The Review

Book review

THE METHOD

JULI ZEH

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The cleverest thing about Juli Zeh's novel of dystopia *The Method*, translated from the German by Sophie-Ann Spencer, is the way it hoodwinks the reader by beginning with a fictive citation from a book purportedly called *Health as the Principle of State Legitimacy*, Berlin/Munich/Stuttgart, 25th edition, by one Heinrich Kramer. One of the exhortatory lines in the foreword to this book runs as follows:

'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of infirmity or disease.'

That bold assertion is nothing other than the WHO's famous formal definition of health from 1948, which has been criticised over the years for being trite, euphoric, and, well, self-interested, insofar as it is likely to keep the Organization handing down phrases like that for a very long time to come. By attributing it instead to Kramer, Zeh associates it with what is generally considered a period of gross irrationality in Europe's progress towards reason: the real Heinrich Kramer was a 15th-century Dominican monk from Alsace who became notorious in the German-speaking lands as an inquisitor of witches and sorcerers, and for his manual *Malleus Maleficarum*.

The Heinrich Kramer of Zeh's novel is the mind behind a social order 50 years hence. It is a consensus society where health is the ultimate good; Kramer's intellectual work is its blueprint. *The Method* ensures that every individual enjoys maximum longevity and minimal biological dysfunction. *'Do you know how dreadfully people suffered in the past? They watched themselves die by degrees and they called it living ... fear was life for these people. For humans to have risen above this condition is a blessing, don't you think?'* Kramer's agenda has ensured that the German fondness for keeping things spick and span has become an antibacterial mania where apartments and bodies alike are constantly monitored for colony counts. Private and public goods are melded in a regime that has turned healthiness into righteousness. Failure to take all reasonable precautions against diseases is a crime.

Santé is the universal greeting. People drink hot water instead of tea or coffee. Food comes in protein tubes containing essential nutrients. Everybody is electronically chipped 'for their own good,' and immunological compatibility is a by-word for getting hitched to a partner. *The Method* has superseded democracy: people police each other and themselves constantly. It is a world mad on metrics, and not entirely unfamiliar.

Mia Holl, the novel's heroine, stirs it all up. When we meet her, she has just lost her brother Moritz, who, it appears, has killed himself in prison with a cord supplied to him by his sister. Mia is a laboratory scientist and, initially, fully accepts the Method. *'The Method is reason; the Method is good sense.'* Moritz had been arrested on a wrongful charge of rape and murder, and moreover was suspected of being an activist for a group called the People's Right to Illness. When his avowal of innocence is taken up by Mia it becomes the grain of sand that threatens to disrupt the Method. Her very resistance is the proof of its fallibility. But to get that far, Mia has to learn civil disobedience, and her first act is refusing to submit her daily body parameters for higher control by the authorities: little by little she realises that her own body is going to have to become the *corpus delicti* (the original novel's German title). Categorised as a 'terrorist,' she is summoned to court at regular intervals. Mia's only real confidante is the ideal innamorata, an 'imaginary' character who has been conjured up by Moritz in prison and bequeathed to her. The ideal innamorata's weightlessness provides a foil for Mia's development: in spite of the gravity of the novel's basic premise its short chapters turn on fast-paced dialogue, and the few sketchy settings are mere struts and props; like the minimalist scenery of Lars von Trier's film *Dogville*. Zeh, who has also written plays, nicely conveys the comedy and tedium of courtroom scenes by relying on her own professional experience as a lawyer.

The Method may be futuristic but it isn't science fiction; indeed, the self-assured Kramer, about whom Mia is openly ambivalent, is a character whose eloquence in defence of the aseptic society of the Method seems all too contemporary, as he glides between functions in the law, journalism, administration, and the media. In fact, the novel's fictionalisation of science themes calls to mind Samuel Butler's classic novel

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Erewhon (1896), that imagined a dystopia in which it is a crime to be 'unfortunate,' in other words, to fall ill. Butler was impressed by the biosocial implications of Darwinism; Zeh is obsessed by a kind of wraparound cultural determinism, in which a positivist law-making society is able to induce total conformism by making everyday life follow bodily 'norms'. That would be to attribute something like the doctrine of infallibility to empirical data: as a glance at an elementary textbook on statistics could have told the author, even though the axiomatic systems which generate metrics may in a sense be airtight we will always be capable of error when interpreting and working with them. Every technology harbours its own negativity, technical medicine included.

A deeper structural flaw attaches to the trick played on the reader by the conflation of those early modern witchhunts and the WHO's shiny definition of health. It is surely most unlikely that a future dystopia that shared anything with 'the Middle Ages ... of human nature' would be so benign. It would be in deadly earnest; and Zeh, a cool and distanced writer, can't quite bring herself to credit how relentlessly her alienated protagonist would be scapegoated in the future present. There is another flaw, too. Medicine, as a secular stand-in for salvation, now faces a crisis of representation much like that which faced the Church 500 years ago when Luther's edicts caused Christendom to splinter into competing factions. So many patients today opt to receive their 'sacraments' from the scores of practitioners of complementary and alternative medicines while the 'true Church' of conventional medicine ever more defensively guards its orthodoxy: that is another sociological phenomenon that saps the Orwellian idea of a unique 'method' and suggests that Juli Zeh, for all her cleverness, hasn't worked through all the implications of her assumptions about health and holiness.

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