



Robert Weldon Whalen. *Sacred Spring: God and the Birth of Modernism in Fin de Siècle Vienna*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007. x + 339 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8028-3216-0.

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Published on H-German (January, 2008)

Romancing the *Fin de Siècle*

Robert Whalen's new book joins a significant body of English-language work already in place on Viennese modernism, including Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (1981), the collaborate effort of Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (1973), Jacques Le Rider's *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (1993), and William McGrath's *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria* (1974). The most noteworthy and profound of these works is undoubtedly *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, and Schorske's is the argument that Whalen incompletely and unsuccessfully contests.

Schorske tied the vitality of Viennese modernism to the crisis and ultimate failure of liberalism in Austria. Schorske's synthetic view of culture and politics revealed three generations of Viennese politicians, cultural theorists, and artists between 1848 and 1914. Each generation represented a unique, more radical, more alienated form of cultural experience. Since Schorske equated rationalism with liberalism, and put the liberal tradition in a contest with the aristocratic Catholic culture of grace, the failure of liberalism in Austria subsequently became the advent of the irrational. Liberal failure in the areas of "national unity, social justice, economic prosperity and public morality ... converged ... to produce a deep crisis in liberalism before it had the chance to stabilize its new power [in the 1867 government]."[1] In the first generation, the irrational was manifested in the Pan-German student movement led by Georg von Schönerer, the Christian Socialism of Karl Lueger, and the Zionism of

Theodor Herzl. In the second generation, Freud was the emblematic figure of the irrational; he undermined the illusions of liberal rationalism by charting the instinctual mind. The third, most radical generation of the Viennese modern was found in the expressionists and their celebration of individual and subsequently psychological alienation. Painter Oskar Kokoschka, architect Adolf Loos, and composer Arnold Schoenberg exemplified this generation, whose members were "too free of specific loyalties to define themselves in relation to history, to cultural structure and function in a temporal sequence." [2] In the expressionists' flight from political and social reality, and their subsequent rejection of all that the nineteenth century represented, Schorske saw the culmination of the crisis and failure of Austrian liberalism.

According to Whalen, however, Schorske was wrong. Modernism, Whalen argues, was not about the confrontation with the irrational but rather "profoundly religious" (p. 16). In order to support his contention that "modernism arose because God visited Vienna" (p. 4) and subsequently "art took on the echo of the divine" (p. 15), Whalen relies on Protestant theologian Paul Tillich's theology of culture and his concept of "kairos," a "fulfilled time" in which the "Other" intruded into human space and time" (p. 4). To prove his thesis, Whalen begins by claiming that "[i]n 1888, emissaries from God visited Vienna" (p. 47). The emissaries turn out to be charlatans intent on tricking superstitious shop owners out of their money; this claim is the beginning of the au-

thor's argument for the presence of the divine. To develop his thesis, Whalen argues further that the pervasive fascination with death provides proof that "Vienna was a very religious place indeed" (p. 59). In the chapter titled "Necropolis," Whalen recapitulates the standard thesis that modernism was tied to the collapsing aristocratic order and even summarizes Schorske's claim about the death of liberalism to support his argument. Emblematic of the Necropolis are Gustav Klimt, Arthur Schnitzler, Karl Kraus, and Gustav Mahler. After summarizing each of these figures (although the logic of why they represent the necropolis is shaky at best), Whalen concludes the chapter by asking, "Could it be that necropolis Vienna was not a city of the dead, but rather a city of the sleeping, the sleeping who were awaiting a call to awake?" (p. 93). The awakening comes in the next chapter, entitled "Resurrection," in which the "writers of the Young Vienna ... the artists of the Secession, and musicians like Mahler were driven not only to explore the night world of death, but to proclaim the dawn of resurrection" (p. 95). For Whalen, Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony* "proclaims the 'rebirth of God'" (p.121). The following six chapters chart the presence of the divine in the major figures of Viennese modernism, including Arthur Schnitzler, Karl Kraus, Freud, Kokoschka, Klimt, and so on.

In order to substantiate his thesis Whalen recognizes that he has to confront the "dominant view" (p.18) of Schorske. Whalen characterizes Schorske's interpretation as "fundamentally political," a judgment that overlooks the brilliance of Schorske's synthesis of politics and culture. In one passage, Whalen uses Schorske's analysis of Schoenberg's unfinished symphony, intended to celebrate the death of the bourgeois God, to support his thesis: "according to Schorske ... Schöenberg wanted to show that the whole of machinery of human thought, all values and categories and prejudices, all 'isms' we humans impose on the world, are all falsehoods and idols [to quote Schorske]: 'By virtue of the collapse of these categories, Schöenberg's modern man seeks God again: but his own, metaphysical God, who stands for the mysterious, unitary plentitude of reality, which no principle can comprehend'" (p. 241). But despite occasional references to Schorske's readings, the project of rescuing Viennese modernism for a religious interpretation requires Whalen to read Schorske's analysis extremely selectively. In discussing Schoenberg's unfinished symphony, for example, Schorske begins by describing how "Schöenberg explained the genesis of his symphony project in ways that stressed the bankruptcy of politics. The work was to deal [quoting Schoenberg]

'with the man of today, who has passed through materialism, socialism, anarchy; who was an atheist, but preserved a remnant of his old belief (in the form of superstition): "[3] Schorske then sums up Schoenberg in these terms: "In his rock-solid affirmation of alienation lay both his revolutionary power as artist and his unwillingness as philosopher to envisage any scene of human realization except the wilderness. The truth of the wilderness—atomized, chaotic, indifferent, yet open and bracing—became Schöenberg's substitute for the beauty of the garden." [4] Schorske's synthetic view thus captures the multi-dimensional elements of Schoenberg's testing of the limits of bourgeois experience. Whalen's religious reading, on the other hand, recapitulates the exact consciousness the expressionists rejected: bourgeois comfort.

Whalen's interpretation of his material will primarily be convincing to audiences unfamiliar with or inclined to be suspicious of Schorske's interpretation. Despite the romance of his encounter with the city, *Sacred Spring* contains an impressive amount of original research, drawing on newspapers such as the *Neue Freie Presse* and the *Wiener Zeitung* and an impressive array of secondary sources (one caveat is the absence of Le Rider's work, especially since Whalen, like Le Rider, suggests that our postmodern world originates in the fin-de-siècle). The book is very eclectic. The frequent music and art criticism is compelling but often intermixed with less convincing vignettes about the monarchy or the experience of commoners. A great deal of repetition occurs due to an absence of chronology that probably stems from Whalen's attempt to chart the presence of the divine. As the example of Whalen's reading of Schoenberg suggests, however, reading Viennese modernism as a "text for theology" (p. 309) at best truncates, and in no way eclipses, Schorske's interpretation. Finally, even if we are to accept assertions that "the whole 'modernization as secularization' thesis" is wrong and that "art and theology have as their central concern the transcendent" (p. 309), it seems to me that Viennese modernism should be more appropriately read in light of the Catholic theology that surrounded it in Austria (especially given the pervasive themes of angst and alienation) and not in light of a Protestant theologian's later work.

Whalen recognizes that his thesis is provocative and will strike many scholars as absurd, but insists we *must* do a religious reading of the *Wiener Moderne* (p. 7). The book, however, will not convince readers unsympathetic to Whalen's concern with divine immanence of the necessity of this reading.

Notes

[1]. Carl Schorske, "Generational Tension and Cultural Change: Reflections on the Case of Vienna," *Daedalus* 107 (1978): 112.

[2]. *Ibid.*, 119-120.

[3]. Schorske, *Fin-de-Si cle Vienna: Politics and Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), 359.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 360.

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Citation: Timothy E. Pytell. Review of Whalen, Robert Weldon, *Sacred Spring: God and the Birth of Modernism in Fin de Si cle Vienna*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2008.

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