

# THE CHEAP-EATERS

Thomas Bernhard



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translated by Douglas Robertson

SPURL EDITIONS

We seek the design of the world —  
This design we are ourselves.

*Novalis*

While taking the walk that he had been taking for the purposes of his studies every late afternoon for weeks – and also routinely at about six in the morning for the preceding three days, a walk that passed through Wertheimstein Park, in which he said he had once again been able, owing to the *ideal* natural conditions prevailing solely in Wertheimstein Park, to return, after a rather long interval, from a completely worthless train of thought regarding his *Physiognomy* to a useful, indeed, ultimately uncommonly profitable one and hence to a resumption of his work on his essay, an essay he had neglected for the longest imaginable time owing to his inability to concentrate, an essay on whose realization, he said, in the end depended a further essay, and on whose realization genuinely depended yet another essay, and on whose realization depended a fourth essay on physiognomy based on these three essays that unquestionably needed to be written and on which his future scientific work and consequently his very future existence actually depended – all at once and all of a sudden, instead of walking to the old ash tree as usual he had gone to the old oak tree and thereby happened upon his so-called cheap-eaters, with whom for many years on week-days, and hence from Monday through Friday at the Vienna Public Kitchen and hence in the so-called VPK, and specifically the VPK on Döblinger Hauptstrasse, he had eaten cheaply. As on the preceding days he had been able to go automatically to the old ash tree and not to the old oak tree, but all of a sudden he had not gone to the old ash tree, but rather to the old oak tree, for if he, said Koller, had gone to the old ash tree on the day in question, he possibly would not have happened upon the *cheap-eaters*, but rather upon something quite different, since in any case, had he alighted upon a different walk than the one he had taken on that day, namely a walk leading to the old oak and not to the old ash, he would have happened upon a different

subject, possibly even a *diametrically opposite subject, upon a completely different one*, he said, than the one he had happened upon, because he had taken that and no other walk, and hence happened upon the cheap-eaters on the day in question, because he had gone to the old oak tree and not to the old ash tree. What at first he had been bound to regard as an impermissible interruption of his train of thought, which for days had again been concentrated on physiognomy, his memory of the cheap-eaters whom he had *forgotten* about for so many years, and the thoughts resulting from this memory, his suddenly all-consuming preoccupation with Einzig and Goldschmidt, Grill and Weninger had suddenly and effectively unforeseeably proved to be not only useful for his Physiognomy, but even decisive for this work that he had been pursuing without interruption and intensively for nearly sixteen years, and possibly even proved fundamentally explicative of the essential points of this work in an unprecedented way. The glimpse of the cheap-eaters that had initially seemed to him nothing but a barely excusable digression from his true calling had all of a sudden become for him the exact opposite of that, namely a glimpse into the center of his Physiognomy, from which he had promised himself nothing less than the fulfillment of his calling in life. When he had suddenly been confronted by Messrs. Einzig and Goldschmidt, Grill and Weninger on his completely unforeseen walk to the old oak tree and not on his ingrained walk to the old ash tree, and confronted by them with a much greater and actually more violent intensity in his mind than in reality, he had with the same suddenness and with the same intensity begun to enjoy the possibility of continuing his work and hence his Physiognomy precisely at the point at which on the previous day it had come to a standstill contrary to expectations. Now, and specifically in instantaneous exploitation of this unexpected

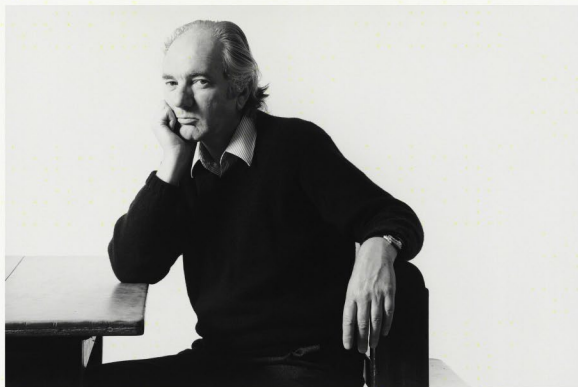
impulse, and specifically as part of his already fairly extensive Physiognomy, he, Koller, intended to make an attempt to write about the cheap-eaters under the title *The Cheap-Eaters*, and this attempt would be of foundational significance, of the greatest importance, for his Physiognomy. His, Koller's, gaze had alighted on Messrs. Einzig and Goldschmidt, Grill and Weninger in their capacity as *The Cheap-Eaters* at the exact right moment, a moment that today he could readily term the *decisive moment* for his Physiognomy. It had been years since he had last thought about the cheap-eaters and naturally it had never since then occurred to him for a moment that the cheap-eaters could ever be of the slightest scientific value to his work; if he had ever had such an idea, he doubtlessly would have drawn upon the cheap-eaters for his physiognomic reflections at a much earlier point in time, but inasmuch as he, Koller, had instead pushed the cheap-eaters out of his consciousness like everything else that was inessential and irrelevant to his scientific work and ultimately had consequently forgotten them, now and specifically in Wertheimstein Park en route to the oak and not to the ash he was all the more compelled to be surprised that the cheap-eaters of all subjects were affording him clarity on the subject of physiognomy. Once again he, Koller, had experienced the confirmation of his conviction that the very notion of a chance event was nonsensical and unthinkable, for it had of course been no chance event that sixteen years earlier he had bumped into the cheap-eaters at the very moment of which he could say today that it had brought about the authentic and hence the decisive *intellectual turn* in his life and indeed precisely on the day on which, a full seventeen weeks after the amputation of his leg, he had been discharged from Wilhelminen Hospital and had returned to his apartment on Krottenbachstrasse, having definitively lost his leg thanks to what he called

the precisely *fortunate* as well as *unfortunate* dog bite, and probably, or rather quite assuredly, as he said to me, thanks to the incompetence of the doctors. On that day, en route to the VPK and, as he precisely remembers, right next to the post office on Pyrkergrasse, he for the first time happened upon the subject of physiognomy, even before he subsequently, upon entering the VPK a couple of minutes later, bumped into the cheap-eaters, and in the final analysis he owed his Physiognomy exclusively to what I termed the *great misfortune of his life*, to the event that he by contrast had often described to me as the *great stroke of good fortune of my life*, to the fact that on that to my mind unfortunate but to his mind very often fortunate thirty-first of October the industrial glassmaker Weller's dog had bitten his leg, which had led to that leg's needing to be amputated and which had in turn led to Weller being obliged to remit to him, in addition to the annuity that he was compelled to remit to him on the first of every month, the sum of two hundred thousand, which had brought him, Koller, who had originally been interested in a *purely natural-science-oriented* career in life, into contact with all possible philosophical ideas and ultimately with physiognomy. And so he owed his Physiognomy solely to the circumstance that on that fortunate/unfortunate thirty-first of October sixteen years ago he had gone to Türkenschanz Park and not turned back prematurely, as well as to the fact that at the same point in time the industrial glassmaker Weller had also gone to Türkenschanz Park and that Weller's dog had torn itself free of Weller's leash and pounced on him, Koller, and bitten him. If he, Koller, had not taken this walk to Türkenschanz Park, if he had for example gone instead to Wertheimstein Park, and if Weller had not gone to Türkenschanz Park at the same point in time as Koller, for Weller had not always gone exclusively to Türkenschanz Park either, but rather had very often, like Koller,

gone to Wertheimstein Park, and if Weller's dog had not torn itself free of Weller's leash at the exact moment at which he, Koller, had been walking past Weller, he, Koller, would of course never have happened upon all those philosophical ideas of his, which had preoccupied him for the last sixteen years, but above all not upon physiognomy, on which he had been principally concentrating for the past sixteen years. Quite apart from the fact that both of them, Weller and Koller, could have gone to Wertheimstein Park and not to Türkenschanz Park on the day in question. He, Koller, said that on the day of his discharge from what he described as the *hideous and dangerous* Wilhelminen Hospital he had been obliged to go into the VPK in order to happen upon physiognomy and probably had also been obliged to run into the cheap-eaters for this purpose alone. He, Koller, always said he owed his Physiognomy to the industrial glassmaker Weller and to Weller's dog and to all the causes and effects of being bitten by Weller's dog and also most assuredly to the circumstance that on the very day of his discharge from Wilhelminen Hospital he had gone straight to the VPK and run into the cheap-eaters. All the circumstances connected to the dog bite were the topic of an essay that he was planning to write, an essay exclusively concentrated on this dog bite. But now he was concentrated solely on the cheap-eaters, who had quite spontaneously shifted themselves into the center of his Physiognomy. For days on end he had had nothing other than the cheap-eaters on his mind and he was merely waiting for the moment when it would be possible for him to sit down and write *The Cheap-Eaters*. Once he had written *The Cheap-Eaters*, he would have written the most important chapter of his *Physiognomy*, which of course he had had *in its entirety* in his mind; only *The Cheap-Eaters* had so far eluded him. Because he, Koller, had not known where to go to eat on the very day of his discharge from Wilhel-



minen Hospital, he had immediately and albeit in the understandably most difficult of circumstances gone to the VPK and there he had run into the cheap-eaters. Now, after having completely forgotten the cheap-eaters for such a long time, all of a sudden, because he had gone to the old oak and not the old ash, he had the cheap-eaters back on his mind and for several days straight he had not been granted a moment's peace of mind by the cheap-eaters. All of a sudden as he had been on his way to the old oak the cheap-eaters had thrust themselves into his train of thought and had gradually drawn his entire train of thought to themselves and completely neutralized every other train of thought in his mind. All of a sudden from then onward his mind had been completely engrossed by the cheap-eaters, owing to the fact that he had all of a sudden broken his habit of going to the old ash and had gone to the old oak. How much do I owe to Wertheimstein Park!, he said, but naturally also to Türkenschanz Park!, but naturally vis-à-vis the cheap-eaters and vis-à-vis my physiognomy, I owe everything to Türkenschanz Park *and* Wertheimstein Park. It had been years since he had last gone to Türkenschanz Park, because with his prosthetic leg he had found it too difficult, in fact basically impossible, to go there, because Türkenschanz Park was sited much too high for somebody in his pitiful condition, whereas Wertheimstein Park was a perfectly ideal site for somebody in his pitiful condition. For years he had fraternized with the cheap-eaters and had eaten cheaply with the cheap-eaters, had eaten more cheaply with the cheap-eaters than anywhere else and actually he had never eaten both as cheaply *and* as well anywhere else, for in the VPK he, Koller, had always eaten cheaply *and* well and he had never yet been able to eat both more cheaply and better anywhere else. He said that he actually owed to the VPK nothing less than the fact that he was still alive today; nothing less, actually, than



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The cheap-eaters have been eating at the Vienna Public Kitchen for years, and true to their name, always the cheapest meals. They become the focus of Koller's scientific attention when he deviates one day from his usual path through the park, leading him to come upon the cheap-eaters and to realize that they must be the focal piece of his years-long, unwritten study of physiognomy. The narrator, a former school friend of Koller's, tells of his relationship with Koller in a single unbroken paragraph that is both dizzying and absorbing. In Koller, the narrator observes a "gradually ever-growing and utterly exclusive interest in thought . . . We can get close to such a person, but if we come into contact with him we will be repelled." Written in Bernhard's hyperbolic, darkly comic style, *The Cheap-Eaters* is a study of the limits of language and thought.

**Thomas Bernhard** was one of the most important and unique writers of the twentieth century. Born in 1931, Bernhard published numerous novels and autobiographical writings, as well as short stories, plays, and poetry. Many of his prose works feature complex narrative structures and obsessive, misanthropic monologues. After years of chronic lung illness, Bernhard died in Austria in 1989.

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