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‘Translation is the making of a subject in reparation’: Elfriede Jelinek’s Response to Fukushima in *Kein Licht*

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I

Elfriede Jelinek’s theatre text *Kein Licht* [No Light], published online in 2011–12, features the nuclear catastrophe of Fukushima and its aftermath as its main theme, engaging with it through a mode of what I term reparative translation. Translation is to be understood here in a very specific sense, namely, as Gayatri Spivak derives it from the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein: ‘Translation is the making of the subject in reparation.’¹ It is not a technical activity that is controlled by the translator, nor is it only a matter of establishing well-tailored linguistic equivalences. Rather it is understood as a subject-constituting process which constantly shuttles between interior and exterior, between self and other, between individual and collective, between the psyche and the social or political. ‘Translation’ in this sense is ambivalent in that the process of subject constitution is both violent in its negativity towards and rejection of the external world, as well as affirmative in its work of reparation. Reparation in psychoanalytical terms, as proposed by Klein, refers to the response to a fundamental negativity that is the precondition of subject emergence, the passage through which self becomes self. Through her reading of Klein, Spivak introduces an ethical accountability and responsibility towards the other in the work of literary and cultural translation. I read *Kein Licht* as such an instance of reparative translation. I argue that *Kein Licht* foregrounds the task of an intersubjective self-constitution as emergent and inseparable from a world of negativity, however impossible or unfinishable this task may be. My reading is further informed by Jacqueline Rose’s work on Klein’s notion of negativity. Three aspects of the work of self-constitution through reparative translation are examined in this article: (1) catachresis as necessary misapplication; (2) the problem of the (un)knowable; and (3) mourning.

¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Translation as Culture’, in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge/Mass., 2012), pp. 241–55 (p. 250). In a note on the original source, Spivak mentions that the proposition is her own formulation of the gist of Melanie Klein’s work and not equivalent to orthodox Kleinian psychoanalytical vocabulary (Spivak, ‘Translation as Culture’, Endnote 1, p. 559).

Kein Licht was published in three parts on Jelinek's website between December 2011 and the autumn of 2012. The main text was first published nine months after the multiple catastrophe of the earthquake, tsunami and nuclear fallout in Fukushima prefecture in Japan, which took place on 11 March 2011. It was supplemented in March 2012 with an epilogue, revisiting the event of Fukushima and its legacy using the foil of Sophocles' *Antigone* and the theme of mourning and truth-telling. The performance script published by Rowohlt in electronic form also carries a previously unpublished prologue, which is an exploration of the impossibility of speech and knowledge, given the extent of human-made damage and violence to the world.² In *Kein Licht*, two musicians, first and second violin, attempt to fathom what has happened to them in an apocalyptic landscape. The play charts a bleak world in the aftermath of a catastrophic flood, contaminated by nuclear fallout, where 'undead' witnesses and survivors of an unacknowledged disaster float around aimlessly, unable to stop producing their own screeching sounds, unable to listen, unable to escape. No light is left from the failures of a highly developed and technologized world, as well as from the failure of human expression to be responsible towards this situation. The tragedy is characterized in a comic, macabre, haunting and caustic tone. It is not only diagnosed as catastrophe, but dismantled as farce, yet without the possibility of assuming a safe distance that is implied in farce or pastiche. In the epilogue, *eine Trauernde* [a female mourner] laments watching over the invisible havoc and destruction. The epilogue pans over the calamitous potentials of human creation, how the devastation is concealed, denied, trivialized, turned into an issue of management and then capitalized upon. *Kein Licht* can be read together with the trilogy *Das Werk/Im Bus/Ein Sturz* (2010), which also deals with the disastrous consequences of human attempts to conquer nature with technology. The discourses interwoven in this text, however, extend beyond the nexus of nature and technology. Readers familiar with Jelinek's work will recognize in *Kein Licht* the recurrent themes of her oeuvre: the critique of capitalism and patriarchy, the demystification of the media, the figure of the 'undead', nature, music and language.

In an essay titled 'Translation as Culture', literary scholar and translator Gayatri Spivak reads Melanie Klein's statement on infant subject formation as follows:

² Elfriede Jelinek, *Kein Licht* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 2012). The e-book edition of the performance script is available upon request to the publisher Rowohlt via <http://www.rowohlt-theaterverlag.de/play/Kein_Licht.2946810.html> [last accessed 26 February 2014]. It includes the section titled *Prolog?* [Prologue?], previously unpublished on Jelinek's website, the main text of *Kein Licht*, also available at <<http://a-e-m-gmbh.com/wessely/fklicht.htm>> [last accessed 26 February 2014], as well as *Fukushima: Epilog?* [Fukushima: Epilogue?], also available at <<http://a-e-m-gmbh.com/wessely/ffukushima.htm>> [last accessed 26 February 2014]. Further references to the e-book edition are provided in the text as KL with page numbers.

Melanie Klein, the Viennese psychoanalyst [...] suggested that the work of translation is an incessant shuttle that is a 'life'. The human infant grabs on to some one thing and then things [sic]. This grabbing (*begreifen*) of an outside indistinguishable from an inside constitutes an inside, fit to negotiate with an outside, going back and forth and coding everything into a sign-system by the thing(s) grasped. One can call this crude coding a 'translation'.³

Spivak is intrigued by Klein's use of the word 'translation' (*Übertragung*) to describe infant subjecthood as formed in the physical act of grasping (*begreifen* is both 'to grab' as well as 'to comprehend') and sensorially approaching objects, primarily the mother's breast, and that this grasping is a shuttle between the self and the object, whereby there is no subject prior to the act of grasping. Moreover, the subject is formed through a response-ability to the object. The formation is, according to Klein, a process characterized by both desire as well as destructive impulses towards the mother's breast due to the experience of separation. Subject formation is thus accompanied by love, anxiety, guilt and reparation. The self emerges from the recognition of and anxiety towards some fundamental negativity, which shuttles between inside and outside. This act of translation 'that is a life' is performed in reparation.⁴ Spivak then steers this notion of translation from Kleinian psychoanalysis to literary or linguistic translation, proposing that a similar process of shuttling between inside and outside characterizes translation in a narrower linguistic or literary sense. It is noteworthy that inside and outside are not fixed positions but different layers of relation inhabited in specific ways. In another essay, Spivak articulates this idea differently by calling for the translator to 'pray to be haunted by the project of the original'.⁵ Depending on whether the original is the mother tongue or another language, the call alters what is meant by inside or outside. An ethical code of accountability, repayment or restitution and a responsibility of self towards and in relation to the Other is thus introduced into the concept of translation.⁶ The proposition 'translation is the making of a subject in reparation' is thus concerned with the question of ethical relations of indebtedness that constitute selfhood, as well as a realization of the inadequacies of any act of reparation. Translation as reparation can take on many forms, but it is not formulaic or prescriptive, because, in Spivak's reading of Klein and Derrida, it involves 'entering the protocols of a text, [...] the laws specific to *this* text'.⁷ Spivak thus calls for a systemic, epistemic work on the self in its indebted encounter with the other, be this other a text, a person, a language, a collective or an event.

³ Spivak, 'Translation as Culture', p. 241–42.

⁴ Spivak, 'Translation as Culture', p. 243.

⁵ Spivak, 'Translating into English', in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge/Mass., 2012), pp. 256–74 (p. 256).

⁶ Spivak, 'Translation as Culture', p. 243.

⁷ Spivak, 'Translating into English', p. 257.

Spivak's reference to the work of Melanie Klein, a thinker incidentally often quoted in interpretations of Jelinek, adopts a catachrestic use of the concept of translation.⁸ As a proposition and not as a definition or maxim, it does not directly chart a course for how to translate, but rather adds a different dimension to the act of translation. In the proposition, the concept of translation loses its literal meaning; it is put to work in an altogether different way, though its dictionary sense is never fully absent. It is what the classic rhetorician Quintilian describes as 'an abuse (misuse) of language, lending the nearest name to things that have no name'.⁹ No concept other than translation would serve the purpose, and yet translation is not used in the general sense of an act of transferral from one language to another. Rather it is indicative of a subject constitution that emerges in relation to its being bound to other subjects through difference.

II

Catachresis is a rhetorical trope which is distinguishable from the genus of metaphor in that 'catachresis is found where there was previously no word. Metaphor where there was a word'.¹⁰ The Latin term for catachresis is 'abusio', yet being an ab-use or misuse of a word does not mean it is a false application, but rather 'a use that does not keep within the limits of common usage, i.e. an immoderate or excessive use' (Greek *kata* 'against' and *chrêsis* 'employment, use, loan').¹¹ Spivak's use of the term catachresis, departing from Derrida, specifically refers to what she calls 'master-metaphors', i.e. concepts that serve to improperly impose one abstract term on to the multiplicity of experiences, e.g. 'woman', 'worker', 'peasant', 'Africa'. There is no true woman, no pure Africa, yet the concepts serve as generic catch-alls, and this not merely for convenience, but in order to make a truth claim. For Spivak, the recognition of the impropriety or incompleteness of the term does not mean that a proper term must or can necessarily be found to replace it, but that the work of recognition itself guards against making sweeping, universal claims.¹² Another example is the term 'queer', which shifted from a supposedly 'original' pejorative and stigmatising label to an affirmative self-characterization of emancipation from

⁸ See for example Eva Meyer, 'Das digital geborene Ich. Zu Jelineks "Neid: Privatroman"' [Born digital. On Jelinek's *Envy: Private Novel*], <<http://www.br.de/radio/bayern2/sendungen/hoerspiel-und-medienkunst/hoerspielpool368.html>> [last accessed 26 February 2014]; and Slavoj Žižek, 'My Own Private Austria', in *The Essential Žižek* (London, 2009), 2nd ed., pp. vii–xvii.

⁹ Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 5 vols, ed. and trans. by Donald A. Russell. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge/Mass., 2001), Book 8, Chapter 6, p. 445.

¹⁰ Quintilian, *Orator's Education*, Book 8, Chapter 6, p. 445.

¹¹ Gerald Posselt, 'The Tropological Economy of Catachresis,' *Critical Studies*, 25 (2005), special issue 'Metaphors of Economy', ed. by Nicole Bracker and Stefan Herbrechter, pp. 81–94 (p. 84).

¹² Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (London/New York, 2003), pp. 34–35.

rigid social norms, which again shifted to being critiqued as a notion that tends to homogenize class inequalities and cultural or regional differences in sexual practices. The improper use of the term signals that there cannot, in fact, be a proper or original use of the term, but that every use of language is tied up with the politics of appropriation, re-functioning and self-constitution.¹³

Jelinek’s literary techniques of appropriating and unmooring language from various discursive fields, her characteristic use of intertextual referencing and the creation of ‘Textflächen’ [text surfaces], fragmentary, non-linear and open narratives, have been the subject of numerous scholarly investigations, as the present volume further testifies. The significance of Jelinek’s use of tropes such as catachresis has also been commented upon in various theorizations of her work. Shepard argues that the consistent use of catachresis both undoes the fixed subject position and paradoxically establishes her own recognizable authorial voice.¹⁴ Biebuyck and Martens argue that tropes such as catachresis in Jelinek’s writing form a figurative register which serves to speak about the figurative unrepresentability of extreme situations.¹⁵ The trope of catachresis misapplies or disrupts linguistic or semantic conventions from within these conventions, for instance by using a cliché phrase in a manner that creates a distance from the cliché in the reader and thus gives new life to the phrase. Shepard claims that through this literary strategy Jelinek is able to both avoid or critically negate as well as simultaneously acknowledge subjective experience.¹⁶ I agree with this analysis, adding that subjective experience in *Kein Licht* is not only about the authorial voice but about a collective, inter-subjective experience.

The play abounds with instances of musical figures of speech applied to the spheres of ecology, finance, the media and mythology, in a gesture of deprive them of their purity and contaminating their commonplace meanings. It is well known that pun and wordplay are a recurring feature of Jelinek’s writing.¹⁷ The two voices of the text, ascribed to A and B, speak at times as two violins, first and second fiddle, unable to hear each other, and at other times as elementary chemical particles, each in turn a multiplicity of voices and fragmentary qualities, indistinguishable from each other. The word ‘Ton’ in German encompasses a range of possible meanings, from an acoustic realm (sound, tone, note, chord), to the visual and tactile realm (clay or shade of colour). In the plural, ‘Töne’

¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘More on Power/Knowledge (1992)’, in *The Spivak Reader. Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, ed. by Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (London/New York, 1996), pp. 141–74 (p. 155).

¹⁴ Ben Shepard, ‘Elfriede Jelinek’, in *Landmarks in German Women’s Writing*, ed. by Hilary Brown (Oxford, 2007), pp. 193–210 (196).

¹⁵ Benjamin Biebuyck and Gunther Martens, ‘Metonymia in memoriam. Die Figürlichkeit inszenierter Vergessens- und Erinnerungsdiskurse bei Grass und Jelinek,’ in *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur neueren Germanistik*, 64.1 (2007), 243–72 (p. 261).

¹⁶ Shepard, ‘Elfriede Jelinek’, p. 205.

¹⁷ Allyson Fiddler, ‘Staging Jörg Haider: Protest and Resignation in Elfriede Jelinek’s *Das Lebewohl* and Other Recent Texts for the Theatre’, *Modern Language Review*, 97.2 (2002), 353–64 (p. 363).

can mean sounds, but also noises, enunciations. In the text, 'Ton' becomes a master-metaphor in the sense of Spivak, which covers not only the dictionary span of meanings, but begins to take on a life of its own, mutating into various compounds and neologisms: 'Tonleichnam' [sound corpses]¹⁸ (KL, p. 32); 'Tönesammler' [sound collectors] (KL, p. 37); 'Tonlose, Machtlose, Harmlose' [the soundless, the powerless, the harmless] (KL, p. 38), 'Tonmassen-Unterkunft' [sound mass accommodation] (KL, p. 33) or even the vernacular 'unsere Tonis, unsere Antöne' [our Tonies, our Antonies] (KL, p. 27). In formulations such as 'legen wir uns zu unseren Tönen?' [shall we lie down with our sounds?] (KL, p. 33) or 'aus dem Ton blühen erdeborene Gesichter' [earthborn faces blossom from the sound/clay] (KL, p. 43), the metaphor of sound is moulded to other sensual realms, making meaning despite not fitting. It becomes an all-encompassing concept, an abstraction without a specific instance. The recognition of this misapplication gives the reader the task of working out what is in fact being translated here, not in terms of the signs or the acoustic symbolism alone, but more interestingly, in terms of the traces of what escapes proper naming.¹⁹ It is pertinent to note in this regard that the word Fukushima is not once mentioned in the entire text of *Kein Licht*, and appears only in the title of the epilogue: clearly a proper name that refuses catachresis. In the radio adaptation of *Kein Licht*, aired in 2012 by German public broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk, the absent presence of Fukushima is dramaturgically resolved by using a speaker with a clearly recognizable Japanese accent in German, who announces the title and the playwright's name and is faintly heard screaming in Japanese in the background.²⁰ In the staging of the epilogue of *Kein Licht*, translated into Japanese by Tatsuki Hayashi, and performed by the group *Port B* in *Festival/Tokyo* in 2012, director Akira Takayama asked female high school students living directly outside the exclusion zone of Fukushima prefecture, presumably also children from families employed with the nuclear plant TEPCO, to choose any part of the text they liked. The voices were recorded and put together in an audio collage. Audience members of the site-specific theatre production were handed a portable radio with the raw aural rendition of these fragments of text and given maps and directions to tour around a commercialized neighbourhood of Central Tokyo using a dramaturgy that catachrestically translated the theme of radioactivity into the medium of the transistor

¹⁸ The word *Tonleichnam* also brings up the association with *Fronleichnam*, Corpus Christi.

¹⁹ On the distinction between signs and traces in Spivak's conception of translation, see Spivak, 'Translating into English', p. 270.

²⁰ Elfriede Jelinek, *Kein Licht*, radio podcast, directed by Leonhard Koppelman, Bayerischer Rundfunk, BR2, original broadcast 2012, <<http://www.br.de/radio/bayern2/sendungen/hoerspiel-und-medienkunst/ursendung124.html>> [last accessed on 26 February 2014]. Since Japanese speakers use the consonants 'r' and 'l' interchangeably, the title *Kein Licht* is pronounced 'Kein Richt', literally 'no referent', another slippage that nevertheless makes meaning.

radio.²¹ In Karin Beier’s 2012 production for Schauspielhaus Köln, the sound of a metronome ticking for an orchestra rehearsal gradually transitions to the sound of the contamination meter. A musical counter ‘translates’ into a radioactivity counter, incidentally also called Geiger counter, named after its inventor, radiologist Hans Geiger, whose surname means violinist.

As a new kind of proper sense of the field of ‘music’ and ‘sound’ emerges, so Jelinek’s use of catachresis does not abuse or misapply a supposedly original use of the term for its own sake, but rather forces the reader to question the grounds on which a proper, originary sense could ever be claimed. To what necessity does this frequent use of catachresis respond? In line with Gerald Posselt’s analysis of catachresis as an act of both representative and performative re-signification, I read *Kein Licht* as an investment in re-signification, notwithstanding the impossibility or inadequacy of this gesture.²² The use of the word sound (*Ton*) in the play is not emptied of musicality, but instead infused with a different kind of sound quality, whereby sound and music, the audible and the verb ‘to listen’ (*hören*) enter into all kinds of spheres and are in turn contaminated by the language of other fields. The catachrestic deployment of the vocabulary of music is a way of naming and occupying a certain subject position and simultaneously extending and disrupting its possibilities. In Quintilian’s sense it shifts the use of catachresis from being a trope to being a figure. Whereas a trope represents a ‘turn’ or a contrast between words and words, a figure takes on the ‘shape’ or contrast between meanings and words, thus covering whole passages.²³

The text is not simply satire, satisfied with attacking and ridiculing those in positions of power. It painstakingly invokes and recognizes the complicity of the so-called progressive segments of society, who claim to know and do better: ‘Wir Feigen, ach! Ach! In feiger Not sagen wir gar nichts’ [we cowards, oh! Oh! In cowardly distress we say absolutely nothing] (KL, p. 54–55). It makes the task of reparation into a difficult process of self-questioning:

Wir sind vielleicht Frauen von irgendwem, doch wir sind nicht Herren von irgendwas [...]. Bin ich Wahrsagerin, doch nur für mich selbst? Für die anderen Nachträgerin, weil ich so nachtragend bin, ja, das gebe ich zu, für mich aber Wahrsagerin? (KL, p. 56)

[We may be wives of someone or other, yet we are not masters of anything [...]. Am I a fortune-teller, but only for myself? For the others an after-bearer of fortune, because I bear such grudges, yes, I admit to that, but I’m a fortune-teller for myself?]²⁴

²¹ See the Festival/Tokyo 2012 programme announcement of the production, <http://www.festival-tokyo.jp/en/program/12/kein_licht_2/cast.html> [last accessed on 26 February 2014].

²² Gerald Posselt, ‘The Tropological Economy of Catachresis’, p. 86. For a fuller exposition of how catachresis dwells in the double bind between the representative and the performative, see Gerald Posselt, *Katachrese: Rhetorik des Performativen* [Catachresis: Rhetorics of the Performative] (Munich, 2005).

²³ Quintilian, *Orator’s Education*, Book 9, Chapter 2, pp. 59–61.

²⁴ The word ‘Wahrsagerin’ means both truth-teller as well as fortune-teller, one who tells

It does not speak of Japan alone, but of a phenomenon that the entire world is responsible for and towards. It sites and situates the crisis not only in a far-away location, but equally 'im Turnsaal der Schule, im Vereinsheim der Gemüsezüchter, im Versammlungsraum der Sonstigen' [in the sports hall of the school, in the community centre of vegetable growers, in the meeting room of the miscellaneous] (KL, p. 51). The text employs a range of aesthetic qualities that border on the comic and simultaneously the tragic: the grotesque, the absurd, the acerbic, the ghostly, the inelegant, the cacophonous, the obsessive and the excessive. The excess and immoderate use of words that defines catachresis becomes a means to emphasize the shared planetary responsibility and interdependence that 'Fukushima' (in Japanese 'happy island') presses upon the world's conscience and future, however bleak and impossible that task may be.

III

The title of the play, '*no light*', is suggestive of the astronomical phenomenon of the black hole, which allows no light or any matter to escape, and which simultaneously emits radiation. There are many resonances between the concept of the black hole and the event of Fukushima. A nuclear apparatus designed in order to generate light and energy fails, bringing about total darkness and negativity. The failure is not merely of a technical or bureaucratic nature, but relates to the existential darkness at the core of the enterprise, to what activist and translator Sabu Kohso has poignantly described as the double bind of the subliminal destruction of nuclear energy on the one side, and the consumerist life driven by the need for more and more energy on the other.²⁵ This thought finds its way into the epilogue as:

Auch in uns einstrahlt das Unsichtbare wie eine Sonne, die grade ihr Haupt erhebt und es wieder, beschämt von sich selbst, senkt, weil das Unsichtbare noch heller ist als sie. Paradox. (KL, p. 51)

[The invisible radiates into us too like a sun, which, having barely just raised its head, lowers it again, ashamed of itself, for the invisible is even brighter than the sun itself. Paradoxical.]

The invisible, used repeatedly in the nominalized form, 'das Unsichtbare', is more an active subject than a descriptor or adjective. It refers to the fact that radiation is not visible, it is curiously an ever-expanding emission from an invisible core. Its damage is done unknowingly, yet pervasively: 'wie dieser Fisch oder dieser Schmetterling oder wer auch immer, der mißgestaltet und

the truth about the unknown future. The neologism 'Nachträgerin' plays with several meanings of the verb 'nachtragen', to append or add (a kind of reparation?); to carry something behind someone; to bear grudges towards something that has happened in the known past. Both words are gendered in the feminine.

²⁵ Sabu Kohso, 'Turbulence of Radiation and Revolution', in *through europe*, 03 March 2012, <<http://th-rough.eu/print/267>> [last accessed 26 February 2014].

verkrüppelt ist durch das Unsichtbare, von dem hier die ganze Zeit die Rede ist’ [like this fish or this butterfly or whoever, malformed and crippled by the invisible, which is what’s being talked about here all the while] (KL, p. 7). The invisible also becomes a name for, ‘translates’ into the unknowable in the text. For where there is no light, the conditions for knowing, Jelinek’s text implies, are absent. The prologue is an extensive meditation on the relation between the visible or audible and the knowable and speakable, with terms such as ‘sichtbar’ [visible], ‘hörbar’ [audible] and ‘wißbar’ [knowable] repeated and combined in various ways: there are voices but they are not heard. That which is unverified needs to be saved or stored to be verified as unverifiable: ‘Sie müssen das Gewisse und das Ungewisse sichern, speichern [...]. Sie sichern also das Ungewisse’ [you have to secure that which is sure and unsure, you save it. You thus secure the unsure] (KL, p.6). To clarify how the (in)visible can be ‘translated’ into the (un)knowable in *Kein Licht*, and how this relates to the question of subject formation, an excursus into Klein’s concept of negativity is in order. I find the work of feminist scholar and psychoanalyst Jacqueline Rose particularly illuminating (!) in this regard.²⁶ In Kleinian thought, the infant’s relationship to its reality emerges from a psychic negativity, destructive impulses that shape the process of becoming a subject.²⁷ For Rose, this negativity, expressed in the death instinct and in emotions such as guilt, aggression and hate towards the mother and/or the mother’s breast, is in no sense a biological concept. Rather, according to Rose, Klein’s concept of negativity carries a psychic significance, i.e. death has meaning for the infant and is essential to the emergence of its imaginative life.²⁸ This resonates with Spivak’s reading of Klein in terms of the making of a subject in reparation for the negative, destructive fantasies the infant sustains towards the mother. Yet, if negativity is essential to the emergence of subjecthood, it also marks its limits. As Rose argues:

What seems to be outrageous — paradoxically harder to manage than death as a pure force, as something which assaults the subject from outside, is this internalization of death into the structure. If death is a pure point of biological origin, then at least it can be scientifically known. But if it enters into the process of psychic meanings, inseparable from the mechanisms through which subjects create and recreate their visions of the world, then from where can we gain the detachment with which to get it under control?²⁹

This is a crucial argument because, in Rose’s framework, the psyche is theorized as the social and political. The tracks of the psyche can be followed across the

²⁶ Jacqueline Rose, ‘Negativity in the work of Melanie Klein’, in *Reading Melanie Klein*, ed. by Lyndsey Stonebridge and John Phillips (London and New York, 1998), pp. 123–56.

²⁷ Melanie Klein, ‘Love, Guilt and Reparation’ (1937), in: Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere, *Love, Hate and Reparation* (New York, 1964), pp. 57–119.

²⁸ Rose, ‘Negativity in the work of Melanie Klein’, p. 131.

²⁹ Rose, ‘Negativity in the work of Melanie Klein’, p. 138.

terrain of social and political life. Rose interprets Klein's concept of negativity as an attempt to think the outer boundaries or limits of what is knowable. If negativity has a generative place within the psyche and, by extension, within social and political life, then it constitutes something fundamentally unknowable, or only graspable through its effects. To make this point clear, Rose reads Klein's concept of negativity and the discipline of psychoanalysis against a passage from Stephen Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time*, where he theorizes the black hole.³⁰ What happens inside a black hole cannot be known because entering it implies being destroyed by it. The laws of science that break down in a black hole cannot be observed from a distance. Yet black holes, though marking a total negativity and unknowable realm, emit light at their edges. So negativity is 'caught up in the positive partner as much as antagonist, and not something to which the positive can only be opposed'.³¹

It is through this analogy that the relation between the invisible and the unknowable in *Kein Licht* becomes evident. Fukushima can be read in Jelinek's play as a state of 'no light'. As in the case of the black hole, being outside Fukushima implies not having the possibility to grasp what is to be known. Being in the proximity of Fukushima implies being destroyed by its invisible destructive force of nuclear radiation. Fukushima, like the black hole, and like Klein's conception of psychic negativity, 'provokes two complementary anxieties: too close, it devours you; safely outside, you don't know what's going on'.³² If one reads *Kein Licht* as a response to this double anxiety, grasping the core originary darkness of the psyche, always also the social psyche, through its unknowable, invisible emissions, the response is one of incomplete reparation through language. Like Stephen Hawking's radiant black hole boundaries and Klein's notion of reparation, Fukushima is approached in *Kein Licht* through its effects. The theme of reparation as a task that is necessary, unavoidable and always inadequate runs through the entire text. It implies that the crisis can and must be spoken of, but it cannot be spoken, i.e. fully fathomed. Yet it is necessary and unavoidable because, for the crisis bearing the name of 'Fukushima' to be known, it needs to be first constructed as unknowable:

Am besten, man tut nichts. Am besten, man entflieht den Übeln, aber was tun, wenn man die nicht sieht? Am besten, man tut nichts und leugnet es auch gar nicht ab, aber vielleicht ist es zu spät, nichts mehr zu tun? Wir tun ja ohnedies nichts mehr. Dieses Stück ist hiermit beendet. Endlich ganz beendet. Denn schlimmer als etwas, das schlimmer ist als schlimm, das geht nicht. Das kann man nicht sprechen. Davon schon, vielleicht. Aber man kann es nicht sprechen. Man kann es vielleicht sagen, aber nicht sprechen. (KL, p. 66)

[Best not to do anything. Best to flee from the evils, but what if one doesn't

³⁰ Rose, 'Negativity in the work of Melanie Klein', pp. 144–45.

³¹ Rose, 'Negativity in the work of Melanie Klein', p. 147.

³² Rose, 'Negativity in the work of Melanie Klein', pp. 144–45.

see them? Best not to do anything, nor even to deny anything, but perhaps it's too late to do nothing? We're not doing anything anymore anyhow. This play is hereby closed. Finally fully over. For, worse than something that is worse than worse, is not possible. That cannot be spoken. It can be spoken of, perhaps. But one cannot speak it. One can maybe say it, but not speak it.]

The task of reparation, and this is crucial to Jelinek's work, is articulated in a counter-intuitive way: far from being expressed as sorrowful apology, regret, self-flagellation or confession of guilt, the text sparkles with wit, sting and defiance, sparing no one: 'Das war vorher. Wir sind jetzt nachher. Und nachher passiert auch wieder nichts. Es wird nichts passieren, außer es passiert wieder was.' [That was before. We are now thereafter. And thereafter too nothing happens. Nothing will happen, unless something happens again] (KL, p. 64). Such a counter-intuitive take on the task of reparation establishes a common ground between the tragic and the comic, viewing them as inhabiting one continuum, rather than being opposite forces. The difference between laughing and crying is thus more gradual than fundamental. Laughter can easily turn into crying and vice versa. The cathartic function of purifying the self and eliminating unwanted foreign elements from it is common to both, though the individual is the centre of focus in the tragic form, whereas the structural and the general mechanisms underlying a situation are foregrounded in the comic. This closely resembles the arguments of anthropologist and literary scholar René Girard, whose collection of essays is referenced at the end of *Kein Licht* (KL, p. 46).³³ In the essay 'Ein gefährliches Gleichgewicht: Versuch einer Deutung des Komischen' [Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis]³⁴ Girard interprets the Aristotelian concept of catharsis as encompassing both the physiological process of elimination or rejection of a foreign object, as well as the religious-cultural phenomenon of crying as a response to watching an act on stage and being purified of sad emotions. He argues that in performing the same act of crying for a physical as well as an inner elimination of something unwanted, the eye functions metaphorically.³⁵ This is cited almost literally from the German translation in *Kein Licht*:

Bei meiner [Stimme] hab ich immer das Gefühl, daß mir ein Fremdkörper hineingeraten ist. Das ist wie mit den Tränen, ja, genau! Man weint über traurige Dinge, zum Beispiel wenn jemand gestorben ist. Noch mehr weint man, wenn einem ein Staubkorn ins Auge geraten ist. Das ist dann aber ein unwillkürliches Weinen, ohne Trauer, ohne Verzweiflung. Ein Weinen, das etwas aus dem Auge vertreibt, das dort nicht hingehört. (KL, p. 9)

³³ René Girard, *Die verkannte Stimme des Realen. Eine Theorie archaischer und moderner Mythen* [The Misrecognized Voice of the Real. A Theory of Archaic and Modern Myths] (Munich/Vienna, 2002).

³⁴ First published as René Girard, 'Perilous Balance: A Comic Hypothesis', in: *Modern Language Notes*, 87 (1972), pp. 1–26.

³⁵ René Girard, 'Ein gefährliches Gleichgewicht: Versuch einer Deutung des Komischen', in *Die Verkannte Stimme des Realen*, pp. 180–201 (p. 183).

[With my voice I always have the feeling that a foreign body has intruded me. It's like with tears, yes exactly. You cry about sad things, for example if someone has died. You cry all the more if a grain of dust has entered your eye. But that is an involuntary crying, without grief, without anguish. A crying that expels something from the eye that doesn't belong there.]

The cathartic function of art — in *Kein Licht*, it is specifically music, though as a play it refers to theatre and literature as well — is not merely achieved through symbolic means, but primarily in physiological terms such as the production of tears, a phenomenon that is common to both the comic and the tragic. In Girard's essay, this laughter accompanied by tears brings about the loss of autonomy and mastery over oneself. That which seems to be known and under control, slips away:

Musik ist kontrollierte Autonomie ihrer Erzeuger, doch schon ist sie dabei, uns zu entgleiten, sich unserer zu entkleiden, sie wird unkontrollierbar, obwohl wir doch gelernt und geübt haben, sie zu kontrollieren. (KL, pp. 23–24)

[Music is the controlled autonomy of its producers, but before you know it, it starts slipping away, it divests itself of us, it becomes uncontrollable, though we have learned and practised controlling it.]

The loss of control is both feared as well as pursued. Girard describes the existence of an external threat as a condition of laughter: one is able to laugh because of the feeling of being at a safe distance from the object of laughter and being able to expel this threat, as it were, with one's laughter. The threat lies in the possibility of losing control, being consumed by the laughter and becoming the object of laughter. Laughter is therefore interpreted as a form of reparation, through which the self is constituted as autonomous (the threat is expelled and the distance is maintained), even as it is contested in its boundaries (one falls prey to an involuntary attack of laughter and loses one's autonomy; one doesn't know if one is laughing with or against someone).³⁶ Reparation assumes the double sense of 'making up for' as well as 'repairing': 'Machen Sie's gut! Machen Sie es wieder gut! Mir ist es egal.' [Fare well! Make up well for the fare! I don't care] (KL, p. 7). Since reparation is inseparably linked to negativity, it is inseparable from the question of the (un)knowable, for which no reparation is possible.³⁷

IV

The eponymous figure of Sophocles' *Antigone* features as the speaking voice of the epilogue, and is translated into the text as 'Eine Trauernde (*sie kann machen, was sie will*)' [a female mourner (*she can do what she wants*)] (KL, p. 47).

³⁶ Girard, 'Ein gefährliches Gleichgewicht', pp. 196–97.

³⁷ Rose, 'Negativity in the work of Melanie Klein', p. 141.

The figure of Antigone recurs in Jelinek's writing, most recently in her 'secondary drama' *Abraumhalde* (2009). The epilogue of *Kein Licht* can indeed be read as a secondary drama or intertextual re-writing of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, commits the crime of burying her dead brother against the wishes of her uncle, the king Creon. She thus stands for a law of kinship that opposes the law of the state.³⁸ Her act of burying and mourning her brother is an act of translation in Spivak's sense, subject-constitution in reparation. In Jelinek's reworking of Antigone, this reparation can be read as truth-telling, unearthing in place of burying.³⁹ The text in brackets and italics marking stage directions simultaneously indicates the inadequacy of Antigone's actions: she can do what she wants but it won't make a difference. She attempts to speak truths, knowing that the truth has lost control of the situation. The attempt to write about Fukushima is an attempt to publicly mourn and acknowledge the loss of all lives both past and future due to the man-made nuclear catastrophe. It is also about the impossibility of a real burial, as even the dead bodies are radioactive: 'es wäre unverantwortlich, nach uns zu suchen, und noch unverantwortlicher, unsere strahlenden Körper an Land zu bringen' [it would be irresponsible to search for us, and even more irresponsible to bring our radiating bodies ashore] (p. 44).

Kein Licht mercilessly undoes the idea that it is possible to look from a safe, autonomous distance at nuclear catastrophe. The unidentifiable, invisible foreign object that has penetrated into the eye and causes tears can be read as nuclear fallout, but also as a metaphor for those who have become scapegoats in the process, a sore in the eye of the system, blamed for being foreign invaders, complainants, unemployed or even audiences of art: 'Beschäftigungslose[], die sowieso nichts anderes zu tun haben als fernzusehen oder Musik zu hören' [the unoccupied, who in any case have nothing else to do other than to watch television or listen to music] (KL, p. 15). The text examines the issue of nuclear contamination and destruction, of human arrogance and the state-corporate nexus in establishing what Sabu Kohso calls a global nuclear regime. The nuclear fallout in Japan curiously caused no damage to the Japanese or global nuclear industry. On the contrary, the nuclear energy company Westinghouse (KL, p. 55) glosses over its incalculable errors, euphemistically referring to the nuclear industry as a 'learning industry'.⁴⁰ The nuclear regime is thus armed

³⁸ This is how Judith Butler formulates the problem that the figure of Antigone poses, a question she explores in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death*. Wellek Library Lectures (New York, 2000).

³⁹ Hans-Thies Lehmann similarly sees the power of Sophocles' figure of Antigone in her capacity to shake up the order of the state by way of occupying the position of one who questions and uncannily suspends the legitimacy of every order, without negating the order. See Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'Erschütterte Ordnung: Das Modell Antigone,' in: *Das politische Schreiben: Essays zu Theatertexten* (Berlin, 2002), pp. 22–38.

⁴⁰ See public statement on *Enhancing Safety*, <<http://www.westinghousenuclear.com/EnhancingSafety>> [last accessed 26 February 2014].

with the rhetoric and double-talk of security, economic growth and national pride to cover up for its exploitative and unjust practices, seeking to make people accept different types and higher levels of radiation.⁴¹

Faced with the aftermath of the nuclear catastrophe, Antigone in *Kein Licht* realizes that truth-telling as reparation is a difficult task, better approached with humour than with heroism:

Die Wahrheit ist grade heraus, ich meine, sie ist grade raus, vor einem Moment, hätten Sie gewartet, hätten Sie sie noch abgepaßt, aber das heißt, sie wird auch wieder hereinkommen. Sie ist nur kurz weg. (KL, pp. 48–49)

[The truth is just out, I mean it's just left, if you were here a moment ago, you could have still caught it, but that means it will return. It's just gone out for a bit.]

The play exposes the scapegoating of populations and regions, which become condemned to serve as 'zones of sacrifice'.⁴² The theme of scapegoating and sacrifice is another key reference in *Kein Licht* taken from the work of René Girard. In his theory of archaic and modern myths, Girard argues that a violent, collective act of lynching that actually occurred transforms into the foundational myth of civilization. A visitor to a community is perceived as a threat to the community, leading to a contagion of hostility towards the innocent visitor, who becomes a scapegoat and is eventually lynched and killed. After the violent killing, the dead victim is worshipped as the rescuer of the community, the community's inner conflicts are reconciled, order and normality return.⁴³ In Jelinek's response to Fukushima, the scapegoat myth is rewritten to speak of the foundational violence of nuclear capitalism. 'Opferrauch steigt hoch, das kommt nicht von einer Kochstelle' [sacrificial smoke rises, it doesn't come from a cooking place] (KL, p. 58). The entire area has become a sacrificial, no-go zone for the experiments of nuclear power corporations. As opposed to Girard's theory that the foundational sacrifice restores order, the apocalypse of nuclear disaster is inverted in Jelinek's writing. As Bärbel Lücke argues, it ushers in a new, even more devastating era.⁴⁴ In terms of compensations for the damage and destruction of livelihoods, the reparation of the nuclear corporations, the companies have in fact not only escaped from being answerable to anyone, but have in turn themselves sought compensations from the state to continue

⁴¹ Sabu Kohso, 'The Global Nuclear Regime', *independent*, 166, 8–28 June 2011, pp. 6, 11, <http://www.independent.org/sites/default/files/independent_issue_166.pdf> [last accessed 26 February 2014].

⁴² See Wendy Matsumura, 'Fukushima's "Zones of Sacrifice"', *independent*, 166, 08–28 June 2011, pp. 7, 11, <http://www.independent.org/sites/default/files/independent_issue_166.pdf> [last accessed 26 February 2014].

⁴³ René Girard, 'Gewalt und Repräsentation im mythischen Text', in *Die verkannte Stimme des Realen*, pp. 23–53.

⁴⁴ Bärbel Lücke, 'Fukushima oder die Musik der Zeit. Zu Elfriede Jelineks Bühnenstück *Kein Licht*', <<http://www.vermessungsseiten.de/luecke/fukushima.pdf>> [last accessed 26 February 2014], p. 2.

further expansion. This absurdity is captured in an uncharacteristically straightforward passage in the epilogue to *Kein Licht*:

Diese Firmen haben wie immer vorgeschrieben und dann den Auftrag an Land gezogen, an das Land, das sich an ihnen so schrecklich infiziert hat, das tut ihnen allen so leid, aber gebaut muß werden, sonst wären sie keine Baufirmen, auf die man bauen kann, und wir müssen die Firmen nehmen, die wir zur Verfügung haben. Wir können nur hoffen, daß sie nicht über uns verfügen werden. Die Welt beim endlosen Vorstellungsgespräch mit sich selbst. (KL, p. 55)

[These companies have submitted a tender as usual and landed the contract, on the land that got infected by them, they are all so very sorry about that, but what must be built, must be built, otherwise they wouldn't be construction companies, on whom one could build one's faith, and we must take the companies at our disposal. We can only hope that we won't be at their disposal. The world in an endless job interview with itself.]

Kein Licht works at undoing this twisted notion of reparation, where the reparation offered for the damage is in fact a demand for people's complicity and co-operation in participating in nuclear capitalism. It exposes how the crisis is talked down and trivialized, how government or corporate discourse takes the place of action: 'Die Menschen, sie sollten besänftigt werden, nicht getröstet: besänftigt.' [The people, they were to be mollified, not consoled, but mollified.] (KL, p. 47) It reveals the mechanisms of the information warfare that accompanies the nuclear crisis: 'Die Seitenzahl unserer Toten ist abgedeckt worden, damit niemand etwas von ihnen weiß.' [The page number of our dead has been covered up, so no one knows of them.] (KL, p. 52) It exposes the workers of the nuclear industry as its scapegoats:

Sie haben kein Dorthin, diese Männer. Über ihnen turmhoch irgendwelche anderen Firmen, die sie sich leihen und dann an andre ausleihen und die wieder an andre, bis nur noch geliehene Menschen übrig sind, für die keiner mehr die Leihgebühr bezahlt. An wen denn? Man sieht ja längst nicht mehr, wem diese Männer gehören! Die gehen ohnedies bald kaputt. Sogar Leihwagenfirmen nehmen normalerweise immer die neuesten Modelle. (KL, p. 59)

[They have no thither, these men. Looming above them tower-high are some other companies, which lease them and then lease them to others, who in turn lease them to yet others, until only leased humans are left over, for whom no one is there to pay the rental. To whom? For a long time now it's hardly been possible to see whom these men belong to any more! They're on the verge of breakdown anyway. Even car rental companies normally opt for the newest models.]

It is this unrelenting survey of the damage of Fukushima and the accumulation of laments that makes *Kein Licht* an act of mourning, an act of reparative translation.

V

It is widely agreed in scholarship on Jelinek that her texts resist psychological frames, that her characters are not personages but fragments and unidentifiable voices. She has been described as 'an artist of surfaces and a champion of two-dimensionality'.⁴⁵ Yet the commitment to exposing injustice, calling for ethical responses and being constructively critical is undeniable in the force of her writing. What does this deconstruction of subjects mean for her thinking of a responsible subject? In this article, I argue that *Kein Licht* takes on a difficult, uncomfortable task, namely of 'reparative translation' as a means of constituting the collective human subject as a responsible subject. The proposition that 'translation is the making of a subject in reparation', theoretically informed by references to Klein in the writings of Spivak and Rose, is fruitful for a reading of Jelinek's *Kein Licht* in different ways. First, it allows for a concept of subjecthood that is not attached to essence or identity, but one that sees the human subject as emerging from its improper, incommensurate grasping of the world. The musicality of the language of *Kein Licht* as well as its use of language pertaining to music serve as a specific instance of a subject formation by way of catachresis, inhabiting conventions of identification and disrupting them from within. Second, I read *Kein Licht* as a text concerned with the limits of the knowable. The monstrosity of the catastrophe of Fukushima becomes a means to grasp the limits of knowledge and thus of subjecthood. The play enters into the protocols of the event of Fukushima and in doing so, imagines human life that is constituted by the event which cannot fully be known. Third, the idea of a reparative translation takes the form of acts of truth-telling, unearthing lies and mourning the loss of lives in the play.

⁴⁵ Thomas Eder and Juliane Vogel (eds), *Lob der Oberfläche. Zum Werk von Elfriede Jelinek* (Munich, 2010), p. 7.