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German-Jewish Literature: An Interruption

1 An Interruption

The question under consideration is the following: What and how the study of Jewish literature in its German contexts can contribute to the research and teaching frameworks of general and comparative literature. When inquiring into the contributions of German-Jewish literature, we tend to stress its interruptive implications and problematize its values as acts of intervention. Not integration but rather estrangement is the measure of its contribution. Indeed, from its emergence during the eighteenth century, German-Jewish writing was regarded as an interference in the major realms of German letters, evoking resistance and reactions. Understanding Jewish literature as an act of interruption in the major courses of the European project of modernity is therefore the point of departure, the Ansatzpunkt, of this short essay.

The question how to study, how to read, how to teach German-Jewish literature begins with a reflection on its interruptive value. This is not to argue that every contribution by Jewish authorship was or should be understood as a “break,” an “accident,” or a “crisis” in the course of German literary affairs. The significant contributions that German-Jewish authors have made in both literary and scholarly writings attest also to the integrative dimension of the German-Jewish cultural enterprises. Here, however, the argument is different: the very question of how German-Jewish writing should be introduced into the field of general and comparative literary studies, which texts should be included in our courses, what methods of reading should be applied in our seminars, implies an act of intervention. According to this view, Jewish writing is defined by its acts of discontinuity, rupturing the canonical frames of European literature.

The nature of this interruption, however, is not arbitrary. The disruptive actions of Jewish writing, its “noises,” the ways in which it challenges the history of the European novel, modern drama, and lyrics and interferes in the history of literary criticism itself, were and still are associated with its traditions, and first and foremost – the liturgical. What German-Jewish writing brought about in the last two centuries (1800–2000) – its interventions – was also based on the remnants of Jewish liturgical tradition.

Although this argument may be too strong, it implies that in order to properly engage the question regarding the German-Jewish contribution to literary study it first requires acknowledging its interruptive course, understanding the
values of its *Gegenwort*, its counter-word, that acted within and against the major frames of modern literature. These acts, however, were grounded in a certain tradition that was translated, adapted, reinterpreted (often also misinterpreted), and ironized in Jewish literary works. The work of prayer, the Talmudic Midrash, the Kabbalistic writings, and the remnants of the *piyut* (the Hebrew liturgical poem) were among the major sources of this tradition. In modernist contexts, this tradition was transformed into discourses of justice, claims for radical correction (*tikkun*), acts of responsibility (*teshuva*), and communion – a theo-political assembly. These adaptations, both playful and creative, challenged the courses of European literature and offered a different understanding of the Western literary enterprise. Among the major agents of this German-Jewish writing, to mention a few, were Heinrich Heine, Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Franz Werfel, Else Lasker-Schüler, and Paul Celan. In their works we find the echo of a lost liturgical poem that becomes a source for a radical interpretation of literature, to quote Kafka (1994c, 171), as a “form of prayer.”

2 Listening

My reflections began with the claim that German-Jewish writing should be understood as an act of intervention in the realm of European literature after 1800. I also argued that German-Jewish writing challenges the very idea of literature by its commitments to the Jewish liturgical tradition. This was not to assert the “religious values” of modern Jewish writing but rather to point to the remnants of tradition, not its Halachic (legal) precepts. It was not the prayer itself but rather its echoes, its sounds, its acoustic figurations that remained as a resonance in the modernist writings of German-Jewish authors.

German-Jewish writing in the twentieth century and its contribution to the European literary heritage should be understood along these lines as “deconstructive” – but how precisely? It was only through acts of “self-destruction” (fragmentation, translation, over-interpretation, irony, silencing) that the Jewish liturgical tradition turned into a source of interruption in modern European literary contexts. The Hebrew prayer, when it was forgotten and denied by its own publics and left as a remnant, turned into a distortive element in modernist writing, interrupting major schemes of European literature. Arnold Schönberg’s musical project, the atonal figuration of the European canonical musical sound, can be seen as a radical manifestation of this phenomenon, as is well demonstrated by his opera *Moses und Aron* (1932), in which the atonal elements are associated with the tradition of Hebrew prophecy, especially through its broken speech acts, the “stuttering” of its main protagonist – Moses.
German-Jewish writing, alongside its acts of interruption, also involves attempts at new beginnings. It was not characterized by crisis and distortion alone but also by the quest for reorientation, searching different directions in the worlds of modernity. An inquiry into its contribution to the realm of literary study must also take into consideration its futuristic dimensions, its revolutionary commitments (as in the works of Gustav Landauer, Walter Benjamin and Rosa Luxemburg, among others). Any reading of German-Jewish literature, the efforts to introduce it anew in comparative contexts, thus begins by listening to the sounds (the noises) of its interventions.

3 A Step Back

This argument requires, however, a “step back.”¹ A first example can be found in the case of Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn’s writings – his essays on aesthetics and articles on the idea of Enlightenment and Bildung, alongside his Bible translations and works of exegesis (bi’ur) – were conceived already by his contemporaries not only as examples of the integrative aspects of German-Jewish writing, but also as an interruption of major developments in the age of Enlightenment. Mendelssohn’s Hebrew writings, his significant contributions to the corpus of the Hebrew Haskala (Enlightenment), and his theological reformational texts attested both to his scholarly, critical efforts and also to the liturgical commitments of his enterprise. These residues – the remnants of the Jewish liturgical tradition, the prayer, the blessing, the piyut – were perceived, however, as obstacles, as the remains of an archaic religious heritage that challenged the modern, secularist vision of European literature around 1800. Although some thinkers and authors of the Enlightenment and the Romantic era quite often engaged Christian liturgical traditions, alongside ancient Hebrew (to recall Herder’s and Goethe’s engagement with Song of Songs), transforming them into modern forms of representation, Jewish authors who dealt with traditional Hebrew sources were regarded as foreign, isolated from the main trends of European writing. German-Jewish writing, in engaging the leftovers of Jewish/Hebrew liturgy, challenged the conformist visions of European literature by alluding to different forms of knowledge, different forms of life. According to Franz Rosenzweig (1998, 335–337), this was precisely the Jewish contribution to the literature of the world: estranging the secularist world-view of the major European enter-

¹ On the implications of a “step back” as an interruption in the history of Western metaphysics, see Heidegger 1986.
prise. Once we ask about the interruptive act of German-Jewish literary writing, we have to consider its challenge to the modern, secularist perception of literature.

Even the writings of Heinrich Heine are not only an exception, but also an example of a German-Jewish author who reflected – with a fine irony, not without joy – his own conditions, his foreignness, his states of denial and cultural amnesia. Heine, a converted Jew, a poet of the free spirit, an exiled German author, conducted literary journeys in his works, notably in his Deutschland. Ein Winternächen, that ostensibly paid little attention to the Jews of his homeland, whom he presented from a somewhat cynical perspective. The jokes, the parodies that Heine recounts in his writings, his critical engagement with German political culture and his attack on its false literary heritage, while celebrating (again, not without irony) his own “homecoming,” are associated, we recall, with a “falscher Stimme” (false voice) (Heine 1995, 397). However, alongside these “comic effects” in Heine’s works, the key message of his writing was a claim for justice. While Deutschland. Ein Winterreise provides a critical perspective on Germany’s future and should be understood as a political poem (Grab, 1992), its own discordant voices, its wounded sounds, are heard as an echo of a (desperate) Jewish prayer (Adorno 1998).

4 Judgment

Understanding German-Jewish literary works in their modernist contexts as an echo of a Jewish prayer, namely, as a remnant of a liturgical poem, is not self-evident. Occasional references to the tradition of Jewish prayer and its modernist interpretation can be found in the writings of Walter Benjamin, himself a German-Jewish author and one of the critical speakers of this enterprise in the realm of German literature. One of these references appears in his short essay of 1928, titled first “Eine neue Kraus-Notiz” (Benjamin [1928] 1991), in which he discusses the “Jewish portrait” of the Austrian critic Karl Kraus. Being-Jewish, in Benjamin’s view, was not an essence, but rather an allusion to a certain constellation of tradition, in which remnants of the Jewish liturgical work were still in act. According to Benjamin, “Jewish” was the name for a tradition that suffered crisis, inversions, and demonic adaptations, yet preserved its liturgical intentions. Let us recall the opening sentence of his note on Kraus:

In [Kraus] ereignet sich der großartige Durchbruch des halachischen Schrifttums mitten das Massiv der deutschen Sprache. Man versteht nichts von diesem Mann, solange man nicht
Benjamin argues that the writings of Krauss should be read as texts intended “before the law,” written as documents to be submitted to the court, for everything in Krauss’s world belongs without exception (ausnahmslos) to the realm of the law. However, Krauss’s own act of writing should be understood as a breaking-through, an act of eruption, Durchbruch, as an intervention (perhaps, an inversion) of the Jewish Halacha. Kraus’s work should thus be read as a Talmudic interference in the realm of German court language. What can that mean?

*Halacha,* implying in Hebrew “a way-of-life,” a guide, a path of being in the world, is first and foremost an act of study. It refers to a scholarly debate regarding the implications of the law. In the Talmudic corpus *Halacha* is interwoven with (over)interpretations (and often interruptions) of the *Mishna* (the ancient Hebrew codex), alongside the *Aggadah* (tales) – stories and anecdotes about scholars, rabbis, and disciples of *Torah,* among them great teachers but also laymen and fools. What *Halacha* implies in this context is not so much an ancient version of a Jewish theological seminar, but rather forms of writings based on radical interventions in the realm of the law. *Halacha* is a method of studying in which storytelling (Aggadah) interferes in the procedures of judgment, creating detours, suspensions, and corrective acts. When Benjamin compares Kraus’s writing to Halachic texts and asserts its “breaking-through” into the realm of German letters, he implies a comparison with a Jewish literary corpus, in which the producers of the law are interrupted by the cause of literature (the *Aggadah*). Furthermore, when Benjamin writes about the *Durchbruch des halachischen Schriftums,* he refers also to a certain dimension of resistance that Hebrew/Aramaic – the liturgical languages – represents in the realm of German language. What *Halacha* means here is not only an act of resistance in the realm of the law, but also an interruptive movement in the world of the German language, based on the historical work of the forgotten Semitic languages.

Kraus wrote his essays and literary criticism, as well as his dramas, in German. The Talmudic associations of his writings were ironic, or as Benjamin himself hinted – “demonic.” In his writings, Kraus expresses the destructive element of judgment. However, his work, according to Benjamin, also implies a move from the realm of judgment into the space of justice. Benjamin writes:

Der sprachliche und sittliche Siblenstecherei dieses Mannes meint nicht Rechthaberei, sie gehört zu der wahrhaft verzweifelten Gerechtigkeit einer Verhandlung, in der die Worte und Dinge, um ihren Kopf zu retten, das verlogenste Alibi sich ersinnen und unaufhörlich durch
Kraus’s work mainly performs the tasks of *ein Ankläger*, a prosecutor and a critic. His major writings should be read as acts of judgment as well as interventions in the realm of German law. The secret of Kraus’s work, we read further, its hidden core, is liturgical: “Ein Dasein, das, eben hierin, das heißeste Gebet um Erlösung ist, das heute über jüdische Lippen kommt” (Benjamin [1928] 1991, 625).

Benjamin listens to the hidden voice of Kraus – to the remnants of a (Jewish) prayer that is concealed in his demonic acts of judgment. Not prayer itself, but its intentions, not Hebrew but rather its German echo, not the liturgical work of angels, but the devilish work of a critic, are the modernist manifestations of Kraus’s writings.

## 5 Noise

More should be said on the work of prayer, the act with which Benjamin concluded his short note on Kraus. The liturgical task Benjamin relates to Kraus is of a Talmudic meaning. In the final section of his 1931 essay on Kraus, Benjamin invokes this liturgical act, referring to the *Unmensch*, the inhuman, as a “new angel”:


The new angel is a modernist figuration of a liturgical body that was created for singing the hymn before God’s throne. These angels are mentioned in the Talmudic tractate of *Hagigah* (Festival Offering), which recounts how the angels were born from God’s breath for singing the song of glory. However, how should this angelic prayer sound? According to Jewish traditions (such as the *Zohar* and the *Hekhalot* literature), the songs of the angels are so mighty that no human ear can bear them. The voices of the heavenly creatures are beyond all measure, dissolving the structure of the world itself. In a few sources, following the Prophetic scriptures, the sound of the angelic prayer is heard as a “great noise” (in Hebrew: *rahash gadol*). In other sources, it is compared to a whisper or the sound of breathing.
Benjamin’s note, which inquires about the implications of Kraus’s work as an intervention in the realm of German letters, leads us to the question regarding Jewish prayer and its voices, its noise. In his infamous essay on Das Judentum in der Musik (1850), Richard Wagner identifies “with horror” the voice of Jewish prayer and the poems recited in the synagogue as “gurgle, yodel and cackle.” (Wagner, 1911 [1850]). He hears the Jewish song of prayer as a disharmonic vocal texture, a noise, and thus as evidence of the Jews’ unmusical character, itself an outcome of their exilic being. Nonetheless, Wagner’s statement, anti-Semitic of its kind, corresponds with the traditional depiction of the creaturely, ear-splitting nature of the angelic prayer. This should not surprise us. The Jewish prayer, because of its unfamiliar, disharmonic sound, ruptures and disrupts the harmonies of European music. Wagner, who denied the radical implications of the Jewish voice, rejected its traditions altogether, failing to understand its depth: the cry, the shout, the twittering and whispering are significant signs of its liturgical task.

6 Twittering

The study of German-Jewish literature within the comparative frameworks of European languages and literatures begins with interventions. Hence, the introduction of German-Jewish writings into larger contexts of literary studies challenges the core concepts of study (theory and method) and draws new attention to the forgotten liturgical aspects of the literary enterprise. What we call, following Kafka, “Schreiben als Form des Gebetes” (1994c, 171), writing as a form of prayer, demands listening to its remnants. The noise, the whispering, the twittering – the distressing voices being related to German-Jewish writing, are also residues of the Hebrew/Aramaic prayer.

Another hint at this interruptive value of German-Jewish writing is found in Kafka’s own prose, in his stories on neglected, forgotten creatures. One of these stories, “Josefine die Sängerin, oder das Volk der Mäuse” (1994b),² can be considered as a testimony of the German-Jewish vocal heritage. Josephine is a musician, her singing, however, we are told, is dubious. Her voice is a whistle – a “quite ordinary piping” (1983a, 361). The whistle, the story tells, is an expression of a collective form of life: piping is “the real artistic accomplishment of our people, or rather no mere accomplishment, but rather a characteristic expression of our life” (361). Piping, the lowest, weakest, minor form of the musical expres-

² In the following, I will quote from the English translation (Kafka 1983a).
sion, is a manifestation of the being of the people, for whom “every day brings surprises, apprehensions, hopes, and terrors” (363). We are told of a certain commitment of the mouse people to Josephine’s art. However, “unconditional devotion is hardly known among us” (365). This source of conflict leads to Josephine’s downfall. Neglected, forgotten by her own people, wounded and tired, Josephine ceases to sing. According to the latest news, “she disappeared.” “The time will soon come,” we are told, “when her last notes sound and die into silence” (375).

Josephine, one can argue, with her poor singing, attests to the leftovers of a Jewish prayer, a piping, a noise that interferes with the harmonious textures of European literature. Her whistles belong to the realm of the minor voices in Kafka’s work, the esoteric, distorted voices – the piping, the cries, the twittering, and the stuttering (Deleuze 1994). An echo of these voices can be heard in the chapter the “Nature Theater of Oklahoma,” one of the final fragments of Kafka’s unfinished novel Der Verschollene (Amerika), The Man Who Disappeared. A young immigrant, Karl Roßmann, wanders through the lands of the new country and finally arrives at the theater of Oklahoma, where “everyone is welcome.” At the entrance, he hears a band of hundreds of women dressed as angels, playing trumpets. Their playing, however, is distorted and sounds like a “big noise” (Kafka 1994a, 296–297). Kafka’s protagonist does not seem to be troubled by this fact, but rather appears astonished and amused by it. For what matters is not the bad music but the gathering itself – the liturgical congregation of immigrants, wanderers and refugees, celebrating their being-together. These distorted voices, alongside their modernist implications, are evidences (again: remnants) of a lost communion. What we hear in these stories by Kafka are the echoes of a forgotten Jewish hymn.

7 Mauscheln

Kafka’s story on the singing of Josefina, her piping and whistles as well as her silences, can be read as modernist figurations of the work of prayer. The unmusical nature of the mouse people hints, however, at another relic of a Jewish dialect – the Mauscheln. It is a pejorative title given to the German-Jewish idiom, understood as a ‘jargon,’ similar to Yiddish. Kafka referred to it in a short note, included in a letter to Max Brod in June 1921, written while he was staying at a sanitarium in Matilary, Slovakia (Kafka 1995, 334–338). After reporting on his health, he turned to the issue of German-Jewish literature and to Karl Kraus’s satirical operetta “Literatur. Oder Man wird doch Da sehn.” Kafka defines the nature of Kraus’s work as an expression of this improper Jewish idiom of the German language. In this context, Mauscheln should be understood as the name
given to the voice of a creature (ein Maus), which has, however, certain Hebrew liturgical connotations, associated with the name of Moses, the ancient Hebrew prophet, a lawgiver himself and a stutterer, an unmusical body. Kafka, however, provides this “Jewish dialect” with a comic interpretation: “Der Witz ist hauptsächlich das Mauscheln, so mauscheln wie Krausk ann niemand, trotzdem doch in dieser deutsch-jüdischen Welt kaum jemand etwas anderes als mauscheln kann” (Kafka 1995, 336). Mauscheln is a form of “Jewish language” that interrupts the German language, transforms it into a creaturely sound. In the hands of Jewish writers, German becomes ein fremder Besitz (Kafka 1995, 336). The Jewish way of handling the German language is one of estrangement.

Kraus’s contribution to the world of German letters, defined by Benjamin as Halachic intervention, is characterized by Kafka as a Mauscheln. Both interpretations are rather comic, referring to the interruptive value of his writing and hinting at its association with traditions such as the songs of (fallen) angels, the language of (false) prophesy. In Kafka’s view, Mauscheln also has certain cultural and social connotations: “(das) Verhältnis der jungen Juden zu ihrem Judentum” (Kafka 1995, 337). The complex relations of young Jewish writers (mainly young males) to Judaism (more precisely: to the Judaism of their fathers) is the condition that finds its voice in Kraus’s work. The Jewish voice, however, is also a voice of lament, which is manifested in Kraus’s operetta in the cry “oi.” This short, minor speech-act is the last gesture of the grandfather, who, at the end of the operetta, reveals what Mauscheln is: a yell that bears the remnant of a Jewish prayer.

In Kafka’s view, the essential element in Kraus’s work is the creation of poetical textures that express the Jewish condition – the foreignness, rootlessness, and anxiety of being a Jew. These poetical textures are of dramaturgical nature: they are written as gestures and are based on intensive acts of body language. Mauscheln is the language of a dramaturgical body – a body of exaggerated gestures and foreign sounds. This body, however, is of a creaturely nature. In his letter, Kafka describes this corpus associated with the being of the Jewish authors as follows:

Weg vom Judentum, meist mit unklarer Zustimmung der Väter (diese Unklarheit war das Empörende), wollten die meisten, die deutsch zu schreiben anfingen, sie wollten es, aber mit den Hinterbeinchen klebten sie noch am Judentum des Vaters und mit den Vorderbeinchen fanden sie keinen neuen Boden. Die Verzweiflung darüber war ihre Inspiration. (Kafka 1995, 337)

The image of this creaturely body, the body of a young Jewish writer, desperately searching for “einen neuen Boden,” a new ground, while turning away from Judaism, is the image of Mauscheln. In this context, Kafka notes the “three impos-
sibilities” of Jewish literary writing: “(Die) Unmöglichkeit, nicht zu scheiben, (die) Unmöglichkeit, deutsch zu schreiben, (die) Unmöglichkeit, anders zu schreiben” (the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing differently) (Kafka 1995, 337–338). These impossibilities, or paradoxes, of German-Jewish writing derive from the rootlessness and anxieties of a collective literary body that has already lost its base in tradition, yet has found no new land in which to take root.

*Mauscheln*, to follow Kafka’s comments, is the name for the poetics of anxiety arising from certain historical, sociological, and psychological contexts of Jewish life and letters around 1900. *Mauscheln*, however, can also be understood as the expression of what literature is. What Kafka sees as the essential element in Kraus’s work – a poetical texture of anxiety and despair – also hints at the foundational tensions of modernist literature. *Mauscheln* expresses an impossible possibility of literary production. This too can be considered as a contribution of German-Jewish writers to world literature: the attempt to escape the world of (patriarchal) tradition and to enter the world of German letters brought about a poetic texture of crisis, expressing the fragility of universal writing.

Kafka’s remarks on Kraus, *Mauscheln*, and German-Jewish literature, I argue, are comic, reflecting the Jewish literary enterprise through an ironic perspective. However, Kafka’s notes can also be considered as reflections on his own project of writing, while his comments on *Mauscheln* can be applied to his story *Die Verwandlung* (Kafka 1983), which recounts the misfortunes of Gregor Samsa – a human body, a creature, a Jew?

### 8 Jewish, too-much

What Kafka calls *Mauscheln* – a sort of German-Jewish dialect that becomes a resource for interference in the realm of German letters – was echoed forty years later by the poet Paul Celan in his notes on the future of poetry after 1945 by means of the term *Verjudung*. In his drafts to the *Meridian-Rede* (1960), Celan writes:


*Verjudung*, Judaization, (making too-Jewish), implies a poetical writing that demands deconstruction of the conventional syntax of the German poem, causing
a distortion within its inner structure. In so doing, the poem attests to a certain historical experience, associated with “what is Jewish,” namely with the deformations of being, with an experience of foreignness and being-other.³ This, to follow Celan, is the path of the poem, a return (Umkehr), moving against (Gegenverkehr) the major stream of language. The poem, in turning back, moves again toward the (forgotten) other, signifying a future – the dimension of an encounter, a belated one. The poem, when distorted by “Jewish” vocal textures, does not serve the false harmonious plan of European lyrics. The poem thus turns into an act of witnessing, which implies not only a tale about the past, but also an openness, a movement towards the other, attesting to, saving his/her secret. Yet, Celan too was aware that this movement (the opening towards the other) is a movement towards the unknown. The path of the poem is not so much a return as a path of departure and of loss. The poem signifies “nowhere,” giving a desperate sign for “where to?”

What we call “the future” contains tensions of this kind: it is shaped by the unfolding of tradition, the reinterpretation of past forms, which then produce a vortex in literary studies. The engagement of German-Jewish writers with traditions involves endless attempts at reorientation. Reading Celan today takes us anderswo, to other places. This too belongs to our experience of literary studies.

Epilogue

Our point of departure was the question: how can the study of German-Jewish literature contribute to the research and teaching in frameworks of general and comparative literature? Beginning with a reflection on acts of intervention and acknowledging the interruptive values of German-Jewish literature, I argued that German-Jewish writing should be understood as an interference in the major, canonical corpus of European literature. In order to study the nature of German-Jewish literary interventions, we should listen to its sounds – the noises of its Durchbruch, its “breaking through.” Among our case studies were Walter Benjamin’s and Franz Kafka’s remarks on Karl Kraus, followed by a short comment on Paul Celan’s poetics of intervention. These cases offer vocal interpretations of the German-Jewish contribution, stressing not only its materialistic implications – body language, gestures, vocal failures (stuttering, twittering, whispering), as exemplified in Franz Kafka’s prose, but also its radical adaptation of liturgical traditions – the prayer and the “angelic” songs. What Ger-

³ For further reading, see Mosès (1987); Eshel (2004); and Liska (2013).
man-Jewish literature offers to the general field of literary studies is a modernist interpretation of tradition, which does not relinquish its messianic power, but instead provides it with a double irony. The “comic” interpretation of the German-Jewish literary project suggests, however, to cite Kafka’s remark on Kraus, not only a joke (ein Witz), but a short moment of relief in the course of our studies.

Bibliography


