

**Felix Mitterer, *Jägerstätter*. Translation by Gregor Thuswaldner with Robert Dassanowsky, ed. Günter Bischof. New Orleans, LA: UNO Press, 2015. 95 pp.**

In spite of the ongoing ministrations (and subventions) by the Goethe-Institut to bring German literature to a reading audience in the United States, there is a marked dearth of German-language drama available for American audiences in print, and the record of contemporary German theatre texts being staged this side of the Atlantic is nothing if not lamentable. Blame partly the habitually very selective attention of U.S. literary culture to foreign works, but also the enormous aesthetic gap between European “postdramatic” performance practices in which texts are only the point of departure (and sometimes the point of no return) for the inventions and interventions of *Regietheater* and an American taste for drama that is often stultifyingly mired in conventions of Realism and representation. Little wonder that, quite apart from the linguistic challenges they present, works by Elfriede Jelinek, René Pollesch, or Falk Richter are rarely seen here.

So the present translation of Felix Mitterer’s 2013 drama *Jägerstätter*, which has the potential to bridge that gap, is a most welcome enterprise. Mitterer has been a productive and award-winning playwright and screenwriter (notably for the TV crime series *Tatort*) since the mid-1970s. Frequently produced in Vienna as well as in a number of Austrian regional theatres, wider recognition of his work, even in the German-speaking countries, has probably suffered because he thinks of himself as a *Heimatsdichter*, a regionalist writer. Like his countryman Ödön von Horváth—he received the eponymously named literary prize—Mitterer’s genre is the critical popular play (*kritisches Volksstück*) which through episodic structure and folk idiom reveals the blinkered attitudes and reactionary politics of the provincial milieu.

Franz Jägerstätter, the historical protagonist of this play, is however no less than a heroic figure whose courageous and ultimately fatal act of resistance against the Nazi war machine sets him in stark relief to the cowering acquiescence of his compatriots. A young, rather impetuous and carefree farmer in the Austrian town of St. Radegund (he had fathered an illegitimate child), Jägerstätter was by 1943 married and the father of three when the Wehrmacht annulled his deferral from the draft and insisted that he join the badly faltering German war effort. Recognizing the horrors of the slaughter and the moral insanity of the war, Jägerstätter, a pious Catholic whose Christianity was more than lip-service, became a conscientious objector. In spite of pleas by his family, his priest, his lawyer, and even the Bishop of Linz (who, quite in line with ecclesiastical complicity, all but commanded Jägerstätter to enlist), Jägerstätter held out in the face of certain annihilation, and was tried and executed in Berlin in 1943.

That Jägerstätter's fate, unlike that of the much more familiar Hans and Sophie Scholl (who were also guided by religious faith), is largely unknown in Austria and Germany is no coincidence. As the useful preface by Günter Bischof and introduction by translator Gregor Thuswaldner explain, Jägerstätter's martyrdom ran afoul of Austria's post-war victim complex in which the myth persisted that the country had been irresistibly conscripted into the evil machinations of an outside power. The young farmer's sacrifice gave the lie to the narrative of the untarnished heroism of the Austrian soldiers. Neither the Church nor the Left, though for very different reasons, wanted to own his act of resistance. His widow Franziska was subjected to hostilities after the war and denied a widow's pension. It was not until, ironically, an American scholar, and later a television documentary, picked up his cause that Jägerstätter's case was reexamined, culminating with his beatification in 2007.

Mitterer's play, drawing on letters and other historical documents, sets the story out in a mostly linear and simply suggestive style, though, a good Brechtian, he tells us right at the start that Jägerstätter will perish. In Mitterer's episodic drama, Jägerstätter is a fallible character, tender-hearted but irascible, proud and clear-eyed, unimpressed by intimidation, whose stiffening resolve against the gathering storm rises to the inexorable heights of tragic fate. This Catholic martyr aligns with the imperturbable creed of Martin Luther—"Here I stand, I can do no other"—or with the immovable conviction of Michael Kohlhaas in Kleist's story. As Arthur Miller says in his well-known essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man," "we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life . . . to secure one thing, his sense of personal dignity." Indeed, there is even a chorus of townspeople in Mitterer's play, though it represents less the moral wisdom of the *polis*, as in ancient tragedy, than the wheedling, bellicose voice of conventional conformity, shot through with pious nostrums and Nazi platitudes.

Thuswaldner's translation (aided in the process by Robert Dassanowsky and Jeff Miller) is more than serviceable; it is for the most part both accurate in its particulars and broadly playable. He acknowledges in his introduction that the play presents the translator with several inherent difficulties owed to its "folkloristic undertones" and "non-standard varieties of Austrian-German" (xxv-xxvi). Indeed, much like the language of Horváth or, in its German equivalents, of Brecht, Fleisser, or Kroetz, Mitterer's is a *Kunstsprache*, a linguistic construct evocative of popular speech rather than a transcription of Upper Austrian sociolects. In the original, this language has subtextual flexibility and subtlety as it does both the work of concealing and revealing, depending on the speaker. It can come across as blunt and hostile, but also as deeply honest and even lyrical. Thuswaldner does his best (and his best is indeed very good) to render the connotations

of this language, as well as to account for the many other linguistic registers of the play, such as the bloated pathos of Nazi slogans, the slippery verbiage of ecclesiastical cant, or the chilling arrogance of legalistic injustice.

It is possible to quibble with word choices, as in every translation. "Betschwester," an epithet flung by Jägerstätter's mother at his wife in the first scene, meant to indict her overt piety or perhaps naivety, is unaccountably rendered as "bigot." Or when Franz writes to Franziska from prison as "Liebste Gattin!" the English term "spouse" distances rather than to serve as an elevated term of endearment. A pun on "Heil Hitler!" misfires because "Hail Hitler!" doesn't quite carry the implication of Hitler's insanity. Common wisdom holds that the target language of the translation should always be the translator's native tongue, and there are a few instances in the translated text that point to a native German speaker. "Spare us with your poems!" should probably be: "Spare us your poems!"

None of this matters much. The signal achievement of Thuswaldner's skillful translation is to bring to potential American audiences a thoughtfully edited and stageable version of an important and compelling story of individual courage and the strength of conviction against terrifying odds. May some American director, against the odds of choosing a play with two umlauts in the title, have the courage to give it a well-deserved production.

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