

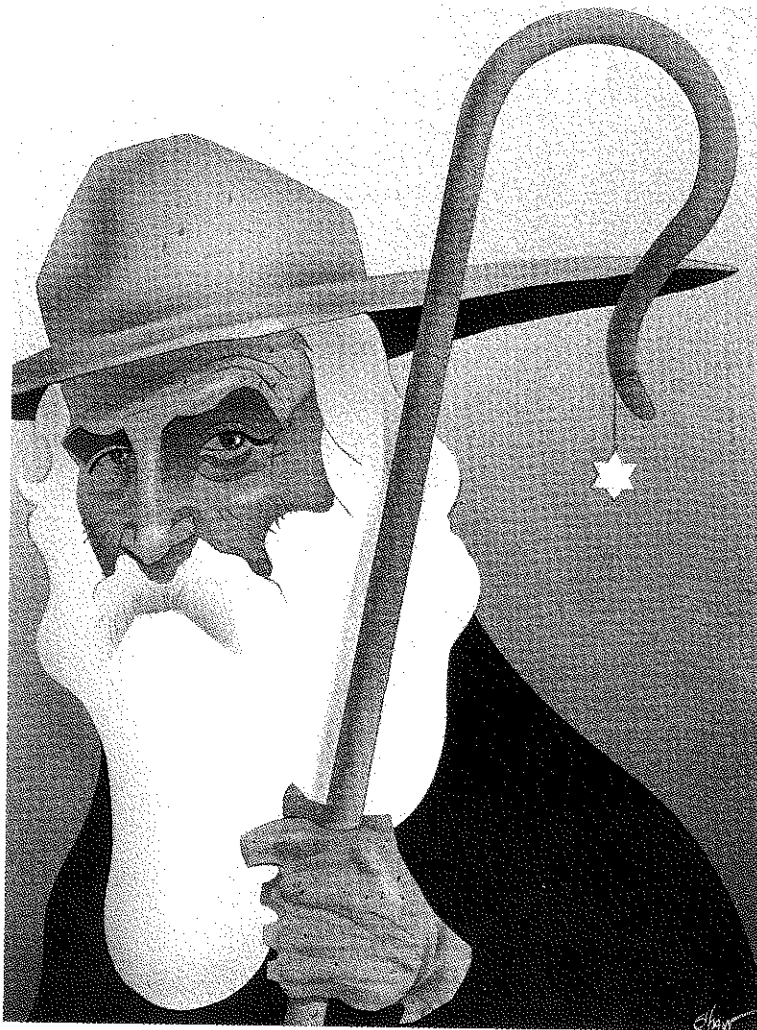
Walt Whitman Among the Yiddish Poets

Julian Levinson

When Jewish writers from Eastern Europe began composing poems in their native Yiddish during the late nineteenth century, they were confronted by a difficult challenge, unique, perhaps, in the history of modern literature: they were writing in a language that had been spoken for a thousand years, but had almost never been shaped into formal verse. Unlike English writers raised on Shakespeare, Italians raised on Dante, or Germans raised on Goethe, Yiddish writers did not have the luxury of a towering figure or set of canonical classics to use as a model for their own work. Previous generations of Jews had, to be sure, composed Biblical commentaries, homilies, and prayers in Yiddish (the genre of *tekhines*—the prayers of early modern Jewish women—being a case in point), but these sorts of writings did not directly aid the would-be Yiddish poet, who sought to express his or her personal response to the world, not the specifics of Jewish law or devotion.

Without an established literary tradition to turn to, Yiddish poets found themselves in a position akin to homelessness. Their lack of a literary tradition in which to root their imaginative lives mirrored the uprooted quality of modern Jewish life. What emerged was a restless effort to adapt materials from foreign sources to build up a tradition they could call their own. To find models for their writing they had to reach into the poetry of other nations, other languages.

In spite of the strain this need for literary models placed on young writers, one benefit was that Yiddish poets could allow their own sensibilities to guide them through the process of apprenticeship. East European Jews tended to know several languages in addition to Yiddish and Hebrew, and they often gained inspiration from Russian, Polish, and German literature. Not surprisingly, most Yiddish poets also tried their hand at translation, especially during their early years. In the most resourceful of the modern Yiddish



poets, then, what we discover is a fascinating and complex dialogue between the language of composition and foreign influences. Because of this dialogue, their work exemplifies what is often called “hybrid” literature—various styles, perspectives, and value-systems converge in the formation of a poetic discourse in Yiddish.

In the work of American Yiddish poets, most of whom circulated in and around New York City, different writers turned to different models. The great modernist innovator, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, drew upon the work of German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine to fashion his own ironic and painfully bitter poetic voice. Mani Leyb, Halpern’s colleague in the poetic group known as “Di Yunge” (“The Young Ones”), modeled himself after Russian symbolists such as Alexander Blok, whose poems were considerably more delicate and abstract than Heine’s.

But what about influences from American literature itself? As they became American citizens in a political sense, did these immigrant writers also join the republic of American literature?

The answer is that a surprising number of Yiddish poets discovered a guiding inspiration in the work and personal example of Walt Whitman. Whitman was by the 1870s an internationally acclaimed figure, hailed by many as an avatar of a new, unbridled poetry. In his great work, *Leaves of Grass*, rewritten over the course of his lifetime, he had cast

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off the ornamentation of Old-World forms and opened the door to free verse and to a democratic poetry of the here-and-now. He asserted that the purpose of the poetic imagination was not to dwell in legend, myth, or romance, but “to give ultimate vivification to facts, to science, and to common lives, endowing them with the glows and glories and final illustriousness which belong to every real thing, and to real things only” (from “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads”). He developed a style of poetry aimed at celebrating the energies of everyday life, asserting that individuals are organically linked to each other and to the natural world. These ideas are expressed in what are perhaps Whitman’s most famous lines: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself / And what I assume, you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

For many in the mainstream American literary establishment, Whitman had gone too far. In lines that read “not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile” or “the scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,” many perceived a dangerous assault on poetry and social decorum. By contrast, when immigrant Yiddish writers such as Morris Rosenfeld and I. J. Schwartz encountered Whitman in the years around 1900, they discovered a solution to their personal quest for identity. For these writers, Whitman’s defiant poetry provided a language with which to understand and express their ambiguous position between the stability of tradition and the openness of the future.

In Whitman, a generation of Yiddish poets saw nothing less than an heir to the prophetic traditions of Judaism and the embodiment of the hopes for a utopian future. These poets, it must be remembered, emerged out of a highly politicized milieu, where socialism was the word of the hour. Whitman’s example suggested to them that it was possible to embrace America without sacrificing their vision for the future of humanity. In one illuminating passage, the first translator of Whitman into Yiddish, the revolutionary anarchist Yoysef Bovshover, described the American Bard in an 1899 essay as “a strong defender of true freedom ... a Moses of free thought” (“*a shtarker farteydiker fun varer fraybeyt ... a moyshe rabenu fun frayen denken*”). Bovshover’s striking analogy between Whitman and Moses (whom he calls according to the traditional formula “*Moyshe rabenu*”—“Moses, Our Teacher”) represents modern, revolutionary thought as a new kind of revelation. The analogy suggests that just as Moses led Jews of ancient times to their first land of freedom, so too will Whitman lead modern Jews to a new land of freedom, a land premised on enlightened human thought rather than divine intervention. Similarly, in L. Miller’s introduction to his book of Yiddish translations of Whitman, published in 1940, he tells his readers that Whitman created “a healthy and robust lyric form, which puts forth the promise of socialistic poetry” (“*a gezunte un krestike lirik, vos trogt in zikh dem onzog af sotsialitisher poezye*”).

The most sustained Whitman-inspired Yiddish poem is I. J. Schwartz’ book-length epic *Kentucky*, serialized in the radical journal *Di Tsukunft* (The Future) from 1918 to 1922. Adapting Whitman’s images of an untrammelled American countryside, the book traces the history of an immigrant Jewish peddler named Joshua, who makes his way from New York City to Kentucky. Along the way he encounters a host of characters unknown to Yiddish readers: white and black southern farmers, ministers, small-town business owners. Even as it celebrates America’s natural beauty, Schwartz’ work demonstrates again and again how American industry has risen on the backs of laborers and threatens the vitality of the people.

For contemporary American readers, who may have first encountered Whitman in English 101, the Yiddish version of Whitman may come as something of a surprise. Our tendency is more commonly to associate Whitman with American patriotism and rugged individualism—not with some imminent socialist revolution. The point, however, is not necessarily to argue over Whitman’s “true” message—as he himself famously put it, “Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself”—but rather to recognize that poets (like all of us) adapt the languages they discover to shape and express their view of the world. No literary tradition is fixed and settled for all time—as W.H. Auden wrote in his elegy for W.B. Yeats, “the words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living.”

The poem that follows, entitled “Symposium” and written in 1923, is presented in English translation for the first time. Its author was a great follower of Whitman’s, a lesser-known Yiddish poet named Reuben Ludwig (1895–1926). Born in a shtetl near Kiev, he arrived in New York at the age of twelve with his mother and two sisters, joining a father who had immigrated some years before. In his new country, Ludwig quickly fell in love with American literature, and his first published poem was written in English for the socialist periodical *The New York Call*. It was when he adapted the cadence and imagery of Walt Whitman to the Yiddish language, however, that he discovered his own voice as a poet. Ludwig associated with a group of writers known as “The Introspectionists” (*Di Inzikhistn*), but he was, in the words of one critic, “perhaps the most American of the Yiddish poets in America.” At an early age Ludwig contracted tuberculosis, and he spent the better part of his life moving from one state to another, searching for an ideal climate in which to recover. He lived in New Mexico, Arizona, and California, and he brought the landscape of the American Southwest into Yiddish poetry for the first time.

“Symposium” is a poem that imagines Walt Whitman’s return from the grave to the America he loved. Whitman revisits the countryside, the cities, and the people, and he finds everywhere decay and suffering. The America he dreamed of and prophesied to the world has come to

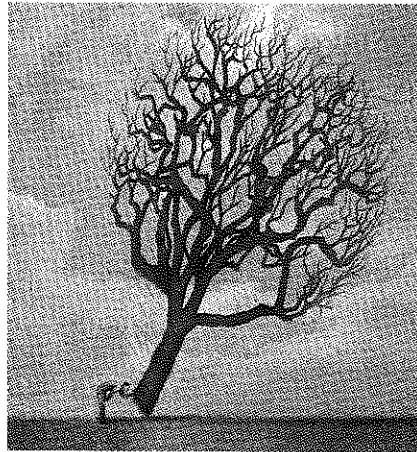
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bring to these new realms the sensorial curiosity, creativity, restraint and ethical savvy that can only grow out of our full-bodied encounter with others in the thick of the earthly sensuous. But if we plug our kids into the computer as soon as they are able to walk, we short-circuit the very process by which they could acquire such creativity and such restraint.

Drinking the Rain

There can be little hope of renewing a collective sense of the ethical without beginning to acknowledge and honor the forgotten primacy of the one reality that we all have in common. Yet the only world that we humans all have in common is the same world that we share with the other animals and the plants: this terrestrial realm of wind and water and sky, shivering with seeds and warmed by the sun. Hence, it seems unlikely that we will locate a lasting ethic without rediscovering our solidarity with all these other shapes of sentience, without remembering ourselves to the swallows and the meandering rivers.

We are understandably fascinated by the rich promise of our technologies, and deliciously dazzled by the new experiential realms opened to us by the genius of the digital rev-



olution. Yet our enthrallment with our own creations is steadily fragmenting our communities and our selves; our uncritical participation with technology risks eclipsing the one realm that alone can provide the guidance for all our technological engagements. Indeed, only one realm is sufficiently wild, outrageous, and complex enough to teach us the use and misuse of our own creations.

Only by remembering ourselves to the sensuous earth, and rediscovering this place afresh, do we have a chance of integrating the multiple and divergent worlds that currently vie for our participation. Only by rooting ourselves here, and recovering our ageless solidarity with this breathing world—drinking the rain, feeling the fur on our flesh, and listening close to the wind as it whirls through the city streets—only thus do we have a chance of learning to balance, and navigate, among the proliferating worlds that now claim our attention at the outset of a new millennium.

There are many, many other worlds, yes, but they are all hidden within this one. And so to neglect this humble, imperfect, and infinitely mysterious world is to recklessly endanger all the others. □

WALT WHITMAN AMONG THE YIDDISH POETS (from p. 58)

naught—it has been destroyed by the forces of capitalism, hauntingly embodied in the image of a “giddy-faced gold miner from California / With thinning, yellowish skin and deeply-sunken eyes.” This is, then, a nightmarish inversion of Whitman’s America: the bright lights of Broadway cannot quite conceal the “hordes of pale-faced children.”

In the second stanza, Whitman is joined by two additional American prophets, John Brown and Abraham Lincoln, who similarly discover a world overcome by violence. These two additional figures reveal Ludwig’s conviction that the promise of America is inextricably linked to the fate of African Americans. Brown’s attempt to free the slaves at Harper’s Ferry and Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation are implicitly put forth as moments when the true America, the radically egalitarian America of Whitman’s vision, came into view. Ludwig’s sensitivity to the struggles of African Americans was common amongst the Yiddish writers in America, who frequently associated black oppression in America with Jewish oppression in Tsarist Russia.

By blending the imagined voices of these American heroes—Whitman, Brown, and Lincoln—Ludwig makes of his poem a “symposium” on the state of the Union. And while the consensus is that chaos has overtaken the land, the poem ends on a surprisingly positive note. The nation is still bound together by “the widely-stretching ribbon of the Mississippi.” Underneath the chaos, there remains a

principle of order and wholeness, a foundation for hope.

The traditional Jewish teaching about redemption suggests that one day a messianic “King” will come and heal the world. Here, Ludwig inverts this teaching in two senses. First, he presents us with a queen, not a king; and, second, he suggests that the source of healing is already amongst us, grounded in the natural world. The implication is that poetry itself has the power to alter our vision, to reveal at once the decay beneath the glitter of modern life, and to express the vision of wholeness that survives intact.

It should be noted that the title of the poem in the original is given in Latin characters, presenting a striking contrast with the Hebrew characters of the main body of the poem. Also the poem’s epigraph—“What do you see Walt Whitman?”—is given in English. By blending languages and alphabets in this way, Ludwig draws attention to the idea that his poem participates in multiple traditions. The Whitmanian cadence, the invocation of the Mississippi, and the presence in the poem of a trinity of American heroes all locate the poem squarely in an American tradition; the fact that Ludwig writes in Yiddish inescapably connects the poem to Jewish culture; and the Greek origin of the title points to the classical beginnings of Western civilization itself. □

For further reading on this topic, see Leonard Prager’s excellent article “Walt Whitman in Yiddish” (*Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3, December, 1983).