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Recommended Citation

Frieden, Ken, "Hebrew Poetry Written with a Gothic Script" (1992). *Religion*. 69.

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Hebrew Poetry Written With a Gothic Script

Else Lasker-Schueler: A Study in German-Jewish Literature
By Leon Yudkin
Northwood: Science Reviews Limited
97 pp., \$16.

By KEN FRIEDEN

Else Lasker-Schueler's "Hebraische Balladen," ("Hebrew Ballads"), written in 1913, established her as an original voice in German-Jewish poetry. Apart from the title's allusion to the Hebrew Bible, this collection of poems also echoes Heinrich Heine's "Hebraische Melodien" ("Hebrew Melodies") of 1851, which in turn drew inspiration from Lord Byron's "Hebrew Melodies" (1815). Moreover, since there were translations of Byron's poems "back" into Hebrew by Y.L. Gordon and Solomon Mandelkern in 1884 and 1890, Lasker-Schueler clearly had notable forerunners in English, German, and Hebrew. Each poet reappropriated the biblical genre in a distinctive fashion.

Born in Wuppertal, Germany, in 1869, Lasker-Schueler became part of the German cultural milieu that gave rise to Expressionist art and poetry. From 1901 to 1912 she was married to the man who founded "The Storm" (*Der Sturm*), the prominent journal of Expressionism. She witnessed the emerging Zionist movement and, from a distance, was aware of Martin Buber's popularization of Chasidic traditions. Soon after receiving the Kleist Prize for literature, she was beaten by Nazis in Hitler's Berlin of 1933, and immediately thereafter left for Switzerland. From 1939 until her death in 1945 she lived in Jerusalem.

Leon Yudkin, a professor of Hebrew at the University of Manchester, is uniquely qualified to reflect on the Judaic dimension of Lasker-Schueler's life and work. He has written about both Hebrew literature and European Jewish literature, and he brings this background to bear on Lasker-Schueler's crowning achievement, her "Hebrew Ballads." He does not attempt to provide an overview of her entire accomplishment, but instead concentrates on the relationship between her poems and their scriptural models. The focus is justified by the stated goals of a new British series entitled "Jews in Modern Culture," of which this is the premier volume. Examining authors who "retain an ambivalent Jewish identity," this series will deal

with "the manner in which Jewish themes, broadly defined, impinge on the subject's sense of modernity."

Mr. Yudkin begins the book with a sketch of the poet's life, summing up her literary career with the comment that "she was particularly prominent as a woman writer, not just as a writer who happened to be a woman, but a woman whose femininity is her primary subject and characteristic." As for the Jewish character of her verse, Mr. Yudkin cites the label "Hebrew poetry in Gothic characters" that was applied to her work by Uri Zvi Greenberg and others. Mr. Yudkin notes that Lasker-Schueler "found the source of her mythology in the Bible, the overt basis for 'Hebrew Ballads,'" and adds that "her Jewish concern is more than tangential. In fact, her Jewish themes and her Hebrew characters are the most prominent of her masks, others of which can be seen as alternative versions devised for an unfulfilled Jewish identity." Exile, Mr. Yudkin notes, is one central theme, as in the poem "My People," which links Lasker-Schueler to Jewish traditions.

The central chapter in "Else Lasker-Schueler" interprets 19 poems from "Hebrew Ballads." In a series of careful readings, Mr. Yudkin shows how these poems "are in fact about the author's own passionate attachment, very thinly disguised. The Bible is a take-off point to

image situations of passion, and the dissolution of that passion in the dissolution of the self. Images of attachment are sought out in the biblical setting — Saul and Abigail, David and Jonathan, Boaz and Ruth, Pharaoh and Joseph." In short, "There is no attempt to recreate a biblical narrative" because the poet allows the biblical source to act "as a springboard for her imagination."

Lasker-Schueler's creative rewriting of the Bible is illustrated by her poem "Abraham and Isaac":

In the province of Eden Abraham built
A city out of leaves and sod
And readied himself to converse
with God.

The angels gladly rested before
his holy place
And Abraham acknowledged
each one;
Winged footfalls left their heavenly
trace.



Else Lasker-Schueler

Until sudden, troubled in their reveries,
They heard the bleating of the suffering rams,
With whom Isaac played at sacrifice behind the licorice trees.

And God admonished: Abraham!
From the waves' crest he broke off shell and sea star
To decorate, on high, the sacrificial altar.

And bore his only son bound to his back
To do justice to his mighty Lord —
Who truly loved his servant.
Trans. Durchslag and Demeestere

Mr. Yudkin refers to Isaac's play sacrifice and comments that, in Lasker-Schueler's version, "Behind the cover of this immaculate innocence something sinister is afoot." The final line cannot do justice to the subtle irony of the German original, "*Der aber liebte seinen Knecht.*" The poet, employing fine understatement, hints at the problematics of theodicy: How can God both love Abraham and command the sacrifice of his only son?

In two additional chapters, Mr. Yudkin situates Lasker-Schueler in relationship to both Expressionism and the broader German-Jewish context. A particularly interesting passage considers the notion of Jewish writers as marginal Jews "who were not to be a full part of the German literary tradition, and who had nevertheless been estranged from their ancestral religion." Within Mr. Yudkin's purview fall writers such as Alfred Döblin, Jakob Wasserman, Stefan Zweig, Franz Kafka, Joseph Roth, and Sigmund Freud. For Lasker-Schueler, "The Jew, particularly at this time and this place, was outsider, victim and catalyst." One wonders whether the conclusions of Mr. Yudkin's analysis are pertinent to 20th-century American Jewish authors.

"Else Lasker-Schueler" is an enlightening introduction to her work for the general reader. Clearly written, the book eschews arcane debates in order to present a broad picture of this neglected poet. Mr. Yudkin reads the poetry in relation to both Hebrew and German precedents, thus taking steps toward resolving some of the enigmas that surround the Jewish content of Lasker-Schueler's work.

Mr. Frieden is an associate professor at Emory University, where he directs the program in Judaic languages and literature.

"My People" translated by Audri Durchslag and Jeanette Litman-Demeestere in *Else Lasker-Schueler's, "Hebrew Ballads and Other Poems"* (Jewish Publication Society).

My People

The rock decays
From which I spring
To sing my songs of God. . .
Headlong I rush from the way
And murmur deep within,
Seaward, distant, and alone
Over the wallingstones.

I have flowed so far away
From the must, the ferment,
Of my blood.
And still, still the echo
In me,
When to the East, awesomely,
The decaying rock of bone,
My people,
Cries out to God.

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