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The Literary Reputation of Else Lasker-Schüler

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Calvin Jones’s book is an ambitious attempt to combine synopsis and critical analysis in a survey of over ninety years of international Else Lasker-Schüler criticism. Although Jones is careful to point out that his is selective rather than comprehensive review, he covers a considerable amount of material over the course of six chronologi-
cally organized chapters. In his preface Jones is particularly critical of early reviewers and scholars who allowed themselves to be influenced by the poet’s self-representation rather than forming their own judgments and notes the tendency in much of the criticism, both past and present, to conflate the writer’s life and her art. What is needed, he argues, is an academic criticism that transcends both the biographical fascination and the rigid categorization of much of the existing literature and which achieves a balance between an appreciation for the poet’s diversity and a critical analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of her work. Jones’s survey differs from previous reception studies in its breadth, in its simultaneously diachronic and synchronic investigation of developments in Lasker-Schüler criticism, and is the first book of its kind on Else Lasker-Schüler in English.

The chronological organization of the book is based in part on a historical periodization (e.g. the first two chapters center around the dates of the two World Wars), in part on a timeline based on points of transition in the history of Lasker-Schüler reception. Jones’s stated interest in historically situating the criticism he is surveying in this study is reflected in his chapters covering the period 1901–1970, but the following chapters seem divorced from a socio-historical foundation and revolve rather around developments in literary historical criticism with little attempt to address how contemporary issues may have influenced the various lines of inquiry as well as the critical approaches employed. Although Jones acknowledges that the material could be organized differently, he adheres to his chronological format even at the risk of thematic overlap and repetition. Yet this repetition and overlap reveals the degree of continuity and recurrence of themes in the reception of Lasker-Schüler’s works. Time and again, critics have addressed the question of her position as an expressionist poet, her relationship to Judaism, her German-Jewish identity, her gender, her innovative use of language, and the themes of love, exile, spirituality, play, and sensuality in her work.

During the first period designated by Jones, 1901–1918, the focus of the reception is on the poet’s connections to expressionism and modernism, on questions of her Jewishness and on her Bohemian lifestyle. Jones argues that much of this early criticism is paternalistic and reveals a widespread lack of understanding for Lasker-Schüler’s status as an artist. The second phase, 1919–1945, witnesses the poet’s spectacular rise and dramatic fall in critical favor in Germany. Lasker-Schüler’s works were lauded during the Weimar Republic only to be lambasted and banned under the Third Reich. Prior to 1933, she was praised as an expressionist poet and admired for her feeling for language that many attributed to her Jewish origins. With increasing anti-Semitism in Germany during the early 1930s, sympathetic critics sought to emphasize themes of tolerance in her works. Awarded the prestigious Kleist prize in 1932, Lasker-Schüler was forced to flee Berlin the following year. She became a marginal figure in the literary world during the last years of her life and it was not until the end of WWII that her works came back into critical purview.

The response of the German reviewers in the late 1940s and 1950s provides one of the most interesting facets in the survey of criticism Jones brings to light. The distinct reluctance to criticize the poet’s works, the emphasis on her Jewishness, the repeated
allusions to themes of reconciliation in her work and the praise for her achievements in transforming the German language point toward a kind of philosemitic opportunism most blatant in Gottfried Benn's 1952 laudatio in which he praised Else Lasker-Schüler's merits as a poet and as a synthesis of Germanness and Jewishness.

In the mid-1950s more objective and academic studies using close reading and biographical approaches began to appear but continued to focus on themes that had been in vogue in earlier criticism. Jones uses the twentieth anniversary of Lasker-Schüler's death (much publicized in both East and West Germany) as the point of departure for his designated fourth phase, 1965–1970. In his comparison of reception in both Germanies, Jones notes how ideological motivations influenced the tenor of the criticism. West German scholarship tended to emphasize the allegedly escapist and apolitical quality of Lasker-Schüler's work; whereas East German reception argued for an image of the poet as an anti-bourgeois activist. The fifth phase, 1971–1980, is marked not only by greater methodological variety beyond the standard close reading and biographical approaches but also by a more critical tone towards the works themselves. Although the thematic interests remain largely the same, there is more attention to the diversity as well as the contradictions in Lasker-Schüler's œuvre and a decreasing tendency to romanticize and idealize the poet and her work. What is new in the most recent phase of Lasker-Schüler reception, 1981–1993, is the growing number of feminist-oriented studies investigating constructs of writing and agency, sexuality, gender, and patriarchy. Despite Jones's homogenized concept of feminism as a single body of criticism, he does offer a balanced survey of the variety of feminist literary critical contributions to Lasker-Schüler scholarship.

Given the amount of material covered in the study, it is not surprising that the discussion of the literature is at times uneven. Jones's style is clumsy and ambiguous in places, especially where his bid for conciseness results in a sacrifice of substance. Other weaknesses in the study are the unreflective appropriations of the discourse of the texts being summarized without providing adequate explication, an imbalance in the amount of space devoted to individual works relative to their content, and an inconsistency in tempering synopsis with analysis. Jones is to be commended, however, for his attempt to fashion a critical narrative out of the survey, relating individual works to each other and reading them in interactive exchange rather than as disparate monads. Jones's book, despite its critical inconsistencies and stylistic weaknesses, is a valuable resource for Lasker-Schüler scholars. He combines an overview of international reception with several pertinent suggestions for future research, particularly the application of a wider variety of theoretical approaches and more critical attention to Lasker-Schüler's graphic art which has been largely ignored in existing scholarship.

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