



MODERN  
CLASSICS



Thomas  
Bernhard  
Old Masters  
A Comedy



*Old Masters*

Thomas Bernhard was born in 1931 in Heerlen, the Netherlands and grew up in Salzburg and Vienna. He trained to be an actor and singer, but persistent ill health made these careers impossible. Starting with *Gargoyles* in 1967 he began, through a series of novels and plays, his devastating assault on the 'mindless cultural sewer' of Austria. Gleefully setting out to be as offensive as possible, Bernhard wrote his major works, including the play *Heldenplatz* and the novels *Cutting Timber*, *Old Masters* and *Extinction* and the micro-stories *The Voice Imitator*. He died in Gmunden, Upper Austria in 1989, forbidding in his will any further publication or performance of his work in Austria.



THOMAS BERNHARD

*Old Masters*

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*Translated from the German by Ewald Osers*



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The punishment matches the guilt: to be deprived of all appetite for life, to be brought to the highest degree of weariness of life

Kierkegaard



Although I had arranged to meet Reger at the *Kunst-historisches Museum* at half-past eleven, I arrived at the agreed spot at half-past ten in order, as I had for some time decided to do, to observe him, for once, from the most ideal angle possible and undisturbed, Atzbacher writes. As he had his morning spot in the so-called Bordone Room, facing Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*, on the velvet-covered settee on which yesterday, after an explanation of the so-called *Tempest Sonata*, he continued his lecture to me on the *Art of the Fugue*, from *before* Bach to *after* Schumann, as he put it, and yet was in the mood to talk rather more about Mozart and not about Bach, I had to take up position in the so-called Sebastiano Room; I was compelled therefore, entirely against my inclination, to submit to Titian in order to be able to observe Reger in front of Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*, moreover standing, which was no disadvantage because

I prefer standing to sitting, especially when engaged in observing people, and I have all my life been a better observer standing up than sitting down, and as, looking from the Sebastiano Room into the Bordone Room, I eventually, by focusing as hard as I could, was able to see Reger completely in profile, not even impaired by the back-rest of the settee, Reger who, no doubt badly affected by the sudden change in the weather during the preceding night, kept his black hat on his head the whole time, so as I was therefore able to see the whole left side of Reger exposed to me, my plan to observe Reger undisturbed for once had succeeded. As Reger (in an overcoat), supporting himself on a stick wedged between his knees, was totally absorbed in viewing the *White-Bearded Man* I had not the least fear, while observing Reger, of being discovered by him. The attendant Irrsigler (Jenö!), with whom Reger is linked by an acquaintanceship of more than thirty years and with whom I myself have always to this day had good relations (also for over twenty years), had been warned by a hand signal on my part that for once I wished to observe Reger undisturbed, and whenever Irrsigler appeared, with clockwork regularity, he acted as if I were not there at all, just as he acted as if Reger were not there at all, while he, Irrsigler, discharging his duty, subjected the visitors to the gallery, who, incomprehensibly on

this free-admission Saturday, were not numerous, to his customary (for anyone who did not know him) disagreeable scrutiny. Irrsigler has that irritating stare which museum attendants employ in order to intimidate the visitors who, as is well known, are endowed with all kinds of bad behaviour; his manner of abruptly and utterly soundlessly appearing round the corner of whatever room in order to inspect it is indeed repulsive to anyone who does not know him; in his grey uniform, badly cut and yet intended for eternity, held together by large black buttons and hanging on his meagre body as if from a coat rack, and with his peaked cap tailored from the same grey cloth, he is more reminiscent of a warder in one of our penal institutions than of a state-employed guardian of works of art. Ever since I have known him Irrsigler has always been as pale as he now is, even though he is not sick, and Reger has for decades described him as *a state corpse on duty at the Kunsthistorisches Museum for over thirty-six years*. Reger, who has been coming to the Kunsthistorisches Museum for over thirty-six years, has known Irrsigler from the first day of his employment and maintains an entirely amicable relationship with him. *It only required a very small bribe to secure the settee in the Bordone Room forever*, Reger told me some years ago. Reger entered into a relationship with Irrsigler which has become a habit

for both of them for over thirty years. Whenever Reger, as happens not infrequently, wishes to be alone in his contemplation of Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*, Irrsigler quite simply blocks the Bordone Room to visitors, he quite simply places himself in the doorway and lets no one pass. Reger need only give a hand signal and Irrsigler blocks the Bordone Room, indeed he does not shrink from pushing any visitors already in the Bordone Room out of the Bordone Room, because that is Reger's wish. Irrsigler finished an apprenticeship as a carpenter in Bruck-on-Leitha but gave up carpentry even *before* qualifying as an assistant carpenter in order to become a policeman. The police, however, turned Irrsigler down because of his *physical weakness*. An uncle, a brother of his mother, who had been an attendant at the Kunsthistorisches Museum since nineteen twenty-four, got him his post at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, *the most underpaid but the most secure*, as Irrsigler says. Anyway, Irrsigler had only wanted to join the police because the career of a policeman would, as he believed, solve his clothing problem. To slip all one's life into the same clothes without even having to pay for those clothes out of his own pocket because the state provided them, appeared to him ideal, and his uncle, who got him into the Kunsthistorisches Museum, had thought the same way, and anyway there was no difference in this

respect between being employed by the police and being employed by the Kunsthistorisches Museum, admittedly the police paid more and the Kunsthistorisches Museum less, but then service in the Kunsthistorisches Museum could not be compared with service in the police, he, Irrsigler, could not imagine a *more responsible but at the same time easier service* than in the Kunsthistorisches Museum. In the police, Irrsigler said, a man served day after day in danger of his life; not so if he served at the Kunsthistorisches Museum. As for the monotony of his occupation there was no need to worry, he loved that monotony. Each day he would cover some forty to fifty kilometres, which was more beneficial to his health than, for instance, service in the police, where the main part of the job was sitting on a hard office chair, life-long. He would *rather shadow visitors to the museum than normal people*, for visitors to the museum were at any rate *superior people with an understanding of art*. In the course of time he had, he said, acquired such an understanding of art that he would be capable at any time of guiding a conducted tour through the Kunsthistorisches Museum, or certainly through the picture gallery, but he could do without that. Anyway, people do not take in what is said to them, he says. *For decades the museum guides have always been saying the same thing, and of course a great deal of nonsense, as*

*Herr Reger says, Irrsigler says to me. The art historians only swamp the visitors with their twaddle, says Irrsigler, who has, over the years, appropriated verbatim many, if not all, of Reger's sentences. Irrsigler is Reger's mouthpiece, nearly everything that Irrsigler says has been said by Reger, for over thirty years Irrsigler has been saying what Reger has said. If I listen attentively I can hear Reger speak through Irrsigler. If we listen to the guides we only ever hear that art twaddle which gets on our nerves, the unbearable art twaddle of the art historians, says Irrsigler, because Reger says so frequently. All these paintings are magnificent, but not a single one is perfect, Irrsigler says after Reger. People only go to the museum because they have been told that a cultured person must go there, and not out of interest, people are not interested in art, at any rate ninety-nine per cent of humanity has no interest whatever in art, as Irrsigler says, quoting Reger word for word. He, Irrsigler, had had a difficult childhood, a mother suffering from cancer and dying when she was only forty-six, and a womanizing and perpetually drunk father. And Bruck-on-Leitha, moreover, is such an ugly place, as are most of the places in Burgenland. Anyone who can do so leaves the Burgenland, Irrsigler says, but most of them cannot, they are sentenced to Burgenland for life, which is at least as terrible as imprisonment for life at Stein-on-Danube. The*

Burgenlanders are convicts, says Irrsigler, their native land is a penal institution. They try to make themselves believe that they have a beautiful homeland, but in reality Burgenland is boring and ugly. In winter the Burgenlanders choke in snow and in summer they are eaten alive by mosquitoes. And in spring and autumn the Burgenlanders only wallow in their own filth. In the whole of Europe there is no poorer and no filthier region, Irrsigler says. The Viennese are forever persuading the Burgenlanders that Burgenland is a beautiful province, because the Viennese are in love with Burgenland filth and with Burgenland dim-wittedness because they regard this Burgenland filth and this Burgenland dim-wittedness *as romantic*, because in their Viennese way they are perverse. Anyway, *apart from Herr Haydn, as Herr Reger says*, Burgenland has produced nothing, Irrsigler says. I come from Burgenland means nothing other than I come from Austria's penal institution. Or from Austria's mental institution, Irrsigler says. *The Burgenlanders go to Vienna as if to church*, he says. A Burgenlander's fondest wish is to join the Vienna police, he said a few days ago, I failed to do so because I was too weak, because of *physical weakness*. Anyway I am an attendant at the Kunsthistorisches Museum and just as much a public servant. In the evening, after six, I do not lock up any criminals but works of art, I

lock up Rubens and Bellotto. His uncle, who had entered the services of the Kunsthistorisches Museum immediately after the First World War, had been envied by everyone in the family. Whenever they had visited him at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, once in every few years, on free-admission Saturdays or Sundays, they had always followed him *totally intimidated through the rooms with the great masters* and had not ceased to admire *his uniform*. Naturally his uncle had soon become Senior Attendant and had worn a small brass star on his uniform lapel, Irrsigler said. With all that reverence and admiration they had, as he was leading them through the rooms, understood nothing of what he said to them. There would have been no point in explaining Veronese to them, Irrsigler said a few days ago. My sister's children, Irrsigler said, admired my soft shoes, my sister stopped in front of the Reni, in front of that most tasteless of all painters exhibited here. Reger hates Reni, therefore Irrsigler hates Reni too. Irrsigler has achieved a high degree of mastery in appropriating Reger's statements, indeed he now utters them almost perfectly in Reger's characteristic tone. My sister visits *me and not the museum*, Irrsigler said. My sister does not care for art at all. But her children are amazed at everything they see when I guide them through the rooms. They stop in front of the Velazquez and refuse to move away

from it, Irrsigler said. Herr Reger once invited me and my family to the Prater, Irrsigler said, *the generous Herr Reger, on a Sunday evening. When his wife was still alive*, Irrsigler said. I stood there, watching Reger, who was still *engrossed*, as they say, in contemplating Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man*, and simultaneously saw Irrsigler, who was not in the Bordone Room, recounting to me chunks of his life story, i.e. the images with Irrsigler from the past week at the same time as Reger, who was sitting on the velvet settee, and naturally, had not yet noticed me. Irrsigler had said that even as a small child his fondest wish had been to join the Vienna police, to be a policeman. He had never wanted to have any other profession. And when, at the time he was twenty-three, they had confirmed *physical weakness* in him at the Rossau barracks, a *world had collapsed* for him. In his state of extreme hopelessness, however, his uncle had got him an attendant's position at the Kunsthistorisches Museum. He had come to Vienna with nothing but a small scuffed portmanteau, to his uncle's flat, who had let him stay with him for four weeks, after which he, Irrsigler, had moved as a lodger to the Mülkerbastei. In that rented room he had lived for twelve years. During those first few years he had seen nothing of Vienna at all, he had gone to the Kunsthistorisches Museum in the early morning, towards seven, and had

returned home in the evening, after six, his midday meal all those years had invariably consisted of a slice of bread with salami or with cheese, consumed with a glass of water from the tap in a small dressing room behind the public cloakroom. Burgenlanders are the most undemanding of people, I have myself worked with Burgenlanders at various building sites in my youth and lived with Burgenlanders in various builders' hutments, and I know how undemanding these Burgenlanders are, they only need the most indispensable things and actually manage to save some eighty per cent or even more of their wages by the end of the month. As I was scrutinizing Irrsigler and actually observing him intently, as I had never observed him before, I could see Irrsigler standing with me in the Battoni Room the previous week and me listening to him. The husband of one of his great-grandmothers had come from the Tyrol, hence the name Irrsigler. He had had two sisters, the younger one, as late as the sixties, had emigrated to America with a hairdresser's assistant from Mattersburg and had died there of homesickness, at the age of thirty-five. He had three brothers, all of them living in Burgenland as casual labourers. Two of them, like himself, had come to Vienna to join the police but had not been accepted. And for the museum service, he said, *a certain intelligence was absolutely necessary.*

He had learned a lot from Reger. There were people who said Reger was mad because only a madman could for decades go every other day except Monday to the picture gallery of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, but he did not believe that. *Herr Reger is a clever, educated man*, Irrsigler said. Yes, I had said to Irrsigler, Herr Reger is not only a clever and educated man, but also a famous man, after all he had studied music in Leipzig and Vienna and written music reviews for *The Times* and was writing for *The Times* to this day, I said. Not an ordinary scribbler, I said, not a chatterbox, but a musical scholar in the truest sense of the word and with the full seriousness of a great personality. Reger was not to be compared with all those garrulous musical columnists, who poured out their garrulous refuse in the daily papers day after day. Reger was in fact a philosopher, I said to Irrsigler, a philosopher in the full clear meaning of the term. For over thirty years Reger has written his reviews for *The Times*, those little musical-philosophical essays which would no doubt one day be brought together and appear in book form. This sojourn in the Kunsthistorisches Museum is undoubtedly one of the prerequisites of Reger's being able to write for *The Times in just the way he does write for The Times*, I said to Irrsigler; regardless of whether or not Irrsigler understood me, probably Irrsigler did not understand me at all, I

thought and still think. That Reger writes his musical criticism for *The Times* is not known to anyone in Austria, or at most a few people know about it, I said to Irrsigler. I might also say *Reger is a private philosopher*, I said to Irrsigler, regardless of the fact that it was rather a stupid thing to say to Irrsigler. At the Kunsthistorisches Museum Reger finds what he does not find anywhere else, I said to Irrsigler, everything that is important, everything that is useful to his thinking and to his work. People may regard Reger's behaviour as mad, which it is not, I said to Irrsigler, here in Vienna and in Austria Reger is not taken note of, I said to Irrsigler, but in London and England, and even in the United States, people know who Reger is and what an outstanding expert Reger is, I said to Irrsigler. And do not forget the ideal temperature of eighteen degrees Celsius, which is maintained here all the year round at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, I also said to Irrsigler. Irrsigler only nodded his head. Reger is a figure highly thought of throughout the world of musical scholarship, I said to Irrsigler yesterday, only here, in his native country, no one wants to know about him, on the contrary, here in his native country, Reger, who has left all the others in his field far behind him, that whole revolting provincial incompetence, is being hated, yes, nothing less than hated in his native Austria, I said to Irrsigler.

A genius like Reger is hated here, I said to Irrsigler, regardless of the fact that Irrsigler had not understood at all what I meant by saying to him that a genius like Reger was hated here, and regardless of whether it is actually correct to speak of Reger as of a genius, *a scholarly genius, and indeed a human genius*, I reflected, that Reger was certainly. Genius and Austria do not go together, I said. In Austria one has to be mediocre in order to be listened to and taken seriously, one has to be a person of incompetence and of provincial mendacity, a person with an absolute small-country mentality. A genius or even an exceptional mind is sooner or later *finished off* here in a humiliating manner, I said to Irrsigler. Only people like Reger, whom one can count on the fingers of one hand in this dreadful country, survive this state of degradation and hatred, of oppression and disregard, of that universal anti-intellectual meanness which reigns everywhere in Austria, only people with a magnificent character and a truly acute incorruptible intelligence. Although Herr Reger has a far from unhappy relationship with the directress of this museum and although he knows this directress well, I said to Irrsigler, he would never have dreamt of asking this directress for anything concerning himself and this museum. Just as Herr Reger had decided he would inform the management, and that means the directress, of the shabby state of

the settee covers in the rooms and possibly induce her to have new settee covers made, the settees were re-covered; and very tastefully too, I said to Irrsigler. I do not believe, I said to Irrsigler, that the management of the Kunsthistorisches Museum is aware that Herr Reger has been coming to the museum every other day for more than thirty years in order to sit on the settee in the Bordone Room, that I do not believe. Because that would surely have cropped up in conversation at a meeting between Reger and the directress, as far as I know, the directress is unaware of it because Herr Reger never mentioned it and because you, Herr Irrsigler, have always kept quiet about it because it has been Herr Reger's wish that you would keep quiet about the fact that for over thirty years Herr Reger has been visiting the Kunsthistorisches Museum every other day except Mondays. Discretion, that is your very strong suit, I said to Irrsigler, I reflected, while regarding Reger who was in turn regarding Tintoretto's *White-Bearded Man* and who, for his part, was being regarded by Irrsigler. Reger was an exceptional person and exceptional persons had to be handled carefully, I said to Irrsigler yesterday. That we, that is Reger and I, should visit the museum on two successive days is unthinkable, I said to Irrsigler yesterday, and yet I have come back today, of all days, because Reger had expressly wished me to do so, but for what reason

Reger is here today I do not know, I reflected, but I should soon know it. Irrsigler, too, had been rather astonished when he saw me today, because only yesterday I had told him that it was quite out of the question that I should go to the Kunsthistorisches Museum two days running, just as until now it had been out of the question for Reger. And now we are both, Reger and myself, back today at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, where we were only yesterday. This must have confused Irrsigler, I thought. It was possible, I thought, to make a mistake for once and therefore go to the Kunsthistorisches Museum again the next day, but surely, I reflected, only for *Reger alone* to make such a mistake or for *me alone* to make such a mistake, but surely not for *both of us, Reger and me*, to make a mistake on this point. Reger had expressly said to me yesterday, *Come here tomorrow*, I can still hear Reger saying it. But Irrsigler, of course, had not heard anything about it and did not know anything about it and was, quite naturally, astonished to see Reger and me back at the museum today. If Reger had not said to me yesterday: *Come here tomorrow*, I should not have come to the Kunsthistorisches Museum today, possibly not until next week, for unlike Reger, who in fact goes to the Kunsthistorisches Museum every other day, and has moreover done so for decades, I do not go to the Kunsthistorisches Museum every other day

but only when I feel like it and when I am in the mood for it. And if I wish to see Reger I do not necessarily have to go to the Kunsthistorisches Museum, I only have to go to the *Ambassador Hotel*, where he always goes after leaving the Kunsthistorisches Museum. At the Ambassador I can see Reger every day if I am so disposed. At the Ambassador he has his corner by the window, that is the table next to the so-called *Jewish table*, which stands in front of the *Hungarian table*, which stands behind the *Arab table* when you look from Reger's table towards the door to the foyer. Of course I much prefer going to the Ambassador rather than to the Kunsthistorisches Museum, but when I cannot wait for Reger to come to the Ambassador I go to the Kunsthistorisches Museum a little before eleven in order to meet him, my imaginary father. Until noon he finds the eighteen-degree temperature at the Kunsthistorisches Museum agreeable, in the afternoon he is happier at the warm Ambassador, which always keeps a temperature of twenty-three degrees. In the afternoon I am no longer so fond of thinking nor do I think so intensively, Reger says, so I can afford the Ambassador. The Kunsthistorisches Museum is his *mental production shop*, he says, while the Ambassador is, in a manner of speaking, his *ideas-processing machine*. At the Kunsthistorisches Museum I feel exposed, at the Ambassador I feel sheltered, he

says. This contrast of Kunsthistorisches Museum and Ambassador is what my thinking needs more than anything else, exposure on the one side and shelter on the other, the atmosphere at the Kunsthistorisches Museum on the one side and the atmosphere at the Ambassador on the other, exposure on the one side and shelter on the other, my dear Atzbacher; the secret of my thinking is based on my spending the morning at the Kunsthistorisches Museum and the afternoon at the Ambassador. And what greater opposites could there be than the Kunsthistorisches Museum, that is the picture gallery of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, and the Ambassador. I have made the Kunsthistorisches Museum a mental habit for myself just as the Ambassador, he said. The quality of my reviews for *The Times*, to which, incidentally, I have been a contributor for thirty-four years, he said, in fact depends on my visiting the Kunsthistorisches Museum and the Ambassador, the Kunsthistorisches Museum *every other* morning, the Ambassador *every* afternoon. This routine alone saved me after the death of my wife. My dear Atzbacher, without this routine I should have died too, Reger said yesterday. Everybody needs such a routine for survival, he said. It may be the craziest of all routines but he needs it. Reger's condition seems to have improved, his way of speaking is once more the same as before the death of his wife. Although he

says he has now got over the *dead point*, he will nevertheless suffer all his life from having been left on his own by his wife. Time and again he says that he had been trapped in the lifelong mistaken belief that *he* would leave his wife, that *he* would die before her, and because her death came so suddenly he had been firmly convinced, even a few days before her death, that *she* was going to survive him; *she* was the healthy one, *I* was the invalid, yes, it was in this belief and in this conviction that we always lived, he said. Nobody has ever been so healthy as my wife, *she lived a whole life in health, whereas I have always led an existence in sickness, indeed an existence in mortal sickness*, he said. She was the healthy one, she was the future, I was always the invalid, I was the past, he said. That he would ever have to live without his wife and actually on his own had never occurred to him, that was no thought for me, he said. And if she should die before me I would follow her into death, as quickly as possible, he had always thought. Now he had come to grips, on the one hand, with the error that she would die after him and, on the other, with the fact that he had not killed himself after her death, that he had not therefore, as he had intended, followed her into death. As I always knew that she was everything to me I was naturally unable to think of continued existence after her, my dear Atzbacher, he said. Out