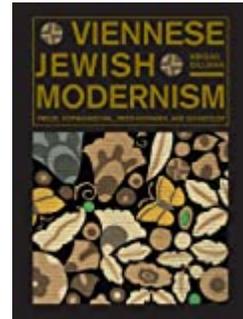




Abigail Gillman. *Viennese Jewish Modernism: Freud, Hofmannsthal, Beer-Hofmann, and Schnitzler.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009. x + 225 pp. \$60.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-271-03409-6.



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“Jewish” Modernism?

Many readers will be rightfully skeptical about Abigail Gillman’s claim to successful reconstruction of Viennese “Jewish” modernism. After all, European modernism, which is reflective of the breakdown of tradition and reason in combination with the advent of the irrational, is typically understood as antithetical to any essentialist interpretation, including one that reifies Jewishness. Revealing a mastery of both primary and secondary sources, however, Gillman produces an erudite and persuasive argument about the existence of a particularly Jewish modernism.

Gillman’s reconstruction of Jewish modernism relies on two intersecting modernist circles. The first is encapsulated by three members: Richard Beer-Hoffmann, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Arthur Schnitzler, all members of the turn-of-the-century literary association Young Vienna. The second circle is centered on Sigmund Freud and the psychoanalytic movement. Viennese Jewish modernism thus becomes “the intersection of these two historical circles” and “describes the intersection of long-standing intellectual commitments of four creative

minds” (p. 2). Skeptics will object that Freud was a “scientist,” not an artist, while Hofmannsthal was raised a Christian. Gillman is aware of these caveats and confronts them head-on. According to Gillman, these creative minds are unified by the construction of “coherent Jewish countertradition” through the production of “genres of memory within the modernist context” (p. 178).

The first section of her study begins with Freud and focuses on his cultural commentaries in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* (1910), “The Moses of Michelangelo” (1914), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). In her discussion of these works, Gillman highlights Freud’s strategy of taking a “cultural icon” and then stripping “away the layers of his identity to reveal a multilayered character” (p. 20). In doing so, Freud “invents a new genre of cultural remembrance by refuting the constructions passed down in scholarly and religious sources” (p. 20). Viewed from this perspective, Freud’s “Jewish” modernism transfigures tradition with an “awkward consolidation of a new genre of Jewish discourse out of extant scholarly modes and artistic forms” (p. 53). The obvious

example of this strategy is Freud's claim that Moses was an Egyptian.

The second chapter focuses on Hofmannsthal's pantomime, *Der Schuler* (1901). The original form of the pantomime incorporated *Ostjuden* as characters, but before the performance Hofmannsthal retracted the Jewish names, though he left the narrative otherwise intact. Thus, this minor "pantomime quite literally enacts the disappearance of Jewish themes" and reveals how "Jewish concerns are both encoded and concealed in Jewish writing throughout the modernist tradition" (p. 58). A slight distraction occurs in this chapter; the narrative gets ahead of itself with a comparative discussion of Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal although the explication of Schnitzler's work doesn't occur until the next chapter.

The second section, "Hybrid Plots, Virtual Jews," begins with a chapter entitled "How a Viennese Modernist Becomes a Jew." Gillman argues that Beer-Hofmann's novella *Der Tod Georgs* (1900) is not an aesthetic failure as many commentators have suggested, but rather reveals how the central character Paul, through the poetics of a memory and the subsequent experience of duration, recovers a non-essentialist Jewish identity. Key to Gillman's reading is the focus on "biblical motifs and scriptural idiom" in the novella and in particular God's injunction to Moses, "you cannot see My face" (p. 98). Thus Paul's quest for absolute self-understanding "stops short" because "from such absolutes one must, so to speak, shield one's eyes" (pp. 98-99).

The fourth chapter focuses on Arthur Schnitzler's novel *Der Weg ins Freie* (1908) along with his play *Professor Bernhardt* (1913) as "prime expressions" of Viennese Jewish modernism. In Gillman's reading these works "share more than a thematics of Jewish concerns; in their 'failure' with readers early and late, their conscious crossing of forms and genres, and their provocation to consider the 'Jewish question' anew, they respond to the situation by offering anatomies of failure: works that on a formal and thematic levels are all about a hopeless hybridity failing to cohere in the well-made story or political program" (p. 103). Relying on both Schnitzler's autobiographical statements and textual analysis, Gillman argues that "Schnitzler was constitutionally unsuited to tragedy. His distrust of absolutes and of all collectivist visions, philo-semitic and *völkisch* ideologies, good guys and bad guys alike, meant that whatever Jewish writing he produced, it would not be the last word on the subject of Jewish destiny, not a solution, but rather some-

thing ambiguous, impractical, and utterly realistic: Jewish tragicomedy" (p. 117). Schnitzler's Jewish tragicomedy relied on a method that required a "problematization of form, radical questioning of the Jewish character, and a determined, if perverse, attachment to life's paradoxes and contingencies" (p. 124). The chapter concludes with an informative reflection on the opposition between Schnitzler and Theodor Herzl "that boils down to the irreconcilable contest between tragicomedy and tragedy" (p. 125).

The final section, "Performing the Jewish Bible," follows the argument's "trajectory into large-scale theatrical endeavors that have been neglected by critics and ignored by scholars of German-speaking Jewry" (p. 22). Chapter 5 engages Hofmannsthal's ballet *Josephslegende* (1912). In her reconstruction of Hofmannsthal's Orientalism, Gillman connects Hofmannsthal to Martin Buber and "heart of the phenomenon" called Viennese Jewish modernism by claiming "the most important affinity between Hofmannsthal and Buber may have been that both appropriated orientalist discourse in their quest for a genre of memory. Both wanted to experience a subliminal encounter with the past that would ultimately become a redemptive self-encounter" (p. 141). The final chapter, "The Forgotten Modernism of Biblical Drama," explores Beer-Hofmann's unfinished dramatic trilogy in verse, *Die Historie von König David*. Once again, Gillman reveals her mastery of the secondary literature and in particular literary scholarship and argues, "if Beer-Hofmann is to be rehabilitated as a German Jewish writer, it should be as unrepentant modernist and the creator of the impossible dramas that retract, or at very least reinterpret, the Jewish legacy of earlier novellas" (p. 155). Taking a cue from Michel Foucault's concept of "counter-history," Gillman argues that "alone among the four writers [Beer-Hofmann] elevates history to a central position in his art of memory" (p. 160). Beer-Hofmann's strivings "for historical (and religious) authenticity in constructing his stage Jews" are reflective of "a secular project committed to legitimizing the repressed components of the tradition on a new plane, thereby creating 'a place for tradition—newly conceived—in a secular world'" (p. 160).

Gillman has provided a path-breaking work that consolidates the insights of recent secondary literature on Jewish experience in the *fin-de-siècle*, and establishes "Jewish" modernism. Her book will be read with interest by scholars of literature, modernism, Jewish studies, and cultural theory.

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