

3. Alter quotes Scholem as writing to Benjamin, "we must not give up on this generation, and since nothing could replace Palestine in its function for Judaism but empty phrases evocative of nothing, how should I conceive of the years to come?" (7–8). But what Scholem had written was, "für diese Generation müssen wir resignieren," "we must [not 'must not'] give up on this generation" (letter of June 30, 1939, in Scholem, ed., *Walter Benjamin / Gershom Scholem: Briefwechsel 1933–1940* [Frankfurt, 1980], p. 308).

4. *Briefwechsel*, pp. 266–73; the reflections on Brod's book end on p. 269.

5. Letter of June 1921, in Max Brod, ed., *Franz Kafka: Briefe, 1902–1924* (Frankfurt, 1975), p. 336; my translation, as are all those not quoted from the books under review.

6. Brod, *Über Franz Kafka* (Frankfurt, 1966), p. 275.

7. Kafka, *Briefe*, p. 336; the passage between asterisks is what Alter quotes from this part of the letter, and is quoted from his quotation.

8. Handelman's title refers to "literary theory," but she discusses chiefly linguistic theory, albeit that of literary critics rather than linguists.

9. It is only fair to note that Handelman herself does not say any of this about her book. She states that she is interested in her three figures because "each is a Jew engaged in mediating the Jewish and modern worlds, as I am. More specifically, each has had enormous influence on contemporary ideas about language, history, and interpretation in a variety of fields from literary criticism to religious studies, philosophy, and social theory" (xviii). In fact, however, the polemical intent of the book emerges more vividly with the reading of each successive section of it; and it is only this polemical intent that finally holds the book together, as I shall make clear later.

10. Benjamin, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt, 1980), p. 57.

11. See on this my "On the Reception of Buber and Rosenzweig's Bible," *Prooftexts* 14 (1994): 141–65.

12. Letter of March 27, 1922, in Rosenzweig, *Briefe und Tagebücher* (The Hague, 1979), ed. Rachel Rosenzweig and Edith Rosenzweig-Scheinmann with Bernhard Casper, 2:768.

13. See, for example, Chryssoula Kambas, *Walter Benjamin im Exil: Zum Verhältnis von Literaturpolitik und Ästhetik* (Tübingen, 1983). I owe this reference to my friend Jonathan Knudsen of the Wellesley College history department.

14. As quoted in Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (New York, 1988), p. 69.

## Gender Criticism and Hebrew-Yiddish Literature: A Report from the Field

Dan Miron. *Imahot meyasdot, ahayot horgot* [Founding Mothers, Stepsisters]. Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1991, 302 pp.

Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, and Anita Norich, editors. *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992, x + 274 pp.

The importance of the two recently published works, *Imahot meyasdot, ahayot horgot* and *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, might best be illustrated by reference to the dark ages before their appearance. Just a year before Miron's work was published, I participated in a seminar on modern Hebrew women's poetry. The critical and theoretical reader for the course, assembled with I can only imagine what difficulty, comprised a strange collection of articles,

ranging from a number of articles on American or European women's poetry, which it was hoped could be usefully applied to our own subject, to a few grainy reproductions of newspaper interviews with women poets from the Hebrew press (Esther Raab at seventy, Yonah Wollach in go-go boots and a miniskirt) and a handful of critical essays on individual poets' work. In short, not much, especially compared to the sort of critical apparatus students of other literatures can call upon in their research, if only to resist. More to the point, there was little that could contextualize the poetry we were reading in the larger narrative of women's creativity in Hebrew, or suggest the specific issues faced by women entering the Hebrew literary sphere.

I report our predicament as evidence for both the keen interest in feminist approaches to Hebrew literature and the lack of materials that could satisfy this interest, at least in 1990. For Yiddish studies, the situation was a little less dismal, although there are still no book-length studies of Yiddish women's writing (a void Kathryn Hellerstein's upcoming work promises to fill). And although there were clearly intersections between gender and language ideologies in modern Jewish history, feminists had not taken up the challenge of examining Hebrew and Yiddish literature from a comparative perspective.

It would be wrong to suggest that feminist or gender studies of Hebrew and Yiddish literature are important merely because they fill a critical gap, bringing an up-to-date critical methodology to the "backward" fields of Hebrew and Yiddish. While feminist criticism can illuminate Hebrew and Yiddish literature in important and unexpected ways, as I think the two volumes under discussion demonstrate, it is also true that these literatures have something to contribute to the broader field of feminist theory. It has been suggested that the Hebrew and Yiddish literary scenes, in all their historical peculiarities, function as laboratories of modern cultural processes in which transformations occur at accelerated tempos and phenomena appear in intensified forms. The connection between nation building and language ideologies, so prominent in the case of Jewish languages, is one such obvious example; another related phenomenon is the relative clarity with which gender and linguistic structures intersect in Hebrew and Yiddish literature. In her introduction to *Gender and Text*, Anita Norich summarizes the importance of gender studies to Hebrew-Yiddish literature: "Primary among [the differences between these two literatures] is the implicit understanding of Yiddish as the mother tongue—as matrilinear, matronymic—and of Hebrew as the father tongue—patrilinear, patronymic, a language in which the influence of tradition is paramount."<sup>1</sup> The distinctive features of Hebrew and Yiddish literature, in which Hebrew tradition is associated with a masculine educational system and the Yiddish language and literature with a denigrated femininity ("real" or symbolic), suggest the possibilities for fruitful exchange between feminism and Hebrew or Yiddish studies. Thus, when Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *No Man's Land* discuss English poetry in light of "the problem of women's historical exclusion from serious, formal training in just those classics which form the foundation of Western literary and linguistic tradition,"<sup>2</sup> a Hebrew scholar may well recognize the muted outlines of the central problem of women's participation in the Hebrew literary tradition. If Norich's view of the respective paternity/maternity of Hebrew and Yiddish is true, then studies of

these languages might well enter into fruitful dialogue with the French post-Freudian investigations into language and gender, for instance, Jacques Lacan's placement of language, law, and authority within (the symbolic realm of) the father, a complex argument summarized under the evocative rubric of "the Name of the Father,"<sup>3</sup> or Helene Cixous's insistence on the primacy of "feminine" speech.<sup>4</sup>

But there is another reason why Hebrew and Yiddish feminist literary criticism is so important an enterprise right now. For all the growing audience for Hebrew and Yiddish women's writing, the disruptions of twentieth-century Jewish experience have created linguistic or cultural barriers between this contemporary audience and earlier writers. Without critical or historiographical narratives that can set individual works in their larger cultural context, contemporary Jewish feminism remains cut off from its own historical precedents. The Jewish encounter with modernity, for men as for women, often involved a renegotiation of traditional Jewish gender roles, which was manifested by—among other cultural phenomena—an explosion in women's literary creativity in Hebrew and even more so in Yiddish. Among the vital services feminist critics of Hebrew and Yiddish can perform is to bridge the present moment of feminist awareness with this earlier era of national and gender self-transformation. Thus, critics have the two-fold task of bringing contemporary feminist approaches to this earlier literature, while documenting this literature for a community clearly thirsty for an informed connection with its past.

*Imahot meyasdot*, Miron's study of the entry of women into Hebrew poetry, admirably performs a number of these services: Miron presents the first comprehensive history of women's participation in Hebrew literature and provides an analysis of the obstacles that delayed their entry. Miron's work, while it focuses on the Hebrew arena, makes reference to the sexual politics of the Yiddish literary scene as well, shedding light on the differing conditions for women's creativity in each language. Moreover, *Imahot meyasdot* recognizes the machinations and sway of sexual politics not merely in the margins of Hebrew literature, but also in the central cultural arenas and literary texts of Jewish national self-transformation, demonstrating the importance of gender-oriented approaches precisely to the most privileged *topoi* of Hebrew literature. What it does less successfully is integrate its analysis with the field of contemporary feminist research, both in Jewish studies and in the academy in general.

The strength of Miron's analysis lies in the deceptively simple question with which he opens, so reminiscent of the inquiry that structures and propels *A Room of One's Own*. In her famous essay, Virginia Woolf meditates on the "perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary [Elizabethan] literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet."<sup>5</sup> Miron, for his part, presents the analogous "conundrum of the complete absence of women poets in Hebrew from 1890 to 1920, the era of the Hebrew Renaissance."<sup>6</sup> As Woolf's meditation did for her discussion of English literature, Miron's question lends coherence and urgency to an exploration of Hebrew literature that surveys, at various points, such diverse subjects as Bialik's eulogy for Rachel and fashions in book jackets during the 1920s. Woolf's groundbreaking response to her own riddle is to expose the material and social conditions that allowed men to write

and publish while excluding their sisters from such activity. Miron detects an answer to his "conundrum" not in the larger patriarchal environment that affected Jewish and non-Jewish women alike. In an analysis that takes its cues from the specificities of Hebrew literary development, Miron traces the absence of Hebrew women poets to the hidden ideological grid and poetic norms of the literary culture from which they were excluded.

Miron begins by noting a curious literary phenomenon: after decades in which not a single woman published Hebrew poetry, the 1920s saw an era in which women poets entered the Hebrew literary arena in full force:

At the beginning of the 1920s, suddenly it was not only possible, but timely [for women to write Hebrew poetry]. All at once, some obstacle was removed, and gates that had been locked were opened wide.

Within no more than two years, four outstanding women poets appeared on the literary stage along with others who left no deep impression: Rachel Blaustein and Esther Raab in Eretz Yisrael, Elisheva Zirkova-Bikhovskiy and Yokheved Bat-Miriam [Zhelezniak] in Eastern Europe.<sup>7</sup>

The absence of Hebrew women poets before 1920 is all the more striking when one notes that Jewish women participated and achieved great visibility in both Yiddish and Russian poetry during the first two decades of this century. The question that Miron puts to this phenomenon turns out, in fact, to be two separate questions: First, why did no women publish Hebrew poetry in the two or three decades before 1920, the period of the Hebrew "Renaissance" or "Revival" (*Hatehiyah*)? And what constituted the sea change, in the years immediately following the First World War, which enabled or encouraged women to write and publish Hebrew poetry?

Miron rejects the two most obvious explanations for the absence of women from Hebrew poetry before 1920—that women lacked the language skills to write Hebrew poetry, and that the misogyny of the Hebrew literary establishment kept women's poetry from appearing in print. Miron argues that a lack of language skills could not in itself explain the absence of women from Hebrew poetry, since women (most notably Dvora Baron, although there were others) did write Hebrew prose during this period. Apparently a certain number of women, both inside and outside the Palestinian settlement, had at least some command of the language, yet they were either not moved to write Hebrew poetry or did not succeed in publishing their poems. Moreover, the women who wrote and published Hebrew poetry after 1920 were often no more fluent than many of the women who studied Hebrew in the decades before 1920.

Pointing to the enthusiastic reception of Dvora Baron's short stories, Miron also argues that it would be wrong to view the literary establishment of this period as sexist: "It is certain," Miron writes, "that Bialik, in his role as editor of the literary journal *Hashiloah*, would have welcomed a woman poet with open arms, if she had sent him a poem that could measure up to his poetic standards."<sup>8</sup> The clue to the conundrum, of course, is in the phrase, "that could measure up to his poetic standards." As Miron sees it, whatever "oppression" of women existed in this period would have to be sought within the aesthetic and cultural taste of Bialik's era. Working backward from the undeniable fact of women's absence

from Hebrew poetry of the period, Miron uncovers the poetic standards that either placed obstacles before the publication of a woman-authored poem or discouraged women from even trying their hand at Hebrew poetry.

In Miron's view, the aesthetic taste of the Revival period, emblemized by but not restricted to the poetry of Bialik, had a mutually reinforcing cultural-ideological and stylistic dimension. The first of these implicitly connected the expression of individual experience with the national self-transformation of the Jewish people:

The poetry [of this era] in general—if not each poem written within its framework—required the presentation of the life-experience of the poetic speaker as a metonymy or synecdoche of the attempt of the Jewish man, or “the new young Hebrew,” to awaken, intellectually, sensually, and emotionally, after his extended historical lethargy, like the sleep of the “dead of the desert,” who rouse themselves to rebellion and a new life in Bialik's famous narrative poem and in dozens of others in that period that imitated and responded to this image.<sup>9</sup>

For a poet's personal development to function as a microcosmic enactment of the larger drama of national renaissance, apparently he had to be male. Women and female experience, Miron states categorically, were not viewed as metonymic stand-ins for the Jewish collective, although abstract feminine images could, and traditionally did, function as metaphors for the people or land of Israel. This was true not only of women as poetic speakers, but also of female characters. As soon as a poet of this era attempts to describe a woman not in the traditional role of an adjunct to his own life-journey or a symbolic abstraction, but rather as a modern Jewish woman, “this feminine character loses her symbolic and metonymic characteristics and becomes an absolutely private individual, or, at the very most, a sociological representative.”<sup>10</sup> Since the readers of Revival poetry were unmoved or unimpressed by strictly “private” or “individual” poetry, and since a female poet would not dream of speaking of and for the Jewish collective, women were effectively barred from Hebrew poetry of the era.

The second characteristic of Revival poetry is what Miron calls its stylistic dimension: readers of Hebrew poetry of Bialik's generation expected a poem to be densely packed with biblical or rabbinic quotations, to draw from a sublime vocabulary, and to treat what they felt were exalted, “important” concerns. A poem, to be recognized as such, would have to establish beyond doubt the poet's grounding in the traditional Jewish library, demonstrating his virtuosity in turning this education to modern, secular, and national uses. The allusions, subject to ironic juxtapositions or iconoclastic contextualizations, would indicate both the poet's traditional knowledge and the freedom and creativity of his expression of this knowledge. Thus, the very style of the poem—whatever its thematic or narrative content—would tell a story, one that constituted, with the rest of the period's poetry, a collective biography, what Alan Mintz has called (in a somewhat different context) the “apostasy narrative” of Hebrew literature. Mintz describes the young men who were to become secular Hebrew writers as “originating in the most devout and scholarly circles of Jewish society,” often distinguishing themselves as “child prodigies of talmudic learning in whom the pride and resources of

family and community were heavily invested." To those who participated in the collective narrative of apostasy, the process of religious doubt accelerated "after the writers left their towns and villages for the yeshiva and there formed bonds with other youths who harbored the same hesitations."<sup>11</sup> Mintz is speaking here of the generation that preceded Bialik's, but at least in its general outlines, this narrative holds true for many of Bialik's peers as well. The trajectory from traditional education to religious doubt, secularism, and nationalism that Miron sees at the root of the poetic norms of the Hebrew Revival has been described not only by Mintz, but also by other critics—Robert Alter, in particular.<sup>12</sup> What is distinctive about Miron's reading of the poetic norms of Bialik's generation, however, is his highlighting of the masculinity of the collective biography that constructed and enforced these norms. Women, Miron implies, could not serve as metonyms for the Jewish collective because the defining narrative of this collective was drawn so exclusively from masculine experience. And women could not meet the poetic standards of the era because these standards were dictated by the exigencies of the (masculine) collective narrative. Thus, the broadest social conditions and subtlest stylistic norms conspired to exclude women from Hebrew poetry during its national revival.

Miron finds a stunning piece of evidence for his analysis in the curious episode of Jewish literary history sometimes referred to as the "Gnessin-Dropkin affair." To summarize the story (which involves a suicide attempt and adultery in addition to the literary larceny germane to this discussion), the well-known Yiddish poet Celia Dropkin, while still a teenager, passionately and apparently without reciprocation loved the modernist Hebrew writer Uri Nissan Gnessin. Gnessin may not have returned her ardor, but he admired a Russian love poem she had written to him enough to translate and rework it in Hebrew for inclusion in his 1913 story *Beterem* [Before], a transparently fictional account of their relationship. The resulting Hebrew poem was an immediate success, lauded for its direct and personal portrayal of the lust and erotic rage of a female speaker toward her emotionally distant beloved. Neither Dropkin nor anyone else was aware of Gnessin's borrowing until she published a Yiddish version of the poem a full four decades later. Even in its bare outlines, the episode speaks volumes about the ways in which the modern Hebrew and Yiddish literary worlds were simultaneously interwoven and utterly removed from each other, a paradoxical relation that has its resonances in modern Jewish gender relations. In Miron's reading, the Hebrew reworking of Dropkin's poem is shown to be the product of the Hebrew poetic norms of the time. Gnessin's version retains some of the force of Dropkin's poem, but he frames and "improves" it by bringing it closer to what he thought constituted a proper poem. Thus, an unadorned and economic line, the first one of the poem, for example, "If he comes back to my town," becomes, in Gnessin's version: "And if it comes to pass and he will return from his wandering to my country." Gnessin, as Miron points out, turns a simple, prosaic line into something longer, denser, and presumably more "poetic"; the Hebrew elevates the poetic register by biblical allusions and a vaguely sublime style. As Miron shows, the transformation is the function of more than just the heightening and "poeticizing" of Dropkin's spare writing. Gnessin's version of Dropkin's poem has its roots in a species of male arrogance particular to the era. In Miron's sharp analysis, Gnessin

transferred the poem's emotional focus from the female speaker and her tormented love to the interpersonal realm between the narrator and the man, who himself, it seems, is also suffering. In his version, Gnessin paints a positive picture of the man, lending him romantic stature and splendor. In so doing, he also implies that the man's special "fate," rather than his insufficient response to the narrator's love, is what somehow compels him to distance himself from her. He is the marked Cain, a sinner who has sentenced himself to wandering or to a quest which obliges him to leave his home and country for a lengthy exile.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, Gnessin's appropriation of Dropkin's love poem for his Hebrew short story makes what could be called a "woman's poem" (which is thus unrecognizable as a "proper" Hebrew poem) into a poem a man of his time might have written, full of the mysteries of masculine wanderlust, "saturated with Hebrew texts and stuffed to the gills with passages from Bialik."<sup>14</sup> Dropkin could not have been a Hebrew poet in 1913, Miron implies, not *only* because she didn't know Hebrew. She could not have written Hebrew poetry because she would not have known or cared to learn the more specific code from which Hebrew poems were made.

The second part of Miron's question, we may recall, is why women suddenly did begin to write Hebrew poetry in the first years of the 1920s. The answer can be intuited, to some extent, by extension and reversal of his earlier hypothesis. When the cultural and stylistic norms that had dominated Hebrew poetry before 1920 finally began to crack, a path was opened for women's participation. That is, as soon as it became possible to write poetry that did not aggrandize the poetic speaker as the sublime and suffering representative of his nation, as soon as it was acceptable to write a poem that was not a tissue of quotations, women found that they could write Hebrew poems as well as their male counterparts. Of course, the poetic revolution against Bialik's near-total hegemony, when it came, was part and parcel of a larger social revolution in which women found their political as well as literary voices.

The entry of women into the arena of Hebrew poetry, for all its promising beginnings, is not entirely a success story. Miron recounts the initial triumphs of women poets, but shows how the first burst of glory was quickly followed by the domestication of Hebrew women's poetry. This was accomplished by marginalizing the most radical of the women poets or the most radical of their works (Esther Raab and the early poetry of Yokheved Bat-Miriam) and anointing a relatively conservative member of this group as the model for women poets—Rachel. Miron reads Bialik's speech on Rachel at the opening of the writers' club in Tel Aviv shortly after her premature death in 1931 as an exemplary moment in this process. Bialik's sentimental and rather conventional address on Rachel's achievement turns out to be, on closer scrutiny, a measured evaluation of the entire phenomenon of Hebrew women poets. Bialik refers to Rachel as "one among the small choir of the daughters of Miriam, the Hebrew women poets, who added their special voices to the choir of Hebrew male poets" and declares that Rachel's "modest flower bed will bloom and give off its scent forever." As Miron sees it, Rachel was useful to the literary establishment of the 1930s, and not only for the moving mythos of her "sacrifice" to the Zionist dream (she actually contracted tuberculosis in Europe). In Rachel, poets like Bialik could exalt an unthreatening

woman who added her special "woman's voice" to the choir without otherwise disrupting the proceedings. Like the biblical Miriam, women poets contribute to the national culture as helpmeets to the true leaders. Moreover, Bialik placed Rachel at the center of the group of women poets, thereby casting the less easily assimilable poetry of Esther Raab or the early Yokheved Bat-Miriam, for example, into the shadows. By making Rachel the model woman poet, Bialik encouraged a conservative feminine poetics that remained unbroken until the 1950s, with the ascendancy of Dalia Ravikovitch. During the lean years before Ravikovitch revolutionized Hebrew women's poetry, Raab remained in virtual poetic hibernation and Bat-Miriam abandoned the sexual directness of her first collection, conforming to the assumptions of what women's poetry should be.

My own considerable appreciation for the contributions of *Imahot meyasdot* to the history of Hebrew women's poetry was somewhat marred by Miron's obvious distaste for and suspicion of contemporary feminist research. In a series of gratuitous asides, Miron caricatures feminists as "trained to search for and find misogyny both in places in which it exists and places in which it does not," and implies that feminism is somehow foreign to Israel or Hebrew literary studies ("This kind of tyrannical criticism [vulgar feminism] has started to make inroads even among us").<sup>15</sup> In the afterword, Miron condemns the very concept of feminist criticism for its false claims, assuring the reader that although he has subjected "the critical literature that is called 'feminist'" to thorough investigation, he must stress that "this essay is not based on the theoretical assumptions that structure this criticism. Actually, it was written from a position of skepticism toward the primary of these assumptions, that is, that there is a specific and separate literary 'theory' that arises, as it were, from a feminist analysis of literature."<sup>16</sup> Miron's disdain for feminists is related, in some part, to his rejection of misogyny as the primary explanation for women's absence from Hebrew poetry before 1920. At the risk of being mistaken for one of the vulgar feminists, I would point out that there is not much difference between the hypothesis that men excluded women from Hebrew poetry because of their misogyny and the hypothesis that men excluded women because of a stylistic and ideological norm based on male experience and education. How would one explain the formation of such an ideological grid without recourse to concepts like patriarchy, if not misogyny? Miron avoids the slippery slope that connects his own analysis and a more overtly feminist one by constructing his argument as a near-tautology: women were excluded from Hebrew poetry because only men could speak for the collective. Why could only men speak for the collective? Because the collective was seen as an extension of male experience. Why was the collective viewed as an extension of male experience? Because collective Jewish transformation was rendered through a poetics that took the individual male as a sign for the nation and that signaled its distance from the tradition through a practice dependent on the poet's education as a Jewish boy, and so on and so forth. While Miron's disdain for contemporary feminist discourse may not affect the bulk of his argument, it threatens to sour its reception precisely among its most potentially eager readers.

*Gender and Text*, unlike *Imahot meyasdot*, firmly situates itself as part of the broader movement of contemporary feminist scholarship. In notable contrast to



Miron's self-imposed distance from feminist criticism, Norich's introduction begins by suggesting that texts written in Jewish languages "may be enriched by the trends in feminist literary criticism and theory that have arisen in the latter decades of this century,"<sup>17</sup> and continues by charting the various trends in feminist research reflected in the various essays that follow. The essays largely emerged from a conference entitled "Gender and Text: Feminist Criticism and Modern Jewish Literature," which was held at The Jewish Theological Seminary of America on June 10–12, 1990. Thus, they represent not so much a compendium of the relevant literature in Jewish languages as a catalog of feminist critics and approaches to this material.

While *Imahot meyasdot* follows the trajectory of its originary question, *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* is propelled, rather, by the promise of its ambitious and far-reaching title. The collection begins with an introduction that has the unenviable task of both introducing the general theoretical issues of the field and making some sense of the variety of individual essays of the volume. The critical essays themselves engage a range of issues: from Hebrew and Yiddish women's writing to the constructions of femininity or masculinity in works by both women and men and the use of feminine voices by male authors or vice versa. The second section of the book includes meditations by Hebrew and Yiddish women writers on the importance of gender to their work. Finally, *Gender and Text* presents two excellent annotated bibliographies on gender studies and Yiddish and Hebrew literatures, respectively.

For all the vast scope of *Gender and Text*, some significant patterns do emerge in the critical essays. Primary among these is the issue raised by Gilbert and Gubar in a different context: How do women participate in a literary tradition that has historically excluded them? The collection begins with two pieces that cover some of the same ground of Miron's study of the first modern Hebrew women poets, itself represented in an excerpt from *Imahot meyasdot* entitled "Why Was There No Women's Poetry in Hebrew Before 1920?" The first essay, Anne Lapidus Lerner's "'A Woman's Song': The Poetry of Esther Raab," focuses on the first of the women poets of the 1920s, a poet distinguished from her European-born peers by her nativist ease with the Hebrew language and sensuous and detailed love for the Palestinian landscape. Lerner reads one of her later and rather atypical poems, the 1969 *Shirat ishah* ([A] Woman's Song). Raab's work belongs to the ubiquitous variety of Hebrew poetry that relies on subversive intertextual allusion to make its point; in the opening line, Raab reverses the well-known prayer in the traditional morning liturgy to be recited by men, "Blessed is He who has not created me a woman" to read "Blessed is He who created me a woman." Lerner's reading of Raab's allusiveness views this pious transgression, as it were, as an expression of the complex relation between the female poet and "the Jewish tradition of her childhood." Lerner goes on to describe Raab as having been raised in an observant community, and infers that "she must often have bristled at the denigration of women implicit in having men praise God daily for not having created them women."<sup>18</sup>

The second essay, Ilana Pardes's "Yocheved Bat-Miriam: The Poetic Strength of a Matronym," raises some of the same issues discussed in Lerner's essay and in Miron's book: the stylistic, thematic, and social relationships between gender and

intertextuality in Hebrew poetry. Pardes's study, however, discusses women's problematic relation to the Hebrew canon and the Jewish literary tradition in terms that go beyond biographical and psychological speculation, establishing the broadest theoretical grounds for her inquiry. Pardes demonstrates how Bat-Miriam's adoption of a foremother, in her assumed name ("the daughter of Miriam") and in her poetry, encapsulates a strategy for female creativity different from the famous theory of poetic genius proposed by Harold Bloom. In Bloom's formulation, a strong poet is one who engages in an oedipal struggle with a ghostly literary father for preeminence. Pardes uses the stunning example of Bat-Miriam's "birth" of her literary foremother to support recent feminist responses to Bloom's theory of the "anxiety of influence." These theories argue that while male poets may need to struggle with the overwhelming weight of tradition and their "strong" precursors, women must instead confront the disturbing absence of female literary precursors. Thus, their relationships with tradition necessarily differ from their male counterparts:

[U]nlike the male strong poet who struggles to send his forefather back to hell (or heaven), the strong female poet is one who is capable of raising the dead, or rather of raising a foremother. . . . Bat-Miriam, I would suggest, derives her strength from conjuring up the name of Miriam the prophetess and reconstructing a matrilinear poetic/prophetic tradition whose beginnings lie in the prophetess's ardent singing of the Song of the Sea.<sup>19</sup>

Through a reading of Bat-Miriam's subversive allusions to the biblical story of Miriam, Pardes identifies Bat-Miriam's strategy for discovering precursors even in texts in which their voices have been suppressed or marginalized: "By using and misusing the far too few verses allotted to Miriam in the Bible, Bat-Miriam thus manages to conjure up a strong foremother, an exemplary female symbolist, magician, rebel, outcast; a model national prophetess with dual nationality; and above all, a precursor who can, in turn, empower her descendant."<sup>20</sup>

A less prominent pattern that emerges from the critical material is an interest in psychological or psychoanalytic approaches to Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Janet Hadda's analysis of Celia Dropkin's poetry, for example, is grounded in her training as a psychoanalyst and in her biographical research on Dropkin. Hadda views Dropkin's love poetry as a function of the poet's "unabashed decision—whether taken self-consciously or out of creative need—to reveal the inner workings of a varied and troubled womanhood."<sup>21</sup> In Hadda's reading, Dropkin's poems are reflections of her inner world (early separation from her father, sexual longings for unavailable men, guilt over erotic feelings, and so on). Anne Golomb Hoffman's psychoanalytical approach to A. B. Yehoshua's *Molkho* (*Five Seasons*), in this case informed by post-Freudianism and poststructuralism, avoids biographical analysis, preferring to set the fictional characters, rather than their author, under her psychological lens. Hoffman's reading of Molkho's desire for infantile gratification and the breakdown of his adult sexual persona is most resonant, to my mind, when she links the protagonist's psychopathology with the contemporary development (and possible disintegration) of the Zionist masculine ideal.

Hamutal Bar Yosef's essay, "The Influence of Decadence on Bialik's Concept of Femininity" takes a path diametrically opposed to psychologism, coolly reading the misogyny of certain of Bialik's poems as a function of literary influence and poetic affiliation. Bar Yosef's study is noteworthy as well for its introduction of European literature into a discussion of the most "Hebrew" of poets. While the essay does not enlarge on the implications of this approach, Bar Yosef's cross-cultural analysis seems to me a potentially fruitful direction for studies of gender attitudes in Jewish literature.

Two particularly interesting essays directly engage the theoretical problems involved in tracing the connections and disconnections between a writer's biography and his or her work—clearly an issue of the gravest concern to critics discussing gender and literature. In "From 'Ikh' to 'Zikh': A Journey from 'I' to 'Self' in Yiddish Poems by Women," Kathryn Hellerstein notes the tendency of both readers and critics to read women's work—more so than men's—as a simple reflection of their experiences, arguing that the women poets themselves struggled to resist such readings. Thus, poets like Anna Margolin constructed characters who were so clearly removed from their own lives that no reader could possibly construe them as autobiographical, as in her 1929 poem "*Ikh bin geven a mol a yingling*" (I Was Once a Boy), for instance, in which the lyrical speaker is a young homosexual Greek boy. Naomi Sokoloff's interpretation of Aharon Appelfeld's *Tzili* begins by asking why the male writer, in his most apparently autobiographical novel, would choose a young woman as his protagonist. The epigraphs to her piece, which juxtapose Anne Frank's confession of her "sweet secret"—the onset of menstruation—to Appelfeld's memoiristic narrative about enjoying "the sweet secret of our Jewishness," set the stage for Sokoloff's distillation of the categories of gender and ethnic identity into a more generalized *topos* of embattled marginality.<sup>22</sup>

The essays by contemporary Hebrew and Yiddish writers fall into similarly illuminating patterns. In a reversal of the historical connections between women's writing and Yiddish, the Yiddish writer Chava Rosenfarb seems rather bemused by the question put to her by the editors, commenting instead on the Holocaust and the endangered survival of Yiddish as central concerns for living Yiddish writers. While Rosenfarb's essay is telling, a more appropriate respondent might have been Irena Klepfisz (also, in fact, a survivor), whose work is informed by an awareness of Yiddish's "femininity" although her poetry is primarily in English.

It is among the Hebrew writers that feminist consciousness seems strongest. Both writers express the sense that gender is viewed as a marginal concern in contemporary Israel, secondary to the obviously important struggle for national survival. Ruth Almog confesses to feeling guilty about writing "personal" stories—that is, stories about women—during the national crisis of the Six Day War: "It was almost immoral to deal with private issues at such a time."<sup>23</sup> Amalia Kahana-Carmon not only presents the problem of women's "private" concerns in a closely knit collective culture, she also diagnoses and criticizes this rivalry. In a witty description of Israeli culture that resonates with Miron's analysis of Bialik's reign, Kahana-Carmon compares Hebrew literature with a traditional synagogue, where all the important activities are conducted in the men's section. For a woman:

[H]er one place in this arena is in the 'ezrat *nashim* (the woman's gallery). As a passive observer, she does not contribute anything. Someone else, acting in the name of all Israel, speaks also on her behalf. And so, anything that is likely to happen to the woman seated in the women's gallery will be defined ahead of time as peripheral, a hindrance, and a deviant incident.<sup>24</sup>

Kahana-Carmon implies that the contemporary state of sexual relations in Hebrew literature results from a perpetuation of traditional social structures long after their official dismantling. Gender ideologies, it would appear, are stubborn and hardy life forms, and can survive social revolutions and the move to a determined secularism alike. In Kahana-Carmon's formulation, the struggles of early generations of women writers and contemporary women are brought into sharp and simultaneous focus.

I began by suggesting that *Gender and Text* is a belated text, coming as it does so long after other fields have developed a substantial body of feminist scholarship. But there is a sense in which the collection is also premature. As long as no comprehensive historiographical approaches to gender and Jewish literatures exist, critical anthologies will be called upon to do work they cannot possibly manage. While Miron's study both establishes and problematizes a canon of Hebrew women writers, we lack even the broadest outlines of a history of Yiddish women's creativity. Thus, readers may not know what to make of the fact that Celia Dropkin is discussed in four different essays, while other poets are never mentioned (Norich argues that Dropkin's work will have to be reexamined "in light of this evidence of renewed interest," but the suspicion lingered in my own mind that the convergence of critical interest in Dropkin—without denying her poetic gifts—is not much more than a coincidence). What *Gender and Text* does most persuasively is provide a catalog of the various feminist critics working in Hebrew and Yiddish. That is, it establishes a canon of critics and critical approaches, but not of the literatures they study. In the meantime, students of Hebrew and Yiddish await the more primary studies that surely must be coming, texts that can combine reliable and coherent accounts of earlier literary generations with the best methodological tools our own generation has to offer.

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#### NOTES

1. Anita Norich, "Jewish Literatures and Feminist Criticism: An Introduction to *Gender and Text*," in *Gender and Text*, p. 4.
2. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land* (New Haven, 1988), p. 243.
3. The clearest and most direct description of this concept can be found in the chapter entitled "On the Possible Treatment of Psychosis" in *Ecrits: A Selection* (New York, 1977), trans. Alan Sheridan from the 1966 French version, pp. 179–225.
4. Helene Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays," *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore and trans. Betsy Wing (New York, 1989), p. 111.

5. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York, 1929), p. 71.
6. Dan Miron, "Why Was There No Women's Poetry in Hebrew Before 1920?" trans. Naomi Sokoloff and Michael Yogeve, in *Gender and Text*, p. 67. The essay quoted here is from an excerpted and translated version of the Hebrew text.
7. Miron, *Imahot meyasdot*, p. 13.
8. Miron, *ibid.*, p. 56.
9. Miron, *ibid.*, pp. 65–66.
10. Miron, *ibid.*, p. 69.
11. Alan Mintz, "*Banished from Their Father's Table*": *Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989), p. 4.
12. For a vivid and nuanced description of both the educational practices of Eastern-European Jewish men and the ways in which such an education could serve a modern Hebrew poet, see Robert Alter, *The Invention of Hebrew Prose* (Seattle, 1988), pp. 7–10.
13. Miron, "Why Was There No Women's Poetry in Hebrew Before 1920?" in *Gender and Text*, p. 82.
14. Miron, *ibid.*, p. 90.
15. Miron, *Imahot meyasdot*, p. 55.
16. Miron, *ibid.*, pp. 284–85.
17. Norich, "Jewish Literatures," p. 1.
18. Anne Lapidus Lerner, "'A Woman's Song': The Poetry of Esther Raab," in *Gender and Text*, p. 25.
19. Ilana Pardes, "Yocheved Bat-Miriam: The Poetic Strength of a Matronym," in *Gender and Text*, p. 41.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
21. Janet Hadda, "The Eyes Have It: Celia Dropkin's Love Poetry," in *Gender and Text*, p. 110.
22. Naomi B. Sokoloff, "Tzili: Female Adolescence and the Holocaust in the Fiction of Ahron Appelfeld," in *Gender and Text*, p. 171.
23. Ruth Almog, "On Being a Writer," in *Gender and Text*, p. 231.
24. Amalia Kahana-Carmon, "The Song of the Bats in Flight," in *Gender and Text*, p. 23. Translated by Naomi Sokoloff and Sonia Grober from *Moznayim* 1989 (Nov.–Dec.): 3–7.