

Love and other forms of madness

Franziska by Ernst Weiss is an extraordinary novel, says Nicholas Lezard

Nicholas Lezard
Saturday June 7, 2008

Guardian

Franziska, by Ernst Weiss, translated by Anthea Bell (Pushkin, £7.99)

As Virginia Woolf once famously remarked, "on or about December 1910 human nature changed". She was of course being provocatively facetious, but she had a point. You may quibble about the date. And, reading this, Ernst Weiss's second novel, you may well think: here is a chronicle of when it was that people started going really crazy.

I had, I must admit, known nothing at all about Weiss before I picked up this novel. But trust Pushkin Press to shove something fascinating and worthwhile your way. Weiss was a friend of Kafka's, and was highly regarded by him. His most famous novel, which I would dearly like to read, is *The Eyewitness* (1938), in which a doctor is haunted by the fact that he treated a young Adolf Hitler for hysterical blindness. (Weiss, a Czech Jew who wrote in German, killed himself in 1940, in Paris, as the Nazis entered the city. Another death to chalk up to them.)

But *Franziska* - originally entitled *Der Kampf* (I thought: you can see why he changed that title, but in fact he changed it six years before Hitler's book came out) - is an extraordinary novel, a depiction of wildly irrational behaviour, of people being driven bonkers either by diabetes, musical talent, love, venereal disease, malaria or simple irresolution. Kafka himself thought he had been portrayed as the feckless young lover, Erwin, and his friendship with Weiss cooled after the book came out. But, as Peter Engel points out in his afterword, Weiss had started work on the novel before he and Kafka had even met.

Still, you can see why Kafka might have imagined a slight. Erwin is a great creation: vaguely likeable, but so useless that I found myself groaning out loud as he flits, like a rather stupid moth, between his two lovers: the mischievous, guileful Hedy and the eponymous heroine.

Franziska, obviously, is the book's centre, and one of the most psychologically convincing portrayals of a gifted musician that I have ever read (only Thomas Bernhard's *The Loser* does it significantly better). The book begins with her mother's death, Franziska's two sisters weeping, but Franziska herself unable to. Later on we begin to see why: at a recital with her mother "she was deeply moved, trembling with excitement, and turned so pale that her mother, taking her in a firm hold, made her go home. Franziska never forgave her for that." The music-as-sex metaphor, you will note, is handled extremely delicately, and is not forced upon us. But there is a persistent note of eroticism throughout the book, handled with cunning subtlety; you will wonder whether there is anything going on, or about to go on, between Franziska and the novel's other great character, the imperious and charismatic pianist who revels in the name La Constanza. (Which I thought at first a signal of egotistical *folie de grandeur*, but is in fact to be taken more or less literally: she is pretty much the only sane character in the book, and you greet her entrances as a relief from the parade of lunacy going before you.)

I wonder why Weiss isn't better known here. A doctor as well as a writer, he knew about the body as well as the heart, and you can trust him when he describes how each can act on the other - this is an extremely useful guide to love (men wishing to know about female emotions would do well to read it). It is also an almost cinematically accurate depiction of prewar Prague and Berlin, and it occurs to you that, just as those cities are half horse-drawn, half motor-driven, it describes a world which is, unknowingly, tottering on the

edge of a tremendous abyss. Not that Weiss does anything so vulgar as to spell it out. That's a mark of his integrity: he's not putting his thumb on the scales. And though the characters may get hysterical, the writing never does.

As for the translation, Nabokov once remarked that a translator had to be (a) good at the language being translated from, (b) extremely good at the language being translated into, and (c) a man. Anthea Bell's entire career, and this translation no less, show that as far as point (c) goes, Nabokov was talking rubbish.