

THE TERROR OF THE CUTE

Elfriede Jelinek, in Conversation with Gitta Honegger

For this conversation I met with Elfriede Jelinek on January 6 and 7, 2017, in the Munich apartment she shares with her husband Gottfried Hüngsberg. The following excerpts are not from a formal interview. After many years of working with Elfriede, I would find it disingenuous to stage a prepared exchange. Rather, in our conversations we explored difficult issues, branching out into several related topics and interrupted by jokes. As a lifelong theater addict, I greatly appreciate the spontaneity Elfriede allowed. The excerpts presented here focus on issues pertaining to the theater.

GITTA HONEGGER *Well, let's start at the very beginning. What propelled you to write this play?*

ELFRIEDE JELINEK The thought that I've got to do something about [Donald Trump]. And I had to work fast. I can't do it otherwise, it is an inner restlessness. I can't just wait and then fiddle around with it—I write [one text] several times, this is already the tenth version, that is, I keep writing over the previous one, like [the Austrian painter] Arnulf Rainer, who paints black over everything. I write over everything until I have the feeling, that's it. And now as new men keep entering the scene, I worked in a few more things I didn't know before. The first version was so quick, it wasn't known yet what people he would pick, that's why this version got to be much longer.

But it was so important precisely because it is the first impression from a time when no one knew how he would approach his presidency.

Yes, and before the Trump play I had already written this small essay—that was one day after the election. But that's no longer correct.¹

Why?

This thought that he did want to become president as in an athletic competition, but did not want to be it, because it's a lot of work and he is extremely lazy, too lazy to think and generally lazy and that he would shy away from such work, but I was wrong.

But it's still too soon to tell whether you were right or not.

I think that he wanted to become it, but he did not want to be president. Maybe [Jared] Kushner and his daughter convinced him, they'd like to get into the act, they all want to get into the act . . . well, for me it was quite logical and conclusive, the brief text I wrote and now I think that I wasn't right at all and this play is, of course, a further attempt, an association to it, as I take the great Oedipus, who preoccupied so many, be it psychoanalysis, be it Greek drama, that is, a superhumanly great figure, that is: guiltless, *the* guiltlessly

guilty one in Western cultures, that I take this great figure, so to speak, who Freud has written about and René Girard and practically everyone has something to say about, that I am taking him down to such a pathetic wretch as Trump, who really is a disgraceful person, dumb, unenlightened, and actually, in the Freudian sense I would call him an Id that never developed an Ego, it's really an Id that speaks out of him, who has no Superego at all, since the Superego serves the socialization of man—that is, fitting him into a culture, and he hasn't got it, he is a little kid in the sandbox thrashing about with bucket and shovel, that's how I see it. But I could be totally wrong.

But this is how many people see him.

It is totally inconceivable to me that such a man could become president. It is unimaginable and inconceivable to me, seeing and hearing it all, that the most powerful nation is ruled by this hot dog, whose way of expression consists of just about the 140 characters on Twitter, and, above all, he bleats out anything that comes to his mind at the moment; that's why I am saying, that it's really the Id speaking out of him and for that those 140 characters will do, a baby, a toddler.

[Silence]

I am at a loss for words. I can only think of Karl Kraus's famous line: "Hitler brings nothing to my mind." I am afraid these days. You once wrote me in an e-mail: "There's no way to get a handle on Trump."

No. Because you can't get a handle on stupidity.

But you manage to respond immediately to current issues and to weave them into the whole of Western culture.

Well, coincidentally, I got a post in response to my play *Fury* [about the 2015 Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris] that says it is always a problem to say something very quickly about a political event and that, like Robert Musil or Hermann Broch, one has to first let it settle, before evaluating it, but I am not interested in that. I want an event to immediately charge me, like sticking your finger into an electric outlet. Something like that. But times are faster today. Musil and Broch had the time to let things settle down and put them into the big movements of the times, so to speak. But I am interested in capturing the moment while at the same time opening up fields of associations such as personal, biographical, or cultural ones, those are like iron filings getting attracted by a magnet—the magnet is in the center and the iron filings attach themselves to it as it were and pow! That's what interests me. I am slow, I react slowly, since I am always at home alone. My life lacks stimuli and this is a chance for me to dock on to the times or to speak, that's why I keep writing plays incessantly. It is my way of speaking, as it were, actually I am exhibiting my speaking—it's not the way we are speaking right now, talking to each other, it is an exhibited speaking. And with the computer it is a fast kind of speaking, it seems to have been invented for me. I type very fast, I am driven by this inner restlessness, I have to constantly scan things, yes, the image of a scanner is even better than that of iron filings, or maybe of an amoeba under water, that has to constantly swirl nutrients towards itself, this is how I see myself. The particular moment should not be eternalized, it would be too much; rather, the various elements should be drawn from the moment and exhibited. A ridiculous type like Trump gets magnified that way.

When you start writing, is it meant to be an intervention or are you doing it to think through a particular issue for yourself?

It is both. I clarify things for myself and I also associate them with my own biography, and on the other hand, I have the sense to possibly stir up someone, but that's ludicrous, for who will come to the theater? It is *preaching to the choir*. That's always a big problem, political theater cannot overcome and this is why aesthetically I want to bring it up to a level where it is right.

And how can this be done aesthetically?

By my applying the utmost I am capable of linguistically, well, this is my method, which works with the sound of words to over-the-top punning, that is, with language itself, so I use everything I've got and go as far as I can go linguistically, and if that is right the political is too. It would no longer work, if I had a political objective and did this with the aesthetics of educational broadcasting or agitprop, though agitprop, taking theater out into the streets could be relevant again.

Occupy Wall Street was a beginning —

Yes, but those were demonstrations, and of course they were completely crushed. But I am worried—we are talking here theoretically, it worries me, that it can get very dangerous for groups like Occupy Wall Street, and there are people, who are coming together again; he'll make short shrift of them, unfortunately I can see a danger of an escalation, not unlike the one in Turkey. And one has to consider that in Turkey, which did not go through Enlightenment, it is still a religion that keeps people dumb. But there is an educated class in America, yes, there is an elite which is unbelievably brilliant, which cleans up the Nobel Prizes,

MIT, or wherever they study, yet there are also the huge masses of people who've got to live with McJobs. . . .

What is the Trump effect on Europe?

A kind of horrified paralysis. But I am always reading the newspaper forums, they are much more interesting than the articles. Always. All of them. Because then you know what the bar regulars are thinking, what "the little man in the street" is thinking. The *Vienna Kurier* for example gets surprisingly many approvals, but not only there, but also among the intelligentsia. For example, there is this philosopher, a Robert Pfaller, who has also published books, he says, he has read Trump's economic program and that it is a leftist economic program. I am convinced that Trump hasn't written one word of this program, if he ever even read it.

You don't think that with his ego he did read at least something about it?

He wouldn't understand it anyway. He would read it if he could understand it, but—as I said, this is my impression, it could be wrong.

But look at how he attacked the CIA. He simply doesn't believe what they are telling him.

Well, he does believe it, but of course he couldn't say that the Russians contributed to his victory, it would mean that he didn't win it on his own strength.

You know America. How could this happen?

I am very surprised. Because America always meant a lot to me.

To me too. America is my—how do you say—my Brigadoon, really, the country of my dreams. When I just think of Donald Duck

and Mickey Mouse, those were the most important factors of my socialization.

Yes, mine too.

It simply was the most beautiful thing in our childhood and this is why I will always admire America, well, also for other reasons. That's why I am so upset by it.

What were your earliest American influences?

Well, the first were the Mickey Mouse comics, I read them already in elementary school.

Yes, I did too.

And in Catholic School, which I attended, they were forbidden. Of course they told the parents that this is trash, children are not allowed to read it. But I fought for it, it was one of the few times I asserted myself vis-à-vis my parents. I forced them to buy me the comics. And later I also bought them used, in a bookstore and I still do today. I love ducks, I visit them daily [in Munich's English Garden] and then I always admire the genius of Carl Barks, who drew them. When I look at those ducks—they really do have facial expressions, he must have observed them for years—I am beside myself with enthusiasm, because I can see how he captured this expression and how he personified it.

It seems to me that you also absorbed the visual aspects of stories. And your Royal Road starts off so wonderfully with Miss Piggy. Tell me more about your Miss Piggy, besides Tiresias you are part of her, but so is Trump.

Yes, Miss Piggy basically is also a Trump, the way she bleats out anything that comes to her mind, like "I sing the most beautiful" or "Every man desires me." That's boasting, just like he does. I also introduce other stuffed

toy animals, like Kermit or Fozzie Bear, but I leave it up to the director what to do with my suggestions. Nicolas Stemmann has used muppet-inspired figures in his productions of *BAMBILAND* and *Babel*,² remember that big frog—I love plushies.

Where does this love come from?

Well, lonely people look for other friends and mine are those plushies.

Did you have many of those already as a child?

No, interestingly, I didn't, they came much later. Yes, those simply are living beings and they also have names and talk to us, our plushies—that surprises you, huh? Actually, it's also a fetishization, this transference to inanimate objects, transferring a life to something not living, because I am quite shy of people. I don't like being among people, there are just a handful I let get near me. [Thomas] Pynchon also always introduces fetishes into the plot. It actually is a perversion, paraphilia. . . .³

You frequently mention your admiration for American actors, Meryl Streep, Fran McDormand, now Alec Baldwin. [Author's Note: Melissa McCarthy had not yet introduced her Sean Spicer routine.] Do you envision specific actors for your plays?

I never think about this when I am writing, because their work is on an equal footing, one who realizes the text and one who thinks it up. This is how I look at theater. This is not a text to hand to actors and they play their assigned parts—it rather is a shared process.

The information you give with Miss Piggy, with Muppet-inspired presentations of the speakers/characters, offers important clues to directors.

Yes, this artificiality is necessary and the stuffed animal is even below the Id, for it doesn't have a consciousness, that is, not even a pre-Ego, if one wants to call the Id a pre-Ego, which is something that follows only its drives—except maybe Miss Piggy and Kermit, who are no longer together I hear, who are instinct-driven creatures, unhampered by a Superego. Miss Piggy is simply vain and the way the two are showing off with each other, that's what Trump is doing too, vainly showing off his wife. It's basically a Candaules complex when the King shows off his wife, wearing dresses with the lowest possible décolleté, always perfectly made up, the daughter too. The daughter is possibly his Superego. So, carrying Freud's triad further one could say that, absurdly the child, the daughter, who has long grown up is the father's Superego, because she is much more intelligent than he.

But how do you get to Freud, you of all people, who deliberately does not develop characters psychologically?

But I would say, if I had not become a writer, I would be a psychoanalyst, I am sure, because I have an instinctive understanding of it. Psychoanalysis has always interested me and not only because I am Viennese [*laughs*] and anyway [*points to bookshelves and tables*], there's Freud, lying around everywhere.

And I am always trying to avoid psychoanalysis when I write about you so I won't get directors on the misleading track of psychological theater.

In art you can't escape psychoanalysis. Because the Oedipus complex is a central finding of psychoanalysis as well as the incest taboo and Trump is walking the line with his daughter, he did eroticize her, after all. He said that if she weren't his daughter he might be dating her. Daddy's little girl. There is something to

Freud's unholy family triad, the Id, the Ego, and the Superego. Strangely, if something were his Superego, it would be his daughter.

Those are helpful hints for directors and dramaturgs.

Well, all they have to basically understand is that everything develops directly from language.

But on the other hand, you are such a visual person.

Yes, the two have to go together. That is, a word game can't yield anything without an image behind it. It would become hollow.

Then directors understand you better than theorists.

Actors understand me very well.

Yes, when they trust the language, it will carry them.

But they have to try it out. Even Nicolas [Stemann] says that when he first reads one of my texts, it's all Greek to him. But reading it aloud the rhythm suddenly comes through and the actors—you can't become an actor if you are not musical. It won't work, it's simply not possible—the actors get it through the rhythm.

But visual artists completely understand you.

Yes, and I have a feel for what they are doing, I am certainly influenced by them. Mike Kelley hangs in my kitchen. He and Paul McCarthy are the most important to me.

Can you say more about it?

Well, Kelley has those animals, exactly as I do. He finds them in the garbage, some of them are knitted. I have those too, my cousin knit-

ted those figures for me, they are on my home page with the text of my play *Snow White*. It is this terror of the cute, that's coming out of a garbage can somewhere or from a dump or wherever. He only works with found things and makes those sculptures out of them—he ties them together and that is the horror of the cute, the harmless, the friendly. Together, Kelley and McCarthy constructed an installation at Vienna's Secession gallery, where you went into a sort of military tent, and you could smell it too. The whole thing was made of some kind of plastic substance, and you could see open food cans, the point was you were entering something. McCarthy also had a large exhibition in Munich. His huge masks inspire me more than the theater. His work takes art to another level of meaning, of performance art. Both he and Kelley work with bodies, while I only work with language; bodies are not at my command even though I had taken ballet lessons for years, and they create an interface between found objects, the cute and the cuddly, those plushies, one missing an ear, the other a paw. They are partly damaged—that's why they were thrown away and they are bundled together, maybe into a collective unconscious, so that gets us back to Freud again, to the Oedipus complex, the conscious and the unconscious. Ultimately, my stuffed or knitted animals as we know them from pictures of the exhibition, are the collective unconscious, also in its childishness. And Trump is extremely childish.

Did you see Alec Baldwin's Trump?

Yes, he is better than Trump himself.

How could you ever surpass Trump?

It's not possible. But one can distort him to the point of recognition.

Earlier you mentioned your fondness for over-the-top punning. How far can one go with the performance of even the crassest, seemingly nonsensical puns—Stemann's speciality—in this play?

Those are perhaps the unconscious which doesn't function in Trump, because he is so flat he doesn't have an unconscious, and he would certainly deny it—he is what he is. He is a large cabinet, so to speak, standing there, one can open the door and there is nothing behind it. He is the Id, he is not adjusted to society, he stands there, well, like a big cabinet I'd say. And I show the ambiguity through language. He speaks the truth, he projects it, so to speak, unintentionally, though he doesn't even know it. So this then is the unconscious.

This ambiguity is the translator's huge problem. To quote Thomas Bernhard: "Is it a comedy? Is it a tragedy?"

If in doubt, always comical. Well, I am trying to get at this ambiguity that's missing in Trump—a certain kind of Id, if one wants to put it that way—the unconscious of someone who lacks consciousness, one might say the unconscious of the consciousness makes him speak as if in tongues, in my text those odd puns, which actually let language speak itself.

Tell me something about the end with Abraham and Isaac, the "conciliatory sacrifice." You weave the theme throughout the text.

That's René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*,⁴ the "conciliatory sacrifice," but Girard refers to Oedipus. The King. Now this ridiculous Trump is king.

But who is this "conciliatory" sacrifice at the end?⁵

So then this ridiculous Trump is supposed to become great—a God, who can order a man to kill his son, the surrogate sacrifice.

The ruler demands this conciliatory sacrifice. And he hurls the people who so strongly supported him, the proletarians, onto the altar. The way he gets those American plants, Chrysler for example, to close their factories abroad cannot function in the age of multinationalization and international division of labor. Or protective tariffs, that's nineteenth century, the banks will get into the picture. To the king, the wages for human labor are just tips he tosses on the table, meaning the banks are paying for him—after all, he is a serial bankrupt, whose assets have long been owned by the banks and they are getting less and less returned of what they lent him . . . a little crook. The steel industry is ruined. And surely, capitalism is stronger even than Herr Trump, who, like the early Nazis has anti-Capitalist traits, when he calls for protective tariffs or insists that no matter what it costs those cars will now be produced in America and no longer in Mexico. Ironically, this is also a leftist idealism. So then Trump is a National Socialist. That sounds brutal, but I do see beginnings of a National Socialism.

[Long silence.]

Heidegger, as always, haunts your text.

Heidegger was the philosopher who wanted to lead the leader, the Führer, and his fundamental misunderstanding was that he, the *Geist* (the mind/spirit) wanted to guide the *Ungeist* [the un-spirit/mind].⁶ He was a Nazi, but he was a “noble-Nazi” with noble goals for the Führer. That's why this time I used his “Black Notebooks” for the play.

Can you elaborate?

The “Black Notebooks” are more concrete than his other publications of that time, the worst of which is his Rector's Address, regarding military service, “labor service”

[*Arbeitsdienst*], “science/knowledge service.” Everything had to serve the State, so to speak, most of all knowledge, the military, and the worker. Again the triad, which corresponds to the Freudian triad and also recurs in the writings of Ernst Jünger and Carl Schmitt [the crown jurist of the Third Reich]. Heidegger is the most concrete in the “Black Notebooks,” regarding the question of “what is *the Jew*”—they contain the most concrete anti-Semitic passages, which I did not include. Most probably Trump is not an anti-Semite, his son-in-law is Jewish after all and the daughter converted. They are religious Jews. But Trump doesn't have to be anti-Semitic. The point is the *Ungeist*, that un-spirit, and that is what caused Heidegger's bitterness, that those brutal sluggers would even need someone like him, that the mind/spirit becomes ridiculous in view of the—in this case bellicose *Ur-horde*, the *ss* and the *sa*, and I fear that this mind/spirit, which in the *us* differentiates with utmost precision, seeing persecutors who can't be seen, seeing itself as victim, where none can yet be seen, that all this gets swept aside.

The translated “Black Notebooks” were supposed to be available in February 2017, but still aren't out, so no standard English vocabulary for his writing in this historic context is not yet available.

I don't see the Journals' vocabulary different than in his other writings. On the contrary, it is more concrete—that's why they came out so late. Those are the worst, since he articulates everything, which he usually covers in clouds, like on a mountain summit, one might say.

But with Heidegger there is the ongoing problem of different translations for his characteristic, ultimately untranslatable terms, and there are never-ending arguments about their meaning.

Well, he is especially difficult. That makes it so difficult for me as well. I keep staring at his text and I don't understand a single word. I read a sentence ten times and I don't understand it.

But you are very good at making an ass of him.

That happens on another level of thinking. Making an ass of somebody is always successful—that's simply my nature, that's my Jewish, subversive humor [*laughs*] and that's also my problem here, there is no reception for it. Maybe in America—here they expelled all the Jews. That kind of humor is no longer understood here.

So now we got from Mickey Mouse, plushies, and Freud to Heidegger.

Not bad, a summit climb.

And they all meet at Trump (Tower).

Yes, this is exactly what I envisioned to be so funny, that this chunk [*Klotz* in German], this German, this German *Klotz* [*laughs*], this klutz gets surrounded by all these language figures, who are taken from the lowest as well as from the most difficult and abstract realms and he's got nothing to do with any of it—he is untouchable. He can't be reached at all by any of my resources. I try it from all angles, from popular mythology, the Muppets and plushies and from the angle of psychoanalysis, Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, the appropriation of the Oedipus Complex and then from the angle of Greek drama, of Sophocles and interpretations of his Oedipus, for Girard he is the sacrificial victim, and I even drag Heidegger down to the triviality of cuddly toy animals and ultimately it's all about a blind spot, the blind spot at the center one can't catch on to. Just as Heidegger did not catch on to Hitler.
[*long silence*]

You know, ever since I've known you, your idea of America was quite pure.

I am sure it's completely different from reality.

Do you know the Squat Theatre?

Yes, of course.

I remember Peter Halasz telling me in New York, in the late seventies that for Europeans America is an idea. This is probably true for immigrants from anywhere in the world and has special resonance in these times.

It is not just an idea. It is the Holy Land, the New Jerusalem.

But it does not exist.

No, it certainly doesn't, at least no longer, but it was for me when I was young and you fulfilled your American dream which I find admirable.

With Mickey Mouse. . . .

Thank you, Elfriede, for your trust and generosity.

NOTES

1. The essay “The One and Only, His Ownness” was published as an online supplement for PAJ 115 (39, no. 1 [2017]): www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/suppl/10.1162/PAJJ_a_00354/suppl_file/Jelinek-Trump-supplement.PDF.
2. Stemann is one of Jelinek’s defining directors.
3. Jelinek translated Pynchon’s *The End of the Rainbow: Die Enden der Parabel* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981).
4. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Paris: Edition Bernard Grasset, 1972). “Surrogate sacrifice” in the English translation. The German translation uses the more ambivalent quasi-poetical term “*versöhnendes Opfer*,” “conciliatory victim.”
5. This question could only come up in our German conversation. The English “surrogate sacrifice” is much clearer.
6. The classic problem of translating the Hegelian *Geist* (mind/spirit) and its opposite.