out with geometrical, symmetrical and mathematical precision’,³²⁴ indicating the extent to which his self-writing, and indeed, his aesthetics of resentment are highly calculated.

Bernhard and Lavant both incorporated the semantic identity of the embattled rural outcast as a means of distancing themselves from the socio-political and religious infrastructure of Austrian society. Despite this, Bernhard was published widely, winning fame and international recognition. In his youth, he was an active participant in the Viennese artistic circles that he would later ridicule in novels such as *Holzfällen* (*Woodcutters*, 1984). The novel points to this biographical aspect and his ‘close artistic ties [...] severed a quarter of a century ago.’³²⁵ The motif of severing evokes resentment’s rejection of noble values, and we are reminded of Strauch in Bernhard’s *Frost*, who has cut himself off from society, ostracising himself in the remote mountain town of Weng.

Bernhard’s public and literary personae often overlapped: his public personality was steered by his writing and his public actions, while his training at music school, his experience working as a journalist in the 1950s, and his later work at the Burgtheater in Vienna rendered him an adept cultural operator. Yet, Lavant too cultivated a public

³²³ Ursula Schneider and Annette Steinsiek, ‘Christine Lavant und die “Wochen österreichischer Dichtung” in Salzburg 1955’, in *Praesent 2004*, ed. by Michael Ritter (Vienna: Edition Praesens, 2003), p. 64, <https://www.uibk.ac.at/brenner-archiv/mitarbeiter/links/schneider/mengenlehre_2003.pdf> [accessed 30 May 2023] (Translation my own).

³²⁴ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Nephew*, p. 90.

³²⁵ Thomas Bernhard, *Woodcutters* [1984], trans. by David McLintock (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 4.

persona, and it is significant to note that she was the recipient of the Grand Austrian State Prize for Literature, the Anton Wildgans Prize, and the Georg Trakl Prize, which she won twice, in 1954 and 1964, an accolade no other poet has achieved since. While she projected an image of herself as a simple ‘einfache Kräuterfrau vom Land’ (‘herbalist from the country’), she too was able to successfully strategise her ressentimental literary personae into a highly successful aesthetic model.

Despite similarities in upbringing, Bernhard also had far greater access to cultural influences than Lavant, thanks to his grandfather, the anarchist writer Johannes Freumbichler. His own ‘personal philosopher’³²⁶ mentored the young Bernhard, introducing him to the arts at a young age and motivating him to attend the Salzburg Mozarteum to pursue his ambitions of becoming a singer. As a result, Bernhard had more opportunities to engage with aesthetic and philosophical concepts (‘Hegel, Kant, and Schopenhauer were to me well-known names’ *GE* 51) that would ground much of his later work.³²⁷ Bernhard’s grandfather therefore gave him the confidence to explore literary self-expression and creativity, in a way that was denied Lavant, resulting in significantly different orders of experience.

Published originally as five separate volumes between 1975 and 1982, Bernhard’s memoir *Gathering Evidence* painstakingly details his troubled upbringing, as he reflects from the vantage point of middle age. Written at the height of his career, it documents his fraught family dynamic, his noxious relationship with his mother, his search for his elusive father, Alois Zuckerstätter (who abandoned Bernhard’s mother prior to his birth) and his lifelong battles with chronic lung disease. Set against the historical backdrop of Austria’s annexation by Nazi Germany and the outbreak of WWII, these memoirs detail what Bernhard called ‘the theatre of my life’ (208). The narrative charts his family’s movements around Upper Austria, Bernhard’s enrolment at National Socialist boarding school in Salzburg, his apprenticeship to a grocer in the working-class district of Scherzhauserfeld District of Salzburg, and his subsequent hospitalisation, which led to protracted stays in medical institutions throughout his young-adult life.

Lavant’s *Aufzeichnungen aus einem Irrenhaus* (*Memoirs from A Madhouse*) form part of an autobiographical trilogy which includes *Das Kind* (‘The Child’, 1948) and *Das*

³²⁶ Thomas Bernhard, *Gathering Evidence: A Memoir* [1985], trans. by David McLintock (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 286. Henceforth referred to it as *GE* in the main text.

³²⁷ Nietzsche too, is mentioned in Bernhard’s *Gargoyles* (1967) as well as in his final novel *Extinction* (1989): ‘I always had the utmost difficulty with Nietzsche [...] I’ve been wrestling with Nietzsche for decades’ (p. 77).

Krüglein ('The Little Jug', 1949).³²⁸ Her memoirs displays not only thematic affinity with Bernhard's *Gathering Evidence*, but these texts also share similar titles (*Das Kind/Ein Kind*), and detail her experience of a six-week institutionalisation in the Klagenfurt sanatorium for psychiatric patients.³²⁹ This stay followed an attempt by Lavant to take her own life in 1935. Although she wrote pseudonymously and without reference to any obvious historical context, the text, as Schneider and Steinsiek have noted, is as close to autobiography as we have in her scant oeuvre.³³⁰

The memoir opens with Lavant's admission into the observation ward for the 'slighter cases' (*M* 15). Written in a diary form with no defined chapters, this text contributes to Lavant's wider literary project, her 'erzähltes Stück Leben' (narrated piece of life),³³¹ employing similar tropes expressed within her verse, such as theological dejection and spiritual defiance: 'Why, if there are angels, is it not incumbent on them to prevent things here on earth which should only be permitted in outermost hell' (*M* 41). Narrated via interior monologue and interspersed with fragmentary extracts of direct speech, the memoir features no coherent plot per se, instead focusing on what Scheler has termed 'phenomenal units of experience'.³³² The text is punctuated by inset scenes that describe the fellow patients, all of whom are women, to whom Lavant gives their own unique monikers ('the old Hunchback', 'The Queen', 'The Dragon'), many of whom shun her. Ostracised even in the asylum, Lavant's vignettes of personal plight emphasise her outsider status: 'it won't be easy to penetrate this circle of the upper ten thousand' (25). She seeks approval from the various nurses and medical staff in one moment, before rebuffing them in the next: 'not a single one will be concerned whether I cry or beat my head against the wall' (16). We see once more the dialectical tensions evinced in Lavant's verse, between inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and rejection, as well as the innate aggressivity characteristic of resentment. Her recollections, much like Bernhard's, illustrate the deep imbrication of memory with resentment's negative-affective territories. The text ambiguously culminates with Lavant's period of institutionalisation ending, and her discovery of a newfound sense of self, which seems at least to some degree, to have derived from a nascent infatuation with her brother-in-law, Anton, the only person to visit

³²⁸ Christine Lavant, *Memoirs from a Madhouse*, trans. by Renate Latimer, 'Preface' and 'Afterword' by Ursula Schneider and Annette Steinsiek (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 2001). Henceforth referred to as *M* in the main text. *Das Kind* and *Das Krüglein* both remain untranslated into English.

³²⁹ The Klagenfurt district hospital would later become a centre for involuntary euthanasia and a 'killing centre' during the Nazi regime, overseen by Dr. Franz Niedermoser.

³³⁰ Schneider and Steinsiek, 'Afterword' in *Memoirs*, p. 99.

³³¹ Sharp, 'Review of *Aufzeichnungen*', p. 194.

³³² Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 2.

during her stay. With this, the reader might infer notions of forbidden love (what Lavant calls ‘my unhappy love’ (72) and perhaps even familial vengeance:

I shall be the voice this time [...] I nourished and raised this love completely alone, and now I will gather and enjoy the fruits no matter how they turn out [...] would that border on hate? [...] I will make it come true. (84-85)

Here, we observe the extent to which resentment operates as a motivational force that harbours potentially destructive urges, illustrating the web of personal and interpersonal forces that activate and feed it.

Institutional(ised) Resentment and the Body in Pain

Both writers explore the medical institution as a physical and metaphorical site that reveals the power dynamics contained within resentment psychology. Life on the ward is described by Lavant as a ‘battle’ (*M* 20), emphasising its hostile milieu, while Bernhard’s narrative takes place against a backdrop ‘filled with hundreds of sounds of suffering’ (*GE* 219). By emphasising its often brutal, alienating conditions, both writers evoke the environs of the medical ward to symbolise the oppression and resistance integral to resentment, while spatialising its physical, affective actuality. While it is important to avoid a superficial correlation between resentment and the reductive medicalisation of these two writers, it is nonetheless pertinent to observe Bernhard and Lavant’s experiences of institutionalisation and illness. This shared biographical feature again points towards Nietzsche, a writer for whom illness was a significant aspect of his philosophical worldview. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes ‘Being sick *is* itself a kind of resentment’,³³³ for in both cases, one is forced to adapt to hostile conditions and find inner strength through a reverse revaluation of one’s debility. Seemingly, both instinctively display a vitalistic will to prevail, or in Schopenhauerian terms a ‘will to live’.³³⁴ This is not to suggest that resentment and illness are de facto equated, but for Nietzsche, illness represents a form of embodied suffering that must be overcome in the name of self-overcoming.

Consigned in various hospitals, TB wards and convalescent homes, Bernhard frequently found himself bound to sick beds in states of sometimes humiliating passivity: ‘I would watch the patient start off as a human being and end up as a worthless creature

³³³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 45 (original emphasis).

³³⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will And Idea* [1809], trans. by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London: Kegan Paul, 1909), p. 244, < <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38427/38427-pdf.pdf> > [accessed 30 May 2023].

whose humanity was no longer recognisable' (*GE* 283). In the final two instalments of *Gathering Evidence*, Bernhard chronicles his continued misfortune at the hands of an incompetent medical establishment (acting as a broader metaphor for systemic failure), documenting the effects of lung disease which kept him 'tied to hospitals and sanatoria for more than four years, during which time I hovered, as they say, between life and death' (205). The subtle note of detachment here ('as they say') complicates the notion of autobiographical retelling. Breaking the literary fourth wall, Bernhard consciously imbues the text with literary artifice, urging the reader to question his narrative stance.

Both writers were subject to the whims of an often-negligent medical staff. Bernhard evidently resents the ineptitude of the clinical staff, describing the 'inhumanity of the medical profession' (*GE* 240) and his doctors as 'brainless, base and irresponsible' (267), as 'victims of either megalomania or helplessness' (241). Bernhard surveys not only their clinical procedures 'but the indifference with which they were regarded by the patients' (228). Simultaneously inhabiting the roles of witness and critic, Bernhard conveys his literary resentment via raging, vengeful soliloquy: 'My hatred was all at once directed against everything outside of Grafenhof [sanatorium], everything in the world, including my own family [...] everyone here was sick, cut off from life, shut out, oriented towards dissolution' (283). While the physical body is rendered helpless, resentment's intellectual force intercedes, performing as the subject's primary means of self-assertion. Lavant too evokes the latent, unfulfilled anger of the self in confinement: 'If this miserable woman shows up one more time, I will scream at her, I will curse her [...] If she returns, I –' (*M* 80-81). The hyphen suggests she has reached her emotional limits, and as a failed or incomplete speech act, this extract signifies a breakdown of language that is indicative of resentment's unresolved rage. As the articulation of wilfully inflicted hurt, resentment signifies an affective tenacity that resides in the body and in the psyche: 'I not only embraced this condition of hopelessness, but clung to it' (286). In this sense, resentment represents the maintenance of a certain intellectual forcefulness and subjective fortitude and can be understood as a mode of resilience when read in the context of illness.

In the opening sequence of Lavant's *Memoirs*, the reader is made aware of the hostility felt towards her by the patients and staff. As an 'uneducated', 'third-class' patient, she is 'the first patient to come to us of her own accord' (*M* 19). She inhabits a liminal identity within the institution as a result: 'Of course the Fräulein doesn't really belong here' (19), the chief physician muses. As an outsider, Lavant wishes to 'observe everything very closely' (15). The theme of observation is central to both texts, and is foregrounded by an understanding of both writers bearing witness to systemic failure; indeed, autobiography itself represents the process of looking back at oneself, only, in these instances, through the

lens of resentment's 'poisonous eye'.³³⁵ Moreover, the notion of witnessing corresponds to the performative nature of autobiographical writing, insofar as the act of writing offers a means of the subjective self to enunciate itself. This gesture can be conceptualised in relation to Lacan's theory of the gaze, which in summary, describes an encounter between self and other; a split that leads to the constitution of one's subjectivity based on the realisation that the object of one's own gaze can stare back. Lacan writes, 'Even a blind man is a subject here because he knows he is an object of other people's gazes'.³³⁶ This realisation elicits within the subject a sense of being reduced to the level of object. What ensues is an 'exchange of gazes',³³⁷ a mutual apprehension that Lacan terms a 'dialectic of recognition',³³⁸ that reminds us of the Master-Slave dichotomy that breeds resentment.³³⁹

The motif of observation is cognate to that of surveillance, and specifically to the patrolling of women's bodies evoked in other asylum texts, such as Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*; Anna Kavan's *Asylum Piece* (1940) and Leonora Carrington's *The House of Fear* (1972) and is therefore intertwined with accounts of uniquely female experiences of oppression. In a Foucauldian sense, the surveillant gaze pertains to a method of domination,³⁴⁰ employed to systematically police minds and bodies within the institutional framework, alongside the practice of diagnostic criteria (such as hysteria) to justify invasive medical procedures.³⁴¹ Lavant's memoir contains a wealth of references to surveillance that articulate the subjugation of female subjectivities within the institutional microcosm:

Hansi is only twenty years old, she's been lying here for an entire year already [...] she is being fed through a tube up her nose because she has evidently resolved to starve herself. She is only a mere skeleton, but at one time she must have been perfectly lovely. (M 22)

She recounts the ways in which women's liberties are revoked, pointing to an underlying, foundational violence within the medical establishment:

³³⁵ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 22.

³³⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* [1966], trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 56.

³³⁷ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 55.

³³⁸ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 353.

³³⁹ This dialectic is also reminiscent of Hegel's Master-Slave dynamic, discussed in my introduction, by which two competing self-conscious beings strive for recognition by one another, each being dependent on the other to constitute their selfhood. See p. 5.

³⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* [1963], trans. by A. M. Sheridan (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003), p. 39.

³⁴¹ 'Hysteria' - a term used by the American Psychiatric Association - was still in common parlance at the time of writing. The medical history of female madness and institutionalisation is one that is invariably one that is socially and politically loaded, and one that in the context of resentment, warrants its own in-depth investigation.

Frau Cent [...] She is the wife of a senior teacher and has a daughter [...] she had been placed among the very troubled patients and held for days in the straitjacket simply for listening to an inner voice and wanting to write [...] “You are writing too, and no one is preventing you,” she said almost accusingly. (77)

This institutional interdiction represents a denial of self-expression. The fact that Lavant resists this imposition herself indicates both the power of willing and the resilience of resentment as a form of overcoming: she refuses to be silenced, employing her medium as an act of denunciation. As Ahmed writes, ‘[p]ower involves the capacity to carry out an action despite the will of others’.³⁴² The urge to write therefore becomes inherently transgressive. Accordingly, both Lavant and Bernhard construct a literary aesthetics of truth-telling that uncovers institutional malpractice, breaking its silence as a defiant, wilful act. As Bernhard writes:

Everything I write, everything I do, is a source of trouble and irritation. My whole life, my whole existence, has consisted of troubling and irritating others, by drawing attention to facts that trouble and irritate them. (*GE* 159)

Equally, the self-reflective qualities of memoir correspond neatly with the psychological mechanics of resentment as a form of willed memory, and as a form of subjective determinacy.

In one scene, Lavant is made to undress in public view in a humiliating experience in which she is deprived of her privacy, forced into a position of powerlessness:

I was so horrified when they all took turns coming in and staring at me with their sick looks and I waited and waited and thought the nurse would surely turn them out and then leave to, but she only turned on me and said: “Hurry up, hurry up, we still have other things to do.” ... “Aren’t they leaving me alone? May I close the door?” ...But she laughed. (*M* 44)

This passage shows Lavant stripped of bodily agency, as she is subjected to the gaze of the other patients and clinical staff. Here, sight encodes the sensual and experiential domain of the subject, and is analogous to the vindictive judgement of resentment, constituting its critical agency (or lack of). She describes one patient’s ‘sad eyes’ (15); another’s ‘like two very heavily laden chandeliers auspiciously turned towards my nakedness’ (48). She is subjected to ‘curious glances’ (53) and writes of being ‘sent to the consultation room before the ungracious eyes of the most-gracious-one’ [the chief physician] (50),

³⁴² Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, p. 54.

subsequently referring to her own ‘big, sick eyes’ (66-67). References to the gaze of the powerless subject, and the antagonistic, objectifying gaze of the Other are deeply suggestive of a suspended agency, and the contained, endlessly deferred violence of resentment. In one seething moment, Lavant writes: ‘Frau Baumerl had a way of squinting mockingly over her eyeglasses, so that I sometimes wished from the bottom of my heart she’d have a seizure. Evidently nothing is as infectious as hostilities. Sometimes I feel as if I consist of nothing but hatred’ (20). This antagonism is mirrored in the behaviour of the staff, who evidently revel in their authority: ‘Whenever Krell for example looked at me with her eyes of fury [...] I understood how the nurses can often tightly lace up a straitjacket with an expression of delight’ (20). The institution itself thus operates as a microcosm for the thwarted sublimation of resentment’s injuries.

These passages display a narrative symmetry with Bernhard’s memoir, which makes repeated reference to the authorial gaze, describing his vantage point from his sickbed in the sanatorium as his ‘observation post’ (*GE* 232) as he boldly reciprocates the gaze of the medical staff. The leitmotif of witnessing is mirrored in his pseudo-autobiographical novel *Woodcutters*,³⁴³ in which the unnamed narrator attends a prestigious Viennese dinner, only to lurk unseen in the shadows, watching and soliloquising from ‘the wing chair’; in doing so, the narrator recalls: ‘I began to evolve a method of watching and observing people, which was to become my own personal art, an art I was to practise for the rest of my life’.³⁴⁴ This declaration may also be understood allegorically in the context of Bernhard’s oeuvre, which performs symbolically as an act of bearing witness to the historical atrocities committed by the Austrian nation. In *Gathering Evidence*, Bernhard’s capacity for ‘careful’ observation is contrasted with that of his doctors, whose observations are ‘incompetent’ (131) and ‘tasteless’ (313), creating a dichotomy between patient and doctor.

By honing his critical eye, one that may be said to be fuelled by resentment, Bernhard establishes a position of psychological, rather than physical power, used as a self-protective measure to counteract the adversity of his circumstance. This is what Foucault calls the ‘sovereign power of the empirical gaze’.³⁴⁵ The state of being bedridden, itself an act of endurance, can lead to heightened intellectual acuity, one that becomes twinned with resentment’s critical power. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry observes:

³⁴³ This novel notably blurs distinctions between fiction and nonfiction. The extent to which it was based on experiences in Bernhard’s life is testified by the lawsuit that followed its publication, which entailed the composer Gerhard Lampersberg suing Bernhard for defamation, having recognised himself in the ridiculed figure of Auesberger, one of the leading characters. The brouhaha that followed propelled Bernhard further into the media spotlight.

³⁴⁴ Bernhard, *Woodcutters*, p. 76.

³⁴⁵ Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, p. xiii.

Pain only becomes an intentional state once it is brought into relation with the objectifying power of the imagination: through that relation, pain will be transformed from a wholly passive and helpless occurrence into a self-modifying and, when most successful, self-eliminating one.³⁴⁶

As if to confirm this, Bernhard writes: ‘At a certain point, when the healing process was well advanced, I rediscovered the pleasure of thinking, of dissecting and analysing what I saw around me [...] My analytical faculty once more gained the upper hand’ (258). He continues: ‘my sickness [...] still afflicted my body, but it no longer afflicted my mind’ (233); ‘Lying on my back with my pneumoperitoneum [...] I had time to think’ (324). In this way, the deferred and unspent energies of frustrated rage become the conduit for imagination, reminding us of Nietzsche’s assertion that resentment occurs in ‘those beings who, denied the proper response of action, compensate for it [...] with imaginary revenge’.³⁴⁷ In this way, resentment’s imaginative power allows one to distance oneself from suffering.

Scarry, describing the phenomenology of the body in pain, highlights the contraction of one’s existential remit when held in confinement: ‘As the body breaks down, it becomes increasingly the object of attention, usurping the place of all other objects, so that finally [...] the world may exist only in a circle two feet out from themselves’.³⁴⁸ We can compare this tight phenomenological remit to the all-encompassing, negative-affective cosmos of resentment. Bernhard describes lying ‘silent and motionless [...] gazing at the ceiling and trying to exert my imagination’ (*GE* 320). This attempt to will his own creative faculties once more portends to the structural relationship between resentment and self-will: ‘I knew that I must not allow myself to be harmed in any way by the things I observed [...] In this way I was able to bear the conditions to which I was subjected’ (231). This self-preservatory instinct echoes what Nietzsche calls the ‘pathos of distance’,³⁴⁹ an internalising concept by which the individual distances themselves from that which is ignoble or harmful. It mirrors the transvaluation of values, in that it allows for the individual to creating their own counter ideal in order to attain a ‘higher nature’,³⁵⁰ by negating or resisting that which is hostile to life. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, it is the pathos of distance that allows the noble class to define their own values, and thus, assert

³⁴⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 144-145. Oxford ebook.

³⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 20.

³⁴⁸ Scarry, *Body in Pain*, p. 33.

³⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, p. 151.

³⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 32.

their own self-overcoming and Will to Power.³⁵¹ For Bernhard, it is this active distancing that allows him to reclaim his nadir moments.

This crucial component of resentment psychology, that of self-reflexive adaption in the face of existential threat, is actualised in a medical context in the final volume of Bernhard's autobiographical quintet. In a scene of graphic detail à la body horror, Bernhard describes the moment a 'highly respected doctor' (*GE* 315) botches his pneumothorax operation. Speaking on the phone during the procedure, and 'after a good deal of to-and-fro about chives and butter' (315), the doctor collapses the young Bernhard's only operative lung, in a highly traumatising scenario in which he, the patient, must direct the inept doctor in a life-saving procedure:

[He] had never performed a pneumoperitoneum before [...] I had no option but to tell him what to do. He prepared the apparatus under my instructions [...] He lacked the nerve. I now had to take the initiative. I literally ordered him to place the needle against my abdomen [...] the first attempt failed. I doubled up with pain, and blood spurted from my useless wound [...] he made a second attempt, which was so amateurish that I screamed with pain and people gathered outside in the corridor. The amateur succeeded only gradually in piercing my abdominal wall, working by fits and starts and causing me quite unnecessary torment [...] I had never lost so much blood after an injection. (330-331)

By directing the negligent doctor to perform his own operation, this scene acts as a metaphor for Bernhard's self-mastery. Literally taking his life into his own hands, this scene shows Bernhard physically enacting his own mental and bodily overcoming, initiating a violent, instinctive gesture of defiance.³⁵² This scene emblematises a Nietzschean self-overcoming, as a life-affirming act that says, 'Yes to life'.³⁵³

Bernhard's wilfulness is transmuted into his own desire to rid himself of chronic illness: 'I had to repeat to myself constantly what my grandfather had told me: that the mind rules the body. Sometimes I lay in bed repeating it to myself [...] in order to pull myself back to health' (*GE* 248-249). This mode of willing is analogous to the self-ascribed power contained within the resentment psyche: 'My trust in myself was greater than my distrust of the doctors' (267). He writes, 'To opt for death would have been easy. To opt for life had the advantage that I remained in charge' (222). Willing, in this sense, becomes both a reactive attitude to adversity and a measure of self-potential.

³⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 11.

³⁵² The act of literally and figuratively cutting oneself open is analogous to the expository act of self-writing and recalls Nietzsche's use of the imagery of vivisection as a metaphor for moral introspection (See *Genealogy*, p. 82.)

³⁵³ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 80.

Bernhard and Lavant find themselves poised as sufferers and spectators simultaneously, and the act of self-writing allows them each to cultivate their versions of truth. Writing on autobiography, William Howarth contends that ‘the function of this narrative mode [autobiography] is to stress spectacle’,³⁵⁴ as we are returned to the notion of performativity contained within these works. Bernhard himself describes his autobiographical project via an extended dramatic metaphor:

The theatre of my life, which I opened between the ages of four and six [...] The performances have improved since the first night, the props have been changed [...] I am each of these characters, and I am the props and the theatre manager too. And the audience? The stage can be stretched to infinity, or allowed to contract until it is simply a peep-show in one’s own mind. (*GE* 208)

Bernhard’s own theatre of resentment, which we might understand as a broader aesthetic category with which to identify his heterodox self-fashioning, is dependent on a self-aware mode of literary artifice that he exploited at will, one that is even pantomimic; reliant as it is on the rhetoric of exaggeration, and which, in the contextual topos of the ward incorporates the physical and metaphorical body in a signficatory, dramatic register. We see evidence of this in the following passage: ‘All the patients were on drips of some sort, and from a distance the tubes looked like strings. I had the constant impression that the patients lying in their beds were marionettes [...] the situation was much more theatrical than I was ready to admit’ (233). Pantomime relies on song, linguistic repetition and role reversal as a technique to explore the protagonist’s intrapersonal conflict, addressing dichotomous themes such as good vs. evil, usually resulting in self-transformation. These techniques establish it firmly in the vein of Bernhard’s resentimental theatrics. If we follow this conceit further, we can consider Bernhard’s language as inherently musical, due to its repetition and phraseological counterpoint: ‘people refuse to be troubled by the trouble-maker [...] all my life I have been a trouble-maker, and I shall go on being the trouble-maker [...] my mother used to call me a trouble-maker [...] I still am a trouble maker [...] my very existence has always made trouble. I have always troubled and irritated people’ (159). Indeed, in *Wittgenstein’s Nephew*, he recalls his ‘extreme pitch of rebellion’,³⁵⁵ which he describes as frustration at his life and career being cut short as a result of his lung disease. Elaborating upon his grievance, he describes working himself up ‘again and again’ to this negative-affective frequency.

³⁵⁴ William L. Howarth, ‘Some Principles of Autobiography’, *New Literary History*, 5.2 (1974), 363–81 (p. 375) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/468400>>.

³⁵⁵ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Nephew*, p. 20.

Lavant also recognises her own tendency for ‘derisive exaggeration’.³⁵⁶ She somewhat hyperbolically writes, ‘the suffering here goes so far beyond anything human that it can’t possibly be countered by something merely human’ (*M* 30), recalling the metaphysical inquiry characteristic of her verse. She states, ‘everything here is uncertain. Everything changes from one moment to the next, every reference is two-sided and continually crosses from the real to the unreal [...] I surely had reached the outermost limit where reason and imagination meet like fire and water’ (55-56). This sense of liminality echoes the feelings of entrapment evoked in her poems, a kind of purgatory that is psychological, as much as it is physical. In correspondence with her translator Nora Wydenbruck, she writes: ‘I am not strong or bad, unfortunately, only pitiful in all my concerns [...] And so one lives as if in purgatory, from despair to hope and back again to despair’.³⁵⁷ Bernhard too, describes his formative years as an experience of being on the social periphery in a form of ‘human limbo’ (*GE* 159).

In *Wittgenstein’s Nephew*, Bernhard describes the alienating effects of chronic ill health on the individual: ‘a sick person is always deserted [...] a sick person is always alone’.³⁵⁸ Nietzsche describes the psycho-strategic function of resentment as an ‘efficient inner adaptation to external circumstances’.³⁵⁹ Resentment’s ‘will’ then becomes an instinct or drive that resists suffering, and as such, it is a response to alienation that reflexively exploits its own exclusion. By invoking the language of pain, and by inhabiting the role of the TB patient and the asylum resident, both writers develop a vector through which they can detach themselves from the outside world, drawing themselves into a psychological space of reflection.

Ressentimental Reason and the Language of Defiance

Book three of *Gathering Evidence*, titled ‘An Escape’, opens with the sentence ‘I found *the other people* by going *in the opposite direction*’ (145, original emphasis). This declaration lays the groundwork for the adolescent Bernhard’s self-actualisation, with the italics underscoring his intent. It can also be read as a statement of intent regarding Bernhard’s resentimental aesthetics. He describes taking a job in the Scherzhauserfeld Project in Salzburg, ‘*the biggest stain on the face of the city*’ (157, original emphasis), evidencing his identification with the wounded, and the outcast, and his conscious embrace of social stigma: ‘Every day I went into the limbo which the city authorities had built for their

³⁵⁶ Lavant, *Memoirs*, p. 21.

³⁵⁷ Correspondence with Nora Wydenbruck (March 21, 1951), from ‘Afterword’ in *Memoirs*, p. 97.

³⁵⁸ Bernhard, *Wittgenstein’s Nephew*, pp. 46-47.

³⁵⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 52.

rejects' (159). This decision 'to go *in the opposite direction*' (146, original emphasis), though much maligned by his family, allowed him the discovery of personal autonomy. He writes 'again and again I had used the phrase *in the opposite direction* [...] I did not just want to go in a *different* direction – it had to be the *opposite* direction, a compromise being no longer possible' (150, original emphasis), succinctly capturing resentment's elemental, obstinate force. In this sense, will is tied to the conditional potentiality of the subject, what Kant called 'the virtue of the volition'.³⁶⁰ This passage reifies Bernhard's volition in a grand gesture of defiance: 'I was pitting myself *against everything*' (153, original emphasis). Autobiographical resentment in this sense performs an agonistic gesture, through which the retelling of one's story comprises an act of individuation.

Bernhard's vituperative outpourings employ critique as a means of distancing himself from national atrocity associated with Austrian politics; his seething prose becomes a form of moral agitation with which he shields himself from the societal conditions in which historical wrongdoing was actuated. It could be argued that such distancing is indicative of a form of emotional avoidance in the wake of trauma, however, while this chapter explores the pathological implications of negative affect associated with resentment and its relationship to illness and institutionalisation, I wish to steer well clear of instrumentalising the sources of injury to support a diagnostic argument that positions resentment as reducible to the conditions of one's traumas. Instead, I suggest that Bernhard's and Lavant's literary resentments, as relayed within the genre of memoir, operate as a creative *reinvention* of pain.

Lavant's literary resentment similarly goes against the grain, her defiant invocations renouncing the social structures that unjustly hindered her. For Lavant, the act of writing resentment is synonymous with her 'writing rage': an aesthetic praxis that reframes her suffering as a condition of possibility. Her memoirs describe the 'mountains of agony' (*M* 23) that grow in Klagenfurt, and the prejudice she experiences during her stay, often as a result of her class and sex. Elitist assumptions made about her intelligence, her social status and her livelihood, as staff from the sanatorium undermine her literary endeavours in brutal acts of condescension:

"Well my dear -" said the short psychiatrist, "of course you will have to break yourself of these habits [...] Probably she can't even spell decently, but she wants to write! [...] that's what happens when every coal miner thinks he has to send his offspring to get an education [...] just leave writing to others [...] be happy if you get a lady who trains you properly for all domestic duties. Understood?". (33)

³⁶⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* [1797], ed. by Lara Denis, trans. by Thomas Kingsmill Abbitt (Toronto: Broadview Editions, 2005), p. 55.

In a gruelling medical examination she is asked ‘So you wanted to take your own life. Don’t you want to tell us why? [...] Most likely your boyfriend left you and there wasn’t another one right away?!’ (32). These scenes encapsulate the affective fervour of Lavant’s resentment, as she recalls with bitterness her exposure to attacks of gender and class-based inequity:

The short psychiatrist asked him: “But why is it that she’s not working? [...] work drives away all sorts of stupidity which these young ladies sometimes encounter at a certain age [...] a decent, stern workplace: that’s still the best remedy for hysteria. Well, maybe you’ll have her under control in a year so that she can be put up somewhere”. (32-33)

She is mocked by medical staff for her desire to write and the reader is made aware of Lavant’s frustration, as her internal, rage-fuelled dialogue communicates the singularity of her anger and thoughts of violently lashing out: ‘I know I could change it with all one blow’ (16). In the instance that her art and class are challenged, she inhabits a defiant, singular voice, reminiscent of her profane verse:

I was called away to the physician's room [...] The chief physician was there and the head nurse [...] and also a short, bald gentleman, a stranger, upon whom I now belatedly and sincerely wish a daughter who, after a suicide attempt, finds herself harassed by a court psychiatrist. But naturally she would be a lady, and therefore everything would be entirely different from the very beginning. (31)

She writes in one passage: ‘Ah, why is it I am so indignant? Is it justified?’ (37) It is left to the reader to decide whether this is rhetorical. In one scene, Lavant’s self-regulation wavers, and her expression of hostility boils over:

His questions [the chief physician] were backhanded and then suddenly so abusive and right into my face like fists [...] suddenly I became very sharp inwardly and like the edge of a knife. My reply turned out well: “...Or? ... What do you mean by or? Do you think it gives me pleasure to lie awake here? To make myself a little interesting, right, is that what you think? (42-43)

The combination of ellipsis, aposiopesis and rhetorical questioning heightens the drama of this dialogue, while the scene’s violence is compounded by the combative nature of the simile ‘face like fists’, reflecting the restrained desire of the individual to lash out, as a symbolic manifestation of resentment’s repressed urges. Here, resentment both sharpens the feeling of alienation, whilst also strengthening the individual’s will to resist. The figure of the tormentor, recurrent in Lavant’s verse, and one that often is represented

by a cruel and vengeful god, is replaced here by that of the malicious institutional body, and the antagonistic male doctor.

Once more, the reader is made aware of the deferred violence endemic to resentment, as Lavant writes of her emotional hostility towards another patient: ‘I felt like inflicting the greatest pain imaginable on her’ (59). Moreover, she describes the sycophantic behaviour of her fellow residents towards the medical staff as ‘odd and pathetic’, observing that ‘again and again every face turns to them with such an expectant, indescribably hopeful expression as if they were saviours making an appearance’ (70). Such displays of scorn and *schadenfreude* demonstrate resentment’s agitated internal dialogue.

If we are to compare Bernhard and Lavant’s respective use of language, we might consider their abundance of burning rage as indicative of resentment’s affective ‘excess’, to use Kristeva’s term.³⁶¹ The social threat posed by the ‘person of resentment’ is that they are *too* feeling. As Lavant writes: ‘what is to become of a creature continuously exposed to these radiations of hatred and misery?’ (22). The etymological derivative of hyperbole, from the Greek *hyperballein* (‘throwing beyond’)³⁶² neatly summarises the affective and linguistic intensity epitomised by Bernhard’s unrestrained verbiage and syntactic repetition evinced throughout this thesis, what Bernhard himself describes as ‘Übertreibungskunst’ (the art of exaggeration).³⁶³ Furthermore, we can consider what might be considered a key modality for Lavant, that of cursing: ‘Damn! Damn! Damn! May the devil take everything that’s still living!’ (M 22), which illustrates the strength of Lavant’s authorial voice and her unwavering moral stance: ‘The devil take each and every one who speaks or writes a single word of mockery about someone who lives in poverty’ (37). Thus, a keen sense of moral justice is inextricably bound up with the subjective values contained within the language of literary resentment.

Both writers employ what Shane Weller calls a practice of ‘linguistic negativism’ that takes the form of ‘parataxis, fragmentation, intensive epanorthosis, and the repeated deployment of negative affixes, negative modifiers, and particles of negation’.³⁶⁴ We can recognise this ‘emphatic negation’³⁶⁵ most prominently in Lavant’s poems, which frequently make use of negative adverbs ‘nicht’ (not), ‘nie’/‘nimmer’ (never), negative determiners ‘nein’ (no), ‘weder’ (neither) and negative pronouns ‘keinen’ (none) ‘nichts’

³⁶¹ See Chapter Two, p. 58.

³⁶² ‘Hyperbole’, in *Etymology Online* [online] <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/hyperbole>> [accessed 10 June 2023].

³⁶³ Bernhard, *Extinction*, p. 65.

³⁶⁴ Shane Weller, *Language and Negativity in European Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 5.

³⁶⁵ Weller, *Language and Negativity*, p. 67.

(nothing). Linguistic negation abounds in one particularly negatively-inflected poem, ‘What a panic-stricken night!’ from her collection *Spindle in the Moon*:

Nobody points at my heart,
I cannot know its time.
The night of panic is too small a wound,
in which nobody dies or becomes devout.
O God of my fear, O obedient God.
go away and release the dog’s tongues.³⁶⁶

Here, Lavant’s voice is commanding and imperious, as she invokes her resentment as a measure of retributive justice. The tone employed here is a far-cry from the diminutive, dutiful servant of God, showing how she uses language as a means of dissolving social as well as theological hierarchies. For Bernhard too, linguistic negation drives renunciation and defamation as means of emphasising his steadfast repudiation of Austrian society. A few choice extracts of this typically Bernhardian invective include descriptions of his countrymen as ‘sickening human beings, given to insolence and insult and endowed with every kind of baseness and viciousness’ (*GE* 77); the Viennese bourgeoisie as ‘perfidious society masturbators’,³⁶⁷ and the Austrian state as ‘a dangerous Catholic National Socialist human grinding mill’.³⁶⁸ Again, we see Bernhard’s fascination with the theatricality of language, and his self-reflexive desire to apply it to his own existential psychodrama. Arguably then, Bernhard’s literary style is structurally dependent on the ideational perpetuation of the very thing he most disdains, ‘the disease of Austrian mindlessness’,³⁶⁹ the very subject of his invective.

Ressentiment’s Autobiographical Voice

Bernhard reserves his most bilious prose for describing his upbringing and schooling in Salzburg in the second instalment of *Gathering Evidence*, titled *Die Ursache: Eine Andeutung* (‘An Indication of the Cause’), originally published in 1975 as the first part of his memoirs. Herein, we see the furious momentum of a writer incentivised to excoriate his past, as he lambasts Salzburg’s ‘breed of irritating, enervating and sickening human beings [...] endowed with every kind of baseness and viciousness [...] a race of citizens who pursue their petty preoccupations, their stupidities and idiocies’ (77). For Bernhard, the process of raking over difficult grounds of memory via the act of writing, and upbraiding

³⁶⁶ Lavant, *STB*, p. 57.

³⁶⁷ Bernhard, *Woodcutters*, p. 87.

³⁶⁸ Bernhard, *Old Masters*, p. 172.

³⁶⁹ Bernhard, *Extinction*, p. 146.

individuals and actions from the historical past, performs not only a purgative function, but it works to uncover the truth of Austria's Nazi past, that as Bernhard recognises, most citizens of Salzburg have conveniently forgotten:

Whenever I speak to people about what happened, nobody knows what I am talking about [...] everybody seems to have lost all recollection of the many houses that were destroyed and the many people who were killed, or else they no longer want to know when someone tries to remind them. (95)

'An Indication of the Cause' relates to the importance of critical truth-telling that opposes the collective amnesia prevailing in Salzburg in the post-war period. Bernhard graphically recounts his experiences of the allied bombing of the city and describes witnessing piles of bodies in the street and finding human remains amongst the rubble. He notes that nobody wants to remember the truth of this horrific event, and much less talk about it: 'It is like being confronted with a concerted determination not to know, and I find this offensive – offensive to the spirit' (95). For Bernhard then, writing resentment resists the relegation of public memory to the depths of history, in contradistinction to Nietzsche's belief in 'the benefit of active forgetfulness'.³⁷⁰ Thus, we are able to conceive of resentment's will to remember as a method of affective and moral archiving. Bernhard's characteristic vitriol then, becomes his technique for engraving the nuances of his resentment onto the national edifice, his writing establishing a mnemonic technique for the inventorying of perceived cultural and political crimes.

Bernhard tells of the 'Catholic-Nazi world', which 'crushed him' and the influence of Nazism on the city of Salzburg, which had a 'demoralising, destructive, and deadening effect' (85). In 'An Indication of the Cause', his language is overflowing; indicating its inadequacy in conveying the overwhelming force of negative affect that resides in the resentment psyche: 'I am speaking of the state of utter inadequacy and helplessness which afflicted me [...] my spirit was almost broken; and nobody, *not one single person, perceived this darkening of my spirit, this virtual destruction of my spirit*. No one saw that I was suffering from a *disease, a mortal disease* [...] this period [...] was undoubtedly the *most calamitous* time for me' (102, original emphasis).

It is worth noting that despite Bernhard's autobiography being compiled chronologically (beginning with *Ein Kind* ('A Child') and ending with *Die Kälte* ('In the Cold')), *Ein Kind* was in fact the fifth and final publication of Bernhard's memoirs,

³⁷⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 35.

suggesting that some of the rawest, most traumatic moments were kept until last. As Honegger notes:

The American edition contains all five works. True to Anglo-Saxon positivism, it begins at the “obvious” beginning, with *A Child*. The placement is highly problematic, particularly in this kind of unrelentingly self-exploratory project. The sequence of remembering is as much part of the autobiographical work as the narrated memories.³⁷¹

Bernhard’s trademark invective is conspicuously absent from *Ein Kind*, which, out of the five instalments is the most moderate in tone. For both writers in fact, their memoirs are generally more reflective than the works analysed in the previous chapters, pointing perhaps to the purgative nature of self-writing. These texts instead represent a genealogy of their respective resentments, as they analyse its origins and permutations. This more tempered voice might be testament to the catharsis of writing, and specifically, of writing resentment.

While the reader can discern what might be considered a less refractory tone within these works, I argue that seeking to conflate the narratorial voice with the author’s personal experience obscures rather than reveals the clarifying nature of resentment; it being structurally determined by interlinking aspects of memory and ‘creative’ adaptation.³⁷² We are therefore confronted with the possibility that the authorial voice present in these memoirs may attempt a selective reconfiguration of memory. Theoretically, every autobiography is an exercise in self-reinvention; as a means by which the author is able to appropriate lived experience of the past to serve the needs of the present. Therefore, though the act of autobiographical writing may not eradicate the injury altogether, it serves to momentarily diffuse the pain of resentment and may even be understood as a therapeutic process. In making this observation, I do not wish to detract from the potency of Lavant’s and Bernhard’s trademark indignation, or indeed to suggest that the act of writing invariably offers a sense of closure to one’s experiences, and indeed to resentment itself, rather, I wish to illustrate the multivalent nature of resentment, and the ways in which its affective forces are modulated in an aesthetic context.

Versions of the ‘I’: Memoir and Self-Presentation

For Lavant, writing the self is a necessary process of self-reflection and realisation that contains within it a moral imperative; self-concealment is not an option. ‘I cannot write

³⁷¹ Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard*, p. 24.

³⁷² ‘The beginning of the slaves’ revolt in morality occurs when resentment itself turns creative and gives birth to values’ (*Genealogy*, p. 20).

anything untrue',³⁷³ she notes; 'my poetry is one of those taboos. I am ashamed because it is self-revelation'.³⁷⁴ Yet, in a letter to Nora Wydenbruck, she writes 'Everything here depends on the hidden "I"'.³⁷⁵ It would appear that this 'I', the narrator, is not a central, defined unity, but a multitude of separate voices. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, Lavant employs the first-person pronoun as a defiant act that represents an expression of individual agency, eschewing the Christian doctrine of self-deprecation.³⁷⁶ Her incorporation of the poetic 'I' speaks to her need to escape the Catholic tradition and the oppression of traditional, patriarchal values. This poetic 'I' intersects with the autobiographical 'I' of Lavant's memoirs, as the autonomous 'I' rebels against the dehumanising strictures of the institution. In her memoir, she states:

Here I am writing this with ordinary words, writing them matter-of-factly, and what I should be doing is demolish the walls stone by stone to throw each one against heaven so that heaven would remember that it too has an obligation toward us down below. Perhaps I am cursing myself with each of these words, but I have to write them, it is perhaps my duty. Others have to build bridges, bring children into this life or transpose things into sounds, somewhere someone is perhaps painting a picture and hates himself more with every brushstroke, ah, we all follow the direction into which we have been cast. (*M* 42)

This passage underlines the centrality of cursing for Lavant's project and shows us that she sees it as her vocation to curse and decry worldly (and godly) injustice. As with Bernhard, the sphere of negative reality that her writing portrays necessitates the communication of a resentment-inflected form of negative truth-telling. If reality is a cruel mishap, then resentment becomes a logical necessity, as it entails a truthful response to adversity. In this way, we can understand resentment not as a subjective deficiency or moral delusion, but as a morally appropriate response.

For Schneider and Steinsiek, Lavant 'can "heal" herself with her writing only if she does not conceal herself',³⁷⁷ and, in turn, Lavant asserts in her memoir that 'one doesn't write oneself, but someone is writing within us' (*M* 83). Writing, like reading, stages an encounter between self and other. This raises the question: does the act of writing liberate both writers from themselves and their history, or does it fuel the cycle of introspection and resentimental angst? Lavant's comment suggests an innate radical alterity that is reflected in Mitgutsch's observation that: 'In order to write herself into the text [...] She has to

³⁷³ Correspondence with Wydenbruck, *M*, p. 96.

³⁷⁴ Correspondence with Wydenbruck, *M*, p. 99.

³⁷⁵ Correspondence with Wydenbruck, *M*, p. 97.

³⁷⁶ See Chapter Two, pp. 56-57.

³⁷⁷ Schneider and Steinsiek, *M*, pp. 98-99.

abandon the dichotomies of within/without. She has to abolish the conventional notion of identity'.³⁷⁸ In this way, the reader is presented with the reality that Lavant's first-person narrative, her 'I', while ostensibly an indicator of autobiographical authenticity, represents another strand of her critical worldmaking, her 'language of roots and stones'.³⁷⁹

Throughout her oeuvre, we observe the ways in which the affective constellation of a beleaguered subjectivity is mediated, and camouflaged by these alternating identities, which work to embolden her. She writes: 'The self is a glorious secret behind a thousand and one miseries and never describable... The truly experienced realm or rather the fragmentary mirror images of it can be found more or less magically transformed - poeticised in my books'.³⁸⁰ While she may argue that she 'cannot write anything untrue', this extract alludes to a calculated self-concealment. Bernhard, too, writes: 'All that is being offered here is a collection of fragments which may readily be put together to form a whole, if the reader chooses to do so [...] fragments of my childhood and youth - nothing more' (*GE* 248). Identity is replaced by likeness, by versions of the self that perform their own unique, sometimes illusory function. Schneider and Steinsiek also posit that 'writing is her means of seeing',³⁸¹ while paradoxically highlighting the fact that nowhere in her documented correspondence does Lavant refer to the work as 'autobiographical' per se.³⁸² Bernhard too alludes to a veiled form of self-disclosure: 'Truth, it seems to me, is known only to the person who is affected by it' (*GE* 160). He goes further: 'Only a person who has no shame is qualified to take hold of sentences and bring them out and throw them down. Only the most shameless writer is authentic. But that too is a delusion, like everything else' (*GE* 303). While Bernhard may be talking about the fundamental difficulty of autobiographical communication per se, *Gathering Evidence* is so full of painful truths and self-revelation that its emotional truthfulness remains undeniable, suggesting that literary or autobiographical resentment has the capacity to entrap and liberate the self in equal measure.

If we are to compare the voices or personae adopted in Lavant's poetry and prose, in much the same way that her poetic persona alternates between the recalcitrant daughter (to the Holy Father), the mystical woman ('root lady' or 'Wurzelfrau'), the diminutive Christian transcendentalist, the spurned lover and the tortured victim, her autobiographical voice similarly performs under a guise, that of the literary-mystical madwoman: 'I have been living for weeks now among madmen' (*M* 85), 'they have all come to consider me as

³⁷⁸ Mitgutsch, 'Hermetic Language', p. 85.

³⁷⁹ Lavant, 'Among withering apple trees, STB, p. 21.

³⁸⁰ Lavant, quoted in 'Afterword' by Schneider and Steinsiek, *M*, p. 98.

³⁸¹ Schneider and Steinsiek, *M*, p. 99.

³⁸² Schneider and Steinsiek, *M*, p. 96.

really crazy too' (87), 'I know it is no longer difficult to convince those who matter that I belong here for the rest of my life' (91). Lavant's self-styled adoption of 'madness' is summarised in what is both a pithy and ironic rejoinder to religious conviction:

Surely God has nothing against losing a player since enough frenzied souls are still at his disposal who can do it better and more naturally. I was not able to, and now I have to catch up learning everything in a new subject matter. My subject matter will be the art of going crazy, and with time I shall become an expert. (91)

The notion of madness corresponds to a shedding of the self, of ego, as a necessary transformation. With this, comes the willed renunciation of her former beliefs, as Lavant inducts herself into a new mode of being.

As well as inhabiting the persona of the literary madwoman, Lavant similarly, and somewhat offhandedly assumes another self-reflexive moniker: 'Frauline Hermine, is likewise *an unsuccessful suicide*' (58, emphasis added). This self-designated title not only becomes another identity for her to inhabit, but one that in the context of life-writing, performs as Lavant's own first-personal method for generating self-knowledge, conveying what Louis Renza terms 'the drama of autobiographical cognition'.³⁸³ Bernhard too adopts the persona of the invalid: he describes the process of being accepted into the 'fellowship' of patients (282). He writes: 'I too began to look like them, with sunken cheeks, a long nose, oversized ears, and a distended belly. I belonged' (282). There is a parity here, between the two writers, as Lavant muses:

It is good to be crazy among the crazed, and it was a sin, an intellectual arrogance, to act as if I weren't. Why shouldn't I too for once be wholly and completely at home? ... They, the ones here, are willing to accept me. (53)

In *Wittgenstein's Nephew*, Bernhard writes: 'For decades Paul lived the part of the madman; similarly I lived the part of the victim of lung disease. Just as for decades Paul played the madman, so I played the victim of lung disease; and just as he exploited his role for his purposes, so I exploited my role for mine'.³⁸⁴ By maintaining his various roles, including that of the reactive, outspoken cultural critic, 'survival artist',³⁸⁵ *Nestbeschmutzer* and literary nonconformist, Bernhard deploys his resentment as a ritualised form of dissent towards an 'opposing, external world'.³⁸⁶ His self-conscious performativity generates an

³⁸³ Louis A. Renza, 'The Veto of the Imagination: A Theory of Autobiography', *New Literary History*, 9.1 (1977), 1–26 (pp. 2-3) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/468434>>.

³⁸⁴ Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, p. 21.

³⁸⁵ Honegger, *Thomas Bernhard*, p. 12.

³⁸⁶ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 20.

index of dissenting gestures, and a cultural and political grammar of defiance. As Butler argues, ‘power that at first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject’s self-identity’.³⁸⁷ The emotional investment of resentment, as a sustained reaction to subjugation, therefore becomes a form of individuation. As a form of cathexis, writing the self (and its resentments) becomes a reflexive gesture that finds unity in its pronouncement. In this respect, literary resentment can be understood as an aesthetically arbitrated re-enactment of what Caruth calls ‘the memory of a painful reality [that] links the repetition to a creative act of invention’.³⁸⁸ It is through such a generative act of (re)invention that the authorial self comes into being. This concerted self-presentation corresponds to what Foucault calls ‘technologies of the self’, which ‘permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves’.³⁸⁹ Writing resentment therefore constitutes a craft of self-recovery and self-protection, allowing the writer to vent and seethe in equal measure.

Ressentiment’s Roots: Trauma, Repetition, Recollection

As in her poetry, Lavant’s prose refers to conceptions of a failing God, who subjects her to great suffering: ‘Supposedly God loves us... But he merely toys, no, not even that, he simply arranges, it gives him pleasure to look on when we use our heart [...] we dance like moths around an artificial light’ (*M* 90). Lavant’s concern with a lack of love and recognition shows resentment as an all-consuming force; it is intuitive and discerning, but also renders the individual exposed. In a hubristic appeal to her creator, she states ‘You must surely want to see all of us safe and fully confident [...] you receive us always as wounded beings and we are compelled to see you as a refuge. But I want you more and better’ (51). Her resentment is consequently entwined with the pathos of rejection. One version of the narratorial ‘I’ writes: ‘Ever since my mother abandoned all affection toward me because of my immensely bashful rejection, which sometimes deteriorated into hatred [...] since then it has occurred to no one to choose me as an object of affection’ (54-55). Lavant thus places herself in the position of the abandoned, parent-hungry child, a schema that is comparable to her poetic pleas for godly recognition, and her attendant sense of failure when it is seemingly withheld.

³⁸⁷ Butler, *Psychic Life*, p. 3.

³⁸⁸ Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 4-5.

³⁸⁹ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. by Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), p. 18.

In one passage from her memoirs, Lavant's authorial voice is diminutive, as she displays her childlike vulnerability when confronted by the head doctor: 'My knees are still trembling so that I have to press them together just to be able to sit' (18). This scene illustrates the potency of humiliation in the genesis of resentment and once more positions Lavant as the ignominious daughter desirous of parental affection.³⁹⁰ Hans Brunmayr, a ministerial councillor and patron of Lavant observed: 'From all these experiences comes the fear, the dominant feeling of the child'.³⁹¹ This episode, with its psychoanalytical flavour establishes a further power imbalance, with the physician occupying the space of the archetypal, disapproving father figure, and she the subordinate child. In this respect, we can observe an inherent similarity between the Freudian notion of the tripartite relationship that is the Oedipal triangle of the father, mother and child and the three-way schema of the Id, ego and superego. Resentment too is determined by a three-way relationship, as it comprises the agent or subject of resentment, the injury it responds to, and the offender on whom it fixates.

A similarly psychoanalytic flavour can be discerned within two pivotal scenes in '*Ein Kind*'. In the first, Bernhard recalls how, at the age of eight, he attempted to ride a stolen bicycle from rural Traunstein to Salzburg. This act swiftly backfires, and he is ignobly returned home. While Bernhard's retrospective narrative foregrounds the pathos of childish hubris, contrasting it with the subsequent opprobrium of his family, this scene also symbolises Bernhard's own sense of entrapment, while figuring the motif of the return. In Freudian psychoanalysis the 'return of the repressed' is understood as physical manifestations of repressed subconscious thoughts and urges that emerge.³⁹² Such urges are embodied in Bernhard's literary technique, whereby the employment of stream-of-consciousness diatribes speak of a fundamental need to restage moments of psychic agony. This motif of return, then, is tantamount to a gesture of retrieving and consequently never losing sight of one's formative experiences (and their concomitant affects), one that is so deeply embedded in the resentment mindset, and one that is integral to the mode of literary resentment. To this effect, the resentment imperative *not to forget* is articulated by Améry: 'I preserved my resentments. And since I neither can nor want to get rid of them, I must live with them and am obliged to clarify them for those against whom they are directed'.³⁹³ Such a notion is evinced in this second passage, which recounts

³⁹⁰ We can compare this dynamic with her poetic address of the absent Holy Father.

³⁹¹ Christine Lavant, *Zu Lebzeiten Veröffentlichte Gedichte*. eds. Doris Moser and Fabjan Hafner, *Afterword* by Doris Moser (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag 2014), p. 628.

³⁹² Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), pp. 382-404.

³⁹³ Améry, *Mind's Limits*, p. 67.

Bernhard's childhood tendency to bed-wet. He describes his mother's anger, and her cruel method of punishment:

When I came home from school [...] I could see my sheet, with its large yellow stain, hanging out of the window [...] *to deter other children, and show them all what you are!* she said. I could do nothing to counter this humiliation [...] I recall that for years I not only wet the bed but constantly wet my trousers during the day [...] everybody [...] knew I was a bed-wetter, for every day my mother would hoist the flag which proclaimed my disgrace. (*GE* 61, original emphasis)

This confessional scene operates as a literal manifestation of the act of soiling associated with the *Nestbeschmutzer* and highlights the latency of resentment's affective forces, including humiliation and impotent frustration, the delayed processing of which occurs in the act of literary reflection. In her account of trauma, Cathy Caruth recognises that 'the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it'.³⁹⁴ Thus, Bernhard the memoirist revisits the site of emotional damage in an attempt to repossess memory itself. The autobiographical retrieval of, and return to these most traumatic moments constitutes a means of integrating one's present and former selves, offering a means of laying claim to these experiences. Describing the process by which subconscious memories might be revisited, Melanie Klein writes:

In taking the analysis back to earliest infancy, we enable the patient to revive fundamental situations—a revival which I have often spoken of as 'memories in feeling'. In the course of this revival, it becomes possible for the patient to develop a different attitude to his early frustrations.³⁹⁵

Returning to the emotional territory of childhood allows both Bernhard and Lavant to rediscover these 'memories in feeling'. As Bernhard writes in the above passage, '*I could do nothing to counter this humiliation*' (emphasis added). By conferring on the younger, narrativised self, a voice and an agency that was denied at the time, literary recollection enables both writers to reclaim the traumas of their experiences, by preserving the object of their torment. By reappropriating his mother's language, for example, that which symbolises his childhood indignity, Bernhard refashions these words as a literary act of memorialising his woundedness. It is worth noting that trauma is the Greek word for

³⁹⁴ Cathy Caruth, 'Introduction' in, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 3-13 (p. 4).

³⁹⁵ Melanie Klein, 'Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-63' [1957], ed. by M. Masud R. Khan (1975), in *The International Psycho-Analytical Library* [online], p. 233, <<https://ccmps.net/PT10/envy.pdf>> [accessed 18 April 2023].

wound, implying the interconnection between physical and mental woundedness, both of which must necessarily be healed to be overcome. As Brown notes, resentment is primarily an ‘identity rooted in injury’.³⁹⁶ This presents us with the question, is resentment simply a form of unresolved trauma? For Lavant, whose childhood was marked by chronic, disabling illness and acute financial hardship, this reclamation is manifest in expressions of an imaginary transfiguration, as she seeks solace in the notion of a salvatory higher power:

Once, as a child, I managed to catch a honey-brown butterfly with my always so fearful hands [...] since I was always ailing and therefore also compassionate, I placed it as gently as possible into the nearest grass. And so, dear Lord, would you place me somewhere into the grass, in disgust as well as in compassion, if I would now out of fear and illness let myself slip into your hands. (*M* 51)

For both authors, tracing the roots of their resentments invokes subjective reclamation. As Dori Laub notes regarding the narration of one’s traumatic past: ‘The event must be reclaimed because even if successfully repressed, it nevertheless invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one’s life’.³⁹⁷ In many ways, this psychic process of obsessive return is linked to what we now commonly understand as PTSD. Dagmar Herzog contends that the ‘impact of epochal historical transformations on psychoanalytic premises and practices is particularly evident in the post-war decades. This was precisely when psychoanalysis gained the greatest traction, across the West’.³⁹⁸ Symptoms such as ‘delayed-reaction onset, numbness of affect, intrusive memories, or hyper-arousal’,³⁹⁹ are concomitant with the psychic mechanisms of resentment. To reinforce this point, Scheler contends that ‘[f]irst of all, resentment is the repeated experiencing and reliving of a particular emotional response reaction [...] The continual reliving of the emotion sinks it more deeply into the centre of the personality’.⁴⁰⁰ The repetitive, temporal dimension of resentment is therefore germane to that of trauma, given the shared tendency to conscious or unconscious (intentional or unintentional) revisitation. It is therefore the role of literary resentment to unchain these memories and reformulate them as a strategy of reclaiming individual power. As Nicolas Demertzis puts it: ‘Traumas are at first repressed, stay latent and are then

³⁹⁶ Brown, *States of Injury*, p. xii.

³⁹⁷ Dori Laub, ‘Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle’ in, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, pp. 61-75 (p. 70).

³⁹⁸ Dagmar Herzog, *Cold War Freud: Psychoanalysis in an Age of Catastrophes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 1.

³⁹⁹ Herzog, *Cold War Freud*, p. 90.

⁴⁰⁰ Scheler, *Ressentiment*, p. 2.

retrieved if and when the right circumstances exist, acquiring thereof a meaning for the subject'.⁴⁰¹ By peeling back the deepest layers of emotional-affective formation, these scenes attest to the power of autobiographical memory as a means of subjective understanding. The motif of return then, serves as a metaphor for the temporal dimension of resentment, which in an Améryan sense is bilateral, pivoting between past and present. Améry's demand that 'chronological time be disrupted in favour of a dis-ordered or nonlinear, moral temporality in which the past is inseparable from the present'⁴⁰² reinforces the notion of a return to the literal and metaphorical site of pain or injury as a revivification of the original affect, embedding the affective forces of resentment deeper into the subject.

Yet literary resentment operates through its unresolvedness – its open-ended nature, for despite the motif of return figuring as a significant thematic device, neither author reveals any resolution to their resentments within their memoirs. At the close of her memoir, Lavant writes: '[t]omorrow the six weeks are over, and I am supposed to leave. they cured me here. Yes, I must assume I am cured [...] although the court psychiatrist approved at least one more year for me' (*M* 92). While Bernhard's pentalogy ends with him intentionally missing a vital appointment, resulting in an embolism. He writes in the final sentences – 'I had ruined my pneumoperitoneum and suddenly put myself once more in the position of having to return to Grafenhof. But I refused and never went back' (*GE* 340). Thus, we can understand resentment, and indeed Bernhard's and Lavant's experientially mediated aesthetics of resentment, as a mode of meaning-making that glimpses the possibility of a better future.

Ressentiment: Temporality, Testimony, Possibility

As we have seen, folded into both the concept of resentment and the genre of autobiography is the temporal dimension of past and present. Ressentimental psychology returns to the site of pain over and over, from which the subject of resentment may 'return with the redemption of this reality'.⁴⁰³ We can understand the personally inscribed works of both Lavant and Bernhard as a return to the site of injury in a bid to write or rewrite their respective truths. Correspondingly, life-writing resentment represents the concerted reconfiguration of a temporal moment in the name of personal sovereignty, echoing Améry's ethical imperative to retain resentment's 'retrospective grudge'.⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰¹ Demertzis, *Sociology of Emotions*, p. 37.

⁴⁰² Victoria Fareld, 'Ressentiment as Moral Imperative: Jean Améry's Nietzschean Revaluation of Victim Morality' in *Rethinking Resentment*, pp. 53-71 (p. 57).

⁴⁰³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 66.

⁴⁰⁴ Améry, *Mind's Limits*, p. 63.

If resentment's temporal repetitiveness and its insistence on retrieving affective intensities from the past is germane to the processing of deep trauma (as I have speculated), as separate but occasionally interlinked psychic mechanisms that unearth layers of repressed memory and buried truths, we are once more reminded of *Frost's* narrative topos, which throws up remnants and vestiges from Austria's recent history. In 'An Indication of the Cause', Bernhard focuses on the social topology of Austrian nationhood, describing its 'deadly spirit' (*GE* 101). In a vein similar to *Frost*, he transposes what he describes as his 'fatal hypersensitivity' (101) onto the country's landscape, cursing 'this lethal soil from which I sprang' (101). This passage's topographical allegory serves the dual function of highlighting Bernhard's self-perceived tainted heritage, in the sense of Austria's historical guilt, but also the fomenting of resentment itself, one that is deep-rooted in nature and potentially hereditary. He describes himself having been buried under 'the mental and emotional detritus of centuries' (113). In this way, his autobiographical project is an excavation of memory, as well as a repository for it.

Grudges borne in the past are maintained in the present, and in this way, the art of literary resentment, as it occurs specifically in the context of life-writing, stages an encounter between the self that is writing, and the historical self that is being written, i.e. the subject of resentimental genesis. As such, resentment becomes a relational form of identity construction that is defined both by the gap that exists between these two temporal sites, as well as a concerted perpetuation of the affect that intrinsically connects the past to the present. Resentiment constitutively refuses to let injury be relegated to the forgotten depths of history. In *Gathering Evidence*, Bernhard writes of the 'burden of heredity', declaring 'my childhood and youth were difficult in every way [...] a period of development which [...] had overwhelming consequences [...] in a manner which has left a lasting mark [...] [I am] always trying to counteract its influence' (135). Such fatalism addresses what might be considered the impossibility of closure regarding the negative textures of Bernhard's personal experience.

David McLintock suggests that Bernhard's 'chief concern is to discover how his personality was shaped by his ancestry',⁴⁰⁵ one that he keenly resented due to Austria's National Socialist legacy. Lavant and Bernhard's texts are authoritative precisely because they stick so close to personal experience. Their resentment 'holds on' to its original pain, for 'pain always raises the question about its origin', as Nietzsche states.⁴⁰⁶ Yet it also produces self-awareness, operating as a self-reflexive condition from which one can assess

⁴⁰⁵ David McLintock, 'Translator's Note', in *GE*, p. vii.

⁴⁰⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* [1882], trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 86.

one's affective territories and relate to one's former self or selves. And life writing is crucial for this mode of relation; as Stephen Shapiro puts it:

Autobiography is a form of communication that unites inner worlds, past and present, self and world. It is [...] an assertion of self against the world, an attempt to conquer chaos through order and definition, and also a submission to the world, a confession of connection.⁴⁰⁷

Literary resentment then, and indeed, autobiographical resentment, are underpinned by a fundamental need to communicate one's truth and draw meaning from it. By a process of methodological negation, both writers assert who they are by critiquing what they are not. In Nietzschean terms, they 'give form to oneself as a piece of difficult, resisting, suffering matter, to brand it with a will, a critique, a contradiction, a contempt, a 'no'.⁴⁰⁸ It is this active 'no' that comprises their unique brand of resentment aesthetics: an embrace of suffering that is reworked as a critical gesture.

Both memoirs, like most autobiographical work, offer a flexible genre for the autobiographer to cultivate their own version of truth, blurring boundaries between fact and fiction. This is in many ways analogous to resentment's role as the 'true womb of ideal and imaginative events', which is to say that the person-of-resentment devises their own conditions of action. The aesthetics of resentment, as demonstrated in Lavant's and Bernhard's testimonial speech acts, bears witness to, and transforms suffering into art. It is a mode that proliferates one's ability to survive and adapt.

One might ask, does resentment ever achieve closure? The answer to that might be found in one of the final few passages of Bernhard's final instalment of his memoirs. While searching for the 'evidence' that the Schopenhauerian worldview inherited from his grandfather holds true, his 'strenuous' search for 'counter-evidence' leads him to the following conclusion:

My grandfather had been right in his judgement of the world: it was indeed a cesspit, but one which engendered the most intricate and beautiful forms if one looked long enough [...] it was a cesspit which yielded up its own natural beauties to the sharp revolutionary gaze. (*GE* 305)

This 'sharp revolutionary gaze' infers a concerted act of witnessing that generates drastic perspicacity in the individual; a critical acuity that is reminiscent of Bernhard's characterisation of Strauch in *Frost*, and Lavant's profane illuminations regarding the

⁴⁰⁷ Stephen A. Shapiro, 'The Dark Continent of Literature: Autobiography', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 5.4 (1968), 421–54 (p. 452) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40467787>> [accessed 3 April 2023].

⁴⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, p. 59.

hypocrisy of religion. Of this worldly ‘cesspit’, Bernhard writes: ‘whoever contemplates it for long, whoever spends decades gazing into it, eventually becomes exhausted and dies, or plunges headlong into it’ (*GE* 305), recalling Nietzsche’s striking aphorism: ‘Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you’.⁴⁰⁹ The metaphor of the abyss, or of the cesspit, exemplify pure negation, and the perils of false morality, as Nietzsche warns the reader not to succumb to the ideals of the thing you wish to destroy, of becoming the thing you most revile. This metaphor works for ressentiment more broadly, suggesting that if harnessed *correctly*, it can induce a level of critical insight that allows the individual a way through their radical negation, into a space of resistance, embracing what Nietzsche called ‘dangerous knowledge’, that which is ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘unfamiliar’.⁴¹⁰

Bernhard and Lavant summon their own ‘dangerous knowledge’, as they seek to shed light on the darker, uncomfortable truths of human existence. Their writing is a targeted exposition of the subjective, social conditions that comprise the personal and cultural topography of ressentiment. The task of literary ressentiment then is to actively mobilise these negative affects, giving them voice and prominence as a subjective counterforce. By exposing the corruption and hypocrisy of ‘polite society’, both writers shape ressentiment into a searing gaze that penetrates the miasma of cultural dishonesty, and finds expression through a sharp, revolutionary tongue.

⁴⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, p. 69.

⁴¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond*, p. 23.

Conclusion

By identifying and developing the term ‘aesthetics of resentment’, this thesis has sought to illustrate the ways in which Lavant and Bernhard’s writing weaponises resentment’s negative-affective forces, transmuting resentment’s rancour into an aesthetic praxis of revolt. I have attempted to provide the theoretical groundwork for recuperating resentment’s critical, creative productivity that Nietzsche only touched upon in *On The Genealogy of Morality*. In framing this radical reinterpretation of resentment, one that counteracts historical and theoretical assumptions that define resentment as merely a weak and vengeful condition, I have argued that such a stance neglects resentment’s capacities as a tool for moral and social introspection. This aesthetic mode offers a means of embodying the art of negation, a means of converting grievance into action.

In reframing this Nietzschean perspective, and by focusing on the transvaluative potential of resentment and its adaptability in the face of affliction, I have outlined the ways in which resentment represents both a combative psychology and a subject position that can be wilfully, if not artfully inhabited. As I have shown, however, it is dangerous to try and pin resentment down by way of taxonomic distinction, for it is a Janus-faced concept, guided by sometimes contradictory and destructive urges, as seen in the rise of hate speech, political intolerance and a backsliding on liberal-democratic principles across the contemporary political landscape. When read in this context, when the socio-political afterlife of resentment can be felt as keenly as ever, this thesis makes the case for a timely reevaluation of resentment as a potent node of moral, aesthetic and theoretical investigation, as it helps inform our understanding of the interconnectedness of cultural emotions to politics and personal experience.

Bernhard and Lavant both specialise in telling the awkward and painful truths that others do not wish to hear, demonstrating the aptness of moral rage as testimony of society’s failures. They bear their suffering as a self-affirmative gesture of resilience, as their hurt is reclaimed in an ethicising act that forces us to confront the circumstances of injustice and dishonesty. Ironically, this may call for finding dignity in indignity, affirmation through negation, to find counsel in resentment’s smouldering embers.

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