Vivian Liska

**Lasker-Schüler, Else (1868—1945)**

Else Lasker-Schüler can be regarded as the most important German female modernist and is one of the few women affiliated with the Expressionist movement.

Her work – mainly poetry, poetic prose and several plays – has often been situated by its critics and readers in a realm not of this world and outside historical time, in a sphere of eternal poetic truth, a realm oblivious of the cultural, political, and social realities of her day. Although her eccentric and exalted poetic imagination indeed seemingly escapes her immediate environment into fairytale fantasies peopled by princes and princesses, sheiks and magicians, angels and tricksters, such a description of her work misses its importance as an artistic as well as existential endeavor of creative innovation in which a return to age-old religious, literary, cultural and textual traditions meets a radically modernist idea of poetry and selfhood. The importance of her work – her poetry, prose texts and dramas, drawings and paintings, but also her live performances and, in some ways her whole vibrant persona – derives to a considerable extent from the unusual ways in which she combined stories and figures from the Biblical tradition and avant-garde poetic forms. One of the most striking manifestations of this amalgamation occurs in her blurring of the boundaries between her multiple and eccentric fictive personae often based on Biblical figures and the real people and events in her personal life. Several of her invented personae – most famous among them Prince Jussuf, based on the Biblical figure Joseph – feature in her prose and poetry, her drawings and quasi-fictive letters as her alter ego and a means of transcending as well as critically commenting on the lack of intensity and authenticity of her surroundings.

The spirit of the bourgeoisie was, for Lasker-Schüler, a consequence of modernity and the Enlightenment gone awry. A continuing emphasis on rationality, pragmatism, autonomy and progress at the expense of the imagination, the passions, and a more immediate sense of proximity to nature and the divine characterizing pre-modern traditions had established a narrow and oppressive mode of existence that left little room for artistic, spiritual, or emotional self-expression. Furthermore, late Nineteenth Century bourgeois social and familial structures had imposed strict gender roles that confined women to a life that Virginia Woolf famously described as that of an “angel in the house.” Although Lasker-Schüler did not adhere to any feminist movement and even mocked activists seeking women’s emancipation, she transgressed all the norms imposed on her by the patriarchal environment of her youth. She was called the first hippie, was married and divorced twice and had a son whose father, she claimed, was a Greek prince. During her Berlin years she invented for herself an androgynous, shimmering persona that disturbed even some of her fellow artists and intellectuals. The female angel that repeatedly features in Lasker-Schüler’s poems is very different from Woolf’s: It is a sensuous and subversive creature, a stranger from an imaginary land, a messenger of divine inspiration and a harbinger of redemption through modernist poetry.

Else Lasker-Schüler was born in 1868 in Elberfeld, a small German city in the industrial region of Wuppertal. She was raised in a largely assimilated Jewish family belonging to the local establishment, which she left after a brief marriage to the physicist and chess player Bertold Lasker and the birth of her son, Paul, in order to join the bohemian artists’ circle of Berlin. She soon became one of its most eccentric figures. Her second marriage to Georg Lewin, the editor of the leading Expressionist journal *Der Sturm* to whom she gave the pseudonym Herwarth Walden, ended after he left her for a Swedish actress in 1911. From early on, her poetry participates in shaping the most diverse modernist styles and modes: Her first book, the poetry collection Styx (1902; “Styx”), displays a flowery *Jugendstil,* while *Der siebente Tag* (*The Seventh Day*, 1905) and Meine Wunder (*My Miracles*, 1911) are mainly written in the expressionist mode. While living in Berlin from 1894 till 1933, she published a collection of semi-fictive letters *Mein Herz, ein Liebesroman* (*My Heart, a Romance*, 1912) and several volumes of poetry. Among them, Hebräische Balladen (*Hebrew Ballads*, 1913) contains the most explicitly Jewish references. Her most famous prose volumes written in this period – *Die Nächte Tino von Bagdads* (*The Nights of Tino from Bagdhad*, 1907), *Der Prinz von Theben* ( *The Prince of Thebes*, 1914) and *Der Malik* (*The Malik*, 1919) – evoke an oriental context in the style of *The Arabian Nights*, but include indirect references to the Jewish tradition as well. Her plays *Der Wunderrabbiner von Barcelona* (*The Wonder Rabbi of Barcelona,* 1921) and especially *Arthur Aronymus und seine Väter* (*Arthur Aronymus and his Fathers*, 1932), which thematize the relationship between Jews and Christians, increasingly respond to the anti-Semitic climate in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s. Although they contain a message of hope of a possible harmony between the religions, they also convey an awareness of past hostility against the Jews and an even greater fear of a renewal of anti-Semitic violence*.* Lasker-Schüler emigrated to Zurich in 1933 after Hitler came to power, then travelled twice to Palestine. On her third trip in 1939 she was refused reentry to Switzerland and settled in Jerusalem for good. She never really felt at home there, never learned Hebrew and nostalgically longed for a Germany that no longer existed. In the last years of her life she suffered from sickness, poverty and loneliness. She died in 1945 and was buried on the Mount of Olives.

**References and further reading**

**Paratextual material**