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BOOK REVIEWS

Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet. Nili Scharf Gold. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2008. Pp. xiii, 445. \$35.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-58465-733-0.

Any reader for whom Yehuda Amichai is a cherished poet will find much to value in Nili Scharf Gold's expertly researched and rigorous biography. Far more than a conventional biographical study, *Yehuda Amichai* in fact constitutes a profoundly important scholarly corrective to which the future corpus of Amichai criticism will likely be heavily indebted. Gold proves an able archeologist of the deepest layers of Amichai's life, offering truly fascinating evidence of the poet's strategic suppression of his German birthplace and childhood in Wuerzburg, and, through meticulously close readings, vividly presents Amichai's lyrical aesthetics of camouflage and subterfuge in presenting an "Israeli" identity at pivotal moments in his career.

The young Amichai's partial effacement of his origins is hardly unique among Israeli artists, (and others of his generation). Thus, it is not unreasonable that "more than anything, Amichai wanted to be known as an authentic Hebrew, Israeli poet with local roots, whose childhood had taken place in Jerusalem during the British Mandate and whose youth had passed in preparation for...military service. In order to present himself as such a poet, he had to hide the exilic universe he carried inside him" (47). In this context, Gold anticipates complaints by those who would insist that the poems do contain evidence of Amichai's European past. She concurs that, while these vestiges are indeed present at times, they are generally "hidden by generalizations, metaphorical overabundance, hermetic language, and Israeli landscapes that blur their foreign origin....Wuerzburg only peeks out through a few scattered metaphors" (49, 50), especially in the seminal volume *Poems: 1948-1962*. In her examination of this crucial collection, Gold produces an especially rich analysis of the development of "Elegy on the Lost Child," the memorable epic work that established the poet's reputation and 'Israeliness.' For example, a line in the published Hebrew version of "Elegy" invokes the child who "hid in the stones of tomorrow's houses" whereas the earlier, German original in the archived notes reads "the child hides between the languages" (61), clearly describing the painful process of transition between cultures, languages, and identities.

At the same time, Gold believes that elsewhere (in cryptic lyrical allusions to Jerusalem as a "river-less city" or to lush forests), Amichai expresses deep, unresolved attachment to Wuerzburg's river and the nearby countryside.

Moreover, in the young poet's German notes (which Gold consulted in Yale's Beinecke Library), she discovered copious expressions of alienation, loss, vulnerability, and even a degree of nostalgia for Europe. But a 1959 visit to Wuerzburg proved a catharsis that inspired the rich sensory details that inform his novel *Not of this Time, Not of this Place* (its protagonist a fairly close surrogate for Amichai). Gold justifiably considers this work a direct confrontation with the identity his earlier verse refuses to claim. It is also a memorial to a lost Jewish world. And she also reveals myriad instances in which Amichai's *late* poems do present memorable instances of his reconciliation with his own "foreignness" (as well as his lyrical comparisons between Jewish dispossession in Germany and that of Palestinians in Israel). Yet what remains most compelling is the striking degree to which the artistic and psychological process that led to that arrival was filled with ambivalence and conflict, as even these posthumously published lines (titled simply "Wuerzburg") suggest: "Pass quickly before the place/where you were born/Travel to the places where others will be born."

Gold creates a remarkably lively portrait of pre-Holocaust Wuerzburg, where the poet spent the childhood years that he struggled later to efface in his verse and public image. From 1924-1936, Amichai was, after all, known as Ludwig Pfeuffer; accordingly Gold insists on referring to him as such whenever addressing his childhood. Thus, for the first time, many readers will come to appreciate the poet's diasporic heritage. This biographer's attention to this period proves especially invaluable in her focus on Pfeuffer's religious life—the texture of which remained intrinsic to Amichai's lyrics throughout his lifetime. And the crucial figure of Amichai's father emerges vividly, as a compassionate if authoritarian man. As Amichai once remarked of his childhood self, "he took the prayer 'our father, our King' literally: 'I reached the naïve conclusion that if you can compare God with a father, my father could also be my God'" (77). (Of course this marked ambivalence would inflect the future poetry in powerfully indelible ways.) In one utterly compelling anecdote, Gold relates how one Purim, he disguised himself as an *Ostjuden shnorer* (Eastern European Jewish beggar) seeking alms, until, consistently rebuffed by the well-to-do German Jews, he revealed his true identity and presumably shamed the community into more charitable behavior. Such vivid illustrations will enable many Amichai readers to better grasp just why the father is such a monumental presence in the poetry.

Gold is a tireless scholar and the material she unearthed is truly exceptional, including notebooks composed by Amichai (in German and Hebrew), and a cache of previously unknown letters written by Amichai to a woman identified as "Ruth Z" whom the poet once was determined to marry. One of Gold's intriguing revelations indicates that it was she who anointed the poet with his new name, Amichai or "my nation is alive" (which he initially feared was too overbearing). The author also successfully tracked down and interviewed a few individuals who knew the poet well in his childhood days in Wuerzburg. Gold also does a fine job of sorting out the relation between many of the famous love poems and actual women in the poet's life. Alongside these

crucial biographical matters, readers will appreciate the author's fresh insights into the poems themselves; surprisingly Gold makes an altogether cogent case for considering T.S. Eliot as an abiding influence on Amichai's use of imagery and mosaic structures.

Readers will be grateful for an appendix that presents the poems under discussion in their entirety (Hebrew originals with English translations). Unfortunately, *Yehuda Amichai* is a bit repetitive; there are far too many variations of Gold's pivotal assertion that "a reader who scours [the] verse for traces of the world left behind will find very few" (47). In the end, the question we must ask of a study of such breadth and complexity is not whether Gold is consistently persuasive (far too much remains speculative, as when she weakly posits that memories of the poet's childhood somehow brought him comfort on the battlefield, or her claim that whenever a European city is invoked it somehow invokes his desire for Wuerzburg), but whether her biography has *substantially* transformed the future of Amichai scholarship. The answer to that must be a triumphant "yes." For all of us, Gold has not only opened up a wondrous new terrain of previously unknown connections and influences that will deepen our enjoyment and understanding of Amichai's oeuvre. She has also dramatically expanded our awareness of the complex interplay between art, difference, and national identity in the modern Hebrew canon.

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Wolfgang Benz. *A Concise History of the Third Reich*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006. Pp. vii, 309. Cloth \$45.00. ISBN 0-520-23489-8.

Any new book on the Third Reich must begin by defending its very existence. And Wolfgang Benz begins *A Concise History of the Third Reich* with just such a justification. Addressing a complex history, a huge literature, and a period that, for better or worse, has so radically shaped Jewish identity, Benz directs this book to readers who seek "insights of historical scholarship" and "concise but reliable information" without "retracing in detail" the many hours of human toil and debate that revealed that information in the first place. This is a thankless, almost Sisyphean, task; and Benz's book displays all the pitfalls of the endeavor. And yet, Benz has succeeded where most would hardly try. His *Concise History* delivers on its promise to students and casual readers, even if those amongst the trees don't share his admirable ability to see the forest.

The true reward of Benz's endeavor lies in his style, tone and approach. His 'thick description' of historical dramas like the Reichstag Fire, the *Machtergreifung* ('assumption of power'), and *Kristallnacht* allows us to understand the mindset of those who enabled and, to some extent, participated in these fatefully tragic events. Take, for example, Benz's observation that many of