

Introduction

As the fifth book of the Pentateuch, the book of Deuteronomy, draws to a close, God appears for the last time to Moses “in a pillar of cloud” and speaks to Israel’s prophet of what is to befall his people upon his death, which is imminent. Rather than comforting the aging leader with promises of his people’s glorious return to the long-lost land of Israel, God predicts a grim future: “You [Moses] are soon to lie with your fathers. This people will thereupon go astray after the alien gods in their midst, in the land they are about to enter; they will forsake Me and break My Covenant that I made with them” (31:16). In anticipation of this seismic rupture, God instructs Moses to “write down this poem and teach it to the people of Israel” (31:19). Counter to what the situation might seem to call for, the poem is not meant to ease exilic pain by ensuring Israel of God’s enduring presence. Rather, offered as a “witness against the people of Israel,” the poem works to aggravate the wound—to remind the wayward people just how far they are from the divine principle of being who legislates the terms of their very existence.

Turning to the poem itself, which God dictates to Moses, we discover that only in the last strophe is there any indication that the sacred Covenant, the guarantor of continuity, will remain intact. Most of the song’s forty-three verses are devoted to chronicling God’s largesse, Israel’s ingratitude, and the violent chaos

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that is inevitable. That is, just as the people of Israel are poised to claim the fabled land of “milk and honey,” they are obliged to take on, and to transmit to future generations, the knowledge that their return is doomed to sour; exile is inevitable. And a *poem* is the means by which this terrible knowing is to be conveyed. As one scholar memorably puts it, the poem “is a kind of time bomb” (Fisch 1988, 51) ticking away as the people lose their sense of vulnerability and, intoxicated by a sense of limitless power, grow “fat and gross and coarse,” without a thought for the God to whom they owe their existence (Deuteronomy 32:15). Then, after a long period of forgetfulness, this explosive utterance will set off a terrible avalanche of memories, as the people will once again suffer dispersion; for the poetic sound track accompanying the people of Israel into exile, comprised of the song Moses imparts to the people, is crafted to remind them just how desperate the “empty howling waste” will be.

This narrative sets the scene for my own inquiry into the contours and dynamics of a Jewish American poetics in at least two critical ways. First, it suggests that in the story of Jewish discursive practices, poetry is inextricably bound up with the exilic condition. Insofar as the story of Jews in America is so often read as an exilic phenomenon, the story of their poetry must be read under the sign of dispersion—if only to ultimately call this claim into question. Second, as the biblical episode makes clear, the Jewish poem can work to profoundly unsettling ends; for rather than holding out a promise of spiritual and material restoration, the poem dwells upon and aggravates the very conditions of estrangement that engendered it. This very idea of the Jewish poem as “an agent of turbulent thought” (to use Charles Bernstein’s formulation [1995, 378]) is central to my methodology. Throughout this study I seek to show how poetry provides an opportunity for complicating and therefore thickening our understanding of a range of issues activated by the discourse of Jewish American identity, including our collective investment in terms such as *exile* and *home*. Furthermore, I maintain that poetry is a powerful strategy for disrupting the strong masculinist narrative that has long underwritten the story of Jewish writing in general, and Jewish American writing in particular. Indeed, poetry’s elision from the “canon” of Jewish American writing indicates a broader politics of gender. The link between the poetic and the feminine—an ancient and ubiquitous aspect of the genre’s history—has important implications for Jewish American literary culture, with its own well-rehearsed troping of the Jew as effeminate and feminine.

One strong marker of the troubling and troublesome place poetry plays in the story of Jewish writing generally, and in Jewish American writing specifically, may be found in the relative silence surrounding the subject. To put it another way, my

book begins with a lacuna. Whereas Jewish American fiction has long been recognized as a fit subject for critical inquiry, Jewish American poetry has largely been overlooked. Until very recently, those who wanted to consider the subject found themselves, like the speaker in Virginia Woolf's classic 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own* (1981), "looking about the shelves for books that were not there." For a long time, when the question of the silence surrounding Jewish American poetry was even broached, the enterprise was declared to be all but impossible, beginning with Harold Bloom's infamously funereal essay "The Sorrows of American Jewish Poetry" (1975a, 247–62). Cynthia Ozick defers the subject, maintaining that it will be a long time before Jewish American writing is "ripe enough for poetry" (1994, 32).

More lately, poet-critic Allen Grossman, in the interest of provoking, rather than preempting, discussion, has written that "there has never been any Jewish poetry"—precisely in order to effect the very kind of quiet requisite to thoughtful reformulation. Although this silence has certainly begun to be filled with the recent appearance of valuable studies—such as Stephen Fredman's *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (2001), Norman Finkelstein's *Not One of Them in Place: Modern Poetry and Jewish American Identity* (2001), and Jonathan Barron's and Eric Selinger's collection *Jewish American Poetry: Poems, Commentary and Reflections* (2000)—I propose that the phenomenon itself is well worth investigating as a marker of Jewish American poetry's troubled and troublesome status.

The process of establishing a canon of Jewish American writing is well underway: the last five years have seen the publication of both a Norton Anthology of *Jewish American Literature* (Chametsky et al., eds., 2001) as well as a *Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature* (Kramer and Wirth-Nesher, eds., 2003), two strong indications that Jewish American writing has been at long last institutionally recognized as a significant strain in American literary history. I would like to defer this process of canonization, however, by suggesting that instead of asking, Who is a Jewish American poet? we might ask, What is a Jewish American poem?—by focusing on questions of form and genre as part of a sustained effort to describe the field of Jewish poetics. In this respect my study is meant to be broadly suggestive, and I hope generative, rather than comprehensive—a desire inscribed in the book's subtitle, *A Jewish American Poetics*. Like Jewishness itself—which, as poet Irena Klepfisz puts it, is "always arguable"—its poetry is dynamic and restless. Read closely, these texts demand that we scrutinize our relation to such structures of belonging as community, nation, and religion.

To appreciate better what may be learned from such poetries, aesthetic models and ideological and theological paradigms of poetic discourse need to be identified

and explicated. But there is more at stake than just intellectual, theological, or aesthetic gain. As I will argue more fully in Chapter 1 of this book, the marriage between Americanness and Jewishness has made for some problematic negotiations. With its particular affinity for tropes of tribelessness, homelessness, and above all exile, American poetics aggravates, indeed accelerates, the loss of ethnic specificity. This universalizing trend, a kind of “trouble” in which poetry is conspicuously implicated, lies at the heart of a deeply problematic claim that has become ubiquitous in contemporary Jewish American poetic practice—rather like a slogan or mantra, a one-line *ars poetica*, invoked by poets as different from one another as John Hollander, Jerome Rothenberg, and Eleanor Wilner: “All poets are Jews.” The phrase, equating poetic art with the condition of Jewishness (both trading on an “outsider” status), in fact diminishes what may be distinctive about Jewishness as a particular cultural and religious affiliation.

In the interest of restoring the material difference Jewishness makes to the poetic enterprise, I concentrate on specific aesthetic dilemmas or concerns, such as those attendant upon metaphor as a rhetorical strategy potentially at odds with the Jewish allegiance to a disembodied deity. Further, I am interested in tracking how poetic texts draw on biblical and rabbinic traditions, sometimes to radically new interpretive ends, in order to make their meaning. To put it another way, many of the poems examined here participate in what historian Yosef Yerushalmi calls an act of “anamnesis”—an imaginative retrieval of the past conducted in the interest of transforming the future.

Readers will immediately notice my commitment to aesthetic and formal concerns, since the book is shaped around particular conceptual problems, rather than specific poetic careers. Each chapter concentrates on genres, forms, and distinctive kinds of rhetorical occasions—such as *piyyutim* (medieval prayer-poems), psalm, lyric, lamentation, elegy, and kaddish—in order to generate a lexicon for Jewish American poetic practice. In this way I mean to deploy one of the most powerful explanatory tools available to the student of poetry, because a focus on genre helps illuminate the specific cultural function of a given text. By investigating how certain specific paradigms of Jewish discursive practice play out in the work of a wide range of twentieth-century poets, this book explores the making of a poetics that both illuminates and actively participates in the making of that complex, ever-changing category of identity known as Jewish Americanness. Responding to philosopher-critic Susan Stewart’s call for a thorough and ongoing consideration of how literary forms may shape and constitute, not just illustrate, culture, I am committed to asking, What *is* the relation between aesthetic and cultural transformation? In other words, although the reader will certainly find extended discus-

sions of such well-recognized poets as Allen Ginsberg and Louis Zukofsky, I am less concerned with demonstrating how they do or don't fit into that slipperiest of categories, "the Jewish Writer," than with showing how their poems illuminate issues central to the making of Jewish identity.

This line of inquiry leads to one of the book's strongest efforts: an ongoing dramatization of how poems may be used to effect cultural transformation. For the poems examined here do not merely describe ritual practices or identity positions; instead, they actively interrogate the function of deeply entrenched prayers (such as the kaddish, the mourner's prayer) and cultural concepts (such as the notion of Israel as "home"). Moreover, in demonstrating how it is that poetry aggravates a crucial and fruitful tension between Judaism as a religious category of identity and Judaism as a cultural one, the book contributes to the fast-growing fields of both Jewish and cultural studies, and also serves as a limit case for theories of literature and culture, which have focused on narrative and have tended to occlude poetry altogether from their considerations. Ruth Wisse's decision to ignore poetry completely in the single chapter devoted to Jewish American writing in *The Modern Jewish Canon* (2000) only deepens my commitment to making a place for poetry in the story of a literary tradition that has just celebrated its 350th anniversary.

But again, rather than simply making a case for a specific set of poets, I want to begin by scrutinizing the silence surrounding Jewish American poetry; for the presence of this silence may well be a practical outcome of a generally assumed distinction and long-standing opposition between narrative (as the realm of the secular, and thus of *natio* and community) and poetry (as the supposed realm of the sacred and transcendent, of "spilt religion" [Hulme 1936]). The assumption thus is that poetry is ill-suited to discussions of "imagined communities" and other such rich cultural tropes and frames of analyses. Jewish American poetry, which is both formally and thematically interested in making manifest what poet-critic Charles Bernstein calls the "holiness of the ordinary," offers an important corrective to this binary, employing "secularized" versions of liturgical forms (such as the kaddish). With such moves, the poetry represented here demands that we think hard about the relation between the sacred and the secular and resist the sort of easy displacements that color our use of a term like *chosenness*.

In the history of Jewish discursive practice, the genre of poetry itself has long been identified as troubling and troublesome, serving as what I have already described as "an agent of turbulent thought." This troubled history provides a rich theoretical framework for discussing the material specificity of Jewish American aesthetic practice. I contend that Jewish poetry's inaugural moment may be traced

to the destruction of the Temple (587 B.C.E.), an event documented with the crucial query “How can we sing God’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4).

The notion of poetry (the act of singing in a strange land) as both a response to and a consequence of exile, a condition of radical displacement, is particularly relevant to the condition of modern Jewish American verse. This dynamic helps focus our attention on how modern Jewish American poetry at once aggravates as well as compensates for the demise of founding social institutions—the very catastrophe (exile) that calls the poem into being. In the exilic space where poetry resides, the potential emerges for speaking not only toward, but sometimes against, the community’s dominant institutions. Thus, such moments of rupture in the poetry mark a disturbance that offers insight into both the poetics and the culture(s) of which it is a part. Indeed, this book contends that the tradition of Jewish poetic writing makes vivid and apparent an irresolvable and ongoing, even sustaining, tension between individuated and collective models of voice and identity.

This may be otherwise construed as a tension between the conditions of estrangement and those of belonging—a tension between “dwelling” and “displacement” that this book means to embrace. One of the most far-reaching claims of the book concerns the ways in which the condition of displacement or exile ultimately becomes the grounds for an alternate account of belonging. With this move, I mean to join other cultural critics—such as Daniel Boyarin and, more recently, Ranen Omer-Sherman—who value literary studies as an important strategy for imaginatively disentangling ideas about community and belonging from those of nationhood and homeland.

In this way my account of a “diasporic” poetics means to interrupt the dominant cultural narrative that views “Jewishness” as a recognizably unified whole—a precept that is complicated further as Jewishness bleeds into Americanness, making for the loss of cultural specificity. For the specific subset of *Jewish American* poetry requires a renewed consideration of the extent to which the story of *American* poetry is itself one of discontinuity and of loss, preoccupied with questions of tradition, authority, and origin (as described by Mutlu Blasing [1987] and Susan Howe [1993] in their revisionary accounts of American literary history). My study thus means to consider both how Jewish writers contribute to a polyphonic American literature and how America contributes to the making of a polyphonic Jewish literary culture.

Early in the process of writing this book, I discovered that it was necessary to use an interdisciplinary approach in order to describe some of the many roles poetry plays in the making of a Jewish American consciousness. Therefore, in these pages readers will find discussions of poetic and cultural theory alongside Jewish

theology and philosophy. Grounding this kind of layered account is my sense of myself as both an insider and an outsider, particularly when it comes to Jewish Studies. For nearly all of my intellectual life, I have tried hard to “dance at two weddings” (the Yiddish version of “being in two places at once”). My early college years were spent in Israel studying Jewish texts. Although I eventually shifted my attention to English literature, my decision to focus on poetry, a kind of discourse that yields itself only under the closest kinds of scrutiny, was most certainly influenced by my ongoing immersion in a textual tradition rich in important ambiguities and in which the act of interpretation truly matters.



The first chapter, “‘Jewish Trouble’ and the Trouble with Poetry,” serves as an introduction to many of the book’s major themes and concerns, establishing both a historical context and a theoretical frame for understanding the problematic status of Jewish poetry as a marginalized discourse. With this context in place, I then focus on two poems as sustained examples of the kinds of “trouble” poetry can make for the construction of Jewish American identity, and as a way of naming some key issues that I explore in greater detail elsewhere in the book. Jacqueline Osherow’s “Moses in Paradise” shows how the act of poetic speech may challenge the profound distinctions that, according to Jewish tradition, set the divine apart from the human, proposing that both may be of the body. Osherow’s example of poetry’s capacity for radical theological and aesthetic subversion is followed by a discussion of Emma Lazarus’s signature poem, “The New Colossus” (better known as “The Statue of Liberty Sonnet”), as an example of how Jewish American poetry mediates between two crucial poles of identity, religion, and culture. Although the book focuses largely on twentieth-century writers, the inclusion of this nineteenth-century poet strengthens the growing recognition of Lazarus’s role as an originary voice in Jewish American writing.

By offering discussions of both well-established and relatively unknown writers, this chapter establishes a precedent for complicating an emerging account of Jewish American poetry as a discrete canon—and for showing how poetics provides a dramatic site in which the intersections of culture, history, and theology come into striking relief. Further, in this chapter I introduce one of the book’s founding figures, the *Shekhinah*, the kabbalistic term for the feminine figuration of the Godhead—a figure who, in the story of Jewish American poetics, serves in the capacity of muse. Known also as the divine presence who dwells with her people in exile, the *Shekhinah* presides over a diasporic poetics—an aesthetic enterprise committed to representing a culture whose boundaries are perpetually in flux.

The gendered aspect of Jewish American poetics takes center stage in Chapter 2, “‘You still haven’t finished with your mother’: The Gendered Poetics of Charles Reznikoff and Allen Ginsberg,” in which I investigate the infamous but insufficiently theorized Jewish Mother—not merely as a thematic or stereotypical figure but as part of a deep structure in Jewish American culture that illuminates the gendered narrative underwriting poetic institutions—thus forcing us to rethink issues of masculinity as well as of usable traditions.

Chapter 3, “‘Speaking about epics’: Zukofsky, Oppen, History, and the ‘Tale of the Tribe,’” takes up the paternal function as played out in the work of two Jewish late-modernist poets, as I explore the tensions (and ambiguities) between myth and history in Jewish poetry and suggest that history can neither be escaped nor contained. In these pages I examine the difference Jewishness makes to the modernist preoccupation with what James Joyce describes as “the nightmare of history.” This chapter also provides another opportunity to expand upon the relation between individuated models of belonging and those grounded in the idea of a unified collective.

Collective models of identity formation continue to be at issue in Chapter 4, “‘Where are we moored?’: Adrienne Rich, Irena Klepfisz, Lament, and Its Diasporic Aftermath,” which begins by examining Rich’s efforts to reappropriate the biblical genre of lament (a genre deeply implicated in the sexual politics of mourning). Reading the book of Lamentations in the context of feminist revisionary readings of poetic mourning provides a frame for considering how this Jewish American poet mourns her nation, even as she questions it as a viable ground of collective well-being.

Rich’s interrogation of nation sets the scene for a discussion of Irena Klepfisz’s experiments in Yiddish-English bilingual verse as an aesthetic strategy devoted to imagining the possibility of an alternate, “diasporic” account of Jewish belonging and identity—an account of “home,” whose boundaries exceed the dictates of national policy. This discussion also affords the opportunity to explore more fully the place of Yiddish, a distinctly “absorbative” linguistic construct, in the making of a Jewish American poetics. Throughout this book, I suggest how—because of the emphases on displacement, estrangement, exile, and diaspora—Jewish American poetry illuminates some of the central political tensions of our time (from the Holocaust to the Palestinian intifadas), especially the relationship between national and extranational modes of belonging.

In my analysis of Klepfisz, the focus is clearly on reading Jewishness as a secularized cultural phenomenon; but in the final chapters of this study, the emphasis shifts from the secular to the sacred, as I concentrate on exploring the relation be-

tween poetry and specific liturgical forms, including that of the psalm. In broaching questions of a theological nature, my book asks that literary studies, especially those devoted to modern and contemporary writing, scrutinize and ultimately overcome a deeply entrenched resistance to institutions of religious knowledge. It also seeks to make vivid the ways in which poetry can contribute to contemporary Jewish theology.

Even as I argue for the importance of liturgical forms in the shaping of a Jewish American poetics, I maintain that it is important to understand what makes poetry distinct from prayer; such is the focus of Chapter 5, “‘Unreachable Father’: Exploring the Boundary Between Poetry and Prayer.” In examining the boundaries, the distance and the difference, between poetry and liturgy, as played out principally in the work of George Oppen and Louise Glück, I again scrutinize the sacred/secular dichotomy so central to discursive assumptions about the poetic.

Merely to insist upon reading poetry and prayer as functionally different kinds of discursive practice, however, risks oversimplifying the relation of these potent genres. Therefore, in the interest of producing a more nuanced account, I turn to the work of Allen Grossman, expanding upon his notion of the “theophoric,” or God-bearing, poem. In the final chapter, “‘Do not be content with an imaginary God’: Poetry as a Preface to Prayer,” I argue not only for how Jewish poems facilitate prayer but also for how, as constitutive utterances working in the service of a diasporic consciousness, these poems can compel us to interrogate our investment in any given land, any specific place in time, and help us instead to imagine alternative sites of belonging, including that of a “Jerusalem of the mind.” In other words, theology and the poetry it engenders give us new ways of thinking about matters of urgent political concern. The chapter affords a renewed opportunity to consider how Jewish American poetry illuminates the limitations of exile as a dominant trope in Jewish identity and aesthetic production.

Taken as a whole, the book explores the (sometimes fruitful) frictions and intersections between Jewish history, theology, American identity, and cultural production.