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GAUGING THE GERMAN JEWISH

DANIEL B. SCHWARTZ
Department of History, The George Washington University
E-mail: dbs50@gwu.edu

Scott Spector, *Modernism without Jews? German-Jewish Subjects and Histories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017)

Vivian Liska, *German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife: A Tenuous Legacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017)

Few fields are as riddled with terminological indecision as "German Jewish thought." One cannot invoke this sphere without immediately bumping up against essential questions of definition. Should membership within its bounds be reserved for those who wrote, primarily, as Jews for Jews, even if in a non-Jewish language?[1] Or should its borders be expanded substantially to include Jewish contributions to secular German thought—or, perhaps more aptly put, secular thought in German, in order not to exclude the vast number of Central European Jewish innovators who wrote in the language? If one takes the latter route, the problems only proliferate, for the question then ensues, what makes any of these supposed Jewish contributions *Jewish*? How is the Jewishness of a particular work, school of thought, or sensibility to be gauged and assessed? How does one avoid the risk of reading too much in—or too little? How does one steer clear of reducing Jewishness to some stable core or essence, without relying on a notion so broad and diffuse as to be effectively meaningless? And always lurking is the question whether, in imputing Jewishness to a cultural product or outlook, one has betrayed its creator, who would have recoiled at being labeled a "Jewish" author or artist. These problems are not peculiar to German Jewish intellectual history. They arise wherever and whenever Jews have been disproportionately prominent in the shaping of secular culture—for instance, in the writing of the "New York intellectuals" in the postwar United States. But the role of authors and

[1] The qualifier of "non-Jewish language" may itself be too restrictive. As several recent studies have shown, Weimar Germany was the site of an efflorescence of Hebrew and Yiddish literature. See Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven, 1996), 185–211; Rachel Seelig, *Strangers in Berlin: Modern Jewish Literature between East and West* (Ann Arbor, 2016).

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artists of German Jewish background proved especially pronounced even after many, like Hannah Arendt or Leo Strauss, emigrated to escape the Nazis. In their new environments, they remained active participants in intellectual life, and the question remains whether they were carrying on the tradition of German Jewish thought.[2]

Such questions of definition lie at the heart of Scott Spector's *Modernism without Jews? German-Jewish Subjects and Histories*, a new collection of essays that seeks, with intermittent success, to establish a new method for exploring the well-trodden terrain of Jewish contributions to the general culture in Germany. They are less of a preoccupation, but still present, in Vivian Liska's *German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife: A Tenuous Legacy*, which traces the contemporary reception—and suppression—of a "Jewish" dimension in the work of four principal twentieth-century Jewish thinkers who wrote in German. While the books overlap to a degree in terms of the subjects they scrutinize—both devote several chapters to the figure of Kafka—they adopt different positions with respect to the problem of definition. Spector appears to recoil from providing any kind of parameters for what constitutes German Jewish modernist culture, opting instead to historicize the very category. Liska, on the other hand, circumscribes her analysis in such a way that allows her to chart the adventures of a distinct strain of German Jewish thought. Both books, however, seek to shed new light on the intellectually and ethically freighted relationship between German Jewish thinkers and the problem of modernity.

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An expert on the varied forms of German Jewish culture in Prague around the *fin de siècle*, Spector approaches his current book with the aim of revising (or at least problematizing) what he views as the chief analytical frameworks that have governed the study of Jewish contributions to German culture to date. For Spector, these basic ideas—which he labels the "terms of engagement"—are assimilation, modernism, and secularization. "The opening gambit of this book," he writes,

> is the admission that some of our fundamental assumptions about the reality lived by German-speaking Jews have been misleading, if not outright mistaken. Our assumptions about the experiences of emancipation and assimilation, or the relationship of Jewishness to modernism, or our understanding of a rapid and thorough process of German-Jewish secularization are all rooted in contemporary Jewish reflection and in the observations

[2] On the "exporting" of German Jewish culture see Steven E. Aschheim, *Beyond the Border: The German-Jewish Legacy Abroad* (Princeton, 2007).

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and judgments of non-Jewish Germans. Yet those articulations often misrepresent more than they expose, and they need to be interpreted in nuanced ways. (x)

By placing these master narratives for making sense of German Jewish cultural productivity into question, Spector aims to situate analysis of this issue on the smaller scale of individual lives and their inherent complexity. The turn to "German-Jewish subjects and their histories" is intended to place under the microscope the *subjectivity* of German Jews—"a process (more than a stable, hidden object) that is constantly shifting, inconsistent, contradictory, and often other than how it perceives itself" (xiii). Generally, it is *ideology*—whether we are talking of hegemonic concepts contemporaneous with the German Jewish subjects being studied or of collective designations used by latter-day historians themselves—"that disciplines all this disorder into peculiar and consistent identities" (xiii).

Spector trains his fire on the concept of assimilation in his first chapter, "Forget Assimilation: Subjectivity and German-Jewish History." His grievance with the category goes beyond a "simple binary of assimilated and nonassimilated" (4). He is also skeptical of a "model of identity ... that assumes a spectrum of possible identifications ranging from the imagined pole of absolute Jewish identification ... at one end, to complete appropriation of German identity at the other" (4). The problem with even this model is that it fails to appreciate the "intricate braid" (14) in which the "German" and the "Jewish" are so deeply interwoven that to treat the two as separate essences is profoundly misleading (e.g. in Martin Buber's turn-of-the-century *Tales of Rabbi Nachman* which "recuperates" Hasidic stories for German readers yet is saturated by its German neo-Romantic intellectual milieu). While fully aware of the reality that contemporary actors (no less than modern historians) often used the language of assimilation to compartmentalize their "German" and "Jewish" selves, Spector is convinced that, read carefully, their work reveals an interiority—or "subjectivity"—that resists simple bifurcation. The title "Forget Assimilation" refers to Gershom Scholem's classic 1966 essay "Jews and Germans," which treated the history of German Jewish assimilation as a purely one-sided affair in which Germans never truly accepted the Jew as "one of them," with ultimately tragic results. Yet even Scholem conceded that "not all 'Germans' are Germans and not all 'Jews' are Jews," in the process destabilizing the opposition that structured his entire essay. "I suggest," Spector writes, "we begin by forgetting what Scholem chose to remember"—namely the zero-sum model of "Jewishness" and "Germanness" that underlay his argument—"and remembering, and expanding on, what he invoked only to forget" (4). The fact that "not all 'Germans' are Germans and not all 'Jews' are Jews" points to how individuals do not necessarily conform completely or consistently to the identities expected of them,

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that they are more elusive and self-contradictory in their identifications and disidentifications than a title "Jews and Germans" is capable of conveying.

Spector's second chapter, from which the title of the volume is drawn, is the finest in the collection. In "Modernism without Jews: A Counterhistorical Argument," an essay first published twelve years ago, Spector wrestles with both the contradictions and surprising echoes of a long-standing discourse that links Jews to the founding and flourishing of artistic and cultural modernism. For Spector, Jewish modernism—or *die jüdische Moderne* in German—functions not as a canon or body of work but as a rhetorical figure, that has historically been deployed to both anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic ends. Books like Steven Beller's 1989 *Vienna and the Jews*, which catalogue the Jewish identity or at least ancestry of a vast number of the cultural avant-garde in *fin de siècle* Vienna, end up confirming the main contention of the modernists' contemporary anti-Semitic critics (namely that modernism was inherently "Jewish") without doing anything "to suggest what we are to do with this similarity or how we are to account for the recurrence of this pattern" (25).[3] Perhaps the most signal contribution of this essay is to raise certain questions about all the ink that gets spilled interpreting the significance of the Jewish origins of authors like Marx and Freud to their work. What if—herein lies the counterhistorical argument—we were to suddenly learn that these artists and thinkers were *not* originally Jewish? How much does the study of Jewish origins truly add to our understanding of the texts themselves? Conversely, Spector notes, if it were to be discovered that Nietzsche were the son not of a Lutheran minister, but (like Marx) of a convert from Judaism, it is nearly certain that there would be volumes upon volumes mining the importance of this Jewish background for grasping a work like the *Genealogy of Morals*. In the age of the triple parentheses, when anyone with a Twitter feed and a Jewish-sounding last name is at risk of being "outed" as "Jewish" by some member of the alt-right, Spector's discomfort with the excavation of alleged Jewish motives or motifs in secular thought in German appears all too timely.

"How are we to historicize Jewish modernism?" Spector asks. "How is it to be defined, and how can it even be invoked without immediately falling into the traps set by its own violent history?" (33). At least in the context of the essay itself, Spector has no clear answers, other than to make us aware of the highly checkered history of claims for the "Jewishness" of modernist art, music, or writing. Perhaps the answer, as in the first chapter, lies in a more rigorous exploration of the "subjectivity" of the artist or author, as opposed to the mere facticity of Jewish origin. Yet here we get one of our first intimations of a recurring problem in Spector's book—its failure to sustain any kind of focused attention

[3] Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1989).

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on what is presumably its chief methodological innovation. Subjectivity goes entirely unmentioned here, and in fact will float in and out of view for the remainder of the book. This is an early indication of a failure to integrate the essays in this volume—most of which have previously appeared in journals or other anthologies—as clearly and tightly as one would like.

The elusiveness of the book's overall argument remains an issue in chapter 3, devoted to the third of the categories for making sense of the German Jewish experience—secularization—deemed in need of reinterpretation. "The Secularization Question: Germans, Jews, and the Historical Understanding of Modernity" deals with the paradox that "a group of intellectuals who were, by Nuremberg-decree definition (Nazi so-called racial laws), Jews" (41) were disproportionately involved in the postwar debate of Carl Schmitt's version of the secularization thesis. The latter was essentially an argument over whether modern, secular concepts of politics, law, and history were mere transpositions of religious concepts, or had an independent genealogy and "legitimacy." The title of the chapter deliberately echoes the "Jewish Question" (*die Judenfrage*), a phrase that came to designate non-Jewish anxieties about the possibility of Jewish integration, and the German Jewish internalization of such anxieties. By evoking this term, Spector raises the question whether, after World War II, "some of the contents of the complex Jewish question might have been shuffled to the unspoken shadows of other discussions and debates, particularly the one about secularization" (42). Though Spector neglects to spell out more clearly what he is arguing or even simply implying, his conjecture of a displacement of the "Jewish Question" onto the secularization debate suggests that the stakes were more than purely theoretical and in fact touched on the underpinnings of the quid pro quo of liberal Jewish enfranchisement (emancipation for assimilation). The relevance of subjectivity to the discussion again goes unaddressed.

Spector's rethinking of the boundaries of the German Jewish is arguably most prominently exhibited in chapter 4, a study of the self-fashioning of Edith Stein. A German Jewish-born philosopher who converted to become a Carmelite nun and was ultimately killed by the Nazis at Auschwitz, Stein, who was beatified by the Pope in 1987, has become a pivotal symbol in controversies over "the 'Christianization' or even 'universalization' of the Holocaust" (60). Spector aims to show how a careful study of this "exceptional, idiosyncratic figure" (60) reveals the futility of conventional frameworks for measuring Jewishness like the binary opposition of assimilation versus Jewish communal identity, and instead calls for closer examination of "how subjects are situated in—and situate themselves within—historical contexts" (60). The model Spector espouses is one he explores in Stein's own *oeuvre*—that of the "intimate history," which "in its rejection of consonance with forceful master narratives, is not a subgenus of history as much as it is a challenge to it" (61). Through a close reading of Stein's memoir *Life in a*

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Jewish Family, written shortly after the Nazi seizure of power to give "an alternative history of German-Judaism" (63), Spector shows how Stein consistently oscillated between gestures of identification with Jewishness through portraits of family members so empathic that the line between author (and, ideally, reader) and subject could seem momentarily erased, and the adoption of the point of view of the "oppositional outsider" (63). As Spector writes, "Stein's turn to Christianity was never described by herself in terms of disavowal; to the contrary, she insisted there was close kinship between her Catholic spirituality and her Jewishness—but as in other close kinships, the relationship was complicated" (66). Indeed, for all the high-powered analysis and exegesis conducted by Spector, it is hard to discern a takeaway from this essay beyond the conclusion that Stein's Jewishness was contextual, performative, and, well, complicated.

Spector's final three chapters focus on Kafka. Here a consistent theme is Kafka's characteristic resistance to closure—whether that concerns the proper home for his literary estate or the irreducibility of a fragment of his work to the conflict of Czechs, Germans, and Jews in early twentieth-century Prague. The effort to trace Kafka's writing to historical realia—what the author labels "historical allegory"—is "unpersuasive": "it is too closed with regard to texts that seem defiantly open; overly deterministic, when Kafka's texts seem anti-deterministic; untrue to the texts as literature in its search for a historical referent" (143). Spector's readings of Kafka in these chapters are careful and insightful. Still, the underlying flaw in this volume—the failure to integrate the macro- and micro-levels of analysis—remains. One completes this collection of essays with only an exceedingly loose grasp of how they all cohere. The task of demonstrating how a larger argument can effectively be built on the backs of "intimate histories" is ultimately left for Liska to demonstrate.

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Ten years ago, in a scathing review for the *New York Review of Books*, Mark Lilla took aim at the relatively recent resurrection of the first-century theologian Paul as a principal source of inspiration for the European postmodern left. The primary culprits in this Pauline revival—thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek—were by no means a unified bunch. But they shared a view of Paul as a political revolutionary whose epistles heralded the extinguishing of an oppressive legalism and evoked messianic hope in a world without sectarian divides. While largely dismissing Agamben as "the very model of the baffling postmodernist—obscure, pretentious, humorless," Lilla devoted a substantial part of his essay to an excoriation of Badiou. The most zealous champion of a militant universalism liberated from all particularity, Badiou reserves special animus for Jewish particularity, which he identifies with contemporary Israel and

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its Jewish citizens and supporters. For universalism to triumph, Israel must cease to exist in its current form. Lilla thus exposed a strain of anti-Judaism that runs through the thought of many of the "new Paulines."[4]

In her most recent book, *German-Jewish Thought and Its Afterlife: A Tenuous Legacy*, Vivian Liska, a professor of German literature at the University of Antwerp and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, subjects these Pauline thinkers (Agamben especially) to careful, if critical, scrutiny. Her book focuses on their reception of the work of a select elite of German Jewish modernists (or, at least, modernists who wrote in German or hailed originally from a German-speaking milieu)—most notably Hannah Arendt, Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, and Paul Celan—and how they elide or disfigure the distinctively Jewish elements of their writing. Hence the "tenuous" nature of the German Jewish inheritance signaled in the book's subtitle. As Liska indicates toward the end of her book, "The evening of the Jewish dimension in modernist thought may well have arrived" (169).

But what constitutes "German-Jewish thought" to begin with? Liska does not overly fuss over questions of definition in her introduction. She does, however, rely on a typology, created by the late French Jewish thinker Stéphane Mosès, to justify her choices about whom to include in this canon. In a lecture given in 2006, one year before his death, Mosès distinguished between "normative modernity" and "critical modernity."[5] The difference between them was based on the degree to which modernity was viewed as having brought about a definitive rupture in the transmission of tradition. Those thinkers who fall within the camp of "normative modernity" (Mosès includes here figures such as Emmanuel Levinas and Franz Rosenzweig) believe that the tradition must be adapted or "translated" into the philosophical language of the present, but is still recoverable. The exponents of "critical modernity," however, believe, to quote Arendt, that "the thread of tradition is broken" and "we cannot reconnect it." What endures is certain forms and fragments, wrested from their original context, that the thinker in this vein retains some attachment to, even if only to interrogate and even subvert them. These shards serve as lenses for studying and thinking through some of the essential problems of European modernity.

The "German-Jewish thought" that Liska is interested in coincides with this category of "critical modernity." The work of Arendt, Kafka, Benjamin, and Celan in different ways marks the site of a frequently unresolved tension between elements of the Jewish tradition that have "become mere hearsay" and a "godless

4 Mark Lilla, "A New, Political Saint Paul?", *New York Review of Books*, 23 Oct. 2008, at www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/10/23/a-new-political-saint-paul, accessed 13 Aug. 2018.

5 Excerpts of Mosès's "Modernité normative et modernité critique" in translation can now be found in Sarah Hammerschlag, ed., *Modern French Thought: Writings on Religion and Politics* (Waltham, 2018), 245–53.

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modernity" (2). Liska's story is ultimately one of betrayal. "My underlying argument," she writes, "is that the Jewish dimension in the works of major modernist German-Jewish writers and thinkers is crucial to their approach to modernity; that this dimension is transformed, but remains significant in postmodernist theory; and that it is appropriated, dismissed or denied by some of the most acclaimed intellectuals and philosophers at the turn of the twenty-first century" (3). Chief among these deniers is Agamben, though Badiou and Žižek also come in for criticism.

Liska's book is divided into four parts, which correspond to a specific aspect of the Jewish tradition, as well as to a particular thinker whose work is deemed to epitomize this concern. The first section, centering on the issue of tradition and transmission, is devoted to Arendt. The second, which emphasizes the relationship between law and narrative, deals with Kafka. The third, on messianism, is primarily about Benjamin. And the fourth, which highlights the theme of exile and exemplarity, is focused on Celan. Each section comprises three or four chapters, in which Liska traces the writer's engagement with the motif in question as well as its fate in the hands of contemporary and later thinkers. This is a demanding book which requires that the reader follow Liska as she draws what seem, ostensibly, to be small distinctions between the thinkers and their subsequent interpreters, only to reveal their larger implications for the flattening out of what are often tensions resistant to resolution in the original. Each chapter is incredibly intricate, and typically features discussion of one thinker reading another thinker reading yet another. Yet out of these fastidiously close *explications de texte*, Liska succeeds in illustrating her main argument concerning the muting of the Jewish elements of modernist thought in the writing of authors such as Agamben who falsely claim fidelity to this legacy.

Rather than provide an overview of the different chapters, I think it would be more conducive to an understanding of Liska's method to describe two chapters in depth. The first chapter comes from the Kafka section, which in many ways constitutes the heart of the book, and is entitled "Kafka, Narrative, and Law." It concerns different readings of arguably Kafka's most famous parable, "Before the Law." The parable opens, "Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper comes a man." What ensues is a protracted negotiation, as the man relentlessly begs the doorkeeper to grant him access to the law, only to be consistently denied entry. The man waits at the door until the end of his life, at which point he sees a flickering light coming from the door, only to be told by the doorkeeper that this entrance to the law was meant for him alone, and he will now close it.

Liska starts by relating Agamben's reading of the parable. An anarchist hostile to all forms of law as products of a repressive sovereignty, Agamben interprets the man's inability to gain access to the law as a sign of the latter's "tyrannical power" (57). For Agamben, the man illustrates one of his key concepts, the *homo*

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sacer ("sacred man"), an ancient Roman category for an individual banned from society and stripped of his rights as a citizen. As such, he could be killed by anybody, but because he was under the ban he retained a certain sacrality and thus could not be sacrificed for ritual purposes. The *homo sacer* was thus left trapped in a state of simultaneous exclusion from and inclusion within the law. Because, according to Agamben, the "state of exception" under which the *homo sacer* exists has become the norm of contemporary politics, "we are all virtually *homines sacri*."[6] Agamben equates the man in Kafka's parable with the *homo sacer*. "No decree forbids the man's access to the law, but he is literally held in a ban that simultaneously includes and excludes him: he neither attains access to the law nor can he turn away from it" (57). In his reading, though, the closing of the door at the end of the parable represents the man's triumph. He has succeeded, through his patient waiting, in ending the ban and suspending the law. He has achieved a kind of messianic closure denied by those, like Jacques Derrida, who interpret the parable in line with what Agamben derisively refers to as the Jewish tradition of a "life lived in deferral and delay" (quoted at 57). Agamben thus reads the parable in terms of a "Pauline rescinding of the law" (57).

Agamben claims to derive his interpretation from Benjamin's messianism, but here, as elsewhere, Liska is determined to pry Agamben's hands loose of Benjamin, one of Agamben's major influences. She does so by contrasting Benjamin's views of state law and Jewish law, which are conflated in Agamben's reading. While Benjamin shares Agamben's bleak view of state laws as "instruments of abusive sovereignty" (57), he is more positive in his assessment of Jewish law, or Halakhah. Moreover, in other writings Benjamin compares Kafka's writings to the Aggadah, or narrative component of the Talmud. Based on this analogy, Liska concludes that Benjamin would read the parable "Before the Law" not in an antinomian sense, like Agamben. Rather, he would read it as an unconsummated meeting of Halakhah and Aggadah, the abstract and ahistorical law glimpsed only as a shimmer of light toward the end and the concrete story of the man from the country. "In stopping short of encountering the law, it [the Aggadah] also circumscribes the law by keeping it from overstepping the boundaries that are set by creaturely lived life itself" (64). The aim is not to overthrow the law, but to demonstrate its "necessary complementarity" with narrative, "which," Liska claims, "is itself the notion of justice upheld by Judaism" (65).

The second chapter I will address comes near the end of the volume and is entitled "Exile as Experience and Metaphor: From Celan to Badiou." Here Liska addresses the positive valorization of Jewish exile in postwar European thought as a kind of homelessness antithetical to "blood-and-soil" ideologies of

[6] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto, 1998), 115.

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national belonging—a subject Sarah Hammerschlag has previously explored with great insight in her 2010 *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought*.[7] Liska is critical of exaltations of Jewish "rootlessness" as a paradigm of a deterritorialized cosmopolitanism that gloss over the historical and cultural particularity of Jewish exile, its frequently involuntary nature and the suffering it has entailed. In Jean-François Lyotard, this culminates in a distinction "between the exilic 'jew' as metaphor for nonidentity and the historical Jews," and in the offensive absurdity of blasting Jews who "claim an identity for themselves" for being "bad 'jews'" (152). Are there ways of metaphorizing Jewish exile as an alternative to being anchored in a place while still doing justice to the coercion and unspeakable torment it has often involved? In thinkers such as Derrida and Levinas, and above all in the poetry of Celan, Liska finds examples of how the "universal significance" and the "singularity of the Jewish experience of exile" can be held in tension (153). Liska concludes by noting that the "affirmative discourse of exemplary Jewish exile" (154) is today increasingly marshaled against Zionism, with Badiou one of the primary culprits. Indeed, Badiou's Pauline hostility to particularist identity is so extreme that he calls for abolishing the term "Jew" altogether. "Badiou's universalism," Liska writes, "thus requires divesting the Jew of any historical, national, ethnic, or religious particularity," an effacement to the point of nonexistence (155).

Liska has written a luminous book that is no less exacting than Spector's in its close readings, yet, for all that, manages to tell a larger story about the eclipse of a certain tradition of German Jewish thought that played a pivotal part in the history of modernist culture. She leaves the reader hanging, however, on the question whether there is any hope for a rejuvenation of this legacy. As she writes in her concluding sentence, "In Judaism ... the falling of dusk begins a new day, and, as Benjamin reminds us, the Jews are not permitted to investigate the future" (169). Fair enough, but this reader at least wishes Liska had ultimately gone beyond a critique of the "new Paulines" to consider if there might be ways of perpetuating "the Jewish dimension in modernist thought." Her final chapter on the American literary critic Geoffrey Hartman and his writings on rabbinic Midrash (or the vast corpus of Jewish textual exegesis) may be a gesture in this direction, yet Hartman died in 2016. Are there younger thinkers at work today who might carry on the tradition of "critical modernity," of keeping the Jewish and modern in productive tension? We can only hope that Liska will revisit this question in her future work, and reveal whether the owl of Minerva may in fact have flown prematurely.

7 Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago, 2010).

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