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CONTENTS

MARSHA ABRAMS
Freudian Hermeneutics 239

GREG MOGENSEN
The Psychotherapy of the Dead: Loss and Character Structure in Freud's Metapsychology 251

JANET R. HADDA
Yankev Glatshteyn: Mourning the Yiddish Language 271

DON JOHNSON
Wordsworth: The Grief Behind the Spots of Time 287

MARK J. BLECHNER
King Lear, King Leir, and Incest Wishes 309

JAMES H. LAKE
Othello and the Comforts of Love 327

ILSA J. BICK
Alien Within, *Aliens* Without: The Primal Scene and the Return to the Repressed 337

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Yankev Glatshteyn: Mourning the Yiddish Language*

Of all life experiences, separation and loss are the ultimate universals. *Feelings* of grief and associated *behaviors* of mourning come naturally and inevitably in response to this unavoidable reality. Our cultures prescribe attitudes, our religions rituals, to help cope with the suffering caused by bereavement. Ethologists report that other creatures mourn their loved ones as well. Yet the process of mourning, and its underlying psychological function, are still matters of disagreement. Moreover, the very nature of what may be mourned remains insufficiently investigated.

The American Yiddish poet Yankev Glatshteyn (1896–1971) experienced his native language in much the same way as he did human beings. Yiddish was far more to him than a vehicle of expression or even a set of vital symbols. The language was alive and independent in him, capable of change and response. It was not merely *mame-loshn,* his mother tongue, but also *tate-mame* and *bobe-loshn*—mother-father and grandmother language. It functioned as a nurturing parent in his life, and, later, as a loyal, patient lover as well.

This relationship might not have come to light except for the tragedy of Hitler's holocaust. One result of Glatshteyn's perception that his people had been decimated and his culture annihilated was his sense that Yiddish, too, had perished. Specifically, he grieved for it and displayed typical mourning behavior. In this paper, I intend to discuss eight of Glatshteyn's poems in order to show how they reveal his attachment and bereavement.

The unusual aspect of Glatshteyn's loss stems from the fact that languages do not commonly die suddenly: it takes genocide to effect such a situation. As a result of this catas-

*This paper is dedicated to the cherished memory of my beloved father, George M. Hadda, M.D., whose sudden and untimely death in January, 1984, forced me to contemplate the nature and significance of loss.

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trophic event, Glatshteyn was forced to grapple with a momentous change in his own identity. Although he had not been personally silenced, he knew that his poetic voice would be without resonance. Deprived of his sophisticated audience, he had, as well, been robbed of his connection to future generations of Yiddish speakers. An alternative might have been to seek comfort in translation, but, for Glatshteyn, this was nothing short of betrayal. Thus, there was no choice but to see Yiddish as lost to him and to respond accordingly.

The notion that mourning need not occur only in response to a living object is not new. In fact, Freud, at the outset of his seminal paper, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917) states unequivocally: "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on."[1]

The British psychoanalyst John Bowlby came to his ideas about mourning from his work with infants and their responses to separation from the mothering figure. His observations, with the help of information gleaned from animal behavior studies, led him to generalize about the larger subject of separation and subsequent mourning in adults. Perhaps the most important characteristic of Bowlby's formulation is that it arises out of the notion that the behavior of mourning is adaptive, i.e., that it has evolved to have a biological function.

Bowlby divides the mourning process into three stages: (1) Attempted recovery of the lost object, (2) Disorganization and despair, (3) Reorganization. In the first phase of mourning, the individual is still focused on the missing object. Repeated efforts are made to achieve reunion, and the bereaved person frequently employs fantasy to deny the failure of such attempts. This stage is often accompanied by anger, weeping, protest, and accusations. These natural responses of the infant to a sudden separation are designed to bring back the absent mother and also to dramatize the infant's distress so that the separation is not repeated. As manoeuvers, they are generally effective when the separation has not been caused by death. In the relatively unusual event of permanent loss, the initial reaction is the one that has, in the

past, succeeded in achieving reunion.[2] This first phase is most fully represented in Glatshteyn's poetry.

The second phase of mourning begins when weeping and protest have clearly failed to accomplish the desired end of reunion. At this point, the healthy individual gradually gives up the search and, simultaneously, withdraws focus from the lost object. As yet, however, there is no replacement for the missing loved one, and this stage of mourning is thus characterized by personality disorganization, a sense of aimlessness and lack of purpose in life, often accompanied by a reduced feeling of self-worth. The bereft person typically experiences pain and despair.

The third stage of mourning is marked by a reorganization of the personality, associated in part with the image of the lost object and in part with new connections. That is, reorganization implies both a move towards substitutions for the beloved and the maintenance of certain values and behaviors that keep the old bond alive even in the face of permanent separation.

From the beginning of his career, Yankev Glatshteyn manifested a relationship to the Yiddish language that was both loving and concrete. How else can one describe one of his very first poems, *Tirtl-toybn* ("Turtle Doves" (1919)).[3] This work about free association focuses on a single word recalled from childhood. The adult narrator finds himself thrown back to the time when, as a tiny child, he had first heard and absorbed the word *tirtl-toybn: Un s'lozt nit op,/Mit dem veykhn kneytsh fun tirtl,/Mit dem lastshendikn kneytsh* (And it [the word] doesn't let go,/With the soft fold of turtle,/With the cuddly fold). This early poem could, of course, be seen as an example of Glatshteyn's playful joy in creating, or as a way of trying to chart the child's acquisition of abstract concepts, without particular reference to the special role of language per se in his life. However, when Glatshteyn's response to the Holocaust is viewed through the prism of his ruminations about Yiddish, there can be no doubt about the latter's role in his life. Yiddish was as real to him, as vibrant, as flesh and blood.

At the earliest point of mourning, the irreparable loss is only partially conceivable. Therefore, grief alternates with dis-

belief and an optimistic fantasy that the wished-for reunion will occur. Glatshteyn's 1943 volume, *Gedenklider (Memorial Poems)* both begins and ends with a poem about the Yiddish language. Each represents an aspect of denial, where grief is countered by the idea that all is not lost. (In Glatshteyn's case at this juncture, as in the situation of an infant whose mother has disappeared, matters are complicated by the uncertainty of not yet knowing whether the object is truly gone forever).

The first poem of the volume, *S' yidishe vort* ("The Yiddish Word")[4] opens hopefully, and, with its allusion to the rod of Aaron, hints at the miraculous: *S'yidishe vort blit af a mandlshtekn* (The Yiddish word blooms on an almond staff). Since the words for Yiddish and Jewish are the same in Yiddish, at first it seems that the poem's reference could be to Hebrew rather than Yiddish. Yet, as the lines unfold, it is evident that Glatshteyn means to evoke thoughts of Eastern European Yidishkeyt: *Un yeder vort iz bazaft/ Mit bobeshaft* (And every word is juicy/With grandma-ness). The scene becomes increasingly dramatic: a desert wanderer approaches the rod, drawn as by some mysterious force; even the herbs that surround the blossoming rod possess magical properties. Specifically, they enable anyone who eats of them to perceive meaning and significance where there was none before. Above all, they cause everything to be ... *ongetrunken mit freyd/Fun bobeshaft* (... watered with the job/ Of grandma-ness).

The positive tone of *S'yidishe vort* breaks down, however, by the conclusion of the poem, as the wanderer realizes that the blossoming Jewish word is not Yiddish at all, but Hebrew. In alarm, he shouts out: *Hoy-veygeshrign,/In der midber blit a mandlshtekn* (Lo, cry out a lament,/An almond staff blooms in the desert). The poem, read without contextual consideration, suggests that the Yiddish language—even if it manages to achieve rebirth or resuscitation—will still be treated with hostility and condescension in the linguistic competition with Hebrew. As an expression of denial, it betrays the extent to which disbelief occurs within a framework of inchoate understanding even at the earliest point of loss.

Gedenklider's final poem emphasizes the predominant

characteristic of initial mourning, namely the effort at reunion. *Undzer tsikhtik loshn* ("Our Tidy Language")[5] is important in that it makes concrete, and not merely metaphorical, reference to Yiddish as an object. As such, it not only provides a contrast to *S'yidishe vort* but underscores Glatshteyn's experience of his language as equivalent to a human loved one. Here, in another Biblical allusion, Yiddish appears as a fiddle hanging mutely from a willow tree. Unlike the lyre of Psalm 137, however, which symbolized the *psychological* impossibility of joy at a time of dispersion, the fiddle is a victim of *physical* persecution. Jews are suffering by the tens of thousands:

Un s'vareme fidele yidish,
Dos farshteyendike, dos kluge,
Iz farshtumt,
Un hengt af a verbe,
Tsvishn brider-kvorim.

And the warm fiddle Yiddish,
Understanding and clever,
Is mute,
And hangs from a willow,
Amongst brother-graves.

The narrator of *Undzer tsikhtik loshn* unleashes his rage and anguish at the German people and their language. He angrily asserts that Yiddish is much too pure to be besmirched by describing Nazi crimes. People and language merge as the narrator exclaims:

Vi azoy kenen mir
Af undzer tsikhtik loshn,
Dertseyln alts vos du host mit undz tseton,
Vi du host undzer velt farloshn?
Khaleshn, khaleshn undzere verter,
Shemen, shemen zikh undzere reyd . . .

How can we, in our tidy language,
Tell all that you have perpetrated,
How you have extinguished our world?
Our words are fainting, fainting,
Our language is shamed, shamed . . .

The narrator's rage at the German language and its speakers is, of course, understandable as a moral stance. It also fits closely with the searching typical in the initial mourning phase. The bereaved person, striving to relocate the absent loved one, experiences an upsurge of aggressive feelings, often against the object itself. Irrational on the surface, this behavior is in fact a primitive attempt at tyranny, designed to ensure that the separation will never occur again. Similarly, reproaches against the self or, as in the case of *Undzer tsikhtik loshn,* against a third party, are indications of a magical formulation that, if someone is to blame, the loss can be annulled.

Glatshteyn's sentiments in *S'yidishe vort* and *Undzer tsikhtik loshn* were prophetic, and they emerged even more strongly some years later, when he knew for certain the awful fate of his people, his culture, and his language. Significantly, his 1946 volume, *Shtralndike yidn,* does not touch the subject of the lost tongue. Perhaps Glatshteyn was too stunned by the irrefutability of the truth to comment on it immediately. Then, too, he was absorbed in directly commemorating his murdered people. The more subtle realization may have needed time to fully emerge. Whatever the reason for his silence, when he resumed the struggle openly, his expression had gained clarity and energy.

The poem *An os* ("A Letter of the Alphabet") appears in Glatshteyn's 1953 volume, *Dem tatns shotn* (*My Father's Shadow*)[6]; it was not reprinted in *Fun mayn gantser mi,* Glatshteyn's 1956 volume of selected poems. While this is not a unique omission, I think its absence is significant. *An os,* unlike *Undzer tsikhtik loshn,* constitutes a complaint against Yiddish. I believe Glatshteyn wished to disavow this direct rebuke after he had reached a state of greater calm. Part of Glatshteyn's grief concerned the extent to which his playfulness with Yiddish—an essential part of his relationship to the language—would have to be curtailed, now that Yiddish represented the voice of a decimated people. His entire identity as a poet was called into question by this simple yet profound ramification.

In *An os,* the narrator, who has accepted his responsibility as a chronicler in grave times, finds himself confronted with a

recalcitrant letter. Ruefully, he berates this rebellious member of his beloved alphabet: *Host gornisht gemeynt, nor gebrent* (You meant nothing, you merely burned). The letter, much as the memory of a loved one may cause rage that the cherished person has disappeared, inspires indignation in the narrator as he tries to force it into the new position he has, of necessity, created for it. But he proves incapable of controlling the letter, and this is intolerable. It is finally preferable, he decides, to eliminate the offensive presence entirely, rather than be reminded of the past and its satisfactions:

> *Az vilst davke farblaybn symbol,*
> *An os on taytsh, vos shrekt.*
> *Kh'hob dikh oysgemekt.*
>
> All night I heard your voice,
> Insisting on remaining a symbol,
> A meaningless scary letter.
> I rubbed you out.

Buried in this poem may be an acknowledgement that a Yiddish letter, even a so-called meaningless one, can be awe-inspiring, indeed holy, like the tetragrammaton, the four Hebrew letters that stand for God's name. More prominently, the letter's evocative power emerges as a central concern. Unnerved, the narrator turns his impotent frustration onto the very thing that causes his unhappiness. It is as if he were saying: because you remind me of the joy you once provided, and because you persist in denying yourself to me, I blame you and hate you.

In the final line of *An os,* the narrator obliterates his irritating adversary, i.e., the letter that would remain meaningless. He thus allows himself a liberty denied the mourner of a living object. His motive, however, is familiar, an attempt at undoing his loss; if the power to erase is there, so is the capacity to recreate. As a peculiarly literary form of denial, the narrator echoes the sufferer's general wish not to be helpless. Reasoned anger against the one who has left suggests, furthermore, that there is a point to the desertion, that the world is still a comprehensible place.

During the initial phase of mourning, memories and fan-

tasies that stave off the brunt of sorrow need not, of course, be negative. Rather, they can grant a welcome respite, even as they prolong the realization of loss. In *Tirtl-toybn*, Glatshteyn had used a word association to recall his childhood and the strange excitement of learning about language. Now, in contrast, he laid aside his playful attitude and, like a grateful son, paid homage to Yiddish. In words of bitter-sweet warmth, he placed Yiddish at the heart of his world, coupling this devotion with a commemoration of his lost parents.

A vort ("A Word")[7] concerns itself, not with a particular word, as had been the case with *Tirtl-toybn*, but rather with the concept that any word can resonate with personal meaning. The narrator emphasizes explicitly that he is not concerned with identifying the word; what counts for him is the link between the word and the security of his childhood, when his father had stood over him in *kheyder* and his mother had greeted him with cheerful responsiveness. What is more, the narrator assumes that the connection is obvious:

Ir vet es ale derkenen
Un ir vet zikh zetsn varemen
Arum dem likhtikn vort,
Vos glit mit ershter, bazorgter freyd fun tatn
Mit der koym-antveynter
Varemkeyt fun der mamen.

You will recognize it
And you will sit down to warm yourselves
Around the bright word,
Which glows with the first, concerned joy of father
With the barely cried-out
Warmth of mother.

Once more language has taken on a life of its own, independent of its users. Here, however, it plays a salutory role, allowing Glatshteyn to revivify, not only the word itself but, through it, his parents as well. He thus manages, temporarily, to block out not only the demise of Yiddish, but, simultaneously, the reason behind this tragedy: the murder of its speakers. Additionally, through his connection of the word with manna, he implies that it is capable of nourishing a generation

that must wander in the desert. Given the actual fate of Eastern European Jewry, the image acquires an ironic undercurrent, again revealing that all attempts to deny loss must ultimately, in the healthy individual, yield to unhappy recognition.

The line between language as representative of something else and language as representative of itself is certainly thin and often elusive. Yet, if Glatshteyn's discussion of Yiddish in *A vort* allows for an interplay between the word and those who hear and speak it, *Mayn tate-mame shprakh* ("My Parent Language")[8] focuses distinctly on the language itself, forming its speakers into vehicles, albeit beloved ones. The narrator explains that, for him, the workaday, weekly flavor of Yiddish is holy, unifying and sanctifying everything around him. He needs it in order to accomplish his work of memory:

Bist mir nisht bloyz keyn muter-shprakh fun vigl,
Nor der zigl fun ale mayne gedekhenishn.

You are not only a mother tongue to me,
A language of my cradle days,
But rather the seal of all my recollections.

What the narrator remembers is the lively and beautiful world of his irretrievable past. Without Yiddish, he is incapable of describing his treasure. This would be enough to certify its significance. Yet the narrator of *Mayn tate-mame shprakh* wants to say more. Playing on the term *mame-loshn* (mother tongue), he firmly equates the language with his parents. The narrator addresses Yiddish, much as he had done in *An os*. For him, Yiddish is not an abstraction, but rather a definite being, possessing an existence quite apart from its articulation, even though this existence may be intangible:

Dos gantse malkhes khsidish
Bistu geven, mayn tate-mame yidish.
Host zikh azoy prost gezogt mit dem baal shem,
Bist geven der eydeler khaver
Fun dem farbenktn bratslaver.

The whole kingdom of Hasidism
That was you, my father-mother Yiddish.
You spoke yourself so simply with the Baal Shem,

You were the refined friend
Of the yearning Bratslaver.

Here, then, as in *A vort*, the narrator finds himself renewing his beloved Yiddish by remembering how it lived in the mouths of people who themselves have died. At the same time, *Mayn tate-mame shprakh* introduces a paradox because of the directness of its reference. Although Glatshteyn was clearly experiencing grief over the fate of Yiddish and exhibiting mourning responses, he was at the same time keeping the language alive through his use of it. Thus, when the narrator must, as always, admit that his good spirits are a protection against misery, he reveals that his mother's prayer, recited at the conclusion of every Sabbath, had provided him with the solace of Yiddish. Here, Glatshteyn does the impossible: he uses Yiddish to describe how the language comforts him even as he is suffering from its loss.

Although the strangeness of Glatshteyn's position does not precisely parallel what happens in human bereavement, it is similar to the phenomenon that Colin Murray Parkes describes as *finding:* "That 'searching' and 'finding' go together is not surprising. A 'sense of the continued presence of the deceased,' 'a clear visual memory of him,' and 'preoccupation with thoughts of him' . . . which have been referred to as components of searching, are also components of finding."[9] That is, a part of the first phase of mourning consists of a wish fulfillment that the lost object has been found. To the extent that Yiddish, lacking corporeal mortality, could "live" on, Glatshteyn's form of finding was more real. Yet, despite the objective continued existence of the Yiddish language, Glatshteyn was unable to elude the knowledge that his subjective Yiddish was gone, never to return.

As anyone who has observed or experienced bereavement will know, Bowlby's three phases must be seen as a continuum of responses, occurring at times almost simultaneously and subject to the forces of regression. Thus, the depression and despair that characterize the second phase of mourning may be glimpsed even in Glatshteyn's most powerful attempts at cheer. Nonetheless, there is an obvious distinction between the undercurrent of gloom in a poem such as *A*

vort, and the sheer anguish of a work like *Etlekhe shures* ("A Few Lines").

The depression of which Bowlby speaks occurs when the mourner has finally begun to realize that the separation is permanent and hence slowly abandons the search for reconnection. The abject unhappiness of this phase is often exacerbated by restlessness, agitation, sometimes a feeling of worthlessness, as the bereaved person hangs suspended, consciously bereft of the coveted lost object but as yet without a substitute. This is Glatshteyn's mood in *Etlekhe shures,* which appears in the 1961 volume intriguingly entitled *Di freyd fun yidishn vort* (*The Joy of the Yiddish Word*).[10] The narrator is anything but joyful as he describes the loss of his own poetry:

> *Etlekhe tsiterdike shures af der dlonye.*
> *Kh'hob zey lang gehaltn*
> *Un gelozt durkhrinen durkh di finger—*
> *Vertervayz.*
>
> A few trembling lines in my palm.
> I held them long
> And let them run through my fingers—
> Word by word.

Two aspects of this poem stand out. First is the striking concreteness of the imagery. The narrator is not addressing the language this time, yet the sense of independence and physicality remains evident. Nowhere has the experience of loss been so clearly articulated. That is, despite all efforts to maintain his language—his *poetic* language in this case—the narrator has failed and the lines, word by word, have dissipated. The second important new aspect of this poem is the somber hopelessness of the narrative voice. There is no anger, no manic defense against depression; in place of these is simple resignation. And, as the poem continues, it becomes unambiguously clear that this loss has cost the narrator his self-esteem. He admits to isolation, recognizing his position of weakness. He begs not to be cast away as wretched. This plea is repeated twice, thereby intensifying the terror implicit in the words themselves. The poem ends on that plaintive request:

Di eynzamkeyt past mir vi an altmodish nakhthemd.
Varf mikh nit avek,
In mayn geplefter shrek.

Loneliness fits me like an old-fashioned nightshirt.
Don't throw me away,
In my bewildered fear.

Now the anxiety hinted at earlier in *An os* has become clear: the loss of language threatens not only the narrator's equilibrium but his very existence. If he has been cut off from the source of his sense of self, then who and what good is he? Gone is the luxury of choosing sober meaning over youthful frivolity. All is lost. As the narrator of *Shoyn bald* ("Soon Now") laments:

. . . in der tunkl farfasn
Mir blitsreyd vos vern farloshn.
Un ash vert zeyer meyn.
Un ash vert zeyer meyn.

. . . in the dark we compose
Lightning speech which is extinguished.
And its meaning turns to ashes.
Its meaning turns to ashes.[11]

It would seem ironic that these sad statements occur side by side with a five-part poem entitled *Di freyd fun yidishn vort* ("The Joy of the Yiddish Word")[12], for which the entire volume is named. Closer inspection, however, betrays the irony of the title itself, for the work actually concerns the unhappy fate of Yiddish. The pressure to reach the broadest possible audience through his writing, an issue that clearly troubled and offended Glatshteyn, once again attains prominence here. The narrator fears that even if Yiddish could be resurrected in a linguistic Valley of the Dry Bones, even if its old essence of joyous meaninglessness were somehow molded anew, the outcome would be hopeless because the surrounding milieu would be as demanding of easy comprehensibility as before. Therefore, his unique capacity to approach the core of Yiddish would remain unappreciated, unwanted.

The theme of a changed, unrecognizable Yiddish goes

hand in hand with Glatshteyn's perception of the language as dead. The personal linguistic possession that had sustained and gratified him as long as he could recall had disappeared. What remained in its place may have resembled Yiddish to the unpracticed or uninterested ear and mind, but it was merely a shadow of the original treasure.

In addition to familiar ideas, however, *Di freyd fun yidishn vort* raises a new and poignant worry: what if the beloved be forgotten? In a kind of dream vision, the narrator begs to be granted access to the joy of the Yiddish word. He doesn't care how much he suffers materially, just as long as he has full and uninterrupted time with a Yiddish that here, more than ever, resembles a person, indeed a lover; the narrator begs: *Lozt mikh nisht dos yidishe vort/Af a rege fargesn* (Don't let me forget the Yiddish word/For a moment). He reminds himself that he has neglected his love.

Directly after this, the narrative voice shifts, and the narrator addresses himself as *du* (you), using the familiar form in Yiddish, rather than the less intimate *ir*. It is almost as if he had shocked himself by the possibility that he might forget. In his feverish dream, he reviews his lover's faithfulness:

> *Dos yidishe vort vart af dir getray un shtum.*
> *Un du ziftst in getsundenem kholem:*
> *Ikh kum, ikh kum.*

> The Yiddish word waits for you, loyal and mute.
> And you sigh in your ignited dream:
> I'm on my way, I'm on my way.

At the conclusion of the poem, the narrator has awakened from his dream and resumed daily life. Yet the experience of the night does not leave him. He ponders his adored language with mixed emotions and says, perhaps to himself as well as to it: *O, zay gezunt, zay gezunt./Nit farlir mikh, zukh mikh op* (Oh, be well, be well./Don't lose me, search me out). The wish to recover Yiddish, to be reunited with it, has a new purpose. Previously, it had signified the struggle to overcome separation, to fill excruciating emptiness. *Di freyd fun yidishn vort* accepts the loss as permanent and inevitable. Now the concern is how to keep the love alive while new possibilities

for attachment intrude. At stake is Glatshteyn's ability to work through the third stage of mourning.

After the despair and disorganization that accompany the gradual relinquishing of any hopes for reunion, the individual who mourns confronts a dual challenge. Those connections to the lost object that no longer bear fruit must be surrendered; others may safely be maintained internally, including goals, values and the confidence of having been loved and well-regarded. Such psychological equipment facilitates the building of a new bond, one that emerges from the prior relationship yet allows the individual to face present and future realities. In the instance of Glatshteyn and his tie to Yiddish, the effort involved reestablishing his original energetic and playful interaction with the language even while recognizing that he might be doing so only for himself. In other words, he had to come to grips with the fact that his personal Yiddish could flourish within him even if the outside world no longer perceived it.

Glatshteyn's final volume of poetry, *Gezangen fun rekhts tsu links* (*Songs from Right to Left*), published shortly before his death in 1971, reveals a man who was attempting with all his might to achieve resolution and peace. While he did not succeed entirely in this aim, he was able to reconcile himself with respect to his cherished Yiddish. The poem *Gebentsht zol zayn* ("Be blessed")[13] harks back to some of Glatshteyn's earlier work, but at the same time it delineates a fresh perspective.

The narrator begins with a familiar complaint: the perversion of languages as their speakers fall into moral decline. In the modern world, there is no room for honest words. Unlike other works, however, where the emotional content had expressed anger, despair, or the fear of annihilation, the tone of this poem is calm, celebratory, secure:

Iz gebentsht zol zayn undzer bobe yidish
Di nit-geredte, di nit geleyente,
Di nit farumreynte.
In gerateveter genize,

So may our grandmother Yiddish be blessed.
Unspoken, unread,
In a rescued geniza
Uncontaminated.

Gone is the lament for a dying Yiddish; gone, too, the almost desperate need to prove that the aged and ageless "grandma" quality of Yiddish both should and will survive. In its place is the placid acceptance of an inviolable tongue—earthy, warm, rich and pure in tradition, free of intellectual pretention.

The narrator elucidates his relationship with the unspoken, unread language:

> *Mir, di pleytim fun undzere kinds-kinder*
> *Trogn a gedekhenish vi a bashertn yokh.*
> *Keyn leftsn konen nisht metame zayn*
> *Undzere yidishe reyd . . .*
>
> We, the refugees of our descendents
> Carry a memory like a predestined burden.
> No lips can defile
> Our Yiddish speech . . .

Clearly, the language is internal, its roots in recollection. Still, the narrator feels that his general experience is understood by others, even if they cannot know the specific nature of his bond. Much like someone remembering a beloved person in the company of friends, he takes comfort in the shared acquaintance; the fact that each person remembers different things, and remembers them differently, is a given that enhances, rather than diminishes, the sense of individual memory.

The narrator speaks of a predestined burden. In creating this image, he acknowledges both the difficulty of maintaining an unchanging, internalized connection and his willingness to renounce his protest, to accept his loss as natural.

The most convincing evidence that Glatshteyn had achieved a point where Yiddish, once perceived as lost, could live anew within him is found, not in something he wrote, but rather in something he did: at the end of this, his final volume of poetry, he reprinted the first three poems of his career, including *Tirtl-toybn.*[14] Thus he reasserted the vitality and wit of his original bond with Yiddish. I used to feel that his inclusion of these poems was a rather sad admission by Glatshteyn that he would have no literary heirs, that he would have to look back upon his work himself, alone and

defeated. There is ample evidence for that interpretation. Now, however, I suggest a second, perhaps contradictory thought. Glatshteyn understood that the language as he had known and reveled in it, was gone forever. Yet he had absorbed its existence within himself and, flying in the face of external reality, he presented the world once again with his beloved Yiddish. The paradox is that, like anyone who has learned to know a person through the memories of others, we feel Glatshteyn's living language and are enriched.

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Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), Vol. XIV, p. 243.
2. See John Bowlby, "Process of Mourning," *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, XLII, Parts 4–5, 1961:317–340.
3. This poem first appeared in the Yiddish literary journal, *Poezye* (June, 1919), pp. 5–6.
4. Yankev Glatshteyn, *Gedenklider* (New York: Farlag Yidisher Kemfer, 1943), pp. 5–6. Hereafter cited as *Gedenklider*.
5. *Gedenklider, pp. 82–84.*
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