

The Passion According to Erika

Elfriede Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel (London: Serpent's Tail, 1988) [First published as *Die Klavierspielerin*, Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, 1983].

The Piano Teacher [La Pianiste], dir. Michael Haneke, 130 min., Kino Films, 2001.

I venture to suggest that the Nobel Prize for Literature will not mean massive Anglophone and international interest in Elfriede Jelinek, and that it's a good thing, too. There is a certain degree of misunderstanding and hostility that writing so brave as Jelinek's must keep producing as its natural environment; and if the Nobel Prize implies literary quality entitled to straightforward appreciation, a good number of Jelinek's readers would protest the suggestion that there are shortcuts to the maze-like process of approaching Jelinek's text.

This does not mean that you must have read Karl Kraus or Thomas Bernhard to understand Jelinek's proud anti-patriotism, for instance. However, it helps being aware of the fact that a certain estrangement is a requirement for writing – estrangement from your home, from your gender, etc. The Nobel Prize tags the writer's name to her home country for the posterity, and the home country literary criticism readily moves into a full appropriation gear. Jelinek knows her Kristeva well: "*Quand on est nul part, on pense; quand on est nul part, on Écrit*". Not-belonging is where one must write from if there's anything to be said.

Michael Haneke's 2001 film the *Piano Teacher* honoured Jelinek's novel in just the right way, and it revived interest in her work. Still, the film was by and large reviewed without taking into account the novel that preceded it. There are elements of the

film that enrich *Die Klavierspielerin* the way only this medium can, and the choice of music (as Robin Wood pointed out in his review) is foremost. There are also certain aspects of the book that Haneke legitimately neutralizes, notably the Austria question. Nonetheless, the book must be read if the film is to be fully grasped.

In brief, this is what takes place in *Die Klavierspielerin*. A young student, Klemmer, of piano falls in love with his teacher, Erika, at the conservatory. During their first amorous encounter that takes place in a school lavatory, she orders him not to touch her or any part of his own body, brings him to the state of pre-orgasmic arousal just to be able to watch closely its waning, and leaves him. By their next encounter she will have written and given him a letter which details her masochistic yearnings. The young man recoils in shock only to have the woman now clinging to him and renouncing her previous fantasies. Their further attempts at lovemaking only increase their estrangement.

As a parallel, we follow the woman's secret night journeys through the world of peep shows, porn shops, and parks where the couples can be watched from a safe distance. She lives with her mother, and the elder woman has near-complete control of her daughter's life.

The romance with the young man ends the night that he comes to their apartment, locks the mother in her room and rapes her, believing that she was the woman he was in love with. The two women decide it will be better not to report the event to the police and go on with their lives. The only glitch occurs the day after, when the daughter, upon seeing the young man passing by with a rowdy group of friends, stabs herself with a knife. She then leaves the building in quick steps.

Whereas the film in its early development offers the young Klemmer as a likeable romantic whom the viewers will tend to sympathize with, Jelinek's book exposes his thinking in all its arrogance and simplicity from the moment he is introduced. Among the many film reviews still available online, the number of critics who manage to maintain sympathies for Klemmer's

trials and tribulations even after the rape scene is not negligible, and the facile interpretation that the film is about Erika's realizing the insanity of her S/M fantasies the hard way is bound to be offered by somebody in any discussion about this work. Haneke himself stated in interviews that he wanted to avoid early judgments on Klemmer—due to the nature of the medium, Klemmer and Erika could not be fully disclosed at the beginning. There would be no film if there are no characters traversing a line of development. Jelinek, however, had other options.

In spite of innumerable caveats that the reader encounters, Jelinek is fundamentally on Erika's side. In many ways, Jelinek is an equal opportunity loather. All of her personalities think their most intimate thoughts in a lowest-common-denominator media-ese replete with clichés. The unifying, nagging tone of the text abounds with phrases like "After all, he is only a man" and "You get what you pay for"—a calibre that undercuts the singularity of the speaking voices, and unsettles readers' attempts at identifying (with) them. The psychic space of individuals seems to be successfully colonized by a Blob-like force: The Austrian moral consensus? The language of TV and advertising? The narrator for the most part goes along with this emptying of the symbolic communication but also shields herself from too much complicity through bouts of sarcasm. Erika is not spared. The descriptions of Erika's seediest pursuits are often punctured by the narrator's little reminders that she is "thoroughly a professor" and "a grand pianist," and Erika's haughtiness is adopted and subverted by being taken seriously (as in those parts in which Erika appears as a capitalized SHE). There is a special social category, the "Turk," and with a lesser frequency, the "Yugoslav," in Erika's thinking that designates people she encounters in working-class and subsidized-housing as well as sex-shop and sex-trade neighbourhoods of Vienna. During the voyeuse scene, while we see Erika in a park watching a couple having sex (a scene that in the film happens in a drive-in cinema) we learn that the concept "Turk" has a determinable sexual dimension as well. The "Turk" is brutal. The woman begs him

to slow down. Erika interprets. And as his violence intensifies so does Erika's racializing of his actions and her sexual arousal. For the woman lying on the grass, Erika feels a mix of scorn and envy.

Still, Jelinek is on Erika's side because she makes the fragility and contradictions of Erika's world visible to us at every junction. Klemmer's world, on the other hand, is unshakable. We get to know the limits of his interpretive tools, but also the fact that their employability is limitless. Klemmer is very calculating from the beginning of courtship, and he muses about his odds with Erika as somebody who is considering putting money on a horse. What is shocking about Klemmer's trading-floor etiquette is its recognizability: everybody will be able to recall their own calculating moments emerging from the depth of what is understood as immaculate loving. It is the upper part of Erika's body that Klemmer prefers to the lower, and he wishes that the upper, thinner part might get a little plumper from the plumpness of her lower parts. Her dressing ways are in need of gentle redirection, but the magic of their love will be able to steer her closer to personal perfection. Klemmer's love will be able to polish Erika so that her shine will fully come through. In this comparison of resumé's that romancing is, Klemmer is aware of his advantages. He is young, fit, outdoorsy (with a penchant for applying whitewater rafting metaphors to other spheres of life), talented (both for science and the arts), and he has, the general consensus has it, a very bright future ahead.

Early on, Klemmer's awareness of Erika's age—she is around 10 years older than he—seems to exist to demonstrate the young man's own magnanimity to himself. Of course, his and Erika's romance will not last forever, he estimates; but it will be a fine experience and they will both learn from it. Surely the age difference cannot be that important. As things do not progress according to the vision that Klemmer has of how sexual relationships should go, the mentions of Erika's age accelerate. In the concluding part of the book, the fact of Erika's being a

decade older and “well past her prime” appears on almost every page.

There is a very clear idea in Klemmer’s mind about what the proper choreography of a relationship and sexual intercourse is. Erika’s little scenarios—something that now, about twenty sex-babble-replete years after the novel was written, seem like an instance of standard S/M play—are received as disturbing because they put violence and inequality at the core of Klemmer’s high-mindedly conceived romancing. Torn between the urge to ‘save’ Erika from her misconceptions about sex, and the urge to punish her for them, Klemmer manages to blend the two with his final act. He insists on explaining to Erika during their last, sad encounter that all he is doing is following her instructions as formulated in her letter.

Slavoj Žizek was among the first to interpret Haneke’s film in light of the Lacanian dictum that *il n’y a pas de relations sexuels*, as well as a story of a bit of the Real piercing through the fantasmatic life support of human existence. Before Lacan of course there was Freud, and his dissection of the processes of being-in-love revealed narcissistic processes at the core of this seemingly other-oriented activity. Loving is not so much about wanting another person in all their singularity as it is about loving our own ego-ideal that this particular person evoked, or keeping our libido in the state of extraordinary self-awareness and busyness through ego-cathexis. Lacan’s variation about the impossibility of sexual relations has been interpreted by many contemporary Lacanians, including Žizek, as a clash of incompatible fantasies that takes place whenever a man and a woman (and likely, a woman and a woman, or a man and a man) take interest in one another. Žizek offers an example: Man and woman kissing is actually a frog kissing a bottle of beer—a frog here hiding a prince of the woman’s fantasies, and the beer standing for a one-time-usage, simple and straightforward pleasure of the man.

Furthermore, Žizek warns that the will to cut through the fundamentally fantasmatic nature of sexual relations and get to

the ‘genuine’ ‘unmediated’ bit tends to be deadly. When we get too close to somebody idealized or fantasized about, when we have a glimpse into idiosyncrasies of their *jouissance*, the sudden perception of the presence of the Real will unsettle our reality. In innumerable ways, the most detrimental thing that can happen to a fantasy is its actualization. Echoes of this can be found, for instance, in the life of one of Zizek’s favourite writers, Patricia Highsmith. According to Andrew Wilson’s recent biography, unachieved conquests, out of reach and straight women—sometimes complete strangers that she crossed paths with only once—were among Highsmith’s most cherished, perfect love affairs.

Since he ignores Jelinek, Zizek’s perspective is only part of the story—Klemmer’s part, at that. If we read the film together with the book, a somewhat more complex image appears of this constitutional misunderstanding of the sexes, or if we want to put it in more historicist and mock-Hegelian terms, of the world-historical crisis of heterosexuality.

Jelinek’s text itself is full of Lacanian overtones. The estrangement as/in sexual relations takes many different forms for example:

The very instant that both have become physical for each other, they have broken off any reciprocal human relations. There are no parliamentarians who could be sent with letters, messages, missives. No longer does one body grab the other; instead, each becomes means for the other, a state of being different, which each would like to penetrate painfully.¹

Or on page 108, which reveals Erika’s thoughts during one of her peep-show visits, on how much the naked body of a woman conceals:

The man must often feel (Erika thinks) that the woman must be hiding something crucial in that chaos of her organs. It is those concealments that induce Erika to look at ever newer, ever deeper, ever more prohibited things...Never has her body

—not even in her standard pose, legs apart in front of the shaving mirror—revealed its silent secrets, even to its owner! And thus the bodies on the screen conceal everything from the man who would like to peruse the selection of females on the open market, the women he doesn't know; and from Erika, the unrevealing viewer.²

During Klemmer's first visit to Erika's apartment:

Klemmer feels incapable of desiring this woman, but for some time now he has wanted to penetrate her. Whatever it may cost him – words of love at least. Erika loves the young man and is waiting for him to redeem her...She wants to be simply sucked up by the man until she is no longer present.³

And concisely, during his ultimate visit:

Asking for love, he opens himself by opening his fly.⁴

Erika is actually eager to belong to the heterosexual normality and cannot be further from any form of contemporary gender-as-performance-and-reiteration consciousness. Her *sexuation* keeps failing in spite (because of?) her ardent will for closure. Of course, her libidinal economy may strike us as peculiar, but it is her readiness to give up her desires and retract that is of greater importance here. Every new opportunity to meet Klemmer is a chance to finally *get it right this time*: she'll be his woman, their desires will finally be compatible. Erika's ideas of what the proper female sex is are a mix of memories of the summers with her mother and aunt and of those few lovers that she had as a young woman, but primarily take form as this textual white noise that writes Jelinek's novel: bits of clichés, pieces of scientific advice, things heard from the neighbours, "common sense," all the chatter and clutter of the centuries that Erika now has to negotiate within her own body.

Pornography is the most easily accessible way for Erika to get pointers for the questions of sex, but her pornographic

subjectification goes awry and never completes her as a subject of/to the porn imaginary. Erika's pleasures, if there are any left at all, remain strictly non-genital: there's her visual field (or her overexcited eyeballs, as Jelinek has it in the scene with the couple in the park), there is also the bladder pressure and the release of urine, and the occasional interest in smells. We never see Erika masturbating during her travails, and the speed-dial line between the eyes and the genitals of the "normal" pornography consumer never materializes with her.

As film viewers, we may assume it on the basis of one scene, but the book makes it clear that Erika has been a cutter since her adolescence. Cutting, as well as piercing with pins and pinching with clothespins, the physical pain of which for Erika is secondary to the point of being unnoticeable, is a way of reminding oneself: *I am in this body, I am here*. Most other times her body figures to her as empty and dark, the vaginal space writ large, which eventually in one passage gets associated with the tomb (p. 198). The hopes that the penetration will do – vaginal, oral, any kind to fill the gaps and enable pleasure – are quickly dashed. There is no element to complete the body puzzle, and the detachment from one's entrails stays on.

Many an interpreter will come back to the figure of the mother in search for the key to Erika's unsuccessful *sexuation*. We can try to understand the mother in historicist terms and debate whether such a character is plausible in its monstrosity. On the basis of the hints that the novel lets on, it can legitimately be suggested that Erika is living in the same apartment with her aging mother for reasons of financial necessity or because it is a socially acceptable arrangement for a widow and her spinster daughter. Then, why do they sleep in the same twin bed. Jelinek, through mother's late night thoughts on one occasion, suggests some possible excuses for the arrangement: mother's health is deteriorating and she may require prompt help in the middle of the night; burglars may break in and the two of them will be much safer if they are in the same room when that happens. For some feminist interpreters, Erika's mother could be a perfect case

study of the mothers of patriarchy—women who have been so fully shaped by the patriarchy that they are among its most willing perpetrators, not least through the method of tight gender policing of their daughters and of undermining the possibility of cross-generational solidarity among women. Maybe the mother's possessiveness and self-righteousness can be understood as an old-age infantile regression. All of these lines of inquiry have something to offer.

However, we can also try and see the mother not as a specific—yours, mine, or Erika's mother—but the more mythical mother of psychoanalysis. In this case, the fact of Erika and her mother's daily physical proximity is just a specific narrative stand-in for the more abstract processes of coming-into-subject. Maybe Erika is not *physically* living with her mother at all—but mytho-psychically; it is also possible for the mother in question to be a Mother of either sex (to use Jungian analyst Andrew Samuels's distinction).

I'd like to settle with one specific psychoanalytic paradigm, however: Julia Kristeva's figure of the Mother. It is the figure from whose oceanic presence we must discern ourselves if personhood is to be achieved; *on se doit débarrasser*, the mother has to be killed if an *I* is to come into being, and the boundaries that mark identities to be established. Anna Smith and other feminist readers have pointed out that Kristeva posits the Mother too harshly and calls for an almost hateful differentiation. Not all is lost with this murder, however. If properly killed, the Mother can be safely resurrected in the Symbolic through its semiotic disturbances: poetic language; melody, rhythm and physicality of speaking, for instance.

Regarding the space of the Mother, there is an important and productive tension in Kristeva's work that Erika's story illustrates perfectly—namely, mother's domain as both totalitarian *and* utopian at the same time, and, although engulfing, also wonderfully safe. The two women have perfected a routine that keeps them shielded from the fierce 'market of women' outside, and for each time Erika dreams of an escape, there is another in which she

years to go back to the familiar fold. The following mood is not an exception:

Who else but mother could guarantee peace and quiet, order and security in their own four walls? Every fibre in Erika's body longs for her soft TV armchair behind a locked door. [...] Their domesticity goes awry because Klemmer won't skedaddle. He doesn't intend to force his way into their home, does he? Erika would much prefer to creep into her mother and rock gently in the warm fluid of her womb.⁵

And in a passage that is an extended allegory on "circus animals and their tamers," Jelinek puts it in clear terms: "*Each requires the other as a fixed point in the blinding chaos.*" Which is why in the very last scene after Erika stabs herself in a public space, she heads home. The film leaves room for other interpretations, but Jelinek tells us that Erika knows that home is "the direction she has to take," and that is where she hurriedly heads to. An episode concludes, but there was no event. Erika is where she has always been.

Reviewed by Lydia Perovic

¹Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 116.

²Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 108.

³Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 206.

⁴Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 272.

⁵Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 74.