Not One of Them in Place

Modern Poetry and Jewish American Identity

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The Six Hundred Thousand Letters

The day like blank paper
Being pulled from my typewriter.
With the six
Hundred thousand letters of the Law
Surrounding me,
Not one of them in place.
                    —*Harvey Shapiro*

Contents

Acknowledgments

My children, Ann and Steven, who are now about the same age as my students and chat so knowingly about books and music and movies with me whenever they're in town, are a constant wonder to me. My stepchildren, Joie and Danny West, finally get to be mentioned in one of my books—thanks for your patience, guys. And to my wife Alice West, I can only acknowledge once again how grateful I am for your love.

—Cincinnati, Ohio

Preface

"The highest, as the lowest, form of criticism," Oscar Wilde declares, "is a mode of autobiography" (17). I will leave it to my readers to decide whether I am writing the highest or the lowest form of criticism, but the longer I write it, the more I feel it to be a mode of autobiography. At the same time, autobiography per se tempts me more and more, as a sort of adjunct to my criticism. Some years ago, given the opportunity to revise the original edition of *The Utopian Moment,* I produced a preface that was largely autobiographical; since then, I joined twenty-nine other Jewish academics and contributed an autobiographical essay called "The Master of Turning" to *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on Their Jewish Identity.* The writing in both instances came partly from a desire to explain my motives as a critic to myself and thus to other readers, knowing full well that in writing about "myself" I am writing fiction—and perhaps that in examining the work of other poets, I am getting closer to myself, writing autobiography as criticism. Be that as it may, I remain convinced that I write about poetry for two reasons: *as a poet* I want to explain to myself why the poetry of another is valuable to me; *as a reader* I want to convince other readers that they will find a particular body of poetry to be of value. And the same is true for writing about Jewish literature: through the work I hope to understand my Jewish self more deeply, and to convince others that the work provides insight into Jewish culture, history, and belief.

It should come as no surprise then that I regard this book, if not as the synthesis of my two earlier studies, then perhaps as the third volume of a loose and by no means preconceived trilogy. *The Utopian Moment* presents a vision of poetry by arguing for the value of a particular range of modern American poetries; *The Ritual of New Creation* presents a vision of Jewish literature by analyzing a variety of modern Jewish textual discourses. The interpretive concerns of both books inform *Not One of Them in Place,* for as readers will see, the importance of Jewish American poetry lies partly in the ways it inflects the persistant questions of mode, style, and canon formation in modern American poetry, and partly in the ways it engages equally persistant questions of modern Jewish identity. *Not One of Them in Place,* therefore, can be read as a work of literary history and of cultural studies in the broad sense of these terms. But I admit that my forte has always been close reading (the long arm of the New Criticism reaching over the decades), and in working through matters of literary ideology, canon formation, ethnicity, religious belief, and so on, I have never abandoned my faith in the category of the aesthetic, scrutinizing a great many individual poems in the hope that readers will find in

them a source of pleasure. "The test of poetry," writes Louis Zukofsky, one of the most important poets under consideration here, "is the range of pleasure it affords as sight, sound, and intellection" (*Test of Poetry* vii). I have yet to find a better summary.

Although I expect that most readers of this book will have some relation to the academy, and have particular interest in Jewish studies or modern American literature, I also hope that it will catch the eye of the general reader who has some interest in the subject, and wishes to learn more. It is not a comprehensive introduction to Jewish American poetry, but it will probably serve to introduce many readers to one or more of the poets whose work I discuss. Much of that work is complex and challenging in terms of its style, its theme, and its cultural or historical context, and my prose has had to rise to the challenge. But I have tried to write in a deliberate and open style, with as little recourse as possible to a specialized critical vocabulary, that is, "jargon." The book has been composed without footnotes: everything I have to say about the subject is to be found in the text, and all quotations in the text refer to the list of works cited.

Introduction

The Traditions of Jewish American Poetry

"I do not, in fact, wish to ask or answer the question, 'What is Jewish poetry?' The poetry of a nation is whatever comes to pass in its domain in the name of poetry, and can neither succeed nor fail" (*Long Schoolroom* 159). Such is Allen Grossman's sensible disclaimer at the beginning of "Jewish Poetry Considered as a Theophoric Project" (1990), an essay which proves, ironically, to be one of our most intelligent and sophisticated articulations of the qualities unique to Jewish verse. As Grossman has known since the start of his career, the "domain" in which he has become a prominent citizen flies two flags, a situation that motivates much of his splendid work in poetics. Reviewing Allen Ginsberg's *Kaddish* in 1962, Grossman declares that for Jews writing in America, "the only significant Jewish poetry will also be a significant American poetry" (*Long Schoolroom* 158). This is not merely an observation about poetry; it is also a provocation to criticism. In what ways shall significant Jewish poetry written by Jewish Americans be understood as significant American poetry? What criteria shall be brought to bear in determining this significance? What paths through the history of Jewish culture, and through the history of American literature, lead to these determinations? As such determinations are made, is a canon of Jewish American poetry coming into being? And keeping in mind the great discursive range and complex affinities of this writing, which are commensurate with those of modern American poetry in general, can we develop a comprehensive vision of Jewish American poetry that may offer answers, however provisional, to questions such as these?

Steven J. Rubin writes in his Introduction to *Telling and Remembering: A Century of American Jewish Poetry* (1997) that "although occasional articles and critical studies have been published in the 1990s, American Jewish literary criticism remains overwhelmingly concerned with prose" (1). What Rubin does not realize, however, is that the critical neglect of Jewish American poetry may actually prove advantageous to an anthologist at work in this relatively undefined field. Every anthology participates in the conflicted process of canon formation. As Alan Golding argues in his authoritative study on canons in American poetry, "Examining the often conflicting standards that American anthologists have brought to bear on the problem of selection . . . illuminates more general issues in canon formation. It helps us understand how an anthology can reflect, expand, or redirect a period's canon; what literary and social principles regulated the poetry canon at different points in American history; and how those principles have

changed over the years" (3). While it still may be too early to speak of a canon of Jewish American poetry (as one may already speak, I believe, of a canon of Jewish American fiction), we must keep in mind, as Golding tells us, that "after a selective canon has been formed, every anthologist faces the choice of maintaining or trying to change the canon" (24–25). Yet the "canon wars" that have defined much twentieth-century American poetry and have made the study of this poetry so contentious hardly seem to have had an impact on the selection of poets in *Telling and Remembering* or the American section of Howard Schwartz's *Voices within the Ark* (1980).

This is due primarily to the fact that a sophisticated criticism of Jewish American poetry, contributing to the determination of a recognizable canon, remains in a formative stage. Consider what Rubin tells us in the Introduction about the selection process for his anthology: "My purpose throughout this collection is to present the best and the most representative work of those writers who can properly be classified as American Jewish poets. I have not included those poets who, although nominally Jewish, do not deal significantly with the American Jewish experience. All the authors represented—male or female, traditionalist or experimental, modernist or postmodernist—share an interest in and a desire to explore those issues surrounding their Jewishness" (11). "Best and most representative" is part of the anthologist's standard discourse, and serves as an open invitation to argument (How, I wonder, could Rubin possibly have failed to include Grossman in this volume?). "Traditionalist or experimental" takes us closer to my concerns, but can bear a great deal of scrutiny: not only does the matter of style connect Jewish American poetry with the great debates over modern American poetry in general, but it also provides crucial insights into the particular sensibilities possessed of "a desire to explore those issues surrounding their Jewishness." What happens to "Jewishness"—which is to say, what constitutes an expression of Jewish identity—when placed in the context of American poetry? One is led to ask if any sort of theoretical perspective on either American or Jewish literature comes into play when such anthologies are constructed, or when "Jewish American poetry" as a class is invoked in a discussion of hybrid American literatures. Yet as I shall argue throughout this book, just such a perspective is crucial if one is to go beyond the casual acknowledgment of ethnic origins or the surfaces of style and theme, and understand this literature in terms of the sociohistorical and textual conditions that have shaped it and that, indeed, grant it cultural significance.

Like anthologists, all critics become more or less willing, more or less persuasive shapers of a canon. This is especially true when the poetry under discussion has not been extensively addressed, as is the case for a number of the poets here. I would be disingenuous if I did not admit that I have my preferences when it comes to Jewish American poets, and these preferences will become quite clear in what follows. But the main purpose of this book is to define and explore a particular dynamic, a historical dialectic that is still unfolding in the growing body

of Jewish American poetry. This is what has determined my choice of poets, though it could also be said that my encounters with them—which were immediate, intense, challenging, and deeply gratifying— eventually coalesced into a more theoretical understanding of the field. I hope that the configurations and speculations to which I submit their work will result in the next step in the criticism of a poetry that we can recognize as both genuinely Jewish and identifiably American.

A small number of important statements serve as both the foundation of my project and, at times, the objects of my inquiry. That almost all the critics who have made important contributions to a nascent theory of Jewish American poetry are poets themselves is hardly an accident. "What is Jewish or not Jewish about certain American poems is all tied up in the vexing problem of what is poetic or not poetic about them," writes John Hollander in "The Question of American Jewish Poetry" (1988). As a rather conservative stylist with a strong investment in Anglo American Romanticism, Hollander has a definite sense of what constitutes the "poetic" in recent American verse. But when it comes to Jewishness, Hollander can be, to use his term, quite "protean" on the subject:

> I suppose that the American Jewish poet can be either blessed or cursed by whatever knowledge he or she has of Jewish history and tradition. I obviously believe in the power of the blessing, but it would be easy for any writer to be trapped in a slough of sentimentality or a homiletic bog. Literalness is the death of the poetic imagination, and all groups in the cultural community that speak for Jewishness will always be very literal about what "Jewish experience" is, as will all groups that want to speak for "American experience." Both kinds of experience are for the poet momentary aspects of the protean body of being who one is, and the analogues between American and modern Jewish identity are interesting apart from the almost exponential complications resulting from a combination of the two. These complications of the varieties of experience remain to be explored by practical criticism and cultural history. (50–51)

Hollander's fear of literalness and his reluctance to accept the authority of self-appointed spokespersons for Jewish (or American) experience indicate that the creative freeedom of the imagination, *poesis,* is of the highest priority in his evaluation of any work that falls under the rubric of Jewish American poetry. What poets *make* of their knowledge of Jewish history and tradition constitutes what Hollander calls "the power of the blessing," as in, for example, these two beautiful quatrains from his "Kinneret":

> The wind was working on the laughing waves,
>   Washing a shore that was not wholly land.
> I give life to dead letters: from their graves
>   Come leaping even X and ampersand.

> Below, the dialect of the market-place
>> All dark *o*'s, narrowed *i*'s and widened *e*'s.
> Above, through a low gate, this silent space:
>> The whitened tomb of wise Maimonides. (*Harp Lake* 4)

The free use of Jewish history and tradition that Hollander espouses is clearly represented in these lines, and the poet's imaginative freedom is counterpointed in the studied use of the form. Even a brief consideration of the text reveals the protean play of Hollander's Jewish American sensibility. "Kinneret" takes its title and setting from Lake Kinneret (*Harp Lake,* as in the title of Hollander's book), the Sea of Galilee in Israel. For the visiting American standing on the shore, this is "not wholly land," the pun on "wholly" and "holy" revealing a skepticism that is fundamental to his identity. Yet the poet remains true to his Jewish heritage: reversing the old anti-Semitic canards about the moribund nature of Jewish existence, he gives "life to dead letters" in a land that the Zionist dream restored. Land and language are alive, but wait: on the shore of Lake Kinneret, in contemporary Israel, it's American English, not Hebrew, which this Jewish poet writes, part of the marketplace of languages Jews have made their own. And above this marketplace of Jewish discourse stands "this silent space:/The whitened tomb of wise Maimonides": the richness of Jewish tradition represented as both absent and present, both silent and audible, both dead and living, by the tomb of the one of the very greatest Jewish philosophers.

Hollander's Jewish heterodoxy in his poetics and his poetry, along with his concern for the protean poetic imagination, find a parallel in an otherwise very different figure, but one who is equally important to my argument. In his indispensible "Pre-Face" to *Exiled in the Word* (*A Big Jewish Book* in its earlier version), Jerome Rothenberg explains that "since poetry, in the consensus of my contemporaries, is more concerned with the 'free play of the imagination' than with doctrinal certainties *per se,* I've made no attempt to establish an 'orthodox' line or to isolate any one strain as purer or more purely Jewish than any others. Instead my assumption has been that poetry, here as elsewhere, is an inherently impure activity of individuals creating reality from all conditions & influences at hand" (9). Rothenberg would undoubtedly find Hollander's work tame, if not positively reactionary, but the strange fact remains that both of these poets from opposite ends of the contemporary American spectrum reject any orthodoxy in the determination of Jewishness, stress the freedom of the imagination, and remain open to all of the possible ways in which Jewish culture and experience may be integrated into the process of poetic composition. Yet style and attitude could not be more different. Consider these lines from Rothenberg's "The Bride," in which sexual and linguistic mysticism are madly swirled together to bring us closer to the Presence:

> my bride where hast thou gone then
> & wherefore wherefore hast left thy milk bottles behind

thy tits will I squeeze upon for wisdom
of a milk that drops like letters
sacred alphabet soup we lap up o thou my Shekinah
do not be thus far from us in our Galician wildernesses
who scratch under our prayervests alive alive
in dreams of Shekinah's entry to the tents of God (*Poland/1931* 26)

Against the ironic equanimity of Hollander's rabbinic rationalism, we can pose the comic fervor of Rothenberg's kabbalistic messianism. Both are recognizably Jewish, and both honor the poem's free use of material drawn from the Jewish heritage. Yet the distances of Hollander's measured parables and the immediacies of Rothenberg's phantasmagorias seem to come from two very different poetic traditions. The difference is less Jewish than it is American, for it is from two different traditions in American poetry that Hollander's and Rothenberg's sensibilities are derived. And these poetic traditions relate in turn to various tendencies in modern Jewish experience, or more precisely, the historical pressures that have been brought to bear on modern Jewish culture.

Most observers agree that the defining tension in twentieth-century American poetry is to be found between two opposing aesthetics, neatly posed by Marjorie Perloff in the question that is also the title of her important essay: "Pound/Stevens: whose era?" On the one hand, the aesthetic represented by Stevens looks back to Romantic and Symbolist modes, with their emphases on a questing "visionary humanism" and the inwardness of the lyric imagination. The Poundian aesthetic, on the other hand, aggressively severs its ties with the nineteenth century and reclaims the external world by way of "collage, fragmentation, parataxis" (*Dance of the Intellect* 21, 22). Perloff's essay brilliantly catalogs the many differences between these two traditions, differences that have to do not only with technique, but with the status of the self in the poem, the view of history it presents, and the role of the poetic imagination in a social and political context. In *The Utopian Moment,* I observe, apropos of such analyses as Perloff's (or conversely, Harold Bloom's), that tradition "is always, at least to some extent, a synthetic matter; the major poet is capable of assimilating, even inventing his or her precursors. In the twentieth century, the 'tradition' of Stevens or the 'tradition' of Pound are thus critical fictions, to which active poets rarely subordinate themselves" (142). Among the Objectivists, with their strong links to Pound and Williams, George Oppen notes in his interview with L. S. Dembo that "really Blake is more important to me than Williams" and that "Wyatt's poems, and several Middle English poems, among other antiquities, mean more to me than any except one or two of the contemporary" (*Contemporary Writer* 184). Likewise, Louis Zukofsky, associated even more closely with Pound and Williams, notes late in his career that he actually felt, at least at that point, a stronger affinity to Stevens: "Reading him for the last three months I felt that my own writing, without my being aware of it, was closer to his than to that of any of my contemporaries in the last half century of life we shared together" (*Prepositions* 27).

Nevertheless, Perloff rightly insists that what is generally perceived as a division between two crucial modes of poetic discourse "is neither an idle quarrel nor a narrow sectarian war between rival academics . . . who just happen to have different literary and political allegiances. The split goes deep, and its very existence raises what I take to be the central questions about the meaning of Modernism—indeed, about the meaning of poetry itself in current literary history and theory" (2).

Given our concerns, this split also has much to do with the meaning of Jewish American poetry in current literary history and theory, for in one respect, Jewish American poetry may be understood as a peculiar fold in the larger debate. Every American poet since the beginning of the century (indeed, every poet writing in English) has had to negotiate this debate in his or her own way, for the successful negotiation of such controversies is always a necessary step in the development of an individual style. Stylistically, the most important Jewish American poets have tended toward one or the other pole, as in the cases of Hollander, whose good-humored, meditative tone owes a great deal to Stevens (as in, say, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*), and of Rothenberg, whose graphic, startling details hearken back to those of Pound's Canto XIV or Canto XLV. Here are two additional instances, the first from Grossman's "The Room," the second from Hugh Seidman's "Fabergé," from his "Collectibles":

A man is sitting in a room made quiet by him.
Outside, the August wind is turning the leaves of its book.
The door is open, everything is disclosed, each leaf, all the voices.

The man is resting from the making of the quiet in which he sits.
The floor is swept, his books are laid aside open, his eyes are open.
All the leaves and voices are outside in the restless wind. (*Ether Dome* 63)

* * *

Royal tchotchkies: chalcedony terrier;
gold-lipped, diamond-eyed, obsidian toad.

"Bourgeoisie love coarse *cloissonné*," he said.
The Nobels were his best non-royal patrons.

Bored Edward, Wallis puffing in Regine's.
No good, evil—just power users. (*Selected Poems* 224)

Grossman's engagement with Stevens, particularly the Stevens of such poems as "Large Red Man Reading" and "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," offers him a way of recovering the Jewish devotion to the Book and its

gathered voices, which in "The Room" proves analogous to the old notion of the Book of Nature and to the Mallarméan one of the Book that is the world. Stevens and Grossman are concerned with self-creation, which involves the re-creation of the exterior world through the power of the poet's interiorizing imagination. Gershom Scholem observes that in the kabbalistic tradition, God "looked into the Torah and created the world"; indeed, the Torah is regarded as God's Name, "consequently not separate from the divine essence, not created in the strict sense of the word; rather, it is something that represents the secret life of God" (*On the Kabbalah* 40, 41). According to Stevens, "We say God and the imagination are one" ("Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" [524]); thus, in an uncannily kabbalistic turn, the poet sits "reading, from out of the purple tabulae,/The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:/*Poesis, poesis,* the literal characters, the vatic lines" ("Large Red Man Reading" [424]). In Grossman's text, the poet rests after having made the room that is his world, much as God rests after the Creation: "Everything in its place is at rest inside the room./And the man is at rest, seeing each leaf, and hearing all the voices" (*Ether Dome* 63). What we have here, as Harold Bloom tells us in "The Sorrows of American Jewish Poetry," is "a blend of a devotional strain and a late Romantic visionary intensity" (260): a poetry derived equally from the tradition of Jewish textuality and the tradition of lyric inwardness that Stevens represents.

Seidman's "Fabergé" reveals a different combination of traditions. Seidman can trace his poetic lineage back to Pound through his teacher, Louis Zukofsky. Zukofsky and his colleagues both develop and revise Pound's Imagist principles (direct treatment of the material, linguistic economy, composition by way of the "musical phrase" instead of the "metronome") to derive their own Objectivist program. In Objectivism, precisely arranged detail, accurate reportage, and historical analysis take precedence over the lyric inwardness and imaginative self-making of Romanticism. Zukofsky's term, drawn from his famous "An Objective," is *sincerity,* resulting in writing "which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody" (*Prepositions* 12). "Sincerity, then," as Mark Scroggins explains, "is an attitude of absolute faithfulness both to one's perceptions and to one's language" (96). Duly followed, sincerity in writing will lead to "objectification," "the resolving of words and their ideation in structure" (*Prepositions* 13), or as Scroggins would have it, "the structural principle by which the poet's efforts of sincerity become the completed poem" (98–99).

These Objectivist values remain in Seidman's work, but as in Zukofsky's poetry, at times we find a distinctively Jewish twist. The lineage of "Fabergé" can thus be traced through the uneasy vacillations of Jewish identity in Zukofsky's "Poem beginning 'The'" back to the bitter satire of Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." Note the startling phrase that begins the poem: "Royal tchotchkies." Many but by no means all readers will recognize the Yiddish word for knickknacks and the dismissive tone it represents. There's something of the unreconstructed

ethnic in these lines, the voice of the Jewish New Yorker looking through the window of the posh midtown shop and bringing his particular view of history to bear on what he sees. The speaker in this poem is not too far removed from his working-class, immigrant roots, despite his mordantly precise language. Examining the object before him, the "gold-lipped, diamond-eyed, obsidian toad," he recognizes, with delicious irony, the essential vulgarity of his ancestral oppressors, the (gentile) aristocracy. His witheringly laconic judgment ("No good, evil—just power users") condemns a class with supposedly refined aesthetic tastes that nonetheless lacks the powers of moral discrimination that are part of the Jewish heritage. Seidman's own moral discrimination and his equally Jewish consciousness of history find a most effective poetic vehicle in the Objectivist tradition, which, although derived from (the anti-Semitic) Pound, revises his work even more dramatically than Jewish poets in the Romantic tradition revise a precursor like Stevens.

As I have been implying through these readings, style, the "what" of poetry, is related in turn to the process of poetic composition, the "how" of poetry, and to the intent of poetry, the "why." Charles Altieri distinguishes Objectivist from Symbolist procedures as follows: "Where Objectivist poets seek an artifact presenting the modality of things seen or felt as immediate structure of relations, symbolist poets typically strive to see beyond the seeing by rendering in their work a process of meditating upon what the immediate relations in their work reflect" ("Objectivist Tradition" 6). As we have seen, these distinctions in turn relate to different temporal and historical orientations. The modal and structural procedures of the Objectivist tradition lead to an analytic perspective in which historical time becomes available and manipulable to the poet through the perception and arrangement of immediate detail. By contrast, the Romantic/Symbolist motive, "to see beyond the seeing" through a process of meditation, leads to an experience of significant time that is personal and interior rather than historical. The Objectivist is concerned with the generation of historical narrative out of perceptual detail, and with the moral distinctions that subsequently arise because of our historically contingent condition. George Oppen expresses this perfectly in the opening lines of his masterpiece, *Of Being Numerous:*

> There are things
> We live among 'and to see them
> Is to know ourselves'.

> Occurence, a part
> Of an infinite series,

> The sad marvels;