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Abstract

Review of Rachel Seelig. *Strangers in Berlin: Modern Jewish Literature Between East and West, 1913-1933*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2016. 225 pp.

Keywords

Berlin; Modernism; Poetry; Jews

Rachel Seelig. *Strangers in Berlin: Modern Jewish Literature Between East and West, 1913-1933*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2016. 225 pp.

Rachel Seelig's *Strangers in Berlin: Modern Jewish Literature Between East and West, 1913-1933*, is an admirable and valuable contribution to transdisciplinary and transnational studies of the dynamics of Jewish assimilation and the place of Jewish writers within European modernism. Essentially a comparative close reading of the work of four different Jewish poets tied to Berlin—Moyshe Kulbak, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Gertrud Kolmar, and Ludwig Strauss—Seelig helpfully rescues overlooked publications and their debates that thematized issues of modernism, diasporic nationalism, orientalism, and linguistic pluralism in poetry (e.g., the journals *Freistaat*, *Milgroyim/Rimon*, and *Albatross*). Seelig's book takes as her main organizing principle a binary opposition between the Jews of the "East" which has traditionally stood for East of Germany and "West" which stands for Germany itself. In this framework, Seelig analyzes the work of two German Jewish poets who experiment with Hebrew and self-Orientalization and contrasts them with two migrating Eastern European Yiddish poets who confront modernist literary styles in Berlin. Taken as a whole, this work advances the effort to recast Berlin as a center of diasporic Jewish literary modernism and a major center of Yiddish and Hebrew, as well as German, literature.

The work rises to the challenge of attempting to extrapolate from experiments in literary discourse conclusions about social trends or even wider cultural phenomena. Though purportedly a heterogeneous account of vertical and horizontal border crossings within geographic and cultural space, as well as between the artistic space of hierarchies between forms, styles, and languages, her narrative method heavily relies on the East-West binary construct. This construct is shopworn, if not superannuated, and often leads her to a slippage between its critical reevaluation and its embrace. Solely in terms of geography, there is something unintentionally comical about imposing an imaginary boundary line of "East versus West" inside a geographical landmass, say from Berlin to Belarus, that is barely a few hours from end to end. Seelig's focus on this framework helpfully highlights issues that are in need of discussion. Her re-articulation of this East-West trope, however, could be a helpful jumping off point for future scholarly advances in deciphering the complexity of relations between German-speaking Central Europeans with their Slavic and Jewish neighbors to the immediate East.

Seelig's chosen case studies distill this historical moment of great upheaval into what might be termed, (*pace* Walter Benjamin) a cultural "two way street." Essentially, she illustrates, on the one hand, two Eastern European poets, Moyshe Kulbak and Uri Greenberg, confronting the legacy and culture of the supposed "West" through their use of Christian themes and dramatization of the collapse of

the pieties and promises of “Western Civilization.” On the other hand, her two chosen German poets, Ludwig Strauss and Gertrud Kolmar, look to the “East” with a romantic gaze as a wellspring of authenticity and renewal.

Strauss, who ended up in Israel, pursued bilingual poetry and built a case for a distinct German Jewish poetic tradition rooted in classical Hebrew. Like Chagall in Paris, Kulbak pursued integration of Yiddish sources in European modernism. From exile in Berlin, he reimagined a nostalgic landscape of his Belarusian childhood. Greenberg forsook Yiddish for Hebrew in Berlin and exchanged cosmopolitanism, rejecting Jewish life in Europe, for a radical Zionism that took him to Palestine. Arguably the most powerful atmosphere of colonization, exile, and even apocalypse emerges in the monolingual German poet native to Berlin, Gertrud Kolmar, who never left the city until her deportation and murder during the Holocaust. In her writings, the East figures as a kind of “lost Atlantis” of the imagination.

This is a complex field of mutual projection, poetic performance, and various registers of the impostor effect set against the backdrop of an acute crisis in European politics, namely the collapse of stable polities that can protect minorities and the rise of fascism. Befitting her subject matter, Seelig proceeds with a narrative that is nothing if not quite poetic itself. There is much thematic continuity in her narrative, which provides clarity and helpful moments of reemphasis for the reader. Her chosen poets all shared anxieties over the boundaries of linguistic forms, cultural territories and over control of the terms and forms of education and self-actualization (as signaled by the German term *Bildung*). It was arguably the struggle itself with so many irresolvable dialectics that led to such cultural fecundity.

Though two of the authors presented are distinctly Eastern European, Moyshe Kulbak and Uri Zvi Greenberg, there is little consideration of modernist literary forces within Eastern Europe that might have impacted their work. In addition to greater dialogue with Yiddish and Eastern European studies, one might wish for a more developed theoretical construct beyond the invocation of Heidegger’s “threshold.” Given his own record as an historical agent and the subjects at hand, the ironies of reliance upon Heidegger are troubling if not worthy of further reflection. Her invocation of the historical construct of a “decline of empire to nation-state” applies with considerably less aplomb to Weimar Germany than neighboring Austria for instance (3, 76, 157).

In the conclusion, Seelig does somewhat awkwardly tack on contemporary migration of Jews to Berlin as further evidence of the city’s status as a meeting place and viable staging ground for cultural experimentation. Not only are the political variables wildly different today, but settlement and integration are both relatively smooth and also offer an escape valve from problematic contexts in Russia and Israel. Seelig’s historical interpretations could be seen as feeding into

the mythos of the city as place and as idealized projection field, but her evidence actually points to a different story. While writing in the city, her poets all looked elsewhere for authenticity, mostly to a kind of Oriental interiority, to the point that one could claim that their brief and troubled encounters with this urban context disenchanting and disillusioned fantasies of cosmopolitan belonging.

Finally, at the risk of historical pedantry, there are a number of conspicuous errors that are worth flagging. Though perhaps 200,000 Soviet Jews may have come to Germany they certainly did not come to the capital city itself, beholden as they were to a complex system of nationwide dispersal. The historical name Lemberg for the contemporary city of Lviv was not merely the product of “German occupation,” but rather was the historical name within the Habsburg Empire and for most Jews themselves. Posen was not a part of East Prussia, but rather constituted its own province within Wilhelmine Germany. The Antisemitic May Laws of Imperial Russia were most certainly not instituted by the “Tsar Liberator” Alexander II, but rather came into being after his untimely demise at the hands of a radical “terror” attack in 1881. Scholars of modern European poetry and those with a focus on Jewish Studies should find this book of particular interest, as well as a wider audience interested in a further exploration of issues of orientalism, diasporic nationalism, and politically vexed multilingual contexts.

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