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**Hannah Arendt**. *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. xii + 388 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5587-0.

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This volume, as title proudly proclaims, is the first complete English-language edition of Hannah Arendt's biographical study of Rahel Varnhagen von Ense, the famous early-nineteenth century *salonniere*. Completed in 1933 on the eve of the author's flight from Germany, the book was not published until 1958 in conjunction with Arendt's *Habilitierung*, a move which helped her claim compensation from the West German government for loss of income due to Nazi discrimination. The edition is expanded with a sixty-page introduction by the Rahel scholar Liliane Weissberg.

This is a peculiar but worthwhile volume, of interest to scholars of the two principles, and generally to all concerned with issues of gender and minority. The introduction contains background information as well as an interpretative argument about the text. Quite rightly, Weissberg asserts that Arendt's biography is as much about herself as about the subject, to the point that the two often merge within its pages. Weissberg draws a lucid parallel between Varnhagen–who used the letter as a form of autobiographical confession in the tradition of Rousseau–and Arendt, who used a highly idiosyncratic form of speculative philosophical biography to similar ends. Always present on a subtextual level is Arendt's concern with the lure of totalitarianism, and pertinent citations illustrate strategies of openness within the text. The only major shortcoming I could detect in the introduction is Weissberg's failure to invoke the post-war German fascination with biography, evident in works by authors such as Wolfgang Hildesheimer and Dieter Kuehn, of which Arendt's Varnhagen biography is an important precursor. Such an invocation would have augmented the reader's sense of the text's importance. That one omission notwithstanding, Weissberg's analysis is consistently clear-sighted and thought-provoking.

Arendt's *Habilitationsschrift* itself is a strange animal. Although the narrative does conform to at least the superficial structures of biography, taking up most of the important details of Varnhagen's life, Arendt's concern is far more with a philosophical-psychological analysis of what might have been running through her subject's mind than with dates and facts. Thus Arendt's account is written in something often approaching stream-of-consciousness: Weissberg's notation of author and subject often merging into one becomes particularly pertinent in this regard. This technique allows Arendt to explore issues of gender, minority identity, and personal selfhood in unique philosophical depth, and it results in passages of startling, even poetic insight. In Arendt's imaginative reconstruction, Varnhagen's life and work was a continued assault on the social acknowledgement denied her by birth as a not-particularly-marriageable Jewish woman. To great effect, Arendt's cites a number of passages from Varnhagen's correspondence and personal diaries that present her in an existentialist light.

At the same time, Arendt's identification with Varnhagen does not prevent her from seeing flaws. In particular, the biography criticizes the subject's attempted rejection and denial of Jewishness, contrasting her unfavorably to contemporaries Ludwig Boerne and Heinrich Heine, both of whom sought to invent hybrid identities and forms of discourse. Ultimately, the process of assimilation–or to follow Arendt, the "transition from pariah to parvenu"–becomes emblematic for a universal search for individual sense of self in a world ungoverned by traditional certainties.

The audience should be forewarned that *Rahel Varnhagen: Life of Jewess* can be an exasperating read. The less profound of Arendt's constant philosophical and psychological interjections irritate without enlightening or advancing her central point. Arendt spends a disproportionate part of the book discussing Varnhagen's early years, which best allow for such extrapolations, at the cost of that period in the 1820s and 30s when Rahel enjoyed some of her most interesting acquaintances. A final, nine-page chapter, for instance, is left to cover the years 1820-33, leaving the distinct impression of a work being wrapped up for convenience's sake. A bit more

conventional biographical structure would have contextualized Arendt's own analysis to better effect. Readers who do take the time, however, to piece together Varnhagen's life will find this text a rewarding experience. Although Arendt was hardly an academic in the normal sense, she assembled citations as well as any traditional scholar–indeed better than most. It is fascinating to follow the exchanges Arendt reconstructs between her subject and figures such as Wilhelm von Humboldt, wonderfully dubbed by Arendt as "the best, keenest and most malicious gossip of the day" (p. 238). Arendt's work itself amounts to a keen, gossipy, occasionally malicious, and relentless rumination on the question of outsider selfhood, which never lapses into essentialism or romanticized visions of minority. As such, it is far more interesting than today's seemingly endless crop of theoretical studies on identity, and in a curious way it succeeds in being true to the idiosyncratic nature of this most influential nineteenth-century figure.

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