Writing as Violence and Counter-Violence in Paul Celan's Poetry and Elfriede Jelinek's Prose

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In a "survey" that is part of an artistic project, three Danish writers ask eleven of their Scandinavian colleagues: "What does violence mean to your writing?" The shortest answer is given by the Norwegian writer Tomas Espedal: "To write is to practice violence."[1] A more elaborate answer is given by the Swedish writer Sara Stridsberg: "I have a strong feeling of violence, something violent, in everything I write. It is as if the very act of writing ravages something, overturns the beautiful trees in the woods and exposes their creepy underside: roots, earth, insects, worms, darkness. But perhaps writing is also the opposite of violence, … a place on the other side of the destruction of language … This may be utopian, but isn't all writing utopian?"[2]

Stridsberg's statement distills the theme of this chapter: literary language as violence and the opposite of violence, or as violence mirroring the violence of the existing order and counter-violence to this very existing order. I shall point to examples of this violence and counter-violence in the works of Paul Celan and Elfriede Jelinek. Celan and Jelinek are two very different writers, but they are both writing under the impact of the highly refined European culture collapsing into the Holocaust (Celan writing directly about the violence of the concentration camp, Jelinek about its repressed but ongoing presence in postwar Austria). Furthermore, both Celan and Jelinek produce a violent writing that simultaneously mirrors and counters the violent language of power. In Celan's case, the language of power is the German language that was his mother tongue as well as the language of the Nazis who put him in a concentration camp and killed his parents. As John Felstiner writes: "When the mother tongue came to serve his mother's murderers, a pall fell across it."[3] In Jelinek's case, the language of power is the oppressive (patriarchal, anti-Semitic, capitalist, catholic, etc.) discourse of reactionary postwar Austria (sprung from sources at the base of European culture) that she constantly cites and parodies in her montage-like prose. My ambition is to show, by way of close reading, how Celan's poem "Todesfuge" (1945) and Jelinek's novel *Die Klavierspielerin* (1983) both mirror and subvert the violence that they are up against; Celan's poem by mirroring the cruel alliance between violence and beauty; Jelinek's prose by arranging collisions between the discourses that she cites.

One aspect is violent language understood as the language of violent regimes, whether the language of the commander in the concentration camp or the language of oppressive discourses (such as the patriarchal discourse). Another aspect is the violence inherent in language. To use the Lacanian term, violence

is inherent in the symbolic order. We enter the symbolic order—that is, the order of language, desire, and sociality—through the symbolic "castration" that separates the infant from the maternal body and signifier from signified. The concept of "castration" testifies to the violence at the base of the symbolic order. Of course, this is not to say that entering language is the same thing as entering a concentration camp, or that name-giving is the same thing as assassination, but that writing on violence, in one or the other way, has to deal with the violence inherent in language.

Naming the world is cutting it up. "Language is the first and greatest divider," writes Slavoj Žižek in *Violence*,[4] referring to the inherent violence in the symbolic castration as well as to its excess of violent *jouissance*. From a constructivist point of view, language is always some kind of hegemonic discourse, imprisoning people and phenomena in words and concepts according to the interests and hierarchies of power. From a psychoanalytic point of view, this is partly true, but psychoanalysis has a special interest in the excess, the leftover that is produced when language cuts up the subject and its world. Eric Santner captures the production of this leftover by his concept of "incarnation." Through symbolic castration (naming) the subject is created as an "incarnation" of a position in the symbolic order: girl or boy, somebody's child—and later on "pupil," "parent," "doctor," "servant," "pope," or whatever social position we take on. When, however, the subject incarnates a social position (that is: becomes a subject), an excess is created. Santner calls this excess "the flesh." This excessive "flesh" (which is *real* in the Lacanian sense) may haunt the subject in violent and compulsive ways (like spasms haunted Freud's hysterics), but it may also represent an opening to other possible orders, other ways to cut up the world than the existing one.

A specific excess or leftover from the symbolic castration is the pleasure in the materiality of language. Symbolic castration

installs language as signifying, but signifiers do not only signify; in excess, they have a material dimension, such as sound and rhythm, which is a source of pleasure for the small babbling child as well as jokesters and poetry lovers. In both Celan's poetry and Jelinek's prose, sound and rhythm play a crucial role in their exposure and subversion of the violence of language. Julia Kristeva calls this dimension of language "the semiotic," as opposed to "the symbolic." I shall here turn to the art historian Georges Didi-Huberman who points out how the material dimension of the signifier does not signify or represent but rather "incarnates." To Eric Santner, "incarnation" refers to the subject becoming flesh by way of symbolic castration. To Didi-Huberman, it rather refers to the remainder of the symbolic castration, the way that the signifier may materialize instead of representing something—the signifier becoming flesh. Despite the deviance in their use of the term incarnation, I shall call on both Santner and Didi-Huberman in order to analyze how incarnation is at work in Celan's verses and Jelinek's prose—as an incarnation of the subject, as a materialization of the signifier, as the violence inherent in language and as violence against signifying language, and even as a theme.

Literature is the art of language, and literary language may partly mirror and expose the violence of the existing symbolic order, but it is also a place where language can open itself up to that which exceeds the existing language—and it may take violence to language to produce this opening. To put it in another way: Literature has the potential to be a counter-language, to practice violence against the violence inherent in language but still through the medium of language. In Walter Benjamin's terms, literature may both mirror the "mythic," system-sustaining violence of language and practice "divine," system-exploding violence.[5]

Violence and Beauty 1: Celan's "Todesfuge"

In the last volume of *Min kamp* (*My Struggle*), the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgård writes about Celan's "Todesfuge"—a poem he found very beautiful as a youngster, but that he would later be "ashamed of having found it so beautiful since its theme was not the beautiful and sublime, but the opposite of the beautiful and sublime, the extermination of the Jews."[6] But "Todesfuge" is and will remain a beautiful poem about something horrifying. This tension between the horrifying theme and the beautiful form may be called "sublime" in the Kantian sense, but my interest is rather to show how the poem demonstrates the kinship between violence and beauty as both a fact about the specific violence of the concentration camp and a problem for the poet.

"Todesfuge" is not only *about* the connection between violence and beauty but also *performs* this connection by being a very beautiful poem about the ultimate violence of the concentration camp. Its title alone signals the musical quality that the poem unfolds in its waltz-like (trisyllabic) rhythm, its acatalectic (non-pausing) verse flow, and its sonorous figures (alliteration and assonance). In its first published, Romanian version, Celan called his poem "Death Tango," according to John Felstiner, in order "to annul the dance that fascinated Europe during his childhood – the essence of life as urbane, graceful, nonchalant."[7] Celan turned from tango to fugue, and the form of the fugue—in which themes are introduced, repeated in different pitches and answered contrapuntally in an ongoing flow— actually seems to capture the beautiful music of the poem more adequately:

TODESFUGE
Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends
wir trinken sie mittags und morgens wir trinken sie nachts
wir trinken und trinken

wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da liegt man nicht eng
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar
Margarete
er schreibt es und tritt vor das Haus und es blitzen die Sterne er pfeift
seine Rüden herbei
er pfeift seine Juden hervor läßt schaufeln ein Grab in der Erde
er befiehlt uns spielt auf nun zum Tanz

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich morgens und mittags wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
Ein Mann wohnt im Haus der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt
der schreibt wenn es dunkelt nach Deutschland dein goldenes Haar
Margarete
Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith wir schaufeln ein Grab in den Lüften da
liegt man nicht eng

Er ruft stecht tiefer ins Erdreich ihr einen ihr andern singet und spielt
er greift nach dem Eisen im Gurt er schwingts seine Augen sind blau
stecht tiefer die Spaten ihr einen ihr andern spielt weiter zum Tanz auf

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags und morgens wir trinken dich abends
wir trinken und trinken
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith er spielt mit den Schlangen
Er ruft spielt süßer den Tod der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
er ruft streicht dunkler die Geigen dann steigt ihr als Rauch in die Luft
dann habt ihr ein Grab in den Wolken da liegt man nicht eng

Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken
der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau
er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau
ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns ein Grab in der Luft
er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der Tod ist ein Meister aus
Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Sulamith (all translations in endnotes)[8]

Like in the fugue, the themes introduced (such as the oxymoron "Schwarze Milch der Frühe" and the apostrophe "dein goldenes Haar Margarete") are repeated and answered by counterpoints. Thus, the Semite Sulamith's ashen hair could be seen as a contrapuntal answer to the Aryan Margarete's golden hair and the grave in the air as a contrapuntal answer to the grave in the earth.

Another recurring theme is the man who lives in the house and plays with serpents and writes (when he does not step out to command the Jews to dig their grave in the air or strike up the dance music). This theme is presented in a very sonorous way, embedded in the alliteration of the s sounds: "der spielt mit den Schlangen der schreibt." While the man plays with snakes, the writer of these lines plays with the letter s, which has the graphic form of a snake. Thus, the activity of playing with the snakes is double-exposed with the activity of writing, and the image of the writing poet overlays the image of the camp commander writing in his house. Something snake-like, something evil is associated with the activity of writing, of forming patterns of letters, which is also the activity of writing this poem.

The violence of the concentration camp distinguished itself by its high level of formalization; everything was organized in regular forms and patterns, far from some kind of brute, uncontrolled,

barbaric violence. This is the common denominator between beauty—whether musical or poetic—and violence in Celan's poem and in the concentration camp: the importance of form.

The musical beauty of the poem could to an extent be seen as a shrill parody, showing how the great European music ended as a dance of Death in the concentration camps; how master Bach ("ein Meister aus Deutschland") turned into master Death, partly based on the historical fact that the camps had orchestras of prisoners—death was accompanied by classical music—just as they actually had commanders who one moment were sitting in their houses writing love letters or reading poetry and the next moment were killing Jews. But the proximity of beauty and violence is not just a spatial fact about the concentration camp, it is also a quality of this beautiful poem about ultimate violence, and it points to the shared formalism of Nazi violence and artistic beauty.

Among the many sonorous figures of the poet, you only find one rhyme. It occurs at the dramatic climax when the commander—aka "Death" aka "a master from Germany"—hits "you" with his ball of lead. The two rhyming verses fall into the same regular meter (trisyllabic pentameter): "Der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau / er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau." Thus, the precision of the (one and only) rhyme coincides with the precision of the (one and only) ball in the poem. The rhyme hits as the ball hits, and the second person pronoun ("dich") that has hitherto been used for the apostrophe of the "black milk" is here directed at the victim of the ball and, at the same time, at the reader. The reader is addressed by "dich," sharing the victim's position in a way that has some of the sudden violence of the shot. The ball hits the victim with the same precision that the rhyme hits the reader. Again, the violence of precise poetic form is duplicating the violence of precise killing. This, of course, is not to say that rhyme

and murder are the same, or that the reader suffers just like the concentration camp victim. You may see it as simply the poem fulfilling the classical ideal of style: harmony between what is told and what is stylistically performed. But by performing this harmony, the poem still raises the question about the nature of the alliance between violence and beauty.

Due to the lack of punctuation, it is not clear what the commander is writing. He may be writing "Dein goldenes Haar Margarete," and Margarete may be his girlfriend back in Germany. But Margarete is also a famous character in German literary history, the "Gretchen" of Goethe's *Faust* left by the hero and executed in prison for having killed the child born from their love story; thus no less a victim of a German man than "Sulamith," if we regard Sulamith as a representative of the Jewish women killed by the Nazis. Margarete and Sulamith may be seen as opposites, representing the Aryan/Jewish opposition, but they are on the same side as victims of oppression, whether patriarchal or racist. (At least that goes for the Sulamith in "Todesfuge"—for the Sulamith in the Song of Songs, the story is different, as she is actually given a voice as important as her groom's.)

"Dein goldenes Haar Margarete" is not only a reference to Goethe's Margarete but also to another feminine character and national treasure of Germany, Heinrich Heine's *Lorelei*. In Heine's ballad about the spellbinding mermaid, she sits on a mountain by the river combing her golden hair: "sie kämmt ihr goldenes Haar." Heine was a Jew and a communist, and his books were burned by the Nazis, but they still sang his *Lorelei*—it was too ingrained in German nationalism to be given up.[9] Thus "the golden hair" is a polysemic knot, or overdetermined image, in Celan's poem, referring to the Aryan but also to the victim—to the woman brought to death (Gretchen) but also to the death-bringing woman (Lorelei); to German nationalism but also to the Jewish, banished writer. It is an image of great beauty

and great violence, of love (hair as a metonymy of women's erotic attraction), and death (hair as the resistant leftover of the corpse).

At the end of the poem, the hair is all that is left, both of Sulamith and Margarete; like relics, they are laid next to each other, representing less the Semite/Aryan opposition than the juxtaposition of two dead women.

"Todesfuge" can be seen as that kind of "barbaric" writing that Adorno questioned ("Nach Auschwitz noch Lyrik zu schreiben ist barbarisch"/ "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"[10]), being not only a piece of poetry after Auschwitz but indeed *about* Auschwitz. But by interweaving its own formal beauty with the formalism of the concentration camp—the poet with the commander, the precision of the rhyme with the precision of the shot—it reveals how the coexistence and interconnection of violence and beauty is a central dynamics in the process that led from the Europe of fine art to slaughterhouse Europe, from master Bach to master Death.

Violence and Beauty 2: Celan's "Engführung"

Whereas "Todesfuge" enacts the intertwining of systemic violence and poetic beauty, Celan's later poetry is rather a revolt against poetic beauty, against the sonority, rhythm, and tropes of classical and romantic poetry, but it still has a violent beauty of its own. As summarized by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub: "To prevent the possibility of an aesthetic, drunken infatuation with its own verse, the later poetry rejects, within the language, not its music and its singing – which continue to define the essence of poetic language for Celan – but a certain predetermined kind of recognizably melodious musicality."[11]

In 1958, Celan wrote a poem that can be read as a new version of "Todesfuge," not least because its title also refers to the art of

the fugue: "Engführung." In the musical fugue, "Engführung" means a densification of the themes, and Celan's "Engführung" indeed seems to densify the fugal repetition of themes to the point of exploding the syntax and verses:

Kam, kam.
Kam ein Wort, kam,
kam durch die Nacht,
wollt leuchten, wollt leuchten.

Asche.
Asche, Asche.
Nacht.
Nacht-und-Nacht. – Zum
Aug geh, zum feuchten.

*

Zum
Aug geh,
zum feuchten –[12]

This seems close to Dadaism, the heavy repetition at once emphasizing the words and turning them into mere sounds (the rhyme "leuchten"/"feuchten" contributing to the sound poetry rather than miming classical verses). The word that came through the night, wanting to shine, is reminiscent of the Word that was made Flesh, but here seems to turn into dust: "Asche. / Asche, Asche" while the night insists: "Nacht. / Nacht-und-Nacht." The violence of this writing is violence to the conventional forms of syntax and verse, making the singular word shine or turn it into dust, which may be two sides of the same thing—a kind of materialization of the word in which its signifying function fades.

The word becoming flesh leads us to the theme of incarnation, to which we shall return.

In *My Struggle 6*, Knausgård has a very long interpretation of "Engführung," focusing more on the semantic meaning of the words than their music but still stressing the poem's "consciousness of the impossibility of representation": "It is as if the relation between the world and its linguistic representation has been destroyed, and the poem both writes inside that destruction, ruin-like, and about that destruction."[13] The poem does not only "write inside" the destruction, but it also performs a violent destruction of verse and syntax.

If "Todesfuge" attacks the violence of the ruling order by exposing and miming how it coincides with beautiful form (but the poem also conserves some of the classical and romantic beauty as a reservoir of Utopian energy), "Engführung" attacks the order directly by blasting the conventions of poetry and language—making way for a different language, a new kind of beauty. In the terms of Walter Benjamin, "Todesfuge" mirrors the mythic violence Celan was a victim of—the violence inherent in the symbolic order—while "Engführung" performs divine violence, the violence that breaks up the symbolic order.

In his book *Violence*, Slavoj Žižek leans heavily on Benjamin's distinction between mythic and divine violence. In order to further develop this distinction in the specific context of (literary) language, I shall now turn to the chapter "The Violence of Language" in Žižek's book.

The Violence of Language: Žižek

Under the heading "The Violence of Language," Slavoj Žižek argues against the common sense understanding of language as an antidote to violence. It is a common idea that violence occurs

when we are not able to speak to each other, but Žižek claims the reverse is true: It is because we can speak to each other that we are violent beings: "What if humans exceed animals in their capacity for violence precisely because they speak?"[14] As already noted, to Žižek, "language is the first and greatest divider."[15] To conceptualize this "divider," he does not call on the Lacanian concept of "symbolic castration," but rather of the "master signifier." The master signifier is the one that does not refer to anything but itself and needs no legitimation from anything but itself. The sovereign monarch is the clearest example, but any governing discourse has such a master signifier. In Western society today, the master signifier could be said to be the economic ratio; "we cannot afford it" is the argument to stop any new idea. It is an argument against which you cannot argue; if you question the economic ratio as the measure of everything—or the principles by which economic value is created—you are deemed a dreamer out of touch with "reality." Žižek's point is that this master signifier is always installed by violence—the violence that it takes to institute some arbitrary signifier as the one to which any other signifier refers.

When it comes to symbolic castration, Žižek is less interested in the fact that it is in itself a violent operation than in the violence dwelling in the excess that it creates. To be subjected to the symbolic order is to be deprived of immediate access to enjoyment, but this enjoyment stays with the subject as an excess tickling its body, some kind of spasmodic urge that may seek its outlet in violence.

In Žižek's view, the violence of racism and chauvinism is not directed at the other as reality but as represented by language. The anti-Semite does not react to the immediate reality of Jews but to the image of the Jew (the phantasy of the Jew's enjoyment) that circulates in the symbolic order. If we did not speak to each other, we would not feel any "natural" immediate aggression toward the ethnic other.

Besides the violence inherent in the symbolic order, Žižek also points to Heidegger's idea of the creative violence necessary to make way into the unsaid, the unthought. Decision (de-cision, "Ent-scheidung") requires violence—the violence needed to "expropriate" man from his "homeliness."

The decisive conceptual distinction in *Violence*, besides the one between mythic and divine violence, is the distinction between "action" and "act." Action is all the activity that it takes to sustain our existing social order. It is the ideal of a liberal-capitalist society for every individual to be very "active": debate, sport, shop, make dreams come true—"just do it!" as the Nike slogan goes. But here the activity (and the "excess" created by symbolic castration) is put in service of the existing order; the frenetic action guarantees that nothing will happen, nothing will change. The "act," on the other hand, changes everything. It is the de-cisive "Ent-scheidung" that cuts up our world in new ways, changes the very coordinates of our understanding of the world. Violence as "action" is the spectacular violence that is just another "show" in our *societé du spectacle*; the angry young man ready to throw his brick, almost posing for the cameras, providing the media with the conventional image of "the angry young man," keeping the stream of news flowing.

The question remains: How can we distinguish violence that makes a difference from spectacular and mythical violence? How can we distinguish the violent gesture that founds or sustains the Law from the one that disrupts the Law—not only breaks the Law but breaks up the very logic of the Law? How do we move from language as violence—cutting up the world in reductive, simplifying, repressive words and concepts—to language as counter-violence, cutting up the established cuts?

In order to further investigate the distinction between the violence of the symbolic order and the violence that breaks up the symbolic order, and to approach literature as a place where

a certain violence against language could lead us beyond the violence of language, I shall now try to define Santner's and Didi-Huberman's different concepts of "incarnation."

The Violence of Incarnation: Santner and Didi-Huberman

Eric Santner uses the concept of "incarnation" to designate the violent creation of the subject by the signifier, the subjection to the symbolic order by which the subject is created. To enter into the symbolic order is to take on the signifier that assigns you a position in that order and makes your body an incarnation of this position. Santner illustrates the violence of this incarnation by referring to Francis Bacon's famous *Study after Velázquez's Pope Innocent X*. Bacon's pope is screaming as if his throne and hat were instruments of torture. The pope's hat is the signifier that is squeezed on his head, making him incarnate "the pope"; the word ("pope") becomes flesh.[16] To Santner, "flesh" is "the fleshy surplus" that we take on when we are taken in by the symbolic order.[17] It is not that we are "flesh" from the beginning, and then a signifier is inscribed into this flesh; flesh is created as the fleshy surplus of that violent inscription. Here again, one may think of Bacon's pope; at the same time as he is fixated into his thrown, some kind of spectral materiality seems to be produced, emanating from him as the materiality of color. The human flesh is to Santner "a spectral materiality … that forms at the impossible jointure of body and letter, soma and signifier, enjoyment and entitlement."[18]

So Santner's "incarnation," just like Lacan's "symbolic castration," points to the violence at work in installing and sustaining the symbolic order, that which Walter Benjamin would call "mythic violence," to which he would contrast divine or

Messianic violence as something that breaks into the symbolic order from the outside and disrupts its very coordinates. Thus (the Christian image of) Incarnation may be opposed by (the Jewish image of) Messiah as the one we are still waiting for. But one may ask whether the counter-power to the violence of incarnation may not also be found in that very "fleshy surplus" created by incarnation itself.

As soon as there is representation, as soon as there are signifiers ("pope"), there is also a material surplus (the rays of color emanating from the pope's figure). When it comes to verbal signifiers, literary language could be said to take care of this surplus—the non-signifying dimension of words and letters, such as their sound and rhythm. On the one hand, the becoming-flesh of the word designates the violent shaping of bodies in the name of the signifier. On the other hand, it designates the insistence on the non-signifying surplus that is created whenever there is signification, and which may be the placeholder for new or repressed signifiers. One may also say that "incarnation" designates an operation of the symbolic (violently producing a symbolic subject), but also a production of something "real" (that which escapes the symbolic signifier).

To Georges Didi-Huberman, "incarnation" designates an alternative to "representation" in art history.[19] Whereas representation is the function of the signifier in the symbolic order, incarnation points to the dimension of the signifier that escapes this function, its material dimension.

In painting, the material dimension is the paint and the cloth (or whatever material is painted with and upon). In his analysis of a small painting of the crucified Christ from the Middle Ages, Didi-Huberman observes how the gigantesque blood drops splashed on Christ's body seem to destroy its gracious figure, like when a child has made a meticulous drawing and then destroys it by coloring all over it. This crucifixion is painted before

the Renaissance revived the ancient ideal of "representation" as the aim of painting, in a period of Christian art when the ideal was rather "incarnation," that is not a mimetic imitation of the phenomena but rather the materialization of an idea—here, the very idea of incarnation, of God becoming flesh. The red paint does not (only) represent blood stains, it (also) *is* bloodstains, the violent destruction of the figure of Christ. The red stains open up the figure of Christ, turning his outstretched arms on the cross into an embrace, making us feel the *real* of his incarnation. Transposed from the signifiers of painting to the signifiers of verbal language, the shift from representation to incarnation means a shift from semantics to the sonorous, rhythmic, and/or graphic qualities of words and letters.

Santner's "incarnation" is the becoming-flesh of the subject, while Didi-Huberman's "incarnation" is the becoming-flesh of the signifier. Santner's "incarnation" is the cut of the signifier in the subject. Didi-Huberman's "incarnation" is the cutting-off of the signifier from representation.

Celan's "Todesfuge" deals with the violent incarnation of the symbolic subject as prisoner or commander or "Jew" or "Aryan," or even poet—and its spasmodic surplus as a *danse macabre*. The poem enacts and exposes the way violence and beauty coincide in the Nazi order. "Engführung" touches upon incarnation as a theme: the Word that came and wanted to shine, reminiscent of the Word that became Flesh. In "Engführung" it becomes ashes: "Asche. / Asche, Asche." But at the same time, the words "Word" and "Ashes" become Flesh; by their isolation and repetition—which violates syntax and grammar—they become material objects with certain sonorous and rhythmic qualities. The word "Wort" ("word") becomes a material object arriving in the poem, thus rather incarnating than representing the word. Celan's later poetry could be said to try to avoid the violence inherent in language (Santner's "incarnation" as the subject

being represented by a signifier) by materializing the word (Didi-Huberman's "incarnation" as liberating the signifier from representation).

At first sight, Elfriede Jelinek seems to be examining the "incarnation" of which Santner speaks: The violence done to the subject by language, specifically the discursive violence of Western patriarchy and capitalism. But her prose is also very much driven by the material side of verbal language: rhythm and sound—that is "incarnation" in the sense of Didi-Huberman, violence to language as representation. I shall try to show this by analyzing some pages from Jelinek's novel *Die Klavierspielerin*, in which incarnation is not only at work, but also a theme.

Butcher's Language: Jelinek

In *Die Klavierspielerin*, the theme of incarnation occurs in a scene where the protagonist Erika Kohut and her mother have just brought Erika's father to a psychiatric hospital outside Vienna and are on their way home. Their driver is the butcher, from whom they daily buy their meat and who has kindly offered to take them in his car.

Jelinek's prose is generally a montage of oppressive language, stuffed with citations from the (literary, philosophical, popular) discourses of European culture. Her characters seem to be puppets for these discourses rather than having an agenda and agency of their own. The protagonist in *Die Klavierspielerin*, Erika Kohut, is a 35 years old piano teacher at the Conservatory of Music in Vienna and trains her pupils in the same sadistic way that she has been trained herself, not least by her mother, with whom she still lives and even shares a bed. Sexually, Erika is a bit of a pervert—voyeuristic in her behavior and masochist in her fantasies. But this perversion mirrors the perversion of the

culture that produced her, the sadist discipline of the classical tradition. All this is told in Jelinek's singular prose, stuffed with more or less overt citations from European culture and driven by sound and rhythm in a tone that lingers between sorrow, aggression, and humor. Jelinek herself has said that her language is a sonorous composition rather than a means to tell a story:

> Bei mir ist das Problem der Sprache deshalb derart groß, weil ich die Sprache nicht als Vehikel benutze um irgend etwas darzustellen, sondern weil ich eine eigene kompositorische Sprache entwickle, die sehr stark vom Klang ausgeht.[20]

Jelinek's statement, as well as her prose, testifies to a certain pleasure in the materiality of language. To rely on sound, "Klang," when combining words, is to give in to the pleasure that Freud calls "die alte Wortlust," the ancient pleasure of words. Sonorous composition (alliterations, assonances, homophony, anagrams) is the principle of a certain category of jokes, and even if Freud is eager to find the sexual or aggressive fantasies at work in the joke, he also finds plain and simple "pleasure of words": *Wortlust*, "the thought … revisiting its erstwhile home of the ancient play with words."[21] The joke may be driven by aggressive and/or sexual pleasure but also by that pleasure of words as pure sound and rhythm that Freud calls "ancient," because it is at work in the small child's babbling. The sound and rhythm of language belong to the non-signifying part of the signifier that is a kind of material excess, a leftover from the symbolic castration. To stress this material excess, and even, like Jelinek, make it the principle of your textual composition, is finally, also a form of attack on the symbolic order itself—not unlike the injury to representation that Didi-Huberman finds in incarnation and, thus, still testifies to aggression as the dynamo of the joke. (There is always a violent

attack in jokes as Freud defines them, either at some person or institution or at reason itself.)

The scene in the butcher's car from *Die Klavierspielerin* is both jocular, aggressive, and sad. Here popular sayings and theological terms, more specifically Eucharist terms, are interwoven into a materialization and profanation of the European spirit and culture.

What happens in this scene? What happens on the scene of language? In the conversation between the butcher and the two women in the car (paraphrased by a narrator sometimes describing the butcher from outside, sometimes sharing his point of view), words become flesh. Metaphorical meaning becomes literal meaning.

Words become flesh, or rather meat, in the way that the butcher's choice of words is compared to his selection of commodities: "Er tröstet vermittels etlicher sorgfältig vorher ausgesuchter Worte. Er bedauert die Damen K. mit ausgewählten Sätzen. Gechäftsleute beherrschen die Sprache des Aussuchens und Wählens bestens."[22] The women's words are compared, by the butcher, to the vilest kind of meat, innards ("Innereien"): "Die Damen K. gießen einen Schwall Innereien, noch dampfend, aus sich heraus, bestenfalls für Katzenfutter geeignet, beurteilt der Fachmann."[23]

Next, the text plays around with the trope "flesh and blood," activating several of its metaphorical meanings but also insisting on its literal meaning, not least by introducing it in this context of the butcher's discourse. The butcher says that car driving has gone into his "Fleisch und Blut."[24] The ladies have nothing to respond with, except their own "Fleisch und Blut, das sie nicht vergießen wollen."[25] They have had to leave a piece of their own "Fleisch und Blut," very dear ("teuer") to them, in the hospital, at a dear ("teuer") price. Thus, the idiomatic expressions that something has gone into your blood as well as "flesh and blood"

for "relatives," are revived from being dead metaphors, exposing how the father is actually treated like a piece of meat and how the exchange of words and favors between the butcher and the ladies is enrolled in a logic of commercial exchange. Furthermore, a biblical connotation of "flesh and blood" is evoked when we hear that the ladies do not want to "shed" ("vergießen") their blood, referring to the one who shed his blood for humankind, Jesus Christ.

We are here circling a trope that is characteristic of Jelinek: the syllepsis. As observed by Biebuyck and Martens, the interaction of different tropes in Jelinek's prose depends on "material figures of sliding and phonetic contiguity ..., above all the mechanism of syllepsis. Syllepsis consists of the simultaneous application of a word in its literal and metaphoric meaning."[26] "Flesh and blood" functions in Jelinek's text as a syllepsis, simultaneously being a metaphor for "family" and referring to literal flesh and blood. The syllepsis has a comical effect, as in the popular joke pronounced by the butcher: "[A]lles hat einmal ein Ende, nur die Wurst hat zwei,"[27] where "end" means both the end of time and the end of the sausage. The comic of the syllepsis seems to be the comic of profanation: The literal meaning profanes the abstract, metaphorical, and even the spiritual meaning.

The literal meaning—the butcher's professional lingo—insists, "even though today is Sunday," as we are told several times. Sunday is "the day for the language of leisure," but we know that it is also the day for the language of the Eucharist—the day when the "flesh and blood" of Christ is served in Christian churches. Ultimately, the clash between discourses at play in the "flesh and blood" theme is the clash between the priest's and the butcher's discourse—between the flesh of Christ and the meat in the butcher's store.

But the Eucharist implies in itself this clash between spirituality and materialism. God himself is supposed to be present

in the stuff that we eat and drink, as he made himself present in the flesh and blood of Christ.

The word made flesh is a recurring theme in Jelinek's writing. It is also a basic *operation* of her writing. She makes the word into flesh, materializes the abstract, pulls the spirit down into the dirt—not least the spirit of European art and culture. Her writing performs an insistent profanation; in this scene, it is incarnation itself that is profaned by being translated into a butcher's terms.

Precisely by taking the clichés of culture to the letter, by concretizing and materializing them, Jelinek's prose also travesties and transcends them. Through her materializing montage of the words of tradition, whether the words of a priest or a butcher, she exposes their hypocrisy as well as their explosive power. This scene is a critique of the butcher's materialist discourse and the hypocritical discourse of the church, but it is performed through those discourses, the clash between materiality and spirituality that is found in the butcher's joke as well as in the Christian incarnation.

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Through the examples of Celan and Jelinek, I hope to have shown how literature is able both to expose the violence inherent in language and produce a counter-violent language. To reproduce the violence by which language cuts up the world and to cut up the established cuts of language. To perform the violence of symbolic castration and to take care of the "flesh" that castration produces. To perform "incarnation" both in Santner's sense (as another word for symbolic castration) and in Didi-Huberman's sense (as an alternative to symbolic representation). Celan's "Todesfuge" is about the shaping of a violent order, showing how this very "shaping" may also be the principle of artistic beauty, including the poem's own beauty. Thus, it deals with

"mythic violence" in Benjamin's sense and with "incarnation" in Santner's sense. "Engführung" (and Celan's later poetry in general) is rather a revolt against poetic beauty—as established by the tradition—but still has a violent beauty of its own, connected to the cutting-off of the word from representation. Here "incarnation" is at stake in Didi-Huberman's sense: as the becoming-material of the signifier. Elfriede Jelinek's prose is, on the one hand, a montage of oppressive language. On the other hand, through its singular practice of citation, pun, and syllepsis, it breaks down oppressive language or finds in the operations of oppressive language the means to oppose its oppression. In both cases, the writers seem at once to find violence and counter-violence in language. In both cases, the counter-violence implies special attention to the dimension of language that escapes representation, the sonorous and rhythmic qualities of words. The materialization of the signifier, or "incarnation," may designate the (violent) operation by which the subject is made to materialize the signifier (Santner, "Todesfuge," the oppressive discourses quoted in Jelinek) or the signifier itself becomes pure material, thereby cutting up representation (Didi-Huberman, "Engführung", Jelinek's sonorous language and puns).

Notes

1. Naja Marie Aidt, Line Knutzon, and Mette Moestrup, *Frit flet* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2014), 189 (my trans.).
2. Aidt, Knutzon, and Moestrup, *Frit flet*, 87.
3. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan. Poet, Survivor, Jew* (London: Yale University Press, 1995), 24.
4. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Profile Books, 2008), 56.
5. Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, 1913–26, ed. Marcus Bullock & Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 249–51.

6. Karl Ove Knausgård, *Min kamp 6* (Oslo: Oktober, 2011), 411.
7. Felstiner, *Paul Celan*, 30.
8. Paul Celan, "Todesfuge," in *Die Gedichte. Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 40–41.

John Felstiner's translation in *Paul Celan*, 31–32:

Deathfugue
Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening
we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink
we shovel a grave in the air there you won't lie too cramped
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair
Margareta
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are all
sparkling, he whistles his hounds to come close
he whistles his Jews into rows has them shovel a grave in
the ground
he commands us play up for the dance.

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at morning and midday we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
A man lives in the house he plays with his vipers he writes
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland your golden hair
Margareta
Your ashen hair Shulamith we shovel a grave in the air where you
won't lie too cramped

He shouts dig this earth deeper you lot there you others sing
up and play
he grabs for the rod in his belt he swings it his eyes are so
blue
jab your spades deeper you lot there you others play on for the
dancing

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday and morning we drink you at evening
we drink and we drink
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
your aschenes Haar Shulamith he plays his vipers
He shouts play death more sweetly this Death is a master
from Deutschland
he shouts scrape your strings darker you'll rise then as smoke
to the sky
you'll have a grave then in the clouds there you won't lie too
cramped

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at midday Death is a master aus Deutschland
we drink you at evening and morning we drink and we drink
this Death is ein Meister aus Deutschland his eye it is blue
he shoots you with shot made of lead shoots you level and true
a man lives in the house your goldenes Haar Margarete
he looses his hounds on us grants us a grave in the air
he plays with his vipers and daydreams der Tod ist ein Meister
aus Deutschland

dein goldenes Haar Margarete
dein aschenes Haar Shulamith

9. Felstiner, *Paul Celan*.
10. Theodor W. Adorno, "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft," in *Gesammelte Schriften 10:1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 30.
11. Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 35.
12. Paul Celan, "Engführung," in *Die Gedichte. Kommentierte Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Barbara Wiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2003), 114–115.
Paul Celan, "The Straitening", in *Selected Poems*, ed. and trans. Michael Hamburger & Christopher Middleton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

Came, came.
Came a word, came,
Came through the night,
Wanted to shine, wanted to shine
Ash.
Ash, ash.
Night.
Night-and-night. -Go
to the eye, the moist one

*

Go
to the eye,
he moist one

13. Knausgård, *Min kamp 6*, 432 (my trans.).
14. Žižek, *Violence*, 52.
15. Žižek, *Violence*, 56.
16. Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 139.
17. Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 122.
18. Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 95.
19. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990), 220.
20. Elfriede Jelinek quoted in Sabine Treude and Günther Hopfgarten, "Ich meine alles ironisch. Ein Gespräch," *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* 153 (April 2000): 24–25. ("With me [when my works are to be translated], the problem of language is considerable because I do not use the language as a vehicle to represent something, instead I develop my own language as a composition that is based very strongly on sound," my trans.)
21. Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. Joyce Crick (London: Penguin, 2002), 166–67.
22. Elfriede Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*. Hamburg: Rowohlt, [1983] 2014, 114. "Carefully picking his words, he tries to console the K. ladies. He condoles with them, pickily choosing his words. Businessmen are well versed in the language of picking and

choosing," in Elfriede Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 96.

23. Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*, 115. "The K. ladies spew out a torrent of innards. The expert finds that these innards are suitable, at best, for cat food." Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 96.
24. Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*, 115. "[I]t is in his blood." Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 96.
25. Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*, 115–116. "[E]xcept their own flesh and blood, and they have no intention of losing either." Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 96.
26. Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens, "Metonymia in memoriam. Die Figurlichkeit inszenierter Vergessens- und Erinnerungsdiskurse bei Grass und Jelinek," in *Literatur im Krebsgang: Totenbeschwörung und memoria in der deutschsprachigen Literatur nach 1989,* ed. Arne De Winde & Anke Gilleir (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2008), 261.
27. Jelinek, *Die Klavierspielerin*, 115. "Everything has an end, only a sausage has two ends." Jelinek, *The Piano Teacher*, 96.

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