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Ortner, Jessica

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The Trope of Death – or how to make silence hearable

Jessica Ortner

Phd-candidate, Department of English, Germanic and Romance Studies, University of Copenhagen

Ortner@hum.ku.dk

Abstract

In der Straßenmitte die feuchten Spuren zahlloser Füße, Spuren, die man hier hat ruhenlassen (so hat man sich die Gräber erspart), an den Rändern sind sie schon halb verdunstet. (...) Sind die Scharen die Träger jener Spuren (...), die Veranlasser, die uns mir ihren zerquetschtem Leben bis heute festliche Anlässe liefern? Sie sind so gründlich verschwunden, als wären ihre Hinterlassenschaften Fossilien in Stein, Urwesen, deren Bewegungen vor Jahrtausenden verwischt worden sind(...). Sogar die Negative dieser Wesen sind vernichtet, und die Negative ihrer Namen im Tausendgründe-Buch (warum wir ständig und daher nie an sie denken) dazu.

Die Kinder der Toten (The Children of the Dead) 1995, page 163

In Elfriede Jelinek's writings the Shoah is recollected by a representation of "the tone of calmness, of the noise of silence and of the sound of forgetting, as Jens Birkmeyer states". (Birkmeyer, 303) Equally, Evelyn Annuß defines Elfriede Jelinek's literary work as an attempt "to make silence hearable". (Annuß, 32) Also Maria-Regina Kecht talks about "Jelinek's narrative devices of letting absence or the forgotten speak". (Kecht, 203) The silence or absence, which Elfriede Jelinek wants to make her readers hear, is the absence of the millions of victims of the Endlösung. The victims, who in the quoted section are characterized as having been annihilated so thoroughly (...) 'as if their remains were fossils of stone' or as if we were dealing with an extinct species. Even the negative of these creatures were annihilated and the negative of their names in the book of thousand reasons (why we constantly and therefore never think about them.)' In order to make the silence' of these annihilated creatures' hearable', Jelinek refrains from a direct denotation of the forgotten victims of the Shoah, who at the same time constitute the secret center of her texts: They are present as a marked void. As we see, Jelinek in this case signifies them with the metonymical figure of footsteps in the snow. Imitating the gesture of a wondering asker, the narrator uncertainly recognizes the footsteps as traces from the forgotten victims of the Shoah. The sound of forgetting on the other hand addresses Jelinek's homeland Austria's neglect of its complicity to the crimes of the NS-regime, but also the forgetting that is inherent in the official remembrance ceremonies and memorials. Ironically Jelinek asks, if those people, who have left the footsteps in the snow, are the initiators, who with their crushed lives give us cause for celebrations.'

A recent research-tradition stresses Jelinek's use of metonymies in order to achieve a certain technique of omission that seems to be adequate for the purpose of representing the Shoah. This research-tradition sees the increased use of metonymies as part of a bigger literary tendency, which, besides Jelinek, shows in the works of writers such as Günter Grass - in particular his shortstory *Im Krebsgang*- and the work of W. G. Sebald.

In the Oxford English Dictionary metonymy is defined as "a figure of speech characterized by the action of substituting for a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc., a word or phrase denoting a property or something associated with it. (...) Because the association involved in metonymy is typically by contiguity rather than similarity, metonymy is often contrasted with metaphor". The footstep, which Jelinek uses in the example above to signify the victims of the Shoah, is a classical example of metonymic sign. The footstep as a substitution for an absent human being is caused by physical tangency between the object, which is to be signified, and the sign which substitutes the object. Metonymy is often seen as a means for indirect speech, because it doesn't designate the thing itself, but displays objects that either in time or space are close to the thing that is denoted. Axel Dunker states, that metonymy refrains from representing the Shoah itself, and instead signifies the traces in reality, which the Shoah has left. As a result, metonymy points at the Shoah without denoting it directly. In this paper I will analyze Jelinek's use of metonymy in her novel *Die Kinder der Toten (The children of the Dead)*, and look at whether Jelinek also succeeds in using metaphor for the purpose of representing absence.

Metonymical fissures in the safe present

The 667 pages novel *Die Kinder der Toten (The children of the Dead)* from 1995, which Jelinek herself considers as her *opus magnum*, is the absurd story of three undead persons spending their holiday in the Austrian mountain-hotel Alpenrose'. The novel has no chronological storyline, rather the story is moving in circles, carelessly jumping back and forward in time and space. The only recurring reference points are the three protagonists, who continue to die horrific deaths throughout the novel. Apparently the plot - if it can be called so - has nothing to do with the Shoah. But the forgotten victims of the Shoah haunt the literary universe of the novel through the repeated usage of words like "skin", "bones", "hair" (*Kinder der Toten* 209), "gas", "oven" (*Kinder der Toten* 148), train and chimney. The repeated and marked use of these words is supposed to evoke the reader's knowledge and cultural memory about the Shoah and of the restored and exposed remains of murdered in the Auschwitz-museum. It is important to notice, that these words are placed in discourses that apparently do not deal with the Shoah. While the text seemingly is "moving forward" on the syntagmatic, metaphorical axis, the marked ambiguousness of single words produce a paradigmatic, metonymical meaning of the same piece of text. That way the innocence of the apparent topic is exaggerated and at the same time contradicted by the metonymical symbolization of the Shoah thus producing an ironic, polyphone discourse. The metonymical punctual meanings, which the text contains do not

constitute a narration, but are supposed to evoke associations to the way the Shoah is present in our cultural memory. Jelinek doesn't tell the mass murder, but makes it present as a subtext; this was actually overlooked by several reviewers of the novel. Jelinek employs the Shoah as a hidden counter story in many of her works, such as in the plays *Stecken, Stab und Stangel* (Rohwolt 2004/1995), *Wolken. Heim* (Steidel: Göttingen, 1990) and *In den Alpen* (Berlin Verlag, 2004). In their analysis of *Die Kinder der Toten*, Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens characterize the effect of this technique very accurately as a production of "metonymical fissures in the safe presence". In the literary universe of the novel the horror of the past is omnipresent. As Biebuyck points out, even the smoke from a barbecue is involved in the metonymical representation of the Shoah. (Biebuyck, 269) Through the chasm of the fissure, the past is constantly broached as still being present. Language for Elfriede Jelinek isn't a means to talk *about* the Shoah. Beyond its mimetic qualities, language *itself* is part of the fascist reality. It is the overall aim of her literary strategy to construct polyphonic texts that unclose the ambiguousness of language, and as a result excavate the hidden fascist contamination of language. Even though this binary division between a syntagmatic and a paradigmatic level of the text is a simplification, it is very apt to explain the multilayered depth of Elfriede Jelinek's literary texts.

The self-reflexivity of the metonymical remembrance

Axel Dunker agrees with Biebuyck's analysis, that words like train or chimney produce metonymical references to the Shoah, but in addition he adds that the metonymical relation of these words to the Shoah are very much conventionalized. They are clichés and Jelinek is very conscious about that. This conclusion shows that Jelinek not only evokes a remembrance of the Shoah in her texts, but also reflects about the way in which the Shoah is recorded in our cultural memory. Jelinek was born in 1946 and therefore belongs to the second generation after the Shoah. Her writings exemplify the paradigm shift caused by the dying of the contemporary witnesses, which shows by an increasing critical self reflexivity in the means of the writings in the second and third generation after the Shoah (Bart Philipsen, 16). The novel *Die Kinder der Toten* contains a constant reflection about, how to remember the dead, including thoughts about the metonymical way of representing the Shoah and the possibility of displaying the Shoah in a museum. As in the following scene in *Die Kinder der Toten*, in which one of the protagonists, the undead student Gudrun Bichler, finds some pieces of clothes in her hotel room:

Das Zimmer hat sich verändert. Es ist zwar immer noch peinlich sauber aufgeräumt, die Decke immer noch glattgezogen und kaum eine Spur von Gudruns Abdruck aufweisend, doch da sind bunte Einsprengsel, die vorher nicht da waren, oder doch? Hier liegt ein buntes Kinderkleidchen, ein paar Blutspritzer sind am Saum zu erkennen, und dort: eine aufgerissene Handtasche. Hier ein einzelner Schuh aus dem etwas Weißes herausragt und sich bemerkbar macht, obwohl Gudrun das gar nicht so genau sehen möchte (Die Kinder der Toten, 149).

The pieces of cloth in Gudrun Bichlers room are obviously remaining objects from victims of the Shoah. ("A child's dress with blood spots on the border, a handbag that is ripet open, a shoe, where something white is poking out.") We are dealing with metonymical signs of absent victims. More precisely, we are dealing with cliché-like description of remaining objects of Shoah-victims that function as metonymical substitutions for the absent victims. The text could resemble the description of a film still, representing impressions shortly after the evacuation of a Jewish ghetto. As the text continues, the artificiality of the scene is stressed further.

Unter dem Bett schaut ein ausgebeulter Pullover hervor, der auf halben Weg stecken geblieben zu sein scheint, denn als Gudrun sich vorbeugt (...), merkt sie, dass der Pullover in der Mitte abbricht, als wäre er auf einer Fotografie, nein, nicht abgeschnitten, sondern das Bild, wie soll ich sagen, also es ist halt nur ein Stück von dem Pulli auf dem Foto drauf. Der Rest, da er eben nicht ins Bild gerückt wurde, ist auch aus dem endlosen freundlichen Begrüßungsgeschrei unserer Augen an die Wirklichkeit herausgefallen (Die Kinder der Toten, 149).

This paragraph evokes a high density of ambiguous meanings. The pullover, which Gudrun finds under her bed, is there cut in two pieces as if it were on a photograph.' The same is the case for the other pieces of cloth. They simply stop at the point, where the lens of the imaginary camera didn't catch them. The way of being as if they were on a photograph' gives the clothes, understood as metonymical signs for the victims of the Shoah, a second medial frame: Now, we are dealing with a literary description of a photograph (or film still) of metonymical signs of the murdered. This duplication of the medial frame underlines the absence of the murdered victims and at the same time points at the artificial condition of the remembrance, which is evoked. The same *Verfremdungs*'-effect is achieved through the way the narrator is fumbling for words, searching for a way to describe the scene. The narrator cuts himself off several times and shifts into common speech: "(...) no, it is not the pullover itself, which is cut in two pieces, but the picture - how can I say - well - there is only a piece of the pullover on the photograph". Certain attention has to be given to the following sentence, where the ambiguousness of meaning increases even more: In English the sentence says similarly The rest (of the pullover) has fallen out of the eternal friendly yells of greetings of our eyes towards reality.' At the syntamagical level the eternal friendly yells of greetings of our eyes towards reality' is a metaphorical picture of the voyeuristic mechanism of television: The viewer attains a feeling of security at the sight of the suffering of other people in the News. The fact, that the rest of the pullover has fallen out of reality' since it wasn't captured by the lens of the camera, implies the media-critical opinion, that we only consider as true what is passed on through media. On the paradigmatic level, the expression yells of greetings' on the other hand implies the event of the invasion of the German troupes in Vienna in 1938, who were greeted with exalted yells of greetings by the public. Here, language reveals a fascistic contamination and turns to a metonymical remain of fascism. As such the expression yells of greetings' addresses the event of the annexation of Austria to German "Reich" and the public approval of this event. Thereby the hypocritical claim of the government, that Austria had no guilt in the crimes of the NS-regime, and that Austria has to be seen as the first victim of the German war of aggression - the so called Austrian "Opfermytos" - is questioned and exposed. Following, the paragraph poses the question, if the remaining effects of the victims of the Shoah at all are capable to hand down the remembrance of the victims.

Die Dinge erhalten ihr Ganzsein vielleicht auch erst in der Bewegung des Menschen, dem sie gehören oder gehört haben. Und da die Menschen verschwanden, sind auch die Gegenstände, die deren Spur in sich bergen nur mehr halb bzw. gar nicht mehr vorhanden, mögen sie auch vor uns ausgebreitet sein. (...) (Die Kinder der Toten, 150).

In an inner dialog, Gudrun reflects on, why the clothes she has found in her room are cut in half, and comes up with a possible explanation: As the human beings, who owned these objects have disappeared, also the objects, that hold the traces of their former owners, only exist partially or not at all, even though they lay spread out in front of us. In spite of the fact, that the objects hold the traces of their former owners' they don't seem to be able to represent the human beings, who once animated them metonymically. Without the animation of their former owners, they only exist partially. This can be seen as a critique of the way the remaining items, such as suitcases, glasses, shoes and hair of the victims are exposed in the Auschwitz-museum. Jelinek seems to express the insufficiency of this exposition for the task of remembering the dead. Maybe Jelinek would agree with Axel Dunker, who states that the artificial, literary metonymy can do more than the real traces of the Shoah, who have turned into a museum. (Dunker 292) In Jelinek's novel, the literary negotiation of the capability of the remaining objects of the victims to transport memory is an inevitable part of the task of remembering. At the same time the clothes, which only exist partially, can be seen as an apt representation of the victims who in the view of Jelinek are not totally gone, but still exist as undead. The existence of undead people is an overall metaphor in Elfriede Jelinek's work. The undead people' symbolize a past that won't fully go by. Jelinek often quotes the fairytale of the obstinate girl of the Brothers Grimm, where the hand of the girl keeps growing out of the grave [1]. The obstinate girl even protests against being dead, and thus becomes a metaphor for the victims of the Shoah who resist against leaving our cultural memory.

Metaphorical fissures in the safe presence

As I have shown, the metonymy constitutes only part of the figurative language in Jelinek's writings. The metaphor of the undead is only the most palpable example of the metaphorical level of Jelinek's representation of the victims as an absence. This observation is interesting given the ongoing debate about the inaptness of the use of metaphors for a representation of the Shoah that existed in postwar Germany. The discussion about Paul Celan's poem "Todesfuge" is the most significant example of this debate. Critics of Celan's famous poem found that Celan's metaphorical and non-mimetic way of describing the NS-concentration-camps concealed the real suffering that had taken place. He was accused of fleeing his memory by transcending his experience through poetry, thereby making the Shoah into a piece of art that gives its readers an artificial pleasure (A. Larcati, 195). Celan's theoretical writings about the task of remembering literarily show on the other hand that Celan's metaphorical language was an attempt to escape the common usage of language, in order to avoid the contaminated language of fascism (A. Larcati, 197 and Celan III 197-202). According to Celan, the German language is loaded with the fascist context. The metaphor for Celan is a way to avoid this load in order to find a way to represent his experience of the NS-concentration camps. Another example is Martin Walser's objection against the postwar reporting, which often compared the Shoah with Dante's inferno or characterized the NS-concentration camps as hell. Obviously, the concepts hell and inferno are misleading as metaphors for the Shoah. Both concepts are usually understood as a God's punishment of man, hence as a way to restore justice, which lacks any similarity to the meaningless killings and mistreatments the internees in the NS-concentration camps had to suffer. (Dunker, 35) As Alvin H. Rosenfeld put it: *"There are no metaphors of Auschwitz, just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else"* (Rosenfeld: A double Dying in Dunker 132). Jelinek does not compare and substitute the Shoah or the victims of the Shoah with a positive concept or expression but rather with expressions of negativity. As in the following scene, that can be read as an allegorical description of the task of remembering the dead:

Karin Frenzel erhebt sich, als wollte sie eine launige Rede halten, sie will aber nur ihre Stille vorweisen, weil man die sonst nicht bemerkt; die Frau legt sogar einen Finger an die Lippen. Dafür hat draussen jemand gerufen. Er oder sie oder was haben mit einem Riss gerufen, der geklungen hat, als wäre ein riesiges Tuch entzweigefetzt worden, aber wie soll man den Essenden hier begreiflich machen, dass sie auf ein Nichtgeräuch zu lauschen hätten. Denn dieser Ruf war inmitten des Lärms eigentlich das Gegenteil eines Lauts, es war ein Leises. (Die Kinder der Toten, 218).

The undead woman Karin Frenzel rises in the midst of the dinner in the mountain-hotel Alpenrose, but not in order to say something, but to exhibit her silence, which otherwise wouldn't be noticed. This scene is programmatic for the gesture of remembering that the novel accomplishes. The three figures in this scene, Karin Frenzel, the group of tourists and the "he, she or it that has shouted outside", are allegorical pictures of the triangular relation, Jelinek is trying to accomplish in the whole novel, namely the relation between the writer, who is trying to recall the silence, the intended audience and the dead victims. Figuratively speaking Karin Frenzel is exhibiting the silence of the dead victims of the Shoah by exhibiting her own silence, which is exactly, what Jelinek is doing in the novel. The novel pretends to tell an exciting story, but the expectations of the reader are disappointed ceaselessly throughout the 667 pages. The story, which is told, is only told to exhibit a silence, which wouldn't be noticed otherwise: The silence of the dead victims of the Shoah. This silence is further characterized. Karin Frenzel hears someone or something shout outside: He or she or it as have shouted with a fissure' that sounded as if someone had slashed a big fabric in two pieces.' The eating group of tourists can figuratively be seen as the ignorant masses that don't care about living on a mountain of corpses and pain', as Jelinek has expressed it elsewhere. ("Wir leben auf einem Berg aus Leichen und Schmerz") How can I make them understand, that they have to listen to a non-sound?' Karin Frenzel asks herself. The sound amidst the noise of the eating tourists, was actually the opposite of a sound, it was a quiet.' Here, Jelinek is playing with homophony of the noun "Laut" (noise) and the adjective "laut" (loud) by characterizing the sound she hears with the neologism ein "Leises" (a quiet).

Conclusion

As we have seen, not only the metonymical level, but also the metaphorical level of Elfriede Jelinek's literary language take part in representing the absence of the (un)dead victims of the Shoah. One of the conclusions of this paper is thus, that it is not the metaphor per se, which is unapt in representing the Shoah, but only the metaphor, which tries to capture Shoah in one singular expression. In Jelinek's writings whether the metaphorical neither the metonymical figures are used as simple positive representations of the Shoah. Jelinek redoubles the medial frame of the metonymical sign of the Shoah, thereby exposing its cliché-likeness and showing, that any representation of the Shoah inevitably will be a mediated one. A real remembrance of the victims is only possible through a negotiating of the real metonymical traces of the Shoah. Further, by arranging a simultaneousness of metaphorical and metonymical meanings of one and the same phrase - even one and the same word, Jelinek shapes a polyphone, multilayered text, that excavates the fascistic meanings of the word. Thereby she describes the language itself as a disguised, metonymical remain of the fascistic past.

Note

[1] *Das Ende der Geschichte ist uns mißlungen. Sie kommt immer wieder auf uns zu, rasend auf ihren Schienen. Warum stirbt sie nicht? Was haben wir getan? Warum wächst ihr die Hand aus dem Grab? Und zeigt auf uns?* (Wolken. Heim Göttingen, Steidel 1990, p.144)

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Abstract

In this paper I want to address the poetics of memory of the Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek. Elfriede Jelinek's writing constantly broaches the issue of the forgotten dead of the NS-crimes during the Second World War. As she states in an interview from 1993 I feel as if I constantly have to talk about (*Auschwitz, JO*) (Berka, 1993). Jelinek not only criticizes Austria's denial of complicity in the NS-crimes, but also the official way of remembering the victims of these crimes, as well as the everyday fascism of present-day Austria. She does so in a highly experimental aesthetical manner, both at the level of semantics and at the level of the overall form of her novels and plays. In this overall critical discourse, the remembrance of the dead victims appears to call for the strongest aesthetical distortion. The victims have to be remembered in a negative and unrealistic way, for, as Dunker rightly states, no signifier exists for a people that was annihilated to such a degree that only the dust remained (Dunker, 2003). So, instead of a positive representation, Jelinek aims to make silence hearable or to represent absence (Anuss, 2000). She does so by employing tropes that allow her to signify the Shoah in an indirect manner. In this paper I will present different rhetorical strategies of remembrance in Jelinek's work. Most significantly, I will present and discuss the assumption that Jelinek primarily approaches the subject of the Shoah metonymically. Because the association involved in metonymy is typically by contiguity rather than similarity' (OED), it is often claimed, that the

metonymy provides an apt rhetorical strategy for Jelinek's purposes.

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