

German 441 Introduction to Irony

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Schillerian Naïveté and Sentimentality in Jelinek's *Piano Teacher*

In the *Piano Teacher*, Jelinek dramatizes how the relationship to nature and naïveté could be read as a sinister development of Schiller's idea of the sentimental. With a language that creates Risse/laceration (Jelinek being categorized as die Rissautorin), the novel successfully deconstructs the old metaphysics of nature, love, sexuality, and art. Aside from shattering the classical vision of a totalized mind, spirit and matter with brutality, the novel demasks ironically, the inner workings and even perversions of the elements classically presumed as the "ideal" or "natural". The role of nature here has navigated through various stages, echoing the paradigm shift of the anthropocentric perceptions of nature. Nature has been presented as "an uncoerced existence, the subsistence of things on their own, being there according to their immutable law", in other words, a "pathetic fallacy" indifferent to the fervent endeavors of the human subject, contrary to artificial laws. Art and high culture are brutally ironized as they are positioned in juxtaposition with the silent creativity of life, the natural of law of being. The protagonist Erika, trained by her mother who constricted her daughter's essence through her pathological education and control, could understand the brutal conflicts and sophistications in art, yet is unable to find a path of reason and freedom back to Schiller's concept of nature. There is no critical distance between her understanding of art and her own self-consciousness. "It is necessary that the object instilling this interest in us be natural or at least considered by us to be natural, and that it be

naïve. Nature must contrast with art and put it to shame. The moment the latter condition is joined to the former, nature becomes something naïve.” (Schiller, 180) Erika’s attitude towards nature and “the natural” is that of utmost arrogance—driven by narcissism, she holds a disdain for normality, regarding the “spirit” and her “culture” as the superior order. Schiller has clairvoyantly stated that “Nature depicts our lost childhood, something that remains ever dearest to us, and for this reason they fill us with a certain melancholy.” (Schiller, 182) Jelinek has constructed a paradigm for the childhood forever lost, when Being is forced to be trapped in a stagnant contingency, the deep well where the individual is forever trapped within an ontological crack, with the present forever hunted by a past that remains unfulfilled. The melancholy here is not only the nostalgia for a certain essence, but is rather due to the fact that the totality has been shattered so early that a transcendental homelessness (Transzendente Obdachlosigkeit) has taken place.

It is important to take note that mother’s own attitude towards nature plays a potentially important role in Erika’s development into an ironist. “This is like the days of Eichendorff, Mother chirps, the important thing is your spirit, your attitude towards nature! Nature itself is secondary! The two women have the proper spirit, for they are able to delight in nature whenever they catch sight of it. If they stumble upon a rippling brook, they immediately drink fresh water from it. Let’s hope no doe has pissed into it.” (Jelinek, 143) From early on, Mother has been instilling the spirit of human sophistication and arrogance to Erika, which is in essence a moral position, instead of a mere aesthetic one. This “walk in nature” is exactly about putting in sharper relief a retrospective of humanity and showing what is unnatural. Mother treats nature as secondary, regarding the attitude towards nature to be more important, the spirit to be more important. The irony lies in the fact that the human subject’s attitude towards nature, their

“proper spirit” is to pollute nature, remolding its organic process so that it could be made fit to be used and hold human contamination. In this scene, nature provides a three-fold function—providing delight since it’s aesthetically pleasing, offering sustenance, and enduring contamination. Even when Erika was a child, she was educated to forgo a natural childlike disposition. “The latter act and think naively, right in the middle of sophisticated contexts of the larger world. Because of their own beautiful humanness they forget that they have to deal with a depraved world ...” (Schiller, 189) Her beautiful humanness has been replaced early on, by a self-consciousness. Nature presented here is more than the collectivity of beautiful scenery----the rippling brook, the trees, and flowers in the countryside, but is rather about the original state of being of the world, undisturbed by culture or anything artificial, a state of being unburdened by self-consciousness. By neglecting this world and moving towards the realm of “high culture” the child is gradually encountering the over burgeoning of self-consciousness and a sentimentality that turns out to be highly overwhelming.

However, there always exists nuisances and digressions when it comes to a character’s attitude towards nature. Despite Mother’s initial alliance with the “sentimental” type rather than the naïve, in a different situation, she advocates the direct opposite, as in the following scene. “Mother retorts. Do not make fun of praises from simple people. They listen to music with their hearts and enjoy it more than those who are spoiled, jaded, blasé. Mother knows nothing about music, but she forces her child into its yoke. The daughter is the mother’s idol, and Mother demands only a tiny tribute: Erika’s life. This narrative proves to be confusing—at first it seems to infer that the mother and daughter were starting to appreciate the value of naivete and simplicity. However, a key hint is the word “praises”. Since Mother knows nothing about music, what she extracts from the masses is fundamentally a narcissistic desire for praises and approval.

The irony of the cultured has been brutally teased with humor here---The sentimental and self-conscious would only return to the state of naturalness and naivete when the latter could offer something to further feed the sentimentality and self-consciousness. This is confirmed in the following paragraph, “There is no way for the child to smuggle herself into the heart of the masses, whom mother and child have always despised: the mother because she has always been merely a small, plain part of the masses; and the child because she would never want to become a small, plain part of the masses.” (Jelinek, 163) The irony is exactly that the only thing that Erika has learnt from her mother is “not-having-learned-how to-live.” All that she has learned were strategies for avoiding and bypassing life. By elevating herself from the masses, she self-exiles into a life that lacks the valuable attributes that a common street person, a member of the masses, could enjoy. Both she and her Mother treat the mass like the child, seeing their taste as an exposure of a childish simpleness, producing a smile, or in the Mother’s case, a brief appreciation of the mass through which their theoretical superiority is known.

These seemingly innocuous walks in nature have accumulated into something more sinister as the child grows up into a musician, with music being the key element that moves between the naïve and the sentimental. Music here not only navigates the power dynamics among characters, but also heightens the tension between the ideal and the obscene, the ineffable and the corporeal, marking the boundaries between the rarefied realm of high art and the more settings in which the more prosaic settings in which the promise of transcendence is pursued, summoned, actualized, and broken. “Erika jeers at the student's Bach. It is a muddy creek, faltering over obstacles like small rocks and mounds, stumbling along in its dirty bed. Deliberately trying to humiliate the student, Erika praises Bach's work to the skies. She claims that Bach rebuilds gothic cathedrals whenever his music is played. Erika feels a tingling between

her legs, something felt only by those chosen by and for art when they talk about art. And she lies, saying that the Faustian yearning for God produced both the Cathedral of Strasbourg and the introductory chorus of the St. Matthew Passion.” (Jelinek, 180) From this paragraph, it is apparent that Erika’s attitude towards classical music is both rebellious and conforming. The power dynamics of her musical career has been duplicated into her sexual relationships. The performance exists in a performance network in which a master voice animates a medium, the human performer, to reproduce his thoughts. There is a puppet master, and there is a marionette. She also eschews the romantic notions when the student declares music to be something that can “bring us together”. In essence, her rebellion against the romantic notions leads to an understanding of art established upon hierarchies that subsist in the realm of aesthetics, reflected in the cultural economy of music. Such rebellion is echoed in her erotic desires and masochist drives---the attempt to construct intimacy as a space of freedom that’s not thoroughly conditioned by power. The attempt is the answer to Walter’s question, “Why destroy what could bring us together?” Masochism is the ironist’s escape to fleeting moments of transcendence, while the rest of her life is entrapped within an affective landscape—a wanderer that walks around a landscape without making any actual progress. According to Jean Ma, the music that appears in *The Piano Teacher* is “Notable for its rejection of the motivic development that typically accompanies music’s conventional phrase structure, the song cycle formally reinscribes the wanderer’s obsessive reliving of the pains of his past in its circular design, the frozen vista of the winter journey in its brittle and paralytic arrangements.” (Ma, 140) Erika is disdainful towards kitschy romanticism that idealizes life exactly because of her hyperawareness of human suffering, the connections between music and suffering, between art and the affect of suffering. Music is about such confrontations, the social antimonies. Art imitates not the world, but its

conditions of alienation and domination and it has a mimetic relationship to a damaged social order, enunciating the disaster by identifying with it.

Erika's relationship to nature is then translated into his/her relationship with music. Here music is presented as different from a Hegelian-romantic conception of aesthetics that's beyond the contingencies of material reality, situated within a timeless, transcendent realm of universal truth and beauty. Instead, music is in a contradictory stagnancy between utopia and a fallen reality. Using Adorno's description of Schubert's music, it is an imminent, crystallized process at a standstill. An important intertextuality is in the movie adaption of the novel, where Schubert's song *Die Winterreise* was presented as a sort of leitmotif within the film's narrative structure, to be repeated at key moments. Key lines within the poem include, "People are sleeping in their beds. Dreaming of what they don't have, replenished of good and bad. And next morning, all flown away. So what? So what?" Here the wanderer, a metaphorical representation of Erika, as she wanders at night around town, seeking a certain satisfaction for her desires, recognizes the futility of dreams and illusions as fantasy-deceptions incompatible with waking life. There has been a demasking as one sees the essence of reality ---" Once the mask is shown to be a mask, the authentic being underneath appears necessarily as on the verge of madness." (De Man, 43) In some sense, her sexual acts are cerebral, just as how Deleuze describes the masochist attitude as fundamentally aesthetic, driven by the faculty of imagination and whose objective is not merely the satisfaction of carnal desire but also an "ascent from the human body to the work of art"

It reflects a disposition towards reality, defined in terms of disavowal as a particular operation of knowledge. "Disavowal should perhaps be understood as the point of departure of an operation that consist neither in negating nor even destroying, but rather in radically contesting the validity of that which is, an operation that neutralizes the given in such a way that

a new horizon opens up beyond the given and in place of it. "It is therefore not only consent that neutralizes violence, but the artfulness of the refusal that does not deny, but instead displaces.

Another feature of this novel is that it incorporates a canon of German idealist thinkers, poets and composers, only to spit them out again, together with their notions of the bourgeois liberated subject. Goethe's idea that salvation is ruled out if the Faustian subject attains the Faustian object of desire, and thus stops striving for the ultimate experience, is relentlessly parodied. "When summer guests complain of the piano teacher's impromptu recitals, Mother venomously retorts that Schubert's sonatas contain more forest hush than the forest itself. Moreover, Mother ingenuously blurts out the truth that aesthetic and natural ideals have been turned into commodities." How could there be more forest hush in Schubert sonatas than the forest itself? This is apparently a highly anthropocentric self-deception that constitutes the rigid idealization of the art and high culture. In Erika's case, the later years of her life is a series of rebellions against such system. The body and its natural instincts go against the rigid idealization of the art and high culture.

But when actual sexual acts were involved, the relationship between nature and the body is reiterated.

"A low treetop beyond the window. A chestnut tree. The tastelessness of Klemmer's sourballs inside her oral cavity, as the man, moaning senselessly, presses his all into her face. Erika sees an almost imperceptible swaying of the branches down below, as they start to get besieged by raindrops (...) Next, an inaudible patter, then a downpour (...) The man is still stuffing himself into the woman's mouth, clutching her hair and ears, while on the outside, natural forces rule with overwhelming power. She still wants and he still can't. (245)"

“While on the outside, natural forces rule with overwhelming power.” This line deconstructs Schiller’s conception of nature and sentimentality, with nature referring to the natural state of the body, and sentimentality referring to high culture. Here we see the body revolting against the tyranny of the theoretical and the cultural. The nature here is a subversion of Schiller’s notion of the natural that’s innocent and childlike, the nature in this context is an overwhelming, sweeping power of natural instincts, the authentic desires of an ironist that has already seen through the hypocrisies or fragilities of idealism, who releases her brutal drive into such sexual liberations. At this moment, Erika is more “natural” than the childlike innocent and sexually ignorant “naturalness” that her mother constantly wishes to force upon her. Her mother kept performing a spiritual and mental castration upon her, in such instances:

“Mother takes Erika on a circuitous route, telling her it’s because of the beautiful weather. The parks are blossoming, the roses and tulips are blooming, and the flowers certainly don’t but their dresses. Mother talks to Erika about natural beauty, which doesn’t require any artificial embellishment. Natural beauty is beautiful on its own, just like you, Erika. Why all of the baubles?”

“Here and there, spring flowers peek out; mother and daughter pick them up and pack them away. Serves the flowers right. Insolence has to be punished, Frau Kohut puts her foot down. The flowers are just right for the round light-green vase from Gmunden, isn’t that so, Erika?”

“Erika quickly touches a fetchingly flowerly cocktail dress, barely grazing its hem. These flowers have never breathed fresh air, nor have they ever experienced water..”

The desire to keep her child a child with no vanity and sexual knowledge is against the human being's natural growth and state of being, so that such twisted desire to control would only lead to further perversions. This is also the fundamental reason that caused Erika's pathologies. All her pathologies are, acts of rebellion against her mother's philosophy of maintaining "childlike" naivete and the anthropocentric notion that high culture is superior than the masses and than nature itself. The result is that Nothing fits into Erika. But she, she fits exactly into this cell. Erika is a compact tool in human form. Nature seems to have left no apertures in her. Erika feels solid wood in the place where the carpenter made a hole in any genuine female. This also leads to her revengeful staging and purchasing of feminine clothing in the later stages of her adult life, she finds power through owning these artificial flowers and decorating herself for a man. Ironists sees through life's performativity and seeks temporary liberations through dramatic performance. All of Erika's quirky rituals, observing the prostitutes or writing down her desired instructions to W, are all resulting from a performative drive, slipping into another role, a role against that of the innocent child, a whore who never shies away from sex, perversions and love making. "Whether concerned with sexuality or violence or another taboo issue, anything that breaks with the norm is obscene, he maintains, while by contrast, pornography is the opposite, in that it makes into a commodity that which is obscene, makes the unusual consumable, which is the truly scandalous aspect of porno rather than the traditional arguments posed by institutions of society" (Ma, 165)

Elevating the analysis of this novel to the more general theme of German idealism and irony. For Terry Eagleton, the aesthetic concerns this most gross and palpable dimension of the human, which post-Cartesian philosophy, in some curious lapse of attention, has somehow managed to overlook... the body's long inarticulate rebellion against the tyranny of the theoretical. A hysterogenic body results when the movements toward satisfaction are directed towards a culturally validated goal but does not produce what is expected. Desire has not been able to find fulfillment, its aim being homeostasis, a cessation of all movement, and the subject turns away from the ideal goal in a fearful disgust, Poetic language is deprived of its normal aesthetic, and instead assumes the form of a hysteric-aesthetic language where pleasure is taken in disgust. Since the Symbolic has so little to offer, the text refuses to invest it with libido except via disgust. A prime target in the Symbolic is German idealistic thinking---the sacrilege of disgust is performed upon every aspect of it, its constitution of a second, a higher nature. It inaugurates a series of deconstructive turns, whereby the odd binaries of natural/unnatural, real/unreal, art/commodity are shown to be ideological constructs. The ironist is trapped within a aesthetics of disgust, as old boundaries excite a violent disgust, the pleasure is used to turn back on itself for a renewed onslaught in an orgy of destruction. This anarchic destructiveness takes place without any attempt at an imaginary reconstitution of society. The ironist speaks of the obscenity of social norms by giving in to acts of perversions and even self-destruction, so that the shock effect of violation works to critique social norms and the ideologies they uphold.

The tragedy of Erika as an ironist originated from seemingly innocent walks in nature during which her mother infused her with false and artificial notions of the superiorities of man-created "high culture" and human sentiments, which transitioned into a perverse relationship with sex and music. However, despite the apparent masochism and her inability to really "live"

her life, her brutal lucid perception the truth of reality allows her to use the masochism as a means of protest, the only appropriate physical reaction when the promised idealism was torn apart. The ironist has seen through the fact that life itself is a performance switching among various roles, so the only way out, to make life temporarily tolerable, is to put on a mask and set the stage herself.

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