

On Cynicism. Dogs, Hair, Elfriede Jelinek and the Nobel Prize

The Cynics were uncouth. At the height of Greek culture, they found its cultivation an affront and called for a return to simpler ways of life. They did so in such artful fashion that Plato referred to their founder Diogenes as “a mad Socrates.” It was said that their disregard for basic conventions led them to go about with their hair unclean and uncombed like that of a dog. It was also said that they were so strong and stubborn in their argumentation that once they latched upon a point they would no sooner let loose than would a dog. Their enemies claimed that they consistently made a fundamental error: they took, as do dogs, the pointed *with* for the pointed *to*. If you tried to explain to them the things which lay beyond their sight and pointed towards the starry heavens, they wouldn’t look at the heavens, they would look at your hand, and then they would bite it. It is for these reasons that they earned their name. Cynic is Greek for dog.

Last December, the 2004 Nobel Laureate for Literature, Elfriede Jelinek—a cynical dog-owner who never appears without carefully combed hair refused to attend the ceremony in person and had her Nobel lecture telecast to Stockholm. She began this lecture by addressing her absence, noting how it is an occupational hazard for a writer to be “*Im Abseits*”—to be “sidelined” or “off-sides”—in relation to the world he or she chronicles. When forced from the sidelines into the spotlight, the writer, she said, is at a loss. She might do her best to prepare—“to put every hair carefully into place”—but no sooner does she enter the public arena than rough winds begin to blow that hair about and she finds herself back on the sidelines, her hair standing on end. This question of public performance settled, Jelinek then turned in the remainder of her lecture to the more private activity of writing, and to dogs.

Jelinek has often written of dogs. Walking a dog has long been for her a metaphor for writing itself. Her much-loved Karl Kraus once said that the true writer is distinguished by not being the master of his or her own language. Jelinek’s characteristic manner of concurring was to describe the act of writing as like being pulled along by a large dog on a leash. One wasn’t sure what the dog was up to. What it was doing didn’t always seem that sensible or important, but one was pulled along all the same, convinced by the dog’s conviction and more or less enjoying the fresh air. In her Nobel Lecture, however, her best friend seemed to turn on her. “And this dog,

language, which is supposed to protect me," she said, "is now snapping at my heels. My protector wants to bite me. My only protector against being described, language, which . . . 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 at all, so that he, while pretending to protect me, pounces on me. Because I sought 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."

No sooner had Jelinek received notification that she was to be awarded the Nobel prize than she criticized the choice. She was quick to point out that, for example, fellow Austrian Peter Handke "would have received the prize as Peter Handke," but that she was receiving it "as a woman" (prognosticators had indeed predicted a female laureate, though Jelinek lagged far behind Algeria's Assia Djebar, Denmark's Inger Christensen, the U.S.' Joyce Carol Oates and Canada's Margaret Atwood in the running). Since the inauguration of the Prize for Literature in 1901, there have been comparatively few female laureates. After Selma Lagerlöf in 1909 (best known for her children's book *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*), another woman did not receive the prize until 1926. The Nobel committee so regretted its choice of American Pearl S. Buck in 1938 that it instituted a procedural change (the *Lex Pearl S. Buck* which dictates that a writer appearing for the first time on the Nobel committee's short list cannot win the prize for that year). Things have gotten better, but too little and too late. For this reason, but not only for this reason, Jelinek promptly stated upon notification of her selection that receiving the prize excited in her "more desperation than joy," and was "a great burden." To understand this last statement, a bit of history is required.

As a small child, Jelinek would run from room to room for hours on end. This unnerved her mother. At the tender age of six, she was taken to the renowned child psychiatrist Hans Asperger (of "The Little Professor Syndrome" fame). "Yes, I was an Asperger patient," Jelinek begins a book-length interview from 1995. "Not an Asperger autistic, though indeed not far off." This was the first of many (interrupted) psychoanalytical cures, and it led to an isolation which her mother would impose upon her. Looking back, she qualified this decision to take her to Asperger as "a crime": "Instead of sending me out to play in the company of kids my age, my mother sent me into the company of severe neurotics and psychopaths." Asperger ultimately diagnosed young Elfriede as prey to an excitement which had yet to find a suitable outlet. In the coming years, her mother would furnish her with one: music. After a complete nervous breakdown at eighteen, she furnished herself with a second one: writing.

Wild and euphoric, Jelinek's first works ran energetically from room to room. Integrating the techniques of Surrealist invention and Situationist intervention, her first work, *we're decoys baby!* (*wir sind lockvögel baby!*), published in 1970 when Jelinek was a mere twenty-four, has no capitalizations, no punctuation, and plot involutions in comparison to which *Gravity's Rainbow* (which she was later to translate) reads like *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*. Montage techniques, Pop-art appropriations, sexual errata and graphic detritus equally animate her second work, *Michael: An Adolescent Novel for an Infantile Society* (*Michael. Ein Jugendbuch für die Infantilgesellschaft*, 1972), as does a physical brutality employed to dramatize the violence of what Jelinek saw as an ongoing class war (which led her shortly thereafter to join Austria's communist party—in which she would remain, despite flagrant and much-criticized purchases from Yves Saint Laurent's special collections, for the next seventeen years).

More brutal than this ongoing class war was, for her, the battle of the sexes. Whatever the local exceptions, Jelinek sees that the global rule is that women are ruthlessly exploited in every place, at every time, and by every means. Even where the greatest personal freedom reigns, the cultural consensus is still that if an intelligent and independent woman is sexually attractive, she is so despite the fact that she is intelligent and independent, and sooner or later there will be a price to pay for that intelligence and independence. This belief drove Jelinek into the theater in the years following the publication of her early novels. Her first two plays are, by her own admission, "didactic" ones meant to illustrate grim social facts. The first, *What Happened after Nora Left Her Husband, or, Pillars of Society* (1979), picks up where Ibsen's *The Doll House* left off. After a job in a factory and another as a dominatrix, Nora ends up back in her husband's contemptuous arms. Jelinek's next play, *Clara S.* (1982), tells a harrowing tale of the sexual and other sacrifices a fictionalized Clara Schumann must submit to so as to foster the "genius" of her mad husband (the whole anachronistically transpiring at the Lake Garda villa of a very randy Gabriele d'Annunzio). The play climaxes with Clara S. strangling Robert S. Before expiring, he gets out one last chauvinist credo: "Artistic activity is beyond women—for them, only physical activity counts." Later plays such as *Sickness, or Modern Women* (1984)—a lesbian vampire drama ending with a very pyrrhic victory for the lovers (one of whom is Emily Bronte)—continue in this cynical vein. Whether it be in these plays, in works of revolutionary pornography such as *Lust* (envisioned as a "female counterpart" to Georges Bataille's *The Story of the Eye*), or still others, the lines of fire remain constant, as do the means of firing. Borrowing explicitly from the exaggerated techniques of Brecht and Thomas Bernhard, the intensity of exaggeration serves in her works, she claims, "*etwas zur Kenntlichkeit zu entstellen*"—"to disfigure something into recognizability."

After these critically acclaimed early works, Jelinek changed gears and genres. Surprising her readers, she began to write in a more realistic mode. *Women as Lovers* (1975) initiated this next movement in her career, and that movement reached an icy fortissimo in the autobiographically based novel *The Piano Teacher* (1983). Erika Kohut, thirty-six years old and a piano teacher by trade, is very much her mother's daughter. They live in the same apartment and, since the departure of Erika's father for an insane asylum outside of Vienna, sleep in the same bed, which is also the one in which Erika was conceived. (Jelinek herself lived with her mother, in Vienna, until the latter's death in 2000 at the age of ninety-six. Even after Jelinek married in 1974, she did not leave home, commuting back and forth between her husband's home in Munich, and her mother's in Vienna. Like Erika's, Jelinek's father—a Jew who survived the Holocaust by working for the Nazis as a chemist—was also committed to an insane asylum while she was still a girl.) *The Piano Teacher's* mother is a tyrant depicted in the most uncompromising and unflattering terms, and Erika is trapped in a "one person private zoo." During the spare hours when she is allowed to roam freely, her tiny acts of rebellion take the form of purchasing expensive clothing she never wears, and pornography which she does not enjoy. Her "hobby" and only source of physical pleasure is cutting herself with razor blades which the narrator describes as "smiling like a groom at the bride." A ray of fairy-tale sunshine enters in the person of a gifted piano student who wins her heart. Their affair begins happily but does not end so.

The cause of Erika's downfall—and the fall is hard—is that she knows nothing of the world, always having been sidelined by her maniacal mother and never having learned to experience life at firsthand. She longs for a love that would not smother her, and yet has been so systematically smothered by the only love she has ever known that she isn't sure such a thing exists. Terrified of her blooming love affair, she commits a desperate act—of writing. She believes that her lover wants to see signs of her weakness, and she believes that come what may she will be "subordinated" and, eventually, abused. Her conclusion is a radical one: if she must be abused, her only means of retaining a measure of control is by determining the conditions of that abuse. In a long and minutely detailed letter she lists for her young lover the ways she wishes for him to mistreat her. With the aid of a small arsenal of sadomasochistic devices that she puts at his disposal, he is to render her completely and painfully immobile. Then she is to be picked, poked, prodded, pinned, whipped, urinated upon and still more—all the while being amply insulted in terms which are also laid out in her letter. Upon reading the letter, her prince is so shocked that he ceases to be a prince. His first reaction is revulsion, and he leaves her. His second one is still more cruel.

No less disturbing than Erika Kohut's sad fate is the pitilessness with which the narrator relates it. When readers pointed out this pitilessness, Jelinek laconically compared it to Flaubert's. The analogy could not have been more pertinent. Like Emma Bovary, the main character knows the world not through direct contact with it, but through seductive stand-ins (romantic novels in the case of Emma, television in the case of Erika). Both women have aspirations of grandeur which they have adopted both from these romantic substitutes for an unromantic life. Both are infused with a feeling that they are more cultured, and therefore should be valued more highly, than those around them. Both writers rifle through their heroines' souls like handbags. Calling Flaubert to her defense, it is not unlikely that Jelinek had in mind a famous cartoon from just after the publication of *Madame Bovary* where the heavily whiskered author—son of a famous surgeon—is depicted as holding up his heroine's dripping heart on a scalpel. A more fitting gesture for Jelinek's treatment would be hard to find.

When Jelinek received a different prize—the Kafka Prize—earlier in 2004, she took the occasion to underline the deep affinity she felt with the writer for whom the prize was named (she was to do no such thing for the inventor of dynamite, Alfred Nobel). Though she does not cite it, her earlier Kafka speech seems imbued with a sentiment expressed in one of that writer's more pointed statements of purpose: "the positive has already been provided, it is the negative which has now been put upon us." Shortly after being notified that she was to receive that other prize, the Nobel, she commented, "I cannot depict anything positive." The reason she gave was perfectly cynical: "it is a simple result of desperation."

Accentuating the negative is, for Jelinek, both a native talent and a national pastime. Fellow Austrian dramaturge Thomas Bernhard drew much of his caustic creativity from, and dedicated much of his caustic creativity to, expressing hatred for his homeland. This proved literally inextinguishable. In an incensed interview, he once stated that when he looked at the Austrians of his day, the only conclusion he could come to was that Austrian women should stop having children. If they persisted, he absurdly thundered, "they should have their ears cut off."

Bernhard had begun his writing career as a court reporter. This first calling shaped his later one in its astounding array and intensity of indictment. He administered massive doses of hyperbolic disdain to Austrian sons and lovers, saving the final and fatal dose for last. Bernhard's ultimate work, *Heldenplatz* (1988) virulently attacked the severely compromised past of the theatre where so many of his own works had premiered and prominently played—Vienna's legendary Burgtheater. The play set off a scandal which sealed Bernhard's bitterness. When he died shortly after the premiere, his

will was found to contain instructions for effecting a feat unique in literary history. Many authors before him had emigrated to free their art—James Joyce being a classic case, and Bernhard’s countryman, and Joyce’s neighbor in Swiss exile, Robert Musil being another. All did so, as one would expect, during their lifetimes. Bernhard’s novelty lay in that his literary emigration was posthumous. His will stated in no uncertain terms that after his death no work of his whatsoever was to be published, republished, played, or otherwise produced in his native land for the entire duration of copyright protection. At the end of Kafka’s *The Trial*, the protagonist’s shame is said to “seem almost as if it would outlive him.” For Bernhard, it was the vitriol he directed at his fatherland which was to do so.

This spirit of denunciation is not, however, merely a result of the recent past that so disgusted Bernhard. In his great unfinished work, Musil, writing of the cultural capital of Vienna, showed how in a culture which did what it did and prized what it prized, it was ultimately better to be a man without such qualities. Karl Kraus, the unquestioned master of the Viennese vitriolic genre, fearlessly and relentlessly attacked Austrian figures of the greatest cultural and political influence for their short-sightedness, pettiness, arrogance, racism, nationalism, provincialism, and generally dangerous degree of stupidity. In one of the finest tributes to this diabolic expertise, Walter Benjamin evocatively described Kraus in this capacity as, “whirling a war dance before the crypt of the German language, outfitted in ancient armour, drawn swords swinging in both hands and wrathfully grinning like a Chinese idol.” When Elias Canetti—an exiled Austrian who credited Kraus with having guided his steps—received the Nobel Prize in 1981, he stated that he was receiving the prize in the stead of countrymen who could not—naming Kafka, Kraus, Musil, and Hermann Broch (Bernhard was to amply insult Canetti for this bit of straightforward and sententious sincerity).

Straightforward or not, Jelinek sees herself as continuing in this critical tradition, voicing time and again her admiration for the cynical pre-war masters Canetti names. And like Bernhard, she is careful to make clear that she does not wish to see the honors bestowed upon her work accrue to her motherland. When the *Österreichische Volkspartei* formed a coalition government with Haider’s party in 2000, she banned her works from Austrian stages. As she had on earlier laudatory occasions, upon her being awarded the Nobel Prize she was quick to specify that an award given to her was not “a flower for Austria to stick into its lapel.” In works such as *Burgtheater* (1984), *Totenauberg* (1991), and *The Children of the Dead* (1995), she has taken her country, its leaders and followers, its past and present, its mountains and valleys, viciously to task. Like Bernhard, the tie that binds her to her home is a bitter one.

Each year the Nobel committee has the difficult task of not only choosing a laureate, but of explaining and extolling that choice in the space of a single sentence. In the case of Jelinek, the committee announced that the award went 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.” A less delicate expression of this same sentiment might be found in the words of another laureate: “when you’re up to your neck in shit, there’s nothing left but to sing.” When Samuel Beckett was awarded the prize in 1969, his reaction was much like Jelinek’s. Sartre had turned the prize down four years earlier and with that option effectively removed, Beckett saw nothing left but public courtesy and private dismay. Like Jelinek, he did not attend the Swedish ceremony, and while he cut a more amiable figure in the public perception of his day, it did not prevent him from being, like Jelinek, charged again and again with turning his back on positive ideals in favour of negative realities—or, more to the point, with cynicism.

Theodor W. Adorno, a cynical man who would have loved receiving the Nobel Prize not only because he loved praise, but also because he would have cherished the occasion to give the Swedish tribunal a good talking to, adored Beckett (the feeling was not mutual). In Adorno’s view, whereas Sartre tried to shoehorn revolutionary content into conventional forms, and thereby produced something basically conventional, Beckett’s matching strangeness of content with strangeness of form arrived at the magic number, art’s π —a curious equilibrium of uncertainty which was both socially and artistically productive. Jelinek’s cynicism, her much-criticized accentuation of the negative—her practice of “disfiguring things into recognizability”—is best seen in such a guttering light.

“Words have been exchanged often enough,” remarked Jelinek in her Nobel Lecture, “and the exchange rate is incredibly bad.” The same restless, repetitive language and the same suspicion that the driving spirit in that language is a rather simple one, full of sound and hurry, but meaning, ultimately, little, is to be found in both Beckett and Jelinek. And in both cases a curiously muted melody is to be heard through their rough words. Jelinek’s desperation is fed by the desperate state of affairs in which we live—by political corruption, sexual cruelty, social degradation, environmental devastation, and historical blindness. But it is not limited to them. The desperation she describes is more than the sum of the ugly parts of society, and is fed by something deeper and darker, something more sad and strange than any social situation or historical event. In *The Piano Teacher*, there are three brief interruptions of the narrator’s cool tone spaced throughout the last section of the book: “Say something sweet to me and get over the letter, she pleaded inaudibly”; “Please don’t hurt me stood illegibly between the lines”; “She

wished dearly that instead of making her suffer, he would devote to her love corresponding to the Austrian norm." Jelinek's Erika Kohut, who appears to be asking the impossible and begging for the unmentionable, is actually begging for something else—for something gentle and generous and child-like and which she has disfigured beyond recognizability. Only her creator can hear and understand these pleas. The deepest, darkest, saddest, and strangest thing in Elfriede Jelinek's works and days—a rending minor chord to be heard beneath the cynical cymbals of subjugation—is precisely such an inextinguishable longing for love. Though not in the Austrian norm.