THE ART OF EXAGGERATION ALEXI KUKULJEVIC

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Everyone has heard the story of the man of Picardy for whom, on the scaffold, they presented a wench, offering (as our justice sometimes allows) to save his life if he would marry her. He, having looked at her for a while and noticed that she was lame, said: “Tie up, tie up! She limps.” — Montaigne¹

Franz-Joseph Murau, the central character of Thomas Bernhard’s last published novel, *Extinction* [*Auslöschung*], is more than a figure who tends towards exaggeration: he is an exaggeration artist [*Übertreibungskünstler*]. Like the man of Picardy who chooses death over a limping wench, Murau puts a “fanatical faith in exaggeration.” As he himself puts it: He has *Übertreibungsfanatismus*.²

The man of Picardy is a fool. And wise counsel when confronted with a forced choice, advises the path of least resistance. If it is going to be one’s money or one’s life, let it be one’s money, so that both are not lost. It is better to lose the least. And this, of course, is the motto of good bureaucrats, precisely those who Lacan suggests are the ones who will truly “set things off” by following orders, rules, and regulations, “mechanically, down the chain of command, with human wills bent, abolished, overcome, in a task that ceases to have any meaning.” He adds: “That task will be the elimination of an incalculable waste that reveals its constant and final dimension for man.”³ The human being—this maker of footsteps that become for the artist holes in the ground—ends up filling them with his or her own refuse. Yet, if reduced to the calculus of its conservation, whose end, Lacan tells us, is the elimination of all waste, the human being ends up at a loss without being a *true* loser. The man from Picardy is indeed a true loser. He gains something in losing that which cannot be won. He gains his very loss.

Murau is like the man from Picardy, and, like Lacan, has no fondness for bureaucrats:

For the last century, the whole of Europe has let itself be tyrannized by three-ring binders, and the tyranny is increasingly oppressive. Soon the whole of Europe will be not only tyrannized but destroyed by them ... Every German book written in this century is a product of this tyranny. German literature has been tyrannized and almost destroyed by three-ring binders, I said. And this present-day literature, produced under this tyranny,

1 Michel de Montaigne, “That the taste for good and evil depends on large part of the opinion we have of them”, in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1948), 34.

2 Thomas Bernhard, *Extinction*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 307. I have also referenced the German edition: *Auslöschung: Ein Zerfall* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986), 611.

3 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 233.

is naturally the most pathetic there has ever been. No other age has seen such a helpless, pathetic literature, a ludicrous desktop literature dictated by three-ring binders. All we have now is a petit bourgeois bureaucratic literature ... For at least a hundred years we've had nothing but what I would call binder literature, lower-middle-class bureaucratic writing, and the masters of this literature are Musil and Thomas Mann, to say nothing of the others. The one exception is, of course, Kafka, who actually was a bureaucrat, though he didn't write bureaucratic works, but none of the other writers could write anything else. Kafka, the bureaucrat, was the only one who produced not bureaucratic literature but great literature.⁴

For Murau, just as for Lacan, the bureaucrat is the quintessential figure who wants nothing more than to keep to his place, and who does everything in his power to hold that *thing* at bay which could threaten it. The bureaucrat knows that the *thing* [*das Ding*] is not-good, making it perhaps great, but most certainly evil. By simply toeing the line the bureaucrat sees no evil, hears no evil, and avoids at all costs being laid "open to the awful humiliation of failure."⁵ Fearing the exposure of the monstrous *thing* within, the bureaucrat hands himself over to the task of good management.

The literary man for Murau opposes himself to the bureaucrat. Yet, in fearing to appear bureaucratic one reproduces its form. It is as if Musil and Mann, for all their ambition, were not ambitious enough. Too eager to protect the literary, by striving to write *good* literature, they become its *executors* and thus its peddlers. They produce a literature that is good, that is correct, but is not great. They do not risk Kafka's exceptionality, according to Murau, which lies in not trying to be something he is not. He is a bureaucrat and thereby can produce non-bureaucratic literature. He can thus produce the *thing* he is not. He can give it an adequate form. By exaggerating the bureaucratic, he produces literature that is not good, but great. By not shying away from what is not literary, i.e. the bureaucratic, by not separating literature from whom he, in fact, is, i.e. a bureaucrat, he does not simply reproduce himself, which is to say, the world to which he belongs. This is perhaps why, for all their gifts, Musil and Mann, for Murau, reproduce the world's petit bourgeois mentality. Unlike the man from Picardy, they make the correct choice. They do not take the art of exaggeration to a ridiculous extreme.

For Murau, exaggeration is not simply *an* art, as Thomas de Quincy proposed, for example, to speak of murder as one of the fine arts. Rather, the art of exaggeration [*Übertreibungskunst*] is the

4 *Extinction*, 305–306; *Auslöschung*, 607–608.

5 *Extinction*, 308; *Auslöschung*, 611.

quintessence of *great* art and thus art as such: “The painter who doesn’t exaggerate is a poor painter, the musician who doesn’t exaggerate is a poor musician, and the writer who doesn’t exaggerate is a poor writer ... Exaggeration is the secret of great art, I said, and of great philosophy. The art of exaggeration is in fact the secret of all mental endeavour [*Geistesgeheimnis*].”⁶ Exaggeration as art [*Kunst*] is the secret of *Geist*. One can imagine Bernhard suggesting that *Geist* drives, but *ist kein Streber*.⁷ Ambition is not a striving after greatness; it is a matter of biting off more than one can chew.

Great art is conceived as the effect and evidence of an excessive drive [*Trieb*], an overdrive [the most literal rendering of *Übertreibung*] that makes art and the artist tend either toward over- or under-statement: “With some, of course, the art of exaggeration consists in understating everything [*alles zu untertreiben*], in which case we have to say that they exaggerate understatement [*übertreibt die Untertreibung*], that exaggerated understatement is their particular version of the art of exaggeration [*macht die übertriebene Untertreibung so zu seiner Übertreibungskunst*].”⁸ Art is driven to exaggerate. In exaggeration, the drive’s excess becomes manifest. Even when absent, the presence of this absence must be excessive. Exaggeration is always too much or too little, over- or under-stated, and it is through this excess that the drive becomes legible.

The legibility of the drive lies in its partiality, its excessive attention to detail. Exaggeration always concerns details: certain things missing or grotesquely amplified. Exaggeration confuses the object exaggerated either with the presence or absence of a detail. And, when pushed to an extreme, a substitution takes place in which the detail takes the place of the object. Partiality reigns and the whole is subordinate to an imperious part. In one of his many diatribes against photography, commenting on a photo he happened to take of sisters that forever imprinted the image of their mocking face on his mind, he writes:

I once told Gambetti that when I spoke of my sisters I was speaking not of my sisters as such but only of their mocking faces, captured by chance in this photograph ... I have often tried to rid myself of their mocking faces, to transform them into faces that don’t mock, but I’ve never succeeded. I have no sisters, I told myself, only their mocking faces. There’s no Caecilia and no Amalia, only two mocking faces, frozen forever in this hideous picture ...

6 *Extinction*, 307–308; *Auslöschung*, 612.

7 A *Streber* is what one might call a try-hard. See Thomas Bernhard, ‘Leute, die ein Gespräch führen wollen, sind mir verdächtig’ in *Der Wahrheit auf der Spur: Reden, Leserbriefe, Interviews, Feuilletons*, ed. Wolfram Bayer, Raimund Fellingner, and Martin Huber (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2011), 246–247.

8 *Extinction*, 307–308; *Auslöschung*, 612.

Just think of the photo of Einstein sticking his tongue out. I can no longer visualize Einstein without his tongue sticking out, Gambetti, I said. I can't think of Einstein without seeing his tongue, that cunning, malignant tongue, stuck out at the whole world, indeed the whole universe. And I can only see Churchill with his lower lip distrustfully thrust forward.⁹

The reduction of Churchill to his lower lip, Einstein to his malignant tongue, and his sisters to their mocking faces is a metonymic operation in which a part is substituted for the whole. The *Übertreibungskünstler* has certain mania for metonymic substitution: "We're often led to exaggerate, I said later, to such an extent that we take our exaggeration to be the only logical fact, with the result that we don't perceive the real facts [*eigentliche Tatsachen*] at all, only the monstrous exaggeration [*nur die maßlos in der Höhe getriebene Übertreibung*]." ¹⁰ Driven beyond all measure, exaggeration positions the subject outside propriety. Exaggeration drives a property of something beyond the place to which it has been assigned by a proper measure. Without measure [*maßlos*] the object no longer belongs to itself; a part no longer belongs to the whole. The exaggerated feature monopolizing the whole becomes a ridiculous thing, something improper. The transformation of the object through exaggeration detaches the subject who exaggerates from its reality. No longer seeing Churchill but Churchill through the lens of his protruding lip, the grip that his power holds loosens, becoming the play thing of the drive that works him over, making him a subject that is not whole. Whether undercut through restraint (understated) or excessively present (overstated), compelled beyond (*Über-*) or below (*Unter-*), art is driven by *impropriety*. Its risk is thus utter and complete ridiculousness [*Lächerlichkeit*].

All of Bernhard's figures are doubtless given to exaggeration, wearing the excess of their preference for the negative on an impeccably tailored sleeve. And no one is endeared to the grim stylist without a strong taste for his refinement for the overstated. However, Murau is the only figure, that I can recall, that regularly has the ridiculousness of his overstatements returned to him in the form of laughter. I am not referring to the laughter of the reader, but that of Murau's pupil Gambetti who frequently bursts into his characteristic laughter, his so-called "*Gambettilachen*", or that of his friend, Maria, the only other figure alongside Kafka that constitutes for Murau an exception to the tyranny of the three-ring binder. She refers to him jokingly as an "expert in extinction" for "doing violence against philosophy [*sich an der Philosophie vergreifen*]", of sinning against spirit [*sich am Geist*

9 *Extinction*, 120–122; *Auslöschung*, 240–245.

10 *Extinction*, 307; *Auslöschung*, 610–611.

Versündigenden].”¹¹ He is her “extinction expert” and it is this joke that he takes in earnest that becomes not only the title, but the essential operation of his account. “I was her *extinction expert* [*ihr Auslöscher*],” she said: “whatever I set down on paper was automatically extinguished [*was ich zu Papier bringe, ist das Ausgelöschte*].”¹²

Extinction [*Auslöschung*] becomes the key operator of his method of exaggeration. Both the name of his account and its operation, the work of extinction will serve the function of nullifying the “whole complex of his origins”:

It’s not enough to make notes about something that’s important to us, perhaps more important than anything else, I said, namely the whole complex of our origins [*unseren ganzen Herkunftscomplex*]. We must produce a substantial account, not to say a long account, of what we emerged from, what we are made of, and what has *determined our being* [*unsere Existenz geprägt*] for as long as we’ve lived. We may recoil from it for years, we may shrink from such an almost superhuman enterprise [*übermenschlichen Anstrengung*], but ultimately we have to set about it and bring it to a conclusion ... I’ll call my account *Extinction*, I had told Gambetti, because in it I intend to extinct everything: everything I record will be extincted [*alles, das ich in diesem Bericht aufschreibe, wird ausgelöscht*]. My whole family and their life and times will be extincted; Wolfsegg will be extincted ...¹³

Extinction is an outrageous book: outrageously ambitious and more to the point, outrageous in its failure. As Murau puts it to Gambetti: “But I can’t abolish [*abschaffen*] my family just because I want to.”¹⁴ The endeavour and its impossibility assumes a comical monstrosity in light of its beginning, which is occasioned by Murau’s receipt of a telegram from his sisters informing him that both his parents and his brother have been killed in an accident: *Eltern und Johannes tödlich verunglückt. Caecilia, Amalia*. The dark comedy of the novel consists in the fact that Murau who has been struggling and failing to write the account which will extinguish his family, struggling and failing to escape them, to will them out of existence, through a stroke of *bad* luck, gets what he wished for. The obstacle to beginning has been resolved. Their present absence makes it possible to begin *Auslöschung*.

The account now takes as its task the *Auslöschung* of their *absent presence*, their all too symbolic grip on his being, his *Existenz*. Having become the sole inheritor and executor of the Wolfsegg Estate, their absent presence has become suddenly all too real. Only through the exaggeration

¹¹ *Extinction*, 273; *Auslöschung*, 541.

¹² *Ibid.*, 273; *Ibid.*, 541.

¹³ *Extinction*, 100–101 (translation modified); *Auslöschung*, 200.

¹⁴ *Extinction*, 8; *Auslöschung*, 17.

of the inordinate symbolic place that Wolfsegg holds over his psychic life does he transform the tragic into the comic, does he consign it and his family to the place of their absence. Thus, in response to Gambetti who accuses him of being “a typical Austrian pessimist [*Schwarzmalerei*],” and a “*maßlosen Übertreiber*” Murau responds that his exaggerations are in truth “monstrous understatements [*maßlosen Untertreibungen*].”¹⁵ This is indeed Bernhard’s general approach: to ruthlessly understate the overstated, to treat exaggeration not as an exception but the rule. Something becomes some *thing* it is not—not through becoming its opposite—but by understating what it in fact is: a matter of complete and utter indifference, cosmically insignificant, but of absolute significance for the subject caught in its grip. For Murau, understating overstatement is the correct response to the horror he inherits. Paired down to essentials, the novel in effect treats a singular mind’s tortuous effort to be done with the horrors of inheritance. He overstates its overwhelming presence in order to mark its underlying absence: The over-stated is thus under-stated.

If exaggeration is Murau’s manner of sinning against spirit [*Geist*], it is perhaps because he pits *Auslöschung* against *Aufhebung*. “I’ve thrown away more manuscripts than I’ve kept, I thought, and those that I’ve kept I can’t bear to look at [*Ich habe mehr Manuskripte weggeworfen, als aufgehoben, dachte ich, die aufgehobenen darf ich nicht mehr anschauen*].”¹⁶ If *Aufhebung* elevates what it nonetheless cancels, preserving the negated form of the *aufgehoben*, *Auslöschung* destitutes, consigns to oblivion, what is *ausgelöscht*. If philosophy is a matter of *begreifen*, grasping through conceptualization, Murau’s writing is a *vergreifen*, a mishandling of the concept. Hegel is conspicuously absent from the philosophical pantheon that Murau often cites. Descartes, Pascal, Kant, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, even Heidegger is mentioned (albeit dismissively), but Hegel is peculiarly absent, casting his grey shadow over the movement of Murau’s thought. *Aufhebung* defines the movement of *Geist*’s success, the capacity of thought to determine retrospectively the conditions of its own emergence. For all its failures, its false starts, and misdirection, it is not *essentially* a failure. Its stupidity is not fundamental. It has a *sens*, meaning and direction. *Geist*’s dialectical movement is not the discourse of a fool.

However, only a fool sets out to write a book with only a title in mind: “The only thing I have fixed in my head, I had said to Gambetti, is the title, *Extinction*, for the sole purpose of my account will be to extinct what it describes [*in ihm Beschriebene auszulöschen*] ...”¹⁷ And: “*Extinction*, I thought, but to be honest I still had only a vague notion of

15 *Extinction*, 62; *Auslöschung*, 123–124.

16 *Extinction*, 272; *Auslöschung*, 541

17 *Extinction*, 99 (translation modified); *Auslöschung*, 199.

the form the work should take, though I had thought about it for years.”¹⁸ This may indeed be an exaggeration, but to take it in earnest serves to position whatever is written down, “whatever is brought to Paper,” as Maria formulates it, in the *essential* void of its content, “the notorious gaping void,” the mute obstacle constituted by its fundamental lack of sense.

An annihilating machine: Whatever enters into its operation will be *ausgelöscht*, it will be brought to not. By relentlessly exaggerating the negative relation he has to the object of his account, he positions the object within the space of its own absence, as the thing it is not. Although the operation, *Auslöschung*, feigns reflexivity, the object included in its operation, the *ausgelöscht*, is in the empty place marked by its present absence. *Auslöschung* establishes the present absence of the ‘object’ through the logic of exaggeration that substitutes the *thing it is not* for the *what* that it is. *Auslöschung*, i.e. extinction as a process of extinguishing the extincted, exaggerates the failure to comprehend, taking the lack of understanding to a ridiculous extreme, by reducing the significance of *what* is said to the mere act of saying it. By repeating what is said, the stress shifts from the meaning to the *formal* manner of its saying:

We say something that seems quite clear at the time, then a moment later we don’t know what it was, I told Gambetti. I’ve just said something about Montaigne, but now, two or three seconds later, I don’t know what it was. We ought to be able to say something and then record it in our minds [*zu protokollieren in unserem Kopf*], I said, but we can’t. I’ve no idea why I spoke of Montaigne just now, and, of course, I’ve even less of an idea *what* I said. We imagine we reached a stage where we’ve become a thinking machine [*eine Denkmaschine*], but we can’t rely on its thinking. This machine works unremittingly against the mind [*Kopf*], I said. It generates thoughts, but we don’t know where they come from, why they were conceived, or what they relate to. The fact is that this nonstop thinking machine overtakes us. The mind is overburdened but has no escape, as it’s inevitably linked up to the machine for the rest of our lives. Until we die. You say Montaigne, Gambetti, but right now I don’t know what that means, any more than I know what Schopenhauer means. You might just as well say *buttercup*: I wouldn’t know what that meant either.¹⁹

No matter what we say, we are saying it. And if we say it, in order to retain what we say, for the mind to record it, it must be said again, it must be repeated, perhaps with some variation, but regardless it will

¹⁸ *Extinction*, 309; *Auslöschung*, 615.

¹⁹ *Extinction*, 79 (translation modified); *Auslöschung*, 157–158.

nevertheless be different. What I say, when I repeat it, *will have been* spoken and this pits the thinking machine against the mind. We ought to be able to say something and record it, to pass from the I to the me, we ought, as Lacan's "birdbrain" would have it, say: "But still, all the same, I am me!"²⁰ Yet, as soon as the mind is inscribed by the thinking machine, by language, the I is spoken. The I speaks, but *it will have been spoken*, and the I can do nothing other than speak *it*. And it is truly exhausting.

It makes the I say things, and as Murau notes, what it generates does not make sense. The thinking machine generates an infernal racket, a "frightful chaos" that the mind tries to follow, to make sense of, but fails. The mind [*Kopf*] depends upon the thinking machine for its thoughts, but this overburdens it, exhausts it: I say, but *it* was said, because "I" was said, but *who* then said it!? Such a question makes the head hurt, the mind stumble in the direction of answers that promise *nothing*. In passing from *I* to *it*, the I that says something is always saying nothing in addition to whatever was said. This surplus of absence, the place of nothing, when exaggerated threatens all meaning with indifference. All sense becomes the mere surrogate of the nothing it drags along with what it says. *What* one says is interrupted by the act of saying it. Whether one speaks of Montaigne, Schopenhauer, or a buttercup, they do not serve the interests of the mind that seeks to grasp them by saying what it thought it said. In these moments, when the nothing that says (the act of saying) overwhelms *whatever* it was that was said, one "taps" one's head and finds that that it is "entirely void."

The most that one can do is attempt to grasp the manner in which *what is* is mishandled [*Vergreifen*] in its recording, producing an account of or a report on the mind's failing. This is what Murau does with *Extinction*. The book comprises the failure to write the book. *Extinction* fails successfully.

The book can then write its own failure by making an object (a book) of the subject's failure to write. To make the act of writing, not *what* is written, into the object of concern. This is the genius of Bernhard's subtle device that makes his novel into a frame for the representation of Murau's account. Sharing the same title as Murau's book, Bernhard is nonetheless careful to offset his novel, adding a subtitle, "*Ein Zerfall*" [A Collapse] (unfortunately left out in the English edition) and the epigram from Montaigne: "I feel death ever pinching me by the throat, or pulling me by the back." He also intervenes decisively at the beginning and the end of Murau's account in order to situate it as written and not spoken. In the opening sentence, we read: "On the twenty-ninth, having returned from Wolfsegg, I met my pupil Gambetti

20 Jacques Lacan, *Seminar III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 289.

on the Pincio to discuss arrangements for the lessons he was to receive in May, writes Murau, Franz-Joseph..." Bernhard, or the narrator's, decision to write the name as if being written down upon a report or a legal document, introduces an exaggerated level of formality: the empty formality one encounters for example when filling out a form. This narrator does not reappear until the final page: "From Rome, where I now am again and where I have written this *Extinction*, and where I will remain, writes Murau (born in Wolfsegg 1934, died in Rome 1983)..." It is here that we learn that the account that Murau has been insistently referring to as a book to be written, no matter how difficult the writing will be, has been written. This makes Murau's account that we have read a book that *will have been* written. Yet, the account that we read is not strictly speaking Murau's account, but its facsimile that is positioned by the third person that informs that Murau *writes*. This difference is striking in the last line of the novel, since Murau tells us "I have written this *Extinction*" and the third person tells us that he *writes* this "I have written." In other words, the novel's formal narratological device reproduces the problem that Murau discusses between the mind and the thinking machine. What Murau writes will have been written. This positions the I of Murau that is always addressed to another (*Gambetti hatte gesagt*, etc.) in relation to a third that makes Murau's first-person account into an object that is being recorded or transcribed as "Murau writes." Murau's I is thus ineradicably, because structurally, exterior to itself. And this is achieved through the exaggeration of interiority. The first person is inscribed within the third person, within the impersonal. Its interiority is a device, an artifice, because he is writing it down.

If we take seriously Murau's claim that whatever he writes down is extincted [*ausgelöscht*], we are observing his extinction [*Auslöschung*]. What we read is not just Murau's *Extinction*, but Murau's extinction. We thus do not just read *Auslöschung*, but *ein Zerfall*. His account and thus his "I" is presented to us by a third person whose presence is understated. An exaggerated stress on interiority is positioned by an understated exteriority; the "I" is positioned by an understated "it." This gap between under- and over-statement is stressed by the jarring tension between the present and past tense that concludes the novel: the impossibility of Murau "writing" *Auslöschung* in the present tense and being already dead: "writes Murau (born in Wolfsegg 1934, died in Rome 1983)." His life is excised from a writing which presents a subject, an I in the process of its *Selbstausslöschung*, in the very place of his absence.

When I take Wolfsegg and my family apart, when I dissect, annihilate and extinct them, I am actually taking myself apart, dissecting, annihilating, and extincting myself. I have to admit that this idea of self-dissection and self-extinction appeals to me, I told Gambetti. I'll spend my life dissecting and extinguishing

myself, Gambetti, and if I'm not mistaken I'll succeed in this self-dissection and self-extinction. I actually do nothing but dissect and extinguish myself. When I wake up in the morning the first thing I think of is setting about my work of dissection and extinction with a will.²¹

This is a fool's endeavour, for only a fool chooses nothing, like the man from Picardy, giving the gift of death. His account begins with such a gift and ends with such a gift, deciding to give "Wolfsegg, just as it stood, with *everything belonging to it*, as an unconditional gift to the Jewish community in Vienna." When he dies, he dies happy, he dies lucid, because he is an *Übertreibungskünstler*. He has effectively *extincted* the horrors of inheritance, ensuring that its world and its malignancy shall not be reproduced in and by him. Like the man from Picardy, he chooses a happy death over a miserable life.

To explain anything properly we have to exaggerate. Only exaggeration can make things clear. Even the risk of being branded as fools ceases to worry us as we get older. In later years there's nothing better than to be declared a fool. The greatest happiness I know, Gambetti, is that of the aging fool who is free to indulge his foolishness. Given the chance, we should proclaim ourselves fools by the age of forty at the latest and capitalize on our foolishness. It's foolishness that makes us happy, I said.²²

—Written in my 40th year.

21 *Extinction*, 147 (translation modified); *Auslöschung*, 296.

22 *Extinction*, 65; *Auslöschung*, 128–129.