Threads/Threats of Violence: Elfriede Jelinek’s
Stecken, Stab und Stangl. Eine Handarbeit
(Rod, Staff, and Crook: A Handiwork)

By

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Abstract

Written in 1995, the play Stecken, Stab und Stangl. Eine Handarbeit (Rod, Staff, and Crook: A Handiwork) reflects the state of the Austrian nation following the racially motivated murder of four young Roma in Burgenland, in February 1995. Jelinek broadens the scope of her play by expanding it into an examination of Austria’s on-going struggle with an uncomfortable past thus challenging a national community and its discourse of denial. Moreover, she succeeds in elevating the topics of national belonging and socio-cultural exclusion to a more universal level that touches upon the general fragility of peace, equality, and justice. By examining the play’s central motif of crocheting, this article aims to show how the concrete threads of this theatrical “handiwork” become metaphorical threads that allow us to connect the specific act of aggression with universal threats of violence beyond the confines of the locale.

Identity, Diversity, Violence

The demand for and pursuit of global thinking permeates the public and the private spheres. In academics and art, education, economics and everyday life we face the necessity to engage with those who are different. Our diverse identities and traditions underline the urgency to establish joint platforms of solidarity in order to promote peace, justice and harmony. While we proclaim these noble goals, however, our reality still abounds with threats of violence. This article discusses a play by the 2004 Nobel laureate, Elfriede Jelinek, as a case in point.

Elfriede Jelinek’s post-dramatic play Stecken, Stab und Stangl. Eine Handarbeit (Rod, Staff, and Crook: A Handiwork) is an unforgiving portrait of a nation driven by the desire to create a placable myth of collective remembrance. Premiered in the Hamburg Schauspielhaus in 1996, it reflects the state of the Austrian nation following the racially motivated murder of four young Roma in Oberwart (in the Austrian state of Burgenland), on February 4, 1995. While removing a sign saying “Roma, zurück nach
In Jelinek’s play, a modern supermarket becomes both cultural code and sacrificial site. At its meat counter, the debacle of the Roma-murders is recalled, reframed, and retouched as an entertaining media spectacle made to order for the tastes of a gullible, insensate, and distracted mass culture. Behind the veneer of deriding banter, death becomes a distant matter of an evasive metaphysics: “Ich persönlich glaube ja überhaupt, daß der Tod als Ereignis jenseits jeder Handlung steht und als pures Widerfahrnis nicht mehr Akt des Lebens ist. Wie können wir den Tod verstehen?” (“I personally believe, indeed, that death as an event stands beyond all action and that, as something that simply befalls you, it is no longer an act of life. How can we understand death?” 47). With pitiless venom, Jelinek delineates the ostentatious nature of the “Österreichen” (“Austri-rich,” 17) as she satirically calls them, who, in their pompous utterances about the abstract mystery of death, brush off an actual brutal drama that has unequivocally written itself into the national moment and place.

More importantly, the play transcends the singularity of the event’s time and place by evolving into a more general examination of issues relating to its theme of dialogue among cultures. Taking a matter of cultural diversity on the local/national level as an acute reference point, the play also succeeds in elevating the topics of national belonging and socio-cultural exclusion to a more universal level that touches upon the fragility of peace, equality, and justice as a pandemic occurrence.

This article focuses on the threads/threats of meaning and violence created by the multidimensional motif of crocheting that dominates the stage processes. Its
Centrality is indicated by the title that designates the play as “A Handiwork” (“Eine Handarbeit”). Its importance is further underscored by the stage directions. With precision and detail, they outline a mise en scène which yields, as a visual outcome, an all-consuming “Handarbeitslandschaft” (“handiwork landscape,” 17). Its growing tangle gradually encases both the setting and the actors. Like Ariadne’s thread, the thread of the handiwork becomes the leading means of a dramatic navigation that traverses and ties all aspects of Jelinek’s disparate theatrical world. This article will show how the concrete threads of this “handiwork” become metaphorical threads that allow us to connect the specific act of aggression with universal threats of violence beyond the confines of the locale. The notion of the “thread/threat” guides an analysis that will explore the play’s correlation of an indeterminate spatial expanse with aspects of nationhood, the threads/threats of disintegrating dialogues that characterize the players’ mode of speech, and the ubiquitous threads of quotes and references whose embodied threats exacerbate the play’s dramatic energies. The analysis will demonstrate how all these “threads” culminate in the dramatization of a threat that permeates political, social, and cultural realities everywhere.

Stecken, Stab und Stangl (Rod, Staff, and Crook) is a provocative play. An unspecified speaker provides the exposition. Proceeding from the indeterminate spatial expanse of an “Erd-Schüttung in ihrer riesigen Vermessung” (“earthy embankment with its immense mensuration”) to the shadowy four “Geistergestalten” (“ghostly figures”), the portentous “Paket mit dem Explosivstoff” (“package of explosives”), and an unnamed federal chancellor, “Herr Bundeskanzler,” (18 f.), she/he narrows the field of vision to the finite place of an identifiable people: the plenitude of the “Österreichische Menschen” (“Austri-rich people,” 23) and the “Radio-Symphonieorchester des ORF” (“orchestra of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation,” 24). This gradual concretization spans a wide spectrum of sentiments, actions, thoughts, and behaviors between the two poles of “Explosivstoff” (“explosive material,” 18) and “Friedensmelodien” (“melodies of peace,” 23).

Jelinek’s language thrives on double meanings and allusions that are often difficult to capture in translation. The German word “Vermessung,” for example, relates to the geological act of land surveying, gauging, calibrating and thus alludes to the natural, earthly, national space; at the same time, it is related to the adjective “vermessen,” which means “impudent,” “foolhardy,” “presumptuous” and thus also hints at an unfavorable aspect of the national nature, a trait of character. This means that the playwright’s theatrical act of “Vermessung” (“mensuration”) with its double German meaning takes to task the “Vermessenheit” (presumption) of a nation whose members would like nothing better than to take cover under the “Deck-Mantel” (“cloak,” 18) of their petty, private “Backhenderln” (“roasted chicken,” 23) mentality and the public image of their illustrious Olympic sports contestants.
Crocheting the Significance of Violence

At the forefront of the unfolding play is the butcher, who, in the role of a public spokesman, moderates the communal memory. In a series of interchanges both the public space of the “Mordezimmer . . . , das ein paar Quadratkilometer groß ist” (“room of the murder . . . that expands over several square miles,” 19) and the private domain of the “winzige Zimmer” (“tiny room,” 20), in which the victims’ families sit together in their suffering and sadness, are recaptured via images, commentaries, narrative blocks, and pantomimes that fill the cultural microcosm of the supermarket setting. The narrow mise-en-scène, however, in which the common grave and the abruptly terminated lives of the Roma are recalled, also opens up into a global expanse: “Unser Leben ist ebenso endlos, wie unser Gesichtsfeld an diesem Ort, an dem wir uns befinden, irgendwie grenzenlos ist. Ab hier: Asiens grenzenlose Weite. Linkes gehts zu den Alpen” (“Our life is just as endless as our field of vision is somehow limitless at this site at which we find ourselves. From here on: Asia’s limitless expanse. To the left, you get to the Alps,” 40). Thus the microcosm of play becomes the macrocosm of a humanity that faces similar challenges and fates everywhere.

Elucidations and obscurations are woven together verbally, visually, and dramaturgically. With the exception of Margit S. and Herr Stab, the characters remain unnamed. Identified only by way of their role, biological gender, or pursuit—as customer, man, woman, In-line Skater—they become the anonymous prototypes of a faceless nation while, at the same time, exemplifying the postmodern death of the subject (cf. Fiddler 131). Moreover, the butcher’s identity as Herr Stab remains unstable, even by his own admission. Issuing an order to Herr Stab, he promptly corrects himself: “Ach so, der bin ich ja selber!” (“Come to think of it, that’s me, isn’t it!” 26). Herr Stecken is conjured up as a name, yet never distinguished as a person (cf. 25). The name Stangl, which recalls the SS-commandant, Franz Stangl, appears in the title only. In the text it is historically coded via passages that provide the relevant backdrop of the Nazi death camps, the ultimate image of violence and obliteration.

What holds these speakers together as a team and a cast is not the logically ordered thread of a plot. Rather, it is a mesh of yarn used in the handiwork that is appended to the scene like a second skin. On the one hand, the threads of these yarns illustrate the communal ties that bundle the diverse elements of the cultural continuum; on the other, they act as constraints that propel the actors into desperate wrestling matches to come untied. Moreover, the persistent ties provoke bloody interventions. Most strikingly conveyed through the butcher’s brutal separation of two interlaced customers with a hatchet, the violent episode illustrates the precarious distribution of power and helplessness that looms behind seemingly playful antics.
With their incessant engagement in the needlework, the actors’ bodies weave their way through the field of action. Crocheting here is not the domestic province of women. Rather, it is the curricular pastime of pedestrian play-figures who act out the playwright’s tenacious scheme. Jelinek’s text production is reduplicated as a textile production that, as a meta-text, creates its own signifying string. The actors’ crocheting needles stand in for the author’s pen that readily takes on culturally and politically charged topics. In the play at hand, Austria’s fascist past and xenophobic present emerge as threatening homespun matters with universal ramifications.

There is, however, a significant difference between the two signifying processes. On the level of the text that purports to remember “the dead whose histories and stories are screened out of collective memory, Jelinek exposes the [nation’s] intractable efforts to overlook and forget the murder of four innocent men” (Kosta 82). Aiming her “contemptuous analytical gaze” at what Jelinek considers the “most catastrophic incident of the Second Republic” (Kosta 81), the author wants to elucidate, accuse, and unearth by exposing layers of meaning, obscured facts, and deluded mindsets. The happenings on the stage show the conditions that lead to Jelinek’s outrage and her “Anklage gegen Gott und Goethe, mein Land, die Regierung, die Zeitungen und die Zeit solo” (“denunciation of God and Goethe, my country, my government, the newspapers, and the times as such” [Jelinek, “Sinn egal. Körper zwecklos,” 10]). What appalls her is the “glaring evidence of the continuation of Austria’s fascist history—a history ‘officially’ concealed but monstrously visible in the language, images, and practices of the nation . . . whose identity is based largely on a rigid concept of ethnic heritage and homogeneity” (Kosta, 82). Her intent is to lay bare the processes that have contributed to the bulk of these “ideological embankments” (“Erd-Schüttung,” 18) and that effectively shroud the nation’s culpability. In the forefront of her persistent critique are the national media whose “proto-fascist ‘folksiness’” creates communal illusions and helps forge a majority alliance that “tries to render commonsensical the crime and to downplay its significance” (Kosta, 83 f.). Unscrupulous weavers of a dissimulated destiny, the actors’ yarn coats bodies and artifacts—like the media cover facts and truths—in layers of pink that homogenize, standardize, acculturate, and intertwine the denizens of denial. As part of a media spectacle, a parody of “mourning and remembrance” (Kosta, 84), they stand, namelessly, before “Herr Horvath, Herr Horvath, Herr Sarközi, [and] Herr Simon” (39), the four victims who made the mistake, “nicht rechtzeitig das Aussehen und die Namen unserer Bekannten angenommen zu haben” (“not to have assumed, in time, the looks and the names of our acquaintances;” 20).

Ariadne’s ball of twine guides Theseus through the labyrinth on his way to fight and overcome the Minotaur, the beast living off the sacrifice of bodies. Likewise,
Jelinek’s proverbial “red thread,” conceived as a visible pink signifier on stage, guides the members of the audience through a process of realization by deconstructing their own monster: a majority’s distorted conscience that, with a deluded fear of difference, turns a blameless minority into a national blemish and threat. Fed by fabrications, busy with the “frantic crafting of the national text” and trained to succumb to the media’s manipulation, the stage personnel renders visible the alarming manufacturing of “the image of an innocent nation” (Kosta, 88 f.).

Led by the biblical rod and staff of Psalm 23, the flock of the faithful is comforted as the group embarks on the path of righteousness and makes its journey towards the unknown. Jelinek’s sarcastic trinity of *Stecken, Stab und Stangl* (*Rod, Staff, and Crook*) embeds the biblical scripture within the framework of a thorny historical script. The play’s title alludes to the columnist Staberl from Austria’s popular *Kronen-Zeitung*, a tabloid which the author “holds largely responsible for the ‘intensified [antiforeigner] climate in Austria’” (Kosta, 87). It also resurrects Franz Stangl, the ruthless camp commander at Sobibor and Treblinka. Thus Jelinek adds depth and breadth to her audience’s field of vision. By weaving together strands of information and interknitting the past and the present, Jelinek’s “staff”—her pen and the “distaff” of the “weavers” on stage—inscribes an indictment on the *Heimarbeit* (homemade item) conjured up in the subtitle of the play. She shows how this industrious homespun enterprise becomes a reworking of the homeland—the *Heimat*—whose parliamentary democracy of the present and “murderous Nazi regime” of the past are recklessly entangled (Kosta, 89). With its contentious, parallel strategies of resisting memory and manipulating the threads/threats of current violence, the play reproduces the nation’s here and now as a theatrical setting that is affirmative, self-pleasing, and unmasking.

The handiwork-motif also extends into the layers of words and speech. Traditional drama is constituted by dialogue and speakers who relate to each other through words. This principle is suspended in Jelinek’s play. Her speakers are isolated and only rudimentarily oriented at their dialogue partners (cf. Pflüger, 22). Thus dialogue disintegrates into speech units that follow one another without expressly feeding off of each other (cf. Pflüger, 23) or propelling the action forward. Human relations and rational dialogue seem to be impossible within a scenario that is not concerned with the production of meaning but the construction of a questionable context informed by false pretenses. Under the agency of alienating verbal attitudes, interaction is not tied to purposeful exchanges. Rather than an expedient web of judicious dialogue, inane crocheting becomes the means of choice to connect the players who, quite literally, get interlaced by threads instead of words. There are

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2 The “*roter Faden,*” or connecting thematic thread of a text or story (editor’s note).
several instances in the play where two characters speak the same text, one starting at the beginning of the block, the other at the end and working backwards. As a result, the speech becomes an incomprehensible meshwork that has, as its visual counterpart, the actors’ entanglement in the crocheting yarn (e.g., 41 f.).

In addition to the mode of speech, the motif of crocheting also informs the substratum of word content. Alongside the visual homogenization of images and identities through the continuously spreading threads of the textile coating, we find, under the leitmotif of “Einmal muss Schluss sein” (“There must be an end, some time,” 50), a discourse of neutralization that refutes both the racially inspired political murder of the four Roma and the terror of Auschwitz (cf. Janz, 279). Covered by their pink, homespun outfits, which stand in crass distinction to the shrouds of the deceased (cf. 37), the actors become optical manifestations of pre-fabricated texts that, as ubiquitous quotes and references, replace authentic speech and embodied fate. Dramatic development consists of encounters of “speechscapes” (Jelinek’s Sprachflächen) that are dissociated from individualized speakers. Like the crocheted landscape, they form layers of meaning that envelop speakers, shroud faces, wrap surfaces, coat objects, and camouflage the narration of history and current event. Individual responsibility and accountability are buried deeply under an incessant montage of diverse strands of text. Hooked together like the pink tapestry that constitutes the final “Handarbeitslandschaft” (“handiworkscape,” 17), they form the striking arena of a cultural subtext in an appalling travesty of fact and fate.

Jelinek readily appropriates the texts of others. Thus she states clearly in the programmatic formulation at the end of the play: “Die Autorin hat wieder einmal Zitate bereingelegt. Sagt aber nicht welche. Raten Sie! Keine Preise zu gewinnen” (“Once again, the author has inserted citations. Does, however, not say which ones. Guess! No prizes to be won!”) (68). Notorious is the double meaning of the German word “hereinlegen” for the English “insert” which can mean both: literally “bring into the text” and metaphorically “to cheat.” The second meaning conveys the idea of “double talk” which widely characterizes the nature of the nation’s art of forgetting. Jelinek’s citations speak directly, in their denotative function, but also indirectly, by way of their connotative function, through the manner in which they are manipulated and contextualized.

The citations that liberally intersperse the text come from various domains: the newspaper, advertisement, radio, television, cultural history and the humanities. A statement by the right-wing extremist, Jörg Haider, which is representative for the public sphere and the public policy of evasion, negation, and relegation of blame, precedes the play as a motto: “Wer sagt, dass es nicht um einen Konflikt bei einem Waffengeschäft, einen Autoschieberdeal oder um Drogen gegangen ist” (“Who says that this was
not about a conflict in connection with an arms deal, a stolen car deal or drugs” (32). Other citations, mostly taken verbatim from Staberl’s columns in the Kronen-Zeitung, establish the direct line from the alleged myth of the Roma murders to the supposed Auschwitz-lie: “Warum also hätten sich die Nazis bei der Ausrottung der jüdischen Häftlinge die Komplikation antun sollen, alle Juden zu vergasen—wenn es doch so leicht war, sie auf andere, einfachere Weise umzubringen! Danke, Herr Stab, daß Sie das endlich der Vergessenheit entrissen haben!” (“Why then, when exterminating the Jewish prisoners, should the Nazis have burdened themselves with the complicated gassing of all Jews—since it was so easy to kill them in different, simpler ways! Thank you, Herr Stab, for finally wresting this from oblivion!” (44). There is, however, an essential difference between the original quotes and their fictionalization in the play: The actual newspaper commentary aims at fictionalizing reality, whereas the fictional reproduction of the citation serves Jelinek’s purpose of bringing the truth to light.

Numerous phrases are borrowed from the world of television and radio. They appear particularly grotesque when the diction and performance style of TV-shows (Kommissar Rex, a popular police drama for television; Wünsch dir was, “Make a Wish,” a family TV game show) or sports events are used to turn death into a sensationalistic media spectacle: “Liebe Zuschauer, geben Sie doch beiseite! Wir wollen auch noch hinein! Wir haben uns eine Eintrittskarte für die Besichtigung dieser Toten gekauft. Bitte nicht drängen . . .!” (“Dear spectators, move aside, please. We, too, are trying to get in! We bought a ticket for the viewing of these dead people. Please, don’t push . . .!” (36). Heidegger, as a cultural icon with a tainted political background, does not get away unscathed either. As “Univ. Prof. Dr. H.,” who equates “Die Landwirtschaft” (“agriculture”) as a “motorisierte Nahrungsmittelindustrie” (“motorized food industry”) with the “Fabrikation von Leichen in den Gaskammern” (“fabrication of corpses in the gas chambers”) he becomes a questionable custodian of the past in a discourse that diffuses and offends (43).

Particularly striking are the citations of Paul Celan-poems that are woven into the text in seventeen places. Their function and meaning relative to our guiding image of thread/threat is multifaceted. As poetic “speechscapes,” they form threads of “strangeness” within the patterns, images, and flow of the surrounding everyday speech, media capers, and tabloid jargon. However, Jelinek purposefully avoids the use of identifying markers by inscribing/weaving them seamlessly into the text. As a result of this amalgamation, the various speech threads bring about an unwritten, synthetic supertext with a polarized spectrum. On the one hand, speech-parts like the following that incorporate Celan into the play’s world of consumerism devalue the Jewish poet’s words as commodities: “Der Fleischer beipflichtend: Fahlstimmig, aus der Tiefe geschunden: kein Wort, kein Ding und beider einziger Name . . ., wunder Gewinn einer Welt. Mir macht das nichts aus. Darfs ein bissel mehr sein?” (“The Butcher in agreement: Wan-
voiced, flayed from the depths: not a word, not a thing, and of both the single name . . . wounded gain of a world. It does not matter to me. You mind if it’s a little more?” 40; “Fahlstimmig”/“Wan-voiced” trans. Felstiner, 247). By seamlessly integrating the various strands, the text moves toward neutralizing and annihilating the strange voice, thus repeating symbolically, in language, the violent acts of annihilation of those “strangers,” the millions of Jews and the four Roma, whose fates the play interrelates (cf. Janz, 281). The dissonance of the different textual threads illustrates quite forcefully the ultimate threat that lies in past perversion and present perpetration. However, the poet’s voice, which is dedicated to the process of inscribing memory, loses its power as incorporated, undistinguished, and carelessly uttered speech part. Therefore, by citing Celan, the figures delve into the denial of the historical truth, which is at the heart of their whole verbal exercise (cf. Janz, 282).

On the other hand, the shoppers at the butcher’s counter do perceive the strangeness of Celan’s voice: Thus a customer states:

Also das wäre nun wirklich nicht nötig gewesen! Daß Sie uns hier einen befremdlichen Sachverhalt mit so befremdlichen Worten darlegen. Ich erinnere mich an dieser Stelle lieber der Firma Revue-Augenoptik, als sie sich bereit erklärte, mir jungem Mann, der ich in der U-Bahn bestohlen worden bin, gratis eine neue Brille anzufertigen (“Well, that would not have been necessary! To present to us such a strange matter in such strange words. At this point, I would rather remember the company Revue-Optometry, that agreed to give me, a young man, who was subjected to theft in the subway, a new pair of glasses at no extra cost,” 40).

As this evasive rejoinder indicates, it is an incommodious strangeness that encroaches upon the figures’ space which, in turn, must be protected from any unpleasant threads/threats, past and present.

The optometrical reference, however, provides yet another view. Within the play, Celan’s voice presents a verbal thread that defies the characters’ determined forgetfulness with regard to the disputed historical truth. For the reader/spectator, Jelinek’s crocheted stage cloak (“Deck-Mantel,” 18) is a visual reminder of the defects in the characters’ vision. Conceived as a meshwork of diametrically opposed threads, her stage script that exposes the malevolent cover-up of past atrocities forms a corrective lens through which the audience is encouraged to penetrate the deceptive layer of a made-to-fit world. Thus the verbal thread which is, simultaneously, a reminder of an ultimate threat, becomes an interface that shows a postmodern process of double coding at work: The play’s fresh energy and urgency revalue and revitalize a past that gains a renewed momentum by its dislocation into a theatrical design of the present (cf. Fuchs, 34).
Finally, on the visual level in the play’s written form, the seamless integration of the Celan citations into a homogenous textual image also evokes the possibility of a societal image. In analogy to the various threads of the text that blend into one another, it would be desirable to create a social plateau that allows its members to be different, yet included, and that renders “the distinctions between ‘citizens’ and ‘aliens,’ ‘us’ and ‘them,’ fluid and negotiable through democratic iterations” (Benhabib, *Rights of Others*, 21). The play as a whole, however, with its chaotic outcome, dismisses this option as unfeasible. In the end, the butcher recklessly attacks the customers with his staff. One after another they fall, only to be swept up by him as inconsequential remains so that the drama can begin anew.

In *Rod, Staff, and Crook*, Jelinek engineers an artful construction, controlled manipulation, and calculated destruction of the verbal and theatrical edifice. Ultimately, the juxtaposed “speechscapes” that rub against each other contribute to the unraveling of the verbal patchwork with its focus on the process of denial. Paradoxically, her tenacious pursuit of the scheme of shrouding, coating, and wrapping brings forth her strategy’s tactical opposite. Her thoroughly disturbing piece of the assassination of four outsiders unequivocally exposes the threads/threats of abuse orchestrated by a culturally coded history of exclusion. Aesthetically and dramaturgically, it thematizes a complex, deep-seated social and historical unease fomented by pervasive changes in the national and multicultural make-up of our modern world where “we are daily confronted with culture ‘skirmishes,’ if not wars” (Benhabib, *Claims of Culture*, 1). Thus it urges us to envision “a postmetaphysical and postnational conception of cosmopolitan solidarity” (Benhabib, *Claims of Culture*, 4) that gives all participants constitutional rights, individual security, and a recognized voice.

Like Penelope who weaves and unravels a burial shroud to stay faithful to Odysseus, Jelinek keeps weaving texts that unravel the pitfalls of selective memory, the dangers of a forged national identity, the perils of a self-righteous rationality, and the slipperiness of duped sentiments. Thus she stays faithful to her ambitious and controversial maneuvers that pursue one thread above all. In unwavering pursuit of exposing politico-cultural ills, what she wants to do on stage is “die Wirklichkeit herausfordern” (“to challenge reality”; Jelinek, “Sinn egal,” 9). As a reminder of past and present atrocities, her play is aimed at all of us and particularly at those (to borrow from Luce Irigaray, 296) whose blindness shrouds their memory and who forget that they have forgotten.
Works Cited:


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