

“Obscene Fantasies”

ELFRIEDE JELINEK'S
GENERIC PERVERSIONS

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Introduction

In April 2008, world news was dominated by headlines concerning the Fritzl Case. It emerged that Josef Fritzl of Amstetten in the province of Lower Austria had been holding his daughter captive in their basement for 24 years (beginning in 1984) and had fathered seven children with her (for more details on the Fritzl case, see Jüttner). In the wake of the scandal, speculation also centered around Fritzl's wife, whose claim of having known nothing many related to the Austrians' collective failure to "know nothing" about what the Nazis were doing in the 1930s and 1940s. As Austrian novelist Josef Haslinger pointed out to *The Australian*: "There is this pretty, shiny surface that Austrians like to show, but it hides a monstrosity...On the surface we have moral standards and enlightened policies, but in the background we have this perverse world that nobody wants to talk about" (Campbell).

It is precisely this "perverse world," or what Slavoj Žižek identifies as Austria's "obscene fantasies," that the work of Elfriede Jelinek investigates. As Žižek puts it:

For decades, Jelinek was uncompromisingly describing the violence of men against women in all its modalities, including women's own libidinal complicity in their victimization. Without mercy, she was bringing to light obscene fantasies that underlie the Middle European respectability, fantasies which crawled into public space in the Fritzl affair which effectively has the unreality of a 'bad' fairy tale (Žižek; see also Robertson, for a discussion of the ways in which "Fritzl existed in literature before he existed in life").

In this book, I examine Jelinek's investigation of Austria's and Western Europe's "obscene fantasies" through her "perversion" of generic forms.

Elfriede Jelinek was born on October 20, 1946 in Mürz-zuschlag, Styria in Austria. Her father was a working-class Czech-

oslovakian Jewish socialist and her mother was a bourgeois Austrian Catholic. Jelinek grew up mostly in Vienna, where she attended kindergarten, grade school, and high school. While at high school, she also studied organ, piano and flute at the Vienna Conservatory, and in 1971 she completed examinations as an organist at the Conservatory. After high school she studied dramatics and art history at the University of Vienna, but she gave up her studies after six terms. Since 1966 Jelinek has lived and worked as a freelance author in Vienna, Munich and Paris, marrying Gottfried Hüngsberg in 1974. Until 1991 Jelinek was a member of the Communist Party (for further biographical information on Jelinek, see: Fiddler, *Rewriting*, 1–8 & 10–11). She is the recipient of many prizes, including the 2004 Nobel Prize for Literature, which was awarded in recognition of 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” (“Nobel Prize”).

Jelinek is most often read as a “political” writer thanks to her self-proclaimed Marxism and feminism. At the same time, however, others view her as a “postmodern” author, thus leading Allyson Fiddler to pose in her 1994 essay, “There Goes That Word Again, or Elfriede Jelinek and Postmodernism,” what she considered to be “something of a ‘Gretchenfrage’ of our time, namely, where does Elfriede Jelinek stand on the question of postmodernism, or rather...what position, if any, do her texts occupy within the postmodern debate on literature? Can Jelinek’s writing be called postmodernist?” (“There Goes...” 129). My readings of Jelinek offered in this book are intended to help expand this discussion beyond the “either/or” dichotomy that categorizes much of the scholarship regarding Jelinek’s politics.

A survey of the critical literature leaves no doubt that many scholars view Jelinek as either a Marxist or socialist feminist.¹ Fiddler, for example, describes Jelinek as a “Marxist-feminist” (*Rewriting*, 12), and in the article cited above, answers her “Gretchenfrage” in the negative, maintaining instead that Jelinek is located “firmly within the older, Modernist tradition,”² due to her “adherence to certain ‘metanarratives’—such as Marxism and feminism” (“There Goes...” 144). In the same collection in which Fiddler’s essay appeared, Linda DeMeritt also argues for a view of Jelinek as a Marxist feminist, citing Jelinek as an example of a

writer whose “main theme is the submission of everyone, regardless of sex, to the accumulation of capital and their resultant alienation,” (115) and who “effectively advances both the marxist and feminist battle” (125). Other examples of scholars who position Jelinek within a Marxist/socialist feminist framework are: Rudolf Burger (21), Jacqueline Vansant (5), Dagmar Lorenz (111), and Marlies Janz, who uses the term materialist, rather than Marxist or socialist, feminist, but who nonetheless believes that Jelinek’s materialist feminist orientation has been falsely assessed in Jelinek criticism (vii).³

Lorenz’s article cited above is a good example of how a reliance on solely Marxist feminist categories can produce a one-sided reading of Jelinek, as her focus on Jelinek’s Marxist feminism leads her to declare that Jelinek’s “works focus on sexual politics, the socio-economic plight of women to which she subordinates the theme of the female body and sexuality” (111). It should be clear to anyone who has read *Die Liebhaberinnen* (*women as lovers*), *Die Klavierspielerin* (*The Piano Teacher*), *Lust* or *Clara S.* (to name just a few) that Jelinek deals with the theme of the female body and sexuality in her work. Indeed, the novel that Lorenz is analyzing (*Die Ausgesperrten* [*Wonderful, Wonderful Times*]) also treats of female sexuality in the figure of Anna and her attempt to define herself as both an intellectual and a woman, something Jelinek’s text makes explicit, when, during a sexual encounter with Hans, Anna realizes that her intellectual skills are of no interest to Hans and also that her identity as an intellectual woman is separate from her sexuality:

is this why I read the whole of Sartre in my spare time, all about Being and about Nothingness? What use is it to me now? I might just as well be a girl who’s never read anything but Bravo. You don’t need any more for this. The fact that she perceives this distinguishes her from millions of other girls, but on the outside Hans, alas, only sees a girl the same as a million others (*Wonderful*, 85).

Dafür hab ich jetzt den ganzen Sartre in meiner Freizeit gelesen, das ganze Sein und das ganze Nichts, schießt es ihr durch den Kopf, während sie aus der Unterhose steigt. Und jetzt kann ich gar nichts damit anfangen. Ich könnte genausogut eine sein, die niemals irgendetwas gelesen hat außer Bravo. Mehr ist hier nicht vonnöten. Daß sie das durchschaut, unterscheidet sie schon wieder von den Millionen anderer Mädchen, äußerlich sieht Hans aber leider nur eine wie eine Million andere auch (*A*, 89).

Another problem with the classifying of Jelinek as either a Marxist or socialist feminist is that her interpreters often simply "take her word for it" by quoting one of her many interviews (see for example Jelinek, "Wut," 89; and Sauter, 110), or citing her membership in the Communist Party (which she left in 1991), as "proof" of her Marxism and/or feminism. But, as Imke Meyer has pointed out:

It is not methodologically sound, in the majority of instances, to ascribe, while concerned with the interpretation of literary texts, the same significance to the elements that comprise the texts as to the facts that comprise the author's life. Rather, a distinction between, for instance, a narrative voice created in prose fiction on the one hand and the voice of the author of that fictitious text on the other seems appropriate. If such distinctions are not made, potential pitfalls occur. For instance, a creative intention that an author expresses in an interview, might, without further investigation, be understood as having become fully realized in a given literary text. However, this need not necessarily be the case, and it seems, therefore, that if one wants to avoid potentially reductive readings of literary texts, one should not let one's analysis be guided by an author's expressed intentions (123).

Following Meyer's advice, what I demonstrate in this book is that, despite Jelinek's personal political commitment to Marxism, there is something in her work that goes beyond Marxism and that we need to add psychoanalysis to our interpretative "tool kit" in order to read femininity in these texts. To assist in this effort, I draw on the work of those scholars who attempt to forge a middle ground in this debate, such as Brigid Haines and Margaret Littler, who view Jelinek's work as exemplified by a "complexity" that "arise[s] from a basic three-way tension between the Marxist, feminist, and post-structuralist aspects" of her work, and who see that tension as "continu[ing] to trouble and enrich Jelinek research" (40).

Thus my position on this "debate" is similar to that of Haines and Littler, but has also been influenced by Verena Mayer's and Roland Koberg's argument that because Jelinek as a private citizen is politically engaged, Jelinek the writer does not necessarily feel the need to write unambiguously engaged literature, but instead reserves for herself the "right to art," (Mayer and Koberg, 9), as well as by Matthias Konzett's contention that the political import of Jelinek's work lies in its investigation of Austria as symptom. He views that as taking place in two ways:

1) as a case study of symptomatic expression of crisis in postwar affluent Western societies informed by legacies of colonialism, racism, and Eurocentric claims to cultural supremacy; and 2) as a site of *jouissance* and perverse pleasure won from this symptomatic site of corruption and decadence....In this latter version, hyperbole rules and brings comic relief to the forces of repression that sustain the symptom as a camouflage of illness. The illness is finally allowed to resurface as illness (Konzett, 8–9).

Konzett further views Jelinek's work after 1991 (beginning with *Totenauberg*, her play about Heidigger and Hannah Arendt) as becoming more directly political in its engagement with the Holocaust, xenophobia, sport, the Iraq war, etc. (Konzett, 13–14).⁴

The Jelinek texts (written between 1975 and 1989) analyzed in this book are political in Konzett's second sense insofar as they investigate Austria as a "site of *jouissance* and perverse pleasure" and depict the symptom and the illness of Austria society. They do so in ways that seem less clearly political at first glance, first through their insistent focus on male-female relations. If Ingeborg Bachmann was correct when she claimed that "Fascism is the first thing in the relationship between a man and a woman" (Bachmann, 144, my translation) ["Der Faschismus ist der erste in der Beziehung zwischen einem Mann und einer Frau"], then these works, while at first glance less directly engaged in politics than Jelinek's later work, could be seen as laying the groundwork for her later, more overtly political, analysis of fascism and racism in Austria.

The second way in which these texts can be viewed as political is through Jelinek's "negative aesthetics" (in the form of rewriting or negating familiar low- and high-culture genres). This term comes, of course, from Adorno and is defined in Hendrik Birus's reading as: "Art must be negative in order to 'bear witness to the negativity of social existence' (Adorno, *GS*, 14:52, Birus's translation)" (141).

My investigation of this political aspect of Jelinek's work therefore consists of a reading of three Jelinek texts in light of their negative reworking of generic forms and the ways that this reworking does indeed function to "bear witness to the negativity of social existence." This reworking also results in "a fundamental intervention in the relationship between reader and text, a disruption of the reader's conventionalized understanding of the contract, the literary institution of a particular genre" (Cranny-Francis, 18). Cranny-Francis further argues that: