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### **Vienna Roast: On Elfriede Jelinek**

***The Piano Teacher* by Elfriede Jelinek, Translated by Joachim Neugroschel. London: Serpent's Tail. 280 pages. \$15; *Wonderful, Wonderful Times* by Elfriede Jelinek, Translated by Michael Hulse. London: Serpent's Tail. 253 pages. \$15.**

### **Marjorie Perloff**

In the English-speaking world, the awarding of the 2004 Nobel Prize for literature to the Austrian novelist-playwright Elfriede Jelinek has been met—when met at all—by puzzled incredulity or downright outrage. Last fall, British papers like *The Sunday Times* and *The Scotsman* chuckled that the Nobel could go to an obscure Austrian feminist communist “porn author,” whose small independent publisher in Britain, Serpent’s Tail, supposedly sold only 270 copies of *The Piano Teacher* in 2003, “while three other novels [*Women as Lovers*, *Wonderful Wonderful Times*, and *Lust*] sold barely 50 copies each” (*Scotsman*, 8 Oct. 2004). Other papers were less amused. In *The Daily Standard*, Stephen Schwartz declared: “The infamous snobs of the Swedish Academy. . . have returned to their habit of awarding the Nobel Prize for Literature to an unknown, undistinguished, leftist fanatic. . . . This time they got a two-fer shot at destroying literary standards, since Jelinek's writings mainly verge on gross pornography.” This sentiment was echoed in *The New Republic*, where Ruth Franklin concluded that Jelinek's sexual and political notions are so “appalling” that they should have disqualified her from the prize.

Normally, such put-downs of a radical feminist and one-time communist author (Jelinek was a member of the Austrian Communist Party from 1974 to 1991) would trigger a defense from the Left; but since Jelinek does not yet have a US publisher, and only four of her novels (and none of her plays or poems) are available in English, there has been little debate, even though German feminist scholars have argued—and I shall take up this point here-- that Jelinek's «pornography,» like her seeming allegiance to communist doctrine, must be understood in the context of her excoriating critique of Austrian neo-Fascism, especially with regard to its impact on women.

Ironically, the one Jelinek work that does seem to be known in the U.S. is not a Jelinek work at all but Michael Haneke's film adaptation of her novel *The Piano Teacher* (starring Isabelle Huppert), which won the Cannes Film Festival Grand Jury Prize in 2001. On its own terms, Haneke's psychological thriller about a psychotically repressed middle-aged piano teacher, whose masochistic and morbid sexual fantasies turn into terrifying realities when she becomes involved with one of her young students, is a haunting film, particularly so because of the ironic tension generated between the soundtrack's gorgeous classical piano music and the sinister violence of the film's surreal visual images. But the film in fact has little to do with the novel; on the contrary, a comparison of the two makes clear just how remarkable a novel *The Piano Teacher* is, and how little of its verbal energy and complexity were translated onto the screen.

First and foremost, *The Piano Teacher*, or, more accurately and ambiguously, *The Piano Player* –Jelinek's title is *Die Klavierspielerin*-- is about World War II, which is to say, post Nazi, Vienna, as seen through the eyes of a half-Jewish writer who grew up in the Austrian capital and attended both the Vienna Conservatory and the University of Vienna. Although the film is nominally set in Vienna, by making it a French film with

French-speaking actors, Haneke gives Jelinek's raw and jumpy interior monologues a very different spin: one forgets that Jelinek's is a tale, not just of bourgeois hypocrisy and capitalist commodification, but, quite specifically, of the particular middle-class venality characteristic of Austria in the immediate aftermath of what was euphemistically called "the seven years" (1938-45), when, in the wake of the *Anschluss*, Austria was a willing accomplice of the Third Reich. During the Allied Occupation that followed the war, the Austrians came to fear and despise their Russian occupiers more than they had ever hated Hitler, and thus, the de-Nazification campaign so prominent in West Germany never quite took place. From the revelations of Kurt Waldheim's military role in the Nazi SA (revelations made while he was serving as president of the republic in the late '80s) to the prominence of the far-right Freedom Party leader Jörg Haider in recent years, Austria has been haunted, despite a succession of Social Democrat or Centrist governments, by the shadow of Fascism.

There is thus no parallel between the bourgeois upwardly mobile *Musikkultur* of Vienna and its counterpart in Paris. For one thing, Vienna was the great capital of classical music from Haydn and Mozart to Schoenberg and Webern. The study of music was—and in part remains—integral to Austrian life in a way that has never been the case in France. Indeed, Jelinek's Erika Kohut, the failed concert pianist turned music teacher at the Conservatory, has a particular cachet not applicable to piano teachers elsewhere. She is, after all, a Professor—a title that attracts the young petit-bourgeois Walter Klemmer, triggering his fantasies of possessing his cold, condescending teacher. More important: the real center of the novel is not, as in the film, the sado-masochistic sexual relationship between teacher and pupil but the deathly union, very much played down in the film, between Erika and her monster of a widowed mother—a mother who had been married for twenty years before giving birth to her only child. As for Erika's

father, soon after her birth, he evidently cracked up and was put away in an asylum.

In the novel's first scene, Erika comes home to the flat she shares with Mother, only to be subjected to an Inquisition worthy of a criminal court, and all because Erika, the family's breadwinner, dared to buy herself a dress now hidden in her briefcase. Mother's outrage at this unnecessary expense is rendered in Jelinek's unique language and syntax:

They are saving to buy a large condominium. The cramped apartment they now rent is so ancient, you might as well just abandon it. When they decide on the condominium, they will be allowed to specify where to put the closets and partitions.

You see, an entirely new construction system is being used. Every aspect is custom-designed, according to your precise wishes. You pay your money and you get your choice . . . and Erika pays. In the brand-new, state-of-the-art condominium, mother and daughter will each have her own realm, Erika here, Mother there. . . . Even here, in this dump, which is slowly falling to pieces, Erika already has her own realm, her own roost, which she rules and is ruled in. It is only a provisional realm; Mother can walk in at any time. There is no lock on Erika's door. A child has no secrets from her mother. . . .

Erika has never had to do housework, because dustrags and cleansers ruin a pianist's hands. During Mother's rare breathers, she occasionally worries about her vast and varied holdings. You can't always tell where everything is. Just where is Erika, that fidgety property? . . . . Mother worries a lot, for the first thing a proprietor learns, and painfully at that, is : Trust is fine, but control is better.

Here and throughout the novel (ably translated by Joachim Neugroschel), plot is character and character plot, both being expressions of a larger cultural unconscious. The first sentence above seems to be matter-of-fact disclosure on the part of an omniscient narrator but, as the second and third sentences reveal, it is more accurately a condensation of Mother's typical thoughts, packed as they are with the truisms of her time and place like the notion that when something is old, get rid of it! With the "You see" in the fourth sentence, the distinction between Mother's mental state and the ads she reads and sees on TV breaks down: She accepts the enticement of the custom-designed partitions with alacrity. But if she is a dupe, she is a sinister one: "You pay your money and you get your choice," means that it is mother who chooses and daughter who pays. Indeed, this genteel bourgeois household, where the young pianist's hands must be protected, is no more than a jail: a child has no secrets from her mother, and so the two women sleep in the same bed, the "proprietor" having learned a maxim that echoes recent Nazi rule: "Trust is fine, but control is better."

Of course, "Erikamother," as she is often designated in the German original, wouldn't verbalize it this way; she is a respectable lady who knows something about music and proudly attends her daughters recitals. Here, as in such other novels as *Wonderful, Wonderful Times*, the viciousness of the portraiture is convincing because, in Jelinek's dark vision, the "victims" are just as poisonous as their victimizers. When Mother berates Erika for buying the unneeded, too brightly colored cocktail dress, Erika, in a moment of rage, pulls so hard at her mother's hair—hair Erika had painstakingly colored a few days ago—that tufts fall out and leave bald spots. Indeed, Erika's violent physical assaults on her old mother are, to my mind, more shocking than Walter's physical assaults on her body. For the violence against parent is the most blatant exposure possible of this society's endless show of "correct" behavior and formal *politesse*. In concert settings, Erika is always

addressed as Professor Kohut, Walter as Herr Klemmer, and Erika's mother, in her "black Persian-lamb-paw coat, as "Gnädige Frau." Thus the most shocking scene in *The Piano Teacher* is the one in which Erika brings Walter home to Mama, takes him into her "room"—a room that has no lock on the door and which Mother has always entered at will—and has Walter put a heavy credenza against the door so that her enraged mother can only try to *hear* what is happening. She, not Erika, is now the voyeuse behind the walls that are not yet the movable partitions featured in the state-of-the-art condos to come. And the final irony is that the vile actions Erikamother imagines as taking place, are not committed at all: they are only talked about, as Erika gives Walter her wish list of sadistic acts to be practiced in future encounters.

All this activity is rendered in a deceptively simple prose that, without actual dialogue or direct narratorial intrusion, shifts, within the space of a sentence or even clause, from one point of view to another, so as to ironize the situation. Take a sentence like «Mother, with less hair on her head, stands crying, in the living room, where her Erika often gives private concerts.» The speaking voice seems to be the narrator's, but when we come to «her Erika,» we see that the perspective is Mother's own. Indeed, the complex layering of Jelinek's text makes it impossible to view Erika as the sex-starved spinster of the film. Rather, she, along with Mother and pupil-seducer, is a pawn in what is a bitter satire on latter-day Vienna, a Vienna that has tried to graft its brilliant pre-war artistic culture, or at least the memory of what that culture might once have been, onto a new, suspect social order. In this postwar moment, elders, like Herr Witkowski in *Wonderful, Wonderful Times*, are former SS officers, returned, without enlightenment or even a change-of-heart, to seedy, petty bourgeois modes of life in the shell of the former Imperial Capital—a shell where *thingness* is all.

Jelinek's writing bears the stamp of the avant-garde poetics of the *Wiener Gruppe* as well as the prose of Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard. Like her two Austrian predecessors, she began as a lyric poet and writes sardonic elliptical plays as readily as novels, in both cases vigorously satirizing her native city. The musical soirée in *The Piano Teacher* recalls the all-night "artistic" dinner in Bernhard's *Woodcutters* or the Salzkammergut society luncheon in Bachmann's *Malina*. Jelinek's communism must be understood in this larger context. In a 1993 interview with Eva Brenner, Jelinek confessed that "being a communist means nothing more or less to me than taking a stance against capitalism—a system which despises human beings—and believing in the necessity of another social arrangement."<sup>1</sup> This is as naïve as Jelinek's radical feminism, assuming as both do that communist societies *do* value the individual and treat women more humanely. But if we understand Jelinek's communism to be no more than a form of Utopianism necessary to survive in an otherwise unbearable world, it becomes less problematic. As for the Austrian Communist Party, when, in 1989, the horrors of the GDR were finally revealed, the novelist immediately resigned from its Austrian offshoot. Indeed, she tells Brenner that she considers her years in the Party "the gravest mistake of my life."

The linkage, in *The Piano Teacher* as in the other novels, of the political and the sexual is more problematic. Jelinek's lurid descriptions of sex acts are not so much pornographic (they certainly don't titillate!) as they are overwritten and overly long, especially in *Lust* (1989), where the factory manager-husband's endless sexual assaults on his own submissive wife are related in such exhaustive and repetitious detail that the reader—at least this reader-- loses interest. Is there, one wonders, no other form capitalist "perversion" and power play can take? Conversely, is woman's experience of sex really never more than a sense of acute violation or rape?

*Wonderful, Wonderful Times* (the title is a particularly foolish one, giving the reader no sense of the original *Die Ausgesperrten*, which means “The Locked Out”), is less dogmatic than *The Piano Teacher* on these issues. Both Rainer Witkowski, the pseudo-intellectual, depraved teenage gang-leader son of the one-legged former SS officer turned night porter, and fellow gang-member Hans Sepp, son of a Communist Party member who was killed in a concentration camp, are in love with the rich beautiful, vicious, but virginal Sophie, the aristocrat's daughter, who engages in the gang's depraved and gratuitous crimes just for kicks, knowing she will soon be required to assume her rightful position in society. However perverted Rainer's half-baked political views, however garbled his analysis of Sartre, Bataille, and Camus, his love for Sophie is oddly disinterested. Only when he is finally forced to concede that there is no hope, does he find his consummation in the brutal slaughter of the final scene, where Rainer, in his own distorted version of an existentialist *acte gratuit*, kills both his parents and his twin sister Anna.

*Wonderful, Wonderful Times* probes, in a series of hallucinatory episodes, what happens when *there is no past* to illuminate the present, when history has become a mere hole that no stuffing, even with the best straw, can fill. Jelinek's dissection of contemporary capitalism can sometimes sound shrill and simplistic, but in her best work, economics takes a back seat to larger, more metaphysical questions. Her Vienna is the site of a collective refusal of memory, the memory of How It Was not so long ago and to a large measure still *is* in our postwar, post-Holocaust landscape.. Given the refusal to meet the past honestly, *things*—whether household gadgets or new clothes, elaborate meals or virtuoso performances, and especially human beings, objectified and commodified—come to dominate all relationships. In the Café Sport, where Rainer kills time before he is ready for the real kill, he takes momentary pleasure in being the owner of



«fashionable diamond-shaped perspex sunglasses.» Together with his new «Caesar haircut,» they give his face just the right look.

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Brenner, «Where are the Big Topics, Where is the Big Form? Elfriede Jelinek in Discussion with Eva Brenner about her Play, *Totenauberg*, Theater and Politics,» in Jorun B. Johns and Katherine Arens (eds.), *Elfriede Jelinek: Framed By Language* (Riverside, CA: Ariadne Press, 1994), pp. 18-34.

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