

Alan Mintz

From: Norris Pope [npope@stanford.edu]
Sent: Friday, March 05, 2010 6:09 PM
To: Alan Mintz
Cc: Szipperstein@aol.com; rodrigue@stanford.edu
Subject: external report

Dear Alan,

Our external report on your manuscript has arrived, and I'll paste it in below.

You'll see at once that the reader has a very high regard for the project and for your work. Congratulations are clearly in order. But the reader also has some suggestions for reorganizing the material, in the hope of making the book of broader interest and significance.

Once you've had a chance to ponder the reader's thoughts, please let me know your reaction.

Meanwhile, I'm sending a copy of this message also to Steve and Aron, in case they have any thoughts about the reader's suggestions.

With all best wishes,
Norris

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Comments on Mintz manuscript

I would like to thank Stanford University Press for forwarding me *Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry* for review. I would like to say at the outset that this book, which in some circles has been eagerly awaited for some time now, makes an unquestionably original, often inspired, contribution to the study of Hebrew literature and modern Jewish culture more broadly. It presents a much-needed corrective to standard histories of Hebrew literature, shedding light on a body of work that has gone almost entirely unnoticed. A good deal of original research has gone into its preparation, and Mintz's philological rigor is put to admirable use throughout. There is no question that the book will be a touchstone for future work on American Hebrew literature; indeed, it will quite possibly affect the ways Hebrew and American Jewish literature will be conceived and written about from now on. The book is filled with fascinating insights into the poetry of an assortment of devoted, somewhat quixotic, and often highly skilled poets, who come alive in this book as complex characters living out a peculiar sort of fate. It is strengthened, furthermore, by a clearly stated set of claims about how American Hebrew poetry differs from Hebrew poetry written in Europe previously and in Eretz Yisrael contemporaneously. The book tells the story, in short, of a branch of the tree of modern Jewish culture that proves, upon inspection, to be remarkably interesting. There is little doubt in my mind that Stanford University Press should publish the book and, incidentally, make every effort to include images such as portraits of the poets, pictures of some of the locations, and pictures of book jackets, and literary journals and magazines.

Having recommended publication in these unequivocal terms, I would like to raise a number of rather serious concerns about the structure and methodology of the book; about its tacit (and, in the epilogue, explicit) ideological investments; and about some of its omissions. The book could be published more or less as is, but I feel it could be considerably strengthened by a number of revisions. Some of the revisions I will suggest may make the book

more "user friendly"; others may help to flesh out what I consider the book's most interesting insights; others may help the book address the concerns of readers whose primary interests lie in fields beyond Hebrew literature, including American Jewish history and Yiddish literature.

These sorts of readers will no doubt be as fascinated by the story Mintz has to tell as I am, but they will also want to see more connections made between American Hebrew poetry and other forms of Jewish literary and cultural expression. I also believe that such readers will also be impatient with the sort of extended close readings the manuscript luxuriates in. What I offer below, then, are my own suggestions, after considerably thought, about how the book might fulfill its promise.

1. Structure

To begin with the book's subtitle, I confess to being somewhat uncertain about what Mintz really means by "A Critical Introduction." What are the parameters of such a genre after all? It would seem that a critical introduction would lay out the biographies and bibliographies of the main figures while making the kind of aesthetic judgments necessary to orient a newcomer to the field. Given the extensive close readings, sometimes running more than ten pages, including detailed philological discussion, this subtitle seems misleading here. More, it seems disingenuous since the book is actually quite invested in a number of forceful arguments.

For better or for worse and in spite of the emphasis on individual texts, I suggest that what the book really offers is a literary history. At least this is probably how most readers will approach and assimilate it. Sadly perhaps (or just realistically), many of the book's close readings will be skimmed over or only consulted by other scholars working on these poets. Notable exceptions may be the discussions of poems by Gabriel Preil, who to my taste at least remains far and away the most interesting poet here. The point here is not (or not only) that few readers have patience for extended close readings nowadays, but also that the narrative at the center of Mintz's book is so very gripping that one will want to return to it, trace its lineaments, follow its ebbs and flows without pausing so frequently to consider poems on their own terms.

Mintz makes clear that he did not set out to write a "literary history", though he admits that the signposts for such a study will inevitably find their way into the book. Nevertheless, as I say, Mintz's book does not really differ from a "literary history" in any significant, methodological sense. On my reading, three key stages of this history emerge: an initial period around the early 1910s when it seems possible that America will indeed take over from Odessa and other European and East European centers as the center of Hebrew literary creativity; a second period between the wars in which American Hebrew poetry struggles for definition in opposition to the new modernist trends that typify the work of the Yishuv; and a third period from, say, the 1940s onward, when American Hebraists begin to adjust to the fact that their work is largely unrecognized by (and maybe irrelevant to) the cultural mainstream in Eretz Yisrael. This is a poignant story and Mintz appropriately designates it a "rise and fall" (page 7); in the epilogue he writes of the Hebraists' monomania as a tragic flaw contributing to their eclipse. Why not structure the entire study according to this narrative? I would even suggest that the book's subtitle should have these Gibborean terms (rise and fall) somewhere in it. After all, a poem written in Hebrew in America in 1917 necessarily means something vastly different than one written in 1947. I personally had to constantly remind myself of when each poem under discussion was written and measure it for myself against this narrative. By cutting short the historical narrative in the book's first chapter and then distributing historical and biographical comments unevenly through the second section, Mintz seems to be imagining readers whose primary interest will be to delve deeply into the twists and turns of individual poems. Whether this readership actually exists or not, this approach seems to me to do the book a disservice.

I should note, by the way, that I was just about as riveted by the first fifty pages of Mintz's manuscript (12-64) as I have been by any scholarly book I have read for a long time. This section traces the rise and fall narrative, makes smart points about the differences

between American Hebrew poetry and the poetry of the Yishuv, an important series of insights about the history of Hebrew language instruction in the United States, and sometimes it offers the kind of surprises one might expect from a good novel. Mintz even adds a bit of his own personal history here, which is all to the good. This section leaves the reader with a general feeling for the American Hebraist, an odd but noble creature stranded in history. Just when one would have wanted to move deeper into this world, to hear its voices, the narrative is broken off and a long reading of Regelson's (worthy) poem is given. Then we move quickly through a series of twelve portraits, each one recapitulating parts of the overall narrative of Chapter One before delving into individual poems. By the time one gets to the third section, "American Vistas," one finds oneself backtracking to review what one has already learned about each poet under discussion then wading through long plot summaries. The first chapter remains, in sum, the most readable section.

Here, in short, are some of the disadvantages of book's current second section as I see it: points are frequently repeated in successive sub-sections (e.g. the points about the Americans distancing themselves from the Tel Aviv avant garde and sustaining the poetic project of the Techiya are made at multiple times); since sub-chapters repeat some of the same ideas, parts of this section reveal their origins in separate documents that have been cut-and-pasted together; each sub-chapter has the feel of beginning the story anew (the general comments by Avraham Epstein about American Hebrew poets on page 338 seem to belong to the book's opening discussion); and there are numerous awkward meta-discursive moments where Mintz reminds the reader of earlier sections and notes that such-and-such will be taken up later. Also, this structure does not seem to allow for enough comparisons between poets, both between the American Hebrew poets under discussion and contemporary poets in Eretz Yisrael. Moreover, as individual essays, they seem truncated; in particular, the endings of the sections are almost invariably abrupt, leaving the reader with no synthesis whatsoever. Finally, since each poet is presented as a singular figure, opportunities are lost for pointing out connections between them. For example we read in multiple sections that a poet attended the Isaac Elchanan Yeshiva, but we have to remember who all went through there. How about a section describing the milieu of Elchanan, its curriculum, and its effect on the poets? Also we discover that a high number of the poets are Litvaks: how about a more comprehensive picture of the Yeshiva world they came from?

My own suggestion is that the book be divided into two main sections, with a first section essentially extending and "thickening" the discussion currently found in Chapter One (this could easily go for 250-300 pages) and a second section devoted exclusively to series of close readings. There could still be readings in this first part, but they would be much shorted, geared always towards providing evidence for the narrative. The historical and biographical discussions that are currently scattered among the readings in the manuscript's second section could all be folded into the narrative of the first part of the book. As for the section on "American Vistas," these main points could also be folded into the historical overview. The second section I am suggesting could be conceived of as a very substantial appendix. It will be consulted by many readers, but they will be left to pick and choose amongst the readings, depending on which poet captures their imagination, etc... This structure would prevent the repetitions and it would satisfy readers whose interests are primarily historical. Written in this structure, I am convinced the book will have a greater impact. In response to the possible retort, "But I did not set out to write a literary history," I would simply say that much more than the mere signposts for such a history are already present here: I am thinking of the biographies, for instance, as eminently suitable to the historical narrative.

2. Methodology

Mintz writes in a number of places that he is interested in exploring the "inner world" of the Hebraist (page 3, page 9). I concur that this is a worthy pursuit and I concur that these poems help us in our pursuit.

However, in a number of his readings and despite his insistence that we are tracing the experiences of "the speaker" and not "the actual poet", Mintz seems to consider the poems themselves as a kind of transparent window into this inner world. In the reading of Schwartz's "The Deer," for example, we trace the speaker's feelings upon seeing a deer. What

is most important is not how the speaker's feelings progress through the poem, but rather what it means for Schwartz to write a poem in Hebrew about a deer in America at this specific moment in history. What kind of performance is this? What does it demonstrate? If the poem recalls the Spanish Hebrew poets, to what effect does it do so? How do the intertextual evocations work here? And for whom?

How would it "mean" differently were it written in Palestine or Berlin or Lvov?

The point I am making is that I could not help reading many of these poems as deliberate exercises: more than "emotion recollected in tranquility,"

what they transcribe are the willed efforts of Hebraists to create poetry in Hebrew in America. Mintz the lover of Hebrew poems occasionally loses sight of the very peculiarity of the enterprise that he is at times so insightful about. I do not really believe, for instance, that Simon Halkin really loved the "warm and flowing colors" of Santa Barbara. Or if he did, this is not chiefly why he wrote the poem. He wrote the poem as a contribution to the intensely willed and self-conscious collective enterprise of modern Hebrew poetry. Where Mintz describes Halkin as a "romantic poet" (page 376), one might focus instead on how Halkin endeavors to create a romantic poetics in Hebrew. The point on page 374 that there is a "transgressive effect in Hebrew of... turning to Saint Barbara" is a wonderful point and exemplifies the kind of attention to the specificity of the American Hebrew enterprise I would like to see more of. More discussion should be devoted to intertextuality, less to the experiences (be they of "the speaker" or the poet himself) that the poems are ostensibly about.

3. Omissions

While Mintz obviously cannot provide a sustained reflection on American Yiddish poetry or on the relationship between the Yiddish and Hebrew literary establishments, I do believe that more attention to this subject

-- at the very least a five to ten-page meditation -- would strengthen the book considerably. It is not sufficient to restate the biases held by the poets themselves, as Mintz occasionally does. Did the dynamics of the Yiddish/Hebrew language wars simply repeat themselves in the New World? Did the Hebrew poets see themselves in competition with Yiddish? To what extent did the products of the American Hebrew imagination differ from those of their Yiddish counterparts? How might these differences be explained? In the Preil chapter, Mintz responsibly cites Feldman on this crucial question, but otherwise we see Yiddish largely as a language that some Hebrew poets condescended to write in when financial woes became unbearable. And yet the parallels and divergences between these literary communities are too fascinating to ignore altogether. On page 227 we learn that Hebrew poets had to contend with the fact that their childhood homes had been "suddenly and problematically transformed." The same can be said about the Yiddish poets drinking coffee at the next table over at the Café Royale. What about their responses? More importantly, can we get to a specifically Hebrew response by contrasting these traditions? One might also notice that at the same moment that Shimon Ginzburg was finding Hebrew equivalents for the chaos of New York City, so too were Yiddish poets like Moyshe-Leyb Halpern. Differences?

Influence?

At the very least, Harshav's *The Meaning of Yiddish* should be consulted, as well as Wisse's *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* and Anita Norich's recent work on Yiddish in America, *Discovering Exile*.

Perhaps some of these questions might be approached by looking a little more closely at the relationship between Schwartz and his brother. How might we explain the divergent language choices made by these brothers? How did they respond to each other's choices?

Moreover, why not notice that just as Hebrew poets wrote about Negroes and Indians, so did Yiddish poets? How could Yehoash's translation of *Hiawatha* have failed to catch the attention of the American Hebrew poets? Mani Leyb writes about Indians (e.g. "A Bit of Land"); Reuven Ludvig writes a sequence of poems on Indians ("Indian Motifs"). For sources on this, Mintz might consult Alan Trachtenberg's *Shades of Hiawatha*; or Rachel Rubinstein's recent book *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination*.

As for Lisitzky's *In the Tents of Cush*, there is a voluminous tradition of Yiddish and English-language writing by Jews about the American Negro that should at least be referenced (e.g. Y.Y. Schwartz's *Kentucky* and especially the idylls at the end of the volume; Berish Vaynshtayn's *New York* poems; Opatoshu's novel *Linchera*). A good reference work to lay out this foundation is Merle Bachman's essay "American Yiddish Poetry's Encounter with Black America." My point here is not that Mintz needs to write a comparative study of Yiddish as well as Hebrew. But to ignore this body of work altogether is to ignore the literary context that must have somehow affected American Hebraists. Moreover, by omitting these references, the reader gets the false impression that these "oddities" of American Hebrew verse were sui generis creations out of the American Jewish experience, which they most emphatically were not.

Finally, if Mintz sees fit to cite Michael Rogin on the question of blackface, why not consider the voluminous secondary literature on the ways American Jews imagine African Americans? Here Emily Budick's book, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* is a logical place to start. Or, considering some of the broader political implications of this encounter, how about Seth Forman's *Blacks in the Jewish Mind*?

Another set of omissions has to do with American poetry beyond the Jewish world. Kudos to Mintz for registering the importance of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Preil. But what about Wallace Stevens? By stressing the imagist influence without exploring Preil's indebtedness to the late romanticism of Stevens seems to me a missed opportunity. Notice, for example, the intertextual resonances linking Preil's poem 18 from the *Maine* sequence (discussed on page 450) and Stevens' "The Motive for Metaphor." What can be made of the centrality of the figure of autumn for both poets? On this question and on American poetry more broadly, I can hardly think of a better place to begin than Marjorie Perloff's "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" And for a discussion of romanticism versus imagism in American Jewish poetic practice, how about Norman Finkelstein's wonderful book *Not One of Them in Place: Modern Poetry and Jewish American Identity*?

4. Ideological Investments

I must admit that while I appreciated Mintz's comments in his epilogue about Hebrew education, the polemical thrust of a few comments here took me by surprise. To divide all American Jews between those who study Hebrew sources and those who do not (pages 631-632) simply cannot do justice to the almost dizzying array of identities and modes of allegiance that currently make up the American Jewish scene. Moreover, to insist on the link between Hebrew and "Jewish authenticity" (page 634) cannot fail to raise a few hackles. Leaving aside the theoretical challenges to the notion of "authenticity" mounted by the academy over the past thirty years and leaving beside the more important fact that the emphasis on Hebrew forgets all those generations of women and "men who are like women" (to quote the title pages of collections of Tkhines) who never learned Hebrew very well, this conclusion seems to contradict some of Mintz's own important claims. This point about Jewish authenticity is complicated, at the very least, by Mintz's point that in many cases, the religious sensibility of American Hebrew poetry is "only remotely Judaic" (page 276, page 365, page 398). This is interesting. What is to be gained by overriding it in the epilogue? The lines between Hebraism and Jewish piety in its various forms (nationalist, religious, etc...) should not be blurred. As I have said, for me one of the salient points to arise from this study is not these poets' "authenticity," but rather their willful and stubbornly idealistic devotion to "high-brow" Hebrew at precisely the moment when this language was becoming the daily vernacular of Jews in the Yishuv and later the State of Israel.

Three additional observations:

- A poetic form like the ballad cannot be an "Objective correlative" in any strict sense (page 198)
- The association of Habad with "pantheism" is questionable (page 364)
- Something more should be said about the irony/humor in Preil (page 445)