

## YIDDISH WOMEN POETS: A MOVEMENT APART?

Venerated to absurdity, assaulted with a venom that testifies obliquely to her continuing moral and emotional power, the immigrant mother cut her path through the perils and entanglements of American life. Everyone spoke about her, against her, to her, but she herself has left no word to prosperity, certainly none in her own voice, perhaps because all the talk about her "role" seemed to her finally trivial, the indulgence of those who had escaped life's primal tasks. Talk was a luxury that her labor would enable her sons to taste.

World of our Fathers, Irving Howe.<sup>1</sup>

Yiddish Poetry, so it has been said, was "not the the world of 'our fathers' but the world of their sons."<sup>2</sup> These were young men who gathered in cafeterias on the Lower East Side, where they conducted literary debates reminiscent of Talmudic disputations from the Yeshiva world of Eastern Europe, in which their fathers had <sup>previously</sup> priorly-? engaged. They were indeed writers "who cannot stand and pray, that is, create, in the middle of the street, but who must have for their literary minyan a special corner, a literary shul, an artistic 'mokem koydesh' [holy place]."<sup>3</sup> In agreement with Ruth

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Howe, World of our Fathers, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, N.Y., 1976, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> American Yiddish Poetry. A Bilingual Anthology, ed. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, Uni. of California Press, 1986, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Shmuel Niger quoted in Ruth R. Wisse, A Little Love in Big Manhattan, Harvard Uni. Press, Camb., 1988, p. 4.

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Wise, "Such use of traditional vocabulary to describe their modern situation, intended by the writers to place ironic distance between themselves and their past, reveals how much of the past still clung to them."<sup>4</sup>

However problematic the relationship of these sons was to tradition, it was nothing in comparison to that with which Yiddish women poets had to wrestle. Paradigmatic of this painful struggle is Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's retelling of the Snow White fairytale. Herein, the Wicked Queen has been recast as a doomed feminist heroine, rebelling against the constraints of the [mostly invisible] patriarchal king. The story of the woman poet or writer is the story of how the Queen, "a plotter, and artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily and self-absorbed as artists traditionally are", seeks to kill her passive, beautiful enemy by "the traditionally female arts of tight lacing, cosmetology and cuisine, but her three 'plots' succeed only in transforming her rival into the eternally beautiful, intimate object d'art preserved in the glass coffin of patriarchal aesthetics", while the artist herself ends up by acting out a death-dance in red-hot shoes, condemned under patriarchy to monstrosity and self-destruction. Alas, she is "The Madwoman in the Attic".<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination, Yale Uni. Press, Conn., 1979, pp. 38-9.

The insistence of Gilbert and Gubar's allegory, being that women artists need to establish their own autonomous self-definition- for "Before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them, they must escape just those male texts which, defining them as "Cyphers", deny them the authority to formulate alternatives to an authority which has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen." -, is radically different from the burden of appeal to be found in both Romain Rolland's "A L'Antigone éternelle" of 1916, and Aaron Glantz-Leyeles "Kultur un di froy" [Culture and Woman], of the preceding year. "For Romain Rolland, as for Sophocles' Teiresias, but on a far vaster scale, the nakedness of the dead between the barbed wires meant an outrage not only against humanity, but against the cosmic order. More specifically, it signified the collapse of masculine ideals and masculine domination in a world gone mad. Only women could now rescue mankind from man... 'Be living peace in the midst of war- everlasting Antigone, who does not yield herself to hatred, who when they suffer, no longer knows how to distinguish between her rival brothers.'"<sup>6</sup>

Although Glantz-Leyeles also called upon women to "begin to create in her own sphere; she must stop imitating Man", in doing so, he relies on a conventional sexual metaphor of male impotence and

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<sup>6</sup> George Steiner, Antigones, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1986, pp. 141-2.

infertility pitted against "the concreteness of motherhood as a model for intuition and the generosity of creation". Even more constricting, his rallying of women to originality and independence is all, ultimately, to be in the service of men: "Women's poetry will create a new world and become a blessing for men."<sup>7</sup> It is within their potential, asserted Sh. Niger, picking up from where Glantz himself left off, to "contribute a necessary femininity, a softness and gentleness to counteract the harshness of the war years."<sup>8</sup> According to Gilbert and Gubar, however, so long as women artists harken to such calls as those from either Rolland, Glantz-Leyeles or Niger, their place will, specifically, be that of a "No Man's Land".<sup>9</sup> *A wonderful way of tying together the feminist argument with World War I apocalypticism. Unlike Hellerstein, you know the significance of a date when you see one.*

The tensions felt by the women poets towards tradition and rebellion is strongly expressed in their poetry. In Celia Dropkin's poetry, one can feel, "פּוֹרְקֵן יְבִרְקֵן יְבִרְקֵן יְבִרְקֵן", the dichotomy between anticipated freedom and the fear of its consequences. In one poem, she is "a circus dancer", who whirls nimbly and lithely between daggers. Tired of playing safe before her audience, though proud too of her own dexterity, she

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<sup>7</sup> A. Glantz-Leyeles, quoted in Kathryn Hellerstein, "A Question of Tradition: Women Poets in Yiddish", in Handbook of American-Jewish Literature. An Analytical Guide to Topics, Themes, and Sources, ed. by Lewis Fried, Greenwood Press, N.Y., 1988, p. 205.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar, No Man's Land. The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century, Yale Uni. Press, Conn, 1989.



times. Although most of this was far from anything even remotely akin to traditional Jewish spirituality, originality was still one thing 'she' certainly neither prized nor attained then.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, we find in "Yorn" that women are a metaphor for the disillusionment of passing, wasted years:

And they were also like actors  
Who mouth Hamlet half-heartedly for the market,  
Like noblemen in a proud country  
Who seize rebellion by the nape.

To quote Katheryn Hellerstein on precisely this poem, "Through nouns imported into Yiddish from English and Spanish, 'aktyorn' [actors] and 'gransinyorn' [noblemen], Margolin depicts the passing of 'yorn' by calling forth the traditions of Western Europe, in which Shakespeare and nobility figure allusively. In the first two stanzas, the years are personified as having been like sensual, insatiable women; like high-class actors playing Hamlet half-heartedly in appropriately low places; like noblemen who easily quell rebellion by force. This string of similes escalates the degree of power possessed by the passing of years, from the private realm of love to the public demonstrations of drama and politics, from the female to the male." [my emphases]<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, this woman poet said, in her own epitaph, that she had been merely statuesque, one of those kinds of statues "with the cold marble breast"; someone who had devotedly guarded with hollow, bare hands her own individual, and inspirational fire, that is the [Jewish]

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>14</sup> Hellerstein, p. 220.

spirit which had been entrusted to her, and in which she burned, only at the point of death.

Equally striking is Rokhl Korn's poem "בְּיָמַי בָּרַח הַיְיָ מִפִּי" , although one might hardly suspect this from Seymour Levitan's 'innocent' translation of it! According to his desexualized rendition, it is because "Every part of me has died an early death, / my head is bowed in mourning to the ground.", which explains the narrator's failure to respond to G-d's call for creativity. For sure, this is one possible understanding, but the word "Eyver"- limb or part of the body- can also mean, more specifically, the penis, and the "in mir" from that same line of the poem could literally refer to the male sexual organ entering inside the woman's body. This would in fact make more sense of the poem, when it is taken as a whole. For the poem on her lips is, after all, first described in a sexual, reproductive metaphor, "וְהָיָה כִּי יִשָּׁק" ,

"וְהָיָה כִּי יִשָּׁק" . Even more explicit is the final metaphor of fertility or- as the case in point here is- of infertility: it is in her hand that the piece of paper withers, not only like a fruit, but "עַל־רַגְלֵי־יְהוָה", in the manner of a barren woman. Finally, the underlying message of the poem becomes clearer in the closing line: so long as the poet conceives of herself as writing poetry in terms of a sexual partnership, in which the she poet can be creative only with the help of a man,\* she will feel estranged from the true sources of her talent, and so continue to have cause for

\* Perhaps it's even more complicated in that not only "God" but even "3'f" is masculine, at least as it's referred to in lines 4-5.

feeling much shame.<sup>15</sup>

The poems of Kadia Molodowsky, it has been well noted, voice the difficulty of escaping old models of womanhood, and the need to find new concepts of self.<sup>16</sup> The words of her grandmothers, who recite 'tkhines', both goaded her to rebel and escape, and bound her within the fold of tradition:

I will go meet the grandmothers, saying:  
Your sighs were the whips that lashed me  
and drove my young life to the threshold  
to escape from your kosher beds.  
But wherever the street grows dark you pursue me-  
wherever a shadow falls.

Your whimperings race like the autumn wind past me,  
and your words are the silken cord  
still binding my thoughts.

And, climatically, comes the uneasy settlement whereby "My life is a paged ripped out of a holy book/ and part of the first line is missing." So slenderly and tentatively reunited are the past and the present.<sup>17</sup>

Ambivalences certainly abound, which makes it all that more difficult to know where to place women poets. As an interesting example, for the purpose of comparison, there is the reception, or

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<sup>15</sup> PBMV, pp. 526-7.

<sup>16</sup> see Norma Fain Pratt, "Culture and Radical Politics: Yiddish Women Writers, 1890-1940", in American Jewish History, 70, 1980-1, no. 1, p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, ed. by Howe and Greenberg, Schocken Books, N.Y., 1976, p. 285.



rather non-reception, which has been accorded to women poets in the canonization of the so-called "Auden generation" of British poets. Robin Skelton, in his Penguin anthology, has defined the Poetry of the 1930s as illustrative of a particular generation of middle-class intellectuals personally and emotionally preoccupied with their relationship to public, political crises, including, in particular, the historic trauma of the Great War, and the rise of fascism. Amongst these, only one woman poet, Anne Ridler, is included, whilst the introductory essay simply mentions Edith Sitwell as the butt of the progressive literary views. This absence of women from the record can not, however, be matched by a corresponding absence of qualifying material. Moreover, all of the women artists who responded, be it in prose or poetry- for Skelton does discuss parallel prose writing- to the social and political issues of the Thirties in a related fashion, shared the same social background and standing as members of a fairly homogenous upper middle-class. They, therefore, not only belonged to the same literary culture, but they also lived through the same history.<sup>18</sup>

Editors of Yiddish poetry anthologies have been similarly troubled by "the woman question". Joseph Leftwich has, for instance, introduced his anthology with a half-hearted apology: "There is, too, the woman's note, which though I am not even now altogether sure that I did right in taking Rachel Levin out of the Soviet group or Rahel Korn out of the Galician group, or depriving the

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<sup>18</sup> R. Skelton, Poetry of the Thirties, Penguin, London, 1964.

London section of Malke Locker's work... and the Polish of Kadia Maladowsky's, seems to me, however, sufficiently distinctively feminine to justify grouping them all together in a separate section."<sup>19</sup> The particular difficulty in which Leftwich finds himself stems, however, rather from his more fundamental, overall problem of organising so many Yiddish poets purely on a regional basis. Albeit, the problem of where to place the women poets remains.

Only one anthology has as yet been published which devotes itself exclusively to women poets, and this is Ezra Korman's Yidishe dikhterins: antologye [Yiddish Women Poets: Anthology]. In his introduction to this collection, which includes women's poetry spanning the years 1586-1927, Korman rejects the idea of a continuous poetic tradition between the women poets of the early and later periods, but, nonetheless sees a line of influence. Although this is indeed a subtle, and tricky distinction to draw, and even more so to maintain, it is an interpretation which has met with the considered approval of Kathryn Hellerstein. Speaking expressly as a literary critic, Hellerstein acknowledges the great diversity in women's modern Yiddish poetry, and the allegiance of certain individuals to poetic movements or groups- for example, the first issue of the "In Zich" journal opens with two of Celia Dropkin's poems, while Fradl Shtok was strongly influenced by the

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<sup>19</sup> The Golden Peacock. An Anthology of Yiddish Poetry, ed. by J. Leftwich, Sci-art Publishers, Harvard Square, Camb., 1939, pp. xxxix-xl.

ideology of the "Yunge" poets- but at the same time, argues in favour of "a separate tradition of women's poetry within the larger tradition of Yiddish literature." [my emphasis]<sup>20</sup> Thus already, Korman's differentiation has been discarded and lost.

right  
you  
are!

Far more persuasive, even though <sup>also</sup> somewhat paradoxical, is the socio-historical perspective of Norma Fain Pratt. For, according to her analysis, women writers were, on the one hand, undoubtedly, isolated: "There was little comradeship among women writers, in sharp contrast to the long term friendships and the intimate groups created by male writers. Women were only marginally tolerated in these circles." On the other hand, however, women poets considered themselves, and indeed were, radical Jewish intellectuals. And, "In general", as Norma Fain Pratt has explained, "radical Jews did not feel secure in their newfound homeland in the 1920's. Political radicalism itself was under attack from the American government during the Red Scare. The radical movement was split into warring factions, and there was the added fear of anti-Semitism. These problems, faced by women as well as men, exacted a certain measure of solidarity." [my emphasis]<sup>21</sup>

It is true that Hellerstein does make more than a passing reference to the importance of the poetic response to history: "It is no accident that the poem [ie. "Yorn"] ends on the question of belief

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<sup>20</sup> Hellerstein, p. 222.

<sup>21</sup> Pratt, p. 82. - Yes, but she grossly overstates the negative response to Yiddish women poets in order to make them the most martyred amongst the alienated, persecuted radical Yiddish poets. I find her treatment the most tendentious of all. Cf. her piece on Anna Margolin. You would think from that that only women suffered from unemployment and material deprivation in the 1930s!

in God, for the poem is written in a Yiddish voice, which is a voice of Judaism in the uncertainty of modern history." Why it should necessarily follow that "That doubting, Yiddish voicing of Judaism is, by nature, undeniably and implicitly female." is, however, far less easy to fathom out.<sup>22</sup> Quite the contrary, so it would seem, for, as with our example of the Auden Generation of the Thirties, the forces of history and social solidarity well overcome the construct of gender. Considerably preferable- though still not ideal!- is, therefore, the decision made respectively by the editors of both A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, and The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse to intersperse women poets amongst their fellow male poets either on ideological, geographic or/and chronological grounds; that is, the decision to welcome belatedly those women poets to join the poetic 'minyan'.

It checks all the boxes of Yiddish 1938.

One could perhaps imagine an anthology of modern Yiddish poetry even more closely constructed upon the basis of responses to historical phenomena, developments and experiences, including, for example, proletarianisation, urbanization, immigration, war, revolution, fascism and persecution/destruction. Naturally, such an anthology would turn out highly selective, and in certain respects, of a quite limited nature, but certainly no more so than any other anthology. The question which we perhaps need to ask ourselves here is, however, how women poets would fare in such an ordering. Although a brief listing is hardly an adequate answer,

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<sup>22</sup> Hellerstein, p. 221.

with Roza Goldshteyn cited as one of the "labour poets"; Anna Rappaport as "the first woman social poet" who gave poetic expression to the painful plight of the immigrant Jewish woman, suffering under the yoke of an industrial milieu; Zelda Knizshik, who sang of homelessness and loneliness; Hannah Levin, who may have written of conflicting loyalties to her Soviet land and revolution, and to her role as a mother and wife, in "Lenin's Portrait", but who ultimately fell under the indiscriminating hand of Soviet history when she perished in the Soviet purge of Yiddish writers in 1948; and Kadia Molodowsky who gave poetic treatment to political issues <sup>(ot)</sup> the thirties, like the Spanish Civil War in "Tsu di voluntirn in shpanye", it certainly provides ample "food for thought", positive indication that such an anthology may yet prove a worthwhile undertaking. All well and good, but isn't this a form of tokenism, especially when you discover that these social-political poems by women are aesthetically inferior to those by men? That is why I began with JJA Se, for which I needed to make no apologies. This suggested anthology may help, furthermore, to redress certain unfortunate imbalances. As Professor Roskies has written in the introduction to his anthology, "one omission needs to be explained. Jewish women play a marginal role in this anthology because, until the modern period, they had little opportunity to contribute to the Literature of Destruction... The Literature of Destruction is a male creation... Even in the modern period, when women took an increasingly active role in Jewish political life, they tended as writers to stay away from this traditionally male domain."<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>23</sup> The Literature of Destruction. Jewish Responses to Catastrophe, ed. by D. Roskies, JPS, Philadelphia, 1988, pp. 11-12.

rare and fine exceptions deserve, however, to be included. Kadia Molodovsky's "God of Mercy" is, for instance, a response to Jewish catastrophe which could fittingly be placed side by side with, lets say, Jacob Gladstein's "Genesis" [or Uri Zvi Greenberg's "To God in Europe", as indeed it is in Roskies' anthology]. \*

On a final note of even greater wishful thinking and planning, in our recommended anthology could well stand comparable historical responses, written in various other languages. Take, for a further example, the Jewish lesbian poet, Irena Klepfisz' prose poem, "Bashert", which is a passionate and successful effort not only to imagine but to work out the meaning of the destruction of European Jews, which is also her own personal history. So successful, in fact, is Klepfisz in drawing her reader into her vision of lives destroyed that one can easily fail to notice how all the people in her poem are women. Our attention is focused on their tragedy and endurance, not on their gender.<sup>24</sup> Thus, we can conclude on a note of agreement with Jan Montefiore that,

The most coherent and satisfying version of a woman's tradition, then, is the reconstruction through poems of women's past, whether actual as in 'Bashert' or semi-mythical as in Audre Lorde's Dahomey poems, Judy Grahn's 'She Who' sequence, or Adrienne Rich's evocations of American history. Conversely, ...the notion of woman's tradition is difficult because it seems to demand that women's poetry be conceived purely in its own terms. This demand proves unrealistic, partly because of its implied essentialism, partly because when women's poems are closely examined, it usually appears that

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<sup>24</sup> I. Klepfisz, Keeper of Accounts, Persephone Press, Mass., 1982.

\* Sorry about this - but the one <sup>14</sup> eg. I happen to chose would be in your anthology, wouldn't it?! I've chosen to leave this paragraph in tho' because I still think the underlying point holds. Also, I've not the luxury of time to look for a similarly suitable eg.

women poets are engaged with patriarchal tradition,  
if only by way of opposing it.<sup>25</sup>

In their engagement with history then, Yiddish women poets need  
certainly not be considered or treated as a "~~case~~<sup>movement</sup> apart".

Absolutely, but there will perforce be a difference of perspective  
on the same historical events: British nurses working behind the lines  
vs. men dying in the trenches. To the extent that the Jewish response  
to catastrophe is collective and archetypal, those differences tend to  
evaporate, which is why Rachel Amerbach's "Tiekor 1913" is  
the most powerful lament ever written for the Jews of Warsaw and  
why Kediz Molodowsky's "God" is no compromised no Glatstein's.

In the sociology of Yiddish, furthermore, there is still a question in  
my mind as to whether the men ever kidnaped the language for their  
own ends or whether they forever labored under the stigma of its being  
a mere "פֿוֹרעם-וועלט" (foreign world). A more nuanced study of the male poets  
might reveal the prolonged and welcome feminization of Yiddish high  
culture.

(A)

Could I have a copy for my files?

P.S. Now that we've established that Molodowsky's *oyf di Cherevputz* was  
written in response to the same pogrom described in Teller's *1363 p"n*  
it would be worth exploring the differences on gender grounds, if possible.

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<sup>25</sup> J. Montefiore, Feminism and Poetry. Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing, Pandora Press, N.Y., 1987, pp. 95-6.