Modern Jewish Literatures

Intersections and Boundaries

EDITED BY
Sheila E. Jelen,
Michael P. Kramer,
AND L. Scott Lerner

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS
PHILADELPHIA
female body. In this reversal of the genders, Dropkin's "Circus Lady" addresses the problem of a woman making art in a man's world.


40. Celia Dropkin, "Tsu a yunger dikhterin" (To a young poetess), in In heyvnt vint (1935), 72; 2nd ed. (1959), 72.

CHAPTER 10

Ethnopoetics in the Works of Malkah Shapiro and Ita Kalish: Gender, Popular Ethnography, and the Literary Face of Jewish Eastern Europe

Sheila E. Jelen

In "Thank God for His Daily Blessings," Amos Oz describes a walk through Geulah, the neighborhood in Jerusalem where he grew up among Labor Zionists but that has since evolved into an ultraorthodox enclave: "The Orthodox Eastern European Jewish world continues as though nothing had happened, but the fathers of modern Hebrew literature, Mendele and Berdyczewski, Bialik, and Brenner and the others, would have banished this reality from the world around them and from within their souls. In an eruption of rebellion and loathing, they portrayed this world as a swamp, a heap of dead words and extinguished souls. They reviled it and at the same time immortalized it in their books."1 Oz concludes by apostrophizing his reader: "However, you cannot afford to loathe this reality because between then and now it was choked and burned, exterminated by Hitler."2 In this statement, Oz eloquently articulates the notion that those seeking to understand a destroyed world will begin by looking to the literature of that world, written by its native sons and daughters, whether in a satiric or sincere light.

My goal here is to identify, define, and analyze what I would call an "ethnopoetic" style in writers who wrote, after the Holocaust, about the world of Eastern European Jewry before the war. Ethnopoetics, in the sense that I employ it, is a hybrid of ethnography and poetics, of anthropological and literary aspirations. Writers of ethnopoetic texts respond to cultural
obligations imposed by historical cataclysm to expand their literary texts beyond the literary. They employ a rhetoric that may even undermine the literary identity of their work. Ethnopoetics is born in literary texts as a response to critical and cultural forces that place those works, because of their subject matter, within an ethnographic, as opposed to a literary, trajectory. To probe the subtle balance between literary and ethnographic impulses in post-Holocaust depictions of pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jewish life, I will focus on two memoiristic works by two Eastern European-born Israeli authors and daughters of prestigious Hasidic rebbes: Malkah Shapiro (1894–1970) and Ita Kalish (1903–94).

The term “ethnopoetics” has been used in a number of ways in literary theory over the past century. My sense of ethnopoetics is conceived partly in keeping with the notion of ethnopoetry, as introduced in 1908 by author and ethnographer S. An-sky (Semyon Akimovitch or Solomon Rappaport). According to An-sky, ethnopoetry represents a synthesis of different levels of literary discourse: the popular and the elite, the historical and the contemporary, the secular and the sacred, taking on the valence of a new “Torah” for Eastern European Jewish culture at the turn of the twentieth century.

In order to arrest the inevitable losses entailed in the breakdown of traditional Jewish life during that period, An-sky called for the collection of folklore and its transformation into ethnopoetry by up-and-coming young Jewish artists who could redeploy it for posterity and through it could create inspiration, Jewish cultural fervor, and historical consciousness in generations to come. Thus, ethnopoetry in An-sky’s view was fundamentally an act of cultural salvage. As David Roskies points out, however, before An-sky initiated his 1912–14 Jewish ethnographic expedition in Eastern Europe, his primary source for folk artifacts was limited primarily to “Yiddish and Hasidic storybooks.” This dependence on literature for ethnographic materials by the father of modern Jewish ethnography himself anticipates the dependence for ethnographic materials on literary texts, within modern Jewish culture.

Just as An-sky calls on ethnographically trained literary authors to combine their skills and to inscribe traditional ethnographically valuable Jewish literary forms into modern literature, thus preserving them for posterity, in the cases to be analyzed here, the work of literary memoirists is also viewed as a hybrid between the literary and the ethnographic. In An-sky’s conception of ethnopoetry, writers used literary expression in service to ethnographic salvage; in the cases discussed below, writers’ literary expressions were deployed as works of auto-ethnographic witness. There is one major difference, however, between An-sky’s notion of ethnopoetry and my sense of ethnopoetics, as derived from post-Holocaust memoiristic works about pre-Holocaust Eastern European life. An-sky’s artists were consciously redeploying literary and other artistic artifacts in the formation of a modern style that was meant to preserve the old forms while rendering them palatable for a new generation and thus immortalizing them for posterity. Kalish and Shapiro, on the other hand, may have been conscious of the ethnographic value of their work because of the specific memoiristic quality of their writings and the fact that the worlds they were describing had, in the intervening years, been destroyed. But they were not necessarily invested, as an ethnographer-cum-artist would be, in preserving particular aesthetic forms for posterity. Rather, they self-consciously set out to describe a milieu to which they were intimate witnesses, and they employed poetic that sought to authenticate and legitimate their point of view, particularly as women within a male-dominated Hasidic milieu.

Through the lens of Shapiro’s and Kalish’s work, I examine the ethnographic aspirations of literary writers who are called upon by history to modify or reconsider their own poetic. To what extent are these writers, who have stylized their texts with the literary trappings of ethnographic observation, responsible for the popular ethnographic reception of their work? In the last several decades, ethnography as a discipline has become conscious of and conversant with the literary aspects of its own generation of texts, and a reciprocal awareness within literary studies has developed to acknowledge the usefulness of ethnographic discourse in making sense of a literary-critical quest for broad cultural relevance. In the late 1980s, New Historicism, for example, drew from ethnographic terminology in order to lend credence to literary criticism’s own quest to wed the practice of close readings to historical and cultural breadth. Thus, literary texts, with the help of ethnographic discourse, were deemed “artifacts” or “thick descriptions” of particular cultures.

Post-Holocaust literature focused on a pre-Holocaust Jewish Eastern European milieu raises the question of whether ethnographic consciousness and literary style can be said to have formed a new kind of union. If we move beyond the usefulness of critical ethnographic discourse in the apprehension of literary relevance, as was accomplished in New Historicism, can we detect ethnographic impulses within literary texts that deal explicitly
with loss, with memory, and with cultural salvage while still maintaining our focus on the literariness of the texts in question? I am suggesting here that a new style needs to be identified and analyzed in works such as those produced by Kalish and Shapiro, within an Israeli context, but also in American literary texts by Jonathan Safran Foer and Allen Hoffman, for example. What is the unique blend of ethnographic consciousness and literary artistry that populates these texts, and how can this style best be classified and understood?

Recognition of the fundamental literariness of the texts in question takes place, despite their ethnographic resonance and relevance, when these texts are analyzed in light of the literary traditions that inspired their production. Early twentieth-century Hebrew and Yiddish literary traditions that Kalish and Shapiro seem to have been emulating were overtly concerned with representing things "as they are." This preference for realist mimeticism was a reaction, at the turn of the twentieth century, to the stylistics of pastiche (in Hebrew) and didacticism and satire (in Yiddish) that had dominated Jewish literary production during the Jewish Enlightenment of the previous century.

The notion that literature could be used not to teach the masses or to forge a new idiom but to reflect the world of the Jewish people in their daily existence was integral to the vernacularization and popularization of Jewish literary forms. In contrast to the commitment to realistic mimeticism, which can be seen in Hebrew and Yiddish literary production at the turn of the twentieth century, what we view in the formation of a post-Holocaust ethnopoetic idiom is an interest in representing things as they were, not things as they are. Producing and reading a text that purportedly represented things as they were was thus an act of cultural salvage that drew upon the literary ideologies of a previous generation. It expanded those ideologies into a broader cultural engagement that did not preclude literariness and incorporated a sense of historical obligation.

The Hebrew and Yiddish literary ethnopoetics that represents Eastern European Jewry is the continuation of a legacy that began in Hebrew letters following not World War II but World War I. David Frischmann (1859–1922) was among the first Hebrew critics to employ an ethnographic idiom in reference to literary representations of Eastern European Jewish life. In an essay titled "Mendele Moykher-Sforim," Frischmann wrote:

How accurately he has depicted our life in exile. He took the street life of the Jews of the shtetl throughout the nineteenth century and gave us a broad portrait of it in all its minutest details. Even if we had already grown away from that milieu, he forced us back into the horrible reality of it. Let's imagine, for example, that some terrible deluge came and erased every bit of that world from the earth, along with the memory of that world, until there was not one single sign of that life left; and by chance, all we were left with was "The Book of Beggars," "The Vale of Tears," "The Travels of R. Benjamin the Third," and "Of Bygone Days," along with his small sketches and stories. Then there is no doubt that on the basis of these sketches, the critic could re-create the street life of the Jews in the Russian shtetl in the first half of the nineteenth century totally accurately.  

Referring to the internal Jewish process of urbanization, assimilation, and emigration as well as to the shifting national boundaries and forced internal migrations that took place during and after World War I, Frischmann's "deluge" created ethnographic witnesses out of a generation of writers who had left that world behind, satirizing and critiquing it in their writing.

While both Oz and Frischmann read the literature written by male writers of the modern Hebrew renaissance ethnographically, I will examine here a phenomenon in Hebrew letters of the mid-twentieth century in which Eastern European–born women's writing in Hebrew was received, in Israel, as primarily of ethnographic, but not literary, value. In the case of Mendele and Bialik, Berdyczewski and Brenner, their ethnographic reception was motivated by the disappearance of the world they depicted; the ethnographic reception of Hebrew literary works by Eastern European–born woman writers, I argue, is inspired by more than the destruction of a world.

Responding to the same cataclysmic decline of the orthodox Eastern European world that inspired ethnographic misprisions of the works of canonic Hebrew writers at the turn of the twentieth century, writers such as Malkah Shapiro and Ita Kalish wrote their texts in the mid-twentieth century in a moment in Israeli history when women's writing and the memory of the Holocaust were both relatively taboo; women were writing, and the Holocaust was discussed, but both were contained and controlled by an ethnographic rhetoric.  

As in the discourse of women and regionalism in nineteenth-century American letters, the depiction of specific geographic locales in women's texts, particularly nonurban or marginalized locales, came to be associated in Israel in the 1960s with the perceived
inability of women to write into the center of literary traditions. Rather, just as their subject matter is marginalized, so, too, does their work resonate not in a literary way but in a kind of social-historical (as in the case of regionalism) or ethnographic one (as here).\(^\text{15}\)

In trying to understand how the rhetoric of ethnography came to be imposed on literary depictions of Eastern European Jewish life by women writers of Hebrew, we find a fascinating text inspired by Frischmann’s in which the publication of Dvora Baron’s 1939 “Trifles” is reviewed by S. Y. Pinless: “If one day the painful image presented by David Frischmann should come to pass, and a massive deluge should eradiate Eastern European Jewry, and our nation should want to preserve in a museum an artistic reproduction of that lost world, it won't be enough simply to include the works of Mendele alone... Dvora Baron's trifles, the details that she depicts, are needed to complete the portrait.”\(^\text{16}\)

Indeed, the intersection of two distinct discourses is evident here: the discourse of realism within literary parlance, or ethnography within broader cultural parlance; and that of gender within the world of modern Jewish letters. Dvora Baron’s “trifles” refers to a collection of short stories by that same name (Ketanot) and also to the general notion of what constituted her poetic. As a woman writer, she was said by her critics to have written about trifles, about the inconsequential domestic aspects of daily existence, which served to complement what had, until that point, been made readily available by the more canonic writers of the modern Hebrew renaissance. As articulated above by Pinless, Baron's trifles, operating in tandem with Mendele's street life, would preserve a vanished world as if in a museum dedicated just to that purpose.\(^\text{17}\)

At what point did appreciation for those trifles constitute a trivialization of the work of Baron and her natural literary inheritors in Israel several decades later? Eastern European-born women writers of Hebrew depicting Eastern Europe were also understood to be providing a portrait of trifles that were necessary for the preservation of Jewish cultural memory after the cataclysmic destruction of European Jewry. But were they ever able to move beyond their trifles? To what extent did women writers see themselves as the natural conservators of the memory of life in Eastern Europe, and how did that influence the nature and genre of the works they produced? What I hope will become clear in this exposition is the relationship between ethnographic expectations, ethnographic production, and ethnographic reception in literary works that depict a culture either in decline or dead. A symbiosis emerges between literature and ethnography in the Hebrew writings of Eastern European-born women writers in the mid-twentieth century that is imposed from within and without—from within the writings themselves and from the community of their readership.

Malkah Shapiro and Its Kalish wrote during the 1960s in Israel among a cohort of other female memoirists who spanned the forties and the eighties, including Shoshana Ushensky, Zelda Edelstein, Sheyna Korngold, Billeh Dinur, Bella Fogelman, Rivka Guber, Zehava Berman, Malkah Heideman, and Tova Berlin Papish.\(^\text{18}\) Shapiro and Kalish are the best known, in part because their memoirs, or excerpts from them, have been translated into English. Translation narratives, indeed, are an important consideration in understanding the birth of an ethnographic discourse in the critical reception of Hebrew (and Yiddish, as we will see) literary texts featuring pre-Holocaust life in Eastern Europe. Most important, Shapiro and Kalish both develop an ethnopoetic idiom, which illuminates the particularly dynamic relationship between ethnographic obligations and literary aspirations. These ethnopoetics, to a large degree, support ethnographic classification, but they also, if scrutinized closely, lay claim to the literary aspirations behind the ethnographic trappings—the artistic intentions undergirding the historical and cultural value of the texts at hand.

Shapiro’s and Kalish’s texts were identified primarily as witnesses to the inner workings and personalities of particular Hasidic courts near Warsaw (the court of the Koziencie Rebbe and that of the Otwock dynasty) and were translated as such. Moving from Hebrew (in Shapiro’s case) to English, and from Yiddish to Hebrew and finally to English (in Kalish’s case), each of their memoirs has been framed, primarily through their translations, as ethnographically, although not particularly literarily, valuable. Translation, as used here, is not strictly a matter of rendering a text from one language to another. Rather, translation can be viewed as cultural or historical mediation. Although I focus here on how translations of Shapiro’s and Kalish’s memoirs into English overdetermined their ethnographic reception for an English-reading audience, it is important to keep in mind that literary criticism, such as that performed by Frischmann on Mendele or by Pinless on Baron, is also a form of translation. In their readings of these literary works featuring the shetel, Frischmann and Pinless translated these works from literature to ethnography. I would call this dynamic process of translation from one genre to another and from one discipline to another “cross-disciplinary translation,” and I would argue
that minor voices (such as women's) within minor literatures (such as modern Hebrew or Yiddish) are particularly vulnerable to cross-disciplinary translation because of their palpable absence in cultural discourse.19

Malkah Shapiro was the fifth of seven children born to Brachah Twersky and her husband, Rabbi Yerahmiel Moshe Hapstein (1860–1909), the incumbent rebbe of Kozenieniec. From 1955 to 1971, she published five books of Hebrew poetry and prose in Israel, where she had settled in 1926.20 Shapiro's 1965 publication Midin lerahanim: Sipurim mehatzerot ha-admorim (From justice to mercy: Tales from Hasidic courts) was her most ambitious and generically most ambiguous book. Midin lerahanim is presented by Nehemia Polen in his English introduction to the book as an astonishing insider's perspective on the Hasidic court of Kozenieniec, a community fifty miles southeast of Warsaw. It encompasses the eleventh and twelfth years of its young protagonist's life, as she prepares for her betrothal and marriage to her first cousin. In The Rebbe's Daughter, we observe the cycle of prayer, ritual observances, holiday preparations, and meditations that punctuate life in a small, wealthy Hasidic court at a watershed moment in Eastern European Jewish history, on the eve of the Russian Revolution.

Polen argues, in a section of his introduction designated "Is The Rebbe's Daughter Autobiographical?", that the primary argument for reading the text as such is the startling change in voice during the last two chapters—from third person to first person. According to Polen, this indicates a breaking down of the fictional pretense and surrender to the autobiographical backbone of the story. But the fact that Shapiro gestures belatedly to herself as the first-person narrator of a world long gone is hardly an indication that her work is exclusively autobiographical. On the contrary, this is a classic literary trope—one that is well documented in Dvora Baron's fiction but that can also be found frequently in the works of Joseph Hayyim Brenner, M. J. Berdyczewski, Sholem Yankev Abramovitch (Mendele Moykhser Sforim), Sholem Rabinovitch (Sholem Aleichem), and countless other writers whose works Shapiro surely read.

I am not arguing that there are no autobiographical elements to Shapiro's story. On the contrary, I heartily agree with Polen that The Rebbe's Daughter is a very valuable witness to the insular world of European Hasidism and the particular court of the Kozenieniec Rebbe from the perspective of what has been called elsewhere an "intimate outsider," or a young girl in a highly rarefied and highly gendered milieu. I argue, rather, for a new orientation toward the work of Malkah Shapiro, one that does not auto-

matically situate her in the camp of Hasidic memoirs or ethnographic testimony, but one that situates her in a trajectory of Eastern European–born writers of Hebrew.

What formal aspects of The Rebbe's Daughter create a resemblance between Shapiro's work and the more canonic works of modern Hebrew literature, written by Eastern European-born writers of Hebrew? Modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries concerned itself with its own justification. The best-known examples of this can be found in the figures of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem. Mendele's identity, as we know, changes throughout S. J. Abramovitch's corpus, but in most cases, he is a book peddler whose itinerant lifestyle creates the occasion and justification for his encounter with Jews of all types throughout the Jewish Pale of Settlement. Mendele appears in Abramovitch's corpus as a character, an narrator, an interlocutor, and a writer. He addresses his readers through sometimes lengthy introductory prefaces and simultaneously implicates himself within, and distances himself from, the world being represented through his elaborate attempts to document the genesis of the stories within which he is featured.

In a similar, though not quite as complex fashion, the figure of Sholem Aleichem is woven by Sholem Rabinovitch into his stories in order to contextualize the conversations and confrontations out of which his famous monologues evolve. In "Tevye der milkhiker," for example, Sholem Aleichem provides an audience for Tevye to hold forth in monologic fashion about his children, life, culture, and beliefs. Sholem Aleichem himself has no voice in the stories and is simply apostrophized by Tevye as he speaks on and on. However, when the rhetorical device of Sholem Aleichem disappears in the stage and film adaptation of Tevye, his centrality to Rabinovitch's vision of the culture that he is representing becomes fairly obvious. Sholem Aleichem is, to Rabinovitch, the figure of the modern Jewish writer, entering the swamp of the traditional Jewish shetel, wielding his pen to give voice to the literarily voiceless. Tevye has no trouble speaking his mind; but without Sholem Aleichem, he would never have been immortalized in literature.

Of course, as has been amply discussed by Dan Miron, Benjamin Harshav, and Robert Alter, among others, the framing devices presented by Abramovitch and Rabinovitch in the figures of Mendele Moykhser Sforim and Sholem Aleichem help to create a "skaz" effect, an effect of conversational encounters with real folk in live environments.21 The literary work
framed by bethetic literary figures who pose as the excuse for a monologue, or as the speaking protagonist himself, all contribute to a poetics, described by Hebrew critics such as Menachem Brinker as one of *kenut* ("sincerity" or "authenticity"). For our purposes, this stylistic choice reflects the seeds of an ethnographic reception, insofar as the effect that these authors create is exactly commensurate with the effect sought out by those who were trying to reconstruct a lost way of life. For Abramovitch and Rabinovitch, this framing effect was a way to yoke literary expression with vernacular voices; for critics such as Frischmann, this was an opportunity to read rhetorical effect as cultural artifact. In the work of J. H. Brenner, we find a later variation on a rhetoric of sincerity, in the form of stream-of-consciousness narratives, some framed, some not, as the anxious ramblings of disturbed individuals. Conceived in keeping with modernist trends that favored intimate glimpses into the consciousness of individual protagonists, Brenner was nodding, as well, to a tradition of modern Jewish anxiety over tracking the genesis of narrative. I would argue that the primary reason for this rhetorical framing device is the desire to express the tension experienced when the enlightened author and the unenlightened literary subject confront each other on the pages of a literary text. Concern over the appearance of a shtetl within the literary corpus of an enlightened writer may have motivated the framing devices described above.

In the case of Malkah Shapiro's narrative, we find constant, complex negotiations of the position of the narrator within the narrative, as eyewitness and as author. The gap between the world being depicted and the world inhabited by the author in the present moment, far off in the future of the text at hand, is also palpably felt through certain narrative choices made by Shapiro. Shapiro's poetics squarely situates her alongside the great writers of the modern Jewish literary tradition—if not in quality, at least in affiliation. Furthermore, her awkward position as a self-appointed ethnographer, and as a creative writer at the same time, situates her work at a crossroads in post-Holocaust modern Jewish literary consciousness. As a Hasidic woman writer, one could argue, Shapiro is well entrenched in the world that she writes of. But the Holocaust creates the same effect that World War I created in the reception of Mendele's work. Shapiro writes across a geographic distance, a temporal gap, and a cataclysmic history that forces a constant reevaluation, in her own mind and work, of the generic identity of her writing. She is both of the world she writes about, and not of that world. She positions her protagonist (and later, narrator) Bat-Zion as both an insider and an outsider to the literary world being presented.

Keep in mind that Shapiro's text is a look into a Hasidic court from the point of view of a young girl. While Shapiro certainly spends time depicting the women's world of the Hasidic court, she also finds ways to see into the darkest recesses of the rebbe's tisch, or the room where her brothers study Talmud—both of which are generally closed to girls. Shapiro's frequent articulations of the protagonist's location within, or unusual access to the scenes depicted, resonate within the tradition of Hebrew and Yiddish texts of sincerity. At the same time, the ability of a young female protagonist in a gender-stratified milieu to access a world to which she would not normally be permitted reflects an ethnographic sensibility. Why else would it be so important for her to demonstrate the authenticity of her narrative? Even so, the elaborate justifications of Bat-Zion's unprecedented access to the world of her brothers and her father reveal some ambivalence over the raw sense of ethnographic obligation that appears to be motivating the unrealistic perspective represented in the book. Gender, in effect, serves as the crucible for the meeting of different systems of meaning here—the ethnographic and the realist—and an ethnopoetic idiom results.

In considering the conventional modern Hebrew literary rhetoric of sincerity alongside ethnopoetics in the work of Shapiro, the question arises as to whether the classic Eastern European-born male writers of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature themselves employed an ethnopoetic idiom. It was, perhaps, that very idiom that lent itself to ethnographically overdetermined critical readings by Frischmann and Pinless. However, the rhetoric of sincerity employed by Sholem Aleichem, Mendele, and Brenner does not reveal ethnopoetic aspirations as much as their placement at the heart of a transitional point in modern Hebrew and Yiddish literary expression. In other words, their struggle to frame their narratives and to inject into them a voice and an aura of credibility and authenticity has more to do with the challenges that they faced as realists in a non-vernacular language (Hebrew) and of stylists in what was considered a wholly vernacular language (Yiddish) than with the burden of history and gender, as is palpable in Shapiro's work. Whereas Shapiro struggles with what I earlier called "historical exigency," Mendele Moykher Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Brenner struggle more with "generic exigency"; in reinventing Yiddish literature as folksy and Hebrew literature as vernacular, they feel called upon to create an effect of sincerity in their work.
Shapiro, on the other hand, as the daughter of a Hasidic scion in post-Holocaust Israel, is probably not concerned with the linguistic or generic identity of her text as much as she is concerned with the place of her text within the historical abyss between the world that she depicts and the world in which she writes. Because she is a woman, her access to the worlds that she feels compelled to memorialize is tenuous. She must find some kind of middle ground, and that middle ground is a literary one, in her rhetoric of sincerity, but also an ethnographic one. The result is an ethnopoetic literary idiom.

The motif of slipping into inner sanctums, of folding oneself into drapes, of falling asleep on chairs in the corners of rooms and witnessing conversations and interactions that were generally closed off to children, especially girls, is reiterated throughout the book and serves as a sign of the text's ethnopoetics. In quoting her grandmother's account of having heard an important conversation as a child, we hear, in her grandmother's words:

I was a little girl then, just five year old. I was standing in the corridor at the entrance to the wooden shed, which was lit with oil lamps. As I listened to the story, I watched Bereleh, a shrewed fellow who was sitting next to the narrator, his head resting on his knees as if he were fast asleep, not hearing a word. Just then, a door to one of the inner rooms opened in the corridor, and my holy grandfather appeared at the threshold and called out, “Bereleh.” The members of the group rose hastily, respectfully moving toward the open door, stretching out their hands to greet my holy grandfather. But only Bereleh was ushered inside. I slipped in along with this fellow. . . . That simple room, with its lone armchair, its canopy bed, and its many books, its mysteries attracted me. I saw the souls of our holy ancestors hiding in that room. I hid myself behind the armchair and, trembling, listened in on the conversation. Trying not to attract attention, I didn't move from that spot, even though the tone of my grandfather's hushed voice, his face shining like an angel of God, struck terror in me.24

The elaborate way in which the old rebetzin feels the need to justify having witnessed an important conversation between a rebbe and his disciple when she was just a five-year-old girl plays itself out in myriad ways throughout Shapiro's text. There is a constant jockeying for authenticity. This story, from the grandmother’s mouth, is witnessed by Bat-Zion (the name of Shapiro’s protagonist) herself as she hides in her mother’s room: “Bat-Zion had followed the conversation with intense anxiety as she sat behind the curtain in her mother’s darkened bedroom. . . . She went out the back door without anyone noticing and ran around for a long time in the dark courtyard without a coat, until her teeth chattered from the cold of the night.”25

Like the figures of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem who present themselves as the literary vehicles for the shtetls of Kasilevke, Boiberik, and Anatevka, so, too, perhaps, does Bat-Zion take on the role of literary bridge between the world of her father's court and the world of modern Hebrew literature. Her position here as a creative writer, betraying neither world in the process of writing about it, is quite a departure from the generally ambivalent sentiments expressed in the figures of Mendele and Sholem Aleichem vis-à-vis the worlds that they represent. The ambivalence expressed here takes on a different form: the ambivalence of a female outsider to patriarchal culture being designated the inside informant of that culture in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Shapiro’s struggle to define her position as a literary artist bridging the Hasidic world and the secular world of modern Jewish letters can be seen in a fascinating moment in the eighth chapter of The Rebbe's Daughter. Here, Shapiro’s protagonist Bat-Zion is asked by her tutor to copy, by hand, an essay on Maimonides from the modern Hebrew journal Hama'sef. The essay that she copies, by a scholar named Slonimsky, deals with Maimonides' formula for the intercalation of years that is necessary to fix the dates of Rosh Hodesh, or the new moon, as the Jewish calendar is lunar and not solar. The depiction of Bat-Zion's process of transcription is described:

Enchanted figures overwhelmed Bat-Zion’s imagination. She saw the crescent moon in conjunction, there by the pond in the pine forest or there, far away in Eretz Israel between the mountains where the Sanhedrin sat. She wrote diligently until she encountered numbers and calculations, which she despised. She began to feel dizzy; and as much as she attempted to be careful about her penmanship, the letters did not come out rounded as always. And, in particular, when she reached Slonimsky's commentary, she nearly twisted the words around.

As Aharon the melamed began examining the manuscript, a dark cloud seemed to sweep over his bluish face. He pulled impatiently
on his scrappy beard, speaking in bitterness, as if to himself, “This is not what I expected! I had a different opinion of you! You can’t say this is bad handwriting, but when writing is of the greatest importance, you should have been more careful. You ought to understand, my pupil, that these are the words of the Great Eagle, Maimonides; and the contemporary scholar Slonimsky is also not an ignoramus. Even though he is one of the maskilim, he should not be dismissed with a stroke of the hand.” . . .

Rebbetzin Leahnu approached Bat-Zion, who stood before the melamed like an accused in the dock, tears gathering in her eyes. Her aunt gave her cheek, already red, a light pinch. Wanting to let her off the hook, she said, in a consoling tone: “There is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of, sweetheart. The handwriting is absolutely fine.”

“You’re right, sister,” responded Rebbetzin Feigenu as she peered at the tablet. “The writing isn’t bad at all. It’s not as precise as Bat-Zion’s hand when she wove my name and the name of my husband—your honored uncle, long may he live—in verses accompanying her Purim gift, but this is nice, too.?”

The dilemma of Bat-Zion’s artistry, her role in this narrative as a creative force, or merely as a cipher, is laid out here. Interestingly, the text she is asked to copy out by her melamed is the work of a maskil, and his scholarship, in turn, focuses on Maimonides, the greatest rationalist in Jewish history. Bat-Zion, the daughter of a Hasidic rebbe, ensconced in a household with clearly delineated non-rationalistic beliefs and practices, appears to be at a particular crossroads in this passage. She negotiates here between the expectation that she transcribe a tradition that is rather alien to her own, and the internal need to create her own texts. In this case, the creative texts that are alluded to are poems attached to the gift of mishlo’ah manot that are distributed to the rebbe’s family and friends on Purim. But in a more general sense, the presentation of this conflict with her melamed communicates an intellectual struggle with authorship similar to the conventional literary struggles that we have come to expect in the canon of modern Hebrew literature.

Bat-Zion, it seems, is content to find her creative outlet within the closed world of her tradition and her father’s household, even though it is within that household that she is introduced to Enlightenment models. In fact, in her limited critical reception, Shapiro is described as admorit hasofret and meshoreret hahasidut (“the female rebbe writer” and “the Hasidic poet”). Because Shapiro’s creative impulse is deployed within the closed world of a Hasidic milieu, it is tempting to identify her work wholly ethnographically, particularly given the dearth of historical resources on Hasidic women. It is important to recognize, in Shapiro’s work, however, a creative literary penchant, not to be downplayed for strictly ethnographic purposes but to be understood within a modern Hebrew ethnopoetic tradition.

In a footnote to an essay he wrote about Shapiro’s text, Polen refers to a translated excerpt of Ita Kalish’s memoir that came out in 1965, in the thirteenth volume of the YIVO Annual of Jewish Social Science.28 Titled “Life in a Hasidic Court in Russian Poland toward the End of the 19th and the Early 20th Centuries,” this “translation” of Kalish’s Yiddish A rebishe heim in amolikn poyfs is a gleaming of what were apparently deemed ethnographically relevant details of the Hasidic milieu depicted in Kalish’s memoir.29 The lineage of her Hasidic forebears, the idiosyncratic behavior of her rebbe grandfather before his emigration to the Land of Israel, and the personalities and life tragedies of some of her closest relatives within the confines of the Hasidic court culminate in Kalish’s final lament about the destruction of this world during World War II: “The site of grandfather’s villa and its large synagogue, which stood for nearly eighty years in Otwock, is now a field cultivated by a Polish peasant. O earth, cover not thou their blood!”

This moment in the text is one of the clearest indications of the ethnopoetic intentions that govern it—the sense of ethnographic obligation as the result of historical exigency. At the same time, My Yesterday is a cleverly drawn, broad-ranging apostasy narrative—beginning in the world of a young girl in a Hasidic enclave and encompassing forbidden reading, the abandonment of a marriage, and the kidnapping of a child.30 Kalish, in this memoir, introduces us to important figures in twentieth-century Hebrew and Yiddish letters, including Dovid Bergelson, David Fogel, and Yehiel Yishayahu Trunk and, in so doing, expresses a desire to number among them.

Ita Kalish, born into the Otwock Hasidic dynasty in Maciejowice, Poland, wrote her memoirs about growing up within her Hasidic enclave and then breaking from it in 1919, after her marriage, the birth of a daughter, and her father’s death. Moving from Warsaw to Berlin to Paris, and finally to Palestine in 1933, Kalish worked first for the Jewish Agency and then for the newly formed Israeli civil service from 1946 until her retirement in 1967. First published in 1965, in Yiddish, as A Rebbe’s Home in Long-Ago
Poland, in 1970 Kalish expanded and translated her memoirs into Hebrew under the title *My Yesterday*. Alluded to in several recent historical publications on women in Eastern Europe, Kalish’s memoir has mostly been considered a valuable historical and ethnographic voice about women’s education within traditional Hasidism as well as Hasidism in Poland in the early part of the twentieth century. The memoir, lyrically and economically written, is also a reflection on Kalish’s apostasy—her break from the ways of her family and her exploration of Jewish women’s options in Europe and Israel just before World War II and in the early years of the Jewish state.

The very title of Kalish’s book, *Etmoli* (*My yesterday*), distinguishes it from the generic, ethnographic way in which its English title presents it: “Life in a Hasidic Court in Russian Poland . . .” The artfulness of Kalish’s book, however, is best illustrated by the way in which it transitions from the Hasidic world to the secular world of Warsaw between the two world wars. In her depiction of her own marriage and her subsequent departure for broader, more secular, climes, Kalish deliberately plays with the identification of the subject of the text:

World War I and its terrors disrupted our way of life. The marriage of the oldest daughter of the Rabbi of Otwock was delayed. Occupied Poland became German and Austrian territory, and movement from one district to another required a special license from the occupiers. The process of obtaining one was arduous and exhausting. My brother strongly believed that his oldest sister’s wedding should take place as planned, and wanted to bring the bride herself before the military court in order to obtain a travel license for the groom and his parents. When Father heard of this plan, he stood to his fullest height and cried: “God forbid you should bring my daughter before the court of the German occupiers!” And in the end, not too long after that, Father succeeded, despite the bureaucracy caused by the military occupation, in overcoming the obstacles, and his first daughter’s wedding was celebrated in Warsaw, in the sumptuous wedding hall on what used to be Moranovsky Street.

Thousands of invited and uninvited guests came to witness the Rabbi of Otwock’s celebration, and the hall was too small. Because of all the pushing and shoving, the sequins and seed pearls on the bride’s wedding dress scattered all over the floor. The food and drink remained in the storage closets because it was impossible to push through the crowds to get to them. When the headwaiter was finally able to make his way through the crown, waving a silver tray above the guests’ heads with “golden soup” for the bride and groom who had fasted the whole day, excited cries were suddenly heard: *The Rebbe is Coming! The Rebbe is Coming!* The young groom jumped out of his place, ran outside, and was pulled away in a tide of Gerer Hasidim, who threw over tables, burst through barriers, jumped from balconies, and ran to greet their rebbe.

As a keepsake of the two long braids that hung to my knees and that were cut off the day after the huppah, I have a photograph taken by Alter Kacyzne, the Yiddish author and playwright from Warsaw. Kacyzne was a photographic artist who made a living in photography, into which he poured all his artistic ability. He was a simple man, prone to fantasy. When he was asked to name a price for his work, he would remove his spectacles, shrug his broad shoulders, turn his dark well-cultivated head of hair toward his wife, murmur, “those are Hannah’s affairs,” and sneak out of the room. We, his friends, saw this as a sign of overindulgence, but we didn’t hold it against him.

Alter Kacyzne, and his wife, Hannah, were killed by Nazi murderers during the Holocaust. Their only daughter lives in Italy and perpetuates the memory of her father by publishing his works in Israel.

Father had high hopes for his young, faithful son-in-law because he thought the young, pure man would know how to quiet his daughter’s longing to sneak out of the reality surrounding her and to forge a different way of life. But his hopes were quickly dashed. It hadn’t occurred to my father that his daughter had already broken out of the narrow confines of her father’s house; Father had not surmised that his daughter was learning foreign languages and reading “apocryphal” books as she put her young daughter, born about that time, down to sleep. The day finally came when his last vestiges of hope disappeared: he came to visit me in the apartment that was a satellite of his own at 14 Dzelnia Street—and he saw before his very eyes, to his great shock, a stack of books in Yiddish and Polish. He was affronted and offended to his very core. He ordered them burned.
Although the winds of secularization have been obliquely alluded to throughout the memoir to this point, they have not been presented as being of particular personal importance to the first-person narrator—Kalish herself. Here, calling herself “the rebe’s oldest daughter” in the generic third person, Kalish brings to mind Mary Antin’s singular digression from a first-person to an omniscient third-person voice in her 1912 autobiographical novel, *The Promised Land*. In Mary Antin’s account of her childhood rupture with Jewish tradition, she deliberately carries a handkerchief over the threshold of her home into the public domain to see if there are any consequences to breaking the Sabbath. Dropping her first-person “I” to narrate the scene, she presents herself here as an unnamed “young pious child,” even as she depicts her intellectual transformation into a nonbeliever. In a similar fashion, Kalish obscures our vision of the young bride in the narrative as the same figure who has been narrating the story. In her details about the bride’s dress being torn apart and the young groom upending tables in his haste, along with his compatriots, to see the Gerer Rebbe, she creates a nightmarish scene. But strangely, she distances herself from it, rendering it in a completely objective, omniscient manner, without any emotional valence.

Only when Kalish turns to Kacyzne, best known for the photographs of Polish Jewish life in the interwar period that he took for HIAS and the *Forverts*, does she resume her first-person narration. She says that her braids, cut off the day after the wedding, were memorialized by Kacyzne in a photograph he took of her from that time.

Her reference to the snapshot functions as an irrefutable record of the continuity between the oldest daughter of the Otzwoch Rebbe and the young woman who abandoned her husband, her daughter, and her father’s court to become a salon hostess to the itinerant literati of the post-Hasidic crowd in Warsaw. Perhaps the photograph’s narrative position as the first acknowledgment of Kalish’s return to the first person marks her irreversible break from the world that she left behind. Her voice is insufficient to capture it; it must be done in a realist artifact, which can be brought out, if need be, to prove the existence of that girl with the long braids but can also be stowed away from the curious eye. This assertion of the ethnographic artifact, the photograph, alongside its immediate sublimation by the return to the first-person narrative voice encapsulates the tension between ethnographic and literary aspirations evident in this, and other, women’s narratives about prewar Eastern European Jewish life in Hebrew.

Figure 10.1. From the *Jewish Daily Forward*, June 10, 1923. Original caption read “Rokhl Kalish, the daughter of the Otzwoch Rabbi, who eloped to Palestine with her lover.” The photograph of the girl with the long luxurious hair matches Ita’s description of her own photograph taken by Kacyzne on the eve of her wedding. It seems likely that the original caption was incorrect and should have referred to “Ita” and not “Rokhl.” From the Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

It is, to my mind, not coincidental that the shift back to the first person occurs not only in the course of a discussion about a photograph but also in the course of a discussion about a photographer killed in the Holocaust. In reflecting on Kacyzne’s character, Kalish is naturally led to refer to his murder on July 7, 1941, outside the Polish city of Tarnopol in a massacre perpetrated by Nazi-sponsored killing squads. The death of the photographer Kacyzne in the Holocaust appears to be essential to the process of the
text's very transformation from an omniscient third-person account of a wedding, to a first-person account of apostasy and betrayal. The photograph outlines its artist, which perhaps posits a new kind of art—an ethnopoetic art—built on the back of the war that made ethnographers of so many artists and that created the impulse to document where before the impulse may have been strictly to create. It is as if, along with Kacyzne, the "indulged" artist who left price negotiations up to his wife and his clients the practice of art for art's sake died in a massacre during World War II. Hence the punctuation of Kalish's text with moments such as this one, documenting Kacyzne's life and death, changes the nature of the text, creating ethnographic moments where before there would have been omniscient narration, turning the third person into the first person and emphasizing the intimate, personal dimension of the genesis of this text.55

The artfulness with which Kalish transforms her narrative from being about her upbringing within a Hasidic enclave to being about her rebellion against that enclave distinguishes her book not simply as an autoethnographic portrait from an insider's perspective but renders it classifiable within other narratives of apostasy and rebellion in the modern Jewish literary tradition. As Alan Mintz has discussed, the literature of the modern Hebrew renaissance grew out of an autobiographical tradition in which the story of individual spiritual and intellectual rupture from the sphere of traditional Judaism came to be understood over time as the story of a generation.56 As such, autobiography evolved into fiction, and the concrete individual came to be understood as the concrete universal. The talish, as is well known, is the transitional figure from the personal to the collective, from the autobiographical to the fictional. His gender exclusivity as a male figure of Jewish modernity has posed an important obstacle to allowing women's Hebrew and Yiddish memoirs, like men’s, to take the leap into the realm, if not of fiction, then of belles lettres. In other words, why has Ita Kalish's Etmol been preserved as an important ethnographic essay and nothing more, while Brenner's Bahoref, to name just one text from that period, has been preserved as a novel?

The process of translating Hebrew male autobiographical voices into fictional tropes, which took place at the turn of the twentieth century in Eastern Europe, should also have taken place in the mid-twentieth century in Palestine Eastern European-born women. The sheer number of women's memoirs being written during that period about the Eastern European worlds left behind earlier in the century marks not only a zeitgeist but the birth of a literary trend. When looking closely at works such as Shapiro's Midin ierahimim and Kalish's Etmol, their literary aspirations and literary value becomes apparent. Their translations into English have, interestingly, overemphasized their ethnographic identity, undermining their literary one, and failed altogether to recognize the ethnopoetics that brought the two elements together.

Notes


2. Ibid.

3. When considering the reasonable disciplinary question of why I think the texts at hand have been read, belatedly, through an ethnographic lens as opposed to a historical one, I contend that history, literature, and ethnography coexist and intersect within a complex constellation of discourses that are mutually informative and mutually enriching. The concern in my particular formulation of ethnopoetics is that texts by writers such as Mendele Moykher-Sforim and Sholem Aleichem, or Malkah Shapiro and Ita Kalish, become windows not simply into the specific worlds they describe but into the entire lost world of Eastern European Jewry. This is precisely where history (i.e., genocide and cataclysm) dictates the terms of ethnography and literature bears its burden. Historians and literary scholars have long struggled with the relationship between their different yet interconnected disciplines. In fact, John Klier, in an essay titled "From Little Man to Milkman: Does Jewish Art Reflect Jewish Life?" sets out "to explore the value of the classics of prerevolutionary Jewish fiction as wondrously realistic social history." In Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Brian J. Horowitz (eds.), Studies in Jewish Civilization: The Jews of Eastern Europe (Omaha, Nebr., 2003), 227–28.

4. In contemporary literary critical discourse, the term "ethnopoetics" was introduced by the poet, translator, and anthologist Jerome Rothenberg, in a 1968 volume titled Technicians of the Sacred. There, he called for recognition of "ethnic" poetics, particularly oral and visual ones, that pushed the boundaries of those poetics conventionally understood to be appropriate for inclusion in the Western canon. "Ethnocricism," a related term, was introduced by critic of Native American literature Arnold Krupat in the late 1980s, to gesture toward the frontier between literary studies and ethnography in work on Native American literature. Krupat, like Rothenberg, dwells on the need to expand the American literary canon and the notion of "literary form," in order to include alternative voices and genres, such as Native American oral storytelling, in the mainstream American literary canon. Krupat calls for literary recognition of ethnographically valuable texts. See Jerome Rothenberg, Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetry from Africa, America, Asia and Oceania (New York, 1968);


15. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture (Urbana, Ill., 2003).


17. For more on Baron’s reception and its place within a discourse of ethnography, see Jelen, Intimations of Difference. In the preface to the book, I discuss “the tension that can be found throughout Baron’s mature work between the author’s impulse to represent a world that had, by the middle of the twentieth century, disappeared and her impulse to write fiction with no obligatory to history ethnographic writing” (ibid., xii).


23. The Rebbe’s Tisch is a gathering of Hasidim with their rebbe, usually on Sabbath or holidays, to partake of a meal and Torah study. It is generally accessible to the community at large, but men alone sit with the rebbe at his “tisch” or table, while women look on from a distance.


25. Ibid., 115.

26. Ibid., 97–98.
CHAPTER 11

Eternal Jews and Dead Dogs:
The Diasporic Other in Natan Alterman’s
The Seventh Column

Gideon Nevo

The Seventh Column comprises Natan Alterman’s main body of journalistic verse. It was published regularly on Fridays as the seventh column of the second page of the widespread daily Davar from 1943 to 1967, and was avidly read and received. Dealing with all things public, large or small, written with brilliantly lucid poetic diction, deftly combining wit and pathos, seriousness and jest, empathy and humor, it earned Alterman unprecedented popularity and prestige among the Jewish population in pre-state Palestine (the Yishuv) and in the early decades of the Israeli state.

Alterman’s stance vis-à-vis the Diasporic Jew in The Seventh Column is at once representative and unique within the context of Labor Zionism, in which he was deeply entrenched and of which he became the main poetic voice. This stance found expression in two discernible thematic clusters: one dealing with world Jewry and institutionalized world Zionism (and especially with American Jewry and American Zionism); and the other with the Judenrat, the administrative bodies that the Germans required Jews to form in each ghetto on the Nazi-occupied territory of Poland and later in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union.

The two clusters—one embittered and acrimonious, the second unflaggingly compassionate—seem starkly at odds with each other. It is the object of this article to elucidate each individual cluster and to trace the line that might possibly connect them. This will amount to delineating (at