EVEN IN ITS HEYDAY, American Yiddish poetry had but a handful of dedicated readers. And were one such cognoscente to have picked up Jacob Glatstein’s first book of poems (1921), its title would have elicited no small measure of surprise, for only the name of the poet appeared on its cover. On second thought, however, the selfsame reader might well have taken this demonstrative act as further proof of Glatstein’s reputation as an enfant terrible. He had, after all, launched his career at the age of 23, first under a female pseudonym and then, with but a handful of poems to his (real) name, had cofounded the In zikh (Introspectivist) movement at the end of that annus mirabilis, 1919. And even before his own reputation as a poet was established, he had published a scathing overview of all of Yiddish poetry in which he specially delighted in challenging Di yunge, the pioneers of modern Yiddish poetry in America.1

The absence of a title in Yankev Glatshteyn, which betrayed both a touch of exhibitionism and a large measure of egocentricity, was designed to annul the barrier between the poet and his creation. Glatstein may also have intended to set the record straight, seeing as how he had made his debut in two New York weeklies under the pen-name of Clara Bloom (the idea being that a woman’s American-sounding name would make his poems more marketable), but found his cover blown soon thereafter. And so, by collecting his poems simply under his real name he might have been atoning for his youthful indiscretions and proclaiming at the same time: My poems—c’est moi!

And yet it would be a mistake to identify the persona with the poet,
a mistake that Glatstein himself warned against in the concluding poem of the volume. Indeed, this was to become his trademark, to reserve the ending as a key to all that had come before:

מימן ליריעה
cזצוף אנצט WebClient להנהן רגע זהות זו ת-confirm קיים.
מי בלantium התו און קורות יאורה —
וי הזיב אוכ על ערך?—
א אני פארגוטק ויתנה נאם מיזמר atrין ממי:
مام.
ואן נואר ירח וילם אווטקלט人寿 מימע יואר והף שני.

MY POEMS
I've composed long sheafs of grey hair and deep furrows.
With blond hair and childish eyes—
How could I?
Since the heart in me still howls in the evenings:
Mama.

And even today I feel like sledding my years away in the snow.

Judging from the title, the speaker must be a poet, yet from the opening line on, the barrier between “art” and “life” breaks down as the speaker contends—true to poetic convention—that his concern is not with poetry at all, but rather with an unmediated act of creation, that of a human character. Thus the opening line ties in with the titleless title of the book in that both invoke a poetic persona that supposedly emerges from out of the poems. And that persona, it would seem, is of an aged man! Despite the poet’s best intentions to create a true self-portrait, he seems to have realized in retrospect that a composite of an “implied poet” had emerged with little or no resemblance to its biographical creator. Thus the final poem can be read as a warning to the reader not to identify Yankev Glatshleym with the “real” Jacob Glatstein.

This warning, if such it is, is directed not at the reader of today schooled to beware the “intentional fallacy,” but rather to the reader of sixty years ago still schooled in the romantic notion of poetry as a true expression of the poet’s creative personality. If the poem seems put there as an afterthought, as if the poet had just “read” his own poems through for the first time, it may suggest Glatstein’s own surprise at having discovered how old he comes out looking, how heavy the mood that surrounds these early, “youthful” poems.

There are other elements in the poem that drive a wedge between biography and rhetoric. What, for instance, are we to make of the reference to his mother and, by implication, to his childhood, when there is virtually no recourse to autobiography anywhere in the volume, not to speak of a sentimental attachment to a lost childhood? In fact, Glatstein’s early poetry altogether lacks an autobiographical impulse or the use of
personal memory as its point of departure. When these finally appear, in
the late thirties, they mark a major shift in Glatstein’s poetics, heralded
by the publication of his first works of prose: *Ven Yash iz geforn* (When
Yash Set Out, 1938) and *Ven Yash iz gekumen* (When Yash Arrived, 1940). \(^2\)

At the time of Glatstein’s poetic debut, biography was one of the
central ways of structuring one’s poems into book form, at least among
Yiddish poets. It was H. Leivick who established the norm in his inaugural
collection of *Lider* (1919) with its narrative line that clearly paralleled the
course of the poet’s dramatic life: from his birth as one “chosen” to be a
poet, to his political exile in Siberia, to his escape on foot to America.
Leivick was lionized from then on among Yiddish readers who responded
not so much to the poetry as to the personality that seemed to body it
forth. So compelling was this method of reading the poet’s life out of
the poetry that even Mani Leyb, whose inaugural *Lider* (1918) were
structured according to far more subtle principles, opened the volume
nonetheless with an autobiographical poem that established the origins
and yikhes (pedigree) of the speaker. Glatstein, in contrast, repudiated
this method out of hand. The main thrust of his critical “Run-through
of Yiddish Poetry,” was, in fact, to censure the first generation of modern
American Yiddish poets who went by the name of *Di yunge* (“the
youngsters”) for their egocentricity, claiming that it limited the scope
and interest of their poems. Both in theory and in practice, therefore,
Glatstein eschewed the autobiographical pattern.

Where, then, would the structuring principle come from? Glatstein
was fully aware that the very act of collecting poems that had originally
appeared in sundry periodicals and under separate aegis created new
contexts for both the individual poem and the collection as a whole.
How Glatstein conceptualized this problem is revealed in a brilliant
review he wrote of *Fabius Lind*, a volume of poetry by his fellow intro-
spectivist A. Leyles. As all poets know, Glatstein confided to his readers,
poems get written in isolation, and only much later do poets return to
them looking for connections, grouping them into sequences that make
up the volume. “But as a rule,” he admitted, “it is the very arbitrariness
of the separately written poems that assumes its own new measure in a
book. The poems take their places so exactly, as if they had been made
for this structure a priori.” \(^3\)

Glatstein’s observations are particularly apposite to our discussion
because the volume under review began with a “diary” of the persona
Fabius Lind—a series of thirty poems each of which carried a date instead
of a title. Glatstein points out that this order is designed to illustrate
how the passage of time leaves its indelible stamp on the poet’s person-
ality. Read as a unit, Glatstein argues, *Fabius Lind* provides “a poetic
record of ten years,” and its organizing principles emphasize this reading.
This “poetic record,” however, is not to be understood in naive mimetic
terms, but rather in terms of a synthesis between the poet’s personality and the reality external to it—a central tenet of Introspectivism. Poems laid out “arithmetically” according to their date of composition have no appeal whatsoever to Glatstein. His ideal is an architectonic structure which itself becomes the source of new meanings. Given these astute critical evaluations, one is lead to ask two related questions: Did the young Glatstein also strive to achieve a free-standing structure in his early volumes, and did he try to achieve this unity through some mimetic principle?

Before answering the first question, we can answer the second with a categorical no. Even the most persistent search will yield not a single, definable object of imitation that serves to unify Glatstein’s early volumes of poetry, and most certainly not a series of narrative signposts that connect the various sections into a single plot line. At most, the theme of death (to which I shall return later) appears at the end of each of his first three volumes, but this closure in no way brings the various sections of the volume together either sequentially or causally.

Some thematic pattern does emerge, however, from the chapter headings of his early volumes, as well as from the opening poems of each section that—in Yanke Glatshteyn at least—serve as a kind of epigraph and are set apart typographically from the poems that follow. When placed in parallel columns, the chapter headings of the first book find their structural and thematic twin in those of the second (1926):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yanke Glatshteyn} & \quad \text{Fraye ferzn (Free Verses)} \\
\text{Undzer dor (Our Generation}} & \quad \text{Evenyzn (Avenues)} \\
\text{Khaloymes (Dreams)} & \quad \text{Trit (Steps)} \\
\text{Tsvelf (Twelve)} & \quad \text{Zibleshrekn (Silver Fears)} \\
\text{Fargeyn (Passing)} & \quad \text{Kanut (Canute)}
\end{align*}
\]

To put it schematically, eros is the underlying theme of “Twelve” and of “Steps,” as thanatos, aging and ending is Glatstein’s major concern in the twin sections, “Passing” and “Silver Fears.” Other analogies, however, are far more difficult to draw. There seems to be little common ground between the opening sections of each respective volume; and while the title “Dreams” is an obvious reference to the shared thematics of the poems in this section, there is no apparent link between the poems of the last section in Fraye ferzn which bears the esoteric-sounding title of “Canute.”

Looking more carefully, we see that not all poems in a section adhere in equal measure to the single leitmotif. The reason why some sections
were more inclusive than others should be obvious: to the extent that his total output is known to us, the young Glatstein included virtually everything he wrote into book form. Thus far we know of only a handful of published poems of this period that didn’t make it into one or another volume. He therefore had to stretch some thematic criteria quite far in order to accommodate almost every poem under the designated headings.

What, then, are we to do with poems that don’t quite seem to fit into their frame? Are we to explain them away as being placed there under duress or by chance? How does their position influence the way we read them? Where does the poet achieve a unified structure and where does he vary his themes? Doesn’t the thematic division limit the reader’s perspective as he or she seeks the common ground between each individual poem and its partners in the same section? In trying to answer these questions, I shall argue that because the editorial process involves such a concentrated effort at synthesis, it can, if properly interpreted, reveal some of the building blocks of the young Glatstein’s poetics.

2

Our Generation

The wick of our generation is flickering.
O, momentary mortals.
Let us carve our deeds into marble at once.
Record our names in books.
Assemble our glory brick by brick,
So that the marble and books will weigh heavily upon our children
And our hands, at least, will wander through space
As the wick of our generation slowly flickers out.

Translated by Melvin Elberger

Knowing as we do the brilliant journalistic career that lay ahead for Glatstein, we could easily be misled—yet again!—by the title of this lead poem to expect some kind of response to contemporary events, perhaps a
lament on the fallen spiritual state of the generation. As the opening lines make clear, however, the referent in this poem is not the contemporary scene at all, but the amazing permanence and durability of the written word produced though it is by transient human beings. Nor is “poetry” the kind of writing that is necessarily meant here, for insofar as Glatstein talks of poetry at all—in the closure poem discussed before—he means something of a more personal bent. Here, in contrast, there is a call for something monumental in scope, some major chronicle designed for future consumption that would describe the “deeds” of the generation in objective terms, as it were, free of the author’s personal bias. Unless, of course, this is nothing but neoclassical posturing, meant to be taken ironically. What bearing, after all, do the modernist credo or the poems that follow in the volume have on the permanence of the written word? And shouldn’t the rhetorical flourish of “O, momentary mortals” put us immediately on guard? Yet the poem, it seems to me, defies a sustained ironic reading. Whatever irony there is conveys the speaker’s hidden doubts as to whether the monument left standing once its creator is gone will have any value beyond its physical presence. Or better yet, this irony may underscore the feeling of powerlessness that emanates from the overt subject of this poem—man’s hopeless struggle with the flow of time.

The pathos and purpose of this opening poem become clear only when we reach the end of the volume. What began as a blueprint of sorts in the first person plural ends—in “My Poems”—with the private doubts and retrospective stock-taking of the poet as an individual. As opposed to the opening invocation of future generations and of sons, the closure gives vent to an instinctual, almost savage cry to the past, to one’s childhood and to one’s mother. Within the context of the volume as a whole, this cry represents the speaker’s most intimate expression, for though he is “actually” but young in years, he has donned the mantle of maturity with its concomitant wisdom and life experience. And so the opening and closing poems are structural markers measuring the span of the book as a whole, at whose pivot lies the speaker’s eventual retreat into his private universe.

Were one to isolate the first section of the book—as critics have done to argue that Glatstein was (always) concerned with the burning issues of the day—“Our Generation” would take its thematic place alongside its companion poems: the apocalyptic “1919”; the response to the pogroms in postwar Poland, Kh’bin a shvakher mentsh (“I Am a Weak Person”); the spoof of the assimilationist Jew in O, ambasadore (“Oh, Ambassador”), and the outspoken antiwar poem Bayonetn (“Bayonettes”). Yet read in the company of “Our Generation,” which, as I have tried to show, has nothing to do with the current scene, the rest of the poems in this section likewise resist an easy thematic rubric.
More obvious proof that something other than the here-and-now is being meant comes in the very next poem, *Der shkolser kinig* ("The Proud King"), one of the most intriguing of Glatstein’s early works. Nothing in this poem suggests a contemporary frame of reference: neither its subject matter (a king conquers an enemy’s city and then discovers that its defenders are old and impoverished), nor its epic style, replete with biblical allusions and locutions. Were the poem to have dwelt on the victims or the gory details of the siege, or on the savagery of the conquering army, then some link could be drawn to the antiwar sentiment so prevalent among the Generation of 1914. Instead, siege, war and violence are invoked only to dissolve once it becomes clear that the young were not casualties of war at all, that some impersonal, amorphous death force hovers over the aged survivors, as over the king himself, a force that no human agent, however powerful, can counteract. As the poem opens with the vainglorious king entering the conquered city with the rising sun, so it ends with the disappearance of the sun, the king, and his royal anger. Whatever contemporary resonance the tension between victors and vanquished might have had finally gives way to the silent presence of time, wreaking its inexorable destruction.

Thus, the concerns of "Our Generation" alluded to in the title poem must be drawn on a much broader canvas, to take in the extremes of life’s ephemerality on the one hand and apocalyptic expectation on the other (in "Homo," the concluding poem in this section). And this thematic sweep, in turn, is meant to exemplify the Introspectivist credo. "For us, everything is ‘personal,’” declared their manifesto of 1919. "Wars and revolutions, pogroms and the labor movement, Protestantism and Buddhism, the synagogue and the Cross, the mayoral elections and a prohibition of our language: each of these may or may not move us, just as we may or may not be moved by a woman with blond hair or our own turmoil."6 As the entire external and psychic world were proclaimed to be the province of modern Yiddish poetry, so the opening section of *Yankee Glatshṭeyn* resists compartmentalization. It is meant to contain both mimesis and fantasy, both feverish actuality and encroaching death.

As for the woman with the blond hair, she and other, lyrical concerns of the poet are reserved for "Passing," the fourth section of the book. Meanwhile we are being dazzled by a veritable kaleidoscope—another key phrase of the In zikh manifesto—of hybrid characters: a conquering king who ultimately must bow to those whom he has conquered; the disintegrating self of Yankl son of Yitskhok ("1919"); the assimilationist who cannot flee from his Jewish fate ("Oh, Ambassador"), and the servant Lucretio who turns out to be a Jew despite his Roman name ("The Last Hours of My Master"). If anything, the organizing thread of the whole first section is that of identity crises.

Though the intended effect of the "Our Generation" section is to
display the poet’s phenomenal openness to the myriad transformations of the external world—an effect which was not lost on Glatstein’s contemporary readers—the thematic thrust in the sections that follow points to a gradual retreat from external reality into the private realm of the poet. There are definite signposts of the movement along the way: the illusions depicted in the “Dreams” section; the erotic poems in “Twelve” and the palpable tension between the lyric speaker and the human landscape that surrounds him in the last section, “Passing.” Accompanying this gradual retreat into the self is the replacement of irony and sarcasm by a distinct elegiac tone.

The reader of modern Yiddish poetry has been here before. There can be no mistaking the thematic principles chosen by the young Glatstein to structure his inaugural volume of poems and their parallel in Moyshe Leyb Halpern’s In New York, which appeared but two years earlier. The latter began with a chapter titled “Our Garden” (echoed, perhaps, in Glatstein’s “Our Generation”) which marked the outer boundaries of the poet’s physical world. There followed the love poems of “Blond and Blue” that depicted a lyric “I” calling to be liberated from its illusions and feverish imaginings. “Evening” then opened with its celebrated elegy to I. L. Peretz, accompanied by laments in a similar vein, and the book ended with the apocalyptic poem “A Night,” in which the poet was torn between the vision of his own imminent death and the national-universal yearning for redemption.6

Revealed in this structural parallel is the young Glatstein’s “anxiety of influence” both in terms of what he borrowed and what he discarded. However innovative the shaping of his individual poems, the overarching poetic structure betrayed a profound debt to his precursors—one that has never been noted before. No less striking are the divergences, however: the lack of any big-city landscape that would link “Our Generation” to Halpern’s “Our Garden,” and the total absence of anything comparable to Halpern’s autobiographical chapter In der fremd (“On Foreign Soil”). Thus, even with so “strong” a precursor as Moyshe Leyb Halpern, Glatstein would not follow his thematic lead. Instead, the debt would be buried well beneath the thematic surface.

What the young Glatstein discovered as he cast around for structural anchor was that his choices on the broad level were far more limited than he might have hoped. Yet equally unanticipated were the new meanings that accrued in the recombination of discrete units, new systems that emerged both at the level of the volume as a whole and at the level of its individual chapters. We have already seen how he used the ending for surprise effect and used the opening to create false expectations. It is worthwhile briefly reviewing the two opening chapters to see how the motto poems operate within their own boundaries: (a) how
they set up an arc to the closing poem of the chapter and (b) how they exist in dialectical tension with their neighbors.

We have already noted the thematic arc that reaches from the empirical (if not imperious) tone of “Our Generation” to the apocalyptic mood of “Homo.” A far more visible arc reaches across the second section of the volume, from the motto poem “Dreams” to the closing poem “In the Dark.” In both, illusion is depicted as a luminous presence that quickly dissipates, accompanied by the repetition of the words *glien* and *gliflign* (“glow,” “fireflies”). But while the opening speaks of illusion as a sandbird that gives birth to new dreams, the concluding poem equates illusion with poetry and describes the certain end that awaits them both:

Nothing but
a word dances in the darkness
and soon
it bursts like a red balloon
on a damp pane
where, only moments before,
the sun expired.

The spatial division here is ever so sharp. The window—that same prop so beloved of the *Yunge* who used it as a barrier or as a bridge between inner and outer reality?—is blind to the outside and any contact with it is fatal. Whilst in the opening poem there were no spatial markers at all, for illusions were capable of expanding or annulling all boundaries, in the closing poem, the dimensions of the poet’s world have shrunk to the narrow confines of his home, a contraction that presages certain death. At the same time as the poem ends on an unequivocal note of finality, it also prepares the reader for the midnight setting of the motto poem in the section that follows.

And so, the theme of death appears somewhat artificially at the end of these two sections as a kind of structural fall-back. While death is a convenient signpost of the lyric speaker’s shrinking universe, its reuse
strikes one as too facile a way of giving each section its proper sense of an ending.

Luckily, the second network of relationships within each section is far more interesting: There is a striking contrast in tone and mood between the motto poem and its successor. Thus, an air of restfulness, that seemingly emanates from the speaker’s spiritual maturity and from his wide contemplative sweep, hovers over each of the motto poems, with each elegant turn of phrase bespeaking a sophisticated consciousness. Even when the feeling of ephemerality lies at the center of the poem, it is balanced out with the hope of renewal and of permanence. Taking the first two motto poems as an example, we have seen how the finality of man’s brief life in “Our Generation” is mitigated by the eternal monumentality of the marble and brick, while the quickly dissolving illusion in “Dreams” gives rise in turn to a new dream.

In stark contrast to the lyrical comfort of the motto poem, the next poem in succession in each of the book’s four sections is marked by drama and tension: A powerless man stands face-to-face with the victorious, all-powerful king (Der sholtzer king, “The Proud King”); he raises his voice in prayer in order to placate the angry god (In shneyland, “In Snowland”); brings sacrifices and offerings in a religious-pagan ritual (Fayertsungen, “Tongues of Fire”), or whispers a magical incantation in order to free himself from captivity (“Sesame”). The tension in these poems is produced by the encounter of a broken man, standing at the brink of life, who confronts an extraordinarily powerful force that he must somehow appease. Thus, “Tongues of Fire,” which introduces a section of poems on love and sex, immediately fills the reader with foreboding: the poem’s speaker sacrifices his young life on a church altar in a repulsive, mysterious and hybrid ceremony that defies a straightforward interpretation. Whatever its thematic link to the poems in this section, “Tongues of Fire” throws a violent light on the sexual relationships soon to be described. These will emerge as an irresistible seduction that lead to destruction or premature death.

One must therefore differentiate between two organizing principles in Glatstein’s first book of poems. The internal rhythm of each section is determined by the juxtaposition of the lyric and dramatic in the first and second poems which gives rise to a rich dialectical tension. But each individual section follows a similar movement from the kaleidoscopic manifestations of an external reality to an anchoring within the consciousness of the speaker. This creates both a link and a cumulative effect from one section to another. Taken together, these two very different patterns provide a clear structural blueprint for the volume as a whole.
The Young Glatstein

The final measure both of Glatstein’s debt to his precursors and of his commitment to a new, modernist, poetics comes in the last section of his book whose supposed theme—that of death—is announced in its title poem:

"PASSING"

Now they’re playing my hours on the finest strings,
Mild vibrations flow into my body.
On white slippers the rustle of silks floats around me.
I am a thin knot of smoke circling upward.

Death emerges as a gradual, even silent act, in the course of which the “I” loses its substantiality as it blends atmospherically with the universe to the accompaniment of delicate, soothing sounds. The rustling, floating silk and the slowly dissipating smoke are the perfect vehicles to convey an elegiac acceptance of the end. Even in the section’s most ironic poem, death—appearing in the form of arteriosclerosis—gnaws at the contented life of a dandy like “a geduldiger gazlen vos loyert af di vegn” (“a patient robber lurking on the roads”; “Arteriosclerosis,” p. 73), which combines a connotation of violence with passive expectation. Death of this sort can carry no dramatic weight; it is the fitting end to a life of ennui, a life that does not seize the moment but is gradually emptied of meaning, or is marked by an inescapable process which vitiates any possible resistance.

No wonder, then, that signs of violence are so few in this last section. Even if in one poem a hidden hand appears that pushes the speaker over the brink, that hand doesn’t complete the task; it merely initiates an endless cyclical movement (Shtot, “City,” p. 66). This also explains why other, more violent poems could find no place in this fourth and final section: Not “Tongues of Fire” with its ironic rituals of macabre magic; not “1919” with its head-on collision between the speaker and the flying debris of modernity; not even “The Last Hours of My Master” with its ironic grotesquerie.

It is entirely possible that the view of death in Glatstein’s poems as presented thus far derived from the influence of the Far East which Yiddish poets arrived at through their reading of modernist literature.
“Nirvana,” a poem in section four, bears witness to this influence. The editors of In zikh were lavish in their praise of Arthur Waley’s translations of Chinese poetry, just as their own poetry is replete with motifs and allusions to the world of the Far East, the scope and function of which within the wider cultural orientation of modern Yiddish poetry has yet to be studied. Yet alongside this “exotic” view of death, we also find traces of a more traditional set of images: death personified as a withered old man who appears suddenly before the speaker (In a zunikn tog, “On a Sunny Day”); as a “bony hand” pointing to his end (Di leite sho, “The Last Hour”), or as professional female mourners (klogmuters) bewailing his death (Af mtn veg, “At Midway”). The two faces of death converge to give this section its clear contemplative stamp, while the “I”’s ruminations on the inevitable end to life bespeak a consciousness thoroughly aware of itself. In a sense, we may take these to be the quintessentially introspectivist poems in the volume as a whole.

But for this self-awareness to be achieved, the lyrical speaker must cut himself off from his surroundings, because all his senses are now geared toward absorbing that truth which is hidden from the others. “On a Sunny Day” exemplifies how such an awareness takes shape and shows the discovery of death’s concreteness to be the greatest possible achievement. Dramatizing the discovery is a frame which begins with a question and ends with an epiphany:

איך?
מה יד איך?
א רוחות שלobarלייצנער נצרוקנער.
וזאש לאוזן זא פן עמעענש קאפריז דייקט.

I?
What am I?
A heap of thoughts flashing by
that let themselves be dictated by somebody’s caprices.

(p. 61)

The description of the “I” as a heap of sudden thoughts that arise without order or sense is perfectly in line with the Introspectivist credo, but this is only the point of departure. Against an ordinary, everyday backdrop—a trip in a city bus—a reversal takes place: the first-person speaker rejects both the sexual advances of the girl standing next to him and the associative flow of his consciousness that would link him to the Hudson River flowing nearby. And all this happens because of his thoughts about death that take hold of him in the ambivalent form of a decrepit old man who accompanies the speaker for “hours, days, years, centuries.” From this point onward the “I” is cut off from the medium in which he moves and begins instead to live the depths of his internal
vision. This raises him above his entire human surroundings to which, but moments before, he was so inextricably linked.

That the poet's world takes shape thanks to his awareness of death that separates him from his surroundings brings us back, once again, to Glatstein's great precursor, Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, this time to his celebrated poem "Memento Mori." Truth be told, in several of the poems of this concluding section, the sharp contrast between the "I" and the "world" creates the most strongly felt link between the poetry of the young Glatstein and that of the Yunge. The same hero who could find no escape from the incursions of the modern world at the beginning of the book ("1919," in the opening section "Our Generation"), has here undergone a transformation. He now manages to build tall barricades around himself and to conduct his autonomous life within their boundaries.

Since the poems of the fourth and final section do not focus on actual scenes of death, there is no room in them for the whole ritual dimension of funerals, burial or mourning—that sometimes morbid portrait of the future that such contemporary poets as Halpern and Leivick attempted to draw. The young Glatstein did not use the theme of death for the sake of a biographical ending, among other reasons, as we have already seen, because the poet in Yankev Glatshleyn lacks a biography altogether. The awareness of death is all that matters, and it matters purely as an intellectual category with no bearing whatsoever on human suffering. While this prevents the lyric speaker from becoming an afflicted saint (as in Leivick's poetry, for instance), his intellectual communion with death enables him to rise above and to stand out from among all those who do not keep the end that awaits them before their eyes. Thus, the way of all flesh paradoxically becomes that which distinguishes and separates the poet from the human community.

Once we grasp the poet's status as a special kind of seer, we can account for the one anomalous poem in the section, Tsu a blinán ("To a Blind Man," pp. 75-76). Here the poet, speaking in the name of "the world of a million eyes," turns his attention to a blind man whose outward appearance—a white collar over a clean shirt—is grotesquely disharmonious with the rest of his human condition. Despite a passing allusion to "a midnight cemetery joke," the poem has no thematic connection to the others in this section, which leads us to conclude that it has but one purpose: to body forth, from an entirely unexpected vantage point, the binary opposition of the "Seer" and the "Blind Man."

The poem that finally encapsulates the young Glatstein's manifold attitudes towards death comes only in his second book of poems, Fraye ferzn. We recall that in this volume he assembled an analogous section of poems on old age and death called Zilbershekn ("Silver Fears"). Its motto poem reads as follows:
PASSING

The passing hour in her wisdom embraces the joy of renewal like a sensible, gray-haired woman soothing her young, blond son with tranquil, considered words.

And as you prepare to encounter the next hour, your eyes will brighten in the unfolding precious secret of a god.

And as you prepare to encounter the next hour, the infinite, mysterious meaning of all that is everlastingly hidden will become clear.

And in every heart preparing to encounter the next hour a frail, imperceptible cry clings to the calm, still, cool hour of time in its passing.

Translated by Melvin Elberger

The journey towards extinction is here portrayed as the ultimate manifestation of the human experience, as the moment of blessed fullness in which a human being approaches the status of God. Fargeyn (“passing”) is the only word denoting death; it also suggests that something gradual, even aristocratic, is involved in this calculated and self-conscious journey. By enlisting the several realms of the senses, the poet seeks to convince us that this journey has a calming effect, that it mediates polarities. For all that the inexorable flow of time is ultimately destructive, its omnipotent force is described as a loving touch that soothes even as it enslaves, overcoming all opposition on the part of the young blood—and all on account of the superior wisdom that is the sole possession of the old. Not until the poem’s end does a “frail, imperceptible cry” disrupt—for only a brief instant—the intellectual quietude in the face of certain death.
When we compare the section that this poem appears in to its twin in *Yankev Glatshteyn*, we can measure both the distance traveled in the intervening five years, and the future direction that the young Glatstein was to take. Where once a first-person speaker dominated all the poems on old age and death, reporting on all that he had personally experienced, in the later poems of "Silver Fears" no such voice is heard. Instead, the poet now develops the theme of old age and death against an ever-changing backdrop and with a virtuoso display of characters and situations: King Saul and Abishag; a Chinese theatrical production about a poor woman who is fooled into murdering her husband for monitory gain; an old coachman in the wonderful title poem who, in a strange mixture of folktales and homosexual reverie, longs to meet the young and naked highwayman in the course of his travels through the forest. Despite the appearance of more conventional motifs such as sunset and autumn, the worm that eats its way through a forest of oaks and the rest that a hospital enforces upon its patients, Glatstein manages to deflate the conventionality of these motifs by means of subtle ironies.

For our purposes, however, it is the pervasiveness of the death theme that is most significant, because it connects the young Glatstein's career with that of his Yiddish contemporaries. His first book of poems, dated 1921 and suffused with doom and destruction, betrays sure signs of the postwar era. Similarly, the two faces of death in this inaugural volume point his work in two directions. On the one hand, the themes of violent premature death, of the sacrificial victim, and of antiwar protest, themes that appear in the first three sections of *Yankev Glatshteyn*, connect the young poet to those movements in Yiddish poetry that arose in direct response to World War I—to Expressionism in particular. On the other hand, the poems of the fourth section evince a very different attitude, which, as I pointed out, is strikingly similar to that of the Yunge. The central paradox of Glatstein's subsequent career is that precisely the latter, more conservative stance, the one espoused by the very poets he so vigorously combatted, who depicted the poetic "I" as a contemplative, isolated and elitist consciousness, was the one that Glatstein developed and deepened in *Fraye ferzn*.11

For all that, Glatstein's second volume of poetry does not merely repeat the structural pattern of *Yankev Glatshteyn*. To fully grasp the innovative character of *Fraye ferzn*, the reader should turn to its closing section, Kanut ("Canute"). Here there is novelty and richness of meaning that mark a new point of departure in Glatstein's poetic career.

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NOTES


2. All the critics who have dealt with Glatstein’s poetry as a whole have addressed the nature and direction of the change that occurred in the late thirties. A summary of these views is given in the introduction to Janet Hadda, “The Early Poetry of Yankev Glatshteyn” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1975). See, also, the review of Hadda’s Yankev Glatshteyn (Boston, 1980) by David G. Roskies in Studies in Contemporary Jewry 1 (1984): 468–70.

3. The Figure of Fabius Lind” [Yiddish], In zikh (April 1937); rpt. in Prost un poshet, pp. 163–64.

4. In her brief attempt to characterize the composition of Glatstein’s early volumes of poetry, Janet Hadda singles out the first and fourth sections in Yankev Glatshteyn and Fraye ferzn as dealing with “external elements” while all the rest are ‘internal’ in focus. The theme of death, however, seems hardly “external.” Despite our very different approaches to Glatstein’s early poetry, I have learned much from Hadda’s analysis of individual poems.

5. Jacob Glatstein, A. Leyles, N. Minkov, “Introspectivism” [Yiddish], In zikh: a zamlung introspective lider (New York, 1920), p. 17; trans. by Anita Norich. That the manifesto was essentially the work of Leyles can now be corroborated by the galleys of Leyles’ Velt un vort [World and Word] (New York, 1958) that are deposited in the YIVO Archives. The galleys include the full text of the manifesto which, due perhaps to financial constraints, was not included in the published volume.


8. See Hadda, Yankev Glatshteyn, p. 188, n. 9. Hadda also mentions a late interview with Glatstein in which he spoke of his life-long interest in Chinese culture. See also his late essay on Arthur Waley in In der velt mit yidish: eseyn [In the World with Yiddish: Essays] (New York, 1972), pp. 384–88.

9. S. Niger took note of this in his review of the book, but he failed to grasp the shift of meaning at poem’s end. See “School and Talent” [Yiddish], Der tog, 4 December 1921.


11. Among contemporary critics, Moyshe Olgin deserves special praise for having correctly noted some of Glatstein’s essential poetic traits, even though Olgin’s proletarian slant is now completely dated. Thus, Olgin noted that a mood of “fading” and “decline” pervaded the poems of the young Glatstein, attributing these to broad social and cultural trends, rather than to something intrinsic to the poet. He also recognized how these features were tied to earlier trends in Yiddish poetry and took note of the gap between the modernist form of the poems and their content. See M. Olgin, “Jacob Glatstein’s Poems” [Yiddish], Der hamer (December 1927): 46–50. See also Richard J. Fein, “Yankev Glatshteyn, Yankev Glatshteyn,” Yiddish, 6 (1985): 55–66.