

Staging Memory: The Drama Inside the Language of Elfriede Jelinek

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“Ja, die Sprache ist die Strafe. In sie müssen alle Dinge
eingehen, und in ihr müssen sie wieder vergehen nach
ihrer Schuld und dem Ausmaß ihrer Schuld.”
—(Jelinek, *Malina* 45)

Yes, language is the punishment. All things must flow
into it and they must dissolve in it, according to their
guilt and the degree of their guilt.

When Elfriede Jelinek was informed that she had been awarded the 2004 Nobel Prize for Literature, she was quick to respond most decidedly that she did not consider the award a feather in Austria’s cap. While her defiant stance against her native country befits her status as the raging scourge of Austria’s political liabilities and social deformities—in that function she has succeeded if not surpassed her fellow Austrian, the late Thomas Bernhard—it is not quite accurate. The fact is that her career, for better or worse, has only been possible in Austria. The small “Alpenrepublik” ‘alpine republic’ (all that is left of the once mighty Habsburg Empire) has provided not only a constant source of irritation, but also, however perversely, painful inspiration to generations of brilliantly enraged voices; it has also served as a resonant stage for its martyred geniuses. There is a long tradition of a sort of sado-masochistic co-dependence between the state and its ostracized artists who, like Jelinek, have chosen to stay

in their native country nevertheless. In an interview in 1993 Jelinek told me, “The polemic of my writing depends on the confrontation with those figures. And as long as that’s productive, as long as I—like that hero of antiquity Antaeus, who always gained strength from contact with the ground—as long as I am in touch with that ground I will stay here.”¹

That ground also roots her firmly in tradition. Her Nobel acceptance speech staged her battle with language in counterpoint to Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s seminal *Lord Chandos Letter* (for many generations required reading in any introductory course on Austrian literature). Hofmannsthal’s stand-in, Lord Chandos, experiences his language dissolving together with reality. The following much quoted passage has come to stand for the traumatized genius of Vienna’s fin-de-siècle culture: “Everything fell into fragments for me, the fragments into further fragments, until it seemed impossible to contain anything at all within a single concept. Disjointed words swam about me, congealing into staring eyes whose gaze I was forced to return; whirlpools they were, and I could not look into them without dizziness; their incessant turning only drew me down into emptiness” (21). For Jelinek, heir to the fragmented remnants of Habsburg culture forever contaminated by the Holocaust, the splinters of language have produced a dog that was meant to protect her but attacks her instead:

And this dog, language, which is supposed to protect me—that’s why I have him after all—is now snapping at my heels. My protector wants to bite me. My only protector against being described, language, which, conversely, exists to describe something else that I am not—that is why I cover so much paper—my only protector is turning against me. Perhaps I only keep him so that he, while pretending to protect me, pounces on me. Because I thought protection in writing, this being on my way, language, which in motion, in speaking, appeared to be a safe shelter, turns against me. No wonder. I mistrusted it immediately, after all. What kind of camouflage is that which exists to make one not invisible, but ever more distinct. (Sideline)

Both writers experience a profound separation from what they thought was “their” language, which now stares back at them.

The result for both Hofmannsthal and Jelinek is the loss of reality, or rather the threat of a reality that can no longer be controlled, that controls them instead. To both it happened at a time of cataclysmic changes—Hofmannsthal wrote *The Lord Chandos Letter* (addressed to Sir Francis Bacon) on the brink of World War I, Jelinek her Nobel award acceptance speech in the wake of September 11, during the war in Iraq. Hofmannsthal spoke through a fictitious alter ego; Jelinek, by not attending the award ceremony, turned it into a virtual event. As she explained, her agoraphobia made it impossible for her to appear in front of a large audience and such a distinguished one to boot. Instead she sent a tape of herself delivering the speech. Intentionally or not, her corporeal absence underscored her view of contemporary culture as mediated presences or, even more to the point, as manipulated absences.

Elias Canetti, another Nobel laureate, born in Bulgaria when it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, one of Jelinek's literary ancestors and, like her, as much infatuated with the German language as he was infuriated by the Austrians' manipulation of idioms and grammar, spoke of "acoustic masks," a person's speech habits, based on class, education, personal politics, and social aspirations (see Honegger, "Acoustic Masks"). Intended by the speaker as camouflage, they give him away all the more visibly. Acoustic masks define character in Canetti's plays *Comedy of Vanities* and *The Wedding*, in which he satirizes the social pretenses and political hypocrisies of Viennese society that prepared for the rise of the Nazis. The seeds of fascism are embedded in the language we inherit or pick up more or less unconsciously along the way. In Judith Butler's terminology, it is "the language that speaks the I" (*Excitable Speech* 24-25).

Jelinek, in her performance texts, has increasingly replaced traditional dialogue with what she calls "language planes." These are long passages not necessarily assigned to individual speakers, but made up of quotes from different literary sources interwoven with media-speak, commercials, local idioms, and Freudian slips played out in jazz-like riffs on punning, and gliding, tumbling chains of signifiers. It is the language that continues to produce the culture that produced (and continues to produce) the author in an ongoing process that she seeks to disrupt with her writing. Acutely aware of the many sources that "speak the I," Jelinek does away with conven-

tional stage characters and focuses on the performance of language itself. The “I”s are submerged in the planes of language that speak them. Her performance texts, programmatically “anti-theatre,” map the virulent cultural legacy embedded in speech acts.²

Jelinek’s linguistic strategies tie her all the more inextricably to her native language. Her performance texts are nearly untranslatable. The translator would have to transfer the processes inherent in the German language to the target language in its specific historical context, which would, of necessity, produce quite a different “drama” of native speech. Take the official English translation of the title of her Nobel text: “Sidelined” for “Aus dem Abseits.” While elegantly compressed to one verb, the passive form misleadingly emphasizes that something has been done to a person. In contrast, Jelinek’s German title highlights positionality: “From the Sidelines” suggests the subject’s choice rather than something forced upon her, with a tongue-in-cheek nod to her absence from the award ceremony. The play with ambivalences of meaning is characteristic of Jelinek’s use of language.

Quite brilliantly, her absence was also consistent with her dramaturgy of speech acts. Her Nobel speech is not a conventional address, but rather a performance text in which the speaker wrestles with language—a hellhound she herself created, at the gates of the unspeakable. (Wittgenstein’s dictum “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof must one be silent” continues to haunt Austria’s postwar generations of writers). Like the dog as reified language, Jelinek’s Nobel speech has become something other than herself and demands to be embodied accordingly. Like her other performance texts which are not “real plays” in the conventional sense, it still needs to be staged. However, the Nobel award ritual does not allow for such a production. According to her own dramaturgy, it would have been impossible for her to deliver the speech herself. Amidst worldwide speculations about the “real” reasons, her absence was also consistent with her linguistic constructs and her own position within them. As she commented in a surprisingly straightforward confessional tone in her quasi-autobiographical performance text “Rosamunde”:

In this dramalette I try to capture somehow my existence as a writer.
A princess, who lives far away in a wasteland from which she can

easily raise herself above everything and judge everything, where she indulges in fantasies of grandiosity in her own writing, which she tries to put beyond the reach of criticism, because any criticism means a narcissistic wound, but who nevertheless survives somehow.³ (*In den Alpen* 257)

Her Nobel text is a daringly frank continuation of her dramatized self-assessments, a work produced in seclusion yet presented in front of a global audience. Withdrawal and exhibitionism are just the two sides of narcissism.

“Rosamunde” is one in a series of five “dramalettes” with the overall title *Death and the Maiden* which she calls her “Princess dramas,” each featuring an icon of femininity such as Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Rosamunde (based on the now forgotten drama by Helmine von Chézy for which Schubert composed the overture, some choral pieces, and entr’acte music), Jackie Onassis, and Princess Diana—all wrapped, as it were, to the point of vanishing in their linguistic garments woven from threads of their culture and contemporary fashions.

A Cindy Sherman of letters, Jelinek has staged herself in different get-ups over the years and posed in unexpected locations for a select group of photographers. Gender, according to Judith Butler, is an “inevitable fabrication” rather than a biologically determined identity (“Imagination and Gender Subordination” 11). Jelinek’s “decked out” self-performances satirize not only cultural perceptions of “femininity,” but also herself as an aficionado of trendy fashions. Like language, clothes are a camouflage, fraught with ambivalence.

The first time I met Jelinek was in the mid-1970s in Vienna at a small gathering prior to an opening at the Burgtheater. (It would be twenty years before one of her own plays would have its controversial premiere at Vienna’s revered and cultural shrine). She was then a budding cult figure in Austria and Germany, admired mostly by a small elite of feminists and radical young literati and maligned by the cultural mainstream for her provocative, quasi-pornographic exposure of contemporary society, her political outspokenness, and her membership in the Communist Party; hence I expected to meet a tough, leather-jacketed, argumentative rebel, with no make-up, tussled blond hair, and defiant mien. Instead, I encountered

a delicate woman with finely chiseled features, softly styled hair, wrapped in flowing garments—a perfect representation of fin-de-siècle femininity in the image of Klimt’s dreamily dissolving female shapes. A decade or so later she looked the public figure she had become, an internationally recognized novelist, feminist figurehead, and unrelenting scourge of Austrian politics—a no-nonsense, sinewy woman in sportswear, her hair raised defiantly in a porcupine cut. As a playwright she was still marginalized by the predominantly male theatrical establishment, which enhanced her rebel-as-martyr status in Austria’s unique cultural climate of genius-coddling and ostracizing (see Honegger, “This German Language”).

I saw her again a few months later, after the opening of her play *Raststätte* ‘Rest Area’ at the Burgtheater’s smaller house in a self-importantly grotesque production by the then artistic director Claus Peymann. If I expected the no-frills writer in her prime, I was surprised by the figure with pigtails in a dirndl-like muumuu who greeted me at Vienna’s Museum Café, the traditional hang-out for writers. In the late 90s she posed for photographers like a high-fashion model, in haute couture clothing against exotic backgrounds, such as a stuffed monkey in Vienna’s Museum for Natural History. In contrast, some of the most recent photographs accompanying the announcement of the Nobel prize show her unadorned, frail, and vulnerable, an aging woman with long graying hair which no longer appears to be self-consciously styled or tussled, but rather let be.

Her transformations resemble her linguistic strategies: they are cultural quotations reconstructed as weapons against their sources—that is to say, against the culture at large, against the language that constructs it and in the process pollutes and destroys itself together with its speaker.

Language constructs not only identity, it also constructs nature—here, specifically “nature” as presented by Austria’s tourist industry. The stage is an ideal medium for showing up the artificiality of “scenery” and its inhabitants, who perform themselves in quaint native costumes that barely camouflage their greed. For Jelinek as for most writers of her generation, the notion of *Heimat*, homeland, does not offer a reassuring sense of belonging, let alone pride in origin. To them it is forever contaminated by Nazi propaganda extol-

ling the “purity” and “innocence” of the Austrian mountainside as against the decadence of Vienna, teeming with “foreigners” from the former empire, most notably Jews. As Jelinek never tires of pointing out with undiminished rage, the reconstruction of native icons after World War II—of the be-dirndled, blond-braided lass and her yodeling beau in native hunting or skiing gear (with Austria’s invincible skiing champs the ultimate hi-tech incarnation of the spirit of the soil)—picks up where the Nazis left off—that is to say, if Nazi sentiments ever disappeared at all.

One of her recently staged works, *In the Alps* boldly links the exuberant rhetoric of the first mountaineering clubs in the 1920s and 30s, which quickly excluded Jews, to contemporary Austrian xenophobia across the chasm of the Holocaust, which is introduced by fragments and motifs from Paul Celan’s seminal text “Conversation in the Mountains.” As she states in the postscript to her “play”:⁴

The mountains belong to one group; all others are and continue to be excluded—those others being primarily the Jews. From its beginning the history of alpinism has also been a history of anti-Semitism. Jews were excluded from all sections of the Alpine Association and the “Wandervogel” movement and had to found their own section (“Donauland”).⁵ The “clean” mountains must never be touched—that is to say soiled by those everpresent “inhabitants of the plains,” who were in no way fit for purity nor for the challenge of the sublime. I tried to capture this perpetual exclusion with insertions of what probably is one of the most famous texts in postwar German-language literature, Paul Celan’s “Conversations in the Mountains.” (254-55)⁶

In contrast to the lucidity of these remarks, the actual text, like all her recent works for the stage, is a dense texture of appropriations from multiple sources in unexpected, quickly changing combinations, which makes it nearly impossible to follow in a linear fashion. While her massive blocks of “language planes” deliberately resist a “natural” life on stage, so to speak, they do need the simultaneity of the various levels of theatrical production (performance, scenography, music) to reflect the intertextuality of her linguistic constructs, thus completing the drama she stages within language itself. Though Jelinek gives detailed stage directions, she also grants

directors great liberty to produce their own vision.

In the Alps examines the catastrophic fire that broke out on a famous glacier train when it entered a tunnel above the town of Kaprun, one of Austria's most popular ski areas, and killed 155 people in November 2000. Focusing on the greed of the tourist industry, Jelinek keeps ploughing through the fertile linguistic soil that supports it. In the process she unearths sound-bites of pre- and proto-fascist infatuation with the unsoiled beauty and heroic challenge of the Alps echoing through contemporary ads that promote hi-tech mastery of nature and unlimited consumption thereof. True to Marx (to maintain her oppositional stance towards Austrian politics, Jelinek was a member of the Communist Party until 1991), she portrays her conviction that the unbridled consumerism of fashionable skiers and hikers equals the greed of its promoters and finally consumes itself in the catastrophic fire. What makes Jelinek's vision so difficult to swallow in the moralistic tunnel vision (pun not intended though consistent with Jelinek's counter-Heideggerian obsession with language roots) of political correctness is her unrelenting vision of the consumers as victims caught in the same capitalist maelstrom as the entrepreneurs who are quickly identified as the guilty. All of them are the voices of the dead in Jelinek's ghastly, ghostly scenario, which casts everyone caught up in the frenzy of the tourist market as guilty, at least by association. One of the main speakers is identified as "The Child." Lest one expect redemption through the innocence of a child, Jelinek states in her stage directions: "The Child: I imagine a young woman, done up as a child with great emphasis, very 'visibly,' like in the old productions of 'Hansel and Gretel.' One should see the production of a child, so to speak, by means of stage make-up. And the actress's performance of the child should be quite obnoxious" (7).⁷

Quite consistently in Jelinek's vision of late capitalist/fascist consumer society headed for self-destruction "the child" is a prime target, the first victim and most potent promoter of the advertising industry. But even more pathetic than "the child" is the woman who in "real life" keeps performing herself as the eternal "child-woman" to fulfill cultural expectation—as much guilty as victimized by commercialized norms. There were so many passengers in the train that they had to stand, squeezed together tightly:

Here they must stand, Mama and Papa, who died with me, next to me, my three-year-old brother stayed at home, with grandma and granddad . . . I generously spread my innocence, together with my skills, I honestly worked on that together with the other kids and we certainly didn't make the promotion of good health our first priority, with our white, greedy tentacle eyes. This is how I got placed in the first group. It's good that the leisure industry is considered a potential partner rather than an enemy. The first group with the best racers and all the good advice "Be careful!" and "Don't risk anything" were ineffective at best. This time it really wasn't our fault. And I don't think much of the fear factor either, considering the train's massive defects, which had been known for quite a while; I just mention October 28, when a technical problem came up in the tunnel. First the lights went out, then the train stopped. After about a minute, the lucky ones, who were on that train, could continue the ride. The dress rehearsal was successful. We flopped, unfortunately—well, from death's perspective. Dress rehearsal a flop; opening a hit. There is always a winner. I am still waiting, by the way, for death's excuse why he got it right only the second time; and I hope his will be better than the rail company's. Death tried harder, in any event, and he made really good time; then again we, the kids, worked really hard to become competent in risk assessment. We'd only had a few years to do that. Why did death take me and not others? Groups two and three got on the next train. Why me and not them? Traditionally the weaker skiers are in that group, and they're an insult to the majesty of the mountains. We are the tough guys from the country—who could race us? who would erase us? (11-12)⁸

Even in death, it is track records, performance, and record numbers that count. The winning athletes are the losers this time, but not in terms of death and the media, who count record viewer rates for the catastrophe that boasts a record number of dead.

The image of people crammed in a tight place recalls the grizzly scenarios encountered by the liberators of Nazi death camps. The "Helper" who assists in gathering the corpses after the fire addresses them cartoon-style:

No pushing! We've got plenty of bags and we won't run out of numbers either. Do you know what it means standing in front of a tunnel like at the entrance to a garden, receiving you in plastic bags and lowering you down in a little cart especially designed for you—the way you were clawing into, grafted onto, wedged into one another so that you could hardly be pushed any further? That's what you practiced. . . . (24)⁹

Squeezed between linguistic moraines, the caustic statement “that's what you practiced” sticks out barely visible like a small, pathetically mundane object, a piece of clothing, some small belonging of the missing in the gliding masses of words. Austria's geology is marked by its recent history. What was it the dead passengers practiced? Skiing down a busy slope or dying, crammed into a gas chamber?

For brief, barely perceptible moments the Holocaust brushes across the landscape in splintered images Jelinek appropriated from Celan's “Conversation in the Mountains,” which portrays in hauntingly terse rhythms the encounter between a Jewish man and his older cousin in the all-pervading solitude of the mountains. Their foreshortened syntax cutting through the stillness of the moment heightens the sense of absolute exclusion:

So it was quiet, quiet, up there in the mountains. It wasn't quiet for long, because when one Jew comes along and meets another, then it's good-bye silence, even in the mountains. Because the Jew and Nature, that's two very different things, as always, even today, even here.

So there they stand, first cousins, on the left is Turk's cap in bloom, blooming wild, blooming like nowhere, and on the right, there's some rampion, and *dianthus superbus*, the superb pink, growing not far off. But them, the cousins, they've got, God help us, no eyes. More precisely: they've got eyes, even they do, but there's a veil hanging in front, no behind, a moveable veil; no sooner does an image go in than it catches a web, and right away there's a thread spinning there, it spins itself around the image, a thread in the veil; spins around the image and spawns a child with it, half image and half veil. (397-98)

Jelinek picks up Celan's image of the veil for the cousins' eerily self-reflecting gaze and wraps it around the hubris of the ath-

letic champion's mastery of nature. One of the dead of Kaprun, the "Young Woman," announces:

I am the snowboard world champion, but I never really looked at those trees, probably because I was racing by too fast. And when we finally see the trees, then we can't be seen anymore. Because we are already all the way down and only our race, dragged by ghosts like fluttering veils, still curtains the landscape. (26)¹⁰

The image of "fluttering veils, dragged by ghosts" creates a sudden eddy in the woman's babble. Like Celan, Jelinek threads the imagery of veils through her text, and toward the end she puts Celan himself onstage as the man "who does not belong and must not belong, who moves on different tracks, so to speak, because he was never to touch the glacier train; its passengers would cross his tracks only in the tunnel where they have to leave the course their own lives had been moving along" (254-55).¹¹ Celan's presence is a reminder that language and landscape are forever haunted by those excluded from both. In the historic context of the Holocaust, those present in the mountains have tacitly accepted the exclusion and murder of Jews, who keep haunting the landscape.

The tourist industry, the main producer of Austria's postwar identity for the global market, distinguishes between foreigners as paying customers and as (cheap, if not illegal) laborers. Jelinek's mammoth performance text *Das Werk* (The Plant; 2002) focuses on the unpaid or underpaid labor force that haunts one of the world's largest power plants, located near the site of the tunnel blaze of Kaprun. Published in the same volume as *In the Alps* it can be seen as its companion piece. As Jelinek points out, while *In the Alps* is about destruction, *The Plant* is about construction (253). It expands the theme of exclusion to foreigners other than Jews—foreign laborers who were worked to death or fell to their death or were killed by avalanches. As Jelinek sees it, "The athlete, like the worker, perceives the mountains as both a challenge and a tool" (258). Both groups find their tragic deaths in the mountains.

The construction of the plant began in the 1920s. The work was continued during the Nazis by laborers hunted down in the occupied countries. Construction was quickly resumed after World War

II, financed by the Marshall Plan, and finished in 1955. The monumental plant aglow amidst unsoiled fields of snow came to symbolize the reconstruction of the Austrian identity after the war. For Jelinek, Austrians considered their colossal achievement, mirroring, as it were, the glaciers' glimmering purity, a reflection of their innocence in the Holocaust—a claim that seemed further validated when Austria was reinstated as an independent nation (1955 was also the year in which the State Treaty with the occupying nations was signed). The official count of workers fatally injured on the job after World War II was 160. Though that figure does not include the fatalities in previous years, it is strikingly close to the death-count in the tunnel blaze. The eerie symmetry establishes the dialectical connection between tourists and laborers, both “working” nature, as it were, both “worked” by greed, by the economy.

The Plant is arguably Jelinek's most ambitious, far-reaching work. Rather than a “play” that “dramatizes” the individual tragedies encased in the giant construction of three dams and the plant, the text is a mammoth linguistic construct of roughly 40,000 words (to be staged in one evening, ideally without an intermission!), a bold experiment in mapping the cultural construction of Austria from its historic roots to the present. Jelinek's method of montage and appropriating other texts is the same as in *In the Alps*. This time her sources are, among others, Ernst Jünger, Wilhelm Müller (the poet of the *Mill Cycle*, set to music by Schubert as *Die schöne Müllerin*) Oswald Spengler, and Euripides' *Trojan Women*, besides expert literature on alpine construction projects. Variations of the *Mill Cycle* point back to the romantic idealization of nature as *Heimat* and hiking as well as to the mill, the idyllic forerunner of the power plant.

Multiple meanings of individual words provide ironic connections not only within the text, but among texts, her own and others'. The German title *Das Werk* means an industrial “plant,” but also a piece of work, a cultural product. Jelinek's text is also a *Werk*; its megalomaniac reach matches the hubris of the construction project. By association the title connects to an earlier monumental piece with a similarly ambivalent title: *Ein Sportstück*, a piece (or play) about sports. A *Stück* (literally “piece”) is also a *Werk*. The German term for power plant is *Kraftwerk*—that is, literally, a work of pow-

er. Taking her cue from Vienna's Jewish comedians, Jelinek loves to juggle compound nouns and their multiple meanings in all possible combinations down to the most absurd, literal one. Given the popular expectation of record-breaking performances from both artists and athletes, their accomplishments—including Jelinek's, are both a *Sportstück*—an athletic feat—and as such a *Kraftwerk*, a work, a product of power,

Continuing along these lines, *Kraft* as “power” or “strength” in conjunction with *Stück* as “piece” leads to the idiom *ein starkes Stück* (literally “a strong piece”), meaning an outrageous act, an inexcusable affront, which about sums up Jelinek's perceptions of Austrian politics.

As a critique of the national obsession with physical prowess, superlative performances, and record figures, all in the commercialized, rural setting of *Heimat* with all its problematic historic resonances, *Ein Sportstück* is the direct forerunner of *Das Werk*. Both pieces are unusually long, unwieldy, and radically anti-dramatic, demanding an unusual attention span even from the initiated reader. It was all the more exhilarating when the East German director Einar Schleaf found the key to Jelinek's dramaturgy with his staging of *Ein Sportstück* at the Vienna Burgtheater in 1998.¹² Rather than constructing a quasi-linear visual narrative gleaned from the massive onslaught of references and allusions, his stunning *mise-en-scène* reflected his titanic struggle with the text. Instead of threading a narrative along the individual characters, he focused on choruses of speakers, thus reconciling Jelinek's unique vision and method with the origins of theatre.

An unforgettable forty-minute passage in the six-plus hour production featured a chorus of forty-two actors performing rigorous athletic exercises while speaking their lines in unison. The highly trained team as contemporary *polis* foregrounded the progression from ancient athletic competitions and warrior societies to the spectacular parades of athletes and armies in dictatorial regimes. The residue of the Germanic obsession with the *Übermensch*, perfected by the Nazis and reemerging in the Soviet Army's crushing shows of force, linger on in contemporary preoccupations with the perfect body. Schleaf's vision, fed by his own cultural biography

as a member of Jelinek's postwar generation but having grown up in East Germany, complement her enraged response to Austria, reflecting the hubris not only of two collapsed empires, but, equally importantly, their own.

Embedded in the hubris of the physical production was an *agon* between the writer and her director on the subject of discipline, violence, and the power of masses (both physical and in terms of market forces) versus the individual in war and sports (both originating in ritual). Jelinek staged herself in the text as the character Elfi-Elektra and as the "Authoress" featured in the speeches of some of the other characters where she satirizes herself in her signature mix of silly, often untranslatable punning: "Authoress, I see that once again you took it upon yourself to talk for me . . . you only want to become famous! The way you are always for the victims! Can't you finally see the eternal light in that traffic light you've got hanging in front of your heart as if it were a tabernacle?" (*In den Alpen* 50).¹³

Schleef followed the writer's lead and staged himself in his production by inserting tableaux and scenes from other works, such as a duet from *La Traviata* and excerpts from Heinrich von Kleist's *Penthesilea* and—most important to Jelinek's dramaturgy—from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, which became the libretto for Richard Strauss' opera. In some performances Schleef himself came on stage to read the lines of Elfi-Elektra, at times venting his own frustrations: "Frau. Jelinek, I don't understand you!" he exclaimed on stage during the tumultuous premiere performance at the Vienna Burgtheater (Wille 6). The director's narcissism mirrored the author's. Not only was his response to the text quite consistent with the writer's linguistic creations—who all turn against her like the dog in the Nobel text—but by taking on the author's part he got to the core of Jelinek's anguish: inside the battle between the writer and her language constructs lurks yet another drama, the Ur-drama as it were, of the father as the word of law who must be deposed and killed. In this configuration the director also represents a father figure.¹⁴

Jelinek wrestles with the father on both the literary and the personal level: as a female writer trapped in the patriarchal language that speaks her, and as the daughter of a mentally ill father who spent many years in a sanitarium before dying there. In the story of

Elfi-Elektra she conflates the two:

My mommy buried my father like a dog, dug him into the ground without a funeral; before that she dug him out again, which wasn't necessary at all and dragged the stinking cadaver between her teeth into the loonie-bin. Well, first into one of those private homes, you know, with twelve people sleeping in one room . . . he didn't die in the bathtub; he was no king, so he died in a hospital bed. . . . Daddy! How can you live without being visible? My daddy was a king and he died so miserably. While he was supposed to rest under my desk, subdued by a spear, instead of me sitting here as his murderess, thrashing on the keyboard so that the blood is squirting out from under my fingernails! But it was you who killed mommy, oh brother! So then mommy brought my daddy to the hospital and put his brain next to him like she does with the innards of a chicken, and I am supposed to live with her in her house until the end (170-73)¹⁵

Jelinek had already told the story about an adult daughter's neurotic cohabitation with her controlling mother in her novel *The Piano Player*.

Elfi-Elektra is first dragged onto the stage by her brother Orestes. With SchleeF speaking Jelinek's auto-biographical variations on the myth, the matricide and the daughter, fixated on the father, merge into one figure.¹⁶ SchleeF's insertion from Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* highlighted the myth's local cultural roots and the Freudian context of Jelinek's multiple transferences, thus framing her as the panicked heir of Vienna's fin-de-siècle.

In her Nobel text Jelinek returned to the source of her conflicted relationship with language that was so brilliantly visualized in SchleeF's percipient production:

Our Father, which art. It cannot mean me, although after all I am father, that is: mother, of my language. I am the father of my mother tongue. The mother tongue was there from the beginning, it was in me, but no father was there, who might have belonged to it. My language was often unbecoming, that was often enough made clear to me, but I didn't want to take the hint. My fault. The father left the nuclear family along with the mother tongue. Right he was. In his

place I would not have stayed either. My mother tongue has followed my father now, it's gone. (*Sidelined*)

Resonating in Jelinek's anguish are the lines of the heroine of another Strauss/Hofmannsthal collaboration, *Die Frau ohne Schatten*:

Vater bist Du's?
Drohest Du mir
aus dem Dunkel her?
Hier siehe dein Kind!

Father, is it you
threatening me
from the dark?
Here, see your child!

Schleef's choral dramaturgy offered the key to the staging of Jelinek's world. The emergence of single speech acts from a sea of voices in stunning physical configurations without individualizing the speaker allowed for a synchronistic perception of different time periods and established an intricate web of speech acts across the ages that continue to contribute to the construction of national identity. It is arguably the definitive performative approach to Jelinek's complex linguistic tapestries.

The director's vision seemed to have freed Jelinek to further expand her technique in subsequent works, particularly *Das Werk*, which she dedicated to Schleef, who unexpectedly died in 2001 at the age of 57. Though her cast of characters includes rural stereotypes such as "Geißenpeter," a goatherd, and "Heidi," she is quick to point out in her stage directions that she doesn't give a hoot whether they are performed by one or more persons. The introduction of choruses consisting of nameless construction workers and their widows may have also been inspired by Schleef and his coming to terms with both the Nazi legacy and the collapsed vision of a Communist utopia in his native East Germany.

Schleef's production opened a new window for reading the text. His staging of the chorus, the unrelentingly strenuous physical and

verbal repetitions and variations brought out the multiple layers of Jelinek's performative grammar (which is quite different from the minimalist language and unrelenting logic of her novels). Just as it is impossible in viewing the production to catch, let alone retain the meaning of every sentence in the bombardment of words, it is futile for the reader, or frustrating at the very least, to try and grasp the meaning of each sentence in sequential order, or, more to the point of her dramaturgy, to track down the multiple voices that inform her language constructs. They resonate in the culture that continues to shape us, whether we are aware of it or not.

The reader's exasperation at some of the incomprehensible sentence fragments or combinations of sentences swept along like cultural debris by the massive torrents of language reflects the varying degrees of our unawareness of, or unease with, the voices that speak us. By making them conscious, if not instantly intelligible (let alone acceptable to some), Jelinek raises the level of irritation, albeit relieved—or further aggravated, as the case may be—by subverted images of the familiar, from the Western canon to slapstick and caricature. If nothing else, the reading- or viewing experience reflects the experience of contemporary culture. Oversaturated with information, it can no longer be reduced to one voice or to the authoritative analysis of one. If Jelinek's theatre is anti-theatre in the sense of her refusal of traditional dramaturgy, it provides a provocative new model for the multiple dramas inside language. In that sense it is her radical response to Hofmannsthal's existential crisis brought on by the dissolution of the world he knew, in a dialogue that straddles two fin-de-siècles.

Notes

1 As my colleague Lisa George, a professor of Classics, told me: "Antaeus was the son of Gaia, the Earth. No one could defeat him in a fight because every time he was thrown to the ground, he gained more strength from his mother's unlimited power." Though Jelinek was not talking (or thinking for that matter, at that time) about Earth as mother, the myth inadvertently points to the core of her panicked relationship with Austria—her obsessive attachment to her mother, which she fictionalized in her novel *The Piano*

Teacher. Until her mother's death four years ago Jelinek divided her time between living with her mother in their old family house in Vienna and living with her husband in Munich.

2 "I want to take the life out of theatre. I don't want theatre," Jelinek characteristically insisted in an interview (. . .). The East German playwright Heiner Müller once commented, "What interests me in the works of Elfiede Jelinek is that she resists the theatre the way it is" (Raabe 2).

3 "In diesem Dramolett . . . versuche ich, meine Existenz als Schriftstellerin irgendwie zu fassen. Eine Prinzessin, die fern in der Einöde lebt, sich daher leicht über alles erheben kann, alles beurteilen kann, sich in Grandiositätshphantasien ergeht in ihrem eigenen Schreiben, das sie jeder Beurteilung zu entziehen sucht, denn jede Beurteilung ist eine narzißtische Kränkung, und die dann doch irgendwie überlebt."

4 I put "play" in quotation marks because it suggests a conventional drama, which Jelinek's texts most decidedly are not. The German language has the term "Stück" 'piece' for play, which is more neutral and therefore more suitable for Jelinek's performance texts.

5 The "Wandervogel" movement (literally "migratory birds") was a hiking organization for mostly middleclass youth founded in the early twentieth century. It was extremely popular in Germany and Austria during the 1920s.

6 "Den einen gehört das Gebirge, die anderen sind und bleiben ausgeschlossen, vor allem sind diese anderen: die Juden. Die Geschichte des Alpinismus seit dessen Beginn ist eine Geschichte auch des Antisemitismus. Juden wurden aus allen Sektionen des Alpenvereins und der Wandervogelbewegung ausgeschlossen und mußten ihre eigene Sektion ("Donauland") gründen. Die "reinen" Berge dürfen von den ewigen "Bewohnern der Ebene," die weder für das Reine noch für die Herausforderung des Hohen, Hohen gerüstet sind, niemals angetastet (soll heißen: beschmutzt) werden. Diesen ewigen Ausschluß habe ich durch Einschübe aus einem der wahrscheinlich berühmtesten deutschsprachigen Prosatexte der Nachkriegsliteratur, Paul Celans . . . 'Gespräch im Gebirg,' zu fassen versucht. Da spricht einer, der nicht dazugehört und nicht dazugehören darf. . . ."

7 “Das Kind: ich stelle mir eine junge Frau vor, die, wie in alten Hänsel-und-Gretel-Inszenierungen, sehr betont, sehr ‘sichtbar’ als Kind hergerichtet ist, man soll sozusagen die Herstellung eines Kindes mittels Schminke genau sehen können. Und die Schauspielerin soll auch recht penetrant das Kind spielen.”

8 “Hier müssen so stehen, Mama und Papa, die mit mir umkamen, neben mir, mein dreijähriger Bruder ist daheimgeblieben, bei Oma und Opa Ich habe meine Unschuld großzügig verströmt, mein Können dazu, ich habe mich mit den anderen kids ehrlich auseinandergesetzt, wobei wir gewiß nicht Gesundheitsförderung als erstes in unseren weißen, gierigen Augen-Greifarmen hatten. Und so habe ich auch meinen Platz in der ersten Gruppe bekommen. Gut, daß die Freizeitindustrie insgesamt eher potentieller Partner als Feindbild ist. Die erste Gruppe mit den besten Fahrern sowie die Appelle “Paß auf!” und “Riskier nichts!” blieben bestenfalls wirkungslos. Es war diesmal wirklich nicht unser Fehler. Auch von Abschreckung halte ich wenig, angesichts der massiven Defekte der Gletscherbahn, die seit längerem bekannt waren, ich erwähne nur den 28. Oktober, als es mitten im Tunnel zu einem technischen Defekt gekommen war. Zunächst fiel das Licht aus, dann blieb die Bahn stehen. Nach ungefähr einer Minute konnten die Glücklichen, die damals drin waren, ihre Fahrt fortsetzen, die Generalprobe war gelungen. Wir sind dann leider mißglückt. Na, vom Standpunkt des Todes aus: Generalprobe mißglückt, Premiere gelungen. Einer freut sich immer. Ich warte übrigens immer noch auf die Ausreden des Todes, warum ers erst beim zweiten Mal geschafft hat, besser als die Betreibergesellschaft werden sie hoffentlich sein. Etwas mehr Mühe hat sich der Tod jedenfalls gegeben, ein ordentliches Tempo hat der drauf gehabt, schließlich haben wir Jugendlichen uns ja auch Mühe gemacht, Risikokompetenz zu erwerben. Wir hatten nur wenige Jahre Zeit dafür. Warum hat er mich genommen, der Tod, und andre sein lassen? Gruppe zwei und drei kamen mit der nächsten Bahn. Warum ich und die nicht? In dieser Gruppe sind doch traditionsgemäß die schwächeren Fahrer, sie sind eine Beleidigung der Majestät der Berge. Wir sind die kraftstrotzenden Burschen vom Land, wer kann da schon mithalten, wer kann da schon mit den Atem anhalten.”

9 “Nicht drängeln! Wir haben genügend Säcke, und auch die Nummern gehen uns nicht aus. Weißt Du, was es heißt, vor einem Tunnel wie vor einem Gartentor zu stehen, euch in Plastiktüten in Empfang zu nehmen und mühsam in einem kleinen Karren, einer Lore, eigens für Euch konstruiert, abzuseilen, euch, die ihr ineinander verkrallt, verkeilt und verschlungen seid, daß man Euch kaum noch drängen kann? Ihr habt das geübt . . .”

10 “Ich bin Weltmeisterin im Snowboarden, aber diese Bäume habe ich mir nie wirklich aus der Nähe angeschaut, wahrscheinlich weil ich immer zu schnell unterwegs war. Und wenn wir sie dann sehen, die Bäume, dann sieht man dafür uns nicht mehr. Weil wir schon unten sind und nur noch unsere Fahrt wie wehende Schleiergardinen, geschleift von Gespenstern, vor der Landschaft hängt . . .”

11 “. . . der nicht dazugehört und nicht dazugehören darf, der sozusagen auf einer anderen Schiene fährt, welche die der Gletscherbahn nie berühren sollte, und auf die deren Insassen nur dort stoßen, wo sie im Tunnel ihre eigene Lebensbahn verlassen müssen.“

12 For a review of the production, see Honegger, “Beyond Berlin, Beyond Brecht” 11-14.

13 Elfriede Jelinek, *Ein Sportstück* 50: “Autorin, ich sehe, daß Sie sich wieder einmal angemacht haben, für mich zu sprechen . . . , Sie wollen ja nur berühmt werden! Sie sind ja immer so für die Opfer. Geht Ihnen denn in Ihrer Ampel, die Sie deutlich sichtbar vors Herz gehängt haben, als wärs ein Tabernakel, kein ewiges Licht auf?”

14 It is interesting to note that all major productions of Jelinek’s plays at leading theatres in German-speaking countries have been staged by male directors. Her deference to her directors’ creative autonomy is unusual even in the German-language theatre, where auteur directors reign.

15 “Meine Mami hat meinen Vater wie einen Hund begraben, ohne Begräbnis verscharrt, davor hat sie ihn, was gar nicht mehr nötig gewesen wäre, wieder ausgegraben und das stinkende Aas zwischen den Zähnen ins Irrenhaus geschleppt. Also zuerst in so ein privates Heim, gelt, wo zwölf

Personen in einem Raum haben schlafen müssen. . . . Im Bad endet er nicht, weil er ja auch kein König war, er endet im Spitalsbett. Papi! Wie kommt's, daß Du leben kannst, ohne sichtbar zu sein? Mein Papa ist ein König gewesen und so elend gestorben. Dabei sollte er speerbezwungen unter meinem Schreibtisch ruhen anstatt daß ich, seine Mörderin, hier sitze und auf die Tasten dresche, daß das Blut mir jetzt unter den Nägeln herspritzt! Die Mama hast aber du umgebracht, Brüaderl, kumm! . . . Da hat die Mama also meinen Papa ins Spital gebracht, seinen Verstand hat sie ihm daneben hingelegt wie die Innereien bei einem Hendl, und jetzt soll ich in ihrem Haus bis zum Schluß mit ihr zusammenleben. . . ."

16 The mythical furies haunting Orestes as dogs haunt Jelinek in the mother's dog-like actions. Schleef further dramatized the agents of revenge in a film sequence in which dogs chased Orestes through the palatial halls of the Burgtheater.

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