Briefly Noted

Amir Eshel

Zeit der Zasur. Judische Dichter im Angesicht der Shoah
Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1999. Pp. 244.

Time and temporality play a key role in the poetry of Jewish authors in the face of the Shoah. In his study, Amir Eshel argues that time's flow and pause, continuity and rupture, function as central themes in the writing of contemporary Jewish poets such as Paul Celan, Rose Ausländer, Tuvia Rübner, Nelly Sachs, Dan Pagis, Yehuda Amichai, and Jacob Glatsteyn.

Although poets such as Celan and Sachs have become fixtures in the canon of German literature and have not lacked considerable attention, their reception has been marked by an emphasis on the “German” aspect, curiously sidestepping a critical discussion of the significance of the Jewish dimension of their texts, an oversight that ironically occurs in the name of an almost obsessed but, at the same time, decidedly uninformed, interest in the Jewish context itself. In a challenging move, Eshel’s study addresses the question of German Jewish writing in a new way. His detailed readings illustrate that German Jewish writing is not only to be read as part of a larger canon of German literature but also needs to be recognized in its own right as part of a wider notion of Jewish literature. These are texts that claim with equal legitimation a cultural, historical, and social context that has too easily been lost sight of as they were read and claimed as exclusively belonging to German literature. Even when seen as German Jewish literature, these texts are still simply addressed as a subset or “minor” literature serving the project of a grand German literature otherwise long abandoned.

In fleshing out the constitutive moment of reflection on time and memory as a poetic impulse that determines not only the themes and imagery but also the way temporality structures these texts linguistically, Eshel succeeds in highlighting an important moment that not only allows us to comprehend these poems as grappling with a shared concern for reimagining their loss that points beyond the conventions of any given nationally defined literature but, rather, gestures toward a recovery of a transnational Jewish memory. As such, these texts present a particular challenge as they are at the same time both part and not part of German literature. This dual aspect calls for a principal rethinking of the business of reading “German” literature in the face of the Shoah that forces us to redraw the boundaries in critical fashion. It not only forces us to attend to the problem of re-
thinking the methodologically flawed approaches to what is categorized as Ger-
man literature simply because it is written in German, but also calls for a recon-
sideration of German literature as reaching beyond the boundaries of what is lin-
guistically German.

Critically comparatist in its approach, Eshel’s study has direct implications for
rethinking German literature in the face of Shoah. Overdue for some time, the ur-
gency of taking up this challenge is highlighted by the efforts to come to terms
with other multicultural challenges in contemporary German literature. Maybe
the time has come to reconsider the passe partout “minor literature” when its
other, the dominant literature, has long ceased to be major. Eshel’s study of Jew-
ish poets argues that the idea of “minor” literature can become incapacitating, as
it were, itself a domesticating force. In the face of the Shoah, this study suggests,
the challenge of a literature that travels the boundaries so eloquently forces us to
rethink the canon of German and national literature in general.