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Literary perspectives: Austria

Anything but a "German appendix"

Though still routinely referred to as Germans, Austrian novelists have experienced a recent run of critical and commercial success. The "difficult" prose of the past has been replaced by a focus on story–telling, with women writers producing no less interesting work in the genre than the new male "narrative miracles". Yet experimentalism is by no means out: darkly humorous and self–referential "writer's novels" are also booming. In the latest essay in Eurozine's series "Literary perspectives", critic Daniela Strigl surveys a contemporary Austrian scene at the top of its game.

The German Book Prize (Deutscher Buchpreis) was first awarded in Frankfurt in July 2005. According to the German Publishers & Booksellers Association, it was intended to go to the "best novel in the German language" and so "to draw attention to German–speaking authors across national borders". The initial selection of twenty titles was nevertheless called a "longlist", in English, and the list of the six finalists a "shortlist". Austrian literature scored an immediate away victory: it was Arno Geiger's family saga *Es geht uns gut* ("We're doing well") that won the prize and the glory, while Friederike Mayröcker and Daniel Kehlmann also made it into the final.

In 2006 a German writer, Katharina Hacker, won the prize with *Die Habenichtse* ("The Have–Nots"). It was striking that not a single Austrian name appeared on the shortlist, although there had been five in the preliminary longlist. Thomas Glavinic with his almost universally acclaimed novel *Die Arbeit der Nacht* ("Night's Work", 2006) –– a man wakes up and realizes that he is the only man on earth –– was, astonishingly, not one of them. Perhaps this time the jury wanted to choose a German book and so play it safe. Perhaps the national composition of the shortlist was indeed pure coincidence. Experience tells us, however, that the role of chance in juries' decisions tends to be minimal.

It would have been understandable if Germany's literary functionaries had chosen here to stem the tide of Austrian success. Austrian supremacy was everywhere to be seen: from the Leipzig book fair essay prize in 2006, won by Franz Schuh for his virtuosic collection of essays *Schwere Vorwürfe, Schmutzige Wäsche* ("Strong Accusations and Dirty Linen"), to the Heinrich Heine Prize, awarded to Peter Handke but later recalled on political grounds (Handke had given a speech at Slobodan Milosevic's funeral). The German reactions veered between open denunciation and blatant attempts to incorporate the Austrian writers into German literature. What the world saw as something only too huge, the critics had to cut down to size (preferably garden gnome size). When Elfriede Jelinek won the Nobel Prize in 2004, Iris Radisch

rushed to downgrade her in *Die Zeit* to the status of a "regional author". Looked at in that way, there was no great difference between Hamburg (where *Die Zeit* is published) and the Styrian town of Mürzzuschlag (where Jelinek was born), with the headline of the Styrian edition of the Kronen–Zeitung running: "Upper Styrian woman wins Nobel Prize for Literature".

The highest international recognition for Austria's most difficult author came at a time when people in Germany had long since grown tired of their neighbour's fascination with their own gloomy past. In the case of Thomas Bernhard, regional dress and world–class literary prestige could still be brought under a single cloth hat. But meanwhile, German critics –– and women critics especially –– were reacting with increasing irritation to the export of national ailments to a country with quite enough of its own. They were no longer the least bit interested in labouring over a kind of literature notorious for its erotic, playful relationship with language. All these winners of the Georg Büchner Prize –– the highest distinction for German–speaking authors –– Albert Drach, H.C. Artmann, Ernst Jandl, and Friederike Mayröcker, indeed Jelinek too, all had their difficulties with simplicity, simple storytelling included. For many it seemed an anachronism that in 2006 the eternally youthful and thus experimental author Bodo Hell won a prize at the Ingeborg Bachmann Competition in Klagenfurt. As German author Jana Hensel opined with impeccable logic in *Die Zeit*, the problem was that since the event is dedicated to "German–language literature", "Austrian and Swiss critics always have to be there, who then of course put forward Austrian or Swiss writers". Thus "the selection is subject from the very outset to a criterion that has little or nothing to do with literature".

For most writers in Austria, the prerequisite for a literature fit for the EU is a German language fit for Germany. German editors have always tried to adapt their Austrian writers to the German market by weeding out "national–linguistic idiosyncrasies" in their texts. The more they found the greats, Bernhard and Jelinek, hard nuts to crack, the more keenly they nibbled away at the idiomatic "problem areas" of the lesser writers, with half–hearted intervention often begetting bilingual cross–breeds. Many Germanize themselves of their own accord in over–hasty obedience, whereas braver writers go on the attack: Wolf Haas's thrillers featuring the ex–detective Brenner have become cult books –– the most recent being *Das ewige Leben* ("Eternal Life", 2003). However they were originally rejected by many publishers, not least because of the highly colloquial style which subsequently made them famous. In his most recent book, which takes the form of an interview, Haas sarcastically translates from German into German (*Das Wetter vor 15 Jahren* ["The weather fifteen years ago", 2006]).

Renowned authors who do not harp on about their Austrian background in their work are often perceived as German –– Peter Handke, for example. That he, or Christoph Ransmayr, or Norbert Gstrein, are discussed in an anthology bearing the title *The Modern German Novel*, remains self–evident. Volker Weidemann, in *Lichtjahre. Eine kurze Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von 1945 bis heute* ("Light–years: A brief history of German literature from 1945 to the present day", 2006), subsumes Austrian literature under the German heading, thus continuing, in his ignorance of individual historical developments in Austria, the standard poor practice of more scholarly works. In this context, Jelinek and Bernhard find their place alongside the Bavarian authors Kroetz and Achternbusch in a chapter entitled, "Wut im Süden" ("Fury in the South"), like a choleric appendix somewhere down in southern Germany.

Writing in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in summer 2007, Paul Jandl proclaimed a "furious autumn" of Austrian literature, which immediately raised hopes in the trade of an Austrian "autumn of the century" and summoned up associations of a good Burgundian vintage. Undaunted, the German cultural pages still like to label even successful Austrian authors like Daniel Kehlmann, Arno Geiger and Thomas Glavinic, who in recent years have more or less systematically abandoned the ban on narration and the practices of literary grief–therapy and collective self–flagellation, as the new *German* "miracle of storytelling". Although it must be added that the Vienna–based Kehlmann, with his dual citizenship, does invite a double evaluation. His novel *Die Vermessung der Welt* (first published in 2005, translated as: *Measuring the World*, 2006), is the bestselling book of recent times (with up to 1.2 million copies sold of the German edition alone). By comparison, the no less ambitious and no less talented *female* authors such as Sabine Gruber, Olga Flor, Evelyn Grill, Eugenie Kain or Bettina Balàka have not really been noticed.

Bettina Balàka's *Eisflüstern* ("Ice Whispers", 2006), for example, could easily be described as a direct hit, were military metaphors not inappropriate in this context. The story of a soldier returning from war, it combines contemporary events with psychological exploration and a thriller's plot in breathtakingly accomplished fashion. If one looks for blank areas in the historical picture of Austria today, one will not find them around 1938 but rather 1918. There are relatively few works of Austrian literature that give serious attention to the critical turning point of the First World War, the collapse of the Hapsburg monarchy and life in the new republic. This could not be further from "women's literature" in the narrow sense. It is not only the narrative perspectives preferred by the author here that are male –– the authorial pose is also "male" in the conventional understanding of the term. In *Eisflüstern*, Balàka takes on a chunk of Austrian history without hesitating or tiptoeing round the issue, and treats it as she sees fit.

Anna Mitgutsch, who lived for a long time as a professor of literature in the United States, also broadens horizons with her semi–historical epistolary novel *Zwei Leben und ein Tag* ("Two Lives and a Day", 2007). An Austrian woman meets an American literary academic "over there", they marry and from then on warm themselves "by the heat of a foreign life". Everything revolves around Herman Melville, creator of *Moby Dick*, until the couple's young son is taken ill in South Korea and suffers psychological damage. Mitgutsch tries the reader's nerves, yet her perseverance also commands respect. Everything in this apotheosis of failure is terrible, relentless.

Sickness not as guilt, but as fate that can strike anyone and everyone, is a theme that also preoccupies the stylishly composed and linguistically equally impressive novel *Über Nacht* ("Overnight", 2007), by Sabine Gruber, a South Tyrolean living in Vienna. It is the story of two women who superficially appear to have nothing to do with each other –– but only superficially. One lives in Vienna and after years of waiting receives the kidney transplant she needs; the other lives in Rome as an old people's nurse, and loses her husband: he cheats on her –– with a man.

By contrast, a gigolo like the first–person narrator in Lilian Faschinger's new novel *Stadt der Verlierer* ("City of Losers", 2007) lives by treating his sexual relationships purely as business. If love gets in the way, that is never good news –– not least because Faschinger has long since established herself as a specialist in the literary marriage of crime and passion. The "city of losers" is of course Vienna. Faschinger affords herself and her readers the pleasure of

immersing themselves in a sickeningly coarse, sexist misanthrope and of seeing the city of the waltz and wine through his eyes. Georg Kreisler once sang about "How lovely Vienna would be without the Viennese". The hero takes the same view: "The best thing about Vienna is the flak towers." We learn that one who feels sorry for himself is capable of anything –– a good basis for a thriller about the banality of evil and the splendour of cultivated deviancy.

This, too, is the domain of Evelyn Grill, who lives in Germany. She had already proved herself a master of apparently merciless human observation before her shockingly vivid novel *Der Sammler* ("The Collector", 2006), the story of an artist and compulsive clutterer who is hounded to his death by his friends with the very best of intentions. Grill's thriller *Schöne Künste* ("Fine Arts", 2007) is above all a satire on the art business, as bizarre as it is cruel.

Evil rears its head less spectacularly in Olga Flor's latest novel *Talschluß* ("Head of the Valley", 2005). It was over forty years ago that the Austrian writer Marlen Haushofer showed in her novel *Die Wand* (first published in 1963, translated into English as *The Wall*, 1991) how to narrate a female Robinson Crusoe–style adventure both as a parable of existence and as an alternative vision of the values of the post–war reconstruction period. *Talschluß* also puts down a marker in the wasteland: here it is a family that takes a break from city life to celebrate a birthday in the mountains. No actual catastrophe occurs, but a cattle disease breaks out, trapping the protagonists in the valley–top. This triggers mixed feelings among them: "At last, something existential," says one, thinking of hunting and mushroom–picking. Yet there is more to the novel than an existential analysis following a nature–induced breakdown in operations: the trained physicist Flor has clothed a radical critique of our materialistic world in the guise of a psychologically subtle family novel. She concentrates here on the *inner* disintegration of a family, which is quite oppressive enough. The valley–top becomes a dead end ventured into by a group of people who perceive the "soul" as the dispensable relic of a bygone era.

What is striking is the current boom of "writer's novels" in Austrian literature. They are generally considered boring because their heroes compensate for a lack of external adventures with a rich inner life. Feared most of all are the novels that deal with writer's block. All the more astonishing, then, that Margit Schreiner's latest book is so entertaining: for *Haus*, *Friedens*, *Bruch* (translated as *Trespass*, 2007) tells of the problems of writing and existence experienced by an author living in Linz as the single mother of a teenage girl.

Like almost no one else, Schreiner masters the art of combining the very heavy and the light, sharpening and simultaneously deflating situations –– for instance the writer's block that naturally gets an author down –– with little twists of sarcasm. Failure at her desk pitilessly brings the spectre of her rivals before her eyes, for after all she has to "write against three hundred and thirty thousand new publications every year, day in, day out". So she reads in the literary supplements "with dismay" about her colleagues' new works and rails against the latest Austrian "miracle of storytelling" (as already mentioned, a male one), along with all the "industry books": "And the boys all write features on each other! One of them showers the other with God–knows–what kind of praise, and everyone in the know is well aware that they're best mates." She is probably aware that she is not devoid of envy, since, at the behest of her publisher, she is supposed to be writing a thriller, a "so–called literary" one of course, as all novelists are writing these days –– only she can't.

Autobiography shapes Margit Schreiner's books, but her greatest success came with the outpourings of a man abandoned by his wife, in the form of the novel *Haus, Frauen, Sex* ("Home, Women, Sex", 2001) whose title reappears paraphrased in *Haus, Friedens, Bruch*. The writer, as the first−person narrator sums up, is "by nature a self−pitying animal", yet he "becomes a hero when he writes. Because it is then that he gets to work on all the crap that others ignore for fear of exposing themselves."

Not a kind of fear that haunts Thomas Glavinic: he too has written a self−referential, indeed exhibitionistic novel. *Das bin doch ich* ("Isn't that me?", 2007), and the most recent works of Michael Köhlmeier, Robert Menasse and Peter Henisch are also "writer's novels" in the broader sense. All four appeared on this year's German Book Prize longlist, along with two other Austrian books (by Sabine Gruber and Peter Truschner). Of the six novels to make the shortlist, two were penned by Austrians, namely Köhlmeier and Glavinic −− ironically, given that a central theme of Glavinic's new novel is the disappointment at not even having made the longlist the previous year with what was supposed to be his most important work, *Die Arbeit der Nacht*.

It is nothing new for novelists to concern themselves with the highs and lows of a writer's existence, even if the nakedly autobiographical and self−ironizing nature of some of these works is arguably new. But there is one thing that *Das bin doch ich* most certainly is not, and that is a roman à clef of the literary industry. There is no key required here, since the protagonists either go by their own names, or else ones that have been altered just for the fun of it. Anyone who does not make an appearance here can consider it to their credit, seeing that almost all participants are treated with a healthy dose of ridicule. At the same time, Glavinic dismantles himself even more ruthlessly: the very first of the 24 chapters begins with self−exposure of a quite literal kind, as the hero, called Thomas Glavinic, reveals himself naked in the shower, where, as usual, he avoids looking at his genitals, fearing that any swellings could be symptoms of testicular cancer. He is a "slave" to his "idiosyncrasies" and lets drop great writerly truths with ease: "Anyone who rejects my books is out of his mind." He constantly compares himself with his friend Daniel (Kehlmann), who is far more commercially successful and somewhat insensitively keeps him updated about his sales by text message. Glavinic undoubtedly drinks too much, although he in fact thinks of himself as a "occasional drinker"; but in this environment there are occasions aplenty. A more horrifying and indeed funny genre portrait of the Viennese cultural scene is hard to imagine.

No less amusing is Robert Menasse's new novel *Don Juan de la Mancha* (2007), whose cover picture of a chilli pepper rapidly achieved legendary status. The title is itself a hint that the author −− renowned as one of the country's most eloquent essayists −− wishes to go way beyond joylessly tending to a sexuality considered revolutionary back in his student days. The Vienna society journalist Nathan is making a confession to his analyst. The novel begins on this audience−grabbing note: "The beauty and wisdom of celibacy was something I appreciated for the first time when Christa crushed up chilli peppers between her hands before masturbating me and finally expressing the wish that I should −− in her words −− 'fuck her in the arse'." These practical sessions, hot and spicy in the truest sense, would probably, however, fail to convince a urologist in terms of their realism.

Peter Henisch is also an expert on the dreams and disillusionments of the '68 generation. An impressively consistent fixture on the German Book Prize longlist, he has recently written a finely tuned, wise book about his

grandmother (following on from his Italian road movie book *Die schwangere Madonna* ["The Pregnant Madonna", 2005]). Told from the perspective of an author who has returned to Vienna from the USA, *Eine sehr kleine Frau* ("A Very Small Woman", 2007) relates something of the grandeur present even in the small. The novel, with its nuanced, considered portrayal, is typical of the new, less emotional approach to tackling recent history: in the 1930s, the grandmother, who is Jewish, married a rabid Nazi of all people and became an expert in self–denial. When she dies at an advanced age, an air ticket to Israel is found in her bag.

Michael Köhlmeier, from the Vorarlberg, created quite a stir with his long–awaited magnum opus when it started streaming out of its publishing house in the summer of 2007. Critic Klaus Nüchtern was roundly mocked for praising *Abendland* ("Occident") in the Vienna city magazine *Falter* as "the most exciting Austrian novel of the twenty–first century", and moreover he was helpfully informed by his colleagues –– who faced with this novel about a mathematician, were disinclined to hide their mathematical knowledge under a bushel –– that there were still a good ninety–two years to go in this century.

In *Abendland*, the chief burden of lived–through history is shouldered by Carl Jacob Candoris (1906–2001). This fictitious character, a respected university professor, is sent by his author to the focal points of historical events –– or, as Köhlmeier would probably put it, that is where the character leads him. Candoris moves from Göttingen in the 1920s to Moscow and America in the 1930s, works in Nazi Berlin as a spy in the service of the English, and follows the Nuremberg Trials as an insider. His godson, Sebastian Lukasser, the narrator detailed as it were to write his biography, gets around too: born and raised in Vienna, school in Innsbruck, Lisbon and the Vorarlberg, studying in Frankfurt at the time of the student movement, and teaching in New York and North Dakota. The whole work is framed by Sebastian's visit to this very old man in his villa in the mountains above Innsbruck: *Abendland* is also a scene depicting the twilight of a life.

Wherever one turns, one finds the tail end of one story and with it a brand new narrative thread which in turn pulls the next after it. The enjoyment of reading prevails in the end and helps one get past some occasional *longueurs* (the book is, after all, 775 pages long!).

The current trend for a kind of literature that is swept along by a narrative voice relishing its role should not lead us to forget the tradition of writing that is conscious of language –– if not in love with it. This tradition remains very much alive –– for instance in the work of Peter Handke, who in his poetic travelogue *Die Morawische Nacht* ("The Moravian Night", 2008) offers a self–critical assessment of a writer's existence. This trend can also be found, though, in the books of highly talented younger writers such as Andrea Winkler (*Arme Närrchen: Selbstgespräche* –– "Poor Little Fools: Solo Conversations", 2006), Andrea Grill (*Zweischritt* –– "Two–Step", 2007) or Michael Stavaric, a native of Brno (*Terminifera*, 2007).

Arno Geiger, who like Köhlmeier is from the Vorarlberg, has made a name for himself in recent years as one of the most important voices in Austrian literature. He started out from this school with its quasi–erotic relationship to language. If in his early works he demonstrated his full literary repertoire, in his major novel he has shrewdly taken a step back. *Es geht uns gut* ("We're doing well", 2005) is both the secretly longed–for novel of postwar Austria and at the same time the story of a family. The title captures the collective

Austrian attitude to life, the well–fed cosiness of the children of the economic miracle, while also ironically commenting on the condition of the family members, which is not so rosy at all.

The story takes as its starting point the inheritance of a dyed–in–the–wool family malcontent, who has been bequeathed a villa in an upmarket Vienna suburb, almost in mockery. An outsider is confronted with his childhood, with the dead and with the Nazi past –– a combination that is not new; one might think for instance of Thomas Bernhard's *Auslöschung* (*Extinction*). What is new is what Geiger makes of it: a commandingly unadorned yet atmospherically intense panoramic illustration, in which politics and the spirit of the age mingle unobtrusively with the private perspective. The narrator extracts twenty–one days from the mass of time between 1938, the year of the *Anschluss*, and 2001, jumping back and forth chronologically in the process. The spotlight placed on these days also illuminates the mood of the family protagonists, from constantly alternating perspectives.

At the very beginning, the privileged wastrel is faced with an Augean stable to clear out: pigeons have nested in the loft of the villa and the filth lies knee–deep. Geiger tells a tale not of remembering, but of forgetting. The heir clears away the stinking mass of accumulated past and throws away the written remains, unread.

Everything in Geiger's narrative, be it the Hitler Youth member in the Vienna offensive in 1945 or the family trip to Italy in the 1970s, the difficult father–daughter relationships through the generations or the expulsion of the minister by his Party friends, reveals empathy and historical relevance, and has the Viennese flavour that befits it. The story entwines itself tightly around iconic national figures, and yet never feels sloganeering. "What had just happened elsewhere was already long gone in Austria, and what was long gone elsewhere was part of the everyday present in Austria," says the grandmother to her husband, who is stricken with Alzheimer's. "Has it never happened to you too that at times you could no longer remember whether it was the Emperor Franz Joseph or Hitler who ruled first?"

With *Anna nicht vergessen* ("Don't Forget Anna", 2007), Arno Geiger presented a volume which gathers together a round dozen stories quite different in form –– as if, after the mammoth effort of the novel, he was now back to experimentation. What unites Geiger's stories about lonely women, unhappy children and nervous men is the issue of happiness, of which Sigmund Freud said that, "it is not accounted for in creation's draft of the human being". Literature's fundamental territory is, as is well known, precisely the deficiencies in the lives of human beings. Geiger shows us what can be done, even in German, with this often underrated narrative form, the short story.

The most unusual publication of recent times is, however, by Elfriede Jelinek. She has published her latest "book" on the internet –– a formal experiment, but also a step towards the democratization of literature, bypassing publishers. *Neid. Privatroman* ("Envy: A Private Novel") tackles after *Lust* (first published in 1989, translated as: *Lust*, 1992) and *Gier* (first published in 2000, translated as: *Greed*, 2006) the next of the seven deadly sins, and reveals more of Jelinek the private individual than most of her earlier texts. *Neid* leads us and the violin teacher Brigitte K., in the middle of a divorce, into a near–abandoned Styrian gold–mining town. Politically the area is still red, but economically it is dead. The novel deals with people's survival in times of unemployment: the

mine is being dismantled, but it will still be used –– as a mining exhibition. Even the dead are guarantors of profit and "people die all the time" –– clearly Jelinek watches *Six Feet Under*. A facelift with a view to creating a model tourist community is designed to help the situation, but young people in this dead area are also supposed to commemorate a death march from 1945 –– in a dignified manner, of course.

The author "E.J." conducts a dialogue with her readers, commenting ironically on the writing process. The internet novel in instalments, an allusive web with highly topical references, is also private in the sense that Jelinek has strictly forbidden any quotation from it. It is of course available for all to read at http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/elfriede/. Begun on 3 March 2007, *Neid* concludes on 3 March 2008 with the fifth and final chapter: "Schluß folgt" ("Conclusion to follow").

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