

# Translating as a Feminist: Reconceiving Anna Margolin

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**W**E ARE ALL FAMILIAR WITH the conventional view in which a translation is considered a secondary work dependent on, and subservient to, the original text. One cliché, proclaiming, “Only one syllable differentiates a translator from a traitor,” puns on the Italian words *traduttore* (translator, masculine) and *traditore* (traitor, masculine). The pun warns what a treacherous occupation translating is, for a mere slip of the pen can transform the whole effort of transporting a text from one language to another into a betrayal that reaches out from a single word to infect the entire culture. It seems significant that this pun works only in the masculine formation, and even more so, that my 1978, pocket-size Barnes and Noble *English-Italian; Italian-English* dictionary, which gives the feminine of “traitor,” *traditrice*, offers no feminine form for “translator.” Is the tourist more likely to encounter a traitress than a woman translator?

The cliché, in the context of the dictionary’s omission, suggests how pervasively gendered are our assumptions about translation (and also about translators and writers). This gendered notion becomes explicit in yet another truism, “A literal translation is plodding, like a faithful wife, and a literary translation is free, like a loose woman.” Likening a translation to a woman, this statement assumes, first, that an original text is like a man, and second, that the relationship between a text and its translation is like a hierarchical, heterosexual relationship between a man and a woman. In this textual or sexual relationship, the original text, equated to the man,

determines a tyrannical dualism, which defines a translation (or a woman) as either literal or literary, tedious or thrilling, domestic or dangerous, too faithful or too free. As in the age-old paradox that binds women into the roles of virgin and whore, a translation, like a woman, can never achieve an appropriate balance. Thus, a translation lives an imperfect female version of the male original.

We find a prototype for this notion in the second story of Creation (Gen. 2:5–23), where God translates doubly: The Creator carries across the breath of life by transforming dust into a man, and then the man's rib into a woman. When the man proclaims, "She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man," his derivative naming of the woman (*isha* from *ish*; woman from man) creates the assumptions about translation upon which the clichés are based.<sup>1</sup> What the clichés do not acknowledge is that translation is transformation, as much the "changing of forms" as the "carrying across" from one language to another. The act of translating creates a text that is something "other," that lives on its own terms.

In this essay, I want to dispute such hierarchial conventions of text and of gender by speaking from my experience as a reader, a teacher, a scholar, and a translator of Yiddish poetry, especially Yiddish poetry by women. At the center of my argument is my belief that the act of translating is the supreme art of making choices. The translator must constantly negotiate between risk and compromise, originality and collaboration, individuality and community. Translation, though, transcends the dualism of these paired opposites. Rather than choosing to be either faithful or free, either a patriot or a traitor, the translator must create more terms, shape other terms, rearrange old terms. By selecting, modifying, combining, and recasting these terms, the translator will transform a poem embedded in one language and culture into a different poem in a second language. This new text might appear to replace the original. In fact, though, each translation continually converses with its original, which does not vanish, but shimmers beneath the second language. A fluid interpretation, the translation talks. Rereading, answering, querying, it keeps the text in motion.

Drawing on my own translations of Yiddish poetry, I would like to discuss some of the ways that a translator whose frames of reference include feminism makes choices. Let me make clear my assumption that every translator is, first of all,

a reader. Just as the intellectual, ideological, emotional, and aesthetic perspectives of the reader shape every reading, so the translator's context, whether that is explicitly acknowledged or not, shapes every translation.

The feminist framework for my long-term and multi-stranded project of translating Yiddish poetry by women took form in 1985, when I began to write an article on Ezra Korman's 1928 anthology *Yidishe dikhterins* (Yiddish women poets) and, at the same time, to translate Kadya Molodowsky's poems. As I combed the card catalogs at YIVO and at the Jewish National Library at Hebrew University for Yiddish books by women, read reviews in the Yiddish press, found poems by women in old journals and newspapers, surveyed anthologies of Yiddish poetry in the original and in English translation, and immersed myself in Molodowsky's earliest book, I realized that women poets in Yiddish had been sparsely represented, received with prejudice, and only partially heard and understood by their contemporaries and mine. It seemed necessary, even urgent, to bring to light—that is, to read, write about, and translate—as much Yiddish poetry by as many women as possible, in order to see what was there and to define and examine the traditions of writing in which women were engaged.

Faced with a vast amount of material and few guides, I did not know how exactly to proceed, that is, how to choose which poets and which poems to translate. In retrospect, I realize that my puzzlement forced me to begin defining the problems of translating as a feminist, for at that moment, I began to bring a set of values or principles based on an awareness and analysis of gender to bear on the framework that I was using to make those choices. Because translators weigh their choices of what and how to translate according to their perceptions of language in a cultural context, a feminist translator continually tests the weight that gender adds to the cultural balance. These choices force the translator to question accepted ideas of canon and of literary value.

At the time I wrote my doctoral thesis on Moyshe-Leyb Halpern—a dissertation that included a verse translation of his book *In nyu york* (In New York) and a critical reading of that work—I felt strongly that the best way to represent a Yiddish poet in English was through a complete translation of the works.<sup>2</sup> It seemed to me that completeness provided a context that was more important than selecting

the “best” or perhaps the “most translatable” of the poems to represent the poet. Yiddish poetry was new to me then, and I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the literature and by the immense silence and indifference that surrounded it in both the university where I was studying and in the books I was reading.

Translating Halpern, with Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Yeats ringing in my ears, I began to question the values of “good” and “bad” poetry with which my professors had inculcated me. What was strong and clear to me in Halpern’s poems had a different quality. The “hard” modernist disdain for the “sentimental” and the “soft” in poetry did not really apply—Halpern’s poems did not fit into these categories of taste.

Such categories of aesthetic judgment are complex enough when they cross the boundaries of culture and language, but they become even more entangled when they encounter the question of gender, which invokes the problems of canon and historical context. When I began to translate women Yiddish poets, I felt an urgency to carry over into English as many female voices as possible, yet encountered so many voices—seventy in Korman’s anthology, more than a hundred in the card catalog at YIVO—that I did not know where to start. To translate one or two poems by unknown poets seemed pointless. Korman’s 1928 anthology—the only collection of Yiddish poems by women—was an early selection of poets, and hardly complete or representative of what had been published in the subsequent decades. Malka Heifetz Tussman was not included there. (She told me that she had refused to send Korman poems, disliking the idea of being grouped with only women poets.) Molodowsky’s poems in this collection are a small, variant sample from her first book; she still had her career before her. How could I trust Korman’s selection without first knowing the body of works from which he had selected? Which of Molodowsky’s poems would Korman have chosen if he’d published the anthology forty years later?

The poems in Yiddish by women form an uncharted, uncanonized body of works that were marginal in their own culture, and thus the translator needs to reinvent the terms of “good” and “bad” values in poetry. Redefining what constitutes a “good” poet, the translator constructs a context for that poet and her work. According to the Poundian, modernist values of poetry that informed my graduate

education in the late 1970s, a good poem was made of concrete rather than abstract language, avoided wordiness and poeticism, was exact, concise, focused, imagistic, discursive, witty, and antisentimental. Every word was *le mot juste*, the exact word. Conventions and clichés or dead metaphors were evoked intentionally, to subvert or crack open the accepted and to revivify the language of ordinary speech. Allusions and quotations drew the poem into a dialogue with the great Western tradition—with Homer, “The Seafarer,” the French troubadour poets, Dante, the French Symbolists, the English Renaissance poets—as well as the ancient Chinese poets.

As a translator steeped in these values, I had to find a different way to read, for example, the wordy poems filled with poeticisms and abstractions, such as Roza Goldshteyn’s “Di yudishe muze” (The Jewish muse) or “Zikhroynes shel peysakh” (Memories of Passover) or Yehudis’s “Breyte himlen” (Ample heavens). From a modernist perspective, these poems are not “good.” Nonetheless, they have value, for they reveal how women at the turn of the century, engaging in politics on the page and in the street, recast the literary language of the Labor poets. These poems merit a translation that conveys their energetic syntax, their spirit, and the differences of gender.

In another example, I learned to read beyond the mid-century misconception that labeled Miriam Ulinover’s deliberately archaic diction in 1922 as naively folkloristic. Ulinover’s poems demand from the translator a diction and a tone in English that correspond to the dialogue between a modern poet and the folk source of her poetry. In a third example, what might be called sentimentality in Roza Yakubovitch’s dramatic monologues of the Matriarchs, Hagar, Esther, or a nameless, pregnant widow, actually provides the poetic means to narrate childbearing and love from a point of view not heard elsewhere in Yiddish poetry. Finally, as her translator, I have recast my own sense of figurative language to accommodate Molodowsky’s slippery, compounded, ever-evolving metaphors—the “pure blood” of the grandmothers’ lineage that binds the brain like silken thread, which itself is likened to the straps of tefillin, a pair of buzzing, old spectacles, a tattered flag deigned like a piece of meat.

These poems, like many Yiddish poems by men, speak powerfully without conforming to the standards of “good,” “modern” English verse. A critical consensus

of poetic quality is defined as much by unacknowledged assumptions about gender as well as by explicit debates about language, aesthetics, philosophy, psychology, and politics. From such a consensus come the delimiting assertions about *froyen-lirik* (women's lyrics/female poetry) in essays and reviews in the 'teens and the 1920s by Shmuel Niger, Melekh Ravitch, and A. Glanz. Unexamined ideas of gender have also shaped the selection of women poets and poems in the important translation anthologies of Yiddish poetry from the mid-1980s, *American Yiddish Poetry* and the *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, both of which expand upon, in very different ways, the tenets of modernism.<sup>3</sup>

Today, there is a need for anthologies that present in English translations facing Yiddish texts poetry by women, as well as for editions of complete or selected works of individual women poets. This work was begun for women writers of Yiddish prose in the anthology *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*.<sup>4</sup> Six books presenting five women Yiddish poets in translation—Rokhl Korn, Malka Heifetz Tussman, Rukhl Fishman, Kadya Molodowsky in English, and Celia Dropkin in French—have been published since 1982, as well as a critical edition of Anna Margolin's poems in Yiddish only.<sup>5</sup> I am currently editing and translating an anthology of women Yiddish poets, in which I attempt to bring into English poems that do not fit the modernist aesthetic, but begin to define a broader sense of poetic soundness and allow for the voicing of the subjects considered "women's."

In selecting for an anthology, the translator must weigh the choices: to represent only poets who have not been translated at all; to include poets who have been well translated, but to pick only poems that have never appeared in translation before; to retranslate poems. It seems important, especially for Yiddish, that, along with translations of unknown poets and poems, more than one translation of a poet and a poem should exist. Dropkin, for example, has been represented in five English anthologies published between 1969 and 1995 by a total of eleven poems, including three translations of "Di tsirkus-dame" (The circus lady) and two translations of "Adam." In 1994, a book-length translation of Dropkin's poems appeared in French.<sup>6</sup> The English translations, by Adrienne Rich, Grace Schulman, Howard Schwartz, Aaron Kramer, and Ruth Whitman, while fine and various, only begin to

“present the different facets, the different registers” of Celia Dropkin’s poetry, in the words of her French translators, Gilles Rozier and Viviane Siman.<sup>7</sup>

More translations of the same poems and translations of yet-unrendered poems provide multiple voices that can open up the Yiddish texts. With multiple translations, students who read Yiddish literature only in translation will have to work harder to get at the poem. Multiple translations help readers return to the Yiddish text or turn to someone who has access to it. At this time, when there are relatively few readers of Yiddish, there is a great need to open the field, to open the discussion of Yiddish literature through translations. Let us not close off a Yiddish text in a “definitive” translation. Let us not condemn translators as traitors. Rather, let us strengthen the fluid, reciprocal conversation between Yiddish poems and English poems.

“What is feminist translation?” My friend and colleague Larry Rosenwald, a translator and theorist of translation, raised this question on the “Bridges” Internet discussion group in November 1994, and from Tel Aviv, where I was at the time, I responded. We began a conversation over e-mail, and decided to test the notion of feminist translation by independently translating the same poem. I chose the poem—Anna Margolin’s “Maris tfile”—the second in a series of seven poems that make up the section “Mari” in Margolin’s single collection, *Lider* (New York, 1929). I was well aware that Margolin is viewed by some as writing with the aesthetics of Yiddish modernism against the personal and intimate poetics of her female contemporaries.<sup>8</sup> The challenge of this perceived resistance within Margolin’s poems to feminist interpretation attracted me to her work for this experiment. I chose this poem because the name “Mari” in the title suggested that the poem’s speaker was female, and I felt that such clear gendering would bring the questions of feminism and translation more quickly to the surface. In addition, I was drawn to the complications suggested by the name Mari, which seems to represent in part, at least, the persona of the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus, a Christian subject in a Yiddish prayer poem.<sup>9</sup> Not coincidentally, the Virgin Mary is one-half of the

dichotomy of virgin and whore through which women and the female personification of translation have conventionally been viewed.

Here is “Maris tfile” in Yiddish:

### מאַריס תּפֿילה

גאַט, הכּנעהדיק און שטום זײַנען די וועגן.  
 דורכן פֿײַער פֿון זינד און פֿון טרערן  
 פֿירן צו דיר אַלע וועגן.  
 איך האָב פֿון ליבע געבויט דיר אַ נעסט  
 און פֿון שטילקייט אַ טעמפל.  
 איך בין דיין היטעריין, דינסט און געליבטע,  
 און דיין פנים האָב איך קיין מאָל ניט געזען.  
 און איך ליג אויפֿן ראַנד פֿון דער וועלט,  
 און דו גייסט פֿינצטער דורך מיר ווי די שעה פֿון טויט,  
 גייסט ווי אַ ברייטע בליצנדיקע שווערד.<sup>10</sup>

Larry sent me his translation on 7 December 1994:

### Mary's Prayer

God, these paths are poor and still.  
 Through fire of sin and fire of tears,  
 All paths lead to you.  
 Of love I have built you a nest,  
 Of silence, a temple.  
 I am your keeper, handmaid, and beloved,  
 And I have never seen your face.  
 And I lie at the edge of the world,  
 And you go darkly through me, like the hour of death,  
 Go like a broad and glittering sword.



Receiving it on 8 December, I refrained from reading Larry's version until I sent him my translation on 9 December:

### Mary's Prayer

God, humble and mute are these ways.

Through the fire of sin and of tears

All ways lead to you.

I have built you a nest out of love

And out of silence, a temple.

I am your protector, servant, and beloved,

And I have never seen your face.

And I lie on the rim of the world,

And you pass through me, dark as the hour of death,

Pass like a broad, flashing sword.<sup>11</sup>

With the title, Margolin establishes the speaker of the poem as Mary and the occasion as her prayer. Expectedly, the poem begins by addressing God. Unexpected, though, are the imagery, the rhetorical stance, and the tone of the woman praying. The poem, ten lines organized into four unrhymed and metrically irregular stanzas, opens and closes with tercets, between which lie two couplets. In the first tercet, after addressing God by name, the speaker describes *di vegn*, "the roads, paths, or ways," as *hakhnoedik un shtum*, "servile, humble, meek, or abject," and "mute or dumb."<sup>12</sup> She then asserts that these roadways or paths all lead to God, "Through the fire of sin and of tears." Although these opening lines serve as a kind of invocation, affirming the dominion of God, they are not followed by supplication, entreaty, or confession, as one might expect in a prayer, particularly in a *tkhine*, a type of supplicatory Yiddish prayer written for private recitation by an individual woman and most likely a model for "Mary's Prayer."

Instead, in the two couplets at the poem's center, the speaker narrates her history with God. In the first couplet, she tells God that she has built Him a nest out

of love and a temple out of silence. In the second couplet, she states that she is His *biterin, dinst, un gelibte*, His “guardian, keeper, custodian, or guard”; His “maid-servant,” and His “sweetheart, beloved, or lover.” After thus characterizing herself in relation to God, the speaker announces that she has never seen His face. We might hear this last statement as a complaint. If we understand it to be a complaint, the concluding tercet of the poem resonates in a peculiar way. Here, the speaker describes her present position, lying *afn rand fun der velt*, “on the “edge, border, brink, brim, rim, margin” of the world, and God’s action. What exactly God does is problematic, and I will examine this problem in a moment.

I have two points here. First, Margolin’s poem presents a woman’s prayer in which the conventional elements of praise, supplication, entreaty, or complaint are presented through the rhetoric of narration. This subsuming of a prayer’s direct address to the indirection of narration is a feature of modern Yiddish prayer poems, which I’ve written about elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Second, the figurative language of the poem is distinctively not Jewish. The rather direct metaphors in the first half of the poem convey the speaker’s attitude toward God by connoting fire, tears, a nest, and a temple. The complex, extended metaphors in the poem’s second half connote relationships rather than things and call forth the experiences of servitude, the sexual act, and violence.

These features of Margolin’s poem emerged for me as Larry Rosenwald and I conversed on e-mail. In the course of our conversation, Larry and I fiddled with word choice, and we corrected errors: In line 1, Larry changed “plain” to “poor,” and I changed “your” to “these.” Each of us found the other’s version attractive and almost too persuasive, because each variant pointed out the range of choices in English that emerged only upon rereading the Yiddish with the other’s translation in mind. As we both tried not to be influenced by the other, our conversation focused, line by line, on the choices of diction, repetition, word order, and syntax.

Larry’s choice of diction was more concrete and conversational, while mine was more abstract and literary: in line 1, Larry chose “paths,” “poor,” and “still,” while I chose “ways,” “humble,” and “mute.” His syntax in line 1 follows normal English usage, while mine reverses the subject and the verb, mirroring the reversal that occurs in Margolin’s Yiddish line. In line 4, though, Larry reversed the normal

English sentence order, to avoid evoking “love-nest,” while I avoided this evocation by writing “nest out of love.”

As I read over our ten-page discussion of this ten-line poem, every detail clamors for attention. Yet the question of feminist translation comes to a head in lines 6 and 9. Margolin’s line 6 reads, *Ikh bin dayn hiterin, dinst un gelibte*. Larry’s version reads, “I am your keeper, handmaid, and beloved.” My version reads, “I am your protector, servant, and beloved.”

Larry wrote:

I think *dinst* is intended to evoke what Mary says when Gabriel announces that she is pregnant with the holy ghost: *ecce ancilla dei*. The stock translation of *ancilla* is “handmaiden.” But then the question is as before, namely, how to deal with Yiddish when it treats of Christianity. *Dinst* is also just an ordinary servant, right? So should I link it to “handmaiden” or contrast it with it?

My reply was:

The reference to what Mary says when she hears the annunciation must be in there—but *dinst* is simply “servant,” although it does contain the feminine. (*Diner* or *badiner* are “servant—masc.”) The female aspect of Mary’s service is clearly there in the Yiddish suffix, as it is in *hiterin* and *gelibte*.

When I look at both translations some years later, I see that Larry’s choice of “handmaiden” and mine of “servant” are compromises. Larry’s “handmaiden” foregrounds the Christian subtext of Margolin’s poem, but in doing so, perhaps distorts the poem: this subtext resonates much more loudly in his English than in Margolin’s Yiddish. My choice of “servant” makes the connotation of the Christian text more remote to the English-reader, as I think it is in the Yiddish, but as a result, it may weaken the English poem.

The question of whether to choose “handmaiden” or “servant” led me, in this same e-mail letter, to continue with more questions about how each of us translated the word *hiterin*. I wrote to Larry that, as I thought about the word choice, I realized that “protector” gave the speaker more power than “keeper,” and proposed that “guardian” might be an even better choice. At that moment, it struck me that Margolin’s word brought to my ears simultaneously a Yiddish *tkhine* in which the supplicant asks God to *babit undz far ale beyze geshekhenesh [sic]*, “Protect us from all evil events,”<sup>14</sup> a line from Molodowsky’s poem, “Clay Ground,” in which young Polish girls cross themselves and say, *hit oys undz got fun shlekhete rukhes* (“Protect us, God, from evil spirits,”<sup>15</sup> and the admonishment that a pious Jewish woman should *hitn shabes*, keep the Sabbath, preserved in the modern Yiddish translator of the Bible, Yehoash’s version of the Second Commandment (Exod. 31:14).<sup>16</sup> I wrote:

Here, Mary is literally keeping the divine seed within her body, to nurture the Holy Spirit and the infant Jesus. I guess that my choice of “protector” gives Mary a moment of one-upmanship over God, which I am not sure Margolin intended her to have. Am I translating as a feminist here? Making God’s paths/ways humble and mute (in my original misreading of line 1) rather than Mary’s? Making Mary a protector of God, rather than one who follows or keeps his ways or offspring? This does not speak well of feminist translation! Seems like I’m distorting the poem for my own rebellion against the passivity and receptiveness of the speaker.

When Larry’s translation of *hiterin* as “keeper” made me reconsider my word choice of “protector,” I realized that I was hearing in the word *hiterin* echoes of other Yiddish texts. These resonances allowed me to perceive the irony in Margolin’s line, where the poet makes the Virgin Mary speak of holding the divine seed within her body in the diction of a pious, Sabbath-keeping woman of Eastern Europe.

At that moment, I found myself blurting out an astonishing statement about translating as a feminist. If the word “protector” granted too much power to Mary in

her relationship to God, I must have mistranslated these lines because, being a feminist, I rebelled against my intuitive reading of the poem as an expression of Mary's passivity.

In retrospect, it does seem to me that "protector" stretches erroneously beyond the Yiddish poem's meaning, and that "keeper" and "guardian" are more in keeping with Mary's prayer. I am most surprised, in retrospect, at my own assumption that a feminist translation distorts the poem. I seemed to be asking, "Shouldn't I, as a feminist, have the clarity of vision to allow the female speaker her words, even if I personally find them distasteful?" Apparently, in the dialogue that grew from rereading our two translations, I caught myself in the act of misreading and mistranslating as a feminist. In fact, though, I caught myself voicing my unexamined doubts about my own frame of reference as a translator.

As Larry's and my discussion continued, though, my framework of feminism, with its heightened awareness of gender in language, allowed me an insight into the poem's concluding lines (8–10):

Margolin:

*Un ikh lig afn rand fun der velt,  
 un du geyst fintster durkh mir vi di sho fun toyt,  
 geyst vi a breyte blitsndike shverd.*

Larry:

And I lie at the edge of the world,  
 And you go darkly through me, like the hour of death,  
 Go like a broad and glittering sword.

Kathryn:

And I lie on the rim of the world,  
 And you pass through me, dark as the hour of death,  
 Pass like a broad, flashing sword.

About line 8, Larry asked, “I’m puzzled by the line itself. What is Mary, what is Margolin talking about?” I responded by postulating that perhaps Mary was describing the moment of conception in which Jesus was miraculously begotten of God. She seemed to me “not really in the world that all other humans occupy.” The phrase *rand fun der velt* made me think of a crescent moon or a lunar eclipse, when the shadow of the earth passes across the full moon, and all that is left is a rim of light, even though the Yiddish words for eclipse, *like-levone* and *like-khame*, are not connoted by *rand*. Yet Margolin’s phrase shifts the speaker’s perspective, as though she were at some distance from the world, gazing back at it, as if at the moon. This shift in perspective seems appropriate to the moment when Mary is becoming the receptacle for the divine seed: she is not walking the humble, mute, earthbound paths of humankind. Neither is she in God’s realm, but somewhere in between. Line 9, *Un du geyst fintster durkh mir vi di sho fun toyt*, suggests that Mary is suspended between death and life as God passes darkly through her. I saw then how Margolin conveys Mary’s uncertainty at the moment of conception and the onset of pregnancy. Mary does not know where she belongs, sexually, humanly, spiritually.

Reconsidering this conversation, I must admit that the insight into Mary’s liminality comes from my own experiences of conception and pregnancy. A feminist framework allowed me to validate a visceral, private, peculiarly female experience, and to apply it to the public, literary act of translation. Although biology does not determine understanding, it can, of course, inform the way one reads and translates a poem. Translating as a feminist, like all translating, allows for both misreading and deep reading. However, as I reread Larry’s and my translations, I am not at all convinced that my translation of lines 8–10 expresses Mary’s liminality any better than Larry’s translation does, just because he confessed to not understanding those lines. In fact, the question that now seems important here changes to, “What is the reader’s share in any interpretative act?”<sup>17</sup>

The last stanza of “Mary’s Prayer” describes the moment of the divine conception—a moment thoroughly foreign to a Jewish sensibility, yet presented in these Yiddish lines in the most intimate of terms. In these lines, Margolin answers a bold question, which perhaps only a skeptical, modern Jew could ask of a sacred

Christian belief. Margolin offers answers that are both conventional and radical: Mary falls off the rim of the world; God enters her body like the hour of death; a sword passes through her. Margolin takes poetic conceits likening orgasm to death far beyond the conventions and the boudoirs of European love poetry.

The simultaneously intimate and alien moment is characteristic of Margolin's poems, and of her life, according to Sheva Zucker and Abraham Novershtern.<sup>18</sup> In the other poems in the sequence, a child is born and lost; Mary is compared to a goblet of wine that a priest smashes on the altar; Mary is alone, even in society, with her husband, among guests; Mary longs to renounce the world and become a beggar woman; finally, Mary, leading a parade of outcasts, follows Death into the forest. "Maris tfile" may contain fragments of the autobiographical narrative, but it is cast in a *fremde shtime*, a foreign voice. This paradox complicates what, as Novershtern argues, is Margolin's conscious differentiation of her poetry from other women poets (*dikhterins*), who were assumed to be writing purely confessional and autobiographical poems.<sup>19</sup> Translating this poem in a feminist context, asking questions of feminist translation, and placing the poem's Christian connotations into the context of *tkhines*, I reconnect Margolin with other women writers.

To conclude, I return to the beginning, where I rejected the conventional "wisdoms" that figure translation as a gendered treachery yielding only a virgin or a whore. Yet in Margolin's poem "Maris tfile," where the title itself presents the oxymoronic juxtaposition of the supreme gentile name with the Hebraic word for prayer, translation itself is a compounded heresy. The translator of this poem betrays Margolin, the poet who has taken the voice of Mary, in order to reveal a woman's most intimate thoughts at a most vulnerable and powerful moment. Each translator of the poem, appropriating the voice of Mary through Margolin, moves through language and imagination beyond her/his own experience. In turn, the Yiddish poet and her persona, otherwise silent to many readers, find their foreign voice in English.

## NOTES

- Part 1 was originally presented at the conference “Di Froyen: Women and Yiddish,” National Council of Jewish Women, New York Section, 29 October 1995, at the Jewish Theological Seminary; an earlier version was published in *Proceedings* (30 March 1997). I am grateful to Anne Golomb Hoffman and Lori Lefkowitz for their comments and suggestions.

The essay as a whole was presented to Ma’yan’s Jewish Feminist Research Group, Center for the Study of Women and Society, CUNY, on 18 March 1997, and at Loyola College in Baltimore at the conference “Between Two Cultures,” 16 April 1997.

- 1 Gen. 2:23, *The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1955), 9th printing, 1976.
- 2 I discovered when I revised the dissertation for publication that most American publishers do not share that sense of the necessity of completeness. Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, *In New York: A Selection*, trans., ed., intro. Kathryn Hellerstein (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1982).
- 3 Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk, *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (New York: Viking, 1987).
- 4 *Found Treasures: Stories by Yiddish Women Writers*, ed. Frieda Forman et al., intro. Irena Klepfisz (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1994).
- 5 These include: Rokhl Korn, *Generations: Selected Poems*, ed. Seymour Mayne (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1982); Rokhl Korn, *Paper Roses*, trans. and intro. Seymour Levitan (Toronto: Aya Press, 1985), a bilingual edition; Anna Margolin, *Lider*, ed. and intro. Abraham Novershtern (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), introduction in English translation, poems in Yiddish only; Malka Heifetz Tussman, *With Teeth in the Earth: Selected Poems of Malka Heifetz Tussman*, trans., ed., and intro. Marcia Falk (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992); Rukhl Fishman, *I Want to Fall Like This: Selected Poems of Rukhl Fishman*, trans. Seymour Levitan, intro. David G. Roskies (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), bilingual; Celia Dropkin, *Dans le vent chaud*, trans. into French by Gilles Rozier and Viviane Siman (Paris: Editions L’Harmattan, 1994), bilingual; Kadya Molodowsky, *Paper Bridges: Selected Poems of Kadya Molodowsky*, trans., ed., intro. Kathryn Hellerstein (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), bilingual.



- 6 Celia Dropkin in English anthologies: *Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Schocken, 1969, 1972), pp. 168–69: “Poem (You sowed in me, not a child)” and “Poem (I haven’t yet seen you / asleep),” trans. Adrienne Rich; *Voices Within the Ark*, ed. Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolph (New York: Avon, 1980), p. 252: “A Circus Dancer,” trans. Howard Schwartz; *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, ed. Howe, Wisse, Shmeruk, pp. 241–45: “The Circus Dancer,” “Adam,” “The Filth of Your Suspicion,” “Like Snow on the Alps,” trans. Grace Schulman; *A Century of Yiddish Poetry*, trans. and ed. Aaron Kramer (Cranbury, N.J.: Cornwall Books, 1989), pp. 139–40: “At the Window,” “My Guest” (excerpts) (“You’re welcome . . . ,” and “You Are a Spider, I a fly”); *Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry*, trans. Ruth Whitman, 3rd ed., bilingual (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), pp. 28–35: “The Circus Lady,” “My Hands,” “Adam,” “A Terror Was Rising in My Heart”; Celia Dropkin, *Dans le vent chaud: Bilingue yiddish-français* (In the Hot Wind: Bilingual Yiddish and French), trans. Rozier and Siman. Fern Kant is preparing a book-length translation of Dropkin’s *In heysn vint* for her thesis for the masters of liberal arts at the University of Pennsylvania.
- 7 Rozier and Siman, introduction to *Dans le vent chaud*, Celia Dropkin, p. 14.
- 8 See Abraham Novershtern, “‘Who Would Have Believed that a Bronze Statue Can Weep’: The Poetry of Anna Margolin,” trans. Robert Wolf, introduction to Anna Margolin, *Lider* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), pp. v–lviii.
- 9 In his “‘Who Would Have Believed that a Bronze Statue Can Weep’: The Poetry of Anna Margolin” (Anna Margolin, *Lider*), Novershtern discusses the penultimate poem in the “Mary” sequence, “*Mari vil zayn a betlerin*,” which, under the title “*Zayn a betlerin*,” was one of Margolin’s first published poems. Novershtern’s translator, Robert Wolf, translates the name as the French “Marie,” apparently missing the allusion to the New Testament “Mary,” to support Novershtern’s point that “through this figure, the poet tried to build a bridge between profound empathy and objective description; in this respect, it is certainly noteworthy that she chose a name so foreign-sounding to Jewish readers” (p. xiii).

I should note that although as early as 1909 the Yiddish novelist Sholem Asch had written about the Virgin Mary’s journey from Bethlehem to Jerusalem (Charles Madison, *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers* [New York: Schocken, 1971], p. 248), Asch’s controversial trilogy of Christological novels did not appear until the late 1930s and 1940s: *The Nazarene*, English translation of *Der man fun Natseres*, was published in English in 1939 (New York: Putnam), and in Yiddish only in 1943. *The Apostle* was published in English translation in 1943, also by

Putnam, and appears never to have been published in Yiddish. *Mary*, the English translation of *Meri*, appeared in English in 1949, and seems not to have been published in Yiddish. (*Der leksikon fun der nayer yidisber literatur* [New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1956], 1; 189–90.)

- 10 Anna Margolin, “Maris tfile,” in *Lider*, ed. and intro. Abraham Novershtern, p. 96.
- 11 Since the winter of 1994–95, Larry and I have each revised these translations and have gone on to translate the other seven poems in the sequence. In the current version of this essay, I have decided not to incorporate our revisions of the translations.
- 12 In this paragraph, I am listing definitions of the Yiddish words, based on Uriel Weinreich, *Yiddish-English/English-Yiddish Dictionary* (New York: YIVO and McGraw-Hill, 1968).
- 13 See Kathryn Hellerstein, “The Subordination of Prayer to Narrative in Modern Yiddish Poems,” in *Parable and Story as Sources of Jewish and Christian Theology*, ed. Clemens Thoma and Michael Wyschogrod (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 205–36.
- 14 *Tkhine fun likht bentshn*, in *The Merit of Our Mothers: A Bilingual Anthology of Jewish Women’s Prayers*, ed. and intro. Tracy Guren Klirs; trans. Tracy Guren Klirs, Ida Cohen Selavan, and Gella Schweid Fishman (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1992), pp. 88–89.
- 15 Kadya Molodowsky, “Leym-grunt,” in *Khesvondike nekht* (Warsaw: Farlag B. Kletskin, 1927), p. 82.
- 16 Yehoash (Sh. Bloomgarten), *Torah, Neviim, Ketuvim* (New York: Yehoash Farlag Gezelshaft, 1st ed. 1941; 2d ed. 1942), Exod. 31:14, p. 143.
- 17 These questions and those in the next paragraph are developed from the helpful comments of Lori Lefkowitz.
- 18 Sheva Zucker, “Ana Margolin un di poezye funem geshpoltenem ikh,” *Yivo bleter*, n.s., vol. 1 (1991): 173–98; Abraham Novershtern, “Ana Margolin — materyaln tsu ir poetisher geshtalt,” *ibid.*, 129–72.
- 19 Novershtern, “‘Who Would Have Believed that a Bronze Statue Can Weep’: The Poetry of Anna Margolin,” intro. to *Lider*, Anna Margolin, pp. xxxix–xlx.

## A Response from LAWRENCE ROSENWALD

Dear Kathryn,

I'll put my response to your exhilarating paper in the form of a letter, since I at any rate have found that it's helpful to think about these matters in the context of addressing another human being; and I'll focus for the most part on the question I asked originally, namely, "Is there such a thing as feminist translation, and if so, what would it be?"

You start by talking about a task where there is clearly such a thing as feminist translation, i.e., the task of choosing which poems and which poets to translate, and how to develop criteria for such choices, specifically, feminist aesthetic criteria for judging Yiddish poems by women. This seems to me an important task, and I admire the argument you make in elaborating it; but I also sense a certain hesitation, a holding back, and think that the argument needs to be developed further. For example, you write that

from a modernist perspective, these poems [by Roza Goldshteyn and Yehudis] are not "good." Nonetheless, they show us how women at the end of the nineteenth century, engaging in politics on the page and in the street, recast the poeticisms of the Labor Poets. These poems merit a translation that conveys their energetic syntax and spirit.

The problem with that formulation, I think, is that it leaves modernist aesthetic criteria unchallenged, because what's being opposed to "good" in a modernist sense is not "good" in some other sense, but rather some other criterion altogether, a criterion of being representative or bearing witness; you present the Goldshteyn and Yehudis poems as worthy of being translated because they represent some aspect of women's literary history. But a modernist could agree with that and continue to think that when push comes to shove, Pound and Eliot are simply better poets.

Similarly, you write of finding "poems that embody sexuality and sensuality, poems that speak about power and powerlessness through images of pregnancy, childlessness, childbirth, child-rearing, widowhood, orphanhood." Here also, it

seems to me, the implicit argument is that these poems are worth translating because of the experiences they embody. So I'd want to push you to formulate not just reasons for translating poems that don't meet modernist aesthetic criteria, but also different aesthetic criteria by which to judge them.

One way to do that, probably, will be to elaborate your statement that "ideally, the translator will acknowledge that her canon, like all canons, excludes as well as includes," and in particular to work out what your canon is excluding. As long as you're arguing simply for the inclusion of this or that neglected poem or poet, you don't really have to formulate aesthetic criteria at all; representing important experiences is warrant enough. But when you get around to excluding poems, to deciding what does not belong even in a generous and capacious anthology of Yiddish women's poetry, I think there's no choice but to formulate aesthetic criteria; and I wonder what poems you would exclude from an ideal anthology, and on what grounds.

In the second section of your paper, you focus on an area where it's less clear what feminist translation might be; in particular, you identify two moments where "the question of feminist translation comes to a head." The first is line 6 of Margolin's poem, in particular the rendering of *hiterin*, "protector" or "keeper." The second is line 9, *ikh lig afn rand fun der velt*. And the two moments offer two different images of feminist translation. In the former, feminist translation is the heightening of a woman speaker's power. In the latter, it's the possibility of "validat[ing] a visceral, private, peculiarly female experience, and [applying] it to the public, literary act of translation." The former image you reject; the latter you endorse.

I agree with both your judgments. But I don't think that either judgment requires a specifically feminist idea of translation. Your rejection of the bad kind of feminist translation, of the rendering that artificially heightens a woman speaker's power, rests on the same philological criteria that all translational judgments have to rest on; and you present these criteria, rightly, as something you and I share, and more generally as something that translators have to share, or at least acknowledge the force of, regardless of gender.

As for the good kind of feminist translation, here the argument is a little more complicated. You write that you're "not at all convinced" that your translation of lines 8–10 expresses Mary's liminality any better than mine does. I myself am entirely convinced; I think that by drawing on your experience, and by applying that experience to the act of translation, you've come up with a more convincing reading of the lines in question, and a more convincing rendering of them, than I was able to. But the possibility of making use of "visceral, private" experience for figuring out how poems work isn't restricted to feminists; such use seems to me one of the ways that all translators have to work. And here, too, the point is that the criteria of judgment don't change; what enables your rendering to convince me is, in a way, exactly what enables my rendering of the earlier line to convince you, namely, that we share certain criteria of judgment—technical, philological, even aesthetic—and bring them into play in much the same way.

So what I think you establish is that, yes, there's a feminist mode of translation, yours and not mine, in relation to our motives for particular translations; yes, there's a feminist mode of translation, yours and not mine, in relation to the experiences we draw on in translating; but no, there's not a feminist mode of translation, yours and not mine, in relation to the philological judgment by which, in the end, we assess the translations we make. And that, after all, is what makes it possible to have this sort of communication.

I'd like to conclude by making two points about the specifically Jewish character of this whole enterprise.

1. You write on p. 200, "the figurative language of the poem is distinctively not Jewish." I'm not sure what you mean. I agree, intuitively, that the idea of paths leading through a fire of sin and tears to God feels more Wagnerian than it does Jewish, evokes Siegfried more than it does *Moyshe rabeynu*; but I'm not sure I'd trust my intuition. And the remaining imagery, especially that of nest and temple, does seem to me Jewish—I think in particular of Psalm 84, which reads, in Yehoash's translation,

*Afile a shperl gefint zikh a heym,  
 un a shvalb a nest far zikh,  
 vu zi tut abin ire yunge,  
 bay dayne mizbeykhes, adonay fun tsvoes.*

(Even the sparrow finds a home,  
 the swallow a nest for herself,  
 where she brings her young ones,  
 at your slaughtersites, O Lord of hosts.)

2. Elsewhere you write, “with multiple translations, students who read Yiddish literature only in translation will have to work harder to get at the poem.” I couldn’t agree more, and would like to sharpen the point a bit.

As someone who comes to thinking about the translation of Yiddish poetry from thinking about translation in general, I’m often astonished and sometimes shocked at how little attention, in Yiddishist circles, is given to questions of translation; anthologies of verse in translation are reviewed with hardly any attention to philological detail, and novels and memoirs in translation are reviewed with hardly even an acknowledgment that they are a result of someone’s translational decisions, and that those decisions are subject to judgment and analysis.

I think I know at least one reason. Yiddish is an endangered language; and because of its endangered state, and because its endangered state has so much to do with the trauma of the Shoah, we greet every new translation of a Yiddish text as a victory over Hitler. Hence the remark quoted from the *Wall Street Journal* on the back of the *Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, “This is the best kind of Holocaust memorial, because . . . it resurrects the culture that Hitler did his worst to kill.”

Nor do I think we’re wrong to hold this attitude. But ideally, we would hold also the other attitude you represent in your paper. We owe this remarkable culture the kind of scrutiny that you so admirably give it in relation to Margolin’s poem.

## A Response from ANITA NORICH

I would like to enter into Kathryn Hellerstein and Lawrence Rosenwald's discussion about the possibilities for feminist translations of Yiddish women's poetry by reflecting on the sometimes overlapping concerns of Jewish and feminist discourse. What can it mean—in either context—to discuss translation as an act “performed upon” a text, an act that enlivens a text, without which that text would remain inert? Yiddish is a particularly apt site of contention for these issues because of its status in Jewish and, more recently, American, culture and because of renewed interest in its role as *mame-loshn* (mother tongue), the language gendered as female.

With its decline, Yiddish has become the sacred Jewish tongue, the language that must be preserved intact, that is threatened by yet more losses by being given over to another idiom. With each text and commentary, Yiddish translators remind themselves of the etymological links among translation, transgression, and aggression. Translators literally carry something over from one place (or language) to another. In doing so, they necessarily transgress—step across or beyond their point of origin. And the act of aggression—attack—thus performed is inevitable. Hebrew has its own version of this homology. In Hebrew, to cross over (*la'avor*) is not necessarily a sin (*'aveira*), but the roots are identical and so are the dangers. Hebrew, however, unlike Latin, does not make translation (*tirgum*) a threatening act in Jewish culture.

Translation from Yiddish may feel like a capitulation to history, hinting at the end of Yiddish culture by suggesting that, in the original, these texts will no longer be read by anyone but will, like their intended audience, disappear. At the same time, however, translation is also an act of resistance to history, an act of defiance that preserves a culture whose transformations should not be met with silence. In either case, however reluctant we may be to invoke it, the language of the Holocaust is pivotal to the discussion: collaborators or resisters, Yiddish translators are inevitably measured by daunting standards.

The cultural politics of Yiddish translation thus impart an urgency to the task that rarely besets other translators. In the contradictions and tensions that have marked its development, Yiddish is not quite like most modern languages.

Combined with a well-established history of educational, political, and cultural institutions is its history of being without borders, always peripatetic, following the geographical shifts of Jewish history. It is now at rest only because it is considered barely capable of being prodded to move any more. The corollary to this wandering is that modern Yiddish has been a cosmopolitan, international, multilingual culture, thus perhaps ironically mitigating some of the problems faced by Yiddish translators. Every writer of Yiddish, and almost every reader as well, has always been multilingual. The relationship between Yiddish and Hebrew is particularly significant in this regard, since the two literatures have been analyzed as the two parts of one body of Jewish literature and the two have, more recently, reversed roles, with Yiddish increasingly the language of study and Hebrew the language of *der yidisher gas* (the Jewish street).

Yiddish may be the literature of a minority, but it is not a minor literature in the Deleuze-Guattari sense, i.e., it is not the product of a minority writing within a major language (Kafka or other Jews writing in German). It is, rather, in the peculiar position of being a major literature in a minor language: major in quantity and quality, certainly in its own perception of itself; minor in the sense that the Jews who read it all over the world were a minority everywhere and could not rely on Yiddish alone. Of necessity, then, Yiddish has always been permeable, open to other literary influences, looking to other languages and traditions, in dialogue with them. This multilingual cultural exchange may make Yiddish literature peculiarly adaptive to translation.

Furthermore, at least since the Holocaust and arguably even before it, Yiddish writers were already anticipating the translations of their works. Isaac Bashevis Singer is perhaps the best example of this, writing (at least since the early 1950s) with his English-speaking audience in mind, always conscious of his harsh Yiddish and adoring English critics. It is highly unlikely that, given the chance, Yiddish readers would have claimed him as their Nobel laureate, that distinction no doubt being reserved for other, more obscure—(because) less often translated—writers. Increasingly, translators and anthologizers, rather than readers or critics, define the Yiddish literary canon. The “world of our fathers” that an English-reading audience



encounters is precisely that: a construction of a “world” that contains precious few fathers, and virtually no mothers.

Still, translators cannot be held responsible for this situation. The sexual politics of Jewish languages and culture is a provocative topic. Generally, Yiddish is regarded in matrilineal terms, as *di mame-loshn*, the language of home, while Hebrew is viewed in patrilineal terms, as the language of scholarship and tradition. But Yiddish is more androgynous than these contrasts suggest: the *language* is gendered as feminine while the *literature* is gendered as masculine.

Yiddish writers of the mid- to late-nineteenth century did not experience “the anxiety of influence” because they saw themselves as having no precursors and wished for no followers in their own language. A sense of a Yiddish literary tradition can be attributed to a stroke of mythmaking genius by Sholem Aleichem, who understood that a respectable literature must have a history and forefathers. A century ago, when he called Mendele Moykher-Sforim *der zeyde* (the grandfather) of Yiddish literature, he claimed such a patriarchal tradition that began with the famous author who was only twenty years his senior. The peculiar genealogy that has become one of the founding myths of Yiddish literature obliterates not only the maternal line, but the authority of the father as well. If there is a role for the father in this story, that role belongs to Hebrew rather than to any individual author.

The role of the mother is more complicated. At the center of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), which gave rise to modern Yiddish literature, was the edict *tsu zayn a yid in der heym un a mentsh af der gas* (to be a Jew at home and a human being in the street). (Let us leave aside, for now, the terrible implications contained in this attempt to distinguish between the Jew and the human being.) *Mentshlekkeyt af der gas* (humanity in the street) meant, unequivocally, speaking the language not of *der yidisher gas* (the Jewish street) but of the broader one—German, Russian, Polish, and so on. The Jew at home, then, might speak Yiddish; but the human being out in the world must speak a more human tongue. If the implications of the distinction between Jew and human being are followed to their (un)natural ends, the Jew speaking Yiddish at home is in the role of the feminine; the generic human being—*der mentsh*—has, after all, always been male, and if we are to

contrast him with the Jew, that leaves the female role for the Jew and for Yiddish. But once Yiddish is thus identified with the familiar, comforting maternal home, it also becomes, like that home, the place from which one sets forth. In the normal course of things, one reaches maturity and leaves *di mame* and *di mame-loshn* behind. Maturity, independence, acceptance of and by the wider world demand it.

The contemporary interest in Yiddish culture is only superficially an expression of the urge to return home, to places that have been utterly devastated. Most readers are content to encounter some version of the Old Country at the safe remove of time, distance, and, especially, language and cultural context. This, too, makes the task of Yiddish translators a particularly laden one since they are now responsible not only for accurate or felicitous translations, but for making their readers feel *hey mish* (at home, but also intimate, familiar), for giving them (back?) the home many of them have never known.

There are some things that translation cannot hope to convey. In the case of the movement from Yiddish to English, one of those things that inevitably gets lost is—literally—perception. The physical and spatial relations of text on the page are different in Yiddish and English. In the most obvious sense, English-readers use their eyes differently, moving from left to right instead of from right to left. I do not want to make too much of this difference, but the possibilities for how and what one sees cannot be ignored, either. Or consider another example, taken from the Yiddish text of Anna Margolin's "Maris tfile": *geyst vi a breyte blitsndike shverd*. Hellerstein translates that line as "Pass like a broad, flashing sword." Rosenwald translates it as "Go like a broad and glittering sword." Both agree that the implied subject of the sentence concluded by this line is "you," and, from each translation, it is clear that the "you" refers to God. Both are, of course, correct. But there is a strong misreading possible in the Yiddish that cannot be conveyed in English and that underscores the problem of translating from one alphabet to another, one set of markings that connote meaningful signs to another. The relevant symbols do not signify in English orthography, are barely noticeable to the English eye, but they contain within them the possibilities for my misreading. Read the Yiddish *geyst* as *gayst*, read ך as ך—that is, change not even a letter in the Yiddish but only the diacritical markings below that indicate vowels (and that, in any case, are often missing in

printed texts), and you have another intriguing possibility. *Gayst* (spelled *giml*, two *yuds* with a *pasekh* under them—the small horizontal line under a doubling of the smallest letter of the alphabet—*samekh*, *tes*) may simply be the Polish-Yiddish pronunciation of the standard *geyst* (*giml*, two unadorned *yuds*, *samekh*, *tes*). But *gayst* also means spirit (or genius) and may thus imply another voice in the friendly debate between these two translations, one in which the speaker of the poem not only addresses God but invokes the notion of her own spirit and genius as well. It is impossible to know if Margolin wanted to strengthen her voice in this way, but it is surely relevant to our understanding of the poem. Is this reading—like the question of how to translate *hiterin* (“protector,” according to Hellerstein; “keeper,” according to Rosenwald), or whether a particular translation gives the speaker more power than Margolin would claim—part of the poetics of feminist reading or translation? Perhaps; but it is also part of the ongoing sense of translation as interpretation and the call for many varied translations that Hellerstein emphasizes.

In many ways, the feminist enterprise and the Yiddishist enterprise bear an uncanny resemblance to each other, as this discussion underscores. Repeatedly, in Hellerstein’s comments and in Rosenwald’s, I find myself substituting the word “Yiddishist” for the word “feminist” to see if both hold equally true. And, repeatedly, they do. I adapt sentences in Hellerstein’s essay to read: “Translating as a [feminist/Yiddishist], one must first confront the problem of canon and how to choose which poets to translate.” “I translate as a [feminist/Yiddishist] in that I try to render the poems that don’t ‘fit’ into a modern aesthetic, that aren’t necessarily ‘good’ according to poetic convention, that are deeply imbedded in particularities of Eastern European Jewish life.” “Translating as a [feminist/Yiddishist], then, I revise my notions of canon and literary taste.” “Translating as a [feminist/Yiddishist], like all translating, allows for both misreading and deep reading.” Or, from Rosenwald: “There is clearly such a thing as [feminist/Yiddishist] translation, i.e., the task of choosing which poems and which poets to translate, and how to develop criteria for such choices, specifically [feminist/Yiddishist] aesthetic criteria for judging Yiddish poems by women.” I would even be willing to ask if the more “abstract and literary” language that Hellerstein uses is the feminine analogue to Rosenwald’s more “concrete and conversational” masculine diction, or if it is somehow embedded in

her understanding of Yiddish, the result perhaps of how steeped in Yiddish women's poetry she has been in recent years and how far it has taken her from the English literary tradition in which she was schooled.

Striking in all this is the extent to which both feminist and Yiddishist sensibilities remain transgressive, threatening familiar standards of canon formation and literary taste. The implications of such changes have been more thoroughly explored in feminist criticism than in Yiddish criticism, but they are equally important for both contexts. Not only does any notion of a received canon become suspect, but the very emphasis on canon itself is challenged. Complexity and obscurity lose some of their privilege when we read with these new perspectives. A greater range of experiences are admitted into all literary and cultural discussions. Perhaps most interestingly, Jews and women are no longer regarded merely as other, no longer marked as not quite European and not male. *Mame-loshn*, in other words, takes on provocative new meanings.

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