Wilhelm Müller's *Leiermann*, Elfriede Jelinek's *Leierfrau*, and Radical Repetition

Joanna Neilly

Abstract
Wilhelm Müller's 1824 cycle *Die Winterreise*, and particularly its final poem 'Der Leiermann', are often read as nihilistic expressions of a Romantic death wish. The wanderer moves into a state of eternal alienation, symbolized by the icy landscape where he will forever rehearse his songs of loneliness and despair to the much-maligned music of the outcast hurdy-gurdy man, who has in turn been read as a harbinger of death. This article argues that such readings overlook the radically critical mode taken up by the wanderer when he stops his journey, dismissing a Romantic aesthetics of forwards striving in favour of a (paradoxically) new aesthetics of repetition. The subversive potential of this act is revealed in Elfriede Jelinek's 2011 play *Winterreise,* in which a hurdy-gurdy woman challenges a modern culture obsessed with novelty by stubbornly refusing to move. By rereading Müller's 'Der Leiermann' in dialogue with Jelinek's experimental reworking, we can recognize how both works reject the chimerical lure of the future for the sake of deliberate attention to the present moment. Müller's poem is not, then, the nadir of a self-destructive Romanticism, but an innovative escape from its logical end.

Keywords: *Winterreise,* Wilhelm Müller, Elfriede Jelinek, Romanticism, repetition

At the beginning of Ian McEwan's 2014 novel *The Children Act,* a husband walks out on his wife, the High Court judge Fiona Maye. The next night Fiona, an accomplished amateur musician in her late fifties, keeps herself distracted by practising the piano part for an upcoming recital. The narrative implies that her chosen pieces mirror her mood. She 'imagin[es] the tenor's part, lingering over Schubert's mournful "Der Leiermann", the hurdy-gurdy man, who is poor and wretched and ignored'.[1] Fiona is neither poor nor wretched, and if she feels ignored by her husband, he throws the same charge at her. Her affinity with the hurdy-gurdy man arises from her age, or at least her perception of it, which is rather overstated in the stereotypical image of a post-menopausal woman nearing retirement who believes she has left sexual desire in her youth. Prematurely sensing the winter of her life, Fiona is drawn to the stark music of 'Der Leiermann', less as a form of comfort than a means of self-identification in a moment of loneliness.

Such interpretations are widespread. The tenor Ian Bostridge describes 'the wretched old hurdy-gurdy man' as an 'outcast fragment of humanity' who provokes not only pity but 'the fear that this lonely, squalid figure could be us'.[2] Writing about Wilhelm Müller's original text, Bernd Leistner reads the hurdy-gurdy man as the final confirmation that Müller's weary traveller is condemned to a life of alienation, denied even the comfort of death.[3] Manfred Frank likewise sees in him the wanderer's double, an outcast in the cold.[4]

[1] Ian McEwan, *The Children Act* (London: Vintage, 2017), p. 59.
[2] Ian Bostridge, *Schubert's Winter Journey: Anatomy of an Obsession* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), pp. 475–76.
[3] Bernd Leistner, 'Einleitung', in Wilhelm Müller, *Werke, Tagebücher, Briefe*, ed. by Maria-Verena Leistner, I: *Gedichte I* (Berlin: Gatza, 1994), pp. vii–lix (p. il).
[4]Manfred Frank, *Die unendliche Fahrt: Die Geschichte des Fliegenden Holländers und verwandter Motive* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1995), p. 172. Lily E. Hirsch makes a similar observation in *A Jewish*

‘Der Leiermann’ is the final poem in Müller’s 24-poem cycle *Die Winterreise* (1824), and it retains this position in Schubert’s setting. A major reason why readers and listeners find the poem so disturbing is the fact that it offers no escape from the existential angst that has plagued the poetic subject in the preceding poems. The cycle tracks the mercurial mood of a wanderer travelling through a winter landscape, who initially seems to be merely a disappointed lover. He quickly moves beyond the specific pain of a failed relationship to give voice to an essential dread of the human condition: the loneliness of subjectivity. The wanderer experiences the spiritual coldness of social alienation. This could be bearable if there weren’t currents of warm feeling surviving just beneath the surface, threatening to erupt and cause a painful thaw. *Die Winterreise* is thus the struggle to contain the human passions which threaten the façade of self-sufficiency.

The hurdy-gurdy man is the second person the wanderer meets on his journey (the first is a charcoal burner who provides temporary shelter) and, sensing a spiritual affinity, the wanderer asks, in the cycle’s final lines, ‘Willst zu meinen Liedern / Deine Leier drehn?’[5] He thus renounces his solitude, but at a cost: he joins his fate to that of an unsuccessful beggar, whose playing earns him no money. Standing barefoot on the ice, an empty plate in front of him, with only growling dogs for company, the hurdy-gurdy man is the material embodiment of the wanderer’s spiritual condition; to join him is not to change the outcast’s fate but to confirm it.

To compound this apparently tragic conclusion, the wanderer has now accepted that his melancholy, despair, and essential difference from the rest of humanity will be rehearsed *ad infinitum*. Love has eluded him, death has eluded him, and all that remains is to recite his own fate once more, this time to the sound of a much-maligned instrument and its monotonous drone.[6] If the *Leiermann* acquiesces, the logic of the final poem demands a return to the first poem, which now becomes the first song in a cycle that will never end. The traveller progresses from one solo recital of his poems to an endless singing with sombre accompaniment.[7] Preparing the way for this eternal recurrence, ‘Der Leiermann’ employs themes and motifs from earlier poems. Like the wanderer who feels unwelcome in civilized society, the beggar’s place is on the outskirts of human settlements (‘Drüben hinterm Dorfe’, 185); he stands on the ice, mimicking the wanderer who lingers on the surface of the frozen river in the eighth poem, ‘Auf dem Flusse’ (175–06); and the growling dogs recall the unfriendly guard dogs already encountered in ‘Gute Nacht’ (170–01) and ‘Im Dorfe’ (179). The poem’s repetitive content thus foreshadows its ultimate demand for an abysmal return.

In the following, however, I will contend that the wanderer’s shift into eternal repetition is not an inescapable destiny of which he is the passive victim. On the contrary, it

---

Orchestra in Nazi Germany: Musical Politics and the Berlin Jewish Culture League (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 99.

[5] Wilhelm Müller, *Die Winterreise*, in Müller, *Werke*, ed. by Leistner, I, pp. 170–86 (p. 186). Subsequent references are made in parentheses in the main body of the text.

[6] For a discussion of the hurdy-gurdy’s sound and its negative reception by the end of the eighteenth century, see Bostridge, pp. 466–70.

[7] J. W. Smeed claims that Müller’s creation of an unending lament is ‘one of the things that make *Winterreise* so extraordinarily sombre: there is no easy slipping into the comfort of nothingness’. J. W. Smeed, ‘“Strange Old Man”: Thoughts on the Closing Lines of *Winterreise*’, *GLL*, 45.2 (1992), 109–13 (p. 110).

is a determined choice. He thereby overcomes the stereotypical Romantic fate of self-negation, occasioned by a constant striving forwards and concomitant effacement of the present. As will be shown, *Die Winterreise* ultimately constitutes a radical criticism of Romanticism's orientation towards the future. Repetition turns out to be the unexpected rejection of Romanticism's existential trap and, just as unexpectedly, *Die Winterreise* becomes an affirmation of life. Its subject transforms his vast spatial journey into a temporal stillness when he joins the hurdy-gurdy man who stands stoically on the ice; the poetic journey into darkness also ends insofar as the wanderer renounces the quest for death and instead asks to keep the present moment alive.

The implications of the wanderer's ultimate agency have been made explicit in a hurdy-gurdy man radically reimagined for the twenty-first century. Elfriede Jelinek's 2011 experimental 'Theaterstück' *Winterreise* includes a *Leierfrau*— a figure of Jelinek herself — who resolutely '[bewegt] sich keinen Millimeter' and cranks out the same tune in the face of insistent demands from the public for something new.[8] Müller's *Leiermann* and Jelinek's *Leierfrau* emerge as critics of their own time. In both cases this means opposing what Lee Edelman calls a 'pathological […] investment in the promise of something that is *always* "to come"'.[9] Upon meeting the organ grinder, Müller's protagonist extricates himself from Romanticism's lure ever onwards, while Jelinek's hurdy-gurdy woman steps outside of time and thus exposes the characteristic mode of living in an age of accelerated news and entertainment cycles: an uncritical drive towards self-annihilation in the guise of an unquenchable desire for novelty. Rather than hastening death, the hurdy-gurdy player slows its approach in defiance of the cultural norms of his or her time.

***

The rejected lover and subject of Müller's poem cycle is a Romantic protagonist without a backstory. We learn very little about the circumstances of his broken relationship, and nothing about his life up until the start of the journey. He is an empty cipher in whom we can read the accumulated fates of his Romantic predecessors: lonely wanderers whose earthly dissatisfaction holds the promise of a better life in a world beyond. This common reading is sustained because the traveller makes recurrent references to death and seems compelled to hurry its approach. He moves urgently ever onwards, even when he could linger if he so chose, for example in the fifth poem 'Der Lindenbaum' (173–04) and the nineteenth poem which tells of only momentary 'Rast' (182). An inner compulsion is revealed in the verb 'müssen'. He declares 'Muß selbst den Weg mir weisen' (170) in the opening poem 'Gute Nacht', and in 'Der Lindenbaum', 'Ich mußt auch heute wandern' (173). Most ominously, 'Der Wegweiser' ends with the lines 'Eine Straße muß ich gehen, / Die noch keiner ging zurück' (180). This is his imagined path to death, which he prefers to the actual paths favoured by the other wanderers mentioned in the same poem. Similarly, 'Der greise Kopf'

[8] Elfriede Jelinek, *Winterreise: Ein Theaterstück*, 3rd edn (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2015), p. 120. Subsequent references are made in parentheses in the main body of the text.
[9] Lee Edelman, 'The Pathology of the Future, or the Endless Triumphs of Life', in *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism*, ed. by Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), pp. 35–46 (p. 35).

(177) describes his disappointment upon realizing that the white in his hair is only frost and that his youth is frustrating his desire for death.

'Der greise Kopf' foreshadows the image of decline and death that several commentators see in the hurdy-gurdy man. The *Leiermann* has been described as 'the refracted image of the wanderer himself, his own fears given independent life and form', 'a sort of older copy of [the wanderer]', and as an image representing 'the contemplation of an old age devoid of any spiritual warmth'.[10] The wanderer's desired final destination is in keeping with the trajectories of Romantic wanderers more generally. Andrew Cusack's illuminating study charts a cultural shift from the portrayal of wandering as a means of *Bildung* (and thus a vital pedagogical stage leading to the subject's ultimate social integration), to its representative function in separating the subject from a society whose aesthetic sensibilities are not in line with his own. This is the journey of the Romantic, or 'modern' artist:

> If the ritual journey of the traditional artisan restores him to the aesthetic horizons of his society, the ritual journey of the modern artist — who no longer shares these horizons — is, in contrast, an initiation into a permanent threshold state, the proper domain of the autonomous artist [.][11]

Romantic artists, if they travel, tend to journey towards the periphery or even to fantastical realms that more than hint at the afterlife. Novalis planned to have Heinrich von Ofterdingen travel into the cosmos, while Hoffmann's *Der goldene Topf* (1814) sees the poet Anselmus live a nebulous 'Leben in der Poesie' in the lost kingdom of Atlantis; meanwhile back on earth his contemporaries think, with good reason, that he has drowned himself in the river Elbe.[12]

The trope of artistic enlightenment occasioned by death is common enough to be satirized even by those who make regular use of it. An example is Hoffmann's *Die Elixiere des Teufels* (1815), in which Medardus's reaction to his beloved's death typifies the Romantic artist to the point of parody: 'Aureliens Tod war das Weihfest jener Liebe, die, wie Aurelie sprach, nur über den Sternen thront, und nichts gemein hat mit dem Irdischen. — Diese Gedanken erhoben mich über mein Irdisches Selbst.'[13] This recalls the male protagonist of Friedrich Schlegel's 1799 novel *Lucinde*, who imagines his lover's death (which does not actually happen) as a positive transcendence of time worthy of his

---

[10] Susan Youens, *Retracing a Winter's Journey: Schubert's* Winterreise (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 299; J. W. Smeed, 'Strange Old Man', p. 110; Alan P. Cottrell, *Wilhelm Müller's Lyrical Song-Cycles: Interpretations and Texts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), p. 67.

[11] Andrew Cusack, *The Wanderer in Nineteenth-Century German Literature: Intellectual History and Cultural Criticism* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2008), p. 74.

[12] E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Hartmut Steinecke and Wulf Segebrecht, 6 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–2004), II.1, 321. For the theory that Anselmus commits suicide, see James McGlathery, 'The Suicide Motif in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf*', *Monatshefte*, 58.2 (1966), 115–23, and Anthony Harper and Oliver Norman, 'What Really Happens to Anselmus? "Impermissible" and "Irrelevant" Questions about E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf*', *New German Studies*, 11 (1983), 113–22.

[13] Hoffmann, *Sämtliche Werke*, II.2, 348.

emulation.[14] If 'wanderers striving for infinity' express the eternal perfectibility of Romanticism, the search for the pure spirit of art runs the danger of tipping into nihilism when it becomes a drive to self-negation.[15]

Manfred Frank suggests that this is the mode of *Die Winterreise*. Appearing at a very late stage of German Romanticism, Müller's cycle employs tropes by now emptied of specific meaning — the theme of broken love being merely an excuse for the despair that follows — to point towards 'eine Menschheitsdämmerung'.[16] The worst of this is that the grave cannot provide an end to despair. The wanderer journeys towards the much-desired afterlife, following in the footsteps of his literary forebears, but it eludes him. Romanticism's spiritual promise is stripped away, leaving behind only a 'ziellose Wanderung', or a kind of living death.[17] Although Frank points out the poetic subject's tendency towards an inward journey of self-reflection, often a positive Romantic trait that enables critical engagement in the manner of Friedrich Schlegel, he also notes that the increasing interiorization is depicted in wintry tones because human hearts have become cold and hard.[18] As a late Romantic journey, *Die Winterreise* cynically inverts the homecoming of self-discovery once declared by Novalis: 'Wir träumen von Reisen durch das Weltall: ist denn das Weltall nicht in uns?'[19] The nadir of the Romantic journey has been reached: Müller's wanderer, who has little or no unique character of his own, is the culmination of a tradition of lonely figures who travel ceaselessly through ice and snow. Among this cast of Romantic misfits Frank lists the outsider Peter Schlemihl; Frankenstein's monster, denied companionship and traversing the icy wastelands, could be an additional predecessor.[20]

Even if death itself is elusive, the wanderer's compulsive travelling is generally read as the expression of a death wish. This interpretation of *Die Winterreise* remains persistent, but can be productively complicated with reference to Lee Edelman's writing on the temporality of Romanticism. Writing about the Romantic aim of transcendence — the imagined dissolution of fragmentary experiences and subjective time into an overarching spiritual unity that would embrace mankind and the natural world — Edelman notes that Romantic poets are logically bound to look beyond the present moment; to strive to overcome it. This requires 'a perspective within which the temporal chain is imagined from the vantage point of its impossible totalization' that 'offer[s] a glimpse of what would otherwise exceed our apprehension'.[21] The '*impossible* totalization' (my emphasis) remains the sought-after ideal: movement ever forwards is the Romantic mode of being. This entails a sublimation of the present, so that what appears to be a commitment to novelty and invention (the Romantic

[14] Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde*, in Friedrich Schlegel, *Dichtungen und Aufsätze*, ed. by Wolfdietrich Rasch (Munich: Hanser, 1984), pp. 9–111 (pp. 84–85).
[15] Cusack, p. 77.
[16] Frank, p. 168.
[17] Frank, p. 167.
[18] Frank, pp. 173–74.
[19] Novalis, *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. by Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel, 4 vols (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–77), II, 417 and 419. On homecoming, see Frank, pp. 174–75.
[20] Frank, pp. 162–63.
[21] Edelman, p. 35.

genius) quickly betrays the 'indissociability of destruction from the […] fantasy of "new beginnings"'.[22]

In itself this is not a new observation. What is striking about Edelman's intervention is his coupling of the Romantic condition with biological reproduction. The standard view of this pairing is that marriage, and by extension reproduction of the species, runs counter to the aims of the Romantic artist, dissipating creative energies in a socially sanctioned utilitarian function.[23] For Edelman biological reproduction is not opposed to Romantic production, but a metaphor for it. He argues that the Romantic tendency towards effacement of the present in the name of future transcendence is akin to the reproduction of the species, which relies on the passing of individual lives for the sake of the survival of the whole. In Edelman's terminology, this 'reproductive futurism' characterizes Romanticism's aesthetics of self-negation.

Applied to *Die Winterreise*, Edelman's theory reveals that Müller's attitude to Romantic temporality is more nuanced than standard readings suggest. On the one hand, the wanderer is initially future-bound and drawn to death. The poem 'Das Wirtshaus' specifically expresses his desire to go to his grave, while his movement forwards, commanded in the penultimate line of the same poem, 'Nun weiter denn, nur weiter' (181), is self-motivated and nothing short of obsessive, echoing the earlier 'Es brennt mir unter beiden Sohlen' from the poem 'Rückblick' (176). Moreover, the traveller's lack of a personal story and his poorly defined character, which as I have suggested make him a generic figure of the Romantic male artist, mean he can be read as a cipher for Romanticism itself, for an aesthetic journey of self-transcendence or, more cynically, self-annihilation.

On the other hand, we would be hard-pressed to argue that *Die Winterreise* in any way celebrates this flight from the here and now. The protagonist's desired escape from the present is not imagined as a merging of the subjective self with the universe or as an artistic apotheosis, as it is in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* and *Der goldene Topf* respectively. It is simply a wish to end all experience and feeling. For this reason, *Die Winterreise* cannot be read as typical of the particular Romantic mode Edelman outlines, according to which 'life's triumph is inseparable from rigor mortis', because there is nothing triumphal or transcendent about the end goal for which its subject at first strives.[24] If Müller's wanderer represents the aesthetics of self-negation suggested by more cynical readings of the Romantic project, his function is critically reflective rather than affirmative. This is true on two levels: first, the drive towards the future is not positively depicted; second, the traveller eventually casts off the burden of his literary prototypes by refusing to carry on the endless journey, opting instead to stand still with the organ grinder. 'Der Leiermann' rejects the Romantic imperative to create ever anew and turns instead to an aesthetics of repetition. This sudden shift will dictate the poetic project from the moment the cycle begins again. After its first recitation, every subsequent performance of the cycle is repetitive and grounded in the present moment of a lasting encounter between the poet and the street musician.

---

[22] Edelman, p. 39.
[23] See Thomas Klinkert and Weertje Willms, 'Romantic Gender and Sexuality', in *Romantic Prose Fiction*, ed. by Gerald Gillespie, Manfred Engel, and Bernard Dieterle (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: Benjamins, 2008), pp. 226–48 (p. 244).
[24] Edelman, p. 45.

The organ grinder and, by the end of the cycle, the traveller, emerge as nonconformists posing a critical challenge to a tired trope of late Romanticism. Edelman identifies a category of people who radically obstruct forwards motion by 'turning back' in 'a movement of repetition and regression'.[25] A pioneer of queer theory, Edelman calls such figures 'sinthomosexuals', who may be denigrated as regressive because they do not urge on the creation of new life, instead '[relentlessly opposing] a futurism whose image is the Child'.[26] Crucially, however, they resist the assumption of value in newness, an assumption which is in any case self-defeating because the very idea of a new beginning paradoxically relies on a history of repeated starting over: 'change on one level paves the way for constancy on another', so that self-perpetuating motion forwards, and therefore destruction of the old, must logically never end.[27]

The value of Edelman's theory for *Die Winterreise* is mainly symbolic, thanks to the connection he draws between artistic and biological production, and I am not arguing here for a specifically queer theory reading of the poems. Nevertheless it is worth noting in passing that Müller's subject may have rejected marriage, just as he ultimately rejects the Romantic role of eternal traveller (or creator) which on the surface appeared to be his inevitable fate. A brief hint at his distaste for marriage appears in the opening poem, 'Gute Nacht', in which the idyllic line 'Das Mädchen sprach von Liebe' is answered by the rather more ambiguous statement 'Die Mutter gar von Eh' – ' (170). The emphatic 'gar' could underscore the beauty of such a dream, but the traveller's claim two stanzas later that 'Die Liebe liebt das Wandern' (170) could just as easily refer to his own love as to the girl's inconstancy, implying retrospectively that the 'gar' indicates an instinctive horror rather than joy at the prospect of lifelong commitment to one person. Furthermore, his reduction of the girl to a rather insipid 'Liebchen' strips her of any originality, recalling the bite at the end of Heine's poem 'Sie saßen und tranken am Teetisch' (1822), which uses the same term to suggest that the addressee could be one of any number of sweet but unremarkable girls.[28] If the failed relationship is indeed, as Frank argues, merely a pretext for the following journey, the traveller's early rejection of marriage and procreation may anticipate the act of artistic resistance in 'Der Leiermann', which brings an end to Romantic striving. For Edelman, such acts triumph over the destruction of the individual.

Even before the final poem, the wanderer shows a determination not to get lost on the Romantic paths that promise a way out of present dissatisfactions. Andreas Dorschel has convincingly argued that *Die Winterreise* is a work of Enlightenment.[29] It depicts the self-determination of a subject who retains the ability to reflect because he is not engulfed by dreams. The realms of dream, death, and nature do not fulfil their promise, and the traveller ultimately rejects *Schein* for *Sein*, or the imagined future for the real present.[30] As Dorschel

[25] Edelman, p. 40.
[26] Edelman, p. 40.
[27] Edelman, p. 36.
[28] Heinrich Heine, *Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, ed. by Manfred Windfuhr, I.1: *Buch der Lieder*, ed. by Pierre Grappin (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1975), pp. 182–85.
[29] Andreas Dorschel, 'Wilhelm Müllers *Die Winterreise* und die Erlösungsversprechen der Romantik', *GQ*, 66.4 (1993), 467–76.
[30] Dorschel, p. 472.

points out, the wanderer actively denies the value of dreaming in 'Im Dorfe' ('Was will ich unter den Schläfern säumen?', 179) and, as we have seen, death eludes him. This is not merely chance, however, for when 'Der Lindenbaum' calls him temptingly back with the promise of eternal rest, he actively chooses to keep walking away from its lure. Dorschel aligns the wanderer with Kant's enlightened subject who sets off on an 'Ausgang […] aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit', avoiding 'die Wege, / Wo die andren Wandrer gehn' ('Der Wegweiser', 180) as he charts his own path.[31] This self-reliance culminates in the twenty-third poem, 'Mut!', which concludes with the upbeat

> Lustig in die Welt hinein
> Gegen Wind und Wetter!
> Will kein Gott auf Erden sein,
> Sind wir selber Götter. (185)

Frank reads this poem as a bitter parody of self-determination in a godless world.[32] Certainly its tone is unexpected given the preceding 'Einsamkeit' (184), but this shift to a life-affirming lyrical mode is entirely logical. It precedes the traveller's awakening in 'Der Leiermann', his decisive break from a fate so well-worn it was threatening to turn him into little more than a Romantic automaton. By asking the hurdy-gurdy man to join him in an act of repetition, he actually becomes more self-reflexive because he disrupts a trajectory already decided by a literary-cultural blueprint, which initially numbed his creative agency. Returning to the start of the cycle inaugurates a newly critical mode. Repetition is an aesthetic form offering, in Rüdiger Görner's words, 'ein notwendiges Korrektiv zu unserem Verlangen, immer Neues, Unerhörtes, Unvergleichliches zu erleben'.[33]

***

Jelinek's *Winterreise* is an experimental play composed of eight scenes, with no defined characters or roles, no stage directions, and no distinct plot. Each of the scenes is a long prose text, sometimes spoken in a single voice, at other times by a collective, and often fragmented in style. There is a range of topics, including autobiographical memories, contemporary lifestyles via reflections on internet dating and wellness culture, scandalous episodes in recent Austrian history, and environmental concerns about how the tourist industry manages the natural landscape. The first and eighth scenes provide a loose frame, each presenting a speaker who feels she cannot keep step with time. Another obvious thread is the debt to Müller's text. Some of the scenes appear to be extended reflections inspired by particular poems from *Die Winterreise*. In the first scene the speaker mentions a 'Wanderpflicht' (7), reminding us of Müller's 'Gute Nacht', and 'Die Post', in which Müller's wanderer knows he will have no letter from his beloved, is reimagined in Jelinek's scene about online dating, in which a 'Klingelton' replaces the post horn (56). The scene of most interest here is the final one, which presents the immovable hurdy-gurdy woman.

---

[31] Dorschel, p. 468.
[32] Frank, pp. 168–69.
[33] Rüdiger Görner, *Ästhetik der Wiederholung: Versuch über ein literarisches Formprinzip* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015), p. 14.

Jelinek amalgamates the wanderer and the organ grinder into a single figure, so that travelling and standing still become one and the same. This is possible because her *Winterreise* is an existential journey in time, imagined — as it transpires in the eighth scene — from the perspective of an ageing artist, the physically immobile *Leierfrau* and Jelinek persona. As Aleida Assmann has demonstrated, Jelinek's innovation is to portray alienation not in terms of the narrating subject's spatial distance from others, but via her sense of falling out of time and being left behind by a self-renewing present.[34] Responding to Schubert's music, in an essay included in the theatre programme for *Winterreise*'s première, Jelinek describes it as a 'Zeitpeitsche aus Klang'.[35] The time-whip recalls the compulsive forwards motion of Müller's original protagonist, and his singularity is evoked in Jelinek's response to Schubert as a '[Komponist] des brüchigen Bodens' who makes his listener feel 'diese Erniedrigung, etwas suchen zu müssen, das für die meisten andren einfach da ist'.[36] For Jelinek, Schubert's musical settings therefore both make outcasts of some listeners, and invite sympathy for marginalized subjects, an aesthetic paradox recently identified by Tom Smith.[37] Here marginalization is specifically related to our experience of time, for the *Leierfrau*, who narrates part of the final scene, is charged with the aesthetic sin of repetition, and therefore growing irrelevance, by a public hungry for constant innovations and novelties. The rest of the eighth scene is voiced by a collective mass representing this public; the people insist that they will ignore the organ grinder's playing and they increasingly drown out her music by clamouring for something else and playing music of their own choice. As the scene closes, the *Leierfrau*, who has insistently stood on the same spot for as long as anyone can remember, sinks into freezing water as the ice melts beneath her feet, and disappears. She is no longer visible nor audible, stifled by the overwhelming voice of the victorious present.[38]

And yet the *Leierfrau* is undeniably the focus of the final scene. Her refusal to perform to the demands of her contemporaries provokes them to such an extent that they spend all their creative energies negatively, trying to unlock the brakes she applies to the speedy passage of time. They mock her, accuse her of plagiarism, insist they cannot and will not hear her, even cajole her in the hope that she will give up her playing and join them in their endless search for the new, but as is clear from their agitation, their vigorous efforts to deny her importance are the very proof of her disruptive impact. Like her Romantic predecessor, the *Leierfrau* obstructs renewal; she aligns with Müller's organ grinder by forcing us to pause and critically assess our relationship to time and to artistic production.

The temporal journey of *Winterreise* takes place across a personal and a national timeline, and it expands to become a cultural critique. The latter constitutes another of Jelinek's innovative responses to Müller's poems, for the futuristic aesthetic of Romanticism is transposed onto a world in which invention has a primarily commercial value, as part of an

[34] Aleida Assmann, 'Aus der Zeit gefallen: Elfriede Jelinek's *Winterreise*', *OGS*, 46.4 (2017), 388–402 (p. 391).
[35] Elfriede Jelinek, 'Zu Franz Schubert', in Johan Simons (dir.), *Winterreise von Elfriede Jelinek*, Schauspielhaus der Münchner Kammerspiele, 3 February 2011 (theatre programme, no pagination).
[36] Jelinek, 'Zu Franz Schubert'.
[37] Tom Smith, 'Emotional Ambivalence and the Musical Canon: Elfriede Jelinek's Restaging of Schubert's Songs in *Winterreise* (2011)', *GLL*, 71.3 (2018), 331–52.
[38] See also Assmann, p. 400.

entertainment industry that distracts the public from the difficult work of critical reflection. Jelinek's polemic is most forceful in the final scene. Before this, *Winterreise* delves into the various levels on which memory is mediated: personal, public, and national. It includes biographical details of the author's own life, such as feelings of guilt about her father's marginalization and her fraught relationship with her mother. It also features relatively recent events in Austrian history, for example the 2009 Hypo Alpe Adria bank scandal, and the kidnapping of Natascha Kampusch in 1998 and her escape in 2006. These memories, alternately subjective and collective, are experienced differently. As Assmann argues, the gulf between the objective and reliably regular passage of time on the one hand and the subjective 'Zeitgefühl' on the other is exacerbated by the experience of ageing, brought to the fore by Jelinek's repetitive use of the term 'vorbei' throughout the play.[39] In sum, this becomes a 'Herausfallen aus der Zeit im Sinne eines Verlusts von Zeitgenossenschaft', particularly because the speed of the modern news cycle and the public's brief attention span seem to cause such an extreme contraction of the present moment that anyone who pauses for remembrance or reflection is instantly rendered anachronistic.[40]

One form of remembrance, criticized by the crowds in the eighth scene, is the reworking of cultural tradition. Jelinek intersperses much of Müller's text through *Winterreise,* sometimes lifting it directly from the original or changing it only slightly, other times by allusion. This return to literary tradition is in itself transgressive because the *Leierfrau*/Jelinek figure is accused of producing 'alles aus zweiter, dritter Hand' (118), whereas in fact she creatively reimagines *Die Winterreise* in order to intervene in an ongoing discourse of temporality.[41] One example is her quotation of a line from 'Gute Nacht', which in Müller's cycle is also later alluded to in 'Der Wegweiser':

> [Die Zeit] gibt uns freigiebig, was kommt, sie nimmt uns gnadenlos, was war, sie nimmt uns das Vorbei, obwohl wir ständig an allem vorbeigehen. Wüßten wir, wie wichtig es einmal werden wird, wir würden stehenbleiben und es genießen, doch das geht nicht. Wir können nicht anders. Vorbei ist vorbei. Fragen Sie die Zeit! Sie wird es Ihnen bestätigen. Vorbei. Ich kann nicht anders. Muß selbst den Weg mir weisen, aber der geht dann auch immer nur an meinem Vorbei vorbei. Jetzt bin ich zwar da. Aber nützt mir das was? Nein. Denn ich bin da und auch schon wieder weg. (12)

The use of Müller's 'muß selbst den Weg mir weisen' seems here almost an impossibility, for in contrast to the original wanderer through space, Jelinek's figure is trying to signpost her own way through a time that cannot be marked because it only ever vanishes.

The alternative to chasing time is standing still; Jelinek has described *Winterreise* as 'die Reise im Stillstand'.[42] A close reading of the final scene can shed light on the seeming paradox of progression through inertia. The scene is set on Austrian ski slopes; all around the

[39] Assmann, pp. 390 and 394.
[40] Assmann, p. 391.
[41] For a detailed discussion of the current 'Beschleunigungsdiskurs', see Assmann, pp. 388–90.
[42] Elfriede Jelinek, '"Fremd bin ich"; Dankesworte zur Verleihung des Mülheimer Dramatikerpreises 2011, am 26.6.2011' <https://www.elfriedejelinek.com/fmuelh11.htm> [accessed 30 December 2018].

narrating *Leierfrau* are jolly young skiers who fly downhill past her and listen to music from loudspeakers or from headphones even as they urge her to play something different. The scene is only partly narrated by the *Leierfrau*; the predominant voice is that of the collective, which also gets the last word after she has sunk into the water. The scene begins with the *Leierfrau*'s sense of being stuck in a past time, in an ageing body unsuited to the ceaseless activity of the skiers. As in Müller's poem cycle, the initial feeling is one of resignation, of being compelled to act a certain way because of forces outside of one's own control. The *Leierfrau* repeats the opening words of Müller's poem 'Rast', 'Nun merk ich erst, wie müd ich bin' (105) and expresses a loss of control relating to her remaining time on earth: 'ein andrer nimmt mir meine Zeit, Hilfe!' (106). This call for help is unanswered and 'stehenbleiben müssen' (106) remains her lot. (There is a clear biographical link to Jelinek's inability to travel because of an anxiety disorder, which she references on her website.[43])

Even worse, the *Leierfrau* fears losing her reason precisely because she cannot move and experience the contemporary world: 'Versagt die Anschauung der Welt, weil man nicht weitergehen kann, versagt auch der Verstand, der sich die Welt sowieso schon lang nicht mehr erklären kann' (107). The loss of bodily control comes with a fear of mental incapacity, confusion about contemporary life, and thus further marginalization. Within this context, Jelinek reverses Müller's 'Der greise Kopf' to describe not a would-be old man horrified by his actual youth, but a youthful public horrified by her age (106). In another explicit reference to the original poems, she claims that nobody sees her (109); this is a deliberate alignment with Müller's organ grinder, for 'Keiner mag ihn hören, / Keiner sieht ihn an' (Müller, 185). The reactions of the general public to the *Leierfrau* and, by implication, at least in part to Jelinek herself, exacerbate her feelings of irrelevance and alienation. They too repeat Müller, derisively: 'Keiner mag Sie hören, keiner sieht Sie an' (118) and address her as 'wunderliche Alte' (119). This echoes the original traveller's appeal to the hurdy-gurdy player:

> Wunderlicher Alter,
> Soll ich mit dir gehn?
> Willst zu meinen Liedern
> Deine Leier drehn? (186)

The crowds likewise invite the Jelinek figure to play her hurdy-gurdy to their songs (119). Unlike the companionship in difference achieved at the end of Müller's cycle, however, this is an invitation to join the mainstream, an effort of the collective to subsume the individual voice and erase its otherness. When she fails to comply, they turn up the volume so that even her fall into silence cannot be detected. Not only is she made to disappear, but the disappearance itself goes unmarked, seemingly confirming her fear that age has robbed her of agency.

As in *Die Winterreise*, however, alienation becomes a condition that actively enables resistance. As I have already discussed, the *Leierfrau* is a disruptive figure with the power to agitate the crowds. Like the *Leiermann*, she never moves, but despite this, like Müller's wanderer she undergoes a shift in perception whereby her initial helplessness is turned into a

[43] Jelinek, 'Fremd bin ich'.

decisive acceptance of outsider status. She becomes a challenge to her observers, using creative wordplay to turn other people's perceptions of her into a provocation. Referencing the stereotype that ageing women experience little or no desire, she declares, 'Vom Begehren bleibt nur das Aufbegehren gegen alles und jedes' (107), here an obvious mouthpiece for Jelinek the 'Nestbeschmutzer'.[44] Having won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004 and numerous other literary accolades (including the 2011 Mülheimer Dramatikerpreis for *Winterreise*), Jelinek is 'no longer an *enfant terrible* but a central, canonical figure of post-war Austrian culture'.[45] This does not mean easy accord with revered cultural institutions: as Tom Smith shows, the play's reworking of a much-beloved poem and song cycle reveals the difficulty of writing as part of a tradition one also wishes to critique.[46] With her 'Aufbegehren gegen alles und jedes', Jelinek embraces the very quality that her detractors decry as 'immer [dieselben Lieder], die vor zwanzig, dreißig, vierzig Jahren schon niemand mehr hören wollte' (119).

Consciously celebrating her difference to the crowds, the *Leierfrau* also represents other sidelined figures referenced in the play. Most notably, the jeering crowd of the eighth scene recalls the collective voice of the fourth scene, which taunts Natascha Kampusch for speaking publicly about her suffering after the initial media interest in her life has died down. Castigating her for bringing the long-past story of her kidnapping back into the public eye, Kampusch's critics cry, 'was will sie noch? Will sie sich über uns stellen? Will sie ewig ein Angedenken sein für uns? Woran? Wozu? […] Wir wollen hier keine Opfer. Wir haben schon genug Opfer' (35).

These words, similar in tone to the reprimand directed at the *Leierfrau*, 'wieso leiern Sie dann das ewig gleiche alte Zeugs daher [...]?' (119) betray the real reason for the obsessive movement ever onwards. This reason is also clear from the invitation the crowd extends to the *Leierfrau*: 'Schauen Sie, fröhliche, berauschte, ekstatische Menschen […]. Durch ein helles, frohes Leben können auch Sie den Schmerz betäuben' (120). The crowd's motivation is not genuine enjoyment of life but a desire to become numb to complex feelings and, more pertinently, to the past. Hence the need to drown out voices that disturb the smooth passage forwards of time: a barely veiled reference to the failures of Austrian *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Because of her insistent refusal to join the others in obliterating the past, the *Leierfrau* finds no place at the 'Wirtshaustische' (117) where, in any case, people would talk over her. If this is a further reference to her exclusion, we must also remember that 'Das Wirtshaus', in Müller's *Winterreise*, is not an actual inn at all but a graveyard. The wanderer is drawn to death but like the *Leierfrau*, he is not accommodated and is instead forced to continue his journey. If the *Leierfrau* is given '[kein] Stammplatz' (117), this means she does not partake of the deadening numbness that stunts all critical

[44] As Allyson Fiddler remarks, 'bold deprecation of her own mother country […] first aroused the public's disdain and won Jelinek her notoriety.' Allyson Fiddler, 'Demythologizing the Austrian "Heimat": Elfriede Jelinek as "Nestbeschmutzer"', in *From High Priests to Desecrators: Contemporary Austrian Writers*, ed. by Ricarda Schmidt and Moray McGowan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 25–44 (p. 25).
[45] Smith, p. 352.
[46] Smith, p. 350.

faculties. Instead, her exclusion becomes a productive criticism of the endless activity that serves only to bury, but not to overcome, a collective problem with the past.

Jelinek's *Winterreise* goes further than the original poem cycle in explicitly drawing attention to repetition as a confrontational gesture. Her 'Reise im Stillstand' allows the *Leierfrau* the creative space for linguistic invention, and she rebuffs the accusation that her work is merely derivative:

> Immer dieselbe Leier, aber das Lied ist doch nicht immer dasselbe! Ich schwöre, es ist immer ein anderes, auch wenn es sich nicht so anhört, wenn es sich manchmal mit anderen Liedern überschneidet, man kann meins immer noch heraushören. (117)

The defence is aimed against two counts, both of which are listed by detractors in the final scene: first, that Jelinek has reproduced the same ideas throughout her entire oeuvre, and second, that she simply rehashes the inventions of others. Although Jelinek is known for collage techniques, she has denied that *Winterreise* falls into this category:

> Ich möche noch ein Wort dazu sagen, daß der Text so oft als 'Collage' bezeichnet wird. Das ist er nicht. Wie immer verwende ich bloß einzelne Zitate, um dem Stillstand etwas wie Türen einzubauen, Dreh-und Angelpunkte aus einer fremden Sprache, nicht Fremdsprache, an die ich mich dann wieder mit meiner eigenen Sprache andocke […]. [I]ch brauche sie, um im Stehen vorwärtszukommen.[47]

As doors or pathways into Jelinek's work, the Müller quotations are effective, for they have entered Austrian cultural tradition through Schubert's settings and are easily recognizable, becoming the 'Wegweiser' on an otherwise rather abstract and fragmented journey.

The quotations work on two levels. They are uncritically repeated by the masses (as they cry 'Keiner mag Sie hören') who, we assume, are familiar with these canonical songs on a superficial level, whereas Jelinek provocatively reworks a beloved tradition.[48] Furthermore, Jelinek makes linguistic repetition serve her purpose, so that the aesthetic mode of the play matches its message. As Assmann has noted, her language is 'in permanenter Bewegung': subtle shifts in sound or meaning that make the piece appear repetitive are in fact signs of invention.[49] This has already been seen with regard to the 'Begehren'/'Aufbegehren' pairing. Another example is the use of 'abfahren' (in reference to the young people skiing down the slopes) and 'auf jemanden abfahren' (to be crazy about someone). With this double meaning, the *Leierfrau* further underscores her own stillness, as poster boys and girls of the Austrian tourism industry whizz past her: 'Auf die Abfahrer fahren hier viele ab' (109). In the same way she is sceptical of a celebrity culture that discards one star after another, annihilating lengthy critical thought:

> Auf mich fährt keiner ab. Wer möchte schon tot sein? […] Jetzt sind die heutigen Stars angekommen, wir filmen ihre Ankunft, wir holen sie vom Hubschrauber heim und führen sie zur Eis- und Schneebühne, von wo aus es gleich ohrenbetäubend laut ins Dunkel

[47] Jelinek, 'Fremd bin ich'.
[48] See also Smith, who notes that 'the "wir" voice uses the lasting, canonical language of Müller to silence the isolated "ich"' (p. 344).
[49] Assmann, p. 391.

> hineintoben wird. Sogar die Abfahrer sind vergessen […]. Wenn dieser Sänger singt, sind sogar die Abfahrer vergessen, denn auf den fahren wir echt total ab. Fahren Sie auch auf diesen oder jenen ab, fahren Sie auf diesen Star ab oder auf den dort drüben? (109–10)

Through her seemingly repetitive language, the *Leierfrau* points a finger back at her critics, whose mindless search for novelty is the death of true invention. The implication is that 'dieser Star' and 'der dort drüben' are entirely interchangeable, heralding an age where everyone is disposable. By thinking of the *Leierfrau* as already dead, the crowds in fact urge on their own destruction, making their present anachronistic before it even arrives. Meanwhile, the *Leierfrau*'s 'Stimme aus dem Off', her conscious step back from the dominant mode of her own time, allows her to make genuine progress as its critic.[50]

***

If Müller's *Leiermann* (and later the wanderer) and Jelinek's *Leierfrau* appear out of touch, this is precisely what gives their confrontational presence such power. They are authentically contemporary, in the sense identified by Giorgio Agamben:

> Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant (*inattuale*). But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time.[51]

Müller's wanderer and Jelinek's *Leierfrau* ultimately choose outsider status and embrace its potential to disrupt, regaining their agency by refusing to urge on the future. Their radical stillness breaches the aesthetic conventions of Romanticism and of modern celebrity culture respectively, so that repetition unexpectedly becomes the genuine novelty which others vainly seek on an ever-vanishing horizon. By rereading Müller's 'Der Leiermann' through Jelinek's challenging adaptation, we discover the poem's power to break through the deadly impasse to which the traveller almost submits.

Notes on Contributor

Joanna Neilly is Associate Professor in German at the University of Oxford, and Fellow and Tutor in German at St Peter's College. She is the author of *E.T.A. Hoffmann's Orient: Romantic Aesthetics and the German Imagination* (Oxford: Legenda, 2016) and has published articles on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers including Friedrich Schlegel, Karl Gutzkow, and Theodor Storm. She is also interested in the contemporary reception of German Romanticism outside of Germany.

[50] Assmann, p. 399.

[51] Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?', in Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 39–54 (p. 40).