

## 4. WRITING DOWN IN ORDER TO EXTINGUISH

(THOMAS BERNHARD)

In each of the many treatises on the art of memory written by Italian authors in the fifteenth century we usually find a chapter on the art of forgetting (*arte dell'oblio*). It explains how one can erase memory contents that have been inscribed as deeply as possible on the mind by means of mnemotechnics. Art is required here too, and this art can be learned. One must first of all understand that both arts are concerned with psychic images whose representations resemble—depending on the mnemotechnics utilized—drawn, painted, or sculpted images in reality. Among Italian authors of the quattrocento, the memory images most commonly used—because they are especially well suited to the spatial conception (the “topics”) of mnemotechnics—are those that are represented as figures made of wax, plaster, clay, wood, or stone and distributed in this form along the path of memory. The more graphic and “striking” the ways in which these statuettes are shaped by the imagination, the deeper they embed themselves in the memory as “active images” (*imagines agentes*).

It is precisely at this point that rhetoric inserts its art of forgetting. If memory images—with or without the assistance of rhetorical art—are present to the mind and occupy it perhaps longer than the will wants them to, then the same faculty of imagination (*imaginatio*) whose operation has produced these images has to be called on to make them disappear again. A switch is flipped, so to speak, so that imagination can begin to work—against its nature, perhaps, but absolutely within the limits of its possibilities—to enshroud, obscure, confuse, or annihilate. If the image is imagined to be made of paper, for instance, it can be crumpled up, torn to shreds, and thrown into the fire or a river (Lethe!). Imagined as a statuette, the memory image can be moved out of the light into the shadows or made entirely invisible by throwing a cloth over it—a cloth woven, of course, of imaginative materials. In the case of particularly powerful image constructions, the masters of the art of forgetting recommend more violent methods. A wax image can be melted, a clay statuette dashed to the ground, while wooden or stone figures are best thrown out of the window. Lina Bolzoni, who has studied these treatises and described them precisely, can offer those who wish to forget a whole arsenal of destructive techniques that in the inventor's opinion are particularly effective in wiping out undesired memory images.<sup>1</sup>

But it may not be necessary to read Italian treatises from the quattrocento to find out how to extinguish memories. Perhaps it will suffice to read attentively *Auslöschung* (*Extinction*, 1986), by the Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard (1931–89).<sup>2</sup> In the first and last sentences of this novel—but only there—we are told that the name of the first-person nar-

rator is Franz-Josef Murau. We learn about the heritage and family history of this man, who comes from a place called Wolfsegg. Around Wolfsegg the whole world of the novel turns, as if obsessively.

Wolfsegg is a town in upper Austria, lying between Salzburg and Linz, whose center is constituted by the impressive presence of the wealthy family in the novel. For the narrator, who is now forty-eight, his father, his mother, his brother Johannes, and his two sisters Caecilia and Amalia belong to the Wolfsegg of his childhood, which was then a dream castle for him but has long since become a fortress. He flees its constraints by going to Rome, where he is distracted from his anguishing memories and makes friends.

The action of the novel covers three days of narrated time that begins in Rome and then shifts to Wolfsegg. The action is set in motion by a telegram: "Parents and Johannes have had a fatal accident. Caecilia, Amalia." This news unleashes a stream of memory in the narrator, which he shares with his Roman friend Gambetti (who remains almost mute in this role). He remains in Rome for a while (part 1 of the novel) and then returns to Wolfsegg (part 2), where he attends the funeral and receives his inheritance.

At the beginning of the novel the narrator has just received the telegram. He is sitting at his writing table in Rome, where he has laid out photographs showing his parents on a trip to London and his brother sailing on the Wolfgangsee; he is also looking at pictures showing his sisters on the Riviera.<sup>3</sup> Is this for him a moment of reverence? There is no reverence in this novel and nothing of the kind in Thomas Bernhard in general. The photographs awaken only unpleasant, repugnant images in the observer, and looking at these pictures increasingly leads him to indulge in a Wolfsegg-bashing (*Wolfseggsbeschimpfung*) that quickly comes to dominate the whole novel. Studying his parents' picture, he sees in them a grotesque couple, the demonic mother reigning over Wolfsegg like an evil fairy over her magical realm. In comparison with the overpowering parents his brother Johannes, a hunter and a sailor, cuts a rather poor figure, whom the narrator sees chiefly as a contrast to himself, the "renegade" (*Abtrünnig*). Finally, the two sisters annoy him above all by the mocking smiles they have put on in the photograph—giving the narrator an opportunity to revile in passing the "devil's art" (*Teufelskunst*) of photography, which petrifies such transitory expressions. For him photographs are, to put it in the language of mnemotechnics, *imagines agentes*, whose "unstoppable action" (*nicht abstellbare Wirkung*) he can no longer "get out of his memory" (*nicht mehr aus seinem Gedächtnis herausbringen*).

Or can he? Is a photo that shrinks the pictured people to eight or ten centimeters anything more than a "ridiculous scrap of paper" (*lächerlicher Papierfetzen*) that one can simply tear up, burn, or otherwise destroy? The

narrator has already often tried "to apply the means of annihilation in this case." But he has not been able to do so, or at least never really believed in the possibility of forgetting these pictures: "They would only pester me with even greater intensity" (*Sie wären dann nur mit einer um so größeren Intensität meine Quälgeister*). The art of forgetting of the quattrocento is obviously not up to the task of extinguishing the Wolfsegg complex.

The counterpart of this failed acid test is found in a scene in the course of which the narrator recounts a dream he had a few years earlier and by which he has since been repeatedly "plagued" (*heimgesucht*).<sup>4</sup> The dream is set in the mountain inn Zur Klause (The Hermitage), which lies in the Grödnertal. The characters in the dream are, in addition to the narrator, the poet Maria (in whom, hardly veiled, we can recognize Ingeborg Bachmann), the Viennese rabbi Eisenberg, and the Italian philosopher Zacchi. The group has set itself the goal of comparing, in the seclusion of the mountain inn, Maria's poems with Schopenhauer's work *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Idea*). The whole scene appears to the dream narrator in such clear detail—for instance the "crazy pants-suit" (*verrückte Hosenanzug*) worn by Maria—that it is as if he were experiencing the dream "now." Suddenly a thunderous bang, which only the narrator can hear, destroys the dream's coherence: "The movie's over" (*Das Bild ist abgerissen*). The bang remains unexplained. But now the proprietor of the inn comes into the room and wants to set the table for breakfast. The books and notes lying on the table are in his way. Angrily he shouts at his guests: "Get this stuff off the table!" Eisenberg replies: "How dare you!" But the host now loses his temper altogether and knocks the open volume of Schopenhauer off the table. The narrator takes care to rescue Maria's poems, Zacchi the notes. The host's anger is now directed against Eisenberg's beard, Maria's extravagant clothes. Finally he threatens to kill his guests: "Riff-raff like you should be exterminated" (*So ein Gesindel gehört ausgerottet*). The narrator and his companions in the dream flee the hermitage. Later he tells the real persons about his dream. "They all remained silent" (*Alle hatten sie darauf geschwiegen*).

The narrated dream from the mountain inn can in many respects be located in the context of "extinction" as an attempt to forget. It is clear: the destroyers, the extinguishers are at first people such as the initially perfectly normal, friendly-seeming host of the inn Zur Klause, the slightest disturbance of whose routine, books and notes on his breakfast table for instance, suffices to enrage him to the point that he is capable of anything, without thereby ceasing to be the jovial innkeeper: "Thus he actually threatened to kill us at the same time that he was setting the table" (*So bedrohte er uns tatsächlich mit dem Umbringen und deckte gleichzeitig den Tisch*). So far as forgetting is concerned, those who tear up, destroy, extinguish always move faster than their opponents and remain far ahead of them in their efforts to forget and to make others forget.

To properly assess the forgetting motif of "extinction" in Thomas Bernhard's novel we must take care to reflect on the fact that this word initially appears in the novel in a context that belongs wholly to the party from Wolfsegg. There people allude to the "new barbarians" (*neue Barbaren*) and suspect anything connected with culture "until it is extinguished" (*bis es ausgelöscht ist*). They are also called "passionate destroyers" (*leidenschaftliche Zerstörer*) and reckless exploiters (*rücksichtslose Ausbeuter*), and in the same context we are told that "extinguishers are at work, the killers" (*Auslöcher sind am Werk, die Umbringer*).<sup>5</sup>

For the narrator, Wolfsegg is the magical center of this horrifying fairy tale, a sort of negative "Magic Mountain," with the mother, the "destroyer," as the quintessence of this evil.<sup>6</sup> Her demonic method of education includes everything in the way of negative forces to be found in the narrator's Austrian environment. The first and enduring victim of her drive to educate is the narrator, her second-born, unloved son, who was brought into the world as a "substitute heir." She does everything she can to keep him from reading, dreaming, thinking, to make him "forget his head" (*seinen Kopf vergessen machen*), so that he is eventually "almost destroyed through education." Only by running away to Rome does he escape extinction at the hands of this evil sorceress.

In Rome he is able to live again. He can finally read his books; this was strictly forbidden in Wolfsegg, with its five (!) libraries—this is Bernhard's "art of exaggeration"—so that he would "forget everything around him." In Rome he can also write. Wolfsegg becomes the great subject of his writing. As a possible title for a book about his life under the burden of the memory of Wolfsegg he considers "The Mother" or "My Sisters' Mocking Faces." Then Maria, the writer, gives him the idea of calling his book "Extinction" (*Auslöschung*). This is the book we are reading.<sup>7</sup>

Can we see it, as the title suggests, as a book of forgetting? It is not easy to say. *Extinction* is perhaps more a book of remembering.<sup>8</sup> The narrator represents to himself with the acuity of his eidetic memory all the havoc that has proceeded from the place of horror that is now far away, represents it in all its details and matters of minor importance, just as it has been faithfully stored up in his memory. In this recollection even the accidental deaths of his parents and his brother, which provide the novel's starting point, have a precisely determined status. For through these deaths the persons responsible for Wolfsegg have been "extinguished" (*ausgelöscht*)—a punishment that the narrator sees, with a sharp-sightedness that recalls Dante, as justified revenge (*lex talionis*). Similarly, like Camus's "stranger," he contemplates the faces of the dead without feeling anything, noting only the changes they have undergone. Nevertheless, the sight of the coffin of his mother, whom he "does in fact love" (*ja auch liebt*), upsets him. It had already been decided that the mother's mutilated body would be hidden from the mourners. Her head had been torn off in the accident.

The narrator makes an attempt to have the coffin opened. He does not succeed, and thus the image of the head severed from the trunk remains for him a mere image, which his imagination nonetheless makes so vivid that it has the power of an *imago agens*. With this power it becomes a symbol of retributive justice in that the "head" of the Wolfsegg conspiracy is now severed in the same way as was the head of the conspirator Bertrand de Born in Dante's *Inferno* (cf. above, chap. 2, sec. 5).

It now remains for us to show how for the author of this novel the ideas of memory and forgetting are so intertwined that the narrator of the Wolfsegg trauma can remember with all the clarity of memory and simultaneously "extinguish" (*auslöschen*) with all the power of forgetting. He is able to do so by writing down what is remembered in this very book, *Extinction*.<sup>9</sup> The narrator writes down in order to extinguish. "I am writing a monstrous text" (*Ich schreibe eine ungeheure Schrift*), he once says of himself, and this should be interpreted in light of the following passage: "I told Gambetti: 'My report is nothing other than an extinction. My report simply extinguishes Wolfsegg'" (*Mein Bericht is nichts anderes als eine Auslöschung, hatte ich zu Gambetti gesagt. Mein Bericht löscht Wolfsegg ganz einfach aus*). And in another passage (Bernhard has an obsessive liking for repetitions) he writes: "We all carry a Wolfsegg around with us and we would like to extinguish it in order to save ourselves; we want to write it down, destroy it, extinguish it. But most of the time we lack the strength for this kind of extinction." Yet the narrator finds this (Schopenhauerian) willpower; and so, by writing himself out and away from the Wolfsegg that he carries within him, he is able to become an "extinguisher" (*Auslöscher*) for this anguishing, fascinating spell, and his "monstrous" text represents a world as will and extinction.

I have not yet mentioned that in this book the narrator represents his father as being a "forcibly recruited Nazi" (*erprefter Nazi*) and his mother as being a "hysterical National Socialist" (*hysterische Nationalsozialistin*). They welcomed Hitler and after the war concealed on their property several of his district chiefs (*Gauleiter*). All these Nazis are present at the funeral and salute their old comrades in their coffins. On the other hand, for Schermaier, the concentration camp victim, there remains only "the role of the forgotten"; he ekes out a meager living in a country that the narrator can only hate. He cannot get any of this out of his head, and so his book is also supposed to represent compensation for this injustice, an extinction of this forgetting. At the end of the story the heir and new master of Wolfsegg donates the whole property "without strings" (*bedingungslos*) to Vienna's Jewish community. His friend, Rabbi Eisenberg, accepts the gift.<sup>10</sup>

The political motif woven into various passages in the novel as a secondary motif does not seem to me artistically convincing (even in the sense of the art of memory and forgetting). In terms of historical significance,

this secondary motif remains fairly pale compared with the primary motif dominated by the demonic mother, and as a reader I cannot invert this order of significance. Moreover, paper, which may be an instrument of extinction for a person writing things down, remains too lightweight if it is supposed to represent, even without a signature, an act of restitution. For that kind of *lex talionis* the paper from which books are made is all too patient.