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“My Characters Live Only Insofar as They Speak”: Interview with Elfriede Jelinek

Brenda L. Bethman

Introduction

While researching my dissertation on Elfriede Jelinek in Vienna during the 1998/99 academic year, I had the opportunity to talk to her about her work and politics. We first met in Darmstadt at the Büchner Prize ceremony in October 1998, to which she had graciously invited me. Back in Vienna, we met several times, both informally and more “formally” with a tape recorder. What follows is collated from two separate conversations, on 23 February and 10 June 1999. The first took place in her home in Hütteldorf, in her study, a comfortable room with a lovely view of the Vienna Woods; the second (which she was kind enough to agree to after my recorder had destroyed much of the tape from the first interview) took place at Café Museum, in the center of Vienna. Rather than separating the questions and answers into two interviews, I have organized them by theme. A bibliography of her major works in German and in English translation is appended. [BLB]

Interview

Brenda Bethman: *Is there such a thing as an Austrian identity?*

Elfriede Jelinek: If there is, then it is a very fragile identity. For that reason your question is difficult to answer. There certainly was one, and I think that Austria identifies with this time, the *fin-de-siècle*. And then, after World War I, no one believed any more in this Austrian identity, with its well-known consequences, the catastrophe. Thus, if an Austrian identity exists today, I believe that it is a very split identity: some look back to those times of glory, to culture, or rather, to that culture of lightness embodied by waltzes and *savoir vivre*, while others, I for one, believe that because of this association with lightness, Austria was much more readily allowed to become innocent again than Germany; and for

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that reason Austrian identity is in fact a non-identity, based on amnesia, so to speak. That's really the negative aspect of identity, namely that Austria since then has not been able, like other countries, to identify with the great, important figures of its past, its culture, or its history, and is stuck in the alternative of lightness or mountains of corpses. But not many people see this as I do; your first question is indeed quite difficult to answer.

What does being Austrian mean to you? Or is it more important that you are Viennese?

To say the least, there are many different cultural realms in this tiny country. I believe that there really are an eastern and a western cultural sphere, and I see myself more as a Viennese. That is, I come out of this eastern cultural tradition, whereas the more western authors such as [Thomas] Bernhard or [Peter] Handke, or even [Franz] Innenhofer, were marked by their rural or small-town experiences. Although I have written many texts that do not take place in Vienna (in fact, most of them), I believe that this experience of an eastern, urban culture has nonetheless left its mark on my work.

For a long time, Austrians have attempted to forget and repress their past, and the Allies, during World War II, developed the myth that the Austrians were "Hitler's first victims."¹ Since the "Waldheim Affair,"² however, Austrians have supposedly been forced to confront their past and come to terms with it, and in addition it is maintained that, indeed, their relationship to the past is slowly changing. Do you see such a change?

Well, I would certainly say that it would be a belated development if it had not taken place until after Waldheim, for there were indeed authors and intellectuals who had addressed this topic long before Waldheim, as I, for example, did with my play *Burgtheater*. It was a great scandal at the time, even though it has never been performed in Austria. So it could be said that after Waldheim no one could any longer deny anything. It has also perhaps become clear to the world since then that Austria, or the majority of the Austrian people, maybe even an over-proportional number, were guilty. As I said, after Waldheim it was no longer possible for anyone to deny anything; but the strange thing about it was that many reacted to it as if this were something new.

Adorno once claimed that writing poetry after Auschwitz would be barbaric, although he later revised that statement. At a discussion at the

Akademietheater after a performance of your play Stecken, Stab und Stangl (Stick, Staff and Stangl)³, you claimed that you are incapable of doing anything other than constantly writing about Auschwitz. Where does this compulsion come from? Could this be understood in terms of Brecht's saying that it would be barbaric, after Auschwitz, to write about trees?

Well, I think that Adorno has often been misinterpreted. I also knew, however, that "whereof one cannot speak, thereof should one be silent."⁴ It's impossible to say something about Auschwitz, but it's also impossible not to speak about Auschwitz. Or, to put it in an exaggerated fashion, one can do nothing but continually "speak Auschwitz." That is the opposite of something of which one cannot speak, but cannot help but speak. Auschwitz is a kind of empty space that is filled with pathos and many false notes, even kitsch. One can, however, write texts—like I tried to do in *Stecken, Stab und Stangl*—in which Auschwitz or the German concentration camp hangs over everything like a threat, because of the continuity of history, that is, its tendency to repeat itself. In other words, one must always think of, or can do nothing but think of, the German concentration camp. That would not necessarily be the case with every subject matter, but it is certainly the case in a text based on a political murder, like that of the four Roma, which is also a kind of mass extermination. It also lies at the heart of a text like *Wolken. Heim* (Clouds. Home), in which one can see that twentieth-century German history developed from this seemingly innocent history of the nineteenth century.

And now there is this controversy about Martin Walser.⁵ I read an article about it in Format.⁶ Austrian intellectuals were asked if a similar type of controversy could occur in Austria, and most answered "no," believing that it would not be possible to claim that the Austrians have already talked too much about their past.

Yes, but then again, Austria was never forced to talk about its past. Germans were forced by the Allies and the long period of occupation to speak of their past. And of course this creates a certain weariness, particularly among young people, who simply wish to hear no more about the past. On the other hand, when an important prize is being awarded, awarded for work that constitutes a critical revision of history, one should not reward someone for boasting about looking away, especially since looking away is what everybody does. And a prize recipient, of whom something more is expected, should not behave like all the rest. That is intellectual dishonesty, and it should not be rewarded.

In texts such as Wolken. Heim, Die Kinder der Toten (Children of the Dead), Ein Sportstück (A Sports Play), and others, there is often a “we” speaking. Who is this “we”?

That is certainly the most difficult question of all, as it is really the task of our “nice dissertation writers” (*liebe Dissertanten*) to determine for each text who this “we” is, because it is not a unified “we” that speaks. It is constantly changing, and it would make an interesting dissertation to trace this collective “we.” Sometimes the “we” is an ironically meant, common way of speaking, at other times it is a negative “we,” a kind of silent, menacing “we.” Which “we” is speaking must be determined with each individual text or from the context. If I were to write an article or dissertation about myself, this “we” would interest me greatly.

Is the bourgeois subject of the nineteenth century dead, as many theorists claim? Or did this subject never exist? What kind of subject exists now, in the present?

Well, this bourgeois subject certainly did exist in the nineteenth-century novel, although even then it was an illusion. I believe that this individual “I” has, in the meantime, ceased to exist, and that when literature claims that it still exists, it’s wrong. I for one have always attempted to analyze the mass phenomena that constitute this “I,” or rather this apparent, fictional “I” that is an advertising and media construct. I began quite early with media critique, which is very *en vogue* at the moment. My first phase of media criticism was in the 1960s, although it was much more political and Marxist then.

Are individuals nothing more than social constructs? And if they are, where could resistance come from?

Well, the problem of resistance is not one with which I am concerned. I am more concerned with determining how and from where these social constructs develop; for example constructions of femininity that come from the media, advertising, or fashion. I am interested in popular myths (*Trivialmythen*) and also in demythologizing them, as Roland Barthes did in his book *Mythologies*. Therefore I am interested in objects that are seemingly innocent, like the miniskirt for example and its societal effects; or, in other words, what is the meaning of the miniskirt, which was originally a type of clothing for children? What does it mean when women dress like children? Is this just an innocent playing with the erotic, or is it an infantilization of women? There are

certainly many answers to these questions, and, to be sure, I have nothing against the miniskirt. I only want to try to understand where it comes from and why women are made into fashion objects.

How important is language in the construction of the subject?

Indeed, it is the most important aspect. My characters live only insofar as they speak. For women this is something I myself have had to realize. On the one hand, for women, there are socially sanctioned forms of speaking, such as the nagging wife and the scolding mother, and on the other, the man is the one who is allowed to speak, to say something "important." I also believe that the limits of language are the limits of the world.⁷

Is there, in your opinion, a tradition of Austrian women's writing? Which writers have been a literary influence on you?

Yes, of course, there are [Ingeborg] Bachmann, [Ilse] Aichinger, and Marlen Haushofer, who had the classically female life of wife and doctor's assistant and whose talent was most certainly underestimated. She was an extraordinarily interesting writer, always underappreciated; but now, her novel *The Wall* (*Die Wand*) is finally being recognized.

In your texts I see parallels to Bachmann's Todesarten-Project, especially thematically. Do you feel an affinity with Bachmann?

Thematically, certainly. I would also say that it is quite surprising that she had already defined radically feminist positions at a time when feminism practically did not exist. But not at all formally, I would say; she said of herself that she is an author of discretion, of suggestion. She was not interested in linguistic textual experiments—as a means, perhaps, but not as an end. And I would say that I am certainly not an author of either discretion or suggestion, but the opposite, I am an author of the axe. I have a completely different temperament. And above all, I belong to the next generation; I could have never surrendered myself to men in the way Bachmann did. She was, on the one hand, very intellectual, very sharp; she could thematize what happened to her; but on the other, she could not cope with it emotionally. For me, it is different; luckily, I live in a different environment.

In her Frankfurt Lectures on Poetics, Bachmann defined the difference between the "I" of the nineteenth century and the "I" of the twentieth as follows: "it [the 'I'] is no longer in history, rather history is now in the

'I' (Werke 4: 230). In your texts, however, I always have the feeling that we are now dealing with history without an "I." How would you describe the relationship between the "I" and history?

Yes, in my work there are no longer any living, acting subjects whatsoever, except perhaps in earlier texts such as *The Piano Teacher* (*Die Klavierspielerin*) or *Women as Lovers* (*Die Liebhaberinnen*). There are hardly any agents in my texts; instead I would say that the acting subjects *are* history in that they only represent the dialectic of history, that is to say, they carry history on their bodies, or express it through their speech. I have written plays in which the characters are constituted by their speech, and as long as they are speaking, they exist, but whenever they cease to speak, they also cease to exist. The subjects speak their historicity, one might say, and thereby become dialectic because they always also carry their antithesis with them. They are artificially constructed, hence constructs. I really do believe that the subject died with the nineteenth century. No one today can maintain the illusion that the subject has an identity, even if one likes to read that. It is nothing but a construct, constructed by its own historicity, which includes advertising, television, and the superstructure, to use the Marxist term. What that means is that even in the most private moments of one's life, or those in which one has the strongest illusion of privacy, the subject cannot preserve itself, because the private sphere no longer exists. We are moving beyond the nineteenth-century conception of the novel or of subjectivity, because we can no longer live under the illusion that we can represent a microcosm of the whole world. No one can afford to do that today, it's an illusion.

*You once stated that you no longer believe in the political effectiveness of the theater. And one of your most recent plays, *Ein Sportstück*, has a resigned undertone. If you no longer believe in it, why do you continue to write for the theater?*

I do believe that one must continue to write and perform political theater. However, I do not believe that one can achieve political change that way.

What does it mean to be a Marxist or a materialist today? Which aspects of Marxism or communism can still be salvaged? Which do we have to abandon? Is there any hope that socialism or communism could ever be realized?

At any rate we must give up the idea that Marxism or communism can function when imposed from above. It is certainly clear that it cannot function in this way. As to what could be saved, it may be possible to develop a new economic theory, one that would not limit individual freedom, or cause certain groups to feel disadvantaged, as real existing socialism did. What one could and must do, however, is to find a way to preserve the relationship between individual freedom and free access to the means of production, or the societal means of production, because the former socialist countries held the freedom of the individual and his or her personal rights in absolute low esteem, and that was the biggest mistake they made. At any rate, it cannot function at all when imposed from above, but only when implemented through democratic measures. At this moment in time I do not see any hope of socialism being realized, at least not in Europe and America.

Do you believe that Austria is a racist and/or antisemitic society? Are there anti-racist or anti-antisemitic strategies that would be effective in Austria?

I would not say that Austrian society is antisemitic, although there are very strong and longstanding antisemitic and racist traditions here that also made Hitler the political criminal he was. People always forget that Hitler was already a political adult when he left Austria for Germany. Naturally things have changed quite a bit since then, and I would also say that there are strong racist tendencies in other places, Great Britain for example, but then again Great Britain is an old, established democracy. And I also believe that Germany, through the Allied decree and its own highly diversified press, has become a very democratic country. That is something I would not say in regard to Austria, because I find that the one-sidedness of the Austrian press, this media monopoly, has certain strongly antidemocratic tendencies, and I do not see democracy thriving in Austria.

Do you read feminist theory? If so, what?

I have only read a few of the works by the newer theorists, for example Judith Butler. I find her very interesting, however, because I am interested in these new "gender" theories, namely the idea that male and female gender roles are constructed, and that it is even possible to construct one's own gender. Judith Butler could never have developed such ideas in Simone de Beauvoir's time. I would say, however, that I am more of an adherent of political feminism, that is, a political feminism influenced by Enlightenment ideas that poses the question of who

has the power. Although I find the idea of constructing a gender identity and playing with male and female gender roles very interesting, at the end of the day, I would say that dealing with such questions is really a luxury (*Luxusproblem*) when one considers the wretched conditions in which most women of the world live, and how miserable the lot of most women is. These questions of gender identity and gender as play really are questions that only western middle-class academics have the luxury to debate (*akademische Mittelstandsluxusdebatte*). It is a theory that I personally find very interesting, but as long as women in Afghanistan are dying from cavities because there are no dentists to treat them, then these types of questions and theories are just an extravagance.

How, if at all, have your feminist politics changed over time? What does the term "feminism" mean to you? Do you believe that women have common interests as women that can transcend the categories of race and class?

That's hard to answer. I would definitely say that I have become more resigned since I began to write. In the beginning, we had greater hopes—we really believed that we could change things, but fundamentally very little has changed, and I am now extremely pessimistic. And what's so stifling is that we all claim that things have changed fundamentally, that women now have choices. It's actually much worse now than when there was still a feeling of anticipation, of expectation (*Aufbruchsstimmung*), a belief that one must simply fight hard enough for things to change, an optimism. Now one is made to feel like a hysterical old hag who keeps on screaming even though it no longer matters. That is really my frustration, that nothing has fundamentally changed; economic power is still in the hands of men, and overwhelmingly so. Even if more women than ever now occupy leadership positions, not the very top ones, but more likely in the middle ranks, the norms are still determined exclusively by men, in particular the cultural norms of patriarchy. Especially in regard to this "market of bodies," which declares women to be bodies and reduces them to their biological being, a being that is unable to improve herself through work, thought, or even, in my opinion, economic power. Women are still reduced to biology, regardless of how much work they perform. If I were a Nobel prize winner for medicine, but had lost my figure and was no longer young and attractive, then I would be the object of men's derision—it happened to me today, by the way, just to illustrate what I'm saying. I was looked at askance because I was wearing long pants with a shirt. Men hollered at me, not approvingly, but rather as if they found me

ridiculous. Well, I guess it's okay if they want to laugh. It does not hurt me any more. But it is just paradigmatic that as a woman, you are thrown onto this market of bodies, irrespective of what you have done and achieved in your life. Nothing has changed that. Instead, it is getting worse; I believe, this "glamour" [English in the original], this pressure to be beautiful [*Zwang zur Schönheit*], this backlash, also when it comes to aesthetic categories, forces women to pump iron [*den Körper stählen*], to build muscles, to work to remain slim and muscular, to fixate attention on the body, as I have shown in *Sportstück*. In other words, more and more is expected of them and they get less and less in return.

Yes, I find that is often true. One thing that I've noticed here in Austria that disturbs me is the proliferation of the Palmers lingerie stores—it seems that there is one every few blocks, always with these posters of half-naked women in the windows.

Yes, five or six years ago the Palmers stores caused a scandal here. The feminists took to the streets and, of course, were portrayed as ridiculous—it was said that the dumb broads were simply jealous because they were not beautiful. And now, if one says that one finds those posters discriminating, one is ridiculous, a ridiculous, nagging old woman. By the way, in Munich, there were also protests by women, and they were dismissed in a similar fashion. It is a way of keeping women in their place. Every man, no matter how he looks, can improve his position through intellectual, cultural, artistic, or economic power, whereas women are still denied that opportunity.

Translated by Brenda L. Bethman

Notes

For their help with formulating my questions, I would like to thank Sara Lennox and Susan Cocalis. I am especially grateful to Elfriede Jelinek for giving so freely of her time.

¹ For more on the Moscow Declaration and Austria as the "first victims" of Hitler, see Keyserlingk, especially chapter 5; and Dusek, Weinzierl, and Pelinka.

² Kurt Waldheim, a former UN Secretary-General, ran for the Austrian presidency in 1986. During the campaign, allegations surfaced that he had

committed atrocities in the Balkans during World War II, something Waldheim had “neglected” to mention in his memoirs. In responding to the allegations, Waldheim first claimed that he had been confined to a desk job and knew nothing of any atrocities, then that he had not been in Salonika (a site of partisan fighting and deportations of Jews), and finally that he had been there, but that he never saw a single partisan. Despite the allegations, which were never entirely proven nor disproven, Waldheim went on to win the election. The controversy ignited by the allegations against him, however, is widely viewed as Austria’s first (belated) engagement with coming-to-terms-with-the-past. For more on Waldheim and the allegations against him, see: Bassett; Good and Wodak; and Dusek, Weinzierl, and Pelinka.

³ This is a difficult title to translate, as “Stab” not only translates as “staff,” but is also a pun on the name “Staberl” (the pen name for Richard Nimmerrichter), a columnist for the Austrian tabloid *Neue Kronen Zeitung*, whose columns on the Oberwart murders Jelinek viewed as incendiary and which she incorporated into her script. “Stangl” refers to Franz Stangl, the commandant of the concentration camp at Treblinka (Carp 59–60).

⁴ Jelinek here is quoting Wittgenstein (189) [the original German reads: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen” (188)], possibly via Bachmann, who was also fond of quoting this phrase. A few examples, among many, are: Bachmann’s essays “Ludwig Wittgenstein—Zu einem Kapitel der jüngsten Philosophiegeschichte,” *Werke* 4: 12; “Sagbares und Unsagbares—Die Philosophie Ludwig Wittgensteins,” *Werke* 4: 114; and an interview given in May 1973, in: *Wir müssen wahre Sätze finden*, 136.

⁵ In October 1998, Walser unleashed a controversy with a claim in his acceptance speech for the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels*: “Auschwitz eignet sich nicht dafür, Drohroutine zu werden, jederzeit einsetzbares Einschüchterungsmittel oder Moralkeule oder auch nur Pflichtübung” (20), which was interpreted by his critics as meaning that Auschwitz should no longer be spoken of. For more on the controversy, see the articles by Baumgart and Weidemann.

⁶ See Brandstetter, et al.

⁷ Again, Jelinek is quoting Wittgenstein: “Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt” (148).

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Appendix

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