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THE PREDICAMENT OF JEWISH AMERICAN POETRY

The identity of the Jewish American writer has been often analysed through the prism of American fiction and nonfiction (ie genres which many Americanists consider to be the umbrella terms for all of Jewish American literature). Criticism of Jewish American poetry, especially its less orthodox proponents who have entered the canon of mainstream American literature, has been quite rare. This paper aims to analyse the presence of a distinctive Jewish identity in twentieth-century American poetry in English. After a brief historical overview, the poetics of several notable twentieth-century American poets of Jewish origin will be discussed using sample poems. The paper finally claims that Jewishness is an essential presence in the poetry of twentieth-century American poets of Jewish origin even if their work betrays more eclectic influences.

American literary criticism has long neglected Jewish American poetry. Until recently, under the omnibus category of “Jewish American Literature”, critics had focused exclusively on the fiction of Jewish authors such as Henry Roth, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, and others. This is very puzzling since Jewish American poetry has an almost two centuries long history within American literature, moreover, it is not defiled, as David Bleich documents, by overused stereotypical themes of twentieth-century Jewish American fiction, namely the “male complaints, fulminations, hand-wringing, philosophical angst, fear of persecution” (2000: 179). Jewish American poetry represents a corrective set of thematic options, being “an inquiry into history and society, done privately and modestly, with humor and dignity, without frivolousness or solemnity, within a tradition of American poetry that is already marginalized” (Bleich 2000: 179–80).

Steven J. Rubin defines Jewish American poetry in more general terms as the “poetry that is written by Jews about Jewish subjects or themes” (2000: 197). However, a more complex question is how the Jewish identity, or Jewishness, of the poet might be identified and what the Jewish subjects and themes are. A related problem is the impulse of the reader, critic, and often even the poet to view Jewish American poetry as marginal and unimportant.

Even major postwar literary scholar Harold Bloom and poet-scholar John Hollander have theorized about the unlikely existence of a viable Jewish American poetic tradition that would give rise to American poets of major status. Bloom claims that the problem lies in the search for a usable past in American poetry, for “American-Jewish poets from the 20’s down to the present day [ie 1972 when the essay was published] have found themselves [...] in the dilemma of [...] how can one accommodate one’s vision to the metric and rhetoric of Eliot, Pound, Williams, and their followers?” (1972: 70) The “peculiar problem of poetic influence” becomes impossible to solve for the Jewish American poet, who is forced to imitate Gentile precursors of “displaced Protestantism”, a process which, as Maera Shreiber notes, is “a violation of [...] a culture deeply committed to keeping its borders intact” (Shreiber 2003: 149). The eleven Jewish poets who are included in Richard Howard’s *Alone with America*, an important study of major American poets who rose to prominence from the 1950s to the late 1960s, either “evade or ignore their Jewishness [...] or they confront the fearful problem of expressing their cultural diversity in the essentially hostile idiom bequeathed them by the various modernist or post-modernist masters” (Bloom 1972: 72). Bloom concludes with the gloomy prediction that Jewish American poetry in English will assimilate with mainstream American poetry of the 1970s to increasingly become “a blend of a devotional strain and a late Romantic visionary intensity” (1972: 73).

In a more recent essay, John Hollander also questions the existence of an original Jewish American poetic tradition, but for him, the problem lies not in the nature of Jewishness, but in the nature of poetry itself, for “the essence of true poetry is originality of a mode of expression; that is, poets will express or figure forth in language not only something totally unique in themselves, but as a kind of general metaphor for the holiness of human individuality, will thus reinvent expressing, or poetic telling” (1994: 38). Hollander interprets the remark of Marina Tsvetayeva who claimed that “all poets are Yids” to mean that all poets are like Jews in the Diaspora, alienated and in exile from something perhaps irrecoverable, nevertheless having to live with and in and among the rest of society [...] It is not merely that modern poets and Jews are outsiders, by nature itinerant no matter how locally rooted [...] both [Jewish and Gentile poets] carry the burden of an absolutely inexplicable sense of their own identity and history (1994: 40).

The linguistic alienation is particularly painful for the Jewish poet in America whose language is English, whose wrestling grips are English hammerlocks and chanceries, has the English Bible built into the heart not only of the diction and syntax, but also the poetics of his language. The English Bible is a polemically Protestant translation of an orthodox Christian book called the Old Testament, which is itself a Christian interpretative translation of the Torah (1994: 44).

To return to Bloom’s argument, the Jewish American poet writing in English (or even Yiddish, for that matter) wages an Oedipal war with the Protestant tradition that has alienated him or her from the idealized, ancient sources of Jewish culture. For all his skepticism, Hollander implies that “the Jewish American poet stands to make a singular contribution to a larger American aesthetic” (Shreiber 2003: 150).

Recognition of Jewish American poetry as a major contribution to American literature has been part of the recent opening up of the American literary canon towards a greater inclusion of multicultural authors. Laurence Goldstein sums up themes of poems included in Steven J. Rubin's groundbreaking 1998 anthology, *Telling and Remembering: A Century of American Jewish Poetry*, as follows:

1) Jews are obsessed with the history of their victimization, from the earliest period described in the Hebrew scriptures [...] down to the Holocaust and the Arab-Israeli conflict; 2) the dead are ever-present, to the extent that Edward Hirsch calls even flowers "those blind / faces of the dead thrust up out of the ground," and the Kaddish becomes the bass note of almost every meditation; 3) the history of one's family, reaching back almost always into the Old World of Eastern Europe, Russia, or the Sephardic culture of the Mediterranean, is both a source of joy and a burden upon the memory; 4) the witnessing and inscribing of acts of persecution and of sinfulness, as well as of the joyful moments in the historical and personal past that redeem the occasions of lamentation, is a moral responsibility of the utmost urgency. (Goldstein 2002: 705)

Looking at sample poems by major Jewish American poets of the twentieth century from Charles Reznikoff to Jacqueline Osherow we see that the Goldstein summary of Jewish American themes and identities forms the ideological backbone of the following sample of poems by significant poets of the last century. In "Babylon: 539 B.C.E.", the plain-spoken former objectivist Charles Reznikoff (1989) celebrates a history of Jewish perseverance and survival skills in the face of great odds:

we Jews are as dew
on every blade of grass
trodden under foot today
and here tomorrow morning. (162–5)

"An Old Cracked Tune" by Stanley Kunitz is a bittersweet lyric that likewise portrays a marginalized survivor who dances, "for the joy of surviving, / on the edge of the road" (7–8). Muriel Rukeyser offers a different view – in her oft-quoted sonnet from her "Letter to the Front" sequence, she compares being Jewish with a gift that enables "full life" with pain and agony. The gift is a painful one, yet one to be desired and explored by the poet who is "daring to live for the impossible" (149). "The Bagel", a whimsical poem by David Ignatow, showcases another major theme of Jewish American poetry – a unique kind of self-deprecating humor of the speaker who first pursues in vain then merges with a bagel that the wind keeps blowing away from his reach:

Faster and faster it rolled,
With me running after it

bent low, gritting my teeth,
 and I found myself doubled over
 and rolling down the street
 head over heels, one complete sommersault
 after another like a bagel
 and strangely happy with myself. (6–13)

The epiphany in the Ignatow poem is not about the realization of loss—it is in the joyful recognition of one’s life as a series of such bagels to be lost every day, while the only viable response is to make fun of the process. Gerald Stern is another poet whose rich body of poetry might be simply read as testimony of bittersweet humor and optimism, yet his short “Underground Dancing” sounds the larger, prophetic note of the Jewish American poetry spectrum. The speaker assumes biblical authority of voice that stands in contrast to the bleak images of death, decay, and greed that the obvious reading offers:

There’s a bird pecking at the fat;
 there’s a dead tree covered with snow;
 there’s a truck dropping cinders on the slippery highway.

There’s life in my backyard—
 Black wings beating on the branches,
 Greedy eyes watching,
 Mouths screaming and fighting over the greasy ball.

There’s a mole singing hallelujah.
 Close the rotten doors!
 Let everyone go blind!
 Let everyone be buried in his own litter. (65)

While the mole, a lowly earth-digging animal “sings hallelujah” and those who are righteous shall be buried in the filth of their own sinful acts, the doors are opened to a new realization of the Jewishness of the speaker (and the reader). Stern transcends the drab and the everyday to give a proud and optimistic statement in the tradition of the Blakean visionary who sees “the world in a grain of sand” while blending “humor and sadness, candor and irony” in a unique voice of utmost authenticity (Chametzky 2001: 826).

“The Self and the Mulberry” by Marvin Bell is seemingly not a Jewish poem at all. However, in the context of Bell’s poetry, which has been called an undersong of myself, a reversal of the Whitmanian poetics of expansive embrace, one sees the familiar aspects of Jewishness – the joy at one’s proximity to the natural world, the ironic undercutting of the sentimental wish of the Romantics to merge with the trees and other natural manifestations. Bell first explores the Romantic tradition of linking self to nature (“I wanted to see the self, so I looked at the mulberry”),

only to discard it by the end of the poem, calling the impulse of the poet to identify with trees fake, eluding the deep truths about love and other human emotions: "Let nature take a turn at saying what love is!" (89). I end the impromptu anthology of twentieth-century Jewish American poetry with a humorous extract from "Ch'vil Schreibern a Poem auf Yiddish", a longer poem by Jacqueline Osherow:

Even Yiddish doesn't have a word
for the greatness of my Yiddish poem,
a poem so exquisite that if Dante could rise from the dead
he would have to rend his clothes in mourning. (21–4)

In this bilingual poem which favors the English part of the gamble, Osherow undermines the attempt of the American poet to write a great poem in Yiddish, a once sacred Jewish language of decreasing readership and importance in contemporary American literature. Allusions to the envy of Dante are to be interpreted as commentary of the marginalized writer upon a tradition that excludes the Jew from the literary discourse. Dante will not rise from the dead to envy the present poem, yet his evocation plays a role in making us aware of the changing status of canonical works which increasingly include ethnic authors.

The question remains whether the authors discussed attain the rank of major American poets in the twentieth century. What follows is an incomplete catalog of poets of Jewish origin, identity, and poetics, who have enriched American poetic tradition in this period. From precursor 19th-century poets Penine Moise, Emma Lazarus, and Gertrude Stein, who was a transitional figure, American poetry entered the 20th century with poets who include (in chronological order, by date of birth) the following: Charles Reznikoff, Kenneth Fearing, Carl Rakosi, Louis Zukofsky, Stanley Kunitz, George Oppen, Muriel Rukeyser, Karl Shapiro, Delmore Schwartz, David Ignatow, Howard Nemerov, Anthony Hecht, Shirley Kaufman, Denise Levertov, Louis Simpson, Kenneth Koch, Maxine Kumin, Gerald Stern, Allen Ginsberg, Irving Feldman, Philip Levine, John Hollander, Richard Howard, Adrienne Rich, Jerome Rothenberg, Allen Grossman, Linda Pastan, Stephen Berg, Marge Piercy, C.K. Williams, Marvin Bell, Alicia Suskin Ostriker, Richard Kostelanetz, Robert Pinsky, Irena Klepfisz, Charles Bernstein, Edward Hirsch, Jacqueline Osherow. The list is far from exhaustive, yet it includes all important generations of recent and contemporary American poets, from the objectivist Reznikoff, who was born in 1894, to the postmodernist Osherow, born in 1956. Take the work, achievement, and impact of these poets away and the edifice of American poetry of the last hundred plus years is going to crumble.

Jewish identity, themes, and poetics should at last be recognized as an essential presence in the poetry of many major twentieth-century American poets of Jewish origin even if their work aspires to eclecticism and mainstream canonicity that are often inimical to explicit poetics celebration of ethnicity. As part of the multicultural debate, Jewish American poetry in English has been a major player in the game of enriching the literary canon for over a century, promoting the marginalized

other as a central trope for poetic, if not literary, existence and tradition in America. As David Bleich argues, “poetry written by American Jews [...] is part of a redefinition of Jewish culture in a friendly society” (2000: 178). More attention to Jewish American poetry in English might not only help us understand the peculiar nature of the Jewish American identity, it also corrects a long-term error of genre discrimination that has been committed by major critics of twentieth century American literature. After all, as Edward Rothstein (2001) reminds in a review, the canonical works should be “latent with interpretive possibility” and there is no lack of diverse and worthwhile interpretations that Jewish American poetry in English offers.

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