REVIEW

The Treasures of Howe and Greenberg


In the first two decades of this century, when literary manifestoes were very much in vogue, the burning issue was that of cultural renewal: Was it to come from within, by reappropriating the past, or from without, by celebrating the present and incorporating its chaotic norms? Neo-classicists and symbolists squared off against Futurists and Expressionists. The revival of folklore, myth and metaphysics was countered by the supremacy of the masses, the machine and the psyche. One rarely thinks of editors and translators, those workhorses of the literary establishment, venturing forth into such treacherous terrain, but as Dov Sadan was the first to note, the Jewish centers of Odessa and Warsaw with Bialik at the head of one and Frischman at the head of the other, were divided over this very issue, and much of their competing energies were channeled into the work of translation. Each was additionally in charge of the means of production—Bialik as editor-in-chief of the Dvir Publishing House and Frischman of Stiebel—so that policy was translated into the distribution of real books. Bialik’s crowning achievement in this area, done in collaboration with Ravnitzky, was the ingathering and Hebraizing of rabbinic aggadah (Sefer ha’aggadah, 1909), while Frischman produced a prodigious number of translations into Hebrew of everything from Oscar Wilde to Rabindranath Tagore. Bialik and Ravnitzky, not to be outdone, cast their Jewish net bilingually and promptly translated their magnum opus into Yiddish (Yidishe agodes, 1910). This tactic of recycling the past to fertilize the present was itself part of a recurrent phenomenon in Jewish literary history, for Khone Shmeruk reminds us of another time, in the Italian Renaissance, when all at once there appeared such classic

agadic anthologies as the *Ein Yaakov, Yalkut Shim'on*, An Elegant Composition Concerning Relief After Adversity* as well as the first Yiddish story collections in an effort to rescue the classical heritage “in the face of modernity.”

Thus the question of How Shall Renewal Be Wrought has preoccupied the Jewish intellectual elite at fateful junctures in our history and in answering that question, they have fashioned the imaginative corpus of tradition into canonical shape. It would be tempting, therefore, to think of postwar America as another such watershed and to view those efforts at the translation of Yiddish classics into English as a part, however modest, of this larger cultural movement of internal renewal.

A very different challenge faced Howe and Greenberg than their illustrious precursors in Odessa. Given the radical discontinuity of anthologizing Yiddish culture, after the Holocaust, to an indifferent or at best, nostalgic audience, the problem of translation was compounded by that of selection. Bialik’s task, to choose from several variants of the same story and to produce a coherent narrative, was essentially an exercise in creative editing. That he preferred familiar versions from the Babylonian Talmud to those in the Palestinian would jar no one’s sensibilities and would not affect the integrity of the whole. Howe’s task was to rescue the very best of a culture that had just been dealt its death blow and to make that saving remnant palatable to a cosmopolitan crowd not much prone to tradition or ethnicity. The measure of Howe’s success and of the need for this rescue operation is the large number of students of Jewish literature whose familiarity with Yiddish rests solely on the introduction to *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (henceforth: *Stories*) and the subsequent anthologies that drew their Yiddish materials exclusively from that collection.

To compounding the problem of selection, Howe himself was operating second-hand. As he described the process on two separate occasions, Greenberg, the veteran Yiddish poet, preselected and read the materials aloud, leaving the final decision to Howe. Greenberg, in turn, was limited by an American-Yiddish critical consensus that had virtually grown stagnant by 1950. Thus, for example, the critical breakthrough in 1964 in the posthumous recognition of Soviet-Yiddish literature, came too late for the first anthology and was reflected only in the later ones. Sifting through the Talmud and countless midrashim was difficult enough, but working without a deciphered Genizah was an exercise in futility.

For all that, *Stories* represents a bold and welcome revision of the canon. A less independent team would never have chosen Lamed Shapiro over Sholem Asch, the most celebrated Yiddish writer of his day, or have preferred I. M. Weissenberg’s brand of naturalism to Joseph Opatoshu’s. In both cases the vote


went to the well-wrought, carefully balanced story rather than to flashier themes in flabbier renditions. Zalmen Schneour’s “Revenge” was one of the few texts that Howe included solely on the basis of its sensational subject (and then made his apologies in the Notes on the Authors). And let us remember that it was Howe who recognized “Gimpel the Fool” as a classic.

Other decisions were less salutary. The vast and varied output of Abramovitch-Mendele was downplayed for being too “distinctively and uniquely Yiddish,” which is to say, too intrinsically bound up with the cultural specifics of nineteenth-century Russian Jewry, but the net result was to deny the reader access to this great eighteenth-century sensibility galavanting in a dizzying array of fictional garbs and to rob the gallery of Yiddish (and Hebrew) literature of its founding father. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, Howe discovered that stories with an American setting by such writers as Asch, Opatoshu, Nadir and Raboy fell flat when rendered into English because much of their appeal lay in the transcription of American speech or in the novelty of the theme to a Yiddish audience. Thus, only five of 52 modern stories in the anthology have America as their backdrop and in two of them (by Asch and I. B. Singer), the Old Country looms larger than the New. And since life in the big cities of Kiev, Warsaw, Lodz and New York was best treated in the great family sagas, what was left in the shorter fiction was mostly on shtetl or village life. Finally, Howe’s own predilection for social realism, for literature as a critique of observable reality, made him unreceptive to the fantasy school in Yiddish fiction, to the revival of folklore, myth and messianism that characterized the work of Ansky, David Ignatoff, Ber Horowitz, Moyshe Kulbak and I. B. Singer. With all this subtracted from the total—the writers who were too Yiddish, too obscure or too popular; the tales of America, of the big city or of the supernatural—what remained, by design and default, was a distillation of the modern Yiddish experience not unlike that portrayed in the second American-Jewish classic of the 1950s—Life Is With People.

Having made the selection, Howe then set out to find the translators, and here, I think, he scored his most brilliant points. Goodness knows, the pool of competent translators was small enough to begin with and the twenty-odd years between the first anthology and the last have added little new talent. What Howe managed to do nonetheless was to find translators with an emotional and intellectual affinity to their assigned Yiddish authors. While all the translators who contributed to Stories knew Yiddish first-hand, in A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry (henceforth: Poetry), the marriage was sometimes effected through a prosaic matchmaker who came armed with detailed descriptions of the syntax, the form and meter of the betrothed. For the most part, these marriages were made in heaven. Isaac Rosenfeld, whose tough parabolic Yiddish has just appeared in these pages translated into English (Prooftexts 2 [1982]: 135–45), was matched with I. M. Weissenberg, Jonah Rosenfeld, Sholem Aleichem and I. B. Singer. The spoken language came through with special vigor in these stories thanks to Rosenfeld’s unerring sense of Yiddish and English idiom: “You think it’s so easy to put one over on Kasrilevke?” (Stories, 118). Milton Himmelfarb made Grade’s “My Quarrel with Hersh Raseyner” sound as if it had been

6. Ibid., p. 233.
written for *Commentary*. Leonard Wolf captured the play of folk idiom and fin-de-siècle in Manger’s biblical poems: “Dost thou sleep, my brother Abel, / That thou art so wonderfully fair? / Never have I seen thee! / As beautiful before” (*Poetry, 278*). John Hollander’s ventriloquism rendered the social protest of Moyshe Leyb Halpern in perfect monosyllabic pitch:

So this bird comes, and under his wing is a crutch,
And he asks why I keep my door on the latch:
So I tell him that right outside the gate
Many robbers watch and wait
To get at the hidden bit of cheese,
Under my ass, behind my knees.  

(*Poetry, 104*)

Adrienne Rich rendered the “women’s poetry” of Anna Margolin, Celia Dropkin, Kadie Molodowsky and Dvora Fogel. The national themes of David Einhorn, H. Leivick and Chaim Grade, so deeply coded in Jewish historical experience, were taken on by Cynthia Ozick who, elsewhere in this issue, recalls the labors of translating a single such culture-laden word in a poem by Einhorn. At least two of the collaborations later spilled over into the translator’s own work. Ruth Wisse noted that “schlemiels abound in Bellow’s fiction, even in the stories he chooses to translate and anthologize,” and indeed, both of Bellow’s contributions to *Stories* (which rank among the finest translations of Yiddish prose into English) are schlemiel tales: Sholem Aleichem’s “Eternal Life” and I. B. Singer’s “Gimpel the Fool.” The experience of translating Chaim Grade made its fairly undisguised way into Cynthia Ozick’s blockbuster “Envy, or Yiddish in America.” Howe can thus be credited with the progeny born of the intimate relationships he fostered between the Yiddish brides and their American grooms.

Some of the translators produced very uneven work. The more subtle the rhetoric in Peretz’s stylized folktales where the narrative voice is the key to the meaning, or the more perfect the control in Mani Leib’s sonnets, the higher the price Nathan Halper paid for the liberties he took. Compare these two openings to Peretz’s “All for a Pinch of Snuff”:

Amiably—moderating his benign smile with a lazy yawn—Satan sat ruffling through the ledger of living souls. Abruptly he stopped. The page of the rabbi of Chelm had fallen open—and it was blank. (*Peretz, 58*)

The Devil was lounging, his legs crossed, smirking in a well-fed sort of way, and, for lack of anything better to do, was leafing through a ledger of all living creatures, half-yawning as he did so.

Suddenly, he clapped his hands sharply. He had noticed that the page given over to the Rabbi of Chelm was completely free of any entries on the debit side. Not a one. Naturally, the servitors of Hell, devils every one, gathered on the run in answer to Satan’s call; they stood at the portals like dogs with their tongues out and waited for orders. (*Moshe Spiegel, In this World and the Next* [New York, 1958], page 287)

The comic domestication of Hell through a wealth of bureaucratic detail was Peretz’s way of telling a very old story in an entirely new manner. None of this comes through in Halper’s truncated version. And when the opening line of Kulbak’s ode to Vilna, “Upon your walls, someone is walking in a prayer-shawl,” is rendered “Someone in a tallis is walking in your streets” (Poetry, 216), Halper loses not only the central allusion to Isaiah (62:6) that links Vilna to Jerusalem, but also makes Kulbak sound like kitsch.

Bristling beneath the surface of the first anthology was a sense of urgency both to rescue documentary evidence of an irrevocably lost world through great works of fiction and to invite a specific audience whose knowledge of Yiddish was greater than it imagined (according to a quote from Kafka prominently displayed on the cover) to savor the artistic delights of that world. Ten years later, the enterprise of selecting and translating modern Yiddish poetry was far more difficult to justify because poetry did not lend itself to documentary purposes and because American audiences were generally so indifferent to poetry. Instead, Yiddish poetry was pressed into service to illustrate “the culture of yiddishkayt” (not to be confused with Judaism), an “ethical style” which secular, progressive Jews could presumably still identify with (Poetry, 12, 24, 32–34, 42, 58–62). Heading the list of Yiddish poets who exemplified this amalgam of ethics and ethnicity, of modern sensibility and liturgical themes was Jacob Glatstein, the only poet to receive double billing in the anthology. To further his case for yiddishkayt, Howe, one of America’s great exponents of modernism, presented Glatstein, the leading American-Yiddish modernist, as first and foremost a poet of Jewish catastrophe. Even the inclusion of Glatstein’s “Rabbi Yussel Luksh of Chelm” (1935) did little to set the record straight because a reader without prior knowledge of Glatstein’s politics and poetics would never read this poem as an outrageous spoof on conventional morality, on folksiness and, if you will, on yiddishkayt.

From then on, the anthologies suffer from a progressive decline. Voices from the Yiddish presents a compromise selection of self-contained literary essays (à la Montaigne or Ahad Ha’am) and expository prose on such varied topics as the shtetl, the Lower East Side, Yiddish language and literature, and the fate of the Jewish people. How little we really know about the genre of the Yiddish literary essay hits home when we look at a rival anthology by Joseph Leftwich, two crammed volumes worth.8 The Peretz collection, I am sorry to say, can only be considered a travesty. I do not know what prompted Howe to elevate Peretz on the one hand and then to produce a badly translated, outrageously excerpted and singularly unimaginative selection. Instead of commissioning a new translation of Peretz’s Travel Pictures, arguably his most innovative, most relentless and most carefully crafted work of realistic prose, Howe recycles a few random chapters from an outmoded translation made back in 1906. While no self-respecting critic would precis a story by Henry James, Flaubert or Gogol, Howe does just that with Peretz’s “The Poor Boy” (pages 144–49), cutting a story which is all of 11 pages long by half. What, one might ask, of the editor’s rule-of-thumb, that if it isn’t good enough to publish as is, don’t publish it at all?

Peretz has much more artful satires on Jewish modernity than this crude monologue of a Warsaw "philanthropist." And why reduce Peretz just to stories? An adequate anthology should include at least the Memoirs, At Night in the Old Market and a selection of poetry by this pathbreaking Yiddish modernist.

The anthologies also get progressively shorter which puts an additional strain on the editor's critical judgment. Three of the central heirs to the classical tradition of Yiddish prose, Bergelson, Kulbak and Der Nister, whose achievement extends far beyond the boundaries of Soviet-Yiddish letters, are compressed into less than 200 pages of translation in Ashes Out of Hope. Kulbak's family saga of forced collectivization in Minsk would be a lot funnier with the missing third of its first part restored, because it takes a while just to get the Zelmenyaner uncles straight. Der Nister's one and only appearance, "Under a Fence," is frankly too brief to rank him. Fortunately, the English reader can also turn to Joachim Neugroschel's Yenne Velt which really does justice to Der Nister's hypnotic style.9

No one can doubt that the growing legitimation and popularity of Yiddish in America and throughout the English-speaking world owe much to the efforts of Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, and though this collaboration ended with Greenberg's death in 1977, Howe's work with new partners has intensified of late. The Best of Sholom Aleichem (1979), done in collaboration with Ruth R. Wisse, showed the comic master to be anything but a naive raconteur. The forthcoming anthology of modern Yiddish poetry with Wisse and Khone Shmeruk promises to do what Stories did for prose, and perhaps a lot more. That the search for hidden treasures continues unabated with ever more sophisticated tools and that prior maps can now be subjected to scrutiny and constructive criticism are hopefully the signs we have been waiting for: that the critical assessment of Jewish culture has finally become part of the national agenda.

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CORRECTION

The following lines were accidentally omitted from Adele Berlin, "On the Bible as Literature" (vol. 2 no. 3), p. 325, line 14:

organizing our perceptions, so be it; but it is not the same as reading something into the text that is not there. These two examples, as I have explained them, correspond roughly to the hermeneutic terms peshat and derash.