

Lust

E.Jelinek

June 17-18, 2018

Jelinek was a controversial choice for the Nobel Prize. Some even claimed that it was the worst mistake ever made in and thus that it seriously compromised the prestige of the prize itself. It has been claimed that she has no original ideas, no visions, nor any clarity of presentation; that instead there is but a verbose flow of more or less impenetrable text, and it goes on seemingly interminably. That the attention her work has gained is entirely due to its shock-value, but as shocks are momentary, that attraction cannot be sustained but instead transformed into mere boredom. Others point to her musical education and that her texts should be thought of as musical compositions. That indeed her prose is musical to its core, and in fact the motivation given for her Nobel prize turned out to be the musicality of her language. She has been compared to Thomas Bernhard, as another Nestbeschmutzer provoking the ire of the Austrian establishment as well as having a musical prose as an extenuating factor. But while Bernhard is lucid and transparent Jelinek is indeed obscure, to read her is an almost unrelenting pain, one plods through her seemingly unedited stream of consciousness with only a vague idea of what is really going on. It is like poetry, clarity of thought is not the issue, but impression. Poetry is usually short, long stretches of it tend to be rather tedious. It could be the case that the prose is seductive and you consequently could get carried away by and with it. This is actually the case with Bernhard, but it does not work for me with Jelinek.

What is it all about? We have the manager and owner of a paper factory. He treats the body of his wife as his property and existing only for his pleasure. In fact because of the AIDS scare, she is the only outlet for his lust. His attention to her is conveyed through the language of pornography. The effect is one of disgust and tediousness. This is not necessarily bad, on the contrary, it shows the intrinsically stupid and disgusting nature of intercourse, as well as its relentless repetitiveness. The activity of carnal congress is counter-intuitive and goes against our natural inclinations. Only in a brain clouded by hormonal invasion is lust engendered. But in this case lust is one-sided, it exists only in the mind of the husband who then becomes a perpetrator, and she a captive victim, her sufferings further exacerbated by his involuntary faithfulness. His lust is pure, a daily obsession devoid of any qualifying emotion or awareness of the other person as a person. From the perspective of his wife it is a nightmare of continued abuse. She tries to escape the unwelcome attentions of her husband by having an affair with a young student of law. So the attentions which previously have disgusted her (and the reader) should now delight her. It is hard to detect the difference in the actual description, and that may also be intended rather than a hapless result of simple ineptness. The young student is also a man, and men can only abuse women in the end seems to be the message. To make it clearer she is shown to be sexually humiliated by him in front of a young audience, although that this is actually going on is not entirely clear from the author's account. The wife is devastated but apparently not entirely cured from her infatuation.

It all takes place against a background of anti-capitalistic rhetoric, with the manager and his life being contrasted to that of the worker of his enterprise, a diatribe against consumer society and environmental degradation, however laudable those may be they do not go beyond the cliché. There are mountains and there is snow, skiing and laughter, drinking and fucking. And at the end there is even murder. The director and his wife have a child, a spoiled brat, who on the final pages is suffocated by his mother using a plastic bag and dumped into a brook. This is supposed, I gather, to be laden with symbolic meaning and elevate the rather sordid tale into tragic art.

Seldom has a Nobel prize in literature gone more against the expressed intention of its donor.

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