

Podcast

On the Royal Road

Elfriede Jelinek

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The text of Elfriede Jelinek published today in Australia *On the royal road* was written in 2016 in reaction to the election of Donald Trump. And if you have never heard about Jelinek even though she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 2004, you will certainly be in for a surprise.

I discovered her work when her novel *Lust* was translated into French in 1991. She had already published *The Piano Teacher*, a novel later turned into a movie. And while reading *Lust*, I remember thinking that I had never seen something like it. I was speechless, blown away not so much by the violence and the pornography of the text, as critics spitefully noticed at the time, but by the freedom. I couldn't believe that a woman-writer could be so bold, so fearless, so unconcerned by the moral taboos strapping society and literature.

But let's put Jelinek's beginnings in their context: why was it so extraordinary to write openly about sex, abuse, violence, male domination, especially from a woman's point of view? It may sound strange, but we should remind ourselves that feminism came to existence only a few decades ago, after the second world war. The leading values of the first half of the last century were chauvinist, white, western, spoken from men in a position of power, and as a consequence women -any women, housewives or writers- were voiceless, or silenced. In literature, only men had openly talked about their sexuality but it wasn't a proper topic for a women writer. Things started to change: feminists thrived in the 70s and 80s; then in the 90s, there was a backlash against them; they were asked to

be quieter, in short, we've heard enough of you. And it was exactly when Jelinek published *Lust*.

21 years after *The Piano Teacher*, Jelinek was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, that was in 2004. It ruffled a few feathers again, and this time, the hostility came from the fact that Jelinek's work didn't abide by the norms of a well-crafted prose or traditional genre. In short, she didn't deliver what was expected in literature. Why? Because she never wrote to please or entertain her audience.

As I mentioned above, just after the election of Donald Trump in 2016 Jelinek wrote *On the royal road*. But the name of Trump is never mentioned; the main character is called 'the king'. *Jelinek's work* is a long monologue uttered by a blind seer with bleeding eyes, the seer is miss Piggy, one of the character of the Muppet show. The text, between tragedy and comedy, has been staged by directors in Germany, France, the US and Australia but it is not a play. Jelinek explains in an interview that "Strangely for (her), writing for theatre has nothing to do with the practice of theatre. Rather, she uses theatre as a kind of licence to write. Privately, (she speaks) very little. But (her) language for the theatre is like an exhibiting."

Her unruly flow of speech might be disconcerting but reading Jelinek, and especially *On the royal road* was for me more than reading: because Stepping into Jelinek's world is entering a vortex of words that pulls you to the next paragraph and constantly draws you forward. The author explains that when she writes, she is in a "state of stimulating trance, between wake and sleep." And anyone who reads *her work* will experience the same trance. Each page throws new ideas cast pell-mell like flotsam and jetsam on a beach according to her own words, and you'll pick out of it what you want, or what appeals to you: satire, puns, information about the making of Donald Trump, social commentary, reference to Austrian history, etc... It draws you further, and that's what Jelinek is aiming at: you'll find a free association of ideas, and their bulk will make sense page after page. She says she makes "conscious in motion"

Now how Donald Trump's rise to power is analyzed? *On the royal road* is not an essay. You are not going to find parallels between Donald Trump becoming the King and Hitler becoming the Fuhrer, even though the similarities are obvious. The making of Trump is dissected with precision.

Reading *Jelinek* was for me an eye-opener about Trump's past. Like a lot of people, I guess, I mainly saw Trump as the clown, an obnoxious mogul, someone from the reality TV, but I discovered much more, thanks to Jelinek's work. I learnt how Trump grew to be a swindler. Many facts - details, dates, names, scandals- behind 'The making of Donald Trump' can be found in the book of David Cay Johnston, mentioned by Jelinek in her biography. (I encourage anyone to watch Johnston's presentation of his book on u tube.) Johnston, who has known Trump for years, explains clearly how Trump has been running a scam all along, because he is essentially a fraud. Johnston explains how Trump worked with organized crime, drug-dealers, we learn about the scandal with the Deutsche Bank, how he cheated his employees out of their wages, the scandal of his Tax Return, his business deals with foreign countries, and much more. In short, he has never been the successful business man he pretended to be, and worst of all, he was not morally fit to run a country. And still, he was elected. But why? How could it be possible? That's the point. After all, how a powerful and modern democracy could prefer to cast their votes for a conman than for any politician. That's what you are going to discover in Jelinek's book. Trump fooled his electorate by selling a deceitful image of himself and *Jelinek's work* is fascinating, because on the one hand it is satirical, funny, witty, and portrays Trump as a clown, a monstrous Ubu, or someone like Arturo Ui like in Brecht's play *the Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, and on the other hand, it discloses the tragedy, the hoax, this aberration in history, the wannabee dictator, the 'wolf in sheep's clothing,' a dangerous man who was able to deceive a country and become president. +-

Reading *Jelinek* will also make you think. For me, I kept pondering about our society and I asked myself: why him? when it was clear well before he was elected that the man was mentally unbalanced, ego-centered, a psychopath, watching his behavior was enough to get the whole picture, still, why him? Then I listened to radio programs dating back to 2016, before Trump was elected. And I realized that back then, no-one amongst the elite believed that Trump would be elected when (quote from *On the Royal road*) "we were told he'd never be elected and we believed it;" when "all of us see nothing". (end of the quote) Back then, Trump was regarded as a powerful man able to protect the US, 'I alone can save you,' he declared, he was seen as someone who would restore the country to its

former glory, and he was a “wonderful opportunity for the US.” As unbelievable as this last sentence sounds, that’s what I heard on very serious programs in 2016.

One of the fundamental question raised by *Jelinek* is the blindness of the thinkers, or so-called intellectuals. After all, *On the Royal Road* is told by miss Piggy, a puppet, a blind seer. Jelinek refers here to Martin Heidegger “the ‘philosophical genius’ who let himself be blinded by the Fuhrer and naively thought that he, the thinker, could lead the leader.” as Gitta Honneger who translated *On the royal road* into English, mentions in her introduction. Still, the thinker, even though he is a genius, is blind. Blind to real life, disconnected from reality, everyday problems, unemployment, poverty, disenfranchised Germany if we think of Hitler, or disenfranchised America with Trump. The American elite scorned Trump’s electorate as much as Trump’s electorate hated them, yet both ignored each other, lived in parallel worlds, in their own bubble, and ignoring is a dangerous attitude. It leads, as we saw, to a divided country, violence and eventually develops into dictatorship.

Jelinek was able to write in 2016 what would happen over the four following years; clearly foreseeing the devastating effect of the Trump administration, and drawing a parallel with the rise to power of Hitler which she understood through her own family history, witness as she has been of the harmful consequences of the Nazi regime in Austria. Trump has been the man who “only spring disaster” and we know what happened to the US because time has proven that Trump was not able to save the country as he promised: by 2020 we have seen the rise of the white supremacy, the rise of xenophobia, the united states becoming the ‘divided states’, poverty, unemployment, the triumph of business aristocrats, and so many people who worked for the common good: judges, lawyers, doctors, administrative officers who lost their jobs after the ‘Trump administration’ fired them or caught them in litigations. And now, in February 2021, we saw how Trump’s conspiracy theory, accusations of electoral fraud, the way he fueled the violence last January, harmed and divided the country by undermining the very roots of Democracy.

Now I would like to expound a little on the blind seer: why is the seer blind? It is a metaphor for the intellectuals but also for our childish times when no one wants to face the truth, the danger, including the danger to

be led by a dictator. As Johnston puts it “the public doesn’t want aggressive journalism, thinking, we don’t want you doing what you do because it upsets us, we don’t want to know.” And we could add with Jelinek : the public doesn’t want aggressive literature, they don’t want to know, they want to be entertained, distracted, but they don’t want to think.

Reading *Jelinek* will also make you ponder about the future. We know what happened, Trump is gone, Joe Biden has been elected, still, is it the end? Should we turn the page and think: Let’s forget. Never again. Is someone like Donald Trump has a chance to be elected in any modern democracy? Yes, in every democracy, there is a Trump in hiding. It happened in the past and it will happen again. And Trump is still well alive in America today. The election of a conman who never held any prior government or administrative office, reminded me of Sylvio Berlusconi in Italy who had no political past; they both chased their own personal interests: none of them came from the political world, or the intellectual world, or the sport world, but the profiteers’ world. *On the Royal road* is a cruel assessment of “la société du spectacle” the essay of Guy Debord on the televisual spectacle, and Debord would certainly be shocked if he could see fifty years later the stupidity of what’s on offer, the influence of Fox news that literally brain-wash the viewers, spreading a malignant influence in the US, the reality shows, the fake news, the omnipresence of social medias, the way they make public opinion, the way they draw people to the streets, to violence, to believe any hoax, face Book or the “book of faces” (as Jelinek says) where no one writes but tweets like brainless birds, or click on a Like: all that proves the lack of common sense and the general dumbing-down of our society.

But what does the writer do about it? How can he ring the alarm bell? Jelinek derides the time of old when thinkers, intellectual leaders and serious journalists thought they could provide answers for a better world. Reading and thinking would educate the masses, they thought, the age of enlightenment would turn men into better human beings, the lamp of reason would lead the way, still, that time is over, Jelinek says. It’s a comedy as much as it is a tragedy. (quote) “The thinking collapses without the thinker having noticed”. (end of quote) When one thinks of ‘the age of enlightenment’ one concludes that nowadays the lights have been turned off.

Well, the writer keeps writing, aware that we have reached the end of an era: (quote) “you are not a savior, you are not one who talks but one who writes, it is quieter, makes less noise, okay, have it your way, there is no one, literally no one who listens, they are listening to someone else. You and your kind are no longer important” (end of quote) Remember the man preaching in the desert? Well, that’s the writer. That’s what the writer does; preaching in the desert.

I’ll keep in mind a very striking paragraph which expresses the tragedy of any writer, any thinker, any serious journalist who will soon be discarded because no one needs him, no-one wants him, no-one wants to hear him:

(quote) “ I am not, I am and I am not, I must let go of my hopeful inclination to speak and be listened to, brush it off, this inclination, which became hopeless long ago, who are we anyway, who do we think we are to talk the way we do? That’s over. We are dying of our own failure and now we are despised. For what we were recently praised for, got almost immortal, yes, the thinkers, yes, but also the poets, the writers, pretty important, too, and this says one, who will soon die, who no longer can foster any illusions. None of her words will survive, already now none is alive anymore.” (End of quote)

Jelinek is the woman with the bleeding eyes, the prophetess of Delphia with the bleeding mouth, but she doesn’t want to be taken in. She writes with her own weapons, aware that writing doesn’t do anything anymore, the writer is useless, still, she writes, she inspires us, she forces us to think, and we can thank her for that.