

BARBARA HAHN. *The Jewess Pallas Athena: This Too a Theory of Modernity*. Translated by James McFarland. Princeton, N.J. and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005. Pp. 233.

Barbara Hahn's *The Jewess Pallas Athena*, beautifully translated by James McFarland, offers an unusually rich and engaged account of German Jewish modernity and its cultural production, its poetry and its intellectual life broadly conceived. And her account is gendered. It makes explicit the central role of German Jewish intellectual women in the production of German modernity. Hahn does this by focusing on the work and words, both public and private, that animated these women's cultural production. Hahn uses the figure of "the Jewess Pallas Athena" who comes to us via the poet Paul Celan as a way into and through this rich tradition. As Hahn explains, "She [the Jewess Pallas Athena] accompanies German-Jewish history, from its start in the middle of the eighteenth century to the time after 1945 when Jewish women driven out of Germany dared to look back. Look back on a country in which they had been raised, whose language and culture they had shared. A country from which they had flown and to which they could never come home again" (pp. 12–13). In other words Hahn begins with the earliest *salonnières* and concludes her study at the end of the 1960s with the death of one of the last of the writing women in this tradition, the poet Margarete Susman. And, in the end, Hahn brings us back to where she began, connecting Susman intimately with the work of Paul Celan. As Hahn so powerfully demonstrates, the relationship between Celan and Susman itself painfully enacts the last breath of this cultural legacy. By looking carefully at some of the poems Celan wrote explicitly for Susman and the correspondences between them, Hahn shows how, together, Celan and Susman were able to mark the end of this legacy of German Jewish letters.

It is fitting that the poetic muse at the heart of this book is Paul Celan. Celan's poetry marks the utter loss of this once vibrant culture even as his figure of the Jewess Pallas Athena is nevertheless still able to usher us into the lost world he mourns. As a literary scholar, Hahn enables her readers to enter into not only Celan's poetry but this broader literary and

philosophical tradition. As Hahn makes clear, German Jewish modernity is both a deeply intimate and a profoundly public culture. Hahn offers readers unique access to the letters and journal entries that make explicit these imbrications. She allows us to witness the intimate and oh-so-public face of the Jewess Pallas Athena as she expressed herself in German for almost two centuries. In every chapter Hahn offers us access to the relationships that animate all the writing and creative production of these intellectual women. But this is not all she does.

Using the figure of the “Jewess” Hahn also offers readers “[a] theoretical reconstruction of culture that investigates the different connotations of this word, so freighted with contradictory meanings” (p. 13). Hahn uses the words and the interactions among these women as well as the various intellectual men with whom they were in ongoing and engaged conversation to ask broader questions about the way Jewish women figured in the project of modernity and their unique place in German letters. She shows the positive as well as the more freighted negative attributes associated with the figure of the German Jewess.

Although there is now a growing body of scholarship on German Jewish thought, German Jewish letters, and even the role of Jewish women in German culture—including work by Paula Hyman on Jewish women and modernity, by Harriet Freidenreich on the place of Jewish women in German universities and professions, by Marion Kaplan on German Jewish feminists and middle-class German Jewish life more broadly, as well as numerous studies of the Salon women of Berlin, including work by Marsha Rozenblitt and many others—<sup>1</sup>Hahn offers readers a very different approach to this legacy. Hers is an intimate portrait. Hahn allows us to see the way writing is shaped through ongoing thoughtful and impassioned intellectual conversation. Accounts of Hannah Arendt and her relationships with both Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger are especially telling in this regard. In these chapters—“Complete Unreservedness” (pp. 138–46) for Jaspers and “Goddess without a Name” (pp. 156–66) for Heidegger—we see traces of the production of Arendt’s critical thinking as it was forged in these powerful relationships. By

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1. These works include Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle, Wash., 1995); Harriet Freidenreich, *Female, Jewish, and Educated: The Lives of Central European University Women* (Bloomington, Ind., 2002); Marion Kaplan, *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York, 1991), and *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: The Campaigns of the Juedischer Frauenbund, 1904–1958* (Westport, Conn., 1979); and Marsha Rozenblitt, *The Jews of Vienna, 1867–1914: Assimilation and Identity* (Albany, N.Y., 1985).

allowing us to read the letters back and forth<sup>2</sup> in conjunction with Arendt's more formal public writing, Hahn shows us how Arendt's thinking develops out of these interactions. We are not simply presented with a prurient account of the scandal of Arendt's relationship with Heidegger; instead we are offered a much more nuanced interpretation. Through Hahn's narration, we begin to see the allures and disappointments of this ongoing relationship. Hahn shows us the attraction of the great man as well as his profound limitations.<sup>3</sup>

As these examples indicate, Hahn does not offer an exhaustive survey of German Jewish modernity. What she offers instead is what she describes as "a series of constellations in which similar figures and similar positions continually reappear." "The result," she explains, "is a network of references, sometimes difficult to decode, sometimes almost lost to sight" (p. 13). Hahn presents the edges of this culture by addressing the figure of the Jewess and, by taking us in through this less familiar route, allows us to get closer to its heart. In other words, Hahn offers readers a fresh take on what we thought we already knew about the world of German Jewish letters. And in this way, she insists, in the words of her subtitle, that "this too is a theory of modernity."

I would argue that it is not only the content of her argument but the way she presents this material that makes this book, too, a model for how to configure modernity. For me, Hahn's account echoes the melancholic tone of S. W. Sebald's writings, but more than that, his method. While Hahn's project offers readers a scholarly apparatus with notes and references to archival and published writings, she still is able to shape compelling, often painful, narratives of a world that was lost to us in the Holocaust. The book left me in tears again and again. By focusing on the *culture* of German Jewish letters, relatively free from the shadow of its coming demise, Hahn shows us a lively and vibrant world. As James Young suggests, such accounts are crucial acts of resistance in the present. They allow us to see more vividly an era before the Holocaust. They allow us to see what was lost. "For part of the tragedy of the Holocaust is the way it has blinded a post-war generation to the richness of the lives

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2. Whenever possible she presents both sets of letters, but in many cases the archive only covers one side of these exchanges. This is especially true in the case of Arendt's correspondence with Heidegger.

3. Hahn's chapter on Heidegger and Arendt is a profound correction and re-reading of their relationship, especially after the superficial and exploitative account offered by Elzbieta Ettinger in *Hannah Arendt/Martin Heidegger* (New Haven, Conn., 1995).

destroyed,"<sup>4</sup> and, in Hahn's case, the richness of the cultures that were also destroyed. Hahn does not avoid the Holocaust—using Celan to frame her study helps to make this always already present, but she does not allow herself to use Celan to say that the end of this culture was inevitable. She avoids precisely the kind of hindsight Michael André Bernstein warns against in his *Forgone Conclusions*.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Hahn allows for the contingencies of history in the various pasts she examines as well as in the present.

What readers will find as they open the pages of this slim volume is often astonishing. In addition to all that I have already discussed, Hahn offers, among other things, a critique of Salon culture as a single and unified entity. She also challenges many of the romanticized myths about the *salonières* who created this cultural form. Instead, what Hahn does is present specific *salonières*, their relationships with each other and with some of the various men of letters with whom they were in conversation. She begins by addressing the *salonières* who lived around 1800. Later in the book Hahn returns to Salon culture, this time the Salons from around 1900, to show a quite different world, one built on an already mythologized vision of Salons past.

On another level, Hahn offers feminist scholars, especially contemporary Jewish feminist scholars and writers, insight into an earlier cultural constellation of intellectual and impassioned Jewish women and their writing. When Miriam Peskowitz and I edited *Judaism since Gender*<sup>6</sup> in order to address the state of contemporary Jewish feminist scholarship, we hoped that such a legacy already existed. At that time, we had little access to the women Hahn writes about. In fact, we fantasized about precisely such a rich tradition, bookshelves filled with books by intellectual Jewish women, not unlike the account offered in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Like Woolf, we wanted bookshelves filled with books by women, books that would have included insights into their relationships with other women, especially their impassioned intellectual relationships with each other. This too is a part of what Hahn offers, a theory of modernity and, perhaps, a theory of two hundred years of German Jewish feminist writing as well.

It is not often that one falls in love with a book she comes across on a

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4. James Young, introduction to Ann Weiss, *The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau* (New York, 2001), 19.

5. André Michael Bernstein, *Forgone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*, (Berkeley, Calif., 1994).

6. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt, ed. *Judaism since Gender* (New York, 1997).

library shelf, especially one with an obscure title by a scholar she had not previously known, but this is precisely what happened to me when I picked up *The Jewess Pallas Athena: This Too a Theory of Modernity*.

There are, of course, many other things to say about this heartbreakingly beautiful book, but mostly I want to urge readers in Jewish studies to go and read it.

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