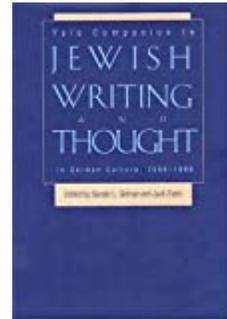


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sander L. Gilman, Jack Zipes, eds. *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture 1096-1996*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997. xxxiv + 864 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06824-5.



Reviewed by Jefferson S. Chase (University of Nottingham)

Published on H-German (September, 1998)

Part of the task of evaluating a volume like this one, almost a millennium in scope, with over nine hundred pages and some 120 entries, is to decide what is meant by “companion.” Is it an encyclopedia, a literary history, or some more loosely structured running supplement? A second, perhaps even more important question pertains to the specific topic at hand: is it even legitimate to speak of a particular Jewish mode of writing in German, shared by figures like Moses Mendelssohn, Heinrich Heine, Walter Benjamin, Lion Feuchtwanger, Peter Weiss and Jean Amery? If so, what is the relative status of Jewishness and Germanity? Does one subsume or outweigh the other? Are they equal but incompatible identities between which individuals must choose?

Although many of its individual entries are worth reading, this volume does a poor job of addressing these issues. On the question of what a “companion” should be, the editors prove indecisive. “Each essay is a reflection on a moment in time,” they write in the introduction, “and the authors who write the texts present the moment’s human face” (p. xvii). This is an extremely weak rationale for entries ranging from “The earliest extant Yiddish purimshpil is traced to Leipzig” and “Prussian universities allow women to matriculate for the first time” to “Hugo von Hoffmansthal worries about his Jewish mixed ancestry” and “Arnold Zweig begins to work

on *Freundschaft mit Freud*.”

There seem to be few principles guiding the choice of material. A minority of the entries are historical; a good many offer summaries of the lives and works of a single “Jewish” author; some deal with specific incidents in a given writer’s career; a very few deal with instances of antisemitism in German society and culture. Nor are connections made between literary, history and religious topics. One guiding principle seems to have been to favor entries featuring Jewish principles over those about non-Jewish principles, however great the effect of the latter may have been on attitudes about or actual conditions for Jews in German society. Although exceptions are made—for example with an entry on Christian Wilhelm von Dohm’s *On the Civic Improvement of the Jews* or one on Fassbinder’s *Garbage, the City and Death*—little mention is made of figures like Richard Wagner, Wilhelm Marr, or even Adolf Hitler.

The impression emerges that this companion’s true aim is to monumentalize Jewish cultural achievement and thereby serve as an artifact of common Jewish identity, much the same as nineteenth-century literary histories did for “German” culture and identity. The acceptability of such monumental literary history today is questionable, but even if one supports the legitimacy of this editorial aim, the present volume has serious flaws. First

and foremost is the neglect of Lessing, who does not receive an entry of his own and is dealt with in a pair of one-page asides (pp. 61-2, 90-1). Likewise, Kafka is the subject of only one article, about the significance of his tuberculosis as a “Jewish disease,” while Rahel Varnhagen von Ense gets two. Heine gets three, but his *Baeder von Lucca*, the work that is directly about Jewish attempts to “pass” in Gentile society, is still left unmentioned. The omissions are symptomatic of a general unwillingness to construct any sort of running narrative. Such fragmentation of focus might have been appropriate for a work that consistently pursued a postmodern challenge to traditional literary history. It is not, however, for a volume intended to memorialize German-Jewish cultural achievement in a very traditional sense.

Nor is there much critical thinking about identity. Although the introduction claims that all entries “contain reflections on the question of what is ‘Jewish’ about ‘Jewish’ writing in ‘German-speaking countries’” (p. xvii), I did not find this to be the case. The historical entries can perhaps be excused as being an inappropriate format for theoretical reflection, but even some of the literary ones, for example the one on Hermann Broch, scarcely mention the role of Jewishness in their subject’s work. As a whole, the volume simply assumes a common Jewish identity among its subjects. The actual historical situation, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, is far more ambiguous. A number of the authors concerned (Heine, Boerne, Tucholsky, Heym and Jurek Becker are just the first that spring to mind) did not define themselves as Jews in any primary sense, instead striving for full assimilation into majority society. The volume’s mere assertion of these and other figure’s Jewishness therefore leaves it open to the accusation of ethnic essentialism.

This companion would surely have been helped if more attention had been paid to historical context. Although proclaiming itself as interdisciplinary, this is first and foremost a work of literary studies, as a comparison of the number and profile of the literary and historical contributors reveals. Because little attempt is made at a coherent historical account of the past, scant mention is made of major events like the Hep-Hep riots or the

Nuremberg Laws, and the structural transformations between religious and secular antisemitism are never highlighted. As a result, when they do occur, the historical entries seem arbitrary and misplaced.

These general reservations should not be mistaken for a total dismissal of the individual entries themselves, many of which deal well in limited space with their topics. I was impressed in particular by Deborah Hertz’s treatment of Madame de Stael and the Berlin salons, Nitsa Ben-Ari’s discussion of the Jewish historical novel, Hans Otto Horchs’ resume of Berthold Auerbach, Richie Robertson’s summary of Joseph Roth, Robert Holub’s piece on Weiss’ *The Investigation*, and Dominic LaCapra’s summary of the *Historikerstreit*. Others are no doubt equally fine. Another good feature is the bibliographies following the entries, most of which are manageable in length, hitting but not obscuring the most important secondary works on the given topic. Finally, I also liked the use of dates and entry headings instead of a normal numerically numbered list of contents. The initial pages of this volume can thus be read as a miniature summary of Jewish cultural history. It is a shame that the book itself does not live up to this innovative organizational promise.

It might be argued that narrative diffusion is inevitable when one opens the pages of such a volume up to so many different critics. If that is the case, then I would argue for the merits of single-author cultural histories. I suspect, though, that the shortcomings of the collective approach could have been surmounted if the editors had been willing to make tough decisions about their volume’s purpose and content. As it stands, despite some first-rate individual scholarship, the *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture* is a rather disingenuous mix of the traditional and the post-modern, a would-be standard reference work with untenable omissions, arbitrary inclusions and a critically naive attitude toward its deeply problematic subject.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Jefferson S. Chase. Review of Gilman, Sander L.; Zipes, Jack, eds., *Yale Companion to Jewish Writing and Thought in German Culture 1096-1996*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2336>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.