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## Passages between Cultures through Theatricality.

Theodor Lessing and Franz Kafka

Bernhard Greiner

In German-speaking culture, the notion of education or *Bildung* that originated with Moses Mendelssohn<sup>1</sup> and was further delineated by Goethe, is recognized as playing a salient role in the foundation and formation of the bourgeois self. Education is expected to bridge the gulf between two apparently irreconcilable worlds: the world of ideas where the individual experiences himself as free and at his own disposal, and the reality of experience where he must acknowledge a universal physical and social determinism. But the conception of education does nothing to illuminate how such a reconciliation can be possible. Kant responds by proposing a conception of “the beautiful as symbol of the morally good.”<sup>2</sup> Goethe proposes a specific conception of the theater with the theatrical novel *Wilhelm Meister's Theatrical Vocation* [*Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung*], reworked following his Italian tour as a *Bildungsroman* going beyond the theater. Distancing himself from the bourgeois theater of illusion, Goethe emphasizes the theater's simultaneous manifestation of two ontologically different worlds, that of representation and that of presence. In the course of representing an imagined world on stage, the reality of what is going on in the theater is not to be neglected.<sup>3</sup> Where the imagined world postulates liberty in order to address mankind's idealized self-image, the reality of play-acting manifests a world both limited and limiting in many aspects. (Such a programmatic opposition is seen in *Faust* in the “Prologue to the Theater” of the poet and theater manager.) With this conception of theater as a place of manifest duality, the theater becomes a site for productive treatment of the enlightenment dualism of freedom and determinism. It does not open a channel for mediation between the opposing worlds, but it clearly links them, by enabling simultaneous appearance of both on the dual levels of the theatrical performance.

Around 100 years later, this configuration will be revisited in the German-speaking world – this time by middle-class Jews in a phase of gradual assimila-

tion and attempted integration into a surrounding majority culture. Education and the theater reappear as conceptual fields that permit a powerful articulation of a demand for equality that aspires to rely on a universal ideal of freedom without entailing the sacrifice of a specific, conditional, empirical existence – that is, of being Jews. The transcendence of the enlightenment dualism of idea and existence that was introduced in the conceptions of education and the theater is appropriated cross-culturally. The strong Jewish interest in the theater that began in the late 19th century develops within this context. Jewish authors, producers, and journalists were major figures in the German-speaking theatrical avant-garde. The fact was duly noted, but few inquired into the causes, with the exception of the Jewish poet and philosopher Theodor Lessing (1877–1933). In his book *Theater Equals Soul* (1907)<sup>4</sup>, Lessing confirms a “disproportionately large influence of the Jewish element in the performing arts” and asks what might be the “peculiar relationship of the Jewish soul to imitative and interpretive arts.”<sup>5</sup> Lessing’s typologizing – speaking of “the Jewish soul” – is problematic, but I would prefer to focus attention on the structure of his argumentation. Its originality is questionable, proceeding as it does from the persecution of Jews as a minority in the Diaspora. Lessing contrasts de facto Jewish existence with the entirely contradictory “essence” of Judaism, that is, the concentration on spiritual existence, “on the priestly, conservative, and dogmatic structuring of life.”<sup>6</sup> The two existential modes seem irreconcilable. Lessing characterizes Jewish acting, the putting on of another identity in a masquerade, as an attempt to link them. Like Goethe, Lessing asserts the simultaneity of two opposing worlds in the theater. At every moment in a performance, the actor is “duplicated,” appearing both as an “empirical being” and as “the ideal being that we tend to be from our own point of view.”<sup>8</sup> Lessing departs from German classicism’s conception of the theater in his claim that this theatrical duplication is already independently in effect in each of the two forms of Jewish existence he names. As a place to merge the two, the theater is for Lessing the obvious choice in an unquestioned and emphatic way. On the level of ideal Jewish essence, Lessing recognizes a theatrical element in the sublimation, the formation of other identities, that results from existence in exile. Judaism, while essentially conservative, devotes itself to revolution. The “paternal fanatic” who devalued the dogma of skepticism becomes a “relativist.”<sup>9</sup> With regard to historical-empirical Jewish existence, Lessing speaks generally of an artist caste that knows how to “hide itself behind any momentarily required mask,”<sup>10</sup> whatever mask the particular concrete situation demands. Both realms of Jewish existence, the ideal and the empirical, are inherently theatrical, and thus the theater is the field where the two will inevitably come together. In this

manner Lessing makes theatricality axiomatic for Judaism. It is not merely a mode of a sought-after mediation, but an element of what is to be mediated. In such a universalization of theatrical existence, of course, there is danger that the Jewish self as the viewpoint for this all-encompassing theatricality will be lost, or will fail in its self-actualization. In his early 20th century writings on theater, Lessing does not yet come to this conclusion. It first appears against the background of rising anti-Semitism in the late Weimar Republic, with his book *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1930). Here Lessing makes out, in an increasingly universal Jewish theatricality, a self-loss, a kind of chronic self-apostasy, even a suicide. “The great transformation succeeds. Every mimicry succeeds. You died with your conflict. You took the route of suicide to fame and fortune.”<sup>11</sup> Surprisingly, Lessing situates the possibility of transcending such experience not in an alternative to theatricality, but in an alternative and genuinely Jewish theatrical tradition: that of the story of Esther and the feast of Purim. Esther acts the part of a Persian queen without abandoning her Jewish identity – neither giving it up, nor giving it away. Her empirical existence betrays nothing of her ideal and essential existence. She risks her life, confessing her membership in the Jewish nation to save it from impending doom. The celebration of Purim reprises this duplication. It celebrates the loss of boundaries, mandating that merrymaking be continued until all powers of distinction are blurred, but its aim is to celebrate the preservation of particularity, of the successful defense of boundaries. The theater as the theatrical doubling which Lessing recommends to Judaism is no longer the pleasing simultaneity of opposites seen in bourgeois educational theater. “The conditions of that theater’s possibility remain unexplained, condemning its practitioners to self-loss and chronic apostasy. It is rather a Jewish theater that clings to the stubborn paradox of the two worlds’ simultaneity. It is the total loss of boundaries, the uninhibited exploration of the other, that serves to celebrate exclusivity and fortify borders. Conversely, to celebrate the self is to cross over to the other.”

Kafka arrives at an analogous scheme for the formation of the Jewish self, again through the medium of theater, although his conception of theatrical duality is not primarily cross-cultural but intracultural. For Kafka, the theater is the place where German-speaking Jews meet Jews who speak Yiddish, where *Westjudentum* is led into contact with *Ostjudentum*.

It is well documented that the Yiddish theater troupe from Lemberg that spent a season in Prague in 1911 and 1912 served to expose Kafka to Eastern Jewry. They became, for him, and quite in the mold of Martin Buber, a screen for projecting an authentic Judaism that was the obverse of a Western Jewry he saw as occupied with hollowing out its Jewish substance from within.<sup>12</sup>

Oddly, research has passed in silence over the role played in this encounter by the theater as theater. Kafka's attraction to the Jewish ensemble itself displays the structure of theatrical duality. In his diary, he notes the mediocrity of their material,<sup>13</sup> even by the standards of Yiddish literature, which he knows from close reading of Pines' descriptions.<sup>14</sup> But in addition to his interest in the world the actors portray, he feels an even more lively interest in the lives of the actors themselves – their rootedness in a living Jewish community that sees no need for self-justification. The world the actors present and the concrete reality of acting enter into a relationship of mutual validation. Because the represented figures are seen through the prism of the actors, the material is lent a certain authenticity despite its literary defects. Likewise the actors, by making themselves windows into central figures of Jewish life and tradition, gain an ideal dimension that transcends their own historical and social limitations. Kafka subordinates this eastern Jewish theatricality, with its content of the validation of Judaism, to the relation between Western and Eastern Judaism. His aim is to lend the east-west relation a theatrical impulse whose content is not merely negative, a manifestation of falsity on one side or the other, but also validating. From the day the distinction was first formulated, the western Jewish postulation of eastern Jews has involved an element of doubt. Eastern Jewry appears either as a foil, a negative embodiment of all that secularization and the aspiration to integrate into non-Jewish majority culture had sought to banish, or it appears as the reverse: Against a background of increasing secularization and mounting doubt that assimilation will be an unqualified success, Eastern Jewry seems a positive embodiment of true Jewish identity, solidly opposed to the charade of Jewish integration.

Kafka was familiar with both oppositions. The first is vehemently promulgated by his father in opposition to the son's excessive interest in the Yiddish theater group. The second comes to him from the programmatic reevaluation of Jewish identity formulated and lived by Martin Buber and others. The problematic elements in both oppositions are hard to miss: the first is denunciation in character, the second romantic. Kafka dislodged the rigid polar opposition of west and east by placing, at its eastern extreme, not a fixed image, but a relation: eastern Jewry's self-validation in the structure of theatrical duality. It is tempting to regard the opposition of east and west likewise as a theatrical simultaneity, with mutual validation, instead of doubt, at its core.

In a speech Kafka made in connection with the theater group's visit in Prague, he programmatically announces and performs such a theatricalization of the narrative of Eastern versus Western Jewry. It would not be going too far to see in this speech the nucleus of his aesthetics, so that from this

point onward Kafka's literary work can be seen as a repeated thinking through and playing out of the opposition put into motion by theatricalization.

Kafka had persuaded the *Bar Kochba* student fraternity to present an evening of Yiddish poems and songs, recited and sung by Jizchak Löwy. The event took place on February 18, 1912 in the Jewish Town Hall in Prague. The audience was made up of German-speaking Jews. The status of Yiddish itself was a subject of controversy. Kafka himself called it *Jargon*, believing it to more be a kind of slang than a fully-fledged dialect. Around one month earlier, on January 24th, Kafka had heard a lecture by Nathan Birnbaum, also organized by *Bar Kochba*. Birnbaum made his name by promoting a higher status for Yiddish. Kafka notes in his diary that whenever Birnbaum was at a loss for words, he would interject "esteemed ladies and gentlemen" or "honored guests."<sup>15</sup> Kafka characterizes this as a common Eastern Jewish habit, carried by Birnbaum to the point of absurdity.<sup>16</sup> To this remark he appends an alternative explanation offered by the actor Löwy. Such stereotyped phrases are frequently encountered in Eastern Jewish conversation. Löwy's examples could be translated, "It's nothing," ("S'ist nischt") and "It's too much to say" ("S'ist viel zu reddn").<sup>17</sup> He claimed that they serve not to mask embarrassment, but as "resources fluttering above the flow of speech, which moves too sluggishly to suit the Eastern Jewish temperament."<sup>18</sup>

Kafka interrupts his own lecture to apostrophize the public directly three times, always breaking the flow at transitional moments to summarize his theses on the listeners' relationship to the Eastern Jewish *Jargon*. His three statements about the Prague Jews' comprehension or incomprehension of Yiddish are mutually incompatible. First he assures his listeners that they will understand much more Yiddish than they expect. In the next summary, he is certain of having persuaded them that they will not understand a single word. Finally, he insists that instead of understanding "from the distance of an excessive nearness" between Yiddish and German, the listener will discover quite a different nearness to Yiddish, in the realization of which, however, he will become a stranger to himself.

By interrupting his speech with direct appeals to the public, Kafka emphasizes the reality of the speaker, of speaking, and thus at the same time of the listeners. On the other side stands his subject, that which the speech seeks to introduce – *Jargon* – although Kafka emphasizes that he doesn't mean the particular poems Löwy will recite, but rather that which will come into view behind what is presented: Yiddish as a "unity" ("Einheit"<sup>19</sup>) of denotation, melody, and the being of the Eastern Jewish actor performing here and now. In his lecture, Kafka attempts to consummate a bridging of duality analogous

to the Yiddish unity of performer and material. His topic is not Yiddish, but the relation between Yiddish and his audience. He speaks of this relation, but he also keeps it moving from one claim to the next – that they will understand more than they expect, that they will understand nothing, that they will understand on an intimate level that defies the misleading similarity between Yiddish and German. The relation of German-speaking Western European Jews to Yiddish is of course one of foreignness, however genuine. If, however, the audience can be made to perceive Yiddish as a relation, a synthesis of the speaker and what he says, the initially posited relation of foreignness is undermined, accentuating in the “foreign” the failure to make distinctions. The opposition of western audience and eastern language becomes a relation of theatrical simultaneity. This metamorphosis is plainly the goal of the lecture, in addition to being a central motif in Kafka’s writing generally. Paradoxes, pairs of mutual negations, become theatrical simultaneities in which opposing positions validate each other. The paradoxes developed in the speech on Yiddish are treated in just this manner.

He presents the speech’s topic as itself a paradox. “*Jargon*,” he says, “is the youngest of European languages, only 400 years old and actually much younger.”<sup>20</sup> Yiddish is, on the one hand, with respect to particular properties, its age for example, a specific language. On the other hand, it is “much younger” than the youngest European language, and thus not a language at all. It possesses neither grammar nor diction:

*Jargon* has not yet developed linguistic forms of the clarity we would demand. Its expression is rapid and succinct. It has no grammar. Its devotees try to write grammars, but *jargon* persists in being spoken. It will not hold still. The people refuse to surrender it to the grammarians.<sup>21</sup>

*Jargon* is a relation between speaker and speaking, but does not attain the status of a language, and this very failure constitutes its identity as a language. This paradox is promptly explained as a theatrical simultaneity: What the speakers perform, in their speech that does not become language, is a continuous “appropriation of the other,” a playing at language:

*Jargon* consists entirely of words from foreign languages. These do not come to rest in it, but retain the haste and liveliness with which they were appropriated. *Jargon* is laced with mass migration from one end to the other. German, Hebrew, French, English, Slavic languages, Dutch, Rumanian, and even Latin acquire, within *Jargon*, a sheen of curiosity

and frivolity. It entails a definite investment of energy to hold the languages together in such a state.<sup>22</sup>

Yiddish is not experienced through the individual foreign word substituted for an original, but as the relation between the borrower and the loan. Yiddish consists in the ease of appropriation, the smoothness of the flow of foreign words through it – a kind of game in which a language is defined through its originating and entering into the symbolic, and so cannot terminate in codification as a language.

The same structure, in which the paradoxical nature of Yiddish is demonstrated to be a theatrical simultaneity of two opposing positions, a simultaneity that legitimizes Yiddish itself, is evident in statements about the relation of the listener to Yiddish – that is, the claims about comprehension. Kafka begins his lecture by announcing his intention to prove that his listeners understand much more Yiddish than they might expect. For listeners and speaker alike, comprehension, like everything else, is subject to the valid rules of a universally applicable Western European order. From this perspective, Yiddish as an Eastern European Jewish dialect must appear chaotic. But since that chaos arises delib-erately, through the Yiddish speaker’s playful relationship to language that consists of self-negating entry into the symbolic with no resolution – for Yiddish is younger than the youngest language – and since Yiddish is at the same time something through which other languages flow, the Western Jewish listeners, despite their reluctant or anxious distancing of themselves from Yiddish, are already contained in it. They have always been players in this linguistic game.

If, on the other hand, Yiddish is held to defy comprehension, that is, if there is a gulf between it and the established languages, then the language that is seemingly closest – German, the easternmost of Western European languages – is farthest away. This closest relative is the one language into which Yiddish cannot be translated. Again, this is not a rigid paradox, but a playful simultaneity in which distance certifies nearness and vice versa. This nearness is however saturated with an additional nearness that forms the basis for all the aforementioned varieties of comprehension. Yiddish is not a language, but a phenomenon that occurs between the speaker and language as entry into the symbolic, and its content is the lack of alienation in the unity of the word, the melody, and the essence of the speaker. The eastern dialect does not, as a favor to western audiences, suspend its refusal to make such distinctions. It is implicit is that the listener is already suspended in Yiddish, held in its grasp from every side, however he may complain of incomprehension. The interplay of comprehension and incomprehension is seen here once again, as any Western Jewish

listener surrounded by Yiddish who finds himself comprehending it and sensing its unity must experience himself, as a disconcerting stranger.

The narrative of Western versus Eastern Jewry that develops each as a negation of the other is transformed by Kafka in his speech on Yiddish, inspired by the union between the reality of the actors and their represented Jewishness, into a theatrical simultaneity – a simultaneity of eastern ideal and western reality as conveyed in *Jargon*. It is thus not surprising that Kafka, following this appropriation of the theatrical, develops his most promising blueprints for a successful Jewish identity formation in the field of theater – for example, in the last chapter of the novel *America*, in the story of the performing ape Red Peter in “Report for an Academy,” the interrogation by Bürgel in *The Castle*, and “Josefine, the Mouse Singer.”

The theater chapter that concludes *America* makes this relatively explicit:<sup>23</sup> Karl Rossmann is sent from east to west to grow up and become a man. His uncle in New York, where he first lands, is clearly identified as western, referring to Karl's relations in the old country indignantly with all the contempt of Western for Eastern Jews. The identity formation demanded of Karl is presented as paralleling Jewish identity, and the reality of Karl's journey is simultaneously presented as the achievement of Jewish identity. The setting of the novel is the vicinity of the fictional city of Ramnes. No such city exists near New York, nor did it exist in the ancient Egyptian kingdom to which the name seems to refer, but it does receive a mention in Genesis as the region in Egypt where Joseph distributes land to his father Israel and his brothers, later a city of forced labor. The exodus begins in Ramnes. In their time of bondage the Israelites perform “hard labor in clay and bricks” (Exodus 1:13). In the novel, Karl Rossmann boards a train in Clayton near Ramnes to travel to the Theater of Oklahama. He never arrives. From the beginning, Karl's journey has been a failure; the Theater of Oklahama promises a reversal, complete with religiously tinged promises of salvation and a declared readiness to admit all comers. But the novel undermines those promises. We learn nothing of what would make the theater a theater; it is, its performances. Instead of the theater, with its ideal promise, we see only the recruitment apparatus. With the theater itself lacking, its actions are without reference, a mere as if, themselves theatrical. Reception by the theater substitutes for the theater. Accordingly, Karl can board the train that should bring him to the Theater of Oklahama, but he cannot arrive. The train can be seen as a reference to the formative events of Jewish identity, the exodus of the Israelites from Ramnes through the Red Sea to Sinai, the giving of the laws and with them the birth of the Jewish people. The train's route through blue-black mountains echoes the parting of the Red Sea that

forms “a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left” (Exodus 14:22) But Karl does not arrive in Sinai; he becomes *der Verschollene*, the man with no forwarding address – missing in action, just as happened to the pursuing Egyptians. The sea swallowed them up, “horse and rider” – in Luther's German, “*Roß und Mann*.”<sup>24</sup> Karl's recapitulation of Jewish identity formation as a journey to the west, into the world of Western Jewry, itself a recapitulation of the Israelites' eastward exodus that forged them as Jews – this recapitulation of Jewish identity formation under the aegis of Western Jewry does not arrive at its destination. The hero remains in transit, just as in the speech on Yiddish. The Jewish language remains an entry into the symbolic and never becomes a language, while at the same time it is a language younger than the youngest language. If one regards this story not in isolation but in its interplay between the author and the narration, just as Yiddish could not be discussed in isolation but only as parallel interplays between its speakers and its listeners and language and *Jargon*, then a Jewish *Bildungsroman* that has its hero recapitulate the story of the *Bildung* of the Jewish people is clearly intended as an entry in to the book of books. Writing about the failure to reach the law, the Torah, the author Kafka arrives at it by constructing a theatrical simultaneity that enables a perceptual shift from the represented world to the reality of writing. But the law is merely attained as writing, not as fulfillment of the law. The paradox that non-attainment equals attainment becomes productive as soon as it is incorporated into an explicitly theatrical configuration. Thus in *The Trial*, Joseph K.'s summary execution at the hands of strolling players has a certain logic. To his great misfortune, Joseph K. has no understanding of the theater.

Translated by Nell Zink

## Endnotes

- 1 Moses Mendelssohn, *Über die Frage: was heißt aufklären?*, in: *Was ist Aufklärung? Thesen und Definitionen*, ed. by Eberhard Bahr, Stuttgart 1974, 3–8.
- 2 Cf.: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, hg. von Karl Vorländer, Hamburg 1974, 213 (§ 59).
- 3 About Goethe's understanding and practice of theatrical duality see: Bernhard Greiner, *Parim in Plunderswellern: Der Karnevalistische Goethe*, in: *Walter and Wirthöller* (Ed.), *Der junge Goethe: Genese und Konstruktion einer Autorschaft*, Tübingen/Basel 2001, 39–64.
- 4 Theodor Lessing, *Theater=Seele. Studie über Bühnenästhetik und Schauspielkunst*, Berlin 1907; furthermore: Th.L., *Der fröhliche Eselsquell. Gedanken über Theater, Schauspiel, Drama*, Berlin 1912.
- 5 Lessing, *Theater=Seele* (Fn 4), 36. All quotations of Theodor Lessing and Kafka are originally in German and have been translated by Nell Zink.
- 6 Lessing, *Theater=Seele* (Fn 4), 37.
- 7 Lessing, *Der fröhliche Eselsquell* (Fn 4), 129.
- 8 Lessing, *Theater=Seele* (Fn 4), 43.

- 9 Ibid., 38.  
 10 Ibid.  
 11 Theodor Lessing, *Der jüdische Selbsthaß*, München 1984 (first published in Berlin 1930).  
 12 Eastern-Jewry as 'invention' is stressed by Sander Gilman: S.G., *Jewish Self-Hatred*, Baltimore (The Johns Hopkins University Press) 1986.  
 13 For instance plays of Abraham Goldfaden, Joseph Latiner, Jakob Gordin.  
 14 Meyer Isser Pines, *Histoire de la littérature judéo-allemande*, Paris 1910.  
 15 "Osjifäische Gewohnheit, wo die Rede stockt, 'meine verehrten Damen und Herren' oder nur 'meine Verehrten' einzufügen. Wiederholt sich am Anfang der Rede Birnbaums zum Lächerlichwerden." (Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher*: Krit. Ausgabe, ed. by Hans-Gerd Koch et al., vol. 2, 1912, 1914, Frankfurt/M 1990, 23 (24.01.1912)).  
 16 Ibid.  
 17 Ibid.  
 18 "(Sie sollen) als immer neue Quellen den für das osjifäische Temperament immer noch zu schwer daliegenden Strom der Rede umquinten [...]" (Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher* Vol. 2 [Fn 15], 23)  
 19 Einleitungsvortrag über Jargon, in: Franz Kafka, *Beschreibung eines Kampfes und andere Schriften aus dem Nachlaß*, ed. by Hans-Gerd Koch, Frankfurt/M 1993, 149–153, 153.  
 20 "Der Jargon ist die jüngst europäische Sprache, erst vierhundert Jahre alt und eigentlich noch viel jünger." (Einleitungsvortrag über Jargon, Fn 19, 149.)  
 21 "Er [der Jargon] hat noch keine Sprachformen von solcher Deutlichkeit ausgebildet, wie wir sie brauchen. Sein Ausdruck ist kurz und rasch. Er hat keine Grammatiken, Liebhaber versuchen Grammatiken zu schreiben aber der Jargon wird immerfort gesprochen; er kommt nicht zur Ruhe. Das Volk läßt ihn den Grammatikern nicht." (Einleitungsvortrag über Jargon, Fn 19, 149.)  
 22 "Er [der Jargon] besteht nur aus Fremdwörtern. Diese ruhen, aber nicht in ihm, sondern behalten ihre Eile und Lebhaftigkeit, mit der sie gekommen wurden. Völkerveränderungen durchlaufen den Jargon von einem Ende bis zum anderen. Alles dieses Deutsche, Hebräische, Französische, Englische, Slavische, Holländische, Rumänische und selbst Lateinische ist innerhalb des Jargon von Neugier und Leichtsinne erfaßt, es gehört schon Kraft dazu, die Sprachen in diesem Zustande zusammenzuhalten." (Einleitungsvortrag über Jargon, Fn 19, 150.)  
 23 For an interpretation of the novel as a Jewish "Bildungsroman", see: Bernhard Greiner, *Im Umkreis von Ranses: Kafkas Venschollener als jüdischer Bildungsroman*, in: *Deutsche Viertelsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 77 (2003), 637–658.  
 24 Kafka read in the Lutheran Bible during his residence at the Sanatorium Jungborn (8th – 27th of July 1912): quotations of the Bible in Kafka's texts show that he used a Lutheran Bible in an edition from 1892. For detailed references: Bertram Rohde, "und Blätterte ein wenig in der Bibel," Studien zu Kafkas Bibelkritik und ihren Auswirkungen auf sein Werk, Würzburg 2002.

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## Saving Confusions. Else Lasker-Schüler's Poetics of Redemption

Vivian Liska

The repeated attempts to impose a fixed identity on Else Lasker-Schüler, that mistress of performance, masquerade and metamorphosis, are among the more paradoxical aspects of the reception of twentieth-century German-Jewish literature. Although Lasker-Schüler was mostly regarded as a poet of exotic dreams and playful fantasies who lived and wrote in a world out of time and far removed from reality, debates nevertheless flared up time and again as to whether she should be considered a German or a Jewish writer. This question was still an issue when literary studies had already largely turned their attention to intercultural and transcultural phenomena and, within German-Jewish literature, to the hyphen between these two denominations. Even in 1993 there was still discussion whether she should be regarded as a true "representative of German 'Geist', sent into exile"<sup>1</sup> or as a "conscious representative of her Jewish people."<sup>2</sup> Whereas in the 1950s her organic attachment to Jewishness was stressed<sup>3</sup> – out of what the critic Dieter Bänisch deems to be a hypocritical and compensatory deference towards the "Hebrew poetess" – Bänisch himself locates her within the German, proto-Fascist art movements of her time. One aspect of this discussion concerns the oriental motifs in her work.

In 1955 Karl-Joseph Höllgen explicitly links Lasker-Schüler's recourse to oriental imagery to her Jewish identity and describes it as an "unconscious unfolding" of her "ancient [Jewish] inheritance."<sup>4</sup> "Else Lasker-Schüler," according to Höllgen, "by no means imitates forms of oriental poetry, but, rather, draws on the same essential, oriental spirit from which such forms emerged."<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Bänisch sees Lasker-Schüler as an adherent of mystical German artistic currents of the period, influenced by Stefan George and his followers, which in retrospect he links to a politically dangerous, elitist belief in a visionary leadership (Führerschaft) that would save Germany and ultimately mankind.<sup>6</sup> While in Höllgen's view Lasker-Schüler's oriental motifs arise directly from her Jewishness, for Bänisch they are a means to self-mythifi-