



Jewish Writers, German Literature: The Uneasy Examples of Nelly Sachs and Walter Benjamin

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By any account, German-speaking Jews have made among the greatest contributions to world culture in this century--one thinks of Wittgenstein and Husserl in philosophy, Freud in psychoanalysis, Kafka in fiction, and Paul Celan in poetry. Yet most Jews were exiled from German-speaking lands (when they were not murdered there), and they have never been integrated within German culture as such.

The poet Nelly Sachs, who won the Nobel Prize in 1966 for her poetry on the Holocaust, and the critic Walter Benjamin are two such German- Jewish writers: born just over a century ago in Berlin and exiled from Germany in the 1930s, both were acclaimed after World War II (Benjamin posthumously), yet neither, to this day, is anything but an outsider to German literature. The present collection of essays addresses the uneasy relationship between Jews who are masters of the German language and the German literary tradition that still cannot accept the otherness of Jewish writers.

After a biographical and historical introduction by the volume's two editors, individual chapters are devoted to Sachs, to Benjamin, to their comparison, and to Sachs in an international context. Topics explored include the Jewish themes and motifs in Sachs's distinctive verse-dramas; the limits of poetic metaphor with respect to representations of the Holocaust; the relationship of Benjamin's theories of dramatic language to Sachs's verse- dramas; and Benjamin's theories of language, imagery, and gesture in the contexts of Western philosophy, German literature, and Jewish thought.

Before now, no work in any language has brought Sachs and Benjamin scholarship together under a single cover. Looking at these two internationally known and celebrated authors together reconfigures both the ways we understand them-- neither just "Jewish writers," nor indifferently German authors--and the ways we understand German literature.

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