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Review of Herzog, Hillary Hope, Vienna Is Different: Jewish Writers in Austria from the Fin de Siècle to the Present

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[Painitz on Herzog, 'Vienna Is Different: Jewish Writers in Austria from the Fin de Siècle to the Present'](#)

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Hillary Hope Herzog. *Vienna Is Different: Jewish Writers in Austria from the Fin de Siècle to the Present.* Austrian and Habsburg Studies Series. New York: Berghahn Books, 2011. 308 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-85745-181-1.

Reviewed by Sarah Painitz (Butler University) **Published on** H-Judaic (July, 2012) **Commissioned by** Jason Kalman

Vienna Is Different, Yet Remains the Same

Fin de siècle Vienna is well-known for its artistic and intellectual innovations. It is where Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, Sigmund Freud's development of psychoanalysis, the art of Gustav Klimt and Oskar Kokoschka, and the literature of Arthur Schnitzler and Robert Musil originated. Beginning with Carl Schorske's work of the 1960s, scholars and the general public alike have been fascinated by the culture, art, and lifestyle generated in Vienna during its final years as the grand capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Scholarship since Schorske's has refined our focus on Viennese modernism, especially in regard to the prevalence of Jews among the artists and thinkers of this era. It is in this tradition, especially the work of Steven Beller, that Hillary Hope Herzog places herself with her study of Austrian Jewish writers of the twentieth century. Taking the vital contributions of Jewish writers of the fin de siècle as her starting point, Herzog traces a tradition of Jewish writing in Vienna to the present. In doing so, she examines the particular insider-outsider position of Jewish writers in Austria, how that position informed both their identities as Jews and their writing, and their relationship to the city in which they lived and worked.

In chapter 1, Herzog discusses how Jewish writers of the fin de siècle responded to such social phenomena as assimilationism, new forms of anti-Semitism, and Zionism. The writers range from luminaries of Viennese modernism, such as Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, to lesser-known authors, such as Adolf Dessauer. Accordingly, Herzog treats a wide variety of literary genres, not only novels, plays, novellas, and poetry, but also satirical and polemical writings by Karl Kraus, feuilletons by Felix Salten, and theoretical writings by Theodor Herzl. Herzog's nuanced analyses highlight the individual nature and varied personal struggles that these writers expressed in their texts and underscore their inherent ambivalence and contradictions. The literary responses range from, for example, Kraus's extreme assimilation evident in his attempts to rid himself of his Jewish background to Richard Beer-Hofmann's embrace of his Jewish identity. Through individual case studies, Herzog successfully shows that writers of the fin de siècle experienced crises of identity as personal rather than universal.

In chapter 2, Herzog focuses on the rise of anti-Semitism between the two world wars and the increasingly precarious position in which many Jewish writers in Austria found themselves. The

aftermath of World War I brought about radical political and social changes, which, Herzog argues, required a reconfiguration of Jewish identity in Austria. As in chapter 1, Herzog stresses the differences rather than the similarities, showing that Jews variously turned to Jewish nationalism, repudiated their Jewish identity, embraced Socialism or internationalism, or retreated to the past. Herzog argues that, although “there was no unified response to the pressure-cooker situation of the interwar years,” the rise of National Socialism gradually left fewer and fewer alternatives (p. 165).

Although Herzog does not explicitly discuss them, there are some interesting differences between the first two and the latter two chapters in her book, which point toward the immense rupture the Holocaust formed in the tradition of the Jewish writing that she identifies. The first two chapters are longer, and writers whose careers spanned multiple decades (Schnitzler, Salten, Stefan Zweig, and Kraus) are treated in both. The cohesion between these two chapters is further strengthened because of the historical progression of the political and social issues that Jewish Austrians faced. Continuously labeled as the “other” within Viennese society, Jews were confronted with difficult questions as to whether, and how much, to acknowledge their Jewish identity. With anti-Semitism growing throughout the first decades of the twentieth century, these questions only became more pressing. However, whereas Herzog emphasizes the lack of any common experiences of these writers in the first two chapters, in the second half of the book, she highlights commonalities in Jewish writing after the Holocaust. The reasons underlying this apparent shift—whether specific political and social changes in Austria created a greater sense of unity among Jewish writers or eliminated alternative responses—remain to be further explored.

The third chapter, in which Herzog examines only three writers who returned to Vienna from exile, begins with an excellent description of the conservative social and cultural climate in postwar Austria. Herzog here identifies alienation and isolation as the common thread in the texts of Ilse Aichinger, Friedrich Torberg, and Hilde Spiel. This chapter is nonetheless the least cohesive, which is perhaps not surprising when one considers the writers’ vastly different exile experiences and reasons for returning. The inclusion of Torberg in this section is the most strained, especially in light of the fact that Torberg identified himself as belonging to the generation of writers of the interwar years and expressed a strong affinity with the Habsburg era.

As in chapter 3, Herzog again focuses on similarities among more recent writers in the final chapter. Although she acknowledges the heterogeneous nature of this group, she identifies a shared political commitment in their writing. This political commitment clearly sets this group of writers apart from their predecessors, who often felt alienated and isolated in Viennese society. Nonetheless, Herzog argues, many of these writers, including Ruth Beckermann, Robert Schindel, and Elfriede Jelinek, place their work within a tradition of Viennese Jewish writing, notably drawing on the rich literary culture of Vienna in the decades prior to the Holocaust. Through her analysis of these and other Jewish writers working and living in Vienna today, Herzog is able to draw a picture of a rich and vibrant Jewish culture, which, although not unified, contributes in important ways to the cultural, social, and political contemporary discourse in Austria.

In tracing a tradition of Jewish writing in Vienna from the fin de siècle to the present, Herzog’s book forms an important contribution to our understanding of Austrian literature and culture of the twentieth century. By focusing her analyses on the ways in which these writers conceptualized their identities as Jews, Herzog illuminates the complicated, yet continually changing relationships

between Jewish writers and the city of Vienna.

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