

An Introduction to the Work of Elfriede Jelinek, Nobel Laureate in Literature 2004

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Abstract: In her paper, "An Introduction to the Work of Elfriede Jelinek, Nobel Laureate in Literature 2004," Andrea Bandhauer explores reactions of the press to the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek after she received the 2004 Nobel Prize in Literature. Bandhauer discusses how the extreme irritation following this announcement was frequently directed at the author's public persona rather than at her work. Against this background, Bandhauer explores the ambivalent relationship of the public towards a politically and socially engaged and outspoken public figure who in her literary work produces highly hermetical texts. As a writer, Jelinek is preoccupied with language and form and is often seen as contradicting cynically any justification for political and social engagement. For Jelinek, language is the instrument of her critical art, her own language, and that of her literary predecessors. Bandhauer thus argues for the recognition of Jelinek's work based on both social relevance and artistic merit.

Andrea BANDHAUER

An Introduction to the Work of Elfriede Jelinek, Nobel Laureate in Literature 2004

On 7 October 2004 the Swedish Academy made a decision which was met with reactions ranging widely from incomprehension, utter surprise and outrage to cautious approval and -- in some cases -- outright enthusiasm within the literary establishment and the international and German speaking press. It announced the Austrian Elfriede Jelinek as the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. The committee declared that the prize was awarded to her "for her musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that with extraordinary linguistic zeal reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power" (see *Nobel Prize in Literature 2004* <<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2004/index.html>>). Much of the international book industry and press reacted with the question of "who?", reflecting the fact that Jelinek's work is still largely unknown to the wider public in most parts of the world. At the time of the award, some of her novels and plays had been translated into numerous languages, among them English, French, Spanish, Swedish, Turkish, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese (see *Nobel Prize in Literature 2004* <<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2004/index.html>>), and her most well-known book *The Piano Teacher* (*Die Klavierspielerin*, 1983) was made into a film, directed by Michael Haneke and with Isabelle Huppert in the title role (2001). The film was awarded three prizes at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001. However, her work is largely unknown outside the German-speaking world, apart from a substantial body of scholarship within academic disciplines such as German literature or comparative literature, where mostly feminist scholars have recognised Jelinek's importance as an innovative and critical voice in German literature and theatre. Critics who acquainted themselves with some of her work as a consequence of the award, reacted frequently with consternation or even outrage. After reviewing Jelinek's website (Jelinek <<http://www.elfriedejelinek.com>>), Ruth Franklin, senior editor of *The New Republic*, describes her works as a product of "a disturbed mind" and criticises Jelinek's *Bambiland*, a play against the war in Iraq which had premiered in Vienna in 2003, as banal anti-American propaganda full of "her inimitable pornographic horror with incomprehensible pseudo-philosophical musings" (Franklin 32).

Clearly, one reason why this award has triggered such extreme reactions is the fact that her writing is non-mimetic and her language is uncompromisingly complex. Her work is thus perceived as extremely difficult and not readily accessible. As Jelinek's British publisher, Peter Ayrtton of Serpent's Tail Press comments: "She's the voice of the avantgarde ... In a way it's a problem with the Nobel Prize. It provides a mass readership for writers who don't write for one" (qtd. in Abbott 16). This complexity of form is intensified by her transgression of the boundaries of genre. As the Academy writes: "The nature of Jelinek's texts is often hard to define. They shift between prose and poetry, incantation ... and hymn, they contain theatrical scenes and filmic sequences" (see *Nobel Prize in Literature 2004* <<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2004/index.html>>). Some of her critics are impressed by her preoccupation with language and form, her playful deformation and dismantling of culturally and socially enshrined clichés and her pointed exposure of the ideological underpinnings of the language and imagery of Western popular and high culture. However, what has created most outrage is the radical content in her work and her strident criticism of late capitalist culture. Jelinek shows the overwhelming power of the market system that affects and distorts our reality and perverts our relations with each other, leading to relationships driven by power and violence. The Swedish Academy in its citation described it thus: "Jelinek lets her social analysis swell to a fundamental criticism of civilization by describing sexual violence against women as the actual template for our culture" (see *Nobel Prize in Literature 2004* <<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2004/index.html>>). Franklin sees this in a different light when she writes that Jelinek "has stubbornly clung to her anachronistic and essentializing -- and worse, erroneous -- representation of women's relationship to men" (Franklin 32).

In my view, Jelinek does not essentialise the relationship between women and men as such; rather, she presents and dissects the language, culture, and politics which create and reproduce hierarchies, especially with regard to sexuality and gender. She does not support or create a

status quo but -- by revealing the destructive power of a sexuality based on gender stereotypes -- is destabilising it. As Ayrton puts it correctly: "It's safe to say that Jelinek's work doesn't leave critics indifferent. A lot of the male critics and some women get so obsessed with some of the sexual scenes, that they completely lose it and don't see the politics, the feminism and the formal inventiveness" (qtd. in Abbott 16). Jelinek's preoccupation with the politics and culture of her home country and the difficulty of translating her closed textual systems, make some of the reactions outside the German-speaking world understandable to some extent. However, the reactions of much of the German-speaking press are less reasonable, for Jelinek has been one of the most honoured authors for her novels as well as for her plays, especially in Germany (since her public debut in 1969). In spite of this, columnists expressed utter surprise about the Academy's choice (see, e.g., *Der Spiegel*) or even shock (see Radisch <http://zeus.zeit.de/text/2004/43/Jelinek_neu>). While the influential literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki at the Frankfurt bookfair in October expressed joy at the honour for German-language literature and claimed to admire Jelinek's courage, her radicalism, her decisiveness and her independence, he denies her *oeuvre* much value (Reich-Ranicki qtd. in "Elfriede Jelinek erhält Literatur-Nobelpreis" <<http://www.welt.de/data/2004/10/07/343468.html>>; all subsequent translations are mine unless noted otherwise). In the same newspaper, novelist Martin Mosebach felt inclined to announce "horror" at the news and called her "one of the most stupid human beings of the Western hemisphere" (Mosebach qtd. in Seewald <<http://www.welt.de/data/2004/10/08/343269.html>>). While as a feminist writer Jelinek has a long history of evoking extremely aggressive reactions, Ina Hartwig of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* questioned her feminist credentials, on the grounds that Jelinek refuses to depict women as innocent victims of suppression and is extremely critical of both, "male" and "female" behaviour patterns (see Hartwig <http://www.single-generation.de/oesterreich/elfriede_jelinek.htm>). And Michael Naumann, the editor of the German weekly *Die Zeit*, combined praise for Jelinek with a sarcastic remark directed at her home country and its attitude towards its first winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. He titled his article on Jelinek receiving the prize thus: "First: very surprised, second: very well earned, and third: a heavy shock for the Austrians -- they will start reading her now" (Naumann qtd. in Brinkemper <<http://die-glueckspilze.de/blog/artikel/2k4/L/23Jelinek2.html>>). The highly emotional and critical attitude of the Austrian press towards Jelinek is reflected in the often vitriolic comments by columnists, especially in the most popular Austrian newspaper, *Die Krone*. *Der Kurier*, *Die Presse*, and some local papers were pleased with the honour accorded to Austrian literature but at the same time were very cautious and reserved in their reactions towards the actual laureate (see "Medienecho" <<http://derstandard.at/druck/?id=1818642>>[inactive]; Traxler <<http://derstandard.at/?url=?ressort=Literaturnobelpreis>>). In almost all cases, columnists referred to Jelinek's controversial status as being one of the Austrian public's most prominent *Reizfigur* (a person attracting and generating irritation). What the journalists had not mentioned is the fact that it has been the press that had fuelled most of the outrage directed against this author.

Jelinek is a writer who aims at unsettling social codes radically and deconstructing what we perceive as a given and thus creates highly pessimistic "texts of negation." As such, she triggers extreme emotional reactions, notably not only by her readers, but by people who do *not* read her texts. It is as a feminist and intellectual that Jelinek provokes this open hostility, which is directed against -- as Jelinek herself states -- a female writer rather than her work: "one has to say that art by women is treated in a biographical way much more than that by men. The biography of women, their biological exterior, their appearance, the way they dress is used to a much higher extent in order to pass judgement on their products than in the case with men" (Lamb-Faffelberger 184). At the centre of the outrage that accompanies her work is Jelinek herself, who as a critic of male violence against women does not shy away from presenting it in the most strident ways, using sexual acts of humiliation (see especially in her novel *Lust*) and as an Austrian who fouls one's own nest (*Nestbeschmutzerin*; Jelinek is a relentless and outspoken critic of Jörg Haider and his right-wing Freedom Party which formed a government with the conservative People's Party in 2000).

In spite of the controversies she triggers again and again, Jelinek's career as a writer has been extremely successful, at least on the surface. Since being awarded the Austrian State Scholarship for Literature (Österreichisches Staatsstipendium für Literatur) in 1972, she has won numerous prizes in Austria and Germany, among them the highly prestigious Heinrich-Böll-Preis in 1986, the Büchnerpreis in 1998, and the Heinrich-Heine-Preis in 2002 as well as the Berliner and Mühlheimer theatre prizes in 2002. Her novels *The Piano Player* (1983) and *Lust* (1989) were highly successful, the latter becoming a bestseller. Her plays are performed in the most prestigious theatres and staged by prominent directors like Frank Castorf, Claus Peymann, Georg Tabori, and Einar Schleeff. With regard to this inconsistent and even contradictory assessment of her work, Jelinek herself asks in an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "Even the public reception of my work fails. I get such horrible reviews. Horrible, devastating reviews, and then many prizes. Why the prizes, if everything I write is crap?" (Jelinek, "Ich renne" <<http://www.faz.net/s/Rub1DA1FB848C1E44858CB87A0FE6AD1B68/Doc~EF60BFDDDA048418B914311DC396A5FAA~ATpl~Ecommon~Scontent.html>>). It seems almost ironic then, that this author is the first Austrian to be awarded the Nobel prize for Literature. Elfriede Jelinek was born in Styria in 1946 to a mother of upper-class Catholic German and a father of proletarian Czech-Jewish descent. She grew up in Vienna where -- commuting between her apartment in Munich and her house in the Austrian capital -- she still spends a large amount of her time. Her unhappy childhood as the only daughter of elderly parents who were trapped in a bad marriage, the traumatic descent of her father into complete mental derangement when she was a teenager, and her mother's extremely ambitious and controlling domination of her, have been -- as Jelinek herself has stated in numerous interviews -- the reason for many psychological problems, including a major breakdown when she was eighteen years old. According to Jelinek, the familial catastrophes and traumata were the motor and catalyst of her creativity, as she was able to gear the traumatic isolation during her mental illness into artistic productivity (see, e.g., Jelinek "Ein Gespräch" 147; Löffler 10). However, the apparent intimate insights into her life and psychological make-up which Jelinek offers, which so frequently shape the media reception of her work, are deceptive. The self portrait Jelinek presents to the press consists of an accumulation of repeated statements that present a constructed persona, an iconic representation rather than a "real" person (see, for example, Vogel 148; Wilke 140; Jelinek, "Ein Gespräch" 153). While Jelinek allows her readers some access to her biography within the tradition of the feminist credo where the private is always also political, Juliane Vogel argues that the mythical totality attached to the author's self-portrait is in fact nothing but a configuration of stereotyped utterances assembled by Jelinek herself (148). In this way, the author is able to present herself as a type rather than an individual, denying this constructed self any self-importance and uniqueness. Her life, or the way she presents it to the public thus serves as the model for a biography shaped by its surroundings, as a symptom of and a reaction to society rather than an individual life story.

In the same manner, while Austria is portrayed in Jelinek's texts according to its specific history, politics, and culture, it can also be seen as a prototype of a society rather than as a specific case or situation. It features as the model for a hermetically sealed-off society, trapped in its own idyllic image based on the splendid past. In the case of Austria, what is buried underneath this seemingly harmonious traditional society is its horrific recent history, its collaboration with Nazi Germany and its substantial role in the Holocaust, which have been repressed in favour of an image that continues to give prominence to the representatives of its pre-war cultural "greatness." What Jelinek exposes in her texts and that are replete with phrases from the media, popular and high culture, and bungled quotations derived from the literary and philosophical canon, is the dark underbelly of a society, the violence, suppression, and restrictions underneath the veneer of civilisation. In what is without doubt her most well-known novel, *The Piano Teacher* which was translated into English for the first time in 1988, she exposes the connection of discourses of sexuality and gender constructs with the discourses of "high" culture. In her compelling reading of the novel, Elizabeth Wright shows how the cultural canon, especially music as the most idealised symbolic discourse, as well as the "noblest" cultural sanctuaries of Austria and Germany are criticised in Jelinek's text (see Wright 52). The protagonist of the novel, Erika Kohut, who makes a bare liv-

ing, teaching piano at the Vienna Conservatory, spends her life striving hopelessly for the heights of musical excellence. She is driven and continually disciplined by her dominating mother who regards Erika, the "genius," as her own -- if failed -- creation and exploits her as the provider of material goods generated by her unfortunate but necessary teaching job. Erika functions merely as an artistic labourer, caught between the extremes of desperate pretension and self-adulation and a total lack of confidence and self-awareness. Erika's artistic existence does by no means reflect the cliché of the artist's freedom and the bourgeois myth of the "artist as genius" generated by the industry propagating the city of music, Vienna. Rather, it is a tortured existence based on force and disciplinary measures generated by a mother motivated by petty-bourgeois materialistic ambitions.

Caught in a highly neurotic family structure, where the weak husband and father had become obsolete after her daughter's birth and "promptly left, passing the torch to his daughter" (*The Piano Player* 3) by becoming insane and dying in an asylum, the now middle-aged Erika had been denied of any freedom to develop her own self and a sexual identity (see also Fiddler 139-40). Left to her mother, Erika is reduced to a mere motherly phallus, as an appendage to her, and at the same time as a substitute for a husband. This complex neurotic constellation depicts the classic psychoanalytic stereotypes of femininity in an ironical way, thus becoming a parody of Freud's and Lacan's theories (see Janz 71). By being cut off from her own body, her sexuality and her self, Erika has -- again in reference to Freud -- no chance of sublimation through her art. She remains the property of her mother and her attempts to assert herself end up invariably in destructive acts. In order to "feel" herself, she cuts her genitalia. Her attempt to enter into a sexual relationship with Klemmer, her student and admirer, by acting out her fantasies, a combination of masochistic and sadistic desires miserably fails (see Jelinek, "Ein Gespräch" 141). It is precisely this complex set of desires of total control and subjugation that in the end make her the victim of Klemmer, whose more direct and unheralded sadism she triggers (see Jelinek, "Ein Gespräch" 141). Her attempt to be noticed -- which culminates in her writing down her masochistic fantasies in order to tell Klemmer what she wants him to do to her -- is met ultimately by his utter disregard of her, both as a woman and a teacher. While Erika is trying to use the hierarchical teacher-student relationship and her superior expertise as a pianist to gain power and control, Klemmer "asserts the ultimate *irrelevance* of Erika's music making and her authority as a musician" (Herrington 65; italics in the original).

The reception of this novel in the German-speaking press reflects what would become, increasingly, Jelinek's dilemma. As Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger shows, some reviewers admired the "aesthetics of distance" which rendered a revealing look at the lies that underpin the culture industry and at the invisibility and irrelevance of women within it (66). However, many reviewers focused on the "obscenities" depicted in the novel and were caught up in drawing parallels between Jelinek and her protagonist (Lamb-Faffelberger 66). Without doubt, much of what Jelinek revealed about her own life such as her family situation and her own experience as an organ and piano student can be taken to be autobiographical references in the novel. Jelinek herself has discussed this aspect on several occasions (see, e.g., Bei and Wehowski). However, in an interview with Günter Kaufmann for the journal *Plärrer*, Jelinek denies any suggestions that the novel can simply be read as an autobiography. The novel, she states, "naturally is not an autobiographical book, rather it is a book, in which -- contrary to most ... other books, own suffering is less encoded" (Kaufmann n.p.). Since *The Piano Teacher*, Jelinek's texts have continued to be seen as revealing intimate details of the author's private life and especially her sexuality (see, for example, the exploitative interview Andre Müller held with Jelinek for the Austrian journal *Profil* as one of the worst examples). However, in the scholarship on Jelinek's texts, drawing such simplistic parallels have been avoided: the discussion and analyses concentrate on Jelinek's highly encoded and formalistic style, which as Anja Meyer states, is marked not by "baring herself, but by dissociation, alienation (and) disguise" (Meyer 39; Meyer 35; Barthofer 139). It is the author's aim to vanish completely in the text through linguistic self-stylisation (see Jelinek, "Gespräch" 9-10). In fact, from the very beginning of her career as a writer, Jelinek has always attempted to analyse the mass phenomena that constitute the bourgeois "I" and that she dismantles as an advertising and media construct. The

fictional "I" Jelinek sets out to demythologise in her texts is a product of the ideology of the market, an ideology which is generated and reproduced continuously by popular myths. In *The Piano Teacher* the deconstruction of the "individual" is achieved through the mixing of quotations from sources ranging widely from the cultural canon, everyday language to banal marketing slogans, which in turn reveal the commercialism of art. The montage and the transposition of quotations show that the myths of the artist as genius as well as the myths of femininity and masculinity occur in the realm of language itself. By presenting language as an ideological construct based on hypocrisy, stereotypes are affirmed and destroyed in the same breath (see also Bandhauer and Borgert 22).

In this way, Jelinek's writing builds on, as the Nobel Prize committee remarks, "a lengthy Austrian tradition of linguistically sophisticated social criticism" (*Nobel Prize in Literature 2004* <<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2004/index.html>>). This tradition, characterised by a particular form of *Sprachkritik* (criticism of language), is based on Karl Kraus's criticism of the superficial phrases of journalism as well as on the playful and critical dealings with language by the "Wiener Gruppe." It refers to Ingeborg Bachmann's search for a language able to reveal "truth" as well as to Thomas Bernhard's use of language in order to depict the absurdity of human existence. Jelinek's distrust of the employment of language patterns that disguise and gloss over rather than reveal reality has, if anything, intensified, as can indeed be seen in *Bambiland* (2005). Thus, in her Nobel Prize lecture she focuses on the role of the author, on the relationship of poetic language and reality, and on an exploration of literary versus public discourse. Her topic here is language as the instrument of her critical art, her own language, and that of her literary predecessors who she refers to indirectly in her lecture. And again, although in some passages of her lecture she becomes more personal, she makes it very clear that what should be the centre of interest to the public is her linguistic art rather than the author herself.

Appendix: Bibliography of Works by Elfriede Jelinek in English Translation to 2005

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