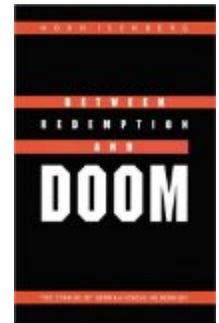




Noah Isenberg. *Between Redemption and Doom: The Strains of German-Jewish Modernism*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. Viii + 232 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2502-2.

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The Persistence of Tradition

In a letter to Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin observes: “Kafka’s work is an ellipse with foci that lie far apart and are determined on the one hand by mystical experience (which is above all the experience of tradition) and on the other by the experience of the modern city dweller” (p. 123). These same two foci function as coordinates for this rich and nuanced study of “German-Jewish modernism.” In each of the four illuminating case studies (of Kafka, Arnold Zweig, the film maker Paul Wegener, and Benjamin), Noah Isenberg demonstrates how the more obvious determinant of urban modernity is qualified, enriched, or complicated by the concomitant factor of Jewish tradition. What is more, this study successfully balances the need to respect unique aspects of these individual cases while drawing out larger, more representative trends.

It is fair to ask to what extent this study alters our view of that preeminent modernist, Franz Kafka. His interest in the Yiddish theater had of course already been duly noted; and the rather narrow slice of works considered—Isenberg really only looks closely at the years 1911-12—might lead one to conclude that Kafka’s interest in Judaism is ultimately not crucial for understanding the later work. But that would be a mistake. Nor should we construe the matter too narrowly, for this is no traditional “influence study.” While the admired (and much idealized) Yiddish actress, Frau Tschissik, may indeed be said to have inspired the fictional “Josephine die Saengerin,” as Isenberg cleverly suggests, the larger argument hardly depends on such specific correlations. For,

after considering Kafka’s lecture on the Yiddish language, which gives rich testimony to his perception of Eastern Jews as a kind of antidote to modernity, one does in fact look at the entire oeuvre differently. The sense of alienation, that veritable trademark of the “Kafkaesque,” becomes immediately more palpable as we are invited to understand it, at least in part, as alienation from Jewish tradition. “Most young Jews who began to write German wanted to leave Jewishness behind them ...” Kafka writes in 1921, “But with their posterior legs they were still glued to their father’s Jewishness and with their wavering anterior legs they found no new ground” (p. 39). In the multitudinous attempts to interpret Gregor Samsa—an example one cannot resist given the foregoing imagery—commentators have perhaps neglected a factor that to some contemporaries was so obvious that it did not need to be named explicitly.

Throughout this study Isenberg gives careful attention to the rather elusive question of what “Jewish tradition” actually meant to each of his subjects. For Kafka, and more so for Arnold Zweig, it appears to have stood for an idealized sense of community that was sorely missed in the disconcerting “present” of their day. While Eastern European Jews—the Ostjuden who immigrated in unprecedented numbers to Germany during and after World War One—represented authentic “Jewishness” to both, religion per se is curiously absent from their idealizations. It is as if Kafka and Zweig desire the effects of a tightly knit religious group without its *raison d’être*. Thus in neither case is this a simple case of cul-

tural transmission, but rather a highly selective affair. Zweig could not render his *Face of Eastern Jewry* (*Das ostjuedische Antlitz*, 1920) without considerable distortion, as Isenberg shows. And Kafka's famous singing mouse, Josephine, embodies a degree of ambivalence and irony quite removed from the author's unadulterated adoration of the historical personage who may have inspired the figure.

To what extent is Benjamin's celebrated conception of memory actually informed by Jewish tradition? Isenberg wisely avoids venturing anything like a specific answer, demonstrating instead the rich proximity of one body of thought to the other. As evidence of Benjamin's ongoing (and vacillating) interest in Judaism accumulates, we come to feel that this endeavor provides not some kind of definitive hermeneutic key, but rather a rich cultural context we would simply not want to miss. Nevertheless, Benjamin remains maddeningly difficult to place, a fact that is in part attributable to his use of the language of religion and mysticism apart from—if not in direct opposition to—traditional Jewish piety. If one senses Isenberg straining here as nowhere else in this study—affiliating Benjamin's treatment of memory now with Toennies's concept of organic community (*Gemeinschaft*), now with the Hebrew Bible—it is attributable to the fact that Benjamin himself inhabited these several worlds.

Isenberg's discussion of Paul Wegener's Weimar film *The Golem* exhibits what is perhaps the book's greatest strength, the ability to make case studies speak to and for larger cultural trends. The film is persuasively explicated

as simultaneously about German interwar fears of Jewish "invasion," even while it ostensibly narrates a tale set in the sixteenth-century Prague ghetto. The socio-political data on Jews in Germany is superbly balanced with a sensitive aesthetic reading of the film's "Architecture of the Jew." The stills and poster illustrations are well chosen and add substance and force to the argument.

In making its own compelling case for German-Jewish modernism, *Between Redemption and Doom* achieves what few other such studies do: it points, if only implicitly, beyond itself, suggesting the need for further inquiry of this kind. For, if Kafka and his contemporaries were left with their hind legs quivering, lacking any hope of firm cultural grounding, what about those other modernists? In the wake of this study, we will want to expand our exploration of the ways in which traditional religious cultures, or the vestiges thereof, form the crucial backdrop to other German modernists as well. Schnitzler's vitriolic indictment of a hypocritically practiced Catholicism (in his epoch-making *Leutnant Gustl*) and Thomas Mann's invocation of what Helmut Koopmann calls "Gnadentheologie" (theology of grace) in *Doktor Faustus* suggest the direction such an endeavor might take. With this perceptive and well-written work, in which Judaism and Jewish tradition are treated with insight and nuance, Isenberg has shown us the way.

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