

Rainald Goetz

Johann Holtrop

(*Johann Holtrop*, Suhrkamp Verlag 2012)

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About the author:

Rainald Goetz (Munich, 1954) is one of Germany's most prominent and contentious authors. His work is marked by an enormous intellectual curiosity and a willingness to immerse himself in the midst of the cultural developments that concern him, which have ranged from rave culture, the blogosphere, the high art market, and insane asylums to the sociopathic world of high finance. Goetz made his explosive debut onto the German literary scene at the readings for the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize when, clad in a staid suit, with his blond hair jutting out in all directions, he slit his forehead open with a razorblade while intoning passages from his first novel *Irre* (Deranged). But Goetz is far from an petulant provocateur: a holder of doctoral degrees in both medicine and history, he gives the lie to Benjamin Kunkel's recent assertions about the dovetailing of intellectual rigor into the casual acquaintanceship with grand ideas characteristic of newspaper readers. His famed media appearances, often derided as stunts, form part of a principled refusal to separate literature from its status as an intervention in the larger world: "The body of the writer must be able to stand up to what he writes. One must not retreat behind the text," in Goetz's own words. Deeply influenced by Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, Goetz

examines pop cultural phenomena as semi-autonomous spheres, each with its own customs and inner rules but also subject to the asymmetrical relations of power embodied by the modern capitalist state. Whereas the work of many of his Anglophone counterparts, Bret Easton Ellis or Jay McInerney, for example, is vitiated by slack hypocrisy, a willingness to throw wispy, ill-informed jabs at a consumer culture that comprises their native element, Rainald Goetz compromises neither in the rigor of his thoughts or the insistent precision of his style. His fulminating prose, often compared to that of Thomas Bernhard, represents the intellectual and stylistic consummation of a global trend toward inquiry into the nature of late-twentieth and early twenty-first century *anomie* that towers over its English-language counterparts.

Numerous critics over the past decade have wrung their hands at literature's abandonment of the public sphere, at the lack of a willingness among writers to address society as a whole in the manner of Balzac or Dickens. With *Johann Holtrop*, Rainald Goetz does so mercilessly. Beginning with a description of a modern office park that reads like an updated *Tale of Two Cities*, Goetz moves forward rapidly, building up to what appears like a tale of corporate intrigue; but the canniness, the contest between the right-minded and unscrupulous that once formed the center of such tales is absent from the business world of the aught years, where capital is unlimited, oversight inexistent, and venality and ruthlessness are the essential ingredients of one's rise to the top. The protagonist, the Johann Holtrop of the book's title, undergoes a meteoric rise to the top of Assperg, a group closely modeled on the media giant Bertelsmann; many of the protagonist's own traits are based on former Bertelsmann CEO Thomas Middelhoff, whose brief tenure as a storied Master of the Universe ended over a stock disagreement in

2002; thereafter, he was named CEO of Acanor, a company he had run into bankruptcy four years later; he departed that position amid recommendations by German prosecutors that he be investigated for defrauding his former employer.

The book is divided into three sections: *Places*, set in 1998, details Holtrop's ascent in the corporate world; *Deeds*, in 2002, is a searing indictment of the ruthlessness of a business culture summarized in Holtrop's mantra, "This one must be gotten rid of"; *Days*, set in 2010, chronicles Holtrop's ignoble firing, his failure in his subsequent appointment, his inner desolation, and his suicide, which eerily foretells the rash of suicides among finance workers in the winter of 2014. Following his dictum "the self is a system," Goetz's *Johann Holtrop* dissects the perverse arrangement of incentives that allow for the rise of the "corporate psychopath."

Sample translation:

Places

When the winters were still long and heavy with snow and the summers were hot and dry

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There stood the glassy black monolith senselessly enormous in the night, on the outskirts of Krölpa, Krölpa on the Unstrut, the forest behind it marking the town's northern boundary, approaching the Warta, there it glimmered, lonesome, wicked, and red, the glowing red logo of Arrow PC high atop the roof of the lurid black steel and black glass onstrosity, the red writing on high, a new building, as broken as Germany herself in those years, asinine and hysterically frigid in conception, like the movers and shakers who had their desks here, who imagined the world to be steered by greed, as they themselves were, unremitting greed, wrangling any sort of advantage, preferably, of course, a monetary one, as it was precisely therein that the abstract financial mechanism residing here was anchored, in their calculations related to self-interest, themselves finally subject to calculation, prevision, exploitation: the phantasm of the total dominance of CAPITAL over man. So false, so risible, so blindly conceived, as childishly megalomaniacal as, as, as —

At midnight a clock rang out from afar, an hour later it struck one, then two, a half-hour later at half-past two the black Subaru Sunset with the black tinted windows rolled into the parking lot of Arrow PC, PC stands here for Products and Consulting, and the men from the janitorial crew employed by Clean Impact stepped one after the other from the car, walked to the back entrance of the building, which was secured with two locks and an electronic code, the door opened, the men entered the building and then

went down to the basement, retrieved their garishly colored cleaning cart and set to work, and for the next few hours that night the lights in the building would switch on, according to a programmed timer, in all of the rooms throughout the various floors in the building where the Clean Impact employees were setting about their tasks.

The desks in the offices were kept orderly, yet it was impossible for Henze, 58, one-time skilled worker in agricultural and forestry machinery and current hourly temp worker contracted by Clean Impact, to overlook the occasional papers and odds and ends left lying about, and he would then either follow or resist the impulse to turn his attention to them, depending on whether he was in a hurry or felt he was being observed by his colleagues or his boss, or whether he might possibly be spending too long on one of the numerous rooms to be cleaned. Henze's boss, Dan Poggart, 45, a British ex-roadie who had stuck around in Thuringia after the fall of the Berlin wall on account of a love affair, had in the interests of his client, Arrow PC, informally arranged for the rooms housing sensitive data to be taken care of by non-German cleaning teams: today, along with his colleagues Üsküb, Callao, Dobrudsch, Asow, and Isjum. Henze had been called in to substitute for Ismail Khedive, who had suddenly taken sick, and was debriefed on the legally binding security regulations included in Poggart's documentation, though not as Henze, as he himself knew, but rather as Khedive.

On the ninth floor Henze entered the corner suite of Sprißler, Leiter KS and sat down in the chair. Henze was a quiet, stocky man with a large head; on account of his friendliness, clever people took him to be stupid, and on account of his slowness, frantic people took him to be lazy. Henze looked at the picture of the Sprißler family displayed on the desk, looked into the full waste bin, took the bin with him as he stood up and

emptied it outside in the hallway in the large blue trash bag. Then he came back with the vacuum cleaner, let the motor growl and cleaned the floor of the room. On the corner of the desk a lower drawer opened. Henze bumped against it with the vacuum tube. He saw a mobile phone lying on the piled up papers, took it out and weighed it in his hand. He thought of the naked breast that he had seen some time back on a woman in a sauna, of the white folding chair he had seen on a cliff side by the sea, with a red umbrella splayed open above it. Then, after a short pause, Henze laid the phone back in the desk drawer and pushed it closed. Just then he heard Poggart's voice behind him, calling into the room: "Everything in order with you?" And Henze could answer truthfully as he turned around: "Yes!" everything was in order. At that moment he saw Poggart's bearded face framed by the lintel, then it pulled away and vanished in the darkness of the hallway.

An hour later, done with the rooms that had been assigned to him, Henze took the cleaning cart to the basement and walked back up to the entryway located on the ground floor. Next to the reception desk were a black leather armchair, a couch, and low tables arranged for visitors; that was where the employees of Clean Impact gathered after work. The others were already sitting there when Henze arrived, and Dobrudsch, the giant Russian, the one who got paid a salary, ordered Henze to bring over the ashtray from the table and to sit down on the floor in front of him, as he said this he beat the arm of his chair. The command ended, there was a pause for effect, silence, tick-tock, a bellowing triumphant laughter, first from Dobrudsch himself, then from all the colleagues together. Laughing weakly, Henze walked to the second seating area, brought the empty ashtray over, and pointed to his ears, he was not in the least deaf, he indicated, Dobrudsch could speak to him softly. Then he took a cigarette from the Kyrgyzstani Asow who was sitting

next to Dobrusch, he was one of Clean Impact's temp workers too, and while he inhaled the first drag, Henze sat in the corner seat of the second, empty seating area to smoke. His ashes he knocked out onto the corner of the glass table nearby.

The others talked about their cars and of the advantages of the Turkeyol tires from Turkey that were now on sale at Autotip. Dobrusch had heard of a test report that stated the Turkeyol tires were no worse than much more expensive so-called brand-name products from Europe or the Far East. Isjum, the Finn, Bulgarian, Afghan, "Where are you actually from? Sewer rat!" had to renew his license on account of drunk driving, so the conversation turned to the revocation of driver's licenses and the German moron test. The moron test was given out by the German authorities, German doctors, driving school instructors, and driver's license centers for purpose of dispatching undesirable foreigners, immigrants, and other sacrificial lambs, Üsküb had heard from Poggart, but the dispatching out of undesirable non-Germans through German tests is not any particularly great surprise. He himself had just been in Germany a few months, before that in Poland and England, before that he's been in Spain, the money was better here, the controls everywhere were just as easy to get around. Dobrusch confirmed what he said, he had a dust-up with Poggart over a sick note that he had had sent to the office for himself and Khedive without immediately bringing the certificate of attestation. To get it, he'd have had to go to a specialist to Werra or in Nörsel, he had failed to do so, as a consequence Poggart had issued a written warning to him in the office at the beginning of the week. He couldn't let that slide from Poggart, though, he'd gone to the district worker's council in Ohra, there they told him that such a threat was invalid, there were worker's protections for these cases, to protect one against the despotism of bosses, etc.

Henze wiped the ash from the table corner into his hand and carried it to the ashtray on the other table, rubbed out his cigarette and sat back at his table alone. Shortly after six-thirty the men brought their session in the entryway to a close, went back to the car in the parking lot and drove from the western suburbs of Krölpa, where the business park with the new Arrow highrise was, over the B-173 to the headquarters of Clean Impact, located a few kilometers south, in Bad Langensalza.

Days

2010. Outside the paparazzi nestled in the bushes, so close, Holtrop could hear the reeling and clicking and flashing of the cameras when he opened the door, at nine-thirty in the morning. It was a show of authority: a public raid. Only a few minutes before, Holtrop had received a call from his father, more than ten police cars had driven past the edge of Holtrop's estate, where his parents had their villa, what could that possibly mean. Holtrop calmed his father down, and then his front doorbell rang, he went down himself to see what it was. Two men and a woman stood there, "Come on in, please," Holtrop said, "Good morning," he stepped back into the house and left the door ajar, the state's attorneys entered with a friendly nod. "You must know why we're here," said the woman who led the troupe after she had introduced herself and her colleagues and handed Holtrop the search warrant from one of the district judges in Schönhaus, three pages of narrowly printed lies and commonplaces, and while Holtrop looked at the paper, he recollected the face of Thewe, its astonishment, dread, and reticence as Holtrop initiated his dismissal proceedings with a similar set of forms approximately nine years back, when the end of his own tenure at Assperg was already in the cards, "yes, yes," Holtrop

said, “naturally.” He was prepared for the investigators’ visit. Through his attorneys he had repeatedly clarified his willingness to hand over all relevant records, also requested to be party to the proceedings himself, but for months no one had reacted. Now they were standing there in person, their chunky pressed-together civil servant shoes on his rug, in his home, in his living room, the executive organ of governmental force, which, pursuant to a plan dictated on high from official channels, had shifted the Holtrop investigation into *attack* mode with regards to its object, Holtrop, and the authorities were trying not to relinquish the distinction between perpetrator and victim that separated the competent authorities, which were subjects of the state, the state’s attorneys, who had come out of the rankest perfidy, and the object Holtrop, who was now being exposed to this attack, who must straightaway have experienced this attack as a scurrilous, devastating proceeding. Holtrop had nothing to apologize for. It was a particularly German vileness that the rights of the state’s citizens should be stomped upon in this way, and in the near future, undoubtedly, the European High Court of Human Rights would bring it thoroughly to light and it would be retroactively repealed, for Holtrop was not Zumwinkel, he hadn’t failed to pay income tax because for years, he’d not had any taxes to pay at all, as a result of his charitable donations, tax loss carryforwards, and so on, all of which was legal and even sanctioned by the state itself — that had always been Bodenhausen’s argument, to sidestep the nanny state through tax-efficient controls on outlay, so that it was not a matter of tax-optimized expenditures and investments, but rather of disposing of one’s money as one wished — however, Holtrop had adopted from Mack’s countervailing optimization extremism the motto “Do not hurl money into the gullet of the STATE” and had therefore arranged his affairs and assets in such a way that

he himself evaded personal liability, he was also therefore quite relaxed and certain that this investigation as well would prove to be just another stage in the elucidation of the dubious nature of all the charges that had been leveled against him, and while the state's attorneys lead a train of police officers into the house to investigate, with the consent of Holtrop, which was courteously requested although it was not at all necessary, Holtrop made a number of phone calls, loitered pointlessly in the bedroom, sat down and stared at the floor, fixated on the scandalous nature of the investigation, which was being carried out against a soundtrack of gruff officiousness, and he could not resist, at least on the surface, suffering through it with his customary insolence. Several times he pulled his lips into a sneer, and when he saw that it was working, he stood up, placed himself in the middle of his villa, which hummed with the bustle of the investigators, and sneered to himself theatrically, without anyone's noticing.