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OSKAR JELLINEK — LIFE AND WORK

(Summary)

Among the German authors who took materials and motives for their literary work from the Czech (Bohemian and Moravian) milieu, the Austrian poet and short story writer Oskar Jellinek (1886—1949) rightly occupies an important place.

Oskar Jellinek was born in Brno (Brünn) of a German-Jewish bourgeois family. (His father owned a textile factory.) After the finals at the secondary school (1. Deutsches Staatsgymnasium in Brünn) in 1904 he moved to Vienna where he studied law, and afterwards was employed as an officer of the County Court (Landesgericht). He resigned from his office in 1919 in order to devote himself entirely to literature and art.

Poetic expression was from the first literary attempts his chief ambition and his whole artistic development is characterised by lyrical, mostly occasional creations which testify to the sincere endeavour of this deeply humanistic poet. Although his verse sometimes echoes the great classical or modern German poets (Goethe, Heine, Grillparzer, Lenau, Wildgans, Hofmannsthal, Rilke, Werfel, and others) one cannot speak about any conscious imitation of these models. Some of Jellinek's early poems with mostly erotic and feminist themes are clearly under the influence of the so-called "Jugendstil" from which the author later on gradually freed himself. It is to be stressed, however, that what above all Jellinek as a lyrical poet aims at is formal perfection, which he also in most of his poems attains. The best pieces among them are — and this is a characteristic feature — reflective poems, most of them concise, essentially personal and on the whole separated from historic and social happenings of the day. The greater part of them is melancholy, which again has its roots in the poet's detachment from his surroundings, his introversion and isolation, and last but not least in his tragic feeling of life resulting from the internal conflicts of the author who had never felt at home in his social milieu.

It is significant that from the very beginning of his literary career Jellinek strove to succeed as a dramatist. This is proved not only by numerous plans and sketches of plays, but also by the seven finished pieces with motives taken mostly from his experiences as a judge. None of them, however, was performed, and only a very small part published in magazines. Although he was nourishing the love for drama in himself for a long time — hoping against hope to reach success in this field — at last he had to put up with the harsh reality that his dream of a stage triumph was futile just like that of many other German and Austrian writers (e. g. J. J. David, F. von Saar, Marie von Ebner Eschenbach etc.). The cause is to be sought, apart from the disfavour of time and of theatre directors, in Jellinek's dramas themselves which suffer from artificial motivation, pathetic expression and insufficient reality and convincingness of the dramatic personae. Later on the author himself autocritically admitted the artistic failure of his dramatic efforts, which he had considered only a necessary step in his poetic development. Nevertheless his dramatic production (especially between 1914 and 1924) was not without importance for his further growth as artist and for his creative work. His undeniable dramatic talent came to fruition and could be exploited to the full in a field where he was to be most successful, i. e. in the short story, which secures him a deserved place in the history of modern Austrian literature.

Jellinek knew not only the works of prominent German short story writers (as e. g. Goethe, Kleist, Storm, Heyse, C. F. Meyer and others) but also important representatives of the Austrian short story (David, Saar, Eschenbach, Schnitzler and others) whom he admired

and was, to a certain degree, indebted to. But in contrast to these "experience poets" (Erlebnisdichter) he is a typical "culture poet" (Bildungsdichter) who constructs the plot of his stories artificially according to a code of his own creation which at the same time forms the base of the action he has invented. And it is rather curious that Jelinek — somewhat anachronistically — tries to create a classical short story of a new type in which he, of course, was not and could not be successful since he was too tightly bound by his own aesthetic and formal principles. That is why the Moravian milieu where most of his stories take place serves only as decorative scenery and background and does not form any integral part of them.

In this milieu a drama of elementary human passions is enacted. The action is psychologically precisely motivated but it bears the stigma of exceptionality and exclusiveness, which again is the reason why the characters (may they be farmers, servants, judges or soldiers) are not convincing as realistic types. Characteristically we always meet in his stories down-trodden, suffering, unhappy and disinherited people, a circumstance which is in full harmony with the view of life expressed by the author e. g. in the lines of the poem "Bekanntnis" (Confession):

*„Was namenlos hin durch das Dasein wallt,
Dem gebe ich Namen und geb' ihm Gestalt:
Der Verkürzten und der Verstrickten Schrei
Durchhallt meiner Dichtung Armenkanzlei.“*

The effect of Jelinek's stories is also based on contrast: determined, sensual and singleminded women stand in opposition to irresolute, weak, dully passionate men (Vejnar, Valnocha, Jošt, Benda). The Czech element is treated here in the same way as in the works of some German and particularly German-Jewish authors, who see in the Czech nation only peasants or people of peasant origin full of „dark passions“ and „strong vitality“. These authors are enchanted by the natural sensuality of this „exotic“ milieu, and enjoy at the same time the contradiction between the high vitality on the one hand and the low social origin on the other. There is a certain decadence in this conception of the Czech people. In stories with Jewish themes his insight into the nature of Moravian Jews is incomparably more penetrating. But even here the author projects himself into his main characters by endowing them with properties he possesses himself, i. e. melancholy, sensuality, passionateness, effeminacy etc. In spite of the above mentioned reservations Jelinek's stories have an artistic value and a genuine personal note which ensure them a definite place in the history of the twentieth-century Austrian short story (Novelle).

Contemporary criticism ranked Jelinek with such Austrian story tellers as David, Saar, Ebner-Eschenbach disregarding the impossibility of connecting him with the so-called "Home-land Poets" (Heimatchdichter), and the author himself justifiably objected to such classification. By calling his purely tragic stories "Schicksalstragödien in Novellenform" he clearly separates himself from the group. Jelinek belongs without any doubt to that type of modern romanticists whose art is not so much a reflection of reality and life as rather a picture of their own personalities and views of life. His generation is that of authors, born in the eighties and nineties of the 19th century, who began their work at the beginning of the 20th century before the first world war. He shares their artistic equipment as well as their view of life and art — he is a decadent neoromanticist, therefore it is right to group him with the Austrian Modernist Movement, represented by Hermann Bahr, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arthur Schnitzler, Anton Wildgans etc. These facts cannot be altered even by the author's own claim that he did not belong to any group or movement and by his personal introversion and exclusiveness.