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Die auferlegte Heimat. Else Lasker-Schülers Emigration in Palastina (Book Review)

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ALFRED BODENHEIMER: *Die auferlegte Heimat. Else Lasker-Schülers Emigration in Palästina*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1995. 141 pp. DM 78,00.

Alfred Bodenheimer's concise and thoughtful monograph is a pioneering attempt at systematically exploring the tensions between Else Lasker-Schüler's self-concept as a Jew and her relationship to the Jewish homeland. Bodenheimer examines the unresolved incommensurability between the poet's pre-1933 depictions of Israel as a kind of longed for mystical other-world and her personal encounters with the reality of Palestine during her visits and exile there from 1934 on. Else Lasker-Schüler made a total of three trips to Palestine over the last eleven years of her life and her third voyage in 1939 was to be the final one. Suspended between two worlds, the German one that had cast her out and the Jewish one that never became her own, she died in a Jerusalem hospital in January 1945. What evolves in Bodenheimer's analysis of Lasker-Schüler's emigration and exile is that her relationship to Palestine reflects in essence the multilevelled intersections of her life, identity, and poetic vision. Using an interpretive approach he somewhat cryptically labels «hermeneutisch-produktions-ästhetisch,» Bodenheimer analyzes the relationship between the poet's work and life from 1933 to 1945.

Only a year after receiving the coveted Kleist Prize in Germany, Else Lasker-Schüler was beaten by Nazi thugs in the streets of Berlin. Disoriented and without luggage, she fled to Switzerland, arriving in Zurich in April 1933. It is here that her odyssey of emigration and exile begins. Jerusalem had been a locus of spiritual and literary longing for her even prior to 1933, and after her first trip to Palestine in 1934, she wrote *Das Hebräerland*, a synthesis of her vision and the reality of her experience. Significantly, she was unable to write this while she was in Palestine and had difficulty producing any literary works during her second visit to the country in 1937. It was

only during her third and final visit that she was able to write to any extent and it was during these last years of her life that she produced her drama *Ich und ich* and large sections of the 1943 poetry collection, *Mein blaues Klavier*.

So what was the poet's relationship to Palestine and to Jerusalem during these twelve years? Bodenheimer seeks to enlighten us, melding references to existing secondary studies with his own insights. What materializes in the course of his analysis is a portrait of the artist as an unresolved dialectic of the literary and the literal, oscillating between longing and loss, fantasy and reality in a space laden with associations to both home and homelessness. Bodenheimer binds these movements and apparent contradictions together using the analytical construct of transgressivity, understood loosely as the relation of opposites (as well as their translations, transgressions, and transitions) but refined over the course of his study to focus on the tensions and intersections between Lasker-Schüler's literal (what Bodenheimer refers to as «Selbstmetaphorisierung») and literary transfigurations. In both life and literature, Bodenheimer argues, Lasker-Schüler's use of metaphor was a willed act of subversion of the monolithic, ownership orientation of bourgeois society – a determination to preserve a sense of indeterminacy in order to thwart categorization and the accompanying stasis of creativity and identity.

After a rather standard introduction composed of a survey of scholarship and a synopsis of the chapters to follow, Bodenheimer launches into his analysis beginning with a discussion of circumstances surrounding Else Lasker-Schüler's «homecoming» to Palestine. The second chapter attempts to define and refine the concept of transgressivity by applying it as a tool for reading *Das Hebräerland*. The third chapter addresses the role of metaphor in the transgressive process, utilizing the theoretical work of Umberto Eco and Paul Ricoeur to examine the oppositions and tensions between Lasker-Schüler's «Selbstmetaphorisierung» and her penchant for role-playing. In Chapter Four Bodenheimer examines Lasker-Schüler's late works and her self-stylization as a kind of poetic prophet, highlighting the increasingly therapeutic function her poetry served in view of historical developments and the hardships she faced in her daily existence in Jerusalem. The fifth chapter focusses on Jerusalem as the locus of poet's last years and her homesickness for the German landscape. Here Bodenheimer reads Lasker-Schüler's last love poems in the context of the ambivalence that marks her relationship to Palestine: as allegories of cosmic love in which the boundaries between I and Thou are transgressed. In his conclusion, Bodenheimer points to the articulation of «home» as both anticipation and expectation in Lasker-Schüler's work in particular, but notes that this construct of «home» can be viewed more generally as a reflection of the destabilized sense of belonging that was widespread in Nazi-occupied Europe.

Although Bodenheimer's construct of transgressivity is both intriguing and fruitful as a means of opening up Lasker-Schüler's complex relationship to Palestine, it is often not clear whether the results of his investigations substantiate his claims. Are the moments in which the poet's irreconciled existence intersects with her poetic world perhaps not transgressions at all but rather syntheses? What does come across clearly, however, is that Lasker-Schüler was an adept at harnessing the spatial and

existential uncertainties in her life as an exile in the service of her own creative and self-creative process. For her the boundaries between performance, literal reality, and literary reality were permeable and it was within this atmosphere of fluid mutability that Lasker-Schüler sought and fashioned her own alternatives to the world that had collapsed around her.

Ultimately Else Lasker-Schüler had no choice but to remain suspended between her desire for home and her feeling of homelessness, an existential condition of exile which was paradoxically brought home to her during the years in which she dwelled but never truly lived in the primordial homeland of her people. Yet Lasker-Schüler both followed and transmogrified the venerable tradition of the People of the Book, returning to the word in the form of metaphor, using metaphor as the bridge between incommensurable worlds, metaphor as an act of simultaneous revelation and mitigation of the contradictions surrounding her. In a sense, Lasker-Schüler's situation in Palestine in the last years of her life can be read as paradigmatic of the condition of contemporary Israel as it is described in Arnold Eisen's study of diaspora and exile, *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming* (1986): uncategorizable as either the Promised Land or as a place of exile, but rather situated in some not yet and perhaps never to be defined space in between.

Bodenheimer's achievement lies in his ability to coordinate an impressive amount of material with cogent and concise analysis. This is particularly true of his discussion of *Ich und ich*. His references to existing secondary studies throughout are judicious and acknowledge the work of other scholars whose analyses have contributed to his own. Although one may stumble over the few unessential cap-doffings to grey eminences in literary theory, on the whole Bodenheimer's book is both disciplined and coherent. As the first book-length examination of Lasker-Schüler's Jerusalem years and as a point of departure for further investigations of the poet's life-long suspension between «Heimat» and exile, Bodenheimer's *Die auferlegte Heimat* offers interesting and stimulating reading for Lasker-Schüler scholars and students of Jewish exile as well.

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