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Jelinek's Vienna: Cultural Elitism and Neo-Nazism

Sometimes, of course, art creates the suffering in the first place.
(Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 23)¹

Abstract: Elfriede Jelinek's novel *The Piano Teacher* (1988) has gained notoriety because of its explicit discussion of sadomasochism, sexual perversion, and violence, as well as its deliberately un-literary or anti-aesthetic style. Behind its provocative depiction of the protagonist Erika Kohut's socially unacceptable behaviour, however, the novel resonates with a much more subtle allusion to the historical forces that have shaped late twentieth-century Viennese culture. This essay focuses on aspects of the novel that expose the ways in which Viennese people of the 1980s were immersed in a sensibility of hatred, violence, and exclusion reminiscent of the extreme nationalism and ethnocentrism of Nazi ideology. Ironically, it is classical music – the epitome of cultivation, freedom, and spirituality – that becomes the vehicle for segregation, expulsion, and cruelty. From this perspective, the defeat of Nazi ideology at the end of World War II appears to be merely nominal, as principles of exclusion and segregation thrive in the networks of private relationships in smaller groups and institutions protected by the law. This essay claims that only because Jelinek's novel directly exposes the remnants of Nazi ideology through its language, does *The Piano Teacher* disturb and shock its readers and critics.

Keywords: art, Elfriede Jelinek, Holocaust, liberal humanism, music, neo-Nazism, post-war democracy, *The Piano Teacher*, Vienna

In 2004, the Austrian novelist Elfriede Jelinek won the Nobel Prize for literature for “her musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that with extraordinarily linguistic zeal reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power” (“The Nobel Prize” 2014). Critics of Jelinek's most famous

¹ Here and in the rest of this essay, the English translations of *Die Klavierspielerin* are quoted from Joachim Neugroschel's 1988 translation. Some of the English quotations are supplemented with the original German text as published by Rowohlt, in this case: “Kunst SIE nicht trösten können, obwohl der Kunst vieles nachgesagt wird, vor allem, daß sie eine Trösterin sei. Manchmal schafft sie allerdings das Leid erst herbei” (Jelinek 1990a, 25).

novel, *The Piano Teacher*, have sharply disagreed with this characterization of her work by the Nobel Prize Academy. One Academy member, Knut Ahnlund, was so outraged at the choice of Jelinek as the award recipient that he publicly terminated his membership of the Academy, denouncing Jelinek's work as "a mass of text shoved together, without artistic structure." Ahnlund did this in a letter to the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, which was published on 11 October 2005, adding that Jelinek's work was "whining, unenjoyable public pornography" and asserting that her Nobel Prize award had "not only been an irreparable damage to all progressive forces" but had "also confused the general view of literature as an art" (quoted in Fleishman 2005).

In the traditional liberal humanist sense – characteristic of Ahnlund's statement – music, art, and literature are seen as the highly esteemed domains of aesthetic beauty, personal conscience, or political justice. These realms need to be protected because they give a fuller expression to our existence as human beings compared to other, more practical fields – like medicine, law, engineering – which merely work toward our material well-being. While art, literature, and music do not have an immediate material use, they increase our sense of self, establish our feeling of connection with other human beings, and may even provide a sense of justice that the world cannot or is not yet ready to offer us. Thus, paradoxically, art announces itself as infinitely more valuable to our humanity precisely because its functional value is absent. We indulge in art, literature, and music not because we expect any practical benefit from them, but in a free choice to enlighten, entertain, or improve ourselves.

Since the mid-twentieth century, this ideal, perpetuated by liberal humanism, has been questioned by postmodern and post-structuralist thinkers. In *The Piano Teacher*, Jelinek targets this traditional outlook as a stereotype and cliché because it leads to a narrower, yet very comforting, vision of art that seems inherent in Knut Ahnlund's statement. Jelinek comments sarcastically on the liberal humanist position that proclaims Vienna as the prized capital of classical music: "Vienna, the city of music! Only the things that have proven their worth will continue to do so in this city. Its buttons are bursting from the fat white paunch of culture, which, like any drowned corpse that is not fished from the water, bloats up more and more" (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 13). This image of Vienna perpetuates Oswald Spengler's (1991) vision of the decline of Western civilization and bears witness to the disastrous aftermath of the two world wars and Nazism, all rooted in the highest technological and cultural achievements of Europe. Instead of revitalizing post-war Vienna, the city's high culture bestows a ghastly afterlife on its lifeless body.

Throughout her novel, Jelinek provides anything but an uplifting vision of art as a medium for aesthetic appreciation or a tool for stirring political reform.

Instead, art – in the form of classical music – is presented as a non-subjective, impersonal, deadly torture mechanism that subjects to its power innumerable young people on the exceptionally narrow road to success. The budding artists are humiliated by their teachers and choose this road not by themselves but under the coercion of their parents. Reminiscent of the Holocaust, “music comes in, spreading like poison gas [*Giftgas*] into every nook and cranny” of people’s lives, pursuing them everywhere and leaving them with a yearning for peace and quiet (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 26; original: 1990a, 27).

Yet, even as it stages the social role of classical music as its object of criticism, *The Piano Teacher* folds upon itself as a novel, raising questions about the limits and value of literariness – the limits of literature as an art form. Jelinek suggests that these limits are imposed by the political reality in Austria inherited from Nazism, which even in the late seventies pervades the consciousness of people and their forms of expression. The novel reveals and partakes in these expressions, and only because it directly exposes the remnants of Nazi ideology through its language, does it disturb and shock its readers and critics. Thus, it is not the lack of artistic mastery that triggers critics’ condemnation of Jelinek, nor is it her use of pornography (*The Piano Teacher* is more a critique of pornography, or even a kind of anti-pornography), but her direct exposure of the discourses of social institutions that unconsciously carry on the spirit of exclusion, hatred, punishment, and ethnic cleansing inherent in Nazi ideology.

Allyson Fiddler points out that “many of Jelinek’s texts make a deliberate contribution [...] towards a critique of fascism [...]. But it is not just the fascism of Austria’s past on which Jelinek casts a critical light. She also highlights what she sees as a dangerous latent fascism in modern Austrian society, and warns against the country’s susceptibility to such politics” (1994, 100). Fiddler refers to a speech that Jelinek gave in December 1986 upon receiving the Heinrich Böll Award, in which the writer made puns using the names of the politicians Jörg Haider and Kurt Waldheim, whose Nazi past was widely exposed and criticized in the 1980s. In her speech, Jelinek sarcastically referred to the officially publicized image of Austria as the land of music and white horses (“Land der Musik und der weißen Pferde”), a country with a clean slate (*weiße Weste haben*) – which is only seemingly a land of beautiful nature and neutral politics. Contrasted to these are the brown Carinthian suits (“Kärntneranzüge”) of numerous local citizens of this former Nazi-occupied and Nazi-implicated region, well provided with big pockets where one can hide things.² Fiddler, along with Ulrike Rainer (1994) and Sylvia

2 “In den Waldheimen und auf den Haidern dieses schönen Landes brennen die kleinen Lichter und geben einen schönen Schein ab, und der schönste Schein sind wir. Wir sind nichts, wir sind

Schmitz-Burgard (1994), emphasizes that the ever-present Nazi ideology, lurking in the thoughts and actions of late-twentieth century Austrians, finds its strongest expression in Jelinek's 1980 novel *Die Ausgesperrten*, translated into English by Michael Hulse as *Wonderful, Wonderful Times* (Jelinek, trans. Hulse 1990b).

Michaela Grobbel attributes negative reactions against Jelinek's writing style to her reputation as "Austria's 'Nestbeschmutzerin' [befouler of her own nest] because of her insistence that Austrians must confront their involvement in the Nazi Holocaust and acknowledge links between the Shoah and the climate of anti-Semitic and anti-foreign sentiments that still persist today" (Grobbel 2007, 136). Grobbel explains the wider resentment of Austrian audiences, "who voiced their hostility by booing and walking out of the theaters" (136), with reference to the fact that Jelinek exposed the violence and social discrimination that groups of Austrian citizens carried out against Roma and Croatian minorities in the mid-1990s. Grobbel analyses Austria's hidden Nazi past on the basis of Jelinek's play *Stecken, Stab und Stangl*, but similar elements of neo-Nazism can be located throughout *The Piano Teacher*, which has not been duly examined as a condemnation of Austria's Nazi past by Jelinek. In the novel, neo-Nazi hostility and resentment find their expression in the impersonal medium of language, which, although employed in the third person, follows closely the thoughts of the characters. In fact, the seamless changing of character points of view foregrounds the fluid and impersonal nature of language, which becomes a medium that pervades all spaces and people – like air, music, or poison gas does.

Jelinek's novel is closely based on her personal experience of living with her authoritarian mother and pursuing a harsh musical career at the Vienna Conservatory, which led to a severe anxiety disorder that kept her confined to her parental house for a year. Like the protagonist in her novel, even in middle age, Jelinek continues to live mostly with her mother in Vienna, and, only partly with her husband, in Munich (Fiddler 1994, 2–3). In the opening sentences of *The Piano Teacher*, Erika's mother appears as an "inquisitor and executioner [*Inquisitor und Erschießungskommando*] in one, unanimously recognized as Mother by the State and by the Family" (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 3; original: 1990a, 5).³ This very first introduction of the nameless mother character, who is only referred to with the generic, capitalized "Mother," brands the family, with its sacrosanct value of motherhood, as a social institution that is an extension of state law in

nur, was wir scheinen: Land der Musik und der weißen Pferde. Tiere sehen dich an: sie sind weiß wie unsere Westen. Und die Kärntneranzüge zahlreicher Bewohner sind braun und haben große Taschen, in die man einiges hineinstecken kann" (Jelinek, quoted in Fiddler 1994, 101).

3 The direct translation of *Erschießungskommando* is "firing squad."

its absolute form – the mother is defined as a “superior authority” (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 8) and “absolute ruler” (9), allowed by the state to deal with its child-subordinates with the unlimited authority of a totalitarian leader.

Fearsome mass-scale public inquisitions, interrogations, and punishments have ceased to exist in post-Nazi, post-World War II Vienna – yet the neo-Nazi spirit of ethnic cleansing and elitism with its extreme intolerance and loathing for the other persist in the psychology and methods of operation of smaller social groups like schools and families, where children suffer physical and, in Erika's case, grave psychological torment at their parents' hands. Erika is insidiously coerced by her mother into dedicating her life to classical music in an act of complete sacrifice of her own interests, personality, and freedom: “The daughter is the mother's idol, and Mother demands only a tiny tribute: Erika's life. Mother wants to utilize the child's life herself” (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 26).

The novel opens with impressionistic snapshots – all in the present tense – of Erika as a baby, as a young child, and as a middle-aged piano teacher. All of these identities perpetually coexist in Erika because she has not been able to detach herself from her mother, who always treats her as a child that has to be trained, shaped, and punished for any frivolous behaviour. Thus, in the first sentence of the novel, we encounter a free-spirited Erika of undetermined age, who “bursts like a whirlwind into the apartment,” as she tries to unsuccessfully escape her mother, a pattern that seems to repeat itself over the years. The name Erika means a “meadow flower,” we are explicitly told by Jelinek, which is perhaps suggestive of the character's supposed freedom-loving nature as an artist. Jelinek points us to an alternative, contrasting interpretation of her name, however – the flower that Erika represents is not a wild, free-existing natural agent, but an aesthetic object that from its very origins has been cultivated through rigorous grooming, restriction, and watchful care. Erika's birth and upbringing – in contrast to the idyllic elegance of her name – are described in an exceptionally unappealing and unpoetic manner, revealing the violence and trauma of her musical training:

Erika, the meadow flower. That's how she got her name: *erica*. Her pregnant mother had visions of something timid and tender. Then, upon seeing the lump of clay that shot out of her body, she promptly began to mold it relentlessly in order to keep it pure and fine [*ohne Rücksicht ihn zurechtzuhausen, um Reinheit und Feinheit zu erhalten*]. Remove a bit here, a bit there [*Dort ein Stück weg und dort auch noch*]. Every child instinctively heads toward dirt and filth [*Schmutz und Kot*] unless you pull it back. Mother chose a career for Erika when her daughter was still young. It had to be an artistic profession, so she could squeeze money out of the arduously achieved perfection, while average types [*die Durchschnittsmenschen*] would stand around the artist, admiring her, applauding her. [...] A world-famous pianist – that is Mother's ideal. And to make sure the child finds her way through every entanglement, Mother sets up guideposts along the way, smacking Erika if she refuses to practice

[schlägt sie an jeder Ecke Wegweiser in den Boden und Erika gleich mit, wenn diese nicht üben will]. (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 23–24; original: 1990a, 25–26).

In raising her daughter, Erika's mother perpetuates the Nazi ideology of segregation between pure and impure, perfect and imperfect, higher and lower types of people. In addition to applying this logic of discrimination to sort out people of different ethnic and national origins,⁴ both Erika and her mother use it to distinguish themselves as superior to the “average types [*die Durchschnittsmenschen*]” of Austrian citizen – farmers, workers, and lower-middle-class people who lack sufficient education and cultivation to appreciate high art. To reach this high level of refinement, Mother becomes the personal prison guard and torturer of her daughter in order to eradicate or slice off any pieces of “filth” or “dirt” that may still endure in her nature since her inglorious birth.

Under such intense coercion, the victimized and traumatized Erika turns to self-mutilation as a form of self-expression and self-punishment, while at the same time adopting her mother's version of herself as a musical genius and taking any chance to humiliate and punish other “average” types of people. Erika's megalomania and misanthropy are manifested in a trolleybus on her way back from school. Loaded with a variety of musical instruments that serve as her weapons of war, the highbrow pianist injures passengers whom she attempts to punish for their mediocrity. As soon as she has stepped onto the bus, she turns into a “kamikaze pilot,” using herself as a weapon, inflicting the commuters with secretive pinches, kicks, and shoves. These kamikaze attacks turn self-destructive, as “mass anger [*Volkszorn*] orders her to get out, even if she is still far from home” (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 15; original: 1990a, 18). Her anger, “concentrated in her fist,” is then refuelled when “she mounts a new assault [*frisch aufgetankten Angriff*]” as soon as she gets on the next trolleybus: “Bristling with instruments, she arduously staggers into the mobs of homebound workers, detonating among them like a fragmentation bomb [*Splitterbombe*]” (trans. Neugroschel 1988, 16; original: 1990a, 17).

The description of this mundane late-afternoon commute borrows from the language of war narratives, public trials, mob justice, and ethnic segregation and cleansing. Erika's musical instruments are described as her war weapons, which she uses against the “ugly masses of people [that] throng about HER uninterrupted-

⁴ At one point in the novel, Erika visits the Prater park at night as part of her voyeuristic adventures. There she stalks a male foreigner, whom she derogatively stereotypes as “the Turk,” ruminating on the inferiority of all foreigners who have come to seek employment in Vienna (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 132–135).

edly” (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 20). These people – who had initially looked up to Erika as the sophisticated artist and had instead targeted their rightful anger at an unsuspecting young man with socially unacceptable grooming – now form “the First Viennese Public Trolley Court [*Erste Wiener Straßenbahn-gericht*]” (trans. Neugroschel 1988, 17; original: 1990a, 19) to publicly condemn Erika for her behaviour. The victimized passengers instantaneously become an organized body of mob justice unanimously proclaiming: “She should leave the clean public vehicle at once! It is not meant for people like her! Paying passengers shouldn’t let people get away with things like this” (trans. Neugroschel 1988, 16).

The free indirect discourse siding with the passengers’ voices is soon replaced with the more detached, sarcastic authorial conclusion that “The mass anger [*Volkszorn*], which has, after all, paid its fare, is always in the right” (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 16; original: 1990a, 19). The distinction between victim and victimizer is completely blurred in this scene, where Erika, whose aggressive behaviour is spurred on by the trauma inflicted by her mother, is both a victim (whom Jelinek calls “an encumbered butterfly”) and a victimizer – just as the commuters whom she injures are her victims and readily turn into her victimizers. Jelinek foregrounds the rhetoric shared by both parties in this conflict, a rhetoric of hatred and exclusion of the other. Just as in her Heinrich Böll Award speech, Jelinek remarks mockingly, “This is the land of wines. This is the city of music,” contrasting the image of post-World War II Vienna with its reality, haunted by the past (trans. Neugroschel 1988, 19). None of the characters of the novel is essentially good or evil, but they are all subject to language with remnants of Nazi ideology, which spreads like an impersonal medium in their lives, determining their thoughts and behaviour. Language, in this sense is historically conditioned and resembles the impersonal agent of classical music – the “poison gas” that determines people’s mentality and limits their ability to re-create themselves.

Classical music, typically perceived as the realm of free choice and free spirit, thus becomes a mechanism of torture not only for Erika, but for strangers whom Erika encounters, and even more so for her numerous students, who have been heavily pressurized by their own parents to pursue a career in music in order to climb up the social ladder of success. We learn that Erika is not the kind of teacher whose goal is the success of her students. On the contrary, she acts as an overseer (chastising students for the ways they spend their leisure time), a gatekeeper for their musical careers, and an executioner who permanently damages their chances in the profession.⁵

5 Jealous of the attention that her lover, Klemmer, gives to one of her female students, Erika plants sharp glass in the student’s coat pocket, which results in the maiming of the student’s

Erika has obviously adopted that spirit of vengeance from her mother, who tells her: “You should stop them. [...] No young woman will emerge from her classroom and pursue a career against Erika’s wishes. You didn’t make it – why should others reach the top?” (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 9). It turns out that Erika’s personal training in violence is particularly at home in the institutionalized system of segregation and expulsion in music education. Jelinek, who was a student at the Vienna Conservatory, tells us in the unusually detached and sarcastic tone that is emblematic of her work:

Conservatories and academies, as well as private teachers, patiently accept a lot of students who really belong on a garbage dump, or, at best, a soccer field. Many young people are still driven to art, as in olden times. Most of them are driven by their parents, who know nothing about art – only that it exists. And they are so delighted that it exists! Of course, art turns many people away, for there has to be a limit. The limits between the gifted and the ungifted. Erika as a teacher is delighted to draw that limit. Selecting and rejecting make up for a lot [*die Grenze zwischen Begabten und den Nichtbegabten zieht Erika besonders gern im Laufe ihrer Lehrtätigkeit, das Aussortieren entschädigt sie für vieles*]. (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 27; original: 1990a, 29)

Highlighted in this passage is the drive toward drawing limits and sorting out categories of people into two polar-opposite camps – one valuable and respectable, but limited to the few who have superior genetic constitution by birth (“the gifted”), and one useless and deplorable (“the ungifted”), constituting the majority of people, who all “belong on a garbage dump.” Art is the ideal for whose sake this segregation is made, parents readily sacrificing their children to it. Erika serves as a safeguard and an executioner for Art,⁶ selecting and rejecting students at examinations and even mutilating students who get in her way, preventing them from pursuing any musical career.

We learn that “some students rebel against their piano teacher. But their parents force [*zwingen*] them to practice art, and so Professor Kohut can likewise use force [*Zwinge*]” (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 12; original: 1990a,

hand and her inability to proceed with a career as a pianist. While director Michael Haneke in *La Pianiste* interprets Erika’s action as an expression of sympathy for the student, thus opening the possibility for her to choose another, perhaps more forgiving, career, Jelinek does not allow space for such a feeling of empathy on the part of the main character Erika (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 168–170; Haneke 2001).

⁶ Neugroschel translates the German *Kunst* as “Art” with a capital letter very sparingly, as in the following sentence referring to Erika: “Her body is one big refrigerator, where Art is stored” (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 21). However, Jelinek’s repeated emphasis on art as a transcendental ideal or a substitute for religion provides sufficient grounds to use a capital letter in the translation of *Kunst* throughout the novel.

13). Erika's intimidation of her students is particularly evident in a passage describing a "very private [*ganz private*] chamber concert for voluntary listeners," mostly Erika's students, who are actually compelled to attend: "Using dishonest methods, such as coercion, extortion, intimidation [*schweren Nötigung, gefährlichen Drohung*], [Erika] ordered these youngsters to come here" (trans. Neugroschel 1988, 66; original: 1990a, 68). We are told that "the pupils know that they will receive poor grades if they don't show up. Death would be the sole excuse for abstaining from art" (trans. Neugroschel 1988, 60–61). Earlier, Jelinek had provided another haunting metaphor of art as a persecutor, reminiscent of the all-seeing eye in a panoptic or carceral society as envisioned by Michel Foucault: "Strictly speaking there are no holidays for art; art pursues you everywhere" (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 29).⁷

At that "very private" concert,⁸ observing her audience of students, Erika denounces their herd instinct, as they would much rather "delight in their mediocrity" and spend their time "watching TV, playing Ping-Pong, reading a book, or doing something equally stupid" (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 66). Erika and her suitor-trainee Klemmer, who is an engineering student, ten years her junior, share their high appreciation of art and highbrow attitude of superiority and loathing for their otherwise indispensable audience. Erika's unspoken address to Klemmer, which nevertheless reaches its addressee intuitively, is revealed as follows:

Well, we don't have to be at all that particular for this third class audience, do we, Herr Klemmer? One has to tyrannize them, one has to suppress them, and oppress them, just to get through to them [*Man muß sie schon tyrannisieren, man muß sie knebeln und knechten*]. One should use clubs on them! [*Mit Keulen müßte man auf sie einschlagen!*] They want thrashings [*Prügel*] and a pile of passions that each composer should experience vicariously for them and carefully set down. They want shouts and shrieks, otherwise they would have to shout and shriek all the time. Out of boredom. [...] these barbarians who have eaten their fill, in a country whose culture is ruled by barbarians. [...] A bond of scorn links the trainer and the trainee. The fading of Schubert's, of Schumann's life, life-light is the extreme oppo-

7 The Foucault reference is to the last chapter of *Discipline and Punish*, "The Carceral" (Foucault 1995, 293–308).

8 Jelinek pokes sarcastic fun at the value we place on "private" gatherings, events, parties, or clubs. Usually, we value privacy in an attempt to preserve our authenticity against popular opinion, mass media, or social expectations that restrict our freedom of behaviour. We can be more true to ourselves in such private gatherings of friends and family. Jelinek, however, points to the desire to exclude others from such events – the idea that these events are not open to the public, but limited to only a certain number of specially invited people, thereby separated from the rest.

site of what the healthy masses mean when they call a tradition healthy and wallow in it luxuriantly. Health – how disgusting. (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 68–71; original: 1990a, 69–72).

Ironically, Klemmer himself is a great athlete, which Erika will perceive as his meek subjection to conventionality and a permanent impediment to his musical career. Klemmer, in turn, accuses Erika of conventionality because she not only still lives with her elderly mother, but also prefers to spend her nights and weekends with her instead of getting involved in a daring canoe trip with her much younger lover, thus sneering at social norms. In their personal petty squabbles, they mutually accuse each other of being conventional and thus excluded from the status of an artist. Both of them are convinced that they are the epitome of progressive thought and behaviour, espousing the rebellious nature of art and sneering at social conventions while, in fact, their language and behaviour propagate hate, intolerance, and violence.

The rhetoric of expulsion and segregation is prevalent in the novel, perhaps most decidedly in the expulsion of Erika's father from their family of a "twosome," "chained together by ties of blood" (Jelinek, trans. Neugroschel 1988, 10) into an asylum for the insane. As soon as the father's function was fulfilled in producing Erika as an offspring, he was deemed useless and doomed to be outcast from the family (231). The language that Jelinek uses, describing the close-knit family of mother and daughter, is reminiscent of scenes of ethnic cleansing, segregation, and marginalization: "No sooner does this family get a new member than he is rejected and ejected [*ausgestoßen und abgelehnt*]. They make a clean break with him as soon as he proves useless and worthless. Mother taps the family members with a mallet, separating them, each in turn. She sorts and rejects [*Sie sortiert und lehnt ab*]. She tests and ejects [*Sie prüft und verwirft*]. In this way there will be no parasites" (trans. Neugroschel 1988, 13–14; original: 1990a, 15).

Jelinek is particularly sensitive to this event in the novel as it almost literally represents a central event in her adolescence – her father's mental collapse, his admission to the Am Steinhof sanatorium, and his subsequent death. Perhaps Jelinek's obsessive insistence on language as reminiscent of Nazi rhetoric is rooted in her father's Jewish origin and the extermination of many of her parental relatives in the Holocaust. Her father miraculously escaped the Holocaust because his research as a chemist proved to be crucial for the success of German military operations in World War II. Yet, in the 1950s, only a few years after the end of the war, he started suffering from the psychological disorder that led to his death. In *The Piano Teacher*, Erika's father is left in the Am Steinhof mental institution with numerous other mentally ill patients, whose living space is so exceptionally small that they are referred to as "dwarves." Their physical movement is incred-

ibly constrained in order to keep the place clean, and they resemble prisoners who are at the mercy of the medical staff but who have ended up there primarily because their families chose to isolate them for the sake of their own personal comfort and leisure.

Comfort and leisure as states that are valued in our society are exceptionally harshly criticized by Jelinek as the effects of silenced and euphemized violence and coercion. Perhaps this is one reason why she wanted readers, too, to experience the novel not as a reassuring leisure activity that would be congruent with our other leisurely experiences, but as an experience that provokes discomfort and awareness of our own values – which are implicated in violence and coercion. The novel does not possess any redeeming qualities; we feel no sympathy with any of the characters, and there seems no obvious way to change the nature of this late twentieth-century democratic society. The novel does not make us feel morally superior or comforted – it only makes us feel disturbed at recognizing the gap between the spoken and socially acceptable expressions of ourselves, and the unspoken mass of thoughts and actions that we might be uncomfortable discerning in ourselves.

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