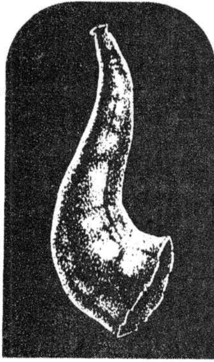

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AMERICAN YIDDISH POETRY: A BILINGUAL ANTHOLOGY. Edited by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (Hrushovski). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986. 813 pp. $55.00. ISBN 0-8490-3926-6.*

Two of the greatest achievements of Ashkenazic Jews in modern times were first carried out here in America and only then "exported" back to the East European heartland: the Jewish labor movement and modern Yiddish poetry. While only specialists in the field of labor history are likely to know the first fact, anyone perusing the shelves of a standard Yiddish library would come upon a number of massive anthologies that set out to document the pioneering achievements of American Yiddish poetry. M. Bassin took 600 pages to illustrate the work of thirty-one of his fellow poets, most of whom were very much alive in 1940, the year of publication, while critic Nakhmen Mayzel devoted almost 900 pages to *America in the Yiddish Word* (1955) that included scores of poets and prose writers.

The magnificently executed Harshav anthology is not only the most beautiful of them all, but its claims are by far the most revolutionary. For while Bassin and Mayzel based their claims primarily on the subject matter of American Yiddish poetry -- the struggle for survival of the immigrant masses, the great ideological battles of the times and the specific American landscape -- the Harshavs see the story in terms of the new rhythms, rhymes, and cosmopolitan concerns that the experience of America introduced into Yiddish poetry. Their selection, moreover, is radically revisionist: out of the seven poets featured in their book, only four appear in Bassin's anthology and even then, with a completely different selection of poems.

It is not too much to say that *American Yiddish Poetry* is really four books in one: (1) the first thoroughly new presentation of American Yiddish poetry to appear in over a generation; (2) the largest selection ever done of modern Yiddish poetry in English translation; (3) a superb introduction to Yiddish modernism complete with manifestos and other relevant documents and, most unexpected of all, (4) a catalogue of American graphic artists, the likes of Ben Shahn and Raphael Soyer, who shared the same background, concerns and sensibilities as the poets. *American Yiddish Poetry*, then, is both a brilliant summation and a creative act of rediscovery.

Who and what have they reclaimed on our behalf? Not only the prophetic voices of H. Leivick and Jacob Glatstein crying out in anguish over the fate of the Jews, but also the still small voices of Judd L. Teller (1912-1972) and Malka Heifetz-Tussman (1896-). Not merely the readily translatable short poems filled with understated, Anglo-Saxon ironies, but also the untranslatable poems filled with dense imagery, multilingual puns, complex rhyme schemes, biblical, talmudic and kabbalistic allusions and high, Jewish pathos. Not merely the Lower East Side of New York as seen through the eyes of that *enfant terrible*, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, but also the rough-and-tumble of the New York docks and of Harlem and the Bowery, as seen through the eyes of the forgotten expressionist poet, Berish Vaynshteyn.

And towering above them all is the "hero" of the book, the poet whom the Yiddish establishment loved to hate because he was considered so cold and intellectual -- A. Leyeles. Leyeles' sonnet ring called "Autumn" which the Harshavs have managed to render into English, complete with meter and rhyme, is surely the volume's tour-de-force. Leyeles emerges as in many ways the most contemporary of all the poets, and the most Jewish as well. It is a tragic irony that he had to wait so long for an appreciative audience.

Roth's delineation of character and locale has never been sharper or clearer. The Israel sequence alone ranks with the best social and political commentary of Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua. But unlike the four previous works, *The Counterlife* is not a straightforward narrative of a Jewish writer's angst. It is like nothing else Roth has ever done. As each new chapter begins, the previous one is turned upside down and inside out. Persons who die, live again; persons who live, die. Events are reencountered and restructured so that nothing is quite what it seems to be. The reader is taken on a dazzling and daring roller coaster ride through the lives and counterlives of these extraordinarily vivid and human figures. But the plot surprises and character reversals are not products of literary virtuosity for its own sake; they are integral to the basic themes of the book: the agony of the creative artist, the ambivalence of freedom, the evanescence of love, and always at the heart of the matter--Roth's own ambivalent yet abiding feelings about his Jewishness. Structurally, in fact, the book begins to resemble various Talmudic commentaries and discourses on a particular text.

The title is the key to its meaning. Life is presented, not as a linear arc from birth to death, youth to age, but as a series of counterlives, twisting back upon themselves, presenting different realities, different meanings, different options, a constant sense of absurdity in the context of which we continually and necessarily seek meaning and indeed even absolution. If there are echoes here of Pirandello, Kafka, and Beckett, the controlling voice and presence is distinctly and triumphantly Roth's own. *The Counterlife*, is a courageous book; it is also a brilliant, deeply human, and profoundly satisfying one.

On one level, Cynthia Ozick's *The Messiah of Stockholm* is a literary detective story. Lars Ademening, a drab, middle-aged, third-rate book reviewer for a second-rate paper in Stockholm, is obsessed with the notion that he is the son of the great Polish-Jewish writer, Bruno Schulz, who was massacred by the Nazis in 1942. Schulz was indeed an historical personage, and two of his books, *The Street of Crocodiles* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, survive to attest to his idiosyncratic genius. He was also rumored to have written a third work, *The Messiah*, which may or may not still be in existence. This is the manuscript that Lars is preoccupied with discovering.

Ozick's narrative deals with the possible discovery. The climax of her talk comes with Lars' reading of *The Messiah*, presented to him by a bizarre trio of characters who may be frauds. After he reads the manuscript he rejects it as inauthentic and burns it. Did he believe it to be fraudulent or was he in some manner afraid of its authenticity? No clear or simple answer is forthcoming. The story concludes with Lars freed from his obsession with Schulz, both as father and literary creator, and becoming, ironically and sadly, a succussful reviewer of mediocre but popular writings.

In *The Messiah of Stockholm* Ozick, like Roth, treats themes she has dealt with in previous works. A basic one is the interrelationship between the Jewish artist and his art. The conflict of artist--creator of idols, ruler of cannibal galaxies--versus Jew--worshipper of one true God--has provided Ozick's fiction with a powerful and dramatic tension. Here, she seems to be coming to terms with the conflict, not simply nor glibly, but with deep human poignancy. Another motif in the book is the quest for a lost father, particularized in Lars' attachment to Schulz, but resonating with the more general search for Jewish peoplehood in a post-Holocaust world. While *The Messiah of Stockholm* is often wryly humorous, it is ultimately an elegaical drama of loss: the loss of our fathers, particularly and generally, and the difficulty of creating an identity in the vacuum left by that loss.

Cynthia Ozick dedicates her novel to Philip Roth. She does so, quite practically, as an acknowledgement of his help in acquainting her with the works of Bruno Schulz. However, the dedication may suggest a deeper acknowledgement, the acknowledgement of a certain basic kinship between herself and Roth. As their two latest books have manifested, they are American Jewish writers influenced deeply, albeit differently, by their Jewishness, accepting it as a core element in their creative lives. Moreover, their work is characterized by a sense of self-scrutiny, fierce moral analysis, and tenuous optimism in the context of despair that is wholly and deeply part of their heritage and tradition.

The Harshavs' method of reclaiming this material is equally special. First, the translations are literal to a degree that will surprise most readers. Yiddish locutions, inverted syntax, and even neologisms are rendered as closely as possible, so that the translation, while eminently readable, is designed to echo but not to supplant the original. When this method works, it really works, as in Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's celebrated poem "I Shall Never Go On Bragging." Secondly, the editors provide useful marginal glosses that are reminiscent of a page of Talmud. And finally, the graphic material provides a commentary of sorts by situating the poems within the context of modern American art. Some of the juxtapositions are so perfect (such as Louis Lozowick's *Nuns on Wall Street* to Leyeles' chapter from *Fabius Lind's Diary*) that one thinks that each must have been created with the other in mind.

By including the artists, the editors can also drive home their major point: that these great poets should not be considered "immigrant poets," just as no one would dare call Lozowick, Shahn and Soyer "immigrant artists." For what made American Yiddish poetry so truly pioneering was its uncompromising embrace of modernity -- even while it developed a uniquely Jewish idiom to evoke this brave new world.

David G. Roskies

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relationships with his new father, a rather crassly materialistic but decent Baltimore jeweler, and with his adoptive mother, who is totally, albeit cloyingly, committed to Manfred's welfare and happiness.

His relationship with his new sister, Adele, a teenager caught between rebellion against and acceptance of her future as a Jewish-American princess, is also described with wry and understanding humor, as Manfred vacillates between the normal resentments of a younger brother and the helpless infatuation of a lovesick swain. In a series of beautifully delineated scenes, and with a keen eye for detail, Kotlowitz also develops Manfred's interaction with his new friends, schoolmates, and teachers in the Baltimore milieu of the late Thirties.

As a novel about youthful rites of passage, the book is replete with sequences that are alternately touching, humorous, sad, and wise. Once again, we have a tale in the tried and true American tradition of *Huckleberry Finn, The Catcher In The Rye,* and *The Adventures of Augie March.*

What makes this particular story unique, however, is the aforementined "door of history." Hovering over the inner world of Manfred's adolescent turmoil is an outer world about to explode, a world which includes his former family, a world constantly and threateningly impinging upon his newly discovered American identity. For all his efforts to assimilate himself into his new existence, Manfred cannot break away from the loved ones he took for granted when he lived among them. Indeed, the more his American family tries to absorb him into their lives, the more he feels the strength of his ties to those he left behind. Increasingly, he becomes a person torn between a world he has abandoned and a world he cannot fully accept.