NO LETTERS ARRIVE ANYMORE: AMERICAN YIDDISH HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

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SEAN SIDKY

NO LETTERS ARRIVE ANYMORE: AMERICAN YIDDISH HOLOCAUST LITERATURE

This dissertation examines Yiddish-language poetry composed during the Holocaust and in direct response to news and rumors of the events as they reached the Jewish communities of the United States. Physically removed from Europe, but unable to imagine themselves as separate from the communities being destroyed, the authors examined are deeply concerned with Jewish existence beyond physical survival. Interpreting the unfolding events against a background of Jewish history, literature, and theology, this poetry confronts the question of what it means to retain, maintain, and rebuild a communal Jewish identity and to imagine a future for the Jewish people in the face of its imminent and ongoing destruction.

"No letters arrive anymore": American Yiddish Holocaust Literature focuses in particular on four Yiddish poets: Kadya Molodovsky (1894-1973), Yankev Glatshteyn (1896-1971), Arn Tsaytlin (1898-1973), and H. Leyvik (1888-1962). The immediacy of these events, the intensity of the crises of identity they engender, and the critical self-awareness that these poets express produce distinct forms of knowing and experience that cannot be understood through current interpretive frameworks derived from the study of survivor memoir and testimony. Rather, these authors are preoccupied with their complex positioning as individual witnesses to the destruction, and as members of a community and, as Jewish tradition would dictate, speakers for a community under existential assault.

This dissertation thus offers a critical interpretive framework that understands Holocaust literature to be responding not only to the physical destruction of Europe's Jews, but also to an accompanying crisis of Jewish self-understanding and collective identity, especially reflective of American Jewish communities of the time, yet to understand their own relationship to the destroyed communities of Europe.

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Introduction

Despite being one of, if not the predominant language of the victims of the Holocaust, and despite a proliferation of Yiddish literature in the United States during and after WWII, Yiddish and Yiddish literature have featured surprisingly little in scholarship on the literature of the Holocaust. This is doubly true for Yiddish literature written by those who were not in Europe during the years of the Second World War and the Holocaust: when it does appear, the Yiddish language is most often relegated to footnotes attached to documents preserved from the ghettos. As the field of Holocaust Literature developed in the United States, Yiddish literature was rendered largely invisible as scholarship prioritized in particular literatures accessible to an Anglophone readership, with a particular emphasis on survivor memoirs. For many scholars, it seems as though Yiddish belongs to a distant past, as though it is little more than a relic of the world lost with the destroyed communities of Eastern Europe.[1]

Certainly, scholars are aware of the breadth, quality, and continued production of this Yiddish literature. Several of those cited below are prominent scholars of Yiddish literature themselves, and though they mention wartime poetry collections, they offer little further discussion; other scholars name one or another Yiddish poem or novel as representative of an otherwise-invisible Yiddish literary community. Since the mid-1980s, literary scholarship has increasingly acknowledged that there was literature about the Holocaust being written, published, and read in Yiddish, outside of Nazi-controlled Europe, but it has remained largely unexamined as a body of work. When American Yiddish literature is included, it is most often as a single representative poem — almost always Yankev Glatshteyn's *"A gute nakht, velt*," or Kadya Molodovsky's *"El khanun*" (Glatshteyn, *Gedenklider* 41–42; Molodovsky, *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* 3–4) — or a single sentence referencing a collection that then goes unexplored.[2]

[1] For detailed discussion of this ideology of Yiddish within the US academy, see especially Jeffrey Shandler's *Adventures in Yiddishland* and Anita Norich's *Writing in Tongues*.
[2] See especially Anita Norich's *Discovering Exile*. Alvin Rosenfeld's 1985 *A Double Dying* remains the most in-depth treatment of Glatsheyn's Holocaust poetics all, as we will see below, mustered under the auspices of a need to read the poetry *literally*, that is: according to, in the service of, and as if it were history.

The writers I examine in this dissertation are significant figures in the Yiddish literary world, and much of their writing is available in English translation. In the case of the two poems mentioned above, this is even more evident: there are at least a dozen published translations of Glatshteyn's "*A gute nakht, velt*;" at least three published translations of Molodovsky's "*El khanun*;" and both poems feature, among other American Yiddish literature, in any number of anthologies (Norich, *Writing in Tongues* 113–28; Hellerstein, "The Gilgul of a Translation" 100–01). Yet, even these poems remain largely footnotes in the history and study of Holocaust Literature.

This dissertation began with two questions about the place and history of the Holocaust poetry composed by Molodovsky and other Yiddish writers in the United States, written and published during or in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust. First, if poems like Molodovsky's and Glatshteyn's are significant enough to bear continual reference and repeated translation, *why* has there has been such a dearth of scholarship on this American Yiddish Holocaust literature? Second, to what extent does "Holocaust Literature" as a field of study and a literary genre, as it stands, make space for, or perpetuate the exclusion of this literature? In order to understand, we must look at the reception history of the Holocaust in the United States, where we see the parallel, interrelated development of "Holocaust Literature" as a nameable phenomenon, with a distinctive literary "canon," and the rising centrality of the Holocaust survivor as the authoriative source of public memory and, increasingly through the postwar decades, of historical authority as well.

First, however, I want to share an illustrative example from a different direction: In a snow-covered forest, standing among a group of quiet figures, bundled up in heavy coats and blankets, a man conducts a funeral service. Beset by sickness and starvation, the winter death of Ben Zion and Krensky is a particularly solemn moment in Edward Zwick's 2008 movie, *Defiance*. Among all the deaths these are the ones singled out for a funeral. The man, a Rabbi judging by the bright, white *tales* draped over his shoulders, continues with a mixture of despair and resignation: "Merciful God, we commit our friends Ben Zion and Krensky to your care. We have no more prayers, no more tears. We have run out of blood" (Zwick). There is nothing in the scene or in the delivery of these lines to suggest that this is

anything but a prayer, and an English-speaking audience in the United States could not be blamed for assuming it was drawn from Jewish liturgy or funeral tradition.

This, however, is no prayer. Rather, these lines are taken from Kadya Molodovsky's poem "*El khanun*" ("God of Mercy" or "Merciful God"), written in New York in 1944 and transported back to the Naliboki Forest in the winter of 1942-43.[3] There is no mention of the poem or its origins in any of the film's paratext; neither poet nor either of its translators are credited. Clearly, in "*El khanun*," Zwick identified something moving in the poem, felt enabled to utilize it without pause or attribution and to place it firmly within the borders of Nazi-controlled Europe. In place of the Mourner's Kaddish, or any number of prayers that an historical community of Yiddish-speaking Belarusian Jews may have recited to mourn their fallen friends, instead the film's audience is presented with lines taken from Molodovsky's poem, shorn of their linguistic, historical, and literary contexts.

In *Defiance*, Molodovsky's *"El khanun*" is transformed into a literary *artifact* of the Holocaust, one among a set of images, objects, and references that can be utilized as the filmmakers deem necessary in order to convey the emotions and experience of the Holocaust, its victims, and its survivors. As such, *Defiance* is representative of a set of assumptions that ground depictions of the Holocaust in the United States, which confine it to Eastern Europe, inform the depiction of the victims and survivors of the Nazi genocide, and allow the filmmakers to confidently assume that their audience would not only feel the same intensity of emotion and imagery in the poem's lines but also, crucially, that they would accept *without question* that these lines *belonged* to this moment, in the forests of Belarus. In fact, Zwick's ability to use lines from Molodovsky's poem is the result of the reception history, memorial history, and

[3] The "prayer" as delivered is a pastiche of two (or three) translations of the poem: by Irving Howe (first in 1969, then a second, revised translation in 1987) and Kathryn Hellerstein (in 1999) ("The Gilgul of a Translation" 91–101). The final line here is most similar to Irving Howe's 1969 translation, though not identical (Howe uses "separateness" as the concluding word (Howe and Greenberg 290)). This line in particular has been the subject of significant scrutiny within the world of Yiddish translation and Yiddish Studies, because even in Yiddish it is far from clear. Anita Norich discusses it at length in her study of twentieth-century Yiddish translation, *Writing in Tongues* (*Writing in Tongues* 97–107). See also Hellerstein, "The Gilgul of a Translation". I will discuss the poem in depth in Chapter Two, below, but for the moment it is enough to recognize the complexities of Jewish, and more specifically Yiddish literary and cultural history that are rendered invisible by the film as a whole, but most palpably in its use of the poem. There is, of course, much more than can be said about *how* this poem is presented, and the relationship of its use in the film to those who translated it for publication. I intend to expand on this in the future.

scholarly discourses that shaped the genre and "canon" of Holocaust literature along the lines described above, rendering Yiddish and its literature invisible, and valuing literary representations first and foremost in their ability to grant access to history.

This dissertation argues that the specific thematic and introspective concerns of the Yiddish Holocaust poetry produced in the United States during this period demonstrate a perspective on the Holocaust and its impact that is not accounted for by the field and genre of Holocaust Literature. As such, it offers a new set of terms through which to encounter this Holocaust literature that prioritizes internal constructions and conceptions of self, community, and the multiple possibilities for forming and transforming communal identity in the face of the Holocaust.

This introduction attends to the memorial, literary, and conceptual history that created the conditions within which Molodovsky's poem could be transformed into the material for historical fiction, providing necessary context for engaging with chapters that follow. In this introduction, I first trace the reception history of the Holocaust in the United States, focusing in particular on the relationship between the centralization of the Holocaust survivor as a keeper of authoritative memory and the persistent historiographical myth that there was little to no public discourse surrounding the Holocaust until the middle of the 1960s. Then, I examine the ways in which those two phenomena shaped the formation and foundational assumptions of Holocaust Literature as a field of study in the US academy, before unpacking one recent attempt to formalize a definition of the genre, and the limitations this American Yiddish Holocacust literature reveal in that definition. Finally, this introduction concludes with an overview of the argument of the dissertation as a whole, detailed chapter overviews, and a brief consideration of the implications of this dissertation for the fields of Jewish Studies, Religious Studies, American Jewish Literature, Yiddish Studies, and Holocaust Literature.

Holocaust Memory in United States

Through the latter half of the twentieth century, the Holocaust became firmly ensconced in the national and cultural memory of the United States, culminating in the enshrining of a memorial museum

(a distinctive, dual-purposed monument), the aptly named United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) adjacent to the National Mall, of all places, the locus of nationalistic mythmaking for the United States. Much has been written by historians about the reception history of the Holocaust in the United States and its so-called "Americanization" (and much is still to be written). However, as David Roskies wrote in 2005 and which continues to be true today, "less obvious is the way in which American literary and academic tastes began to shape and delimit the *canon* of Holocaust literature, both looking back and going forward" (Roskies, "What Is Holocaust Literature?" 192 my emphasis).[4] Before turning to that process of canon formation and literary history, two features of the "Americanization" process are worth highlighting insofar as they have played a central role in shaping that canon as well: the persistent myth of public silence regarding the Holocaust, and the growing centrality and metonymic authority of the Holocaust survivor.

For several decades after the war, survivors, led in this regard by Elie Wiesel, and historians, most vocal among whom was Peter Novick, insisted that the public — meaning the non-Jewish public — ignored or even willfully refused to acknowledge the Nazi genocide of the Jews of Eastern Europe. According to this narrative, the outrage over genocide that fueled public discourse in the United States was largely sated by the Nuremberg Trials of 1945-49, the length, complexity, and legalistic discourse of which quickly wore down public interest. This coincided with the looming threat of the Soviet Union and the reconstruction of West Germany, and an accompanying ideological shift that forced US public discourse to reconcile the fact that its new allies were its former enemies, and in the case of the USSR, the opposite (Novick 86–87). The wartime response of the United States is, according to Novick, easy to sum up:

> The most common version tells of the culpable, sometimes willed obliviousness of American gentiles to the murder of European Jews, the indifference to their brethren's fate by a timid and self-absorbed American Jewry; the "abandonment" of the Jews by the Roosevelt administration — a refusal to seize opportunities for rescue which made the United States a passive accomplice

[4] See: Helen Flanzbaum, *The Americanization of the Holocaust*; Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in American*; Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*; Alvin Rosenfeld's *The End of the Holocaust*, and Ed Linenthal's *Preserving Memory*. (Flanzbaum; A. Mintz; Novick; Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*; Linenthal)

in the crime. (19)

American Jews, the narrative goes, were focused on unity, a desire for assimilation and proving their place among the broader US public. It was not until the capture and televised trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961 and the Six Day War in 1967 that the position of the American Jewish community would shift, leading to a revitalized public interest in the legacies of the Holocaust. This is in part true of historical descriptions of the 1960s more generally. The "turn of the 1960s" writes Kirsten Fermaglich, marked most prominently by the civil rights movement, gave rise to a number of cultural shifts in the United States, including the rise of liberalism as a central feature of US politics, the increasing visibility of Jews in public life (that is, political and popular culture) and, crucially, a broadly construed "spirit of cultural transgression" which created both the space and the desire for political comparisons between the United States and the Nazis (3–11). There is a forcefulness to these descriptions of the 1960s, as if something wholly new woke in the mind of the American Jewish community, rendered broadly and monolithically.

Edward Linenthal argues that what would come to be separated and later named "'The Holocaust' was often indistinguishable, in the immediate postwar years, from the millions of noncombatant casualties due to terror bombing of civilian populations, epidemic illness, or starvations. It was considered simply part of the horror of war" (5). Similarly, Alan Mintz begins his popular culture reception history of the Holocaust in the United States by drawing our attention to a similarly linguistic argument, intended to represent a broader conceptual failure (rather than simply the development of new historical terminology):

> In the depths of the 1940s and 1950s, at a time when the term *Holocaust* as we now use it had not been invented, when survivors were silent and stigmatized, and when the destruction of European Jewry did not figure in public discourse, who could have predicted that the Holocaust would move so forcefully to the center of American culture? (3)

I quote Linenthal, Mintz, and Novick as representative of a particular historical and historiographical disposition toward the Holocaust that is no longer given primacy in historical studies, though the strength

with which it was insisted upon has cemented it perhaps permanently as one of the touchstone phrases in broad public discourse about the Holocaust.[5]

There has been, however, significant work since the turn of the century to rectify that narrative. Most notable among these is Hasia Diner's 2009 *We Remember with Reverence and Love*, a direct attempt to undo the monolithic and reductive "myth" of silence, drawing on previously understudied archival sources, argues that there was a much more active public and private memorialization effort among the Jewish communities of the United States than this dominant myth would have us believe (Diner). For our purposes, though perhaps less widely hailed, equally if not more significant is Anita Norich's 2007 *Discovering Exile*, a close and detailed study of the literary and cultural debates that occupied, and bridged, the Yiddish- and English-speaking Jewish literary worlds during the period of WWII and the Holocaust (Norich, *Discovering Exile*). Norich and Diner's work notwithstanding, the mythos of unassailable silence seems unaffected by the amount of literature written and published either during or in the immediate aftermath of the war, and, again, with the exception of (and perhaps because of) *Discovering Exile*, there remains to be an in-depth study of Yiddish literary production in the United States during the Holocaust.

In hindsight, as Mintz noted above, it is difficult to believe that this mythos should have taken hold so intensely. The destruction of the largest Jewish communities in the world thrust the Jewish communities of the United States into the center of Jewish culture in ways they had never before experienced. American Jewish communities, broadly, were forced, as Jeffrey Shandler notes, to confront the fact that, now, "they were not only the world's largest and most prosperous Jewish community but also its most continuous and, albeit by default, its most authoritative" (*Adventures in Yiddishland* 16).[6] Indeed, had historians and scholars alone been the source of this meta-narrative of silence, perhaps it

[5] Fermaglich, too, succumbs to this narrative at times, but her work is focused primarily on the representations of, and public discourse surrounding, the Nazis in the United States through the late-1950s and into the 1960s, rather than their victims.

[6] Jonathan Sarna quotes from the editors of the *American Jewish Year Book* for 1949 to make a similar point: "The answers to the most critical questions as to the future of the Jews everywhere will be determined by the attitudes and the position of the five million Jews who are citizens of the American Republic" (274).

would not have been so successful. However, in tandem with this "silence" was a coincident elevation of the Holocaust survivor to a position of absolute privilege, as keeper of Holocaust memory and the living embodiment of an authoritative Holocaust narrative.

Although the work of Hasia Diner on public memorialization and of Jeffrey Shandler on representations of WWII and the Holocaust on US television has demonstrated the extent to which the mythos of silence fails to stand up to the historical and cultural record, it is still true that the decade of the 1960s saw an explosion in representations of the Holocaust and, more specifically, of the Holocaust survivor.[7] There are, of course, many factors that shape the landscape of public memory and popular culture, but for our purposes three stand out as most significant. Historically, it was the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann through 1960 and into 1961 that placed Holocaust survivors at the center of the discourse of Holocaust justice and which, through a complex performative maneuver by the prosecutors of Eichmann, had the effect of transforming survivor memory into testimonial evidence. I will discuss the impact of the trial on the landscape of Holocaust literature and memory in the United States at length in Chapter Four. For now, I will focus on the two key literary moments: the English-language publication and reception history of Anne Frank and her *Diary* in 1956, and the English-language publication of Elie Wiesel's *Night* in 1960 (Frank; Wiesel, *Night*).

The publication of *The Diary of a Young Girl* was a watershed moment in the transmission of the Holocaust to the United Sates. Although edited both by Anne herself after learning from a radio broadcast in 1944 that some wartime diaries were going to be collected and published, and after the war by Anne's father, Otto, the 1952 English-language translation was a near-instant success.[8] The success of the diary, and its impact on the landscape of US Holocaust memory is difficult to underestimate: its 1955 stage adaptation was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1956 (Goodrich et al.); the film adaptation of the

[7] See Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love*, and Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches*.
[8] Even prior to its sales figures, the diary seemed to have been marked out for success: the English-language publication was accompanied by an introduction from Eleanor Roosevelt, who had been First Lady of the United States during the war, and at the time of the *Diary*'s publication was serving as US delegate to the United Nations Human Rights Council, having only stepped down as Chairperson of the UN Human Rights Commission a year before. An auspicious name to attach to the diary of an as-yet unknown Dutch Jewish Girl.

play won numerous awards, both in the United States and beyond; and the diary has been republished dozens of times in competing "authorized," "critical" and "uncensored" versions, including several recent graphic memoir adaptations (Stevens; Frank et al.; Folman et al.; Jacobson and Colón).

Central to its success are three features that mark Anne as distinct from other Holocaust diaries and memoirs, even those that came later: first, her particular, candid, and often very vulnerable authorial voice frames her months in hiding not through the markers of war, but through a *bildungsroman* of sorts of her own growing sense of self. Second, the presentation of Anne's diary, especially in its adaptations, offered a message of hope and positivity that was digestible and desirable to a post-war US public that hoped to rebuild and look ahead after the war. It's final feature is, in fact a *lack*: Anne's diary ends just before they were discovered by the Nazis, allowing the diary's adaptors, playing with structure and timing to end on a final note of universal hope.

Elie Wiesel's memoirs, published in English in 1960 as *Night*, do what Anne's diaries could not. Because Wiesel *survived* the Holocaust, unlike Anne Frank, who died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Wiesel's memoirs are able to cross the threshold of the concentration camp, to tell us the story of *over there*, and to return from that other world changed forever. Wiesel, himself a teenager during the year or so he spent in Auschwitz, offered an equally profound authorial voice and a story of adolescence in the most terrible conditions imaginable. Wiesel's memoir was inflected with mysticism, with his own wavering and intensely emotional crises of faith and existence; the relationship that occupies the core of the memoir is between Wiesel and his father, as his mother and sisters were ripped away from them at the gates of Auschwitz. Wiesel's great tragedy — because this is, all readers know before they open the book, a story of survival — is that he has to watch his father slowly succumb to illness, starvation, and eventual death, mapped onto the loss of Wiesel's faith in God.

It is this complex layering of metaphysics and family tragedy that has made Wiesel's memoir so deeply influential, both to scholars and to the general reading public. As Alan Mintz sums up:

> The universality of Wiesel's themes, the failure of God and the failure of the father, made *Night* a powerful text for an audience that was becoming more knowledgeable about the Holocaust and

> that was ready to follow Wiesel's autobiographical narrator into the dark domain that Anne Frank had also entered in her life but not in her diary. (21)

In Wiesel, the US public found the embodiment of its central figure, the Holocaust survivor, and on who, perhaps understandably, would quickly come to dominate the representational landscape of the Holocaust in the United States. The story of survival is universalizable. Each iteration inflects and varies the narrative slightly with specific biographical details, true, but generally traceable as a meta-narrative. As David Roskies describes it, "within 20 years [of the war's end], a standard chronicle of survival would emerge in the West: a plot depicting a youthful protagonist whose story usually begins with the outbreak of the war and always ends with liberation" ("What Is Holocaust Literature?" 177). Moreso, those stories which found the greatest success, and which resonated most intensely with audiences, were stories of the concentration camp.

Central to the elevation of the survivor, and the other factor that concretized Wiesel's importance as a metonymic figure for *all* survivors was his insistence that those who were not in the concentration camp *cannot* know what it was like there.[9] As Wiesel's now well-known dictum runs, "A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel, or not about Treblinka" ("Literary Inspiration" 7). Over the course of his career and post-Holocaust life, Wiesel would repeat this dictum regularly, often exchanging the name of one camp for another, depending on the particular text or representation he was critiquing. As such, and as I discuss below, we may then conclude that he intends the named camp to metonymically represent the concentration camp experience writ large.

Wiesel's position is reflective of a particular historiographical and representative perspective that understands the Holocaust to be so far removed from the world of mundane life as to be somehow,

[9] The stress that Wiesel and others place on the unknowability of Auschwitz is inseparable from their particular version of the mythos of silence. For example, as Wiesel put it, in one of many pronouncements to the same effect:"It took me ten years to write my first book. It was not a coincidence; it was deliberate. I took a vow of silence in 1945, to the effect that I would wait ten years to be sure that what I would say would be true. In the beginning people did not talk about what happened over there" (Wiesel and Rubenstein 367). While scholars, Naomi Seidman in particular, have done much to counter that narrative — Wiesel's own Yiddish memoir claims he began writing while in the hospital right after liberation (*Un Di Velt Hot Geshvign* 245)— it still persists in published versions of the memoir, even the 2006 retranslation of *Night* from French, which features a new preface in which Wiesel addresses (without naming Seidman) the critique Seidman offers (Seidman, "Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage"; Wiesel, *Night*).

historically — ontologically — *unique*, and thus unimaginable to those who were not in the concentration camps themselves. As a result, the Holocaust is rendered untouchable: incomparable to all other events, and furthermore unrepresentable through the established genres and mechanisms, language itself included, of the mundane world. I will explore the implications of this epistemology at length throughout this dissertation, especially in Chapter One and Chapter Four. This position has largely fallen out of favor among scholars, especially historians who recognize that comparisons between historical events do not diminish, and in fact can often highlight, the distinctive features of a given event, and to mark it as *unique* is in some ways to place it outside of human history, and thus to imagine its causes as more (or less) than human. It remains, however, a preoccupation of many artists and writers, who turn their attention to, or critique others who attempt to place fictional work within the frame of the concentration camp.[10] It's hard to understate the impact Wiesel has had on the landscape and discourse of Holocaust memory in the United States, owing not only to the popularity and emotional accessibility of his writing, but also to his own visibility and public advocacy for Holocaust survivors and the central role he believed they ought to play in Holocaust memorialization.[11]

Scholars have paid significant attention to Wiesel's writing, almost always framed by one version or another of his pronouncement that those who were not in concentration camps will never understand, often trying to parse his claim to allow for a historical data-driven understanding of the conditions that led to the Holocaust. Alan Rosenberg, for example, argues that Wiesel only places a phenomenological understanding of the Holocaust outside of the grasp of non-survivors, leaving space for the work of history to continue (see Rosenberg and Myers).[12] Reflecting on several of these attempts to

[10] Not that this stops people from writing Holocaust novels, films, television series, video games, tabletop roleplaying games, comics, podcasts, webomics, plays, jokes, ballets and other media. Rather, it remains most prominent in the reflective writing of artists who seek to explore their own relationships to the Holocaust, and as a tool for critics of those works.

[11] As Edward Linenthal's history of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has shown, Wiesel's singular notion of *how* the Holocaust ought to be represented — namely, with Jewish victims and Holocaust survivors as the central focus — and the controversies and difficulties this position during the years-long process of creating the USHMM has deeply shaped the current state of public, national Holocaust memory today (22–51).

[12] See also Rosenfeld and Greenberg; Katz and Rosen; and much of the work of Michael Berenbaum, who was Project Director for the USHMM prior to its construction, and Director of the USHMM's research institute until 1997.

complicate-without-undermining Wiesel's absolute statements, Gary Weissman notes that while it remains unclear that Wiesel intended to enshrine anything less than a totalizing impossibility of knowledge for non-survivors, it is not enough to separate historical and experiential knowledge:

> For we are dealing here not only with two ways of knowing, but two *objects* of knowing. One is the Holocaust, the other what is oftentimes called 'the Holocaust experience.' This term refers not to the experiences of the millions who died of starvation, disease, beatings, hangings, bullets, or gassing, but rather to the wartime experience of individuals who *survived* the Holocaust. Survival is a necessary part of the Holocaust experience when the *full* experience of the Holocaust is implicitly understand to include not only wearing the yellow star and starving in the ghetto, but learning that most or all of one's family has been killed; not only deportation to the camps, but liberation and emigration; not only being engulfed in the catastrophe, but bearing witness to the catastrophe in its aftermath. (92)

Weissman argues, as I will discuss more in Chapter Four, that because within the United States, the *survivor* rather than the dead victim is the emblematic figure of the Holocaust, when scholars attempt to unpack the possibilities of knowing the Holocaust, they are, in fact, talking about an extremely specific and small subset of those who were victims (broadly construed) of the Nazi's genocidal actions in Europe. For Weissman, surviving the Holocaust has become synonymous with the experience of the Holocaust, and thus the millions of victims who did not survive are the matter either for history and data, or fully beyond our knowledge (as the experience of death is *always* understood to be). However, in articulating this epistemological binary (in service of his primary critique of non-survivors attempts to know the "Holocaust experience"), Weissman, intentionally or otherwise, reinscribes precisely the experiential hierarchies that Wiesel himself represents and continually reifies. At the top of that hierarchy, the full experience — which we may cynically read to mean the *authentic* or *authoritative* experience of the Holocaust — is reserved for not just the survivor, but the survivors *of the concentration camp* who then *chose to share their testimony.*

The Study of Holocaust Literature

Although no longer the central concern of historians, the still-present mythos of silence through the first post-war decades, and the absolute centrality of the Holocaust survivor, embodied first and foremost in the United States by Elie Wiesel, continue to shape the field and discourses surrounding

Holocaust literature. Furthermore, as I have shown above, these two factors are inextricable. Central to the process by which Wiesel and the survivor came to occupy that metonymic position (through which they each stand in for the entirety of the Nazi genocide of the Jews of Europe) was the repeated insistence that people were not listening to them, grounding their claims to historical representation in a significant moral urgency.[13]

The first studies of Holocaust literature largely replicated or adhered to this hierarchy, prioritizing the writings of Holocaust survivors and, with few exceptions, sharply criticizing the attempts of others to reference or represent the Holocaust in their literary works — with particular vehemence reserved for prose fiction. Lawrence Langer's 1975 study *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* is generally placed at the beginning of the mainstream academic interest in Holocaust literature.[14] Although Langer's book has shaped much of the approach literary scholars have taken to examining the literature of the Holocaust, he appears only sparsely in this dissertation because his readings of literature are framed in such a way as to make them deeply problematic for my purposes: first because he insists on measuring literature against historical fact, and second because he refuses the possibility of *any* lessons being taken from atrocity. Neither quality is unique to Langer, but his particular expression of those beliefs markedly differentiates his work from those who would follow him. Langer insists that even in works that are explicitly, self-consciously, intentionally fictional, there will always be a discernible historical truth.

> For in the literature of atrocity, no fiction can ever be completely that — a fiction; however extraordinary the imaginative efforts of the writer to disguise his theme with the garments of literary invention — and as we shall see, some of these efforts are extraordinary indeed — he can never totally conceal the relationship between the naked body and the covering costume, the actual scars of the Holocaust and the creative salves that often only intensify pain. (Langer, *Literary Imagination* 91)

Langer, thus, is alone among scholars of Holocaust literature in denying the possibility of fiction to writers who were "closely allied with the events of the Holocaust even when they were not literally

[13] As Wiesel wrote in his Yiddish memoir: "Now, ten years after Buchenwald, I see that the world forgets [...] I am not so very naive that I believe that this book will change the path of history, or shock humanity's knowledge. A book today does not have the power it once did. Those who were silent yesterday will still be silent tomorrow" (*Un Di Velt Hot Geshvign* 245 my translation)

[14] And rightly so, though some, notably George Steiner, wrote about the literary attempts to represent the Holocaust, Langer's was the first to attempt a systematic close reading of texts written by survivors about their experiences.

survivors" (*Literary Imagination* 20). Langer is notable in his inclusion of non-survivors within boundaries of the field, which would otherwise make his study a crucial model for my own, except that, for Langer the category seems to be entirely limited to authors who had been in hiding, like Jerzy Kosinski, or members of the resistance, like Albert Camus and André Schwarz-Bart. Here, "closely allied" is more or less equatable to physical presence in Nazi-controlled or collaborating countries, but not in concentration camps. Further, this overwrought insistence on the possibility of literal truth even against the attempts of a text's composer leads much of his analysis to take pathways very different, and perhaps less than fruitful for my own project.

Over the course of Langer's career, he has repeatedly insisted that there are no lessons to be learned from the Holocaust. Once again, he is not alone in holding this belief, but as Andrea Reiter argues, in her study of how the act and performance of narrating survival experiences shapes survivor testimony, Langer evinces the "deeply pessimistic view that survivors — and *a fortiori* those who read their accounts — cannot learn anything even from the most terrible experiences, so devoid was the Holocaust of all meaning. Any attempt to deny this, *even by survivors*, Langer treats as ideologically suspect" (3 my emphasis).[15] Langer has a tendency to make these broad claims about the nature of atrocity that ironically both defer authority to survivors and their testimony and, at the same time, establish himself as the arbiter not only of what they say, but also of what they could possibly have understood.

Alvin Rosenfeld, on the other hand, who serves as a critical touchstone throughout this dissertation, is unwilling to make the same brazen claims to his own exceptional insight as Langer. While Rosenfeld still defers to historical veracity and the biographical data of authors as his primary means of valuing the literary quality of, and for understanding the implications and claims of, the texts, he is less committed to an absolute hierarchy of quality and appropriateness as Langer. Moreover, where Langer's

[15] Reiter (z''l) quotes from Langer's 1982 *Versions of Survival* to demonstrate her point: "How is it possible, without violating the complex and contradictory truths of Auschwitz and the other death camps, to create out of such uncompromising material a literature celebrating the growth of the human spirit? . . . Heroic defiance, growing into tragic insight, needs a vision of moral order to nourish it, and this is precisely what the Holocaust univere lacks (Langer, *Versions of Survival* 85; in Reiter 3).

gesture to texts written by those outside of Nazi-controlled Europe is nominal at best, largely in the context of an intense critique of George Steiner, Rosenfeld was the first scholar in the English-language academy to offer an extended treatment of literature written in the United States, devoting much of a chapter of his seminal 1980 work *A Double Dying* to the poetry of Yankev Glatshteyn (*A Double Dying* 25–28; 115–26).[16] Although, as I will discuss in Chapter One, Rosenfeld's insistence on the "literalness" of lyric poetry leads to some particular and slightly perplexing readings of this Yiddish poetry, Rosenfeld's insights into the linguistic concerns of Glatshteyn's Holocaust poetry has served as a crucial, if often unacknowledged, source for later scholarship on these poems.

What unites these two scholars, and has made these two monographs (particularly Rosenfeld's) especially productive for my own thinking and approach to this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry is the value they place on lyric poetry. Lyric poetry, for both Langer and Rosenfeld, is distinguished from other forms of Holocaust writing because of its attentiveness to the limitations of language. That is, although both insist on a literal approach to the *content* of poetry about the Holocaust (or, perhaps in Langer's case, all poetry written by survivors), they also observe in the oblique, often fragmentary language of Holocaust poetry an emergent challenge to a reader's ability to read through it to the experience Langer and Rosenfeld hold it to represent. There is a layer of meaning to lyric poetry separate from its semantic content.

For both scholars, the German-language post-war poetry of Paul Celan is an exemplar of this language play. Langer focuses on Celan's emblematic and most famous poem, *"Todesfuge*" ("Fugue of Death" in Langer), in which he sees the "repudiation of normal punctuation," and "fragmentary phraseology" as demonstrating the possibilities offered by poetry to disrupt the patterns of linguistic reference one might expect of documentary prose (*Literary Imagination* 9). As such, Langer understands Celan's poetry — especially in German as the language of the Nazis and given that Celan was writing in

[16] Even David Roskies, whose 1984 *Against the Apocalypse* I will discuss throughout, especially in Chapter 2, limits himself to a brief mention of Glatshteyn's 1938 poem *"A gute nakht, velt*" (*Against the Apocalypse* 284).

France — to recreate in miniature the abject negation of language that Langer understands the Holocaust to have engendered (*Literary Imagination* 9-15).

Rosenfeld, more focused on poetry as a genre, limits his study to Celan's later career poetics (perhaps building on Langer's own treatment of "*Todesfuge*"), which he characterizes as "more clipped and elliptical, their forms frequently abbreviated and narrowed on the page, their language often intensely private and hermetic" compared to Celan's earlier work of the "*Todesfuge*" period (*A Double Dying* 89). For Rosenfeld, in addition to, and perhaps more important than, the disruptive limitation these odd linguistic features pose to language-as-reference, is the difficulty a reader has on encountering these lines. On reading, we are forced to halt, to take stock and reflect on the implications of this disruption and, as Rosenfeld says of Glatshteyn's poetry (and which I discuss at length below), encounter the unnamed horror that lies behind the words (*A Double Dying* 26).

This dissertation offers a new perspective on Holocaust literature through a case study in poetry written by authors acutely aware of their own physical distance, relative safety, and limited, fragmentary knowledge of what was unfolding in Nazi-controlled Europe. The continual characterization of the Holocaust as beyond representation and words — even, as Wiesel said on one memorable occasion, and as Langer holds, those of the survivor themselves (Wiesel, *A Jew Today* 234; Langer, *Literary Imagination* 8)— is emphasized and concretized in the insistence of Langer, Rosenfeld, and others on history as the primary metric of literary quality.[17] In fact, we can trace a similar deferral to and centralization of history (and its individuated compatriot, biography) in the study of American Jewish literature more broadly, through which studies of Jewish literatures (defined idiosyncratically and by each new study) have sought to locate and identify historically determined Jewish subjects, imposing extrinsic criteria upon literary texts as a metric of evaluation.[18]

[17] See especially the work of Berel Lang, including but not limited to *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, and *Holocaust Representation*.
[18] For relatively recent critiques of this historical trend see Jonathan Freedman, *Klezmer America*; Dean Franco, *Ethnic American Literature*, and especially Benjamin Schreier, *The Impossible Jew* and *The Rise and Fall of Jewish American Literature*.

The immediacy of the events to which the Yiddish-language poetry in this dissertation responds, and the intensity of crises of community, identity, and futurity that those events engender result in a set of responses to the Holocaust that cannot be reduced to windows into history; in fact, they provide little to no insight into even the landscape of Yiddish New York. Rather, the poetry I examine emphasizes not only the multiplicity of responses, imagined futures, histories, and identities emergent in a given poem, but also the *contingency* of that imagination and those identities given the radical uncertainty of the future. Through a focus on each poem as an articulation of a developing relationship between poetic speaker (who, as I will detail in Chapters One and Two, is not equatable to the author of a poem) and the events in Europe, and drawing on a vocabulary that is experiential rather than historical or geographical, this dissertation offers a new model of encountering Holocaust literature understood within its historical contexts, but no longer read in the service of history.

Definition and Categorization

As a result of the history outlined above, and the particular focus on survivors and survivor-writing, the genre of "Holocaust Literature" has thus far had remarkably narrow boundaries. In the most recent of the handful of encyclopedic overviews of Holocaust literature to appear since the turn of the century (and the only one to attempt a formulaic definition), David Roskies and Naomi Diamant offer "a working definition at once formal and flexible, true to the past and attentive to the present": "Holocaust literature comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it" (2). Roskies and Diamant go on to expand on the definition phrase by phrase. In a moment, I will focus on the most problematic piece of the definition for our purposes, the criterion of public memory. But first, it's worth briefly acknowledging the literary history of Roskies and Diamant's *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* itself, and the ways in which that history shaped this definition.

The genesis of that encyclopedic project was a sixty-five page review essay that Roskies wrote for *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* in 2005 (Roskies and Diamant 315). The essay was initially solicited

as a book review and although Roskies does not explicitly note this, it is clear from context that it was intended to be a review of S. Lillian Kremer's two-volume *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work* published by Routledge the year before (Kremer). I note this not because of the significant timespan between the review essay and the book, of which the essay makes up substantial portions of the first chapter, both sharing the title "What is Holocaust Literature?" and both offering the same definition, above.[19] Rather, because Roskies' critique of Kremer's encyclopedia, limited to roughly one paragraph, contains crucial elements influencing the shape of the 2013 volume, and may help to explain several of his notable omissions.

Roskies's critique is simple and two-fold: (1) it is present-oriented, rather than working from the past forward. Specifically, "the selection of authors, the allocation of space, and the litcritical [sic] jargon bespeak current intellectual fashion, mostly in the North American academe" (Roskies, "What Is Holocaust Literature?" 166). An encyclopedia should, it seems, provide a broad swathe of representative languages, rather than judging inclusion based on "the success of a writer in English or in English translation" ("What is Holocaust Literature?" 166). By 2013, however, given perhaps more direct experience with the encyclopedic process, this critique seems to have been forgotten: "To make this a usable guide for readers of English, the selection was limited to books available (somewhere, somehow, and with one exception) in English translation" (Roskies and Diamant 8). Temporality remains a crucial concern, and *Holocaust Literature* (2013) does proceed according to chronology of initial publication in order to remind its readership that "chronology of creation is very different from chronology of reception," despite acquiesing to the fact that, as Naomi Seidman put it elsewhere, it is only *in translation* that the genre this encyclopedia details came to be recognizable and categorizable as such (Roskies and Diamant 10; Seidman, *Faithful Renderings* 199–242).

[19] Though, by 2013 it has stepped back to a working definition, in 2005 Roskies presents it more authoritatively: "Looking back more than two genrations later, we conclude that Holocaust literature comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocuast and been shaped by it" ("What is Holocaust Literature?"166).

The second critique Roskies offers is more problematic. He writes: "A strong feminist agenda drives the selection of authors. A writer who lives in postcolonial Australia or Brazil, even if she has authored but a single Holocaust-related book, is more likely to be included than a writer who perished in Auschwitz or Bialystok" ("What is Holocaust Literature?" 166). It is on the basis of these two criteria, though Roskies gives *substantially* more space (of the single paragraph) to the second, that Roskies finally concludes that Kremer's encyclopedia "fails to provide the most elementary overview of the field" (167). Instead, he notes, it ought to be read as a "sad and eloquent testimony" to the current (as of 2004) state of the field of Holocaust literature and of Holocaust memory in the United States (167).[20]

Notwithstanding the fact that all encyclopedic projects are reflective of a particular moment in literary and scholarly history, it is *also* true that they are the product of the scholarly and literary interests of their composers and editors. Roskies is not wrong in pointing to the dearth of Yiddish writing in curricula, but Kremer's encyclopedia includes a significant number of Yiddish writers, including two of the major authors examined in this dissertation, Kadya Molodovsky and Arn Tsaytlin, who each get a single, off-hand mention within the pages of Roskies and Diamant's *Holocaust Literature* and, importantly, are not included on their list of the "first" hundred books despite publishing major collections in 1946 and 1947 respectively, which had received at least collected translations long before 2013 (Molodowsky, *Paper Bridges*; Zeitlin). Glatshteyn, on the other hand, is granted two books in the list, only one of which to be found in English translation, the other must be pieced together from half a dozen poems included in English-language anthologies (Roskies and Diamant 202).

Returning to Roskies' 2005 essay also points us toward the difficulty *Holocaust Literature* faces in balancing between Roskies' earlier-stated desire to have Yiddish occupy a more prominent place, and the primary criterion upon which the genre of Holocaust literature, according to his definition, is to be judged: the effect of a work on public memory, or public memory's effect on it. This focus on memory

[20] It's also worth noting that *nowhere* in the 65 page 2005 essay does Roskies mention the 2002 *Reference Guide to Holocaust Literature*, published by St. James Press, and edited by Thomas Riggs, which *does* in fact do all of the geographical, temporal, authorial collocation that Roskies calls for ("What is Holocaust Literature?"). It's *also* worth noting the heavy-handed, if *technically* implicit misogyny in his critique of Kremer's encyclopedia.

reflects the historical *and current* prevalence and centrality of remembrance literature for the field of Holocaust literature: the first texts to emerge that were clearly literary in nature (constructed, narrative) were memoiristic writings penned by people who emerged from the concentration camps and ghettos. These were the attempts of survivors to narrativize and, in doing so, find sense in or simply to set down in permanent record their experiences, in the days after liberation, many years later, or as a continual process over decades. Acknowledging the literariness of these works (though a late and still contentious part of the study of Holocaust literature) was often a way that scholars could account for the changeability, the ahistoricity, of memory, a significant obstacle to those who would read memoir and testimony *as* historical documents. The literary artifact, in this case, comes to occupy the space between experience and memory, an articulation of the relationship between the survivor at present, and their traumatic and formative pasts.[21] Roskies and Diamant attempt to address the limitations of this by projecting a text's relationship with public memory into the relative future, allowing for the possibility of new forms and formations of Holocaust literature to emerge.

However, a text's relationship to public memory — in either direction — seems particularly unsuited to wartime literature, and *yet further unsuited* to Yiddish literature, insofar as it implies that a text's inclusion within the category of "Holocaust Literature" is dependent on its reception, rather than its content or composition. None of the collections of poetry that we are discussing have played any significant role in shaping the public memory of the Holocaust, with the very minor exceptions of Glatshteyn's "*A gute nakht velt*" and Molodovsky's "*El khanun*," the influence of which is still limited to a small community of readers of secular Yiddish literature and Holocaust literature scholars. Nor are wartime writers, whether in ghettos or in the United States, composing their texts as immediate responses to the ongoing news of the Holocaust, working in or through a space of memory, except insofar as they can look backward from an imagined future. Such a criterion highlights some of the more prominent

[21] "Memory is defined by the present, and by the contents of the soul at present," writes Amos Funkenstein in an explicit paraphrase of Augustine of Hippo (Funkenstein 7). This is one of the central problems that Naomi Seidman — through the critical lens of translation studies — attempted to acknowledge and address in her salient analysis of the autotranslations of Elie Wiesel's *Un di velt hot geshvign* (*And the world was silent*), which would be published in its more recognizable form in French as *La Nuit* (*Night*).

limitations of Roskies and Diamant's broader system of categorization. Their framework relies on retroactive judgment of text's reception and its impact on public memory as the means to measure not only its significance, but also its inclusion within the fold of "Holocaust Literature" and, as such, limits us to engaging with only the most widely read texts, implicitly reinscribing the boundaries of the established literary canon.

Ultimately, and as a result of the complex process of text selection and the necessarily limited space of the encyclopedia, Roskies and Diamant end up reproducing the same categories and divisions that emerge from the "essentialist claims" of definitions that preceded theirs (4). They rely on or recreate with different names the same periodization found in studies such as Langer and Rosenfeld: wartime, post-war, post-Eichmann, and so on. In particular, however, in their survey of wartime literature, they instantiate a new geographical binary between the "Jew-Zone" of Nazi-controlled Europe and the "Free Zone" that ostensibly comprises the entire rest of the world, but in practice is limited to Western Europe and a handful of texts in the United States that they argue were aimed at motivating US intervention in Europe. Still a fundamentally essentializing and binary division, the problem lies less in the categories themselves than in the hierarchical relationship the anthology establishes between them.[22] For a text to count, thus, as a piece of Holocaust literature it either has to be a work of memory ("been shaped by"), a work of significant, albeit possibly generations post-facto, public import ("shaped the public memory"), or, for wartime literature, as mentioned above, be specifically aimed at motivating political action.

What then, to do with Yiddish poetry written in the United States— which Roskies and Diamant mention throughout, though briefly — for a Yiddish-speaking readership who, with access to the Yiddish press and their own personal and familial connections to Europe, had at least as much information as the

[22] Not that the categories aren't hugely problematic themselves: ignoring the reductivist definition of "Free Zone," by which "freedom" means anything less than Nazi racial and genocidal policies; to collect all of Nazi-controlled Europe under the singular umbrella of "the Jew-Zone," (again, ignoring the fact that the phrase itself sounds uncomfortably like anti-Jewish propaganda) reproduces the same kind of essentialist approach to the history of the Nazi genocide that *at best* prioritizes under the rubric of "the Holocaust" the Jewish experience, and at worst (and more likely) excludes the experience of non-Jews.

authors of the literature, and which is *still* rarely read by those without a prior interest in Yiddish culture and literature?

Although I've been quite critical of Roskies and Diamant's definition, and of the book itself, I do want to recognize and acknowledge that their definition — "Holocaust literature comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it" (2) — remains the most capacious offered to date, and the best representation of the state of the field that we have at our disposal.[23] All encyclopedia endeavors more closely capture, and reflect on, a moment in the development of a genre and a literature than represent the entire history of that genre. The critique I offer above, and throughout, is as much directed at the field of "Holocaust Literature" as we encounter it today, as it is at *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide*. This definiton continues to serve as a major touchstone for my conception of the genre of Holocaust literature as it has developed historically, and is a recurring and foundational text throughout the chapters below.

To propose a definition, however, is as much a normative gesture as it is descriptive. As such, this dissertation, and the American Yiddish Holocaust poetry examined within, offers a direct critique and corrective to the field of "Holocaust Literature" as represented by the working definition above, and of the direction in which Roskies and Diamant seek to guide the field. This is not because that direction is unproductive. Rather, because their definition, at its heart, *still* encounters Holocaust literature looking back from the present moment, and fails to account for the *unknowability* and *unpredictability* of the future for those writing during the war, no matter where they were physically located.

[23] Alan Rosen's (ed.) 2013 *Literature of the Holocaust* adopts Roskies and Diamant's periodization and geographical divisions, if not his terms, at least in the book's overarching structure. Roskies, in fact, contributes the chapter on "Wartime victim writing in Eastern Europe" (15–32). Within the individual essays — which group literature by genre or by language — the periodization and geographical divisions are much more fluid, more or less at the discretion of the chapter's writer.

Argument Overview

This dissertation attends to the poetic production of four writers composing poetry in Yiddish, in the United States, during the years of WWII and the Holocaust: Kadya Molodovsky, Yankev Glashteyn, Arn Tsaytlin, and H. Leyvik. Each produced a significant volume of literature during those years, and all composed poetry in direct response to news of the events as they reached the Jewish communities of the United States, through the Yiddish press, through letters and postcards, and through rumors. Physically removed from Europe, these writers were seemingly unable to imagine themselves as *separate* from the communities being destroyed, from the families, friends, and homes that lay across the Atlantic. Yet, as their poetry demonstrates, they were also acutely aware of their own location, in the United States, far from the destruction. As Leyvik writes:

> I was not in Treblinka
> nor in Majdanek,
> but I stand on their threshold
> and on their balcony. (*"A treblinke-kandidat"* 1-4 in Leyvik, *In treblinke bin ikh nit geven* 11)

Or, as Arn Tsaytlin describes:

> I am a person in New York and a shadow in Warsaw,
> an eternal shadow in a non-existent house.
> No, I cannot leave here,
> from this non-existent house
> in a past Warsaw.
> New York, 1944. ("*A shotn in varshe*" 43-47, in Tsaytlin 48)

Enabled in part by that physical distance, these poets were deeply concerned with Jewish existence beyond physical survival. Interpreting the unfolding events against a background of of Jewish history, Yiddish literature, and Jewish theology, the poetry collections produced during, and in the months immediately following the end of WWII confront the question of what it means to retain, maintain, and reconstruct a life and a Jewish identity — both individual and communal — and to imagine a future for the Jewish people in the face of its imminent and ongoing destruction. As Glatshteyn laments:

> The dead do not praise God,
> the Torah was given for life.
> And as we stood all together
> at the giving of the Torah,

so we all died together in Lublin. ("*Nisht di meysim loybn got*" 1-5 in Glatshteyn, *Shtralndike Yidn* 15)[24]

The immediacy of these events, the intensity of the crises of identity they engender, and the critical self-awareness that these poets express produce distinct forms of knowing and experience that cannot be understood through current interpretive frameworks that dominate the field. The academic study of Holocaust literature grew out of the study of survivor writings, with a focus on memoir and testimony on the one hand, and German-language lyric poetry on the other. As such the studies undertaken, especially through the 1980s, rely on a a set of assumptions and criteria for what constitutes Holocaust literature, and for how it functions in relation to the history, memory, and experience of the Holocaust that are derived from a limited pool of reflective writing, produced by an even more limited group of individuals: namely, survivors of the concentration camps who produced and published literature. It is only in the last few decades that wartime writing outside of the ghettos and forests of Europe has been granted a limited and tokenistic place within the field and genre at all.

As a result of the idiosyncrasies that have shaped the formation of the genre's boundaries, the poetry produced during and in response to the Holocaust, by the writers I examine, has largely been excluded from the category of Holocaust literature. This American Yiddish Holocaust poetry has, with very few, small exceptions, played no role in shaping the public memory of the Holocaust in the United States, and remains unread by all but a handful of academics and those who have a particular interest modern Yiddish literature. Lyric poetry makes little claim to historicity, even as it responds to, enfolds, and stages historical events within its lines.

Instead, this dissertation argues for understanding the poems we will examine in the chapters that follow as the working through of incomplete information, the weight and effect of individual responses to the Holocaust, the poetic speakers realizing the proximity of their own potential destruction (and requisite contingency of their ongoing existence), and the cloud of uncertainty hanging over the future. In short, rather than approaching this poetry through the lens of *memory*, as one would if read as *post*-Holocaust

[24] I offer original texts in Yiddish and full translations of each poem as they are discussed below.. All translations throughout, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

literature, I argue for this poetry as a reflection and refraction of the poetic present, unburdened by the linear movement of narrative prose, a fragmentary and momentary enactment of a relationship between a speaking voice and the imminent destruction to which they respond.

These poems, and the diegetic voices who articulate them, continually grapple with implications of the Holocaust, refusing to relegate it to the realm of unspeakable horror. At the same time, these poems, read individually, in succession, or as collections, also refuse to claim a position of authority such that a singular interpretive position might be elevated over others; rather, they push us, as readers, to accept the necessary partiality of interpretations borne of diachronic comparison, of analogy, or of Jewish theology. Each of these poems offers a fragmentary glimpse into an ongoing process of understanding, turning their gaze inward to concern themselves not with documentary history, but instead with the formation and transformation of their own poetic relationship to the Holocaust.

The speakers of each poem, those individuated voices that articulate the words, not strictly identifiable with the author of the poem, are preoccupied with their complex positioning as individual witnesses to the destruction of Europe's Jewish communities, as members of, and according to Jewish tradition as *speakers for* a community under extreme, existential assault. These speakers simultaneously confront the looming possibility of both their own destruction and the destabilization of the foundations of modern Jewish existence and identity in diaspora. My dissertation demonstrates that these poems offer a distinctive perspective to the field and genre of Holocaust literature not accounted for in survivor or post-war reflective writing. In doing so, through my readings of these poems, I construct a novel critical interpretive framework that understands Holocaust literature to be responding not only to the physical destruction of European Jewry, but also to the crisis of self-understanding and collective identity that accompanies witnessing that destruction.

Contributions and Chapter Overview

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Each centers around a particular question and issue emergent in the corpus of American Yiddish Holocaust poetry that I am examining. Several of the

chapters centralize a specific writer as a means to illuminate the particular thematic, structural, or conceptual focus of the chapter. However, each chapter also places poems and writers into conversation. in order to trace common themes and poetic dispositions across the corpus of these four poets' wartime literary production.

"No letters arrive anymore": American Yiddish Holocaust Literature focuses on Yiddish-language poetry written during the Holocaust and in direct response to news and rumors of the events as they reached the Jewish communities of the United States. The speaking voices of these poems turn their attention to, and are preoccupied with, their complex positioning as individual witnesses to the destruction, and as members of a community facing imminent destruction. My dissertation thus offers a critical interpretive framework that understands Holocaust literature to be responding not only to the physical destruction of Europe's Jews, but also to an accompanying crisis of Jewish self-understanding and collective identity, at a transformative moment in the history of the Jewish communities of the United States.

This dissertation contributes to the fields of Jewish Studies, Religious Studies, American Jewish Literature, Yiddish Studies, and Holocaust Literature in a number of ways. First, this dissertation offers a direct critique of and alternative to the epistemology of Holocaust literature that sees the Holocaust, or any event, as beyond representation. This position, though largely rejected by historians, is still given primacy in the study of Holocaust literature, and is grounded in a particular othering of the space of the concentration camp in terms drawn from apophatic theology, such as "unknowable," or "unspeakable."

One outcome of this epistemology is a restriction of authority to speak about the Holocaust to those who were themselves in the concentration camps, reinscribing a hierarchy that historians such as Raul Hilberg noted was present among survivor communities (187). Effectively collapsing witnessing into direct experience, this epistemology undermines the traumatic nature of both witnessing the Holocaust from any distance, *and* the physical experience of the death camps. The experience of these Yiddish poets is distinct from that of survivors, but cannot be dismissed in terms of displaced trauma nor in terms of representative failure in the face of an absolute other. This dissertation offers critical insight

into the implications of an historical understanding of the Holocaust and its literature that is derived from a theological vocabulary which renders the Holocaust fundamentally unknowable and thus beyond critique. In its place, I propose a counter-epistemology of "witnessing" as a critical experiential category that produces distinct forms of knowledge and discourse.

Second, this dissertation, in particular Chapters Four and Five, develops a framework for critical literary study that emphasizes not only the multiplicity of historical and communal identities emergent within a given text and corpus, but also the *contingency* of those identities given the radical uncertainty that faces the writing of Holocaust literatures, or any catastrophe literatures. I argue that, in reimagining the terminology of its identification and in emphasizing the partiality of historical or theological explanations to the Holocaust, this literature offers a new model for the comparative study of catatastrophe literature that rejects geographically and historically determined conceptions of reading and of identity, a set of future possibilities to which I turn my attention in the Conclusion. In the context of the Holocaust, a focus on the contingency of these poetic speakers' survival through a vocabulary that is experiential rather than geographical provides a framework for future non-hierarchical comparative engagement with texts written in hiding, in transit, and on the borderlands of Nazi-occupied Europe in concert with those written outside of Europe entirely.

This dissertation further offers an alternative and corrective to the persistent myth within the study of American Jewish literature of a singular historical Jewish subject, and the accompanying trend of reading Jewish literature in search of historical data, and of identifiable Judaism(s). Beyond Jewish Studies altogether, this model opens a space for new textual networks and communal formations to emerge through the comparative study of catastrophe literatures understood within their historical contexts but no longer read in the service of history.

The first three chapters of this dissertation offer detailed examinations of poems themselves, placed in conversation both with scholarship on the poems, and with scholarship that makes sweeping claims about the function and scope of Holocaust literature in general. Over the course of these three chapters, this dissertation demonstrates the necessity of including this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry

in conversations about the literary representation of the Holocaust, and simultaneously demonstrates the challenges that this early, uncertain, and exploratory literature poses to the construction of Holocaust literature as a genre whose terms are primarily derived from memory-writings.

Chapter One begins with the title image of Kadya Molodovsky's 1946 collection *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* (*Only King David Remained*), which draws on the image of the biblical king mourning the death of his son, a death he was not present for. Developing that image as a central touchstone of the chapter, Chapter One argues for greater attention to the figurative structures of Holocaust poetry that does not view them as something to be read *through* or as somehow representing the impossibility of expression. Contra Alvin Rosenfeld's famous assertion that "there are no metaphors for Auschwitz, just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else," this chapter argues that the figurative power of this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry, drawing simultaneously on metaphor and metonymy, offers a careful construction of poetic relationship between speaker and the Holocaust that relies on a readerly recognition of the distance between a figurative image and the object which it symbolically represents (*A Double Dying* 27). In doing so, this chapter demonstrates first the necessity of metaphorics to our ability to recognize Holocaust literature *as* Holocaust literature and, second, the crucial role that figurative language plays in enabling the reader of a poem to recognize themselves as part of a community of readers, of writers, and of those who are, in some way, implicated in the destruction of the Holocaust.

Chapter Two turns its attention to poetic form, through close engagement with a selection of poems by Molodovsky, Glatshteyn, and Leyvik that take the form of monologues directed at an absent addressee. Monologue, as a framework for interpretation, allows Chapter Two to illuminate several features of these poems: first, it highlights the constructed nature of the poetic voice, or poetic speaker themselves. Rather than, as previous scholarship has assumed, being identical to the poem's authors, this chapter demonstrates the carefully constructed nature of the individual voice that characterizes each of these poems. Second, monologue highlights the necessity for, and the equally constructed nature of, the poetic addressee, particularly significant in the case of Holocaust poetry which often takes the form of a

monologue directed at a silent God. Finally, this chapter demonstrates the extent to which these poems are concerned first and foremost with the *relationship* between the speaker and that addressee, using their monologic address as a means to articulate and trouble possible models of interpretation inherited from the traditional forms of address that they draw on, especially that of prayer and liturgy.

Chapter Three directly engages the role and function of God, and of the relationship between the poetic speaker and God as a central thematic of Yiddish Holocaust poetry, drawing on the work of Molodovsky, Arn Tsaytlin, and finally several poems from Yankev Glatshteyn. Utilizing language drawn from the theological subfield of *theopoetics*, this chapter argues that these poems actively work to claim uncertainty as a positive and generative position from which to form, re-form, or transform their possible relationship to the divine. This poetry eschews authoritative interpretation, rather it offers multiple, often contradictory understandings of the individual and communal relationship to the divine as a way of generating meaning in and of itself. The final section offers a case study of poems drawn from Yankev Glatshteyn's two collections of Holocaust poetry, *Gedenklider* (*Remembrance Poems*, 1943) and *Shtralndike yidn* (Radiant Jews, 1946), which reconstruct a relationship with the divine based on an interpersonal ethic of mutual care, in place of a hierarchical conception of promise and reward.

The final two chapters of this dissertation, building on the thread of analysis traced through the first three, argue for a reconstitution of the foundational terminology through which the field of Holocaust literature is described. Namely, these two chapters offer a critical intervention into the convergence of the category of "witness" with that of "survivor," arguing that "witnessing" offers a distinctive set of possible subject-positions that do not *necessarily* require one to have been physically present in the concentration camps or, indeed, in Nazi-controlled Europe.

Chapter Four develops a novel reading strategy for Holocaust literature that foregrounds the dynamic relationship between poetic speaker and Holocaust that is emergent in each poetic text. Centralizing the reflexive and introspective poetics at play, this chapter constructs this reading strategy along two lines: first, through a close examination of H. Leyvik's 1945 poem "*A treblinke-kandidat*," which brusquely and intensely announces the subject-position of the poetic speaker, with the opening

lines (from which the title of Leyvik's collection is taken): "*In treblinke bin ikh nit geven*," "I was not in Treblinka." In parallel, this chapter offers a critical history of the deployment of the term *witness* to refer primarily and often exclusively to survivors of the concentration camp. Through close analysis of several critical theoretical usages of the term, this chapter offers a working definition of the subject-positions of the witness as a textually and discursively generated subject position that is grounded in a reflexive preoccupation with the poetic speaker's position *in relation to* the Holocaust.

Chapter Five offers two case studies in the poetic enactment of the subject-position of the witness, each highlighting one recurrent mechanism — one a common theme and set of images, the other a quasi-ekphrastic structure and accompanying set of images — by which the speakers of this American Yiddish Holocaust literature construct themselves in relation to the Holocaust. First, is the repeated presence of specters, demons, and ghosts that haunt, terrorize, or merely accompany the speakers of a selection of poems from Tsaytlin and Glatshteyn. Blurring the lines between past and present, between sleep and wakefulness, the encounter with these ghosts offers little by way of interpretation of their presence or appearance. Rather, the speakers instead turn inward, to reflect on the precariousness of their own existence, and the relationship they have, or are refusing to have, with the dead. The second case study is somewhat more mundane, examining poems from Molodovsky and Tsaytlin in which the speakers receive, or reflect on being in possession of letters sent from the Warsaw Ghetto. These letters metonymically and metaphorically represent the complex network of social and familial connections that exist now only in these objects, and in the ongoing existence of the receiver/speaker. Continually preoccupied with the inextricable overlapping of past and the present, these poems reflect on the contingency of the speaker's existence and the unfolding possibilities of the future. Finally, in the conclusion, I build on the model of reading constructed in the preceding two chapters, to gesture toward a set of comparative possibilities with literatures beyond the scope of the Holocaust.

Brief Biographical Overview

The world of Yiddish New York during the years of the Holocaust offered a vibrant literary community. By the time of the Holocaust, Yiddish culture in the United States was well-established, and though English would overshadow English as the primary literary language of the American Jewish communities in the years following the war, over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, the United States became, and remained, the center of Yiddish cultural production (for an in-depth overview of the culture and debates of the wartime Yiddish literar milieu in the United States see, especially Norich, *Discovering Exile*). Largely composed of immigrants from eastern Europe, Yiddish writers in New York both wrote and read prolifically: the writers I examine in this dissertation not only published their own work extensively, but were also active editors of literary magazines, journals, and book series, helping to shape the literary landscape around them in a variety of ways. To situate the poetry we will examine roughly within the careers of their authors, I want to offer now brief biographical sketches of our four poets::

Yankev Glatshteyn was born in 1896 in Lublin, Poland.[25] As Janet Hadda notes, "although he spent virtually all of his adult years living in New York City and reacting to his immediate environment, his birthplace, Lublin, Poland, always remained a powerful, if intermittent, imaginative stimulus" (11). This became even more true during the years of the war. As the conditions for the Jews of Lublin worsened in the years leading up to WWI in 1914, Glatshteyn was sent to live with an uncle in New York. While in law school in New York, he met Nokhem-Borekh Minkhov, who "opened Glatshteyn's eyes to the exciting presence of a Yiddish belletristic milieu in the United States" (Hadda 13). Minkhov would eventually be a co-founder, with Glatshteyn, of the journal and poetic movement *In zikh*, which stressed introspection and inward-focused poetics. Glatshteyn was a prolific poet, editor, journalist, and critic. In the mid-1930s he returned to Lublin to visit his family. His experiences and travels would later be fictionalized in two novels: *Ven yash iz geforn* (*When Yash Left*) and (*Ven Yash Iz Gekumen*) (*When Yash*

[25] Supplementing my own knowledge, biographical information for Glatshteyn is drawn from Janet Hadda's literary biography, *Yankev Glatshteyn*, and Joshua Fogel's *Yiddish Leksikon* blog.

Arrived). His career did not change, Hadda notes, with the outbreak of WWII, but his poetry and prose would be deeply marked by the war and the Holocaust (16-18). He died on November 19, 1971.

H. Leyvik is the pen-name of Leyvik Halpern.[26] He was born in a small town in what is now Belarus. Dates for his birth vary, but most sources agree that it was in 1888. He had a traditional *yeshiva* education, but was also taught non-Jewish subjects. Leyvik was a committed socialist, and was arrested several times, spending time in jails, in prison labor-camps in Moscow, and in exile in Siberia. He arrived in the United States in 1913, where he worked in a factory and as a poet. Like Tsaytlin, Leyvik is counted among the Yiddish poetic movement known as *Di yunge* (The Youth), in response to which Glatshteyn and his colleagues would develop their own poetics. Leyvik's influence on the Yiddish literary and cultural scene of New York was wide and lasting: not only was he a prolific poet and playwright, but he was also a journalist, editor, and publisher. In 1946, he was selected to travel to Displaced Persons camps in Europe as part of the World Jewish Congress' delegation; he would publish a collection of his impressions of the trip first in the Yiddish newspaper *Der Tog*, and then as (Leyvik, *Mit Der Sheyres-Hapleyte*) (*With the Surviving Remnant*) in 1946. The poems I examine below are taken from Leyvik's 1945 collection *In treblinke bin ikh nit geven* (*I Was Not in Treblinka*). He died in December of 1962.

Kadya Molodovsky was born in May of 1894 in a small town in White Russia, now part of Belarus.[27] She received both a Jewish and Russian education from her father, which Kathryn Hellerstein notes "was not at all typical for a young girl in the shtetl," and, oddly, that she was "better educated than either of her sisters" (19). Moldovsky taught in Jewish day schools for several years before moving to Warsaw to teach Hebrew prior to the outbreak of WWI. Moving to Kiev in 1917, and "having survived the Kiev pogrom," Molodovsky published her first collection of poetry in 1920 (Hellerstein 21). She

[26] Supplementing my own knowledge, biographical information for Leyvik was gathered from *Der leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literature*, as well as Joshua Fogel's *Yiddish Leksikon* blog and *Yiddishkayt.org*.
[27] Supplementing my own knowledge, biographical information for Molodovsky comes from Kathryn Hellerstein's "Introduction" to *Paper Bridges* (17-60), Anita Norich's introduction to her translation of *Fun lublin biz nyu-york*, *A Jewish Refugee in New York* (vii–xxii)*;* and Joshua Fogel's *Yiddish Leksikon* blog, which is largely a translation of Niger and Shatzky's *Der leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literature*, with the addition of information from Berl Kagan's 1986 *Leksikon fun yidish-shraybers* (Fogel; Niger and Shatzky; Kagan).

traveled to New York in 1935, after having published several collections of poetry in Warsaw, joined by her husband in 1938. Molodovsky's 1937 collection *In land fun mayn gebeyn* (*In The Land of My Bones*) was an extended reflection on her immigration, of which it is unclear whether she had intended to stay in the US. In 1942, she published, serially, her novel *Fun lublin biz nyu york* (*From Lublin to New York*) a diaristic novel that follows a young Jewish immigrant woman in the US finding her place in the US. It touches, though briefly, on the unfolding events of the Holocaust as news from Europe grows sparser and more dire. In 1946, she published *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblin* (*Only King David Remained*), her collection of Holocaust poems, which she had begun composing in 1941, in response to news from Poland. After the war, Molodovsky and her husband moved to Israel, where Molodovsky found significant success as a children's writer. She died on March 23, 1973.

Arn Tsaytlin was born in 1898 in what is now Belarus.[28] His father, Hillel Tsaytlin, was an exceptionally important figure in pre-Holocaust Yiddish and broader Jewish culture as a writer, journalist, and pre-eminent philosopher of neo-Hasidism. Arn Tsaytlin began his literary career as a journalist, poet, and literary critic in Warsaw. Religious or spiritual themes occupied his literature from his earliest poems (see especially Wolski). He traveled to New York in 1939, having been invited by a colleague to "oversee the staging of one of his plays" (Faierstein xi). In New York, he taught Hebrew literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Morris Faierstein notes that "[i]n the end he did not emigrate and it was only the accident of his being in New York in the summer of 1939 that enabled him to survive the Holocaust" (xiii). During a brief period in 1939-40, Tsaytlin had to leave New York for Cuba, in order to wait for a more permanent visa to re-enter the United States. Tsaytlin continued to write prolifically before and after the war, returning to the Holocaust as a theme regularly. He died in September of 1973.

[28] Supplementing my own knowledge, biographical information for Tsayltin is drawn from Morris Faierstein's translator's introduction to *Poetry of the Holocaust and Poetry of Faith* (xi-xvii) and *Der leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literature*, as well as Joshua Fogel's *Yiddish Leksikon* blog. His obituary ran in the New York Times on September 30, 1973, under the title "Aaron L. Zeitlin, A Jewish Writer," a small article underneath the much larger announcement of W. H. Auden's death the previous day ("Aaron L. Zeitlin, A Jewish Writer").

A Note on Translation and Transliteration

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Yiddish, German, or French are my own. For in-line references to Yiddish titles and text, I have relied on the YIVO standard for transliteration, as Yiddish is a right-to-left language, which makes in-line non-transliterated quotation difficult. YIVO standard does not necessarily reflect the particular form of Yiddish used — and certainly not spoken — by any of the poets examined here, rather it offers a standard for academic translation, and for those of us who encountered Yiddish first in the university classroom.

For names, I have transliterated from the Yiddish, rather than using the English spellings reproduced on the frontispieces and Library of Congress entries for these authors, emphasizing consistency over strict adherence to YIVO transliteration standards. By and large, the transliterations I have chosen reflect the forms of the names as I first encountered them, part of my own developing relationship with these poets, inscribed in a small way into each page of this dissertation.

Chapter One: Only King David Remained

The title image of Kadya Molodovsky's 1946 collection of Holocaust poetry is one of despair: *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* (*Only King David Remained*)[29] constructs itself around a portrait of the biblical king as a survivor, alone and mourning for a world lost. The central image of the poem provides a symbolic foundation that shapes our reading of the entire collection. As Molodovsky herself would write, reflecting on this period some thirty years later, "I constantly saw before my eyes a destroyed Jewish world, Jewish cities, destruction and death. I named this book *Only King David Remained* to say that the people was no more, the only thing that remained was King David alone with his sadness-crown on his head" ("Baym Hirshbeyns in Hoyz in Nyu York" 60). The title of the collection invites us to read Molodovsky's self-described response to the Holocaust as formed around this singular image, and to engage with the collection as if spoken from the position David occupies as mourning a death at which he was not present. This chapter argues that this American Yiddish Holocaust literature is grounded in the symbolic position of a grief-stricken mourner, acutely aware of their own safety and physical distance from the catastrophe they weep over. As such, contra to the persistent antipathy toward critical engagement with figurative language among extant scholarship in the field, this chapter demonstrates that careful attention to the figurative and metaphorical elements of this literature is critical not only for understanding the internal workings of the poetry itself, but for recognizing these poems *as* Holocaust literature at all.

"Holocaust Literature" as a scholarly field developed its reading strategies primarily from (and from the study of) literature written by survivors and, as such, the broad claims made by scholars about the representative capacities of the Holocaust seem very distant from this poetry composed during and in the immediate aftermath of WWII. Beginning with an examination of those scholarly claims, and their requisite dismissal or even open hostility toward the symbolic, figurative, or metaphorical aspects of

[29] An equally appropriate translation might be "King David Alone Remained." The translation above, "only King David remained" however, appears on the title verse of the original publication and so, for consistency and clarity, I have used that throughout — both in reference to the title of the poem and collection, and within my translation of the poem.

Holocaust literature, this chapter proposes an alternate reading strategy that acknowledges that these poems respond not only to the events in Europe but, equally, to their own and their readers' distance from those events.

The necessarily limited representation that metaphor and analogy provide is not an indication of the failure of metaphor: figurative language never claims perfect verisimilitude, and to dismiss metaphor on those grounds is to ignore the generative possibilities that emerge from moments in which metaphor does "fail." Neither is it enough to say that the extant genres, forms, and structures that these writers turn to — drawn from Biblical and Yiddish literary traditions — are mocked, parodied, or found wanting. Rather, as Chapter Two argues, the reliance on these recognizable forms and generic allusions functions analogously to symbolic language, allowing the poets to build on the assumptions of particular kinds of literary writing to create connections between themselves and their readership. That is, we cannot read this American Yiddish Holocaust literature, now or at the time of its publication, without recognizing that neither its readers nor authors *were there*. Rather than dismissing this literature on that basis, I engage with this physical distance as a fundamental and intentional feature of these texts, and as a lens for illuminating the sympathetic connections created between the poems and their readers.

As the composer of the Psalms, according to Jewish and Christian exegetical tradition, David provides a dual-layered analogue for Molodovsky herself in both her capacity as individual mourner and as poet speaking for her community, placing the destruction of the Holocaust within a landscape of biblical catastrophes that David may be mourning. Kathryn Hellerstein draws our attention to a particular moment in the Hebrew Bible that the title of this collection appears to be alluding to, the response of King David to the news that his son Absalom (who was leading a rebellion against David) had been killed (42):

> The king was shaken. He went up to the upper chamber of the gateway and wept, moaning these words as he went, "My son Absalom! O my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son! (II Samuel 19:1)[30]

[30] וַיִּרְגַּז הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַל עַל־עֲלִיַּת הַשַּׁעַר וַיֵּבְךְּ וְכֹה ו אָמַר בְּלֶכְתּוֹ בְּנִי בְנִי אַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּנִי בְנִי אַבְשָׁלוֹם מִי־יִתֶּן מוּתִי אֲנִי תַחְתֶּיךָ אַבְשָׁלוֹם בְּנִי בְנִי.
II Samuel 19:1, Sefaria.org.

In this moment of despair, David is isolated emotionally and physically from the site of his loss — he had wanted to lead the army himself, but his soldiers had entreated David to stay in the city and not to risk death or injury (II Samuel 18:3) — and retreats further into isolation in the act of mourning.[31] As he goes, David's crying is heard by others, and news of David's grief spreads to his generals and soldiers, causing them to be infected by the king's sadness (19:2-3). David's cries make his grief public, the auditory transformation of private pain into public memorial practice.[32]

This is a problem for David in his role as king; his grieving is cut short when he is chastised by his general, Joab, for forgetting the duty he owes to his people (II Sam. 19:6). At stake in this minor confrontation is the dual-role played by David as both father and king, and the complications of mourning as a private individual for Absalom, his son, who was a threat to the kingship and the nation. Molodovsky employs this metaphor on two different levels: first, in the title image of the collection; second, in the poem from which that title is taken, which I will discuss below. In this first function, the image of David in mourning frames the reader's engagement with the collection as a whole, inviting us to read all the poems through this central metaphor. The duality of David's position, torn between his public obligations and private grief, and a recognition of the tension that necessarily emerges between the individual and community in the act of mourning act as the catalyst for a more complex act of symbolic recognition and relation with the poet. Where David's grief was a burden to his ability to act in his public duty, for Molodovsky, and others writing at the same time, the individual act of mourning becomes the figurative model for a community still coming to terms with the tragedy that is unfolding before it.[33]

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[31] Though Hellerstein announces this allusion explicitly, she restricts her analysis to noting that Moldovsky transforms David here "into a symbol for her own survival in absolute, bereft isolation" ("A Yiddish Poet's Response" 245). The allusion is more complicated than this however, and the biblical context is not quite as simple as David mourning, as the impact of his grieving on the public shows.

[32] See II Sam. 19:3: "And the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the troops, for that day the troops heard that the king was grieving over his son." Sefaria.org

[33] As much as I stress below that we cannot equate the speaking voice of a poem with its author, given the proximity of the collection of a title to its author's name on the page, I do use the titles of collections — both here and with Leyvik's *in treblinke bin ikh nit geven* — as a means to consider how the author of a collection frames our understanding of their relationship to that collection and the poems within.

There Are No Metaphors for Auschwitz

There has been a particular distaste for the discussion of metaphor in literature of the Holocaust since at least the 1960s, when the study of Holocaust literature began to take shape in the Anglophone academy. Before considering the way in which metaphor is employed to create a connection with the non-survivor readership, it is important to understand how the conversation around figurative language in Holocaust literature has developed and how it has shaped the readings of Holocaust poetry along particular lines — including some of the American Yiddish poetry that we are discussing. Of particular importance is the way in which the concentration camp was symbolically transformed into "*l'univers concentrationnaire*" ("the concentrationary universe") through the writings of prominent Holocaust survivors, a space defined by uncertainty, and one which is impossible to know or describe, perhaps even for those who were there, but certainly inaccessible to anyone who did not experience it directly.

This understanding of the concentration camp as wholly other and thus beyond knowledge and language emerged in relation to the assertion that the Holocaust is "unique".[34] The problem of Holocaust "uniqueness" was once the subject of significant debate among historians. It came about in part as a response to the perceived moral failure of the world in the years following the end of WWII — the marginalization of the Holocaust in political discourse, the relativization of the genocide of Europe's Jews to other groups targeted by the Nazis, and/or the Holocaust being categorized among the broader Nazi crimes, not marked out for special consideration by historians or otherwise.[35] Interest in this notion has waned in intensity and importance in the last few decades, with only a few staunch holdouts still arguing for the significance of such a position (see especially Katz; and Rosenbaum).

[34] The phrase "wholly other" echoes 19th century Christian theologian Rudolph Otto, and was redeployed self-consccoiusly Holocaust theologian Arthur A. Cohen in *The Tremendum* (A. A. Cohen). I use the phrase throughout as a way to mark the *absolute* rupture these scholars instantiate between the spatio-temporal world of the concentration camp and the rest of the world.

[35] The Soviet Union's gathering of all victims of the Nazis from Soviet countries under the broad rubric of "Soviet citizens" would be the epitome of this kind of relativization and obfuscation practice.

The work of the historian, of history itself, is always comparative, the result of the limitations inherent to our intellectual and linguistic capacities. Writing as he often does at the crossroads of history and literature, James Young reminds us that

> only when the events of the Holocaust are brought into a continuum of some sort can sense be made of them; on the other hand, all comparisons tend to belie the unique character of events [...] Historical events are never exactly like one another; nor do they often occur for the same reasons. While the events are new, our names for events and the meanings they make are necessarily old. Only if we allow new and unprecedented events to corrupt in their image the old and available frames of reference we bring to them can we begin to create unique meaning. (88)

Even the quality of "uniqueness" is grounded in at least the acknowledgement that the task of comparison is possible, even if the result is always more dissimilar than congruent. The claim to "uniqueness" is now looked on as itself morally and ethically problematic, especially by historians, scholars, and activists who work with non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust (the Roma and Sinti peoples, to name just two examples).[36] Critics assert that claiming that the Holocaust is "unique" actively attempts to render invisible, or at the very least to diminish the suffering of non-Jewish victims.[37]

Rather than an ontological claim about its radical otherness, to name the Holocaust as "unique" seems to be a deeply charged, normative moral claim that we should *treat* (the Jewish experience of) the Holocaust as different from all other events. It functions as an imperative to not diminish through comparison the importance and significance of the events or, critically, to not diminish the specificity and extent of the destruction of Europe's Jews through historical comparison or by attempting to understand the events through some pre-existing explanatory or theoretical framework. Within the study of Holocaust

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[36] As I want to attempt to avoid re-enacting that same process, and though recognizing that this list is necessarily incomplete, I want to acknowledge the non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust: ethnic groups targeted under Nazi racial policy include the Slavic, Polish, and Ukrainian victims, and Afro-German populations of the Rhineland and elsewhere; Soviet prisoners of war who were the first to be killed in the gas chambers; Spanish Republicans; those with physical and intellectual impairments who were victims of the Nazi eugenics policies and Aktion T-4; those killed for their gender identity or sexual orientation, including but not limited to people who were gay, lesbian, or bisexual, transgender, or gender non-conforming (though recognizing the historical contingency of identity terminology, and the difficulty of applying them anachronistically); those killed for their religious beliefs including Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholics, and Freemasons; speakers of Esperanto; those persecuted and killed for their political beliefs, including communists, socialists, trade unionists, and political dissidents. Many others were killed as part of the genocidal actions of the Nazis in Europe and beyond, and this short list does not do them justice.

[37] See especially the collection *Is The Holocaust Unique*? edited by Alan Rosenbaum, now in its third edition (as of 2009, and re-released as an ebook in 2018), in which historian Steven T. Katz is the lone voice on the side of "uniqueness".

literature, this argument has most often taken the form of a set of persistent contentions about the representative possibilities of the Holocaust which, in their most extreme forms, assert that because (or if) the Holocaust is unique, then it is *necessarily* beyond the capacities of language to describe.

The claim is not particularly complex or nuanced. Drawing on language used by theologians, the argument asserts that the Holocaust introduced something new into the world — something *other* — that language, which emerges from the experience of the world itself and shares its boundaries, is unequipped to deal with.[38] Although historical and factual claims can be made, language thus fails in the attempts to capture the *experience* of the Holocaust, as it exceeds all available metaphors and analogies, and mere descriptive language will, apparently, not suffice. We are either faced with writing that is preoccupied with its own insufficiency (as Elie Wiesel often claims of his own writing), or we require a new kind of language-system, something that troubles language itself. Many would find the prime example of this in Paul Celan's poem "*Todesfugue*" ("Death Fugue"), perhaps the most cited piece among Holocaust literature scholars of the 1970s and 1980s as a deconstruction of the German language.[39] This repesenational problem is mapped onto the generic boundaries of what constitutes, or is accepted as "Holocaust Literature," still largely centered on writings by Jewish survivors of the concentration camps.

Although phenomenological claims about the non-representability of certain Holocaust experiences ground themselves in the language of *walls* and *borders*, these terms bear little relation to the actual geographic spaces of the camps. Instead, they serve as a shorthand for a monolithic "unknowable" with little attention to the diversity of Holocaust experience. We are asked to understand the walls and gates of the concentration camp as a border between the representable world, and one which is beyond our experience and understanding. There has, to my knowledge, not been any such claims about the inexpressibility of the experience of being in hiding or in the ghettos, for example, or of being in a prisoner-of-war camp.

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[38] In fact, in some ways the "uniqueness" argument denies complexity by denying understanding and critique.
[39] Rosenfeld, Langer, and several of the writers in Lang's collection *Writing and the Holocaust* all elevate Celan as the sole poet who has achieved representation of the Holocaust.

The prisoner-of-war camp, the ghetto, and even the concentration camp are institutions with long histories. Though it is certainly true that the term "ghetto" took on decidedly darker connotations in the wake of the Second World War, the structure and operation of these two institutions under the Nazis did not differ fundamentally from their earlier instantiations.[40] On the other hand, though not an invention of the Nazis, their transformation of concentration camps into sites of mass killing distinguishes these spaces from their historical antecedents and led to the concentration camp, in the United States especially, becoming the singular symbol of the Holocaust and the primary metaphor for conceptualizing the linguistic and experiential divide between the camp inmates and the rest of the world, through language employed by survivors themselves.[41]

It is understandable that the concentration camp would become elevated as a representative symbol, given what many have reported about the radically dehumanizing conditions of the camp, from Terrence Des Pres' description of Auschwitz as an "excremental assault," designed to remove even the barest possibilities of human dignity, to Primo Levi's famous dictum, delivered from an SS guard upon his entrance into the camps, "*hier ist kein warum*" ("Here there is no why," see Des Pres; Levi 33).[42] Most of the literary memoirs we have from survivors are from those who — even if not for their entire internment — spent time in one or another of the camps at Auschwitz. In many of these memoirs, the act

[40] Though with hindsight and the impossibility of separating the ghetto from the concentration camps for which they served as a staging point, it is harder to recall a past in which "ghetto" was not *necessarily* a bad thing. We don't have to look far for an example of the radical change in connotation of the "ghetto" — Yankev Glatshteyn's positive use of the term in his most famous poem, the 1938 "*A gute nakht, velt*" ("Good night, world"), in which he declares forcefully, "I am going back to the ghetto," ("*gey ikh tsurik in geto"*) to retreat from a world that seems to despise the Jews. Here, only a year before the first Nazi ghettos were formally established, the term was still only associated with the medieval "Jewish quarters," like that found in Venice, for example, and presents a rose-tinted vision of a time of increased Jewish cultural isolation in Europe, though even then it was imposed upon them externally.

[41] The term "concentration camp" pre-dates WWII by half a century: the Oxford English Dictionary's earliest example of the term used as a generalizable category of institution dates to 1897. The OED also points to a possibly analogous term in Spanish, "*concentrado*" or "*reconcentrado*," used in the 1930s during the Ten Years' War between Spain and Cuba to describe interned Cuban civilians — this is noteworthy because many generalized histories of the "concentration camp" cite this as the first usage of the phrase. The OED notes: "contemporary evidence appears to exist for use of either Spanish *campo de concentración* or Afrikaans *konsentrasiekamp* (1918 and 1921, respectively; both after English) with reference to the Cuban war of independence or the Boer War" ("Concentration Camp, n."). The issue is linguistic, rather than conceptual however, as the two institutions are fundamentally united in the act of interning civilians who by their very existence are deemed a "threat" as part of a military conflict or otherwise.

[42] Levi is more invested in exploring the actual spatial logic of the camps than almost any other memoirist, with perhaps the exception of David Rousset, whom I will discuss below.

of passing through the gates of Auschwitz is granted particular importance and focus, and serves to establish the concentration camps as a space outside of the normal logic of the modern world — a division that is often represented in the Anglophone world by slogan over the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau, "*Arbeit Macht Frei*" ("Work Makes [You] Free").[43]

It is from a non-Jewish writer, if we care to mark those distinctions, that we receive the most enduring language for transforming the concentration camp into this symbol for radical otherness, in the phrase "*l'univers concentrationnaire*," the "concentrationary universe." David Rousset was a French intellectual born in 1912, and educated in France. A professor of philosophy at the outbreak of the war, Rousset immediately began organizing as part of the French underground. One of his early translators, Ramon Guthrie, notes that he was one of a "sizable contingent of professors" who were "among the earliest organizers" of the French resistance, where he published a "clandestine weekly magazine devoted to disseminating secret political and military documents" and sharing news from the Allied radio (*The Other Kingdom* 16). He was arrested as a member of the resistance in October of 1943 and held in a French prison before being transferred to Buchenwald in January 1944. Interned in Buchenwald for two months, he spent the rest of the war in the concentration camp at Neuengamme in northern Germany, where the majority of internees were Soviet prisoners of war.

Having experienced firsthand the structures and world of the concentration camp, upon returning to France in 1946 he wrote *L'Univers concentrationnaire* in an effort to describe the conditions of the camps, and laying out the structures of a world he saw as *absolutely* different from our own. However, the *attempt* to understand it was critical, because

[43] This is in part a result of the photographic images that circulated in the British and US press. For other countries, with photographers elsewhere, the symbolic images and reference points differ. David Shneer (z''l) notes this cultural divide in his work on Soviet Jewish WWII photography: When imagining extermination camps, most people think of two sites: Auschwitz, with its iconic gate reading, "Arbeit Macht Frei," which has become the stand-in for the Holocaust experience writ large, and Dachau and Buchenwald, with piles of bodies and emaciated survivors, whom American journalists photographed extensively in April 1945 [...] In the Soviet Union, however, the first visual images of extermination camps came not from Auschwitz or Dachau, but from Majdanek" (Shneer 154). Shneer also notes for the Soviet context, but generalizable though less intensely to the broader visual memory of the Holocaust, that the photographic elevation of the gates of Auschwitz, which most Jewish inmates never passed through (rather than the train tracks leading to Buchenwald) subtly but symbolically universalizes and de-Judaizes the image of the camp (185).

> that the *concentrationary universe* exists is not without importance for the meaning of the universe of ordinary people, of simply men. It is not enough to have a sort of physical contact with this life, so totally separated from the normal structures of the twentieth century. We still need to grasp its rules and to understand its meaning. (Rousset, *L'univers Concentrationnaire* 43 my translation and emphasis)[44]

Rousset's short work is precise and detached. These lines, and the first usage of the title phrase of his book, which precede his attempt to lay out the workings of the camps, bear some important similarities to Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This is a Man*, 1947; published in the US as *Survival in Auschwitz*), which would be published in Italian only a year later.[45] Both ground their writing in their own experiences within the concentration camp, and they also strive for detached and objective language, punctuating their own recollections with detailed descriptions of the hierarchies and spatial arrangements of the camps. The insistence on objectivity in reporting on the conditions of the camps distinguishes Levi's and Rousset's memoirs from those more invested in the emotional and psychological experience of the camps, and perhaps accounts for them remaining relatively unknown, especially in the United States. Despite being relatively unknown by the reading public, this depersonalized descriptive language led to these two memoirs' elevation within academic discourse, often treated more as histories than as memoir.

The phrase "*l'univers concentrationnaire*" has persisted even where the work itself has not: adopted by several scholars in the 1970 and 1980s, most notably employed as a conceptual touchstone by Lawrence Langer in *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (1975), it continues to be used by scholars of Holocaust literature, often with reference to, but not discussion of its originator. The resounding finality of the phrase and the broad reach of its claims to distance and difference are not worldly, but instead "universal": the phrase extends beyond even the limits of imagination, encompassing all possible existence. If this is the case, *of course* the world of the concentration camp is beyond language, *of course* there are no words readily available to capture the experience of something so *wholly*

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[44] ". . . que cet univers concentrationnaire existe n'est pas sans importance pour la signification de l'univers des gens ordinaires, des hommes tout court. Il ne peut suffire de prendre une sort de contact physique avec cette vie, si totalement séparée des structures courantes du xx^{e} siècle. Mais faut-il encore en saisir les règles et en pénétrer le sens."

[45] For all its explanatory power, however, today Rousset is largely unread outside of France (and rarely there, either), a fate shared by Levi in the United States at least. These early, emotionally distant accounts were pushed aside for more vivid, affective memoirs and other writings from the 1950s onward.

other. As such, for scholars who wish to invoke the absolute otherness of the camp, the short phrase is deeply affective, totalizing. Rousset's final description returns to the critical feature of this other place:

> Normal men do not know all that is possible. Even if testimony forces their intelligence to admit it, their muscles do not believe it. The inmates know. The soldier who has spent months in the zone of fire has been made aware of death. Death lived among the inmates every hour of their existence [...] They have walked for years through the fantastic scene of all of human dignity ruined. They are separated from others by an experience impossible to communicate. (181, my translation)[46]

It is possible that this is the first time the claim that the experience of the Holocaust specifically as incommunicable appeared in published writing — from the pen of a non-Jewish survivor, no less. The irony of such a statement is acknowledge by Rousset, and is no means unique to his work: although "it is a universe apart, totally enclosed, a strange kingdom of a singular fatality," the futile attempt to understand the camp experience remains the central task of the inmate and survivor (30 my translation).[47]

For many survivor-writers, this task defines the role of the survivor in the post-Holocaust world, as Elie Wiesel would write:

> I believed that, having survived by chance, I was duty-bound to give meaning to my survival, to justify each moment of my life. I knew the story had to be told [. . .] We all knew that we could never, never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words, coherent, intelligible words, our experience of madness on an absolute scale. ("Why I Write" 201)

Rousset, like Wiesel here and as Primo Levi remarks in the preface to his own memoirs, remains unconvinced that his words, however detailed, will prove effective (9-10); again and again we are reminded of just how absolute the border of the camp is for Rousset, and how alien the worlds of Buchenwald and of Neuengamme are as he looks back on it from the outside. The insufficiency of language to represent the Holocaust is thus not an impediment to actual writing, as the careers of these writers and hundreds of others attest, but instead is mustered as an impediment to readerly understanding. The argument that emerges from this position is built around limiting our interpretive capabilities: if even

[46] "Les hommes normaux ne savent pas que tout est possible. Même si les témoignages forcent leur intelligence à admettre, leurs muscles ne croient pas. Les concentrationnaire savent. Le combattant qui a été des mois durant dans la zone de feu a fait connaissance de la mort. La mort habitait parmi les concentrationnaires toutes les heures de leur existence. . . Ils ont cheminé des années durant dans le fantastique décor de toutes les dignités ruinées. Ils sont séparés des autres par une expérience impossible à transmettre."
[47] "C'est un univers à part, totalement close, étrange royaume d'une fatalité singulière".

the survivor cannot understand their experience in its linguistic representation, certainly no one else can either.

"*L'univers concentrationnaire*" neither relies on or requires the real physical space of the concentration camp for its meaning to be understood. In fact, it is purposefully inscrutable, and in transforming the concentration camp into something wholly other, no longer worldly in the way the actual camps were, the symbolic boundaries that it draws place historical data firmly outside of this unknowable other universe. This is true in general of approaches to the literature of the Holocaust that draw heavily on spatial-geographical language (most often that of walls and borders), insofar as these approaches are not interested in the geographical spaces themselves, but rather in defining a category of experience that they argue is fundamentally unknowable. That is, *real* geography disappears into the background of the symbolic landscape that emerges linguistically in early scholarship on Holocaust literature.

This is not to say that such symbolic transformations cannot be useful for making visible the linguistic and phenomenological issues that confront both those who returned from the camps, and those who attempt to study them. Instead, it is to highlight the necessity of figurative language *even* to these scholars' attempt to characterize the Holocaust in the process of dismissing the viability of figurative language. Further, it is to introduce the possibility that the "unknowability" of the Holocaust experience emerges as a *product* of these scholars use of *metonymy*— in which for example "Auschwtiz" comes to mean all experiences within any concentration camp. These metonymic moves shift our understanding of the phenomenology of the Holocaust into a symbolic dichotomy in which the only operative categories are *camp* or *not-camp*, an ontological division between two apparently irreconcilable forms of existence. In this way, the linguistic choices made by these scholars, namely using figurative shorthands such as "*l'univers concentrationnaire*," "the concentration camp," or the particularly prevalent "Auschwitz," create (or at least reify) the condition of unknowability against which they write.

Of scholars who have written about the relationship between figurative language broadly and Holocaust representation, none have treated it more directly, nor rejected it more explicitly on moral grounds than Berel Lang. Weighing the relative possibilities of historical versus "imaginative" writing,

Lang makes no attempt to hide his disbelief in the latter's capabilities to represent the Holocaust. In fact, he argues on two fronts that figurative language would "personalize events that are impersonal and corporate; it would dehistoricize and generalize events that occur specifically and contingently" (Lang, *Act and Idea* 144). That is, the use of figurative language creates a space between language and its referent that adds additional information, thus "misrepresenting" the subject, and imposing on it a "particularized point of view" that is morally problematic (144). "If genocide is distinctive among acts that are open to moral judgment" and Lang asserts repeatedly that it is, then "figurative representation of that event will diminish the moral understanding of those events, not as it happens or for certain representations, but *intrinsically*" (150, my emphasis). Lang is able to make this claim because of the foundational belief articulated most clearly elsewhere that the standard by which all Holocaust representations ought to be judged is historicity (*Holocaust Representation* 32).

This is even superficially a confusing claim to make, insofar as it introduces as the central basis for judgment a criteria of historical accuracy, one which readers understand *not* to be a critical feature of novels and lyric poetry (the two genres Lang primarily writes against). Even the limit-case of historical fiction, a genre that poses some challenges to drawing a line between the real and the fictive, relies fundamentally on the knowledge that while it may draw from history for its character, plot, or setting, *it is not history.* On the other end of the spectrum of genres is lyric poetry (which Lang repeatedly names) which makes no intrinsic claim to be representing anything from the real (that is, historically verifiable) world.[48] As such, Lang's claim requires imposing a particular purpose onto *all* Holocaust literature: it rests on the perplexing assumption that the goal of any Holocaust literature is (or should be judged as if it is) the transmission of verifiable historical information about the Holocaust.

It is only with this assumption in mind that Lang can claim that the introduction of the individual perspective has a negative impact. Beginning with the assumption that anything not verifiable historical fact is beyond the communicative capabilities of language, the conclusion Lang comes to — that anything subjective, experiential, or from a particularized point of view is necessarily a misrepresentation — poses

[48] Or, indeed, to represent anything at all.

a major problem for the study of the Holocaust even before considering the question of poetry. The primary vehicles of historical writing about the Holocaust that we have access to are *memoir* and *testimony*, both of which are deeply personal genres and rarely invested in either disseminating broad historical truths about the events experienced by the author, or in confirming their individual experience with historical data.[49] True, documents from the camps and ghettos such as the archives of the *Oyneg Shabes* do exist, but because survivor testimony remains the primary textual source for the experience of the Holocaust, to reject anything individualized or particularized refuses us access to any kind of phenomenological account of the Holocaust at all.[50]

The conflation of memory and history is a common move in the study of Holocaust diaries and memoirs, as James Young has noted, in which scholars read a Holocaust text as "testimonial *proof* of the events its embodies" (403 emphasis in original). Yet, Lang here extends that to the very functioning of figurative language itself ("intrinsically"), thus disregarding the figurative without taking into account any measure of its form or context. It ignores the possibility — perhaps commonsense to the encounter with *non*-Holocaust literatures — that the literary text is not attempting to give us critical historical insight, but rather is an attempt to articulate exactly that individuated experience. No text, historical or otherwise, is free from an individual perspective. This refusal to value anything except history is a remapping of the same symbolic divide between the concentration camp and the outside world, this time onto language itself, because no writer could give us verifiable information except those who were there, or those writing with a pile of history books beside them.[51] The persistent error occurs in evaluating works written outside of the *l'univers concentrationnaire* according to a set of criteria they could never meet.

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[49] This precise problem led to a well-documented confrontation between literary critic Alfred Kazin and Elie Wiesel. Alfred Kazin wrote that he doubted the specific historicity of a passage in Wiesel's *Night*, in which Wiesel witnesses a young boy being hanged, and has a crisis of faith as a result, saying that the more he read about Auschwitz, the less he would have been surprised to learn that this episode never happened. Wiesel himself was furious, and accused Kazin of lending credence with his comments to those who would deny the Holocaust ever happened, thus firmly staking his claim that despite being a product of memory, Wiesel believed his writing to be as beyond question as historical fact itself. For a detailed analysis of this conflict (Weissman 1–28).

[50] Led by historian Emanuel Ringelblum, the *Oyneg Shabes* was a group within the Warsaw Ghetto, made up of writers, historians, and other cultural figures and dedicated to preserving documents from within the ghetto. When the destination of those being deported from the ghetto — Treblinka — became clear, the archives were buried in milk canisters and metal boxes, only some of which have now been recovered.

[51] Rosenfeld and others often cite Leslie Epstein's *The King of the Jews* as a positive example of the latter (Epstein).

The American Yiddish Holocaust literature that we are examining here tacitly accepts the symbolic division between its own position and *l'univers concentrationnaire*. Like David mourning his son, these voices who speak in these poems are acutely aware of their physical distance from the concentration camps, though they are not preoccupied with examining the nature of that division. Instead, they are concerned with the affective consequences of witnessing a world they cannot enter, an experience which (as we will see in later chapters) forms the focus of much of their writing, rather than the unknowability of an experience they did not have. Nor are their contemporaneous readers able to forget the fact of their own safety, while friends and families were murdered in Europe.

This poetry shuns the historical in favor of the symbolic because *history* is the problem. Information coming out of Europe is piecemeal and confused; for those who turned to Jewish tradition as a guide, history seemed to be repeating itself, and neither factual information nor literary convention could do anything to change the course of that history. Instead these poems reflect on what it means to live through these times and to witness them, even from a distance. Scholars below, like Lang and Steiner, developed their understanding of the operations of Holocaust literature through close and careful reading of survivor writings, and the insights they gleaned have been invaluable for scholarship on this literature, and for interpreting the political and public life of survivors in the years after the war as the Holocaust gradually became more visible in public discourse. However, those inferences from survivors writings have been applied too readily and too broadly as claims about the *necessary* functioning of all Holocaust literature, and even — after Wiesel perhaps — to the Holocaust itself.

An understanding of the representative possibilities of the Holocaust developed from taking survivor writing as the model for all Holocaust literature has also led to some very particular, and confusing readings of the literature that we are interested in. Alvin Rosenfeld's *A Double Dying*: *Reflections on Holocaust Literature* is a particularly useful space for discussing the implications of this position because, in addition to being committed to the failure of figurative language, Rosenfeld's work is distinctive among those from that period of Holocaust literary scholarship for its actual engagement with American Yiddish Holocaust poetry through the work of Yankev Glatshteyn. Rosenfeld writes in part in

response to George Steiner's more radical pronouncements made in the 1960s, that "The world of Auschwitz lies outside speech as it lies outside of reason" (Steiner, *Language and Silence* 123). Steiner would soften on this position somewhat as time passed, but his claims about the relationship between literary criticism and the Holocaust remain idealistic: "These books and the documents that have survived are not for 'review.' Not unless 'review' signifies, as perhaps it should in these instances, a "'seeing-again,' over and over" (*Language and Silence* 168).[52] It is unethical, Steiner argues, to read anything beyond the intention of the survivor to *attempt*, however unsuccessfully, to transmit the experience of the Holocaust through language.

Rosenfeld holds up Steiner's position both as the theoretical ideal and as fundamentally unsustainable: Steiner is announcing the end of literary criticism even as he undertakes the task himself within the pages of that same collection. "We are yet to develop," Rosenfeld asserted in 1980, "the kind of practical criticism that will allow us to read, interpret, and evaluate Holocaust literature with any precision or confidence" (*A Double Dying* 19). This perception is a direct product of his commitment to "*l'univers concentrationnaire*" as the model for *all* Holocaust experience, evidenced throughout by his insistent use of "Auschwitz" a metonym for all concentration camps: "Auschwitz no more readily reduces to these considerations [Oedipal symbols, class struggle, revealing patterns of imagery and symbolism, mythic analogies, or deep grammatical structures] than does death itself" (*A Double Dying* 19). Rosenfeld here analogously (and ironically) invokes a tropic literary understanding of death as "the great unknown," in order to declare the irreducibility of "Auschwitz" to hidden meaning or to comparison. "I think we must accept as a given the proposition that the Holocaust was something new in the world," he asserts, "without likeness or kind" (*A Double Dying* 21). This insistence on the uniqueness of the Holocaust is

[52] By the time Rosenfeld is writing, Steiner's position is a less an absolute rejection of the possibility of speech, than an ethical imperative *not* to speak: "that silence is the only, though in its own way suicidal, option; that to try to speak or write intelligibly, interpretatively, about Auschwitz is to misconceive totally the nature of that event and to misconstrue totally the necessary constraint of humanity within language" ("Metaphor" 156). It's not *impossible* to speak about Auschwitz, but it remains a failure of signification — one *necessarily* misrepresents both language and the Holocaust. "What remains of language after the Holocaust — *humane* language, in Steiner's terms — is a haunting echo in the voices of "survivors, remembrancers and ghosts" ("Metaphor" 156) It is to them that the remnants of the beauty that was pre-Holocaust language belong, and it is an ethical failure for the rest of us to attempt to retain it.

central to understanding the implicit secondary goal of Rosenfeld's book: where his aim is first to analyze the workings of Holocaust literature, he does so with the intent of demonstrating that it, like the Holocaust itself, is *fundamentally* different from other literatures.

In his general description of the act of reading Holocaust literature, Rosenfeld builds on Rousset's phrase and the symbolic dichotomy that it represents by imbuing the "otherness" of the Holocaust with sacredness. This has the effect of redefining our apparent inability to engage critically with Holocaust literature as emergent from the holiness of the literary objects, itself a product of their having come *from there*: it is not longer the content that gives these texts meaning, but their existence at all.

> We need, but do not have, a suitable hermeneutics to explain that phenomenon [Anne Frank's death in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen] and render it intelligible, just as we need but do not have, a working theory of the miraculous to explain the mere existence of other texts. That certain books have come down to us at all is nothing short of astonishing, and we can never distance ourselves from an accompanying and transfiguring sense of awe as we encounter them. A manuscript written secretly and at the daily risk of life in the Warsaw ghetto [. . .] begins to carry with it the aura of a holy text. Surely we do not take it in our hands and read it as we do those books that reach us through the normal channels of composition and publication. (*A Double Dying* 17)

The physical artifact of the text — the manuscript — is the primary source of authority for Rosenfeld here. The readerly response proposed through the implicitly normative final sentence ("Surely we do not...") emerges from the history of the manuscript's composition and transmission, and by extension, the history of its author. The reader's relationship to the text, that "accompanying and transfiguring sense of awe" happens on the initial encounter with the physical object, by the time we "take it in our hands and read it," we are already firmly set on our interpretive position (*A Double Dying* 17). There is no space in this initial, formative moment, for consideration of the book's contents. That comes later, always viewed through this holy aura. This is the only critical positioning that would allow the kind of overly sympathetic literalism that Rosenfeld lays out as the necessary path for *reading* Holocaust literature.

This mystical reverence lays the groundwork for two different critical moves: first, it allows Rosenfeld to develop a hierarchy of Holocaust literature in which texts are granted prestige by the history of their composition — or, more specifically, by the Holocaust experiences of their composers. Second, it establishes a framework for "awe" as the primary mode of readerly engagement. Rosenfeld's contribution

to this lack of hermeneutic is to develop a reading strategy based ultimately on sympathy to the task of the writer of Holocaust literature. His insistence that Holocaust literature is not be read as "normal" publication extends this sympathy to the point of eschewing critical judgment wherever possible. "My own hope," he writes, "has been to address the literature seriously and also intimately but without exhibiting any affective response other than that which belongs to attentive listening and sympathetic understanding" (*A Double Dying* 9). Rosenfeld, as above, recognizes the necessary limitations of this ideal for the kinds of academic study he is undertaking, but nevertheless announces it as his aim, deriding "writing about it in rhetorical ways" as "overdramatizing the literature" (*A Double Dying* 9). Rosenfeld's rather grandiose claim that we "lack a phenomenology of reading Holocaust literature" subtly announces his own task as the construction of such a phenomenology, which would carefully maintain the imperceptibility both of Auschwitz and of its literary artifacts.

The key feature of Rosenfeld's developing phenomenology is the assertion that Auschwitz is not reducible to comparison, to analogy, or to metaphor. It is not the existence of metaphor that Rosenfeld takes issue with, but the perception that metaphor stands *in place of* the event it purports to represent, and obfuscates or "dissolves" it (*A Double Dying* 25). As such, he claims that once we recognize the presence of the Holocaust in a piece of literature we "*must* disown the figurative use of language, then, and interpret literally" (*A Double Dying* 27 my emphasis).[53] A critical position that begins with "disowning" figurative language ultimately not only ignores or refutes the presence of symbolism and metaphor, but by extension — implicit in the "holy aura" that surrounds the texts — also refuses to acknowledge the constructedness of the literary object, to the point that his own readings seem disconnected from the texts with which he works.

Rosenfeld is aware of the difficulties of restricting his study of Holocaust literature to only those texts that emerged from the concentration camps and ghettos however, and the poetry of Yankev Glatshteyn provides his path beyond. Despite this, however, Rosenfeld's use of Glatshteyn reinforces his commitment to an image of the Holocaust as unrepresentable, derived from that symbolic hierarchy of

[53] In this case, he is speaking specifically of the Glatshteyn poem, "*Roykh*," discussed below.

Holocaust experiences described above. Rosenfeld grounds his claim about the need to read Holocaust texts literally in a reading of Glatshteyn's short poem"*Roykh*, " from his 1946 collection *Shtralndike yidn* (*Radiant Jews*).

רויך

דורכן קרעמאַטאָריע־קוימען
קרויזט אַרויף אַ ייד צום עתיק יומין.
און ווי נאָר דער רויך פֿאַרשווינדט,
קנוילן אַרויף זיין ווייב און קינד.

און אויבן אין די הימלישע הויכן
ווייגען, בענקען הייליקע רויכן.
גאָט, דאָרט וואו דו ביסט דאָ,
דאָרטן זיינען מיר אַלע אויך נישטאָ.

Smoke

Through crematoria-chimneys
A Jew curls upward to the Ancient of Days.[54]
And as soon as that smoke disappears,
His wife and child float up.

And above in the heavenly heights
Cries, yearns holy smoke.
God, wherever you are,
We are all also not there. (*Shtralndike Yidn* 16)

Comparing this poem to one by Thoreau, primarily on the basis that they share a title, "Smoke," and that Thoreau's poem is replete with recognizable, tropic metaphors and allusions — the smoke becomes in turn Icarus of Greek mythology, birds, clouds, and other images — Rosenfeld aims to demonstrate that Glatshteyn's poem refuses a metaphorical use of language. The formal qualities of the poem, "a certain jauntiness of rhythm—the hippety-hop of nursery school jingles—and the playfulness of rhyme" he claims, are imposed upon a darker truth at the poem's core: that is it literally about a Jew being turned into smoke.

> [Glatshteyn] changes the Jew into smoke. Worse yet—and at this point the poem turns into something else, something new in the history of poetry—he does so in a way that has nothing at

[54] Rosenfeld's translation uses the term "Holy One." I have used my translation here, "Ancient of Days" because it is the most common translation for this phrase in its original context in Daniel 7). Rosenfeld uses Chana Faerstein's translation from *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (Howe and Greenberg 331).

> all to do with metaphor, a disabling fact that he forces upon us from the start. To read this poem at all, we must disown the figurative use of language, then, and interpret literally: the Jew has become smoke and a similar fate will overtake his wife. (*A Double Dying* 26)

This poem does something "new in the history of poetry," Rosenfeld argues, but is unclear what, precisely, is new about this transformation. One possibility, if we are to take seriously his imperative to read it as literal, is that Rosenfeld is claiming that the reporting of a physical transformation of a body into smoke is unprecedented in poetry. Perhaps this is true, but reportage poetry has existed for centuries, and there are significant antecedents in the Jewish literary tradition of which both Glatshteyn and Rosenfeld are well aware.[55]

A second possibility is that Rosenfeld is seeing in this poem the literary enactment (or re-enactment) of that transformation, such that he is reading the poem itself as an artifact of the Holocaust and thus subject not to literary interrogation, but to historical. If so, the poem would be less poetry than it would be memoir or testimony that employs poetic structures. To claim that a poem functions in this way would be odd, however, because the explicit and visible constructedness of the poetic text seems to stand as a barrier to the kind of transparent, direct relation of text and event that a historical reading would require. Thus, it seems that the uniqueness Rosenfeld identifies in this poem may be more a function of his readerly perspective: it is novel not necessarily because of anything the poem *does*, but because of the intensity of its subject matter — the Holocaust was an "annihilation" that "overleapt the bounds of metaphor" (*A Double Dying* 27) — and because of the assertion that, as Rosenfeld has established, we "must" not read any "paradox or fantasy" into the poem, or we run the risk of diminishing the "brutal literalness" of the couple's destruction.

The language Rosenfeld employs in his description of the poem speaks to a particular conception of how figurative language functions, in common with those scholars above: the "brutal literalness" of Glathsteyn's non-figurative poem is directly contrasted to Thoreau's "transfiguring imagination, which loved to dissolve phenomena into fanciful patterns of thought" (*A Double Dying* 25). Note the dismissive

[55] Most notably, Chaim Nachman Bialik's poem of the 1903 Kishinev pogroms, "*Be-'Ir ha-haregah*" ["In The City of Slaughter".

description of Thoreau's craft as "fanciful". The "function of metaphorical language of this kind [that turns the Holocaust into a symbol]," Rosenfeld writes elsewhere, "is to compare one thing with another not so much from an urge to get at the first but to get rid of it" ("On Holocaust and History" 19).[56] Writing more generally about scholarship on Holocaust literature, James Young identifies a trend similar to that which we see here, a "traditionally positivist attitude toward metaphor as frivolous and merely decorative, a trivializing influence" in which metaphor "can ultimately do no more than falsify the facts and, therefore, deceive the readers" (90–91). For Rosenfeld, metaphor is an aesthetic feature, a layer built on top of and obfuscating the primary level of the literature, which is that of historical fact, and the hermeneutics of Holocaust literature he proposes here is a method by which we can peer through to the truth beneath the language. Rosenfeld's position carries greater urgency than described by Young, however, insofar as any preoccupation with metaphor on the part of the reader is at best a moral disservice to the victims of the Holocaust, and at worse a purposeful act of historical revisionism or erasure. Reading literally is a careful strategy aimed at revealing the "actual" smoke about which the poem speaks, allowing an insight into the reality Rosenfeld understands the poem to be portraying, and which the figurative qualities of language ultimately obscure. To read otherwise, Rosenfeld argues, would be to look away from, ignore, or even actively dismiss the deep horror that the smoke implies.[57]

To insist on the literalness of this poem thus is to collapse it into the broader category of experiential, historical literature such as that of survivor testimony. Reading literally places us in the difficult position Lang would argue for, in which historicity is the only viable criteria with which to encounter and critique the literature. The *poetic* qualities of the poetry here are at best a burden that needs to be overcome and, at worst another attempt at falsifying or obfuscating the facts of the crime "behind or

[56] Rosenfeld is here talking about the use of the Holocaust as a symbolic referent for other events and situations, but given the equivalence established in his famous dictum below, "there are no metaphors for Auschwitz, *just as* Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else" (my emphasis), it does seem to apply to symbolic transformation in both directions. Rosenfeld continues: "*By turning the Holocaust into a symbol*, one empties it of its history and, in effect, disposes of it" ("On Holocaust and History 19 my emphasis).

[57] In some ways, Rosenfeld's reading of this poem has hints of the Romantic, in which the poet has access to a vision of some truth that transcends explanation, only partially represented in their literary production, and even less accessible to readers, who lack the kind of artistic genius of the poetic vision and voice.

before words" (*A Double Dying* 26). It is this understanding that leads Rosenfeld to his most direct assertion that

> there are no metaphors for Auschwitz, just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else. Why is that the case? Because the flames were real flames, the ashes only ashes, the smoke always and only smoke. If one wants "meaning" out of that, it can only be this: at Auschwitz humanity incinerated its own heart. Otherwise the burnings do not lend themselves to metaphor, simile, or symbol—to likeness or association with anything else. They can only "be" or "mean" what they in fact were: the death of the Jews. (*A Double Dying* 27)[58]

This is not true, at least, not in the descriptive sense. Rosenfeld acknowledges, explicitly and repeatedly, the presence of analogy and metaphor in Holocaust literature, especially that recourse to tropes and events of Jewish catastrophe literature such as Lamentations and the destructions of the temple. Even here, the couple is *not* literally transformed into smoke, even if that is the conclusion of Rosenfeld's reading. Cremation is not a total physical destruction, and evidence — ash and metal dental fillings — remains after the fact. Further, though the particles of the smoke contain the corporeal remnants of the body of the Jewish man and his family, it would be a significant extension of *literalness* to say that this smoke *is* "a Jew," "his wife," or his "child." If Rosenfeld's fear is that engaging with metaphor and figurative language obscures the historicity of the poem, we should ask the complementary question of what this literal approach itself obscures. Or, put more directly, what does the figurative *do* here that makes it necessary to the function and meaning of the poem when taken as a whole, alongside the literal possibilities, and not instead of them? In fact, given the lack of explicit reference, it is only in the operation of figurative language that a recognition of this poem *as* Holocaust literature is possible, and thus even Rosenfeld's literal reading requires some engagement with the symbolic imagery of the poem.

Rosenfeld rejects metaphor most directly because it is incomplete: " in almost all cases [of analogies] the gains in perspective are only temporary and provisional, for what inevitably emerges in Holocaust literature are introduced only to reveal their inadequacy, and they are in turn refuted or rejected as being unworkable" (*A Double Dying* 21). Each analogy that is drawn creates gaps between the symbol and its referent, and in those gaps Rosenfeld appears to read a deep representative, and perhaps even

[58] Not to overlook the fact that "incinerated his own heart" is, of course, a metaphor.

moral failure. Yet, at the same time, "the "entire poem," Rosenfeld claims, "is predicated upon the author's certain knowledge that we will recognize and be able to name the crime that resides behind or before words, in the silence that the poem was written to break. The unspoken but unmistakable ground of this poem, that is to say, is the Holocaust" (*A Double Dying* 26). The death of the three people is itself a figure for the death of the Jewish people in the Holocaust. Rosenfeld's reading of the poem as Holocaust literature requires us to understand this, but he might argue, along the lines above, that reading this poem in a figurative way undercuts the brutalness of these *individual* people's deaths by making them stand in for the broader Jewish population. We are trapped in some ways between two incompatible readings.

One common features of this kind of Holocaust literature— personal, lyrical, emotional — is that the destrucction is rarely named, and the realization that a text *is* Holocaust literature is not necessarily possible from the text itself. For that moment of recognition Rosenfeld highlights to bear any weight as a source of interpretation and critique, it cannot be imposed extrinsically by the reader; it must have some grounding in the literature. Molodovksy's collection *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblin* is one example where this problem is easily visible.

As Kathryn Hellerstein notes, fewer than twenty of the poems in the collection have explicit reference to the Holocaust, "or allude to the literary tradition of Jewish responses to catastrophe"; "twenty-five poems of the book seem not to deal with the destruction at all, and thirty-eight only allude to it" ("A Yiddish Poet's Response" 246). We know Molodovksy intended the collection as a whole to be her poetic response to the Holocaust, because she says as much in later autobiographical writings: "all the poems in this book are destruction-poems, lament and crying" ("*Baym hirshbeyns*" 60). Molodovsky calls these poems, "*khurbn-lider*," a term that links the Holocaust linguistically to the destructions of the first and second temples of Jerusalem, and reinforces the importance of the image of King David for the collection as a whole — the image she chose to title the collection. As such, the foundation for our ability to recognize and read those twenty-five poems and thus the entire collection, as Holocaust literature rests on an understanding that here David is mourning the Holocaust. (The contemporaneous reader would have no access to Molodvsky's comments above, written a decade and a half later.) This is true also of

"*Roykh.*" Without explicit reference to understand a piece of literature as Holocaust literature *requires* discovering, or creating a figurative connection between the text and the historical event that inspired it, before any reading, literal or otherwise, can even begin.[59]

There are ethical implications to a reading strategy that begins with the figurative, in addition to the fears noted above (the risk of distorting the historical facts, providing fodder for Holocaust deniers, rendering invisible the victims, or somehow lessening the horror of the events). The Nazis themselves engaged in particular kinds of language games, using metaphor and euphemism throughout the ghettos and camps — deportation, disinfection, selection, the signs hung in the bathrooms that insisted on cleanliness, even the famous "*Arbeit Macht Frei"* carrying a disturbing multiplicity of meanings. Not unlike Rosenfeld's fears of distorting the facticity of the Holocaust, if we are committed to radical literalness, then the use of metaphorical language in Holocaust literature replicates the ways in which the Nazis themselves attempted to linguistically conceal the horrifying truth of the camps, even from those within it. Further, as David Roskies and others have observed, the early institutions of the Holocaust were unsettlingly familiar to the Jewish communal memory. The Nazis purposefully recreated the historical forces of Jews' oppression: "they reinstituted the Renaissance ghetto, the medieval yellow star, and the seventeenth-century Jewish Council" (*Against the Apocalypse* 13; 191). As such, the Nazis created a symbolic landscape of destruction that correlated to the physical world of the camps, and to make metaphorical connections in literature — or to engage with them critically — runs the risk of recreating that symbolic destruction, and thus playing into the Nazis figurative assault on Jewish historical memory.

However, there are equally broad consequences inherent to the refusal to engage with the metaphorical qualities of these poems. In the first instance, as I have been describing, the inclination toward elevating historicity as the measure by which these poetic texts are judged — even as *a* measure for judging symbol-laden lyric poetry — effectively dismisses any text that does not grant us novel, or at least verifiable historical insight into the events of the Holocaust, or denies the ability of a text to be

[59] There is nothing in the lines "*Roykh*" after all to explicitly suggest that it is the Holocaust that Glatsheyn is referring to, nor does it draw on any particular established allusions, tropes, or literary references.

anything *except* history. We might argue that the experience of the individual writer loosely falls under the category of history, but a reading such as Rosenfeld's (and he is by no means alone in approaching Holocaust poetry in this way) is not interested in asking what we can learn about the poet speaker, but only in what we learn about the Holocaust as a historical moment.

Rosenfeld's reading of "*Roykh,*" for example, rests on two claims about the function of figurative language in the poem: first, that " the flames were real flames, the ashes only ashes, the smoke always and only smoke," and second that a Jew is *literally* turned into smoke *(A Double Dying* 27). In this way, Rosenfeld marks metaphor as both irrelevant and harmful to his intended reading. Yet, at the same time, he draws on metonymy, another category of figurative language, in order to ground his reading strategy: not only does he take a single individual to be representative of the Jewish community, but he also reads the transformation of this family into smoke as representing the destruction of the Jewish community writ large.[60] Although there are rhetorical and philosophical differences between metaphor and metonymy, in the case of "*Roykh*" and the Holocaust, both enact the symbolic transformation of the individual object into the larger historical event — exactly what Lang warned against — in order to make the historical event more present or understandable. Rosenfeld only *explicitly* decries metaphor, though he speaks generally against figurative language or any attempt to transform the Holocaust symbolically. Equally problematic, however, is the tendency of scholars across the field of Holocaust literature to employ Holocaust metonym — even as a way to critique metaphor — without a second thought to the implications inherent in this particular figure of speech.

As the most common shorthands for the Holocaust, geographical-spatial language of "the concentration camp," "the camps," and "Auschwitz" establish a dichotomous conceptual framework in which the only significant categories of experience are concentration camp experiences. An uncritical employment of such language effectively collapses *all other kinds of Holocaust experience* into a singular category that is defined only as being outside of the symbolic spaces above. This geographically coded

[60] This specific figure of speech would be classified as *synecdoche* in which a part is used to represent the whole (generally considered a subset of metonymy)

synecdochal language thus, at best, runs the risk of diminishing the radical multiplicity of Holocaust experiences into a set of, for lack of a better term, master narratives — this is the "camp experience," this is "to be in hiding," and so on. We already see this at work in the reception history of Holocaust literature in the United States where it begins (and often ends, for the broad public) with Anne Frank and Elie Wiesel. As such, the interchangability of the terms "Holocaust" and "Auschwitz" in academic discourse hierarchizes those two categories of experience, implicitly insisting that if you did not experience the concentration camps directly, your experience of the Holocaust is somehow less than authentic. This diminishment works in both directions, however, it is just more visible in the case of non-concentration camp experiences: there was far more variety of experience within the camps, and variety *of* camps themselves than is allowable within this conceptual framework.[61] Such a simple binary does not stand up to the radical proliferation of survivor memoir and testimony in the decades following the Holocaust, which may also explain why scholars until the 1980s turned to the same small set of texts (despite many more being available in English). Even within the scholarly "canon," we need only compare Elie Wiesel with Primo Levi to see two individuals in the same place at the same time paint radically different pictures of Auschwitz — differences lost in the quick substitution of one term for another.[62]

The necessary referentiality of language itself, however, makes a reading strategy that completely ignores implications of employing figurative language unachievable even for its most ardent proponents: though "*Shoah*" is the preferred term of those who would argue for the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust, it too derives its meaning from its biblical context (see for example Zephaniah 1:15). "Holocaust," and "*Hurban*/*khurbn*" suffer equally from the weight of etymology and history, each having certain connotations — sacrificial and ritualistic in the case of "Holocaust," and part of an ongoing Jewish historical narrative that begins with *der ershter un tsveyter khurboynes*, the destructions of the First and

[61] See, for example, Wachsmann.

[62] For another kind of contrast, we might also compare David Roussett's account of the camps to Tadeusz Borowski, the latter being a Polish journalist imprisoned in Auschwitz and who worked on the disembarkation platforms. A favorite of Langer and Rosenfeld in particular, this comparison would lead to a view of two radically different experiences of Auschwitz from the perspectives of two non-Jewish prisoners, highlighting again the problematics of collecting this variety under even such a nebulous monolithic phrase as "*l'univers concentrationnaire*". The phrase is, of course, Roussett's, but it is only in divorcing it from its original context that it becomes employed synecdochally for the Holocaust writ large.

Second Temples of Jerusalem for the latter term.[63] Regardless of the chosen signifier, there is no escaping the continuous association with images and knowledge derived from past experience, especially the collective memory and its requisite literary corpus of Jewish history and responses to catastrophe.

This is no less true of *"Roykh*," though Rosenfeld's reading is not interested in these analogies. The esoteric phrase "*otik-yomen*" ("Ancient of Days"), for example, is far from common among names for God either in Yiddish or in the Hebrew Bible, where its only notable appearances are in Daniel 7, and even then only in the context of Daniel's dreams and visions. There is a decidedly symbolic or figurative connotation even to the contexts of this name's use. One might be tempted to argue that biblical names for God fall into a different category of language in the Jewish tradition than the modern category of metaphor, but at the same time the specific choice of Glatshteyn to draw on this particular phrase with all of its prophetic and apocalyptic connotations functions no differently than any other kind of figurative or metaphorical language.[64] The reader is required first to recognize the reference, and then to infer meaning from it, the same process Rosenfeld ascribes to the encounter with the poem as a whole. A refusal to engage with the figurative dimensions of Holocaust literature would thus be to ignore a critical site of meaning common to all text, regardless of its historicity.

Metaphor functions in the space of incongruity; it requires disjuncture. To compare the Holocaust to the destruction of the First Temple, for example, is not to claim equivalence, but rather to assert that there is something in our understanding of the past that can help us to understand the present. In the first instance, for figurative language to function at all, it requires a reader to recognize that it *is figurative language*, and as such to recognize that the two objects of reference — the Holocaust and the destruction of the Temple; or the death of a single Jewish family and the destruction of European Jewry — are not the same thing. This seems a simple step, realizing that two things bear similarities *and* differences, but to

[63] "*Hurban*" being the most common transliteration when taken from Hebrew, and "*khurbn*" being the standardized Yiddish transliteration.

[64] Certainly we could discern an implicit argument in the works of Alan Mintz and David Roskies on the relationship between Holocaust literature and other Jewish catatrophe literatures that allusion, especially Biblical allusion, is excluded from this diminishing functioning of metaphor insofar as it allows writers to integrate the Holocaust into Jewish history. However, for those proponents of a "unique" Holocaust, even comparisons across Jewish history are dangerous, insofar as they diminish the magnitude, mechanization, and ideology of the Nazi genocides.

argue that the urge toward metaphor is an urge to "be rid" of the things being compared is to dwell only in the space of similarity, and to refuse the central role that difference plays in all acts of comparison, figurative or otherwise. In order, then to affirm the "author's certain knowledge" and "name the crime that resides behind or before words," as Rosenfeld asserts is required for understanding the poem, we must already step into the world of the non-literal, by recognizing and accepting the metonymic function not only of the Jewish man, but of the crematoria chimneys, and the smoke itself (*A Double Dying* 26). It *is* actual smoke, but the smoke is not the man, and the smoke is not the act that created it, nor are the crematoria chimneys the mechanism or act of the mass killing they represent. This is, in the most fundamental sense, what is lost in an insistence on the literal.

Metaphor-As-Community

The poetic speaker and reader form a bond in this moment of recognition: the realization of incongruity — this distance between the literal and the symbolic meaning of each word and line of a poem — creates a shared vocabulary between the two, and establishes a space of meaning within the frame of the poem, both intellectual and emotional. This is at play already in the first line of Molodovsky's "*Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*"

דער מלך דוד אַליין איז געבליבן

דאָס פאָלק איז פאַרשניטן —
וואונד און טויט.
די וועגן פאַרשאָטן,
די הייזער פאַרברענט.
דער מלך דוד אַליין איז געבליבן,
ער מיט דער קרוין אין די הענט.

געשטאָרבן דער שאַל פון דעם האָרן.
דער לעצטער שטאַפעט איז געפאַלן —
וואונד און טויט.
עס רייסן קריעה אין הימל
פאַרשרפעטע, חרובע וועגט.
דער מלך דוד אַליין איז געבליבן,
ער מיט דער קרוין אין די הענט.

עס הוילט דער ווינט אין צעשאָטענע נעסטן —
וואונד און טויט.

דִי לאָנקעס דִי גרינע פון קינדהייט,
דִי טשערעדע שאָף — איז פאַרלענדט.
דער מלך דוד אַליין איז געבליבן,
ער מיט דער קרוין אין דִי הענט.

דאָס לאַנד איז צעמאָסטן אויף קברים —
וואונד און טויט.
אַ וועג אַן איינציקער גרינט און איז פריש.
דער וועג צו זיין זון דעם משיח,
וואָס דאָס פאָלק האָט פאַרטרוימט און צעשמט.
אַהין גייט דער אָבל, דער מלך,
ער מיט דער קרוין אין דִי הענט.

ער טראָגט דִי פאַרהיילִיקטע ירושה —
וואונד און טויט.
— אָט איז דיין כתר, משיח,
אַלע פּערל געשווינט, ניט פאַרשוועדט.
אָט איז דיין כתר, משיח,
אויף דִי לעצטע צוויי יידישע הענט.

Only King David Remained

The people is destroyed —
wound and death.
The roads covered,
the houses burned.
Only King David remained,
he with the crown in his hands.

Dead the call from the horn.
The last messenger has fallen —
wound and death.
Scorched, destroyed walls
tear at the sky in mourning.
Only King David remained,
he with the crown in his hands.

The wind howls in scattered nests —
wound and death.
The green meadows of childhood,
the flocks of sheep — are destroyed.
Only King David remained,
he with the crown in his hands.

The land is measured out in graves —
wound and death.
A solitary road grows green and is fresh.
The path to His son, the Messiah,
whom the people dreamed up and esteemed.
To there walks the mourner, the king,

he with the crown in his hands.

He carries the sacred heritage —
wound and death.
— Here is your holy crown,[65] Messiah
All the pearls cared for, not squandered.
Here is your holy crown, Messiah,
In the last two Jewish hands. (Molodovsky, *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* 74-75).

"The people" functions figuratively here: we understand immediately, given the historical weight of the poem's title, that this refers to the nation of Israel and thus (with another small shift in our symbolic perspective) the Jewish people themselves.[66] Written in Yiddish in the United States in the 1940s, and thus directed at a relatively small, self-selected subsection of the American Jewish community, the reader understands the breadth of this first line immediately and, more importantly for the symbolic operations of the poem, they understand that *they are included* among the collective people that has been destroyed.[67] This understanding requires an analogous thought process to the one Rosenfeld laid out for the initial encounter with Glatshteyn's "*Roykh*": a recognition that there is more at stake in the first line than its literal interpretation might imply. In this case however, rather than a revelation of the unspoken crime behind the words, the reader is revealed to be themselves implicated in the destruction, as one among the victims being mourned by David. The inclusivity of this line further pushes us toward a metaphorical understanding of the act itself, raising the possibility that the destruction — in Yiddish the most literal translation would be "the people is cut down" though the term commonly denotes destruction (1) — is not *specifically* physical, but is more absolute, reaching across temporal boundaries to connect biblical and present historical time.

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[65] Up to this point, the poem uses the Germanic *kroyn*. When David presents the crown to the Messiah, the word used is the Hebraic *keter*, which carries mystical connotations for its association with the Kabbalistic tradition. Hellerstein translates it as "diadem," to make this distinction (a neat solution), and reads a tone of mocking chastisement into David's phrasing (407, 536n188).

[66] This is a figurative move, but it is not a metaphorical one, in which one object stands as representative of another. This is "synecdoche" insofar as the more generalized and ambiguous term "the people" is understood to be the more specific "nation of Israel," or, as I argue above, the Jewish people as a whole.

[67] The first line of the poem, which I have translated here as "the people is destroyed," is an odd construction in the Yiddish because "*farshnitn*" ("destroyed"), which usually functions as a verb, here used as an adjective renders it no longer in the past tense, as for example Kathryn Hellerstein translates it — "the people was cut down". The inclusion of both the poet and the reader among those destroyed is a feature of this poetry that I will discuss in the following chapter, as well as in the fifth and sixth chapters of this dissertation.

I dwell on this particular interpretation because it requires an approach to metaphor that differs significantly from the kind of positivist dismissals of metaphor that we saw in Rosenfeld, Lang, and Steiner. Philosopher Ted Cohen has critiqued similar perspectives that, "either state or imply that metaphors are frivolous and inessential, if not dangerous and logically perverse, by denying to them (1) any capacity to contain or transmit knowledge; (2) any direct connection with facts; or (3) any genuine meaning" (T. Cohen 3). That is, because metaphor relies on this incongruity of signification to create its figurative meaning, it requires specific kinds of thought processes in the reader. In the first instance, the reader has to realize that what they are reading is *not necessarily literal*. This first step is easier with poetry than other media, because poetry's constructed nature is more apparent on the page than other genres, and we understand that it relies more heavily on figurative and symbolic language than other forms of literature. This is the first move in both Molodovsky's and Glatshteyn's poems, insofar as it begins with the realization, in Rosenfeld's terms, that there is something "behind or before words." The result here, as mentioned above, is the creation of a shared vocabulary, built on the foundational understanding that meaning resides as much in the figurative as the literal.

The second step that must be made is the discovery of *what it is precisely* that lies behind those words, or more accurately (because metaphor is not a closed system), the discovery of a shared constellation of reference and information that lies behind the literal words, and the interpretive possibilities that it might lead to. That is: in order to progress from recognizing a metaphor to interpreting it, some assumptions must be made by the reader about what knowledge they share with the poem. Cohen, in differentiating metaphor from literal speech, refers to this as a "cooperative act of comprehension," which allows metaphor to create a kind of "intimacy between the teller and the hearer" that other kinds of speech acts do not (7, 9). Critical to this intimacy — or "sense of community," as he describes it elsewhere, and a phrasing that I prefer — is the "the knowledge that not everyone could make that offer or take it up" (7). Metaphor requires not only a set of shared knowledge, experience, or understanding in order to function, but the ability of the reader to recognize and understand where a specific metaphor may point at any given textual moment. This moment of comprehension can be painful,

as we clearly see in the case of "*Roykh*," and perhaps in all shared knowledge that emerges from Holocaust poetry, insofar as intimacy brings with it an overwhelming sense of despair both for those who have died, and for the crushing theological weight carried by the final lines.

In the case of "*Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*," the reader is drawn into a figurative community that has four primary characteristics: First, it is a Yiddish-speaking community which thus has access to a set of common linguistic and literary references drawn from Yiddish literature. Second, if not a Jewish community, it is a readerly community versed in and able to recognize important Jewish cultural references, such as the figure of King David himself (which aids in understanding the overwhelming use of biblical allusion in Yiddish Holocaust literature in general). Third, it is a community that, at least by 1946 but perhaps even in 1941 for some of the earliest dated poems in this collection, is acutely aware of the fate of the Jewish communities of Europe. These are fundamental features of the readership of a vast amount of, if not all, Holocaust literature in Yiddish, providing critical access to the kind of referential world that is necessary for even recognizing — to return again to Rosenfeld's central criteria — a piece of literature *as* Holocaust literature. This poem, however, adds one further characteristic: given the thematic content of the poem and its focus on the image of David as a mournful survivor, the communal relationship into which the reader is drawn here is less likely to be made up of people who survived the direct experience of the concentration camp than people who, like David, like Molodovsky herself, *were not there*.

Metaphor and other figurative language do not only rely on incongruity, but rely also on *absence* — that is, they force us to recognize the affective and meaningful power of a thing that is not, or cannot, be said explicitly; it circles around the unspoken object. Elizabeth Scheiber, in her study of figurative language in the memoirs of Charlotte Delbo, argues that the particular "lack that Holocaust metaphor [in general] points to is that of language itself, of language's inability to give full expression to the horrific events it witness and the effects on those who were present" (Scheiber). This argument draws from the common set of assumptions discussed above that view the Holocaust as unique and thus beyond the possibilities of human expression, built on the idea that the only ethical representation of the Holocaust is

grounded entirely in the historical. This is a particularly prevalent (and convincing) argument in cases such as Delbo, where the text in question deals with the author's own personal experience of *l'univers concentrationnaire*. Scheiber offers a compelling reading of a central image in Delbo's *Auschwitz et après* (*Auschwitz and After*), in which the sight of a pile of frozen corpses transitions suddenly into a childhood memory of a pile of mannequins outside a Paris store, a somewhat traumatic experience for the child. Far from diminishing the intensity of the image of corpses, Scheiber argues, Delbo's use of this flashback allows her to establish a shared referentiality with the reader, so that as the text progresses, the "mannequin" metaphor comes to apply even to the still-living inmates, imbuing them with that same traumatic and death-like quality of the original comparison.

The mediating quality of the metaphor in this case allows us to grasp — through a personal, but relatable childhood experience — something *like*, but certainly not identical to, the emotional experience of Delbo in this moment. We are invited to understand this quality — *like, but not the same as* — as the operating function of the metaphor, and to understand that it allows us only a partial glimpse at the full affective landscape of the inmate, but at least it allows us that. In addition, Delbo's use of metaphor poses a challenge to any such claims as to the ineffectiveness of figurative language in the case Holocaust, not for its function in making Delbo's experience intelligible to us as readers but because it serves primarily to allow Delbo *herself* to confront the events she is witnessing.[68] A distinction must be made between approaching these texts as historical accounts, as Lang would have us do, and as *phenomenological* accounts of a historical event. The latter is more in line with the qualities of memoiristic and reflective genres of writing in general. In that case, the attempt of a survivor or witness to *understand* their own experience themselves seems to be as essential to the phenomenology of the event as the historical facts of what they went through. To exclude one of the critical tools through which survivors themselves

[68] An argument could be made that the metaphor is a product of the composition and writing process of the memoir, rather than something she recalled in the moment, as has been often made about the relationship of memoir;s narrative voice to its narrative present (that the temporal distance between the writing and the memory itself invites exposition, explanation, or reflection). However, the argument still holds that because Delbo relies on metaphor to understand her experience, even if the metaphor only emerges after the fact, we cannot say outright that metaphor does not allow for a better comprehension of the experience of *l'univers concentrationnaire*.

experience the Holocaust by dismissing it as something that should be read *through* to get to the truth would be to inadvertently position the scholar-reader as having greater access to the experience of the survivor than the survivor themselves.

Where Rosenfeld criticized metaphor because of its incompleteness, I would argue instead that the value of metaphor lies precisely in its partiality. Through metaphor, readers are granted access to what I earlier called a shared constellation of reference and information that lies behind the literal word. Though we recognize at all times that our shared experience overlaps in only limited ways with that of the text, it is precisely that overlap, however small, that enables metaphor — though we did not experience the same traumatizing vision of a pile of mannequins as Delbo, we do understand the general emotional moment, the radical rupturing of expectations, the transformation of what appeared to be alive into "an object to be manipulated" (Scheiber). As such, even if we are to accept the possibility that the Holocaust is a unique and inexpressible experience, Scheiber's reading offers us a model for developing our understanding of metaphor as the creation of a shared community into a consideration of metaphor as a way of reaching out from *l'univers concentrationnaire* to the reader who was not there.

Thus, we can return to *"Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*," to understand that the image of David created here draws as much on the reader's recognition and knowledge of the biblical figure's experience as it does on their ability to reconcile the *differences* between David's reaction to his son's death, and his function here, out of time, mourning the destruction of Jewry itself.

געשטאָרבן דער שאַל פון דעם האָרן.
דער לעצטער שטאַפעט איז געפאַלן —
וואונד און טויט.
עס רייסן קריעה אין הימל
פאַרשרפעטע, חרובע וועלט.
דער מלך דוד אַליין איז געבליבן,
ער מיט דער קרוין אין די הענט.

עס הוילט דער ווינט אין צעשאָטענע נעסטן —
וואונד און טויט.
די לאָנקעס די גרינע פון קינדהייט,
די טשערעדע שאָף — איז פאַרלענדט.
דער מלך דוד אַליין איז געבליבן,
ער מיט דער קרוין אין די הענט.

Dead the call from the horn.
The last messenger has fallen —
wound and death.
Scorched, destroyed walls
tear at the sky in mourning.
Only King David remained,
he with the crown in his hands.

The wind howls in scattered nests —
wound and death.
The green meadows of childhood,
the flocks of sheep — are destroyed.
Only King David remained,
he with the crown in his hands. (7-19)

As we noted above, in the biblical moment alluded to here, David has retreated into his private chambers to mourn the death of his son. There is an additional layer to the grief that David experiences in this moment: David learns of Absalom's death second-hand, it is reported to him by one of his soldiers. David was separated by space and time from the violent death that he mourns. Identification with David in mourning unites the reader and poetic voice in the difficult act of survival — the insistence that "only" David remains increases the despair that is felt, emphasizing the isolation of this position. David stands here, alone, as representative of his destroyed people, where he had previously fulfilled this function in his role as king. In the biblical scene, David is chastised by his general for this act of mourning, and in particular for the effect that his anguished cries have on the people. Although in II Samuel, David quickly accedes to Joab's requests to halt his mourning for the people's sake, for a brief moment the public expression of his emotional landscape collapses a boundary between his role as king and his personhood, and threatens his ability to function as representative for the nation.

Here, however, the great success and great tragedy of both the image and the poem derives from the fact that it opens not with the image of King David, but with the explicit announcement that his mourning cannot be in conflict with the duty he owes to the people, because the people are no more.[69]

[69] The tragedy of this opening line is highlighted further because David is the central figure, as the total destruction of the people but the survival of David recalls the promise make to the king by God in II Samuel 7:16: "Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever." (וְנֶאֱמַן בֵּיתְךָ וּמַמְלַכְתְּךָ עַד־עוֹלָם לְפָנֶיךָ כִּסְאֲךָ יִהְיֶה נָכוֹן עַד־עוֹלָם, Sefaria.org) The promise here takes an ironic turn: if David survives even alone, the literal word of God's promise remains unbroken, despite the destruction of his people.

This is, in part, what makes Hellerstein's singular description of the poem as a metaphor for the poet's own "survival in absolute, bereft isolation" unsatisfying: in the context of the poem, David has not secluded himself by choice, but has been thrust into this state by the actions of those who destroyed his people (*Paper Bridges* 16). There is no threat of David's public mourning practice negatively impacting his people, because he is now the speaker for the Jewish people not because he is king, but also because he is its sole survivor. Molodovsky's Yiddish-speaking readers become caught up in the practice of mourning through identification both with David and with the poetic voice that announces the destruction. The poem does not claim a singular authority to speak as sole representative of the people here, but by positioning David in this way, I argue, the speaking voice of the poem instead reaches out to its community of readers, to share that burden of survivorship and thus of speech.

As the title of the *collection*, however, allusion still serves to highlight the complicated relationship between the individual poet affected by her own grief, and their function as witness, perhaps modeling for its reader the transformation that is taking place on the communal level. Molodvsky's own initial response to learning about the extent of the destruction of the Jews of Poland in 1943 was self-mutilation: "The bitter news began to arrive about the destruction of Poland. I began in frustration to tear at the fingers of my hands. One finger was so torn up it had to be operated on. It was impossible to me for me to keep myself occupied with the journal" ("*Baym hirshbeyns*" 60). Hellerstein speculates that this was "an especially symbolic act of grieving and distress" because it impeded Molodovsky's ability to write ("Poet's Response" 244). She did, however, begin composition of this collection. Hellerstein further notes that Moldovsky describes herself as often feeling as though she was out of breath, or choking, while writing these poems — a collection she describes as "a gravestone for a life that has vanished" ("*Baym hirshbeyns*" 60). Hellerstein reads these as a "symbolic symptom of [Molodovsky's] response to the knowledge that the Jewish world had been destroyed," as evidence to highlight the intensity of the "inconsolable" grief that she is expressing — further attesting to the parallels between the roles of the poet and the biblical King (*Paper Bridges* 42). By this line of reasoning, the collection itself then serves

the same function for Molodovsky as the cries of David did for the King: translating the inner grief of the poet as private mourner into the public expression of grief for the losses experienced by the nation.

Where the poem itself differs from its biblical antecedent is precisely in the identification and empathy that is enabled here by the use of figurative language and allusion. Although emerging perhaps from her own grief (certainly Moldovsky claims that it does), the poetic voice that narrates the poem is not Molodovksy's per se, but inhabits a more detached space: it speaks to the reader from a position of knowledge, laying out the borders of the emotional landscape that David, and by extension the poet and reader, now inhabit. The world of "*Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*" is one in which the destruction of the Holocaust has been completed; even the brief turn to messianism in the last few stanzas offers nothing, as there is no people left to be redeemed. The opening line of the poem announces the symbolic burden that the poet and King David bear — this is not an accounting of the multitude of the dead, but of the complete destruction (or extermination) of a people, of a world. The first three stanzas, with the exception of two repeated refrains, are an enumeration of the extent of that destruction: not just the people, but roads, homes, fields, livestock, even the auditory evidence of a people's existence — the sounding of horns, the passing of messages — has fallen silent.

In addition to the repetition of the title image of David, the repeated interjections of "wound and death" separating the grief-filled opening lines of each stanza echo Molodovsky's description of the collection as a whole as her first emotional response to the news of the Holocaust. These interjections emphasize a structural difference between the beginning and ending of each stanza — the last four lines of the first three stanzas introduce an ABCB rhyme scheme that links the image of David to the described destruction, a rhyme scheme not found in the first lines of any of the stanzas. The reader is set off balance by this, the cry here stymies a rhythmic reading of the stanza; the unbalanced construction of the poem, especially in the second and fourth stanzas further forces a more thoughtful progression through the poem.

These plaintive lines cannot be attributed to David, however, who is a passive, silent figure until the final stanza; they belong instead to the poetic speaker, unable even to describe the state of the world

without pausing to weep. As such, between the two repeated lines, the poem structurally mirrors the duality contained in the allusion to David: on the one hand it describes the silent, collected, and publicly visible mourning of David ("Only King David remained, / he with the crown in his hands"); on the other hand, the interjections emotionally echo David's own cries. In this way, the reader is able to identify both with David and with the poetic speaker, understanding and empathizing both parts of the collective mourning practice that the reader is inheriting and practicing in the reading of the poem.

This is not a position unique to this poem, but rather a thread of affect and disposition that runs through the whole collection *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*. For example, the second poem in the collection (after the relatively well-known "God of Mercy"), "*A briv tsu eliyahu hanovi*" ("A Letter to Elijah the Prophet") as the title suggests announces itself a letter to the biblical prophet in light of the distance between them, and lamenting the nostalgic past of childhood that they had shared together. The opening verses described a poetic speaker who had distanced themselves from their own Jewish past, which is embodied in the figure of Elijah "prophet of mercy and vengeance," and a yet-unnamed external event that has prompted the poet to reach out to this "old friendship," which remains undescribed until the closing verses.

אַ בריוו צו אליהו הנבֿיא

אַלטער בשורה-טרעגער, אליהו,
איך האָב פאַרלאָרן אַלע אַדרעסן,
שרייב איך איצט אַ בריוו צו דיר.
האָסט אַלטע פריינטשאַפט זיכער ניט פאַרגעסן,
ווען כ׳פלעג דיר קינדווייז עפענען טיר.

ניט איין מאָל דיך געפירט מיט ציטער און מיט תפילה
צום יום-טובדיקן טיש, צום כוס מיט וויין.
עס קען ניט זיין, זאָלסט איצט ניט וועלן אויסהערן
מיין ביטערע מגילה,
עס קען ניט זיין.

כ׳האָב לייכטזיניק פאַרשניטן אַלע דיינע שפורן
און אויך די וויטקייט פון מיין הימל,
און אויך די וואַרעמקייט פון גלויבן.
עס שטייען מיינע לידער איצטער נאַקעטע, ווי הורן,
נאָר דיינע מעשהלעך פאַרדעקן זיי ווי טויבן.

צווישן אונדז אַזעלכע פרעמדע תהומען זזיינען אויפגעקומען,
איך האָב, זעט אויס, געגראָבן זיי אומזיסט.
איך שוועך, איך האָב געוואָלט פאַרזייען זיי מיט בלומען,
ס׳איז ניט מיין שולד, וואָס זזיי זייען פאַרשאָטן איצט מיט מיסט.

איך האָב געוואָלט דערגראָבן זיך צו זיסע קוואַלן,
פאַר זיך קיין טראָפן ניט געגומען,
ניט איינגעשלאָגן ערגעץ ניט פאַר זיך קיין סלופ.
דו האָסט איידל אויסגעפורעמט מיר מיין האַלדז און גומען,
ווי איידל דו פלעגסט טאָן פון כוס אַ זופ.

דו ביסט דער נביא פון רחמים און נקמה,
דיין פייערדיקער רייטוואָגן די וואָלקנס ברעכט,
דו ווייסט מיין האַרץ, איך האָב געפירט די בראָנע
אויף ריניקן די בייט פאַר גוטסקייט און פאַר רעכט.

איך בין געפאַלן און צעטראָטן,
און יעדער הונט, וואָס לויפט פאַרביי, גיט מיך אַ ביס,
נאָר ס׳קלאָפט מיין האַרץ, גאַרט ביזן לעצטן אַטעם
צום קוואַל צום אייביקן, וואָס איז נאָך אפשר זיס.

אַן עוולה, וואָס דו קומסט ניט און דו זעצסט זיך ניט אַנידער
ביי סדרים אונדזערע מיט חמצדיקן ווין.
מיר זינגען דאָרט אַזעלכע לאַנגווייליקע לידער,
אַז דו אַליין וואָלסט אפשר מציל זיילן.

אָפט ווילט זיך מיר, אַז דו זאָלסט ווידער קומען,
בקפיצת-דרך, אויף זילבערנעם לבנה-גראָז,
וואָלסט ווי אַמאָל מיך ווידער מיטגענומען
אין ליכטיקן מאַרשרוט פאַרזוכן יעדער כוס.

צי ביסטו דאָרט געווען ?
דאָרט. . . דאָרט. . . אונטערן בייזן מויער ?
אין לאַנד פון פיין, אין היים פון בראָך ?
צי איז אויף זייער יום-טובדיקן טרויער
די לאַטע גרעסער ווי אין מיטן וואָך ?

צי האָסטו דאָרט געהערט אַ קינדס געלעכטער ?
אַ קינד מיט בלאָנדע הערעלעך, געשאָרן.
צי האָסטו זייער כוס פאַרזוכט ?
צי זיינען דיינע ליפן ניט פאַרברענט געוואָרן?

עס שטיקן זיך אין האַלדז ביי מיר אזויפיל נעמען . . .
כ׳האָב מורא פרעגן דיך, און זאָג מיר גאָרניט,
אויב ס׳האָט עפעס זיך געטראָפן . . .
גיב אַ ריר דיינע רחמימדיקע ברעמען,
פאַרלעש מיין לאָמפּ,
און אויב עס איז צו דיר קיין בשורה ניט דערפלויגן,
פאַרלעש מיין לאָמפּ
און מאַך מיר צו די אויגן.

1942

A Letter to Elijah the Prophet

Old message-carrier, Elijah,
I have lost all addresses,
I am writing a letter to you now.
Old friendship you surely have not forgotten,
When as a child I used to open the door for you.

More than once with shivers and prayers I led you
to the holiday-table, to the goblet of wine.
It cannot be that, now you will not hear me out,
my bitter *megile*,[70]
it cannot be.

I frivolously cut up all traces of you
and also the distance of my sky,
and also the warmth of my belief.
My poems stand now naked, like whores,
but your stories cover them like doves.

Between us such strange abysses have grown,
I have, it seems, dug them in vain,
I swear, I would have sown them with flowers,
it is not my fault, that they are filled now with dung.

I would have dug myself down to sweet springs,
For myself taking no drop,
I drove no post for myself anywhere.
You gently formed my throat and palate for me,
like gently you used to sip from the goblet.

You are the prophet of mercy and vengeance,
your fiery chariot breaks the clouds,
you know my heart, I guided the harrow
to purify the [garden-]bed for goodness and justice.

I am fallen and trampled,
and every dog, that runs past me, bites me,
but my heart beats on, until my last breath
to the spring of eternity, that may yet be sweet.

An injustice that you do not come and you do not sit down,
at our Seders with our *khometsdikn*[71] wine.
We sing there such boring songs,
that maybe you'd want to save yourself.

[70] Scroll, generally one of the biblical books read on Jewish holidays such as Ruth or Ecclesiastes. In Yiddish, especially, this term on its own generally refers to the Book of Esther.
[71] Usually "leavened," denoting bread products that are not allowed during *Pesakh*. In this case, the distinction is that the wine is not special or sanctified; they are making do with what they have.

Often I feel like you should to come again,
teleported,[72] on silver moon-grass,
you would take me with you once again
on [your] bright route, searching for every cup.

Were you there?
There. . . there. . . past the evil wall?
In the land of pain, in the home of disaster?
Is the path on their holy day despair
larger than in the middle of the week?

Did you hear a child's laughter there?
A child with blonde hair, cut short?
Did you taste from their goblet?
It didn't burn your lips?

So many names stick in my throat. . .
I am afraid to ask, and do not tell me,
If something has happened. . .
Move your pitying brow,
extinguish my lamp,
And if no news has come to you,
extinguish my lamp
and shut my eyes.

1942 (*Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* 5-7)

Elijah's foremost actions in the biblical tradition are as one who stands up to King Ahab, who introduced the worship of Baal (1 Kings). In post-biblical Jewish tradition, Elijah plays a particularly important role as a witness during the circumcision rituals, and his presence stands as assurance of the continuation of the covenantal bond between the Jewish people and God. This function is extended into Elijah's promised place at the Passover Seder, the experience that stands at the heart of this poem: during the Seder, a cup of wine is poured and left untouched for Elijah, and the front door of the house is opened to invite him in reaffirming Elijah's function as prophet and, thus, as a sign of future redemption.

This common experience of Jewish childhood — it is often the children who are sent to open the door for Elijah — and the requisite loss of that connection as the speaker passed into adulthood serves here to set the reader in a position of nostalgia, and of regret, looking to Elijah to remind them of what they had lost: "but my heart beats on, until my last breath / to the spring of eternity, that may yet be

[72] *Bekiftses-derekh*, the supernatural ability to instantly travel over long distances, hence my maybe anachronistic sounding use of "teleport" here.

sweet" (31-2). The final verses unify the reader and poetic speaker in the understanding of the intensity of that loss: in reaching back to a nostalgic Jewish childhood, many of the poem's contemporary readership may have been looking back to Eastern Europe. Even now in the symbolic landscape of Jewish memory, the European *shtetl* (small market-town) is the primary space for representing nostalgia for a lost, "authentic" Jewish past.[73] The two penultimate verses take the form of questions that the final verse insists should not be answered, leaving us with the knowledge that neither an answer, nor silence, can bring with it positive news. The search for this innocent Jewish past transforms in these final verses into a lamentation for a world that seems irrevocably lost, and the poem (dated 1942) ends embodying the position of the distant witness, of the community itself, who knows that there can be no comfort, and so prefers to delay the inevitable arrival of terrible news.

This dual positioning is not unique to Moldovsky, nor does it require that the imagery be drawn from biblical tradition. Arn Tsaytlin's 1942 poem, *"Zontik af vashington skver"* ("Sunday in Washington Square") is an observation poem, a series of short portraits of figures in and around Washington Square Park. I am not including the entirety of the poem because of the racially charged language that Tsayltin employs, but here is an example:

דער שאָפער זיצט אינעווייניק אין קאַר,
אין קאַר שפּילט ס׳ראַדיאָ.
ער לייענט אַ בלאַט.
אַ זינגערין זינגט אים פון ליבע —
נאָר ער הערט נישט. ער לעזט די געשיכטע
פון דעם נייסטן מאָרד אין עפּעס אַ שטאָט.

The chauffeur sits inside his car.
In the car the radio plays.
He reads a newspaper.
A singer sings to him of love —
But he doesn't hear. He reads the story
Of the latest murder in some city. (Tsaytlin 48, 9–14)

The descriptions are minimal, usually a racial descriptor and a line about what the person is wearing or what they are doing — all mundane activities. Among them, of note, is "*a kleyne zkeyne in shpakuln*" ("a small old woman in spectacles") sleeping over a Yiddish newspaper (22-3). She is notable as the only

[73] See, for example, Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*; and Veidlinger**.**

identifiably Jewish figure in the park, among the sights in New York. On its surface, the poem seems to be little more than these observations, and the symbolic landscape of the poem is hardly visible until we get to the final stanzas that throw these images into sharp relief.

ס׳איז זונטיק. ס׳איז מאַי.
פּערלעך און פייגל אויף וואַשינגטאָן סקוואר.
אויך אהרן צייטלין איז דאָ דערביי —
וועט ווייס, וואָס מיט אים איז דער מער.
אויך ער איז דאָ דערביי —
ווי קומט ער איבערהויפּט אַהער?

אַ וועלט האָט ער געהאַט, אַ וועלט פאַרלוירן.
זיין וועג — פאַרהוילן.
עס טאַנצט פאַר אים אַ וואָרט,
אַרומגעהילט מיט פלאַמען פון מאָרד,
אַ סיגנאַל, אַן אַקאָרד:
פ ו י ל ן.
1942

It is Sunday. It is May.
Couples and birds in Washington Square.
Arn Tsayltin is also there, nearby.
Who knows what the matter with him is.
He is also there, nearby —
How did he come to be there, generally?

He had a world, a world lost.
His way — hidden.
A world dances in front of him,
Surrounded by flames of murder.
A signal, a chord:
Poland.
1942 (35-46)

There is a sense of isolation to the stanzas and the traumatic internal world that characterizes the character of "Arn Tsaytlin," and is unable to be reconciled with the mundane and nonchalant actions of those around him: he cannot share this experience with any of them. The poem speaks to the unseen trauma that permeates the individual tormented by memories of Poland, and the knowledge of its destruction. With this description of Tsaytlin, the previous verses take on greater weight, as each individual comes to be representative of a world of experience that cannot be seen or described by those who observe them strolling through the square.

This poem *could not work* without the shared understanding between reader and poem of how figurative language functions. "Arn Tsaytlin", we are told, is more than just his physical appearance. The speaker wonders why no one can see the past, "Tsaytlin's" lost world, written on his body — why they cannot see past the surface to the complex and traumatic history, and present, that we are told he is carrying with him. This is precisely the operation of figurative language. It models those two interpretive steps we outlined above: first, the recognition that there is something being represented, or simply that there is something behind the surface; second, the discovery or exploration of what those things might be. In the final stanza, we are told the limitations of "Tsayltin's" own representative constellation: "Poland," "surrounded by flames of murder," or, in other words, the Holocaust itself. However, the isolation that characterizes him ("who knows what the matter with him is," 38) is indicative of the referential problem at the heart of the poem. The speaker's frustration in "*Zontik af vashington skver*" is at the failure of those around "Arn Tsaytlin" to recognize that he is more than what he appears on the surface, more than just his physical existence — a failure (to recall Rosenfeld's description of "*Roykh*") to recognize the "crime" of which the speaker marks "Arn Tsayltin" as representative, the ongoing murder of Jewish Poland.[74]

This representative failure — or failure of recognition — is bidirectional, and built into the reading of the poem as well. The final stanzas introduce the possibility that an individual can be more than they appear, simultaneously calling attention in the reader's mind to the presence of figurative language at the textual level of the poem. We are invited to reread the poem with this newly discovered knowledge of the symbolic. As such, the previous descriptions of the people in Washington Square Park are reframed in the same terms as "Arn Tsaytlin": if Tsaytlin "carries with him a history, a world, that is indiscernible in his physical presence within the park, each of these individuals *must* also carry a past, a world, that is inaccessible to "Tsaytlin," to the poetic speaker, and to us as observer. The presence of the old woman dozing over a Yiddish newspaper especially indicates to us that the speaker themselves fall victim to the same failure of recognition. Her experiences and memories likely bear the most similarity to that of "Tsaytlin"; this failure is shared by us as readers, who realize only after the description of "Arn

[74] The poem is dated 1942.

Tsaytlin" the symbolic significance of her Yiddish newspaper, marking her as unlike the others, and thus as like *also* having memories, experiences, or at least some connection to the lost Jewish world of Eastern Europe. The poem thus teaches us *how* to read it by drawing attention to what cannot be understood through a surface-level or literal reading of the poem. We are not granted insight into the histories these people carry with them, but we do recognize what cannot be understood without paying attention to the figurative, underscoring the necessity of a figurative reading practice for understanding the poem as a whole.

The poem also suggests that the value of this reading practice is not limited to a better understanding of poetry or literature. The poem draws our attention to a critical gap in our understanding of the people who surround us, insofar as the public face an individual presents bears no necessary resemblance to their inner world. Just as "Tsaytlin" is just "there" and no one "knows what the matter with him is" (38-40), neither does he (nor anyone) have access to the experience of those he observes. As such, the poem's guiding us toward a recognition of its own symbolic functioning is inseparable from the interpersonal lesson that it contains about empathetic limitations of an encounter with another person that is devoid of communication. Without asking the kinds of questions the speaker asks of Tsaytlin, ("what is the matter with him", "how did he come to be there" 38-40) the *only* interaction possible is superficial and misleading. Like Molodovsky's collection, and the pained cries of David, "*Zontik af vashington skver*" is an attempt to bridge the divide between private grief and its public expression by illuminating for the reader the intensity of that grief and modeling for us a way of interacting with others — and thus forming meaningful connections — founded on the recognition of the "world" that remains hidden behind the surface, and the possibility of community that lies just out of the poetic speaker's reach.

This sense of individual isolation and displacement, and the impetus contained within these poems to form communal connections out of a recognition of shared grief prefigures a particular sentiment that would strike the broader American Jewish community in the last few years of the 1940s. "Whereas before [the Holocaust]," writes historian Jonathan Sarna, "the Jews of Europe represented the demographic and cultural center of world Jewry, now that designation fell to America" (274). The full

extent of the Holocaust then broadly known within the Jewish community, the Jews of the United States in the late 1940s were confronted by the sudden realization that they were "not only the world's largest and most prosperous Jewish community but also its most continuous and, albeit by default, its most authoritative one" (Shandler 16). That is to say, the readership of the poem is able to recognize, though in different terms, its inherited dual role as mourner and representative. As such, we can read this poem and the collection to which it lends its title as modeling for the Yiddish language readership *not only* the two sides of the individual grief of the survivor, but also the collectively inherited burden of a community that now finds itself acting in that place — distant from the act that left their families destroyed, and now forced to transmute their mourning practice into communal action.

Conclusion

Understanding these poems as creating a shared space, a relationship of sympathy or common feeling between the poetic voice and the reader would not be possible without approaching a poem as a constructed textual object with a particular care to the symbolic and figurative language at work within its lines. Were we to take the positivist approach to metaphorical language as not being able to convey information, then it would be true that there is little in any of these poems that directly describes, or tells us anything about the Holocaust or the experience of the Holocaust. To approach this American Yiddish Holocaust literature through its figurative qualities, rather, is to begin the process of recognizing a multiplicity of Holocaust experiences without making claims about their relative value or utility for present readers. It is also to turn our gaze back toward the poetic speaker to encounter the poem as an expression of individual response to the news and event of the Holocaust, rather than a source of historical information. We take this *kind* of poetry, especially this particular set of poetry written in the United States for a self-selecting audience of Yiddish speaking readers of non-religious literature, as a kind of reception history of possible individual and communal response, both affective and interpretive, to piecemeal news of the unfolding disaster before them. As such, it need not, and *cannot* be held to the

standard of history, with concrete information, hindsight, and perhaps most importantly, the ability to view the Holocaust as having an end, even if that end is unmitigated tragedy.

No linguistic figure functions in isolation, just as no allusion or metaphor within a work of Holocaust literature is expected to carry the full weight of that text's meaning. Figurative language is one among many methods that writers have for granting us piecemeal access to their own experiences, yet it has been singled out by scholarship on Holocaust literature as at best absent, and at worst threatening to the facticity of the Holocaust itself. A focus on metaphorics and figurative language does not claim to overcome the impassable barriers to communication implicit in the notion of "*l'univers concentrationnaire*," but instead allows for the possibility of less direct forms of communication that focus on the shared experience of readers and writers — survivors and victims included — of the world *outside* the Holocaust, both before and after. As the example of Charlotte Delbo, and the recourse to images and tropes of Jewish catastrophe literature across the corpus of available Holocaust literature show, survivors of the Holocaust themselves regularly turn to allusion, metaphor, and other figurative language in order to communicate and understand their experience. These metaphors allow us to recognize and affectively respond to Holocaust literature. Further, in recognizing what they are encountering as figurative, readers are simultaneously made aware of the necessarily limited communicative capacities of any text to represent *any* experience, and the perhaps even more restrictive possibilities of representing such a specific and traumatic experience. Yet, the loss felt by Charlotte Delbo at the sight of those mannequins lying in the street, or the emotionally loaded image of the mourning King David communicate critical information that may be otherwise inexpressible.

Figurative language is most threatening to those who wish literature — but even novels and poetry — to be held to the same standard as history, and thus to be valued on its relationship to, and ability to communicate, verifiable data. There is a value to this kind of approach, but it stems from an assumption that historical data is the only informative way of understanding the events of the Holocaust. The study of memoir (outside of Holocaust memoir) has never ignored either the constructed nature of the memoir, or the fact that the act of remembrance, and the writing of memories both have transformative

effects on memory itself — this has been discussed in writing as long as people have reflected on the nature of memory.

It seems, then, that those who would value Holocaust literature purely for its historicity do not do so because of a misunderstanding about the nature of memory-writing, or about the nature of literary writing in general, but from a moral concern — a fear — that focusing on the dissonances and constructedness of literary representations of the Holocaust may lead people to question the historicity of the event itself. But literature is not history, and if the study of memory has demonstrated time and time again that memory is more a reflection of the individual at present than at the time they are remembering, then this is even more true for those composing texts that are explicitly not intended to represent the world as it is, but rather the world as it was *experienced*, *or understood*, especially poetry.[75]

A refusal to engage seriously with the figurative aspects of Holocaust poetry is a refusal to engage with one of the key things that makes it *poetic*. As in the case of the twenty-five poems in *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*, that do not even allude to the Holocaust, not granting sufficient space to — or entirely ignoring — the figurative would leave us unable to justify the desire or inclination to read this literature *as Holocaust literature* if it does not explicitly name itself as such, or does not use tropes and literary references we already recognize as part of a shared language of Holocaust literary writing and Jewish catastrophe literature. A reading strategy focused on literalness asks us to not think critically about specific textual qualities of a piece of Holocaust literature beyond the surface meaning — ultimately, in a twist of etymological irony, the desire and attempt to read Holocaust poetry *literally*, without engaging with the figurative, has led scholars to dismiss precisely the qualities that make these texts *literary*.

A focus on the figurative aspects of these texts does more than just redress gaps in literal reading practices, however: it allows us to think beyond the physical impact of the Holocaust and into the event's symbolic and communal dimensions. Molodovsky's invocation of the mourning David, and the narrative she tells of this collection's composition, which begins with self harm and continues with her composing

[75] Amos Funkstein begins his *Perceptions of Jewish History* with a paraphrase of this same sentiment from Augustine: "The past is the remembered present, just as the future is the anticipated present: memory is always derived from the *present* and from the contents of the soul at present" (Funkenstein 7)

the collection with her injured hands, mark the collection as a literary manifestation of the same grief and trauma that led to her wounding her fingers: her inner affective world not only rendered visible, but manifest in language and then sent out to the public. Like David's cries reaching the people of his city and filling them with his grief, *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* attests to and narrates the symbolic transformation of private trauma into public discourse. Only through this image of David, and Molodovsky's description of it, do we as readers gain access to the complexity of that emotional transformation. In the act of reading through this collection — or even through a single poem — Molodovsky's use of metaphor and other figurative language requires us to re-enact that same process as a practice of interpretation. It begins with recognizing the presence of figurative language, and then carefully drawing on the knowledge and experience it gestures toward in order to come to terms with the experiential and emotional world created by the text. Metaphor serves as a linguistic means of connecting the individual and the traumatic, and of lending language — however impartial and imprecise — the complex experience of private grief and rendering it visible and intelligible (again, even if only partially) to a readerly community.

As such, the act of reading becomes an act of community formation and communal engagement, of forming a relationship not only between reader, poetic voice, and poet, but the formation of a community of other readers. The encounter with metaphor, and the ability to navigate its plethora of possible meanings also builds on membership in certain kinds of communities: knowledge of King David requires some knowledge of the Hebrew Bible; the messianic turn at the end of the poem speaks to other, extra-biblical traditions of Jewish learning and belief; and on the most basic level, the ability to read Yiddish in New York in the 1940s or now, *and* the willingness to read secular Yiddish literature also creates a self-selected community that any one reader can imply from their own engagement with the text. This community was itself in active mourning for its lost European world — friends, family, home — and the act of reading can be a kind of catharsis, especially when the literature mourns the same terrible events that its (contemporaneous) readers are *themselves* coming to terms with. As a broader community to which this readership can understand itself as belonging, the Jews of the United States were

collectively confronting the effects of the Holocaust, not only as something to be mourned, but also in terms of the unexpected position it left the US Jewish community in, as the largest remaining community of Jews in the world. Although this poetry emerged before the full extent of the Holocaust's effects on this community would be understood, the transformation it narrates of private grief into public speech could also be seen to provide a model for expressing mourning between community groups. A focus on the figurative capacity of Holocaust literature gestures toward a new kind of community grounded in a shared language of grief, and shared figurative vocabulary for understanding and expressing that grief. The utter horror and destruction of the Holocaust is balanced by the *need* of individuals and communities who remain both during and after the event to survive, and to imagine new possibilities for communal formation that understand and engage with both the facts of the Holocaust and its continually changing meaning.

Chapter Two: We Renounce Hymns

Although to this point we have been focused largely on the content of these Holocaust poems, to do so to the exclusion of their formal or structural qualities would be to ignore one of poetry's most distinctive features, and would risk redefining this critical aspect of the medium as little more than a barrier that has to be overcome. Rather than obscuring the "true" meaning of a poem, these qualities — the careful choice of words, lines, references, rhythm, and rhyme — are tools used by writers to enable a *multiplicity* of meanings to emerge from their poetry, each depending on what a particular reader brings to their encounter with a given poem. This is what makes poetry different from regular speech.

This chapter reads these poems through the lens of monologue. Monologue, in this case, should be understood as a continuous speech given by a single poetic voice — one speaker, that is — directed at a specific, identifiable figure. This figure, the addressee, is external to the poem (and is not the reader); they are not given voice within the poem and a response from them is either not expected or, as we will see in the case of this Holocaust poetry, entirely precluded.[76] It should be noted that the speaker of the poem, what I've been calling the poetic speaker or poetic voice, is not and should not be considered identical to the author. Though scholarship on Holocaust literature is especially prone to collapsing both into the identity of the author, the voice discernible within a given work of literature is as much a constructed feature as any metaphors, meter, or rhyme scheme.

Monologue is not the most significant poetic structure in modern Yiddish poetry, but it presents an interesting lens through which to view this Yiddish Holocaust poetry that can begin a conversation about the utility of engaging critically with the implications of authorial choices apart from the semantic content of their texts. Reading the poems through this lens allows us to focus first on the poetic speaker themselves — simultaneously helping us avoid accidentally conflating them with the author — and considering them in relation to the absent figure they address. It further allows us to give primacy to the

[76] A single-voiced speech directed at the reader of the poem is certainly possible. However, we tend to theorize the relationship between text and reader differently — as more akin to a dialogue — because the act of reading is interpretive and thus a form of response. Directing a speech at a tertiary figure, such as God, allows the author full control over the possibility of their response.

ways in which that absent figure is constructed by the poetic address: monologue requires the existence of an addressee, but it does not require them to be responsive, to be listening, or even for them to actually exist. They are a function of the poem. Monologue is ultimately a framework that allows an author and a poetic speaker to give voice to their thoughts and emotions and, crucially, to give those emotions direction and form. In this way, thinking through poems as monologues also helps us step outside questions of history, of theology, or of representability, and to focus first on the expressive capacity of an individual speaker responding to a deeply traumatic experience.

Poetry that takes the form of monologue is common among Holocaust poetry in general, especially in the small selection of American Yiddish Holocaust poetry that has become known outside of Yiddish literary circles — including the two most famous examples in Kadya Moldovsky's "*El khanun*" ("God of Mercy") and Yankev Glatshteyn's *"A gute nakht, velt*" ("Good Night, World"). In addition, the monologue poem is particularly prevalent among Holocaust poetry that utilizes other kinds of poetic forms, most commonly (but not exclusively) that of prayer and liturgy, in a necessarily one-sided monologue directed at the divine. In part this is because the monologue form is deeply embedded in the history of Jewish poetic response to catastrophe, stretching back to the foundational texts of the tradition. By employing both recognizable and historically prevalent poetic forms, writers draw parallels in the minds of readers between an individual poem and the literary tradition in which the structure is embedded, as well as between similarly structured poems within a corpus or collection. Form is another tool by which authors can draw a reader into the conceptual world of a poem, deepening the shared vocabulary of reference and information that exists separate from the literal meaning of the words. Unlike with figurative language, however, the goal is not to create empathy, but rather to position the reader as a witness to the poetic speaker's own struggles to articulate their relationship to the Holocaust, to the Jewish community, and to the silent figure(s) they address.

Among those who study literature, it is likely that the first thing that comes to mind at the mention of form and structure in poetry is prosody — the study and theorizing of metrical structures and rhyme schemes in formal verse. This is partly due to the way the study of poetry developed within the

academy, with a special interest in strict poetic forms inherited from medieval and early modern British, French, and Italian poetry — the sonnet or the ballad for example. This is also partly because free verse and its antecedents (poetry that eschews rhyme and regular meter) gained their popularity in the modern period, really from the 19th century onward, well after poetry was supplanted by prose as the popular form of literary consumption. The significance and utility of attention to structure is much more evident in the case of formal poetry, if only because strict meter and rhythm impose on us a particular kind of reading and engaging with a text, making them difficult to ignore.

This is no less true in Yiddish, in particular when we encounter Yiddish language poetry that adopts these more strict and standardized poetic forms from other cultures: Aaron Glanz-Leyeles, for example, was a prolific writer of sonnets, even including several dedicated to other Yiddish poets in his 1947 collection *A yid oyfn yam* (*A Jew at Sea*), which also contains his few published poems written in direct response to the Holocaust.[77] These kinds of recognizable forms derived from Western European poetics have long had a place in Yiddish poetry, though, of course, they were always intentional borrowings from neighboring cultures, an active exploration of the possibilities of cohesion between Yiddish poetry and other cultures' historical poetry. I am using form in a broader sense, however, as an indicator of an adopted structure that implies particular patterns of speech and a certain positioning of the poetic speaker.[78] Although at times we will turn our attention to the rhyme and meter of the poems below, it is important to note that within the collections of poetry we are examining it is uncommon to encounter a poem that is overtly formalized in this way. Poets responding to the Holocaust in Yiddish seemed to prefer loose metrical or rhyme schemes, or simply free verse.[79]

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[77] Leyeles seems to have been more dedicated to strict formal poetry than almost any other poet of his period in the United States. As part of the *in zikh* (Introspectivist) movement in American Yiddish poetry, he and his colleagues professed to value symbol and figure over form, yet Leyeles remained dedicated to exploring form as a means for self expression. For example, in his 1926 collection, the aptly named *Rondeaux,* Leyeles drew on the medieval French metrical and rhyme scheme as a means for continuing to develop his introspectivist poetics. (Glanz-Leyeles)

[78] We might think of it similarly to "genre," though I do not use that term here because it also carries implications of shared subject matter. The genre of these poems is better located elsewhere: Holocaust literature, catastrophe literature, prayer and liturgy.

[79] The poems found in these collections tend to fall into one of three categories: (a) blank verse, poetry that has consistent meter but no rhyme, (b) free verse, poetry that has no consistent rhyme or metrical pattern, or (c) poetry that has meter and rhyme, but it functions idiomatically. For a comprehensive and historical overview of Yiddish

As an example both of how these traditions come into play, and of what such a form-first reading might look like, we can turn to the lesser-known of the two accusatory prayer poems found in Molodovsky's *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*, the short poem "*Havdole*".[80]

הבֿדלה

גאָט פון אַברהם,
באַשאַף אונדז אַ צווייטן בראשית.
מעג קיין זון דאָרט שיינען —
דאָס ליכט האָט אונדז סייוועי פאַרראַטן.

Havdole

God of Abraham,
Make us a second Creation.
May no sun shine there —
The light has betrayed us anyway. (*Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* 76, 1–4).

Within the first two lines**,** the poem signals its form and conceit. Naming the poem "*Havdole,*" immediately marks it as liturgical, situated within a very particular temporal moment at the close of the *Shabes* prayers, symbolizing the movement between the sacred, set-aside time of *Shabes* and the mundane time that begins at the setting of the sun. "God of Abraham" the poem begins, "Make us a second Creation." We could note a number of symbolic and figurative readings about the significance of employing *Havdole* as symbolic frame for a poem about the Holocaust (especially one published in 1946), but the importance for our purposes is that the title immediately indicates that we should expect the poem that follows to take the form of a prayer, and a supplicatory prayer at that.[81] The poem presumes a certain familiarity on the part of its reader with common Jewish liturgical practice, a safe assumption for a reader of Yiddish poetry. The first line confirms the title, introducing the most distinctive feature of the monologue poem — and this kind of prayer poem always takes the form of a monologue — a specific,

(and Hebrew) prosody, see Benjamin Harshav's *Three Thousand Years of Hebrew Versification: Essays in Comparative Prosody* (especially 149–296).

[80] Or "Havdalah," if we wanted to follow the transliteration adopted into English from Hebrew. The other of these two poems is "*El khanun*."

[81] "*Got fun avrom*" is the first line of a specific *Havdole* prayer: a *tkhine*, Yiddish language prayer written for women (who were rarely able to read Hebrew), that closes the *Havdole* liturgy. This is the women's supplicatory prayer that closes *Havdole*, and is often included in modern *siddurim*, prayer books, in which case it would be the only Yiddish prayer.

identifiable addressee who is *not* the reader and, critically, from whom a response is at best unnecessary and at worst, as in the case of poems to God, impossible. In beginning with such an address, and in taking this form, the poem announces itself as embedded Jewish poetic traditions. Writing is "rooted in ancient inheritances," Molodovsky wrote in 1971 (in Valencia 12–13): not only does her work recall the history of Jewish liturgy and prayer, but also the parallel, and perhaps equally long, history of utilizing traditional and liturgical modes of expression against the divine.

As we discussed in the previous chapter, many scholars of Holocaust literature remain committed to the notion that in addition to being historically or ontologically unique, the Holocaust necessarily exceeds the possibilities of linguistic communication. This is not limited to the problem of figurative language however, and in the early years of Holocaust scholarship was extended to the very forms and genres of literary expression that pre-dated the Holocaust. "A novel about Treblinka," runs Elie Wiesel's famous and oft-repeated dictum, "is either not a novel or not about Treblinka. A novel about Majdanek is about blasphemy. *Is* blasphemy. Treblinka means death, absolute death, death of language and of hope and of inspiration" (Wiesel, "Literary Inspiration" 7 emphasis in original). The extremity of the position put forward here has not limited its popularity among scholars and especially among other writers, such as Aharon Appelfeld who in 1988 insisted that no literature had been written about the Holocaust, or Cynthia Ozick who claimed she cannot escape writing about the Holocaust, even though she believes that it shouldn't be done.**[82]** These authors, Wiesel included, continue to write Holocaust literature, and continue to do so in genres and forms whose history is either embedded within the European history that led to the Holocaust or (and the lines between the two are not clear cut) that is part of an ongoing tradition of Jewish literary responses to disaster and catastrophe.[83] As much as Wiesel and those that follow him

[82] See Appelfeld's essay "After the Holocaust" (83-92) and Ozick's contribution to the "Roundtable Discussion" (277-84) that closes Berel Lang's 1988 collection *Writing and the Holocaust*.

[83] The single most referenced idea in the collection of essays that contains both Ozick and Appelfeld's pieces is Theodor Adorno's own famous dictum, "*nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch"* ("after Auschwitz to write poetry is barbaric"). Read by these writers as an imperative, this passage understood in its contexts seems rather to speak to the moral problematic of writing poetry in the post-Holocaust world, given that poetry as a product of Western culture is fundamentally implicated in the same cultural processes, and understanding of history that led to Auschwitz and, (if we adopt an extreme perspective, but certainly no more extreme than Adorno adopts elsewhere) that *necessarily* led to the Holocaust. See: Adorno's essay, "Cultural Criticism and Society".

insist conceptually on the need for what he has called "fresh vocabulary, a primeval language" ("Why I Write" 201), they return again and again to familiar metaphors, allusions, and forms.

The middle of the 1980s saw a significant shift in the focus of scholarship on Holocaust literature away from an almost exclusive interest in survivor memoir and German poetry (notably Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs), toward a more historically embedded understanding, largely due to the parallel publication of Alan Mintz' *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, and David Roskies' *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* in 1984. Both books aim to trace the historical trends that can be discerned in Jewish catastrophe literature from its earliest instantiations in the Bible through to literature of the post-Holocaust era. In fact, it is largely because of the work of these two scholars that we are even able to discern, speak about, and identify persistent characteristics of a thing we can call "Jewish catastrophe literature" as a diachronic tradition and genre. Though Mintz and Roskies see the Holocaust as distinct in some ways from other catastrophes — or at least recognize that those who write Holocaust literature, both survivors and others, operate with the understanding that it is — they acknowledge the central role that literary tradition plays in shaping the linguistic and literary mechanisms by which writers are able to confront the Holocaust. That is to say: whatever the nature of the Holocaust, writers have a limited toolbox with which to express themselves, and though they may desire a fresh, primeval language, they instead revive, recall, and transform traditional models of literary expression in order to draw connections between past and present disaster.

For the Jews of Europe, the tragedies of the past (both biblical and post-biblical), memorialized in literature and integrated into patterns and rituals of Jewish remembrance and mourning, served for generations as a heuristic for understanding the complex events of the present. This was especially true for the Jews of Eastern Europe through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — "schooled in the exercises of collective memory," as Roskies describes them (*Apocalypse* 13) — a century and a half filled with regular bursts of local and state oppression, pogroms, and then the outbreak of World War I. The literature of the Holocaust in both Yiddish and Hebrew emerges from this tradition of interpretation, stretching back through the Middle Ages and to the Bible; Alan Mintz even argues that the very idea of

Holocaust literature as a distinct genre doesn't make sense for Yiddish and Hebrew, given how much these literatures owe to that tradition (ix). Each element that was recognizable in the persecution of the Holocaust — ghettos, confinement, exile, mass murder — could be fit into a known pattern of oppression, thus served to shape literary responses. Indeed, as we noted earlier, far more than previous persecutors, the Nazis paid particular attention to the history of the Jews in constructing the symbolic landscape of their destruction, drawing from medieval history and conducting major *aktionen* such as deportations and liquidations on important days in the Jewish calendar. All of this is part of the literary memory that becomes textualized, and thus evoked, in the literature of the Holocaust, just as the poetic forms we are examining also gesture back to earlier moments in the history of Jewish destruction.

Mintz and Roskies are drawn to texts that take the form of monologues. Though neither is especially concerned with poetic form or structure, both do take seriously the persistence of poetic responses to catastrophe modeled after prayer and liturgy.[84] A detailed discussion of the importance of these two studies for the field of Holocaust literature would require far more space than we can offer. However, I want to draw two key points from these texts to inform the way we approach monologue poetry, one taken from Mintz' reading of Lamentations, and the other a critical term Roskies re-appropriates from Christian devotional poetry in order to examine the relationship of these Jewish writers to their Biblical and post-Biblical traditions. I employ the category of monologue poetry not as a means to supplant the terms used by Mintz, Roskies, and others, but to supplement them, such that we might continue to think more critically about Holocaust poetry's use of traditional modes and forms of literature beyond simply their catalogue of symbolic references. In doing so, we can not only recognize the utility of these studies for furthering our understanding of the literature we are examining but, in doing so, highlight the need for reframing the limits of the genre of Holocaust Literature such that this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry is no longer excluded.

[84] Mintz is focused on what he calls "paradigm shifts" in the communal responses to catastrophes, reading literature as indicative of the interpretive lens through which the Jewish community — in a particular location and historical moment — understood both their catastrophe and the mechanisms available to respond to it. Roskies, on the other hand, is interested in tracing how traditional theological discourses and systems of symbolic reference are transformed and changed as each successive generation of Jewish writers faces its own catastrophe.

Ancient Inheritances

The Book of Lamentations is the ur-text of Jewish catastrophe, an extended and complex poetic response to the fall and destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II in 587BC. Lamentations notwithstanding, the event itself, the destruction of the First Temple, remains one of, if not the centrepiece of the Jewish liturgical tradition: the Holocaust is often referred to in Yiddish as *"der driter khurbn"* ("the third destruction") explicitly placing it on a continuum of disaster that began with this event. Elie Wiesel's memoir for example begins by recounting how he used to run to the synagogue to weep over the temple's destruction (*Night* 1). The importance of the events to which Lamentations responds for Jewish communal memory is hard to overstate, and that is due in no small part to the intensity of the rhetoric and dramatic movement of Lamentations itself.

Lamentations 3, in particular, marks a turning point in the development of the poem's narrative as well as a marked shift in the mechanism and perspective of the poem as a response to catastrophe: the first line of the chapter introduces the speaker as a definable feature of the poem, rather than disembodied omniscience voice. "I am the man who has known affliction Under the rod of His wrath (3:1)".[85] The poetic voice is either taking on the persona of Israel and thus speaking for them with a collective "I," or they are establishing their *own* identity and presence diegetically (that is, within the narrative of the poem itself). Whichever is true, we are faced with the sudden reframing of the entirety of Lamentations as an extended monologue from a single, identifiable voice.

In establishing so assertively the presence of the poetic speaker, Lamentations 3 introduces as a foundational concern of Jewish catastrophe literature the problem of poetic voice we noted in our examination of *"Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*". That is, to read Lamentations from chapter 3 outwards, as a monologue on the catastrophe, is to emphasize the tension inherent in the duality of the speaker's position as both individual witness affected by disaster, and as speaker for the nation. The development of this voice over the course of Lamentations 3 is complex: where it begins with the marked

[85] אני הגבר ראה עני בשבט עברתו Sefaria.org.

and identifiable speaker, as the long list of troubles they have suffered at the hands of God continues the poetic "I" gets increasingly subsumed into the passive object of God's wrath, becoming the generalized "man" who is punished. The personal pronoun resurfaces with a previously unheard intensity in 3:40, however, at the culmination of a long, ponderous, theological monologue that attempts to understand the reasoning behind God's punishment.[86] There is much that can be said about the shifting theological stakes of this chapter, but most important here is that the re-emergence of the poetic voice as a self-aware subject coincides with an assertion (however much the product of empty hope) that there *must* be some reason for this destruction. Crucially, it is not the poetic "I" that we see as the primary figure in the closing lines of the chapter, but the collective "we".

Alan Mintz reads this as a transformation in the speaker's relationship to the people. He argues that at the opening of Lamentations 3 the speaker is fundamentally selfish, acting only with thoughts to their own suffering. He understands the speaker's transformation to be the discovery of a "capacity for empathy" that leads to the speaker assuming "the role of an advocate of his people's cause before God" (38-9). What this leads to, in effect, is a total sublimation of the individuated speaker into the collective: "The sufferer becomes the people, the people the sufferer. No longer does he speak on behalf of the people, but *as* the people. He has truly become a personification, an "I" through whose singleness the pathos of the "we" becomes luminous" (40). This is the *aim* of Lamentations 3, Mintz argues, because it unites the people into a singular expressive voice, and is ultimately in service to the book's broader goal of attempting to find some explanation for the actions of God in the face of God's absolute silence.

Reading Lamentations as the beginning of a continuum of *monologic* catastrophe poetry, however, reminds us of the importance of retaining the identity of the individual speaker even as they serve as representative for the collective. Where Mintz sees the transition from "I" to "we" as emerging from a newfound "capacity for empathy," and culminating in an act of "self-transcendence" (38-40), I argue that the opening lines of this book — the long list of suffering the speaker has endured — *enables* the community to speak as a collective. Though Mintz' reading is justified in an interpretation that gives

[86] "Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord" (Lam. 3:40, Sefaria.org)

primacy to the theological movement of the text, a critical reading of this chapter with a mind to the relationship of the poetic speaker both to the people they represent *and* the catastrophe they have experienced leaves us disinclined to allow the individual victim to be lost in the collective.

One of the features common to these poetic monologues is the blurring of lines between internality and externality — between speech directed at a specific addressee (here, God) and the thought process of the speaker as they interpret the events about which they speak. If we look outward from Lamentations 3 to engage the entirety of Lamentations as a monologue, we can read these moments of self-description not as an inability to imagine anything but his own persecution, as Mintz puts it — "In his isolation he imagines that he alone has been singled out for victimization" (38) — but rather, a recognition that he *has also been persecuted*. As such, we are forced into an act of retrospective re-reading of the first two books of Lamentations: rather than reading Lamentations 3 as the sole site of critical poetic reflection, understanding Lam. 3 (and thus the book as a whole) as an extended monologue marks the first two chapters as part of a developing narrative of the poetic speaker's self awareness. No longer is the poetic voice of Lam. 1-2 *merely* a passive observer, as the description of the terrible fate that befell Zion and the people had previously seemed, but now we understand these chapters to be recounting a fate the speaker themselves is both victim of and witness to.[87]

The collective "we" is still strongest here, and that carries through the final two chapters as well, but now we are unable to focus solely on the fate of the nation. Instead, the poem-as-monologue pushes us to reconsider the need for a distinction between the individual speaker and the collective at all, because collective experience of destruction *necessarily* contains the individual. Only the most cynical of readers would read an individual victim's lament as asserting that their suffering is more important than the collective. That is, it is not only on a linguistic level that the poetic "I" enables the people to have a voice for their collective suffering, but to read the poem as a monologue reminds us that the poetic speaker is

[87] I am not at all concerned with the actual authorship of Lamentations in this case, but with the way in which the poetic speaker constructs their affective, but also temporal and locative relationship to the destruction of Jerusalem. I should also note that this argument does not attend to the specific character of Zion, for a detailed discussion of her character within the poem see Mandolfo; and O'Connor**.**

also one of the victims and, as such, is *always* speaking for the community, even when speaking for themselves alone.

We can see this relationship evidently at work in Molodovsky, though the temptation is less to call out the poetic speaker for only being concerned with themselves but, rather, to see the individual *entirely* sublimated into the collective. In neither of her monologue poems discussed in this chapter is there a singular poetic speaker, the poems instead seem intensely committed to the collective voice. We can turn back to *"Havdole*," which we briefly discussed to frame our understanding of the monologic nature of these poems, as an example:

הבֿדלה

גאָט פון אַברהם,
באַשאַף אונדז אַ צווייטן בראשית.
מעג קיין זון דאָרט שיינען —
דאָס ליכט האָט אונדז סייוועי פאַרראַטן.
מעג דער ווינט דאָרט ניט זינגען —
ער האָט מיט די דיטשן צוזאַמען געטריבן
אונדזער פאָלק צו די שחיטה-וואַרשטאַטן.
מעג קיין ים דאָרט ניט רוישן קיין גרינער —
ער האָט געזונקען די שיפן — די שפענדלעך
מיט אונדזער לעצטע אַנטרינער.
מעגן בערג דאָרט ניט רייסן צום הימל די שפיצן —
זיי האָבן דעם וועג ניט פאַרצאַמט פאַר די רוצחים,
אַ פיצעלע קינד צו באַשיצן.
מיר זאָגן זיך אָפּ פון דער שיינקייט.
מיר זאָגן זיך אָפּ פון דער גבורה.
מיר זאָגן זיך אָפּ פון דער שירה.
מעג איינשטיין קיין יורש ניט לאָזן.
מיר זיינען אין חרם צוזאַמען
מיטן געטלעכן תמים שפּינאָזע.

באַשאַף אונדז אַ וועלט מיט אַ פּאַסיקל הימל,
און איין מאָל אַ יאָר זאָל אַ שטערן דאָרט שיינען,
און מאַכן הבדלה, און געטלעך פֿאַרטייטשן:
ס׳איז אַ צווייטער בראשית,
אויסער וועלט פון די דייטשן,
אויסער הכמת-הדמים.
און עס וועלן די קינדער אונטער פּאסיקל הימל
ענטפערן: אָמן ואָמן.

Havdole

God of Abraham,

Make us a second Creation.
May no sun shine there —
The light has betrayed us anyway.
May the wind not sing there —
Together with the Germans it has driven
Our people to the slaughter-workshop
May no greener sea roar there —
It sank the ships —planks
With our last escapees.
May the mountains there not rip the sky with their peaks —
They did not block the way for the murderers,
To protect a small child.
We renounce beauty.
We renounce courage.
We renounce hymns.
May Einstein leave no heir.
We are excommunicated together
With the divine naive one, Spinoza.

Make us a world with a strip of sky
And once a year a star should shine there,
And make *Havdole*, and divine interpretation:
This is a second Creation,
Outside the world of the Germans,
Outside the wisdom of blood.[88]
And the children under this strip of sky will
Answer: Amen and Amen.

Given the nature of these poems' composition, as the history of scholarship on Holocaust literature reminds us, once we are aware of the authorship of the poem it is near impossible to read this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry *without* being reminded that the author did not directly experience the Holocaust. Such a reading is inherently valuable. Even in a poem such as *"Havdole,*" however, which speaks only from the collective, a careful reading of the poem reveals the presence of a speaker uniquely positioned, separated in time and space from the portion of the collective who suffers the terrible fate they recount. Lamentation poetry is enabled, fundamentally, by such distance — the genre is a recounting, after all, a looking back and reflecting after the fact. As with the titular King David, sitting alone and mourning his lost son and Jewish world, at no point in Molodovsky's collection do her poetic speakers

[88] Kathryn Hellerstein suggests that Molodovsky might have been drawing on a pattern of terms for sciences that would suggest her own translation of "science of blood," a euphemistic way of describing race science perhaps. See: p. 536 n 192 in *Paper Bridges*, Hellerstein's selected translations of Molodovsky's poetry.

claim to have been physically present in the ghettos and camps. Rather, they speak from that complex position of communal survivor, representing a collective that contains not only those who died at the hands of the Nazis, but also those who remained outside of Europe and, thus, on whose shoulders the burden of memory and memorialization now falls.

As such, the insistence on the collective is a purposeful reminder against a reading that would diminish the significance of a given Holocaust poem because of the writer having been, for example, in the United States during the Holocaust. To do so, the poem implies, would undercut the significance of communal destruction: it is *we* who have been destroyed, not *them*. At its most distant — "together with the Germans it has driven / our people to the slaughter-workshop" (6-7) — the poem still refuses to allow the reader to separate the speaker from the collective, by claiming ownership over those who have been murdered. In taking the poem as speech — as monologue — we can, in fact, return to the question of authorial distance in such a way that our reading is deepened and enabled by the need for the poetic speaker to be *both* distanced from the destruction *and* caught up in it as a communal destruction.

Reading *"Havdole*" as part of a tradition of monologue poetry that begins with Lamentations allows us to reaffirm the critical importance of the place of the writer within the community for which they speak. This is not a monologue spoken from a detached communal voice: this "we" contains and is inseparable from the poetic speaker in the same ways we noted with Lamentations above. But now, in addition, we are reminded that the scope of this collective "we" includes far more than just those victims and survivors — not only the poetic speaker, but the target readers of the poem as well in Yiddish-speakers in the United States, few if any of whom were themselves Holocaust survivors. This is the additional burden that this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry must bear: it is written for and from within a community of readers who do not yet understand their own relationship to the Holocaust. Yet, this form — the unanswered monologue to God — is part of the long tradition that began with Lamentations, and is what *allows* us to understand the complexity of this position: speaking not for, but alongside those who suffered a fate they were spared from. The monologue form, like figurative language drawn from Jewish tradition, thus enables both the writer and their readers to reconcile their physical

safety with their experience as part of a broader catastrophe that *necessarily* includes the entirety of the Jewish community.

We Have No More Prayers

The most noticeable thematic feature of both "*Havdole*" and its companion poem — the other direct, monologic renunciation of God in Molodovsky's collection — "*El Khanun*" ("God of Mercy") is that they are addressed to a God who does not and will not answer. In addition to an identifiable speaker, monologue poetry requires the presence of a specific, diegetic addressee: that is, someone to whom the monologue is being delivered within the framework of the poem itself, *distinct* from the reader. To read these poems as monologues is to recognize two features. First, that despite their textual absence (that is, silence) the addressee is critical as an enabling force of the poem: not only do the poems respond specifically to the past actions of the addressee, but they could not exist in this form without a diegetic figure to listen. Even if that figure's very existence is in question, their purpose is *to be spoken to*. Both of Molodovsky's poems take that structural positioning of the addressee, as a silent listener, and extend it into the demands they make of God. Words would not suffice as a response to either "*Havdole*" or "*El khanun*," both of which call for action — and not *just* action, but a recreation of at least the very terms of Jewish existence and covenant, or in the extreme case of "*Havdole*," of the world itself. In the face of such demands (and certainly we recognize that this is an impossible demand) speech without accompanying action would only serve to exacerbate the crisis faced by the speaker, reminding them of the failure of God to act.

A second feature of these monologues reinforces the impossibility of speech implicit in the demands made within this poem, insofar as the structure of both of these poems leave no textual space for such a response. The great success of Lamentations, as Mintz puts it, is its ability to rhetorically transform the speaker's experience of the first two chapters — of *absolute* rejection by God — in such a way that Lamentations 3 is able to recover God as "an addressable other" (37). Yet, Mintz concedes finally, this is little more than the briefest respite from that rejection: it "can distract but momentarily from the unmoved

fact that God neither speaks nor acts. Nowhere in Lamentations is there the least trace of a divine response" (41). If that is the case, then the speaker's achievement of reconciling both the destruction of Jerusalem and their own experience of radical suffering with their theology —having convinced themselves that there *must* be a sin for which they are punished — does little more than establish a framework for God to speak: Lamentations ultimately cedes the last word to God. Thus, I would argue, the great success of Lamentations 3 is not necessarily in recovering God as addressable, but rather in having reclaimed the *possibility of a response*. The small vestige of hope that is retained at the end of the book is hope for some future reconciliation, even if it is outside the speaker's lifetime.

David Roskies makes similar remarks about Holocaust literature as a whole (in both Hebrew and Yiddish). He claims that the "single, recurrent pattern" that emerges out of the vast corpus of Holocaust literature is "a return to a liturgical mode of writing":

> Suddenly, the addressee of Jewish poetry — composed by avowedly secular writers — becomes, once more, the God of Israel. Through these dialogues with God, modern Jewish poets express the full range of their emotions: anger, despair, remorse, pride, joy and awe. And because God now presides over history once again, one can address all historical and metaphysical complaints directly to the source — thus, Kadia Molodowsky's plea that God (temporarily) choose another people. In the world of Yiddish, where the human addressees have all but vanished, the presence of a listener-God is especially poignant.[89] (*The Literature of Destruction* 566)

Roskies refers to these poems as a dialogue between the poets and God. Certainly the trend of addressing their poetic laments to God emerges forcefully as a result of the Holocaust, but to actively claim that God is listening — or even that the poetic speakers believe God to be listening — seems to ignore the very intense ambivalence these poets have about that possibility. Both "dialogue," and the descriptor "listener-God" imply at least the *expectation* of a response. These are not dialogues, however. God never

[89] Roskies' claim that Molodovsky's cry for God to choose another people is temporary is based on a misreading of the repeated third line of the poem "*derveyl*" (elect, choose) as "*dervayl*" ("for the time being"; *Literature*, 570-1). This was a common reading in early translations of the poem, the result of specific typographic trends in Yiddish printing at the time. The best known translation for some forty years, Irving Howe's 1969 translation that appeared in *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, makes this precise error. Anita Norich addresses this trend of mistranslation, and similar difficulties with the translation of this poem in *Writing in Tongues* (104-6). She notes that it was not until a recording of Molodovsky reading the poem out loud began to circulate that her specific word choice was made clear. (See also: *"Kadye molodovski a shmues mit avrohom tabatshnik"* ["Kadia Molodowsky A Conversation with Abraham Tabachnik"], *Yiddishbookcenter,org*).

speaks. Instead, time and time again not only is God silent, but these poets spend their time lamenting the *impossibility* of such a response. There is a certain irony to the idea of a monologue addressed to God on the idea that God may not be listening. Yet the persistence of this address seems to indicate that regardless of whether He is listening, the importance lies in the fact that He *can be* addressed.

There is no need for a divine response in "*Havdole*," nor a desire for one. The poem carries and explores a single thought from beginning to end: the first half recounting the failures of the world and the reasons for the poet's desired departure, and the second laying out the kind of world that would be acceptable as recompense. That new world is, of course, noticeably *more* distant from the world of prayer and liturgy, from a relationship with God, than this one: *Havdole* comes only once a year. As such, the poem's closing moments are thematically analogous to that of the better known "*El khanun*," over the course of which Molodovsky entreats God to take away the chosenness, we might say, of the Jews. In addition to ending with calls to action that preclude verbal responses, both poems structurally dismiss the possibility of God speaking. "*Havdole*" begins with a traditionally phrased injunction to God, taken from a *tkhine* — a women's prayer — and ends with "*omeyn vomeyn*" ("amen and amen") a common phrase used to end prayers. The general function of this final phrase is to mark the prayer as complete and finished, but here it is tinged with irony as the world in which the words are uttered is one in which God's existence is forcefully limited, in which He is effectively removed from the people's daily lives. Where the conceptual development of Lamentations is incomplete because it rests on the waning possibility of God responding, insofar as "*Havdole*" mirrors the structure of a prayer it leaves no space for any other voice.

Prayer is not *necessarily* monologic. Rather, this feature emerges out of the conditions that produce Jewish catastrophe literature. Within the framework of the Bible, prayers could be and often were answered, both verbally and with action. God could be assumed to be listening, or even present. This is the central theological problem of Lamentations: the most important religious consequence of the fall of Jerusalem was the destruction of the Temple and, with it, the loss of the people's mechanism for communicating, and thus reconciling, with God. It is this loss, rather than the physical destruction that

creates the *need* for a text like Lamentations. Without a means for reconciliation, the destruction could not easily be understood as part of the ongoing cycle of sin, punishment, and redemption that characterizes a Jewish theological conception of history.

The destruction of the First Temple thus creates a new communicative paradigm in Jewish literature, of which Lamentations is the first instance: as prayer untethered from God. Jewish catastrophe literature afterward is characterized by an assumption of God's absence, and each successive catastrophe reinforces the inevitability of silence. By the time these writers are composing their responses to the Holocaust, even the vestigial hope that is retained in Lamentations is rarely imaginable; thus, when they draw on the structure of prayer, they speak from within a long tradition that is built on the understanding that God will not respond.[90] Not only that, however, as our discussion of "*Havdole*" has shown they take pains to ensure that such a response cannot occur: these prayer poems of the Holocaust are constructed as monologues because to do otherwise — to invite, or even leave open the possibility of dialogue — would be to cede consolatory authority to a disinterested, even absent, God.[91]

This structure is common to several of Molodovsky's poems, and is notably shared by the best-known poem from this collection *"El khanun*" ("God of Mercy"). Structured like a prayer, the repeated epithet "God of Mercy" continually reminds us of both the address and tone of the poem, drawing from a particular set of prayers said on Yom Kippur which beg God for mercy and forgiveness.[92]

אל חנון

אל חנון
קלייב אויס אַן אַנדער פאָלק,
דערווייל.
מיר זיינען מיד פון שטאַרבן און געשטאָרבן,

[90] These Holocaust poets do occasionally turn to Messianism, but even then what they describe is couched in hesitance and hypothetical, and the best they can muster is a *theoretically possible* redemption after the end of historical time. The one poet whose work seems most aligned with a theodicy-centric theological imagination, in the style of Lamentations, is Tsaytlin, who is more invested than others in Messianism as a set of possibilities.

[91] Lamentation, writes Alan Mintz, referring both to the biblical book and the genre of writing, is "a record of man's struggle to speak in the face of God's silence" (41). Consolation, he says, "belongs to God." I would argue that the poetry of the Holocaust takes aim at this distinction and, in pro-actively rejecting the possibility of a divine response, attempt to claim "consolation" as feature of the poet and, by extension, the people.

[92] Kathryn Hellersein notes the irony of this epithet: insofar as the prayer it is derived from is a reversal of God's promise to Moses that "although He is merciful, He will not forgive the children of Israel their sins or cleanse them of their guilt" ("A Yiddish Poet's Response" 258), the poem itself turns that reversal back onto God.

מיר האָבן ניט קיין תפילות מער,
קלייב אויס אַן אַנדער פאָלק,
דערווייל,
מיר האָבן ניט קיין בלוט מער
אויף צו זיין אַ קרבן.
אַ מדבר איז געוואָרן אונדזער שטוב.
די ערד איז קאַרג פאַר אונדז אויף קברים,
נישטאָ קיין קינות מער פאַר אונדז,
נישטאָ קיין קלאָג–ליד
אין אַלטע ספרים.

על חנון,
הייליק אַן אַנדער לאַנד,
אַן אַנדער באַרג.
מיר האָבן אַלע פעלדער שוין און יעדן שטיין
מיט אַש, מיט הייליקן באַשאָטן.
מיט זקנים,
און מיט יונגע,
און מיט עופהלעך באַצאָלט
פאַר יעדן אות פון דיינע צען געבאָטן.

על חנון,
הייב אויף דיין פייערדיקע ברעם,
און זע די פעלקער פון דער וועלט —
גיב זיי די נבואות און די יום-נוראים.
אין יעדן לשון פרעפלט דיין וואָרט —
לערן די מעשים זיי,
די וועגן פון נסיון.

על חנון,
גיב פּראָסטע בגדים אונדז,
פון פּאַסטעכער פאַר שאָף,
פון שמידן ביי דעם האַמער,
פון וועש-וואַשער, פון פעל-שינדער,
און נאָך מער געמיינעס.
און נאָך איין חסד טו צו אונדז:
על חנון,
נעם צו פון אונדז די שכינה פון גאונות.

God of Mercy

God of Mercy
Choose another people,
Choose.
We are tired of dying and death
We have no more prayers.
Choose another people,
Choose.
We have no more blood
To be a sacrifice.

Our house has become a desert.
Earth is too scarce for our graves,
There are no more lamentations,
No more elegies
In the old books.

God of Mercy,
Sanctify another land,
Another mountain.
We have covered all the fields and every stone
With ash, with holiness.
With the old,
And with the young,
And with babies paid
For every letter of your ten commandments.

God of Mercy,
Lift your fiery brow,
And see the people of the world —
Give them prophecies and the days of awe,
In every language they babble your word —
Teach them the acts,
The ways of temptation.

God of Mercy,
Give us simple clothes,
Of shepherds with sheep,
Of blacksmiths at their hammers,
Of washers, of hide-skinners,
And give us one more blessing:
God of Mercy,
Take back from us the divine presence of genius.[93]

The poem follows the same thematic development as *"Havdole*": beginning by laying out the terrible fate that has befallen the Jewish people, before proposing to or entreating from God a solution that ostensibly ends the relationship between God and the Jewish people (though, in this case, it is much more ambiguous). Much like "*Havdole*," the monologic structure serves to heighten the thematic development that this ironic epithet seems to express: God is being chastised here, mocked even in a less generous reading, for the actions that led to the Holocaust.

[93] There has been significant debate over the final line: "*un nem tsu fun undz di shkhine fun geoyne*s," both in its meaning, and mostly in how to render it accurately in English. Anita Norich discusses two very different translations of this poem in the final chapter of her *Writing in Tongues*.

As we progress through the poem, building toward the dramatic final lines, the tone grows more mocking, angrier, or perhaps just more desperate. At its most basic level, each stanza is little more than a list: the first of things the Jewish people can no longer do (having been destroyed); the second, of the horrors they have faced; and the third a sardonic recounting of the ways in which God marks His chosen people. With each repetition, as the collective pile of tragedies grows, it becomes more and more difficult to read the epithet "God of Mercy" as earnest. This is especially true in the final stanza, this time a list of mundane — and perhaps non-Jewish — occupations that would grant the Jewish people safety and obscurity. The final instance of the epithet, in the penultimate line (above), is the only time the poem breaks with the regular structure of beginning each stanza with the entreaty to God. As such, this final cry is both more dramatic than its previous instantiations and more forceful, marking the request or demand that follows with a level of intensity as yet unseen. It is difficult to imagine any kind of *verbal* response emerging from this situation, certainly not one that is satisfying to a speaker and people who are — as the final line indicates — asking specifically to be *removed* from the special relationship that such direct communication would imply. Even if we could imagine the possibility of a response to such an overwhelming demand, there is no room within the poem for any voice but that of the speaker and, by extension, the monolithic voice of the Jewish people begging for God to *act*.

The liturgical structure of these poems is one of the few aspects of Yiddish-language Holocaust poetry, not just that of Molodovsky, that has been discussed by the scholarship, largely thanks to the work of David Roskies. Borrowing from scholarship on British devotional poetry, in *Against the Apocalypse* Roskies employs the phrase "sacred parody" to refer to the relationship that each generation of Jewish catastrophe literature has cultivated with the texts and traditions that preceded it:

> It is a parody in the double sense. Most directly the sacred text is put to irreverent use, but what triggers this response on the part of the individual sufferers is their desire to imitate the sacrilege, to disrupt the received order of the text in the same way as the enemy, acting at the behest of God, interrupted the order of the world (20).[94]

[94] This, Roskies says, is a more preferable term to the earlier-used "symbolic inversion" or "counter commentary" because these two terms are employed by scholars who "only recognize [this approach's] use in the modern age" when it is "one of the two basic forms of Jewish response to catastrophe" the other being attempting to situate the catastrophe within the framework of covenant and faith (*Apocalypse*, 20)

We can see this evidently in both of the Moldovsky poems above, and its broadest application — which includes imitation or parody of the figures, symbolic or literal, that populate those received texts — also applies to both the structural and figurative qualities of the poems discussed in this and the previous chapter. Parody, Roskies asserts, may be destructive, but can also be an act of faith if undertaken respectfully: what makes this parody "sacred," he claims, are the "self-imposed limitations" these writers put in place (20). How we as readers should discern destructive from faithful parody is left open, but for the caveat that a "faithful" parody should act to "expand the meaning of the text" (20), in contrast, perhaps, to the implicit idea that other forms of parody offer only one lens for interpretation.

I mention "sacred parody" for two reasons. First, because it has been a critical touchstone for all of the major scholarship on Molodovsky, and thus should be acknowledged because of its previous use as a key framework for understanding her relationship to the act of writing.[95] Second, this double notion of parody — destructive as a means to being generative — can serve as a useful phrase for broadly capturing the complex relationship of witnesses to historical events, especially those writing about such events. This desire to be rid of the conditions that produced the Holocaust, but the need to do so with tools (language, forms, genres) that are themselves products of those conditions is a struggle many authors of Holocaust literature have reflected on. Roskies intends the term here to refer to Jewish writers' relationships to their religious and literary traditions: "to mimic the sacrilege allows the individual to keep faith even as the promise is subverted" (*Against the Apocalypse* 20). If we broaden Roskies' conception further, however — not limiting it to a particular religious goal — it offers a generalized notion of how Jewish catastrophe poetry relates to its traditions, by disrupting the received order of the text, or world, or language, in order to reclaim something concrete from it.

We might, for example, recall the long discussions in the early years of scholarship on Holocaust literature about the impossibility of representing the Holocaust literarily. Despite their pronunciations, scholars were drawn to poetry because of its purported ability to break down the mundane functioning of

[95] See for example Valencia 9-12 and Hellerstein, "A Yiddish Poet's Response".

language in order to form new modes of expression and meaning-making. This sounds like an overly grandiose claim to make about poetry, but especially in the work of Paul Celan — who builds his work on discordant images and unclear phrasings — these scholars found something akin to what Roskies is describing in "sacred parody," a breaking down of German, the language of the perpetrators, in order to describe something these scholars believed to be inexpressible.[96]

Both of these Molodovsky poems, *"Havdole*" and *"El khanun*," model themselves on prayer and liturgy as a means to ensconce themselves within a long tradition of Jewish liturgical writing and to establish a particular rapport with the reader, not only through their familiarity with prayer, but *also* through their understanding that this use, this parody, is generative. The poems do this by utilizing the literary form of prayer against itself (a roundabout way of describing what parody does) as a means to open a space for communication about and toward the divine that does not rely on the implicit promise of commonplace prayer. That is, these poems reject the idea that the meaning-making capacities of the language of prayer rest on the hope for a response.

We might say, then, that the poetry of the Holocaust is *always* a form of sacred parody because it fundamentally rests on, and derives from a tradition that sits in ambivalent relationship with its tools: it simultaneously claims that tradition and language are insufficient or lacking, but employs that lack as a space for generating meaning, and for creating connections between text, author, and reader. Ultimately, like Molodovsky's use of the prayer form, "sacred parody" is most useful because it foregrounds the importance of literary device — form, tradition, symbols, language — as a means to destabilize the connotative baggage that those very literary devices bring with them, and thus reflecting in a given form, or symbolic figure, the complexity of the writer's relationship to the events to which they are responding.

[96] Celan was perhaps *the* critical touchstone for discussions of poetry among scholars of Holocaust Literature through the mid-1980s. See especially George Steiner, "The Long Life of Metaphor," 166-70; Langer, *The Hollocaust and the Literary Imagination*, 9-20; Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying*, 84-90.

I Wallow in Your Dust

At the heart of the idea of sacred parody is an intense uncertainty about whether there is any kind of consolatory power left in the traditions of writing, speech, and expression received by those attempting to respond to their destruction. Parody — at least in the sense Roskies is using it, of "sacred parody" — might then be regarded as the generic expression of this artistic ambivalence, and a tool that allows these authors to work meaningfully through both possibilities without rejecting or accepting either. I suggested above, however, that this ambivalence is a pervasive feature of Holocaust literature, extending beyond the Jewish literary tradition to the idea of poetic and artistic expression in the face of such destruction or, in one specific case, to the entire enterprise of modernity. This case, the best known expression of ambivalent frustration in the corpus of Yiddish Holocaust literature, and perhaps the best known of all American Yiddish poetry, is Yankev Glatshteyn's "*A gute nakht, velt*" ("Good Night, World") which, despite being written in 1938, deals with many of the same concerns as those other monologue poems we discussed above.

אַ גוטע נאַכט, וועלט

אַ גוטע נאַכט, ברייטע וועלט.
גרויסע, שטינקענדיקע וועלט.
נישט דו, נאָר איך פאַרהאַק דעם טויער.
מיט דעם לאַנגע כאַלאַטן,
מיט דער פייערדיקער, געלער לאַט,
מיט דעם שטאָלצן טראָט,
אויף מיין אייגענעם געבאָט –
גיי איך צוריק אין געטאָ.
וויש אָפּ, צעטרעט אַלע געשמד׳טע שפורן.
כ׳וואַלגער זיך אין דיין מיסט,
לויב, לויב, לויב,
צעהויקערט יידיש לעבן.
חרם, וועלט, אויף דיינע טריפה׳נע קולטורן.
כאָטש אַלץ איז פאַרוויסט,
שטויב איך זיך אין דיין שטויב,
טרויעריק יידיש לעבן.

חזיר׳ישער דאַטש, פיינטלעכער ליאַך,
עמלק גנב, לאַנד פון זויפן און פרעסן.
שלאַברע דאמאָקראַטיע, מיט דיינע קאַלטע
סימפאַטיע-קאָמפרעסן.
אַ גוטע נאַכט, עלעקטריש צע׳חוצפה׳טע וועלט.
צוריק צו מיין קעראָסין, חלב׳נעם שאָטן,

אייביקן אָקטאָבער, דריבנע שטערן,
צו מיינע קרומע גאַסן, הוקערדיקן לאַמטערן,
מיינע שמות, מיין סוואַרבע,
מיין גמרות, צו די האַרבע
סוגוית, צום ליכטיקן עברי-טייטש,
צום דין, צום טיפן מיין, צום חוב, צום גערעכט,
וועלט, איך שפּאַן מיט פּרייד צום שטילן געטאָ–לעכט.

אַ גוטע נאַכט, כ׳גיב דיר, וועלט, צושטייער
אַלע מיינע באַפּרייער.
נעם צו די יעזוסמאַרקסעס, וועדג זיך מיט זייער מוט.
קראַפיר איבער אַ טראָפן פון אונדזער געטויפט בלוט.
און איך האָב האָפן אַז כאָטש ער זאַמט זיך,
גייט אויף טאָג-איין-טאָג-אויס מיין ווארטן.
ס׳וועלן נאָך רוישן גרינע בלעטער
אויפ אונדזער בוים דעם פאַרקוואַרטן.
איך דאַרף קיין צו דלד אמות,
פון וואַגנערס געץ-מוזיק צו ניגון, ברומען.
כ׳קוש דיך, פאַרקאָלטנט יידיש לעבן.
ס׳ווייַנט אין מיר די פּרייד פון קומען.

אַפּריל, 1938

Good Night, World

Good night, wide world
big, stinking world.
Not you, but I slam the gate.
With my long robe,
with my flaming, yellow patch,
with my proud step,
at my own command —
I go back to the ghetto.
Wipe out, trample all converted traces,
I roll around in your refuse,
praise, praise, praise,
hunchbacked Jewish life.
A ban, world, on your unclean culture.
Although everything is devastated,
I wallow in your dust,
sad Jewish world.

Piggish German, hateful Pole,
Amalek thief[97], land of guzzling and gorging.
Weak democracy, with your cold
sympathy-compresses.
Good note, electric, *khutzpedik*[98] world.
Back to my kerosene, tallowy shadows,

[97] Amalek was a nation in the Hebrew Bible that was an enemy of the nation of Israel. It has become a metonymic shorthand for a kind of "eternal enemy" trying to destroy the Jewish people.
[98] Chutzpah, which has more of less entered into US English; something like arrogant or brazen.

eternal October, tiny stars,
to my crooked streets, hunchbacked lanterns,
my loose pages, my Bible books,
my Talmud, to the difficult
questions, to bright Yiddish-translations,
to law, to deep meaning, to duty, to justice,
world, I step with joy to the quiet ghetto-light.

Good night. I give you, world, a donation
all my liberators.
Take away the jesusmarxes,[99] choke on their courage.
Die over a drop of our baptized blood.
And I have hope that although he lingers,
my waiting will rise up daily.
Green leaves will still rustle
on our withered tree.
I need no consolation.
I go back to my four cubits,
from Wagner's idol-music to Yiddish [or Jewish] melodies, hums.
I kiss you, shaggy Jewish life.
It cries in me the joy of coming.
April, 1938 (Glatshteyn, *Gedenklider* 41–42)

Torn between two worlds, the poetic speaker here seems to not think particularly positively of either: the world is unclean and stinking, but the ghetto is full of refuse and dirt, though the latter offers a solace here that the former does not. There is safety, the poem says, in isolation and separation from the world; the "ghetto" here is not the ghetto of the Nazis, but the historical ghettos of medieval Europe. Despite all the restrictions they carried on those living within their walls, to the writer in 1938 the ghetto offered an image of stability and security in separation that is lacking in the world from which the poem speaks.

We cannot ignore the fact that this poem was written in 1938, before the invasion of Poland, before the mass incarceration in camps and ghettos, and before the concentration camps.[100] This is one of

[99] The oddity of this neologism has been discussed at length by others. Norich in particular lays out the questions that emerge from this line as revolving around (a) the directionality of the poet's attack — is it the Jews, the saviors, or their general followers who are the objects of his scorn, and (b) the Jewish identity of these figures whose followers comprised both non-Jews and, of course, Jews who thus left the Jewish community (*Discovering Exile* 21-25).

[100] I have never been certain of whether to classify this as a Holocaust poem, or not, though the majority of scholars have no such qualms. Its inclusion among major overview-studies of the genre, and its relatively common place in classrooms demonstrates its broad acceptance by the world of Yiddish academia. Its own singular importance in the reception history of American Yiddish poetry means it merits discussion here, but despite the real crises that Glatshteyn is responding to, it is worth remembering that the world in which "*A gute nakht, velt*" was written, and into which it was published in April, 1938 was a *very different world* than even a year later. This is the crux of my hesitation: though Glatshteyn responds to fascism, rising antisemitism, and anti-Jewish violence in Europe,

the reasons "*A gute nakht, velt*" has had more scholarly attention than any text we will discuss. Most of the scholars who write about this poem are quick to point out that it was written in the wake of three events: Glatshteyn's 1934 visit to Poland, the Nuremberg Laws in 1935; and the *Anschluss* (Germany's annexation of Austria) only a month before this poem's publication. As a result, the poem is often judged anachronistically, ascribing to the author a better sense for events to come than he could have predicted, even given those developments above. Instead, Glatshteyn writes in response to the growing anti-Jewish sentiments in Poland he experienced for himself and, crucially, with full knowledge of how the Jews in annexed Austria were being treated: his 1940 children's novel *Emil un karl* (*Emil and Karl*) paints a vivid and disturbing portrait of Jews being attacked in the streets, men having their beards torn off, and of Jews, even children, forced to scrub the streets with their bare hands as the non-Jewish public watch and ridicule them. This is not strictly representative of what was to come, but enough to push Glatshteyn to despair for the future of Jewish life in Europe. As such, despite its early composition date, the long, emotional monologue of *"A gute nakht, velt*" is preoccupied with many of the same concerns as the later poems of Molodovsky we discussed above, not only in this vision of separateness as a means (perhaps the only means) to safety, but in the way the poetic voice constructs its position in relation both to the world that it wishes to return to, and to its own addressee.

The poetic speaker of "*A gute nakht, velt*" is an individual caught between two worlds. This is not a single voice standing in representative for a community, and there is no sense of the collective voice being channeled through an individual speaker here. Instead, it is decidedly solitary, and the ambivalence that has been the central focus of scholarship on the poem is the result of this tension: a displacement between the modern world to which the poem is addressed, and the Jewish past the poetic speaker has left behind. The poetic speaker insists, in fact, on their autonomy in this moment — "At my own command / I

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especially Poland, he had no knowledge of the mechanisms, horror, and, most importantly, *scope* of the Holocaust, of which the Jews of the United States would have learned in great detail by the time this poem was published in a collection, in Glatshteyn's 1943 collection *Gedenklider*. Michael Galchinsky argues, though only somewhat convincingly, that all of Glatshteyn's poetry changed after the Holocaust, and that a poem of this scale was unimaginable for the post-war Glatshteyn (254). For an extended discussion of this poem, see: Anita Norich, *Discovering Exile,* 44-52, especially 48-9.

go back to the ghetto" (7) — though that claim to autonomy is undone immediately by repeated reminder that the world has been "devastated" by the "pig-like German, hateful Pole / thieving Amalek" (17). They want to claim a choice, though it is forced on them by circumstance. As such, this poem parallels the journey of Lamentations as the overt isolation of the speaker transforms rapidly over the course of a few lines into the acknowledgement of the importance of community, and their own critical place within that community. It is the symbolic return to *"yidishe lebn*" (39), not to the geographical or temporal space of the ghetto that inspires the overwhelming joy of the poem's final line.

For many of the early critics responding to this poem, it represents a radical turning point in Glatshteyn's literary development, echoing the poet speaker's forced return to *yidishe lebn*. Yet, as Anita Norich demonstrates, these critics were torn between reading the poem as a rupture in tradition, a "fundamental divergence from all things prior to 1938", and the desire to place it within an understandable development (Norich 61).[101] In one important way, however — in the relationship between the poetic speaker and the world they address — the poem is in fact entirely consistent with Glatshteyn's expressed poetic ideology, even his purportedly world-renouncing "introspectivism".

Apart from this poem, Glatshteyn is best known as one of the founders of the introspective, *"In zikh,*" movement in Yiddish poetry and, in fact, in the 1919 manifesto of their movement, jointly written with his co-founders Aaron Glanz Leyeles and Nokhem-Borekh Minkov, we can already see the seeds of tension between the poet and the world. "The world exists and we are part of it," the manifesto famously claims, "But for us, the world exists only as it is mirrored in us, as it touches *us*" ("Introspectivism" in Harshav and Harshav 774, Anita Norich's translation). The goal of the *Inzikhistn* was the exploration of the self, first and foremost, and of the world as encountered, embodied, and refracted in the multiplicity of poet's inner world. Yet, the "modern poet," it argues cannot, be separated from the world: "the contemporary poet is a human being like other human beings and must be an intelligent, conscious

[101] Norich notes that "the desire to see continuity in the radically different is a repeated theme of Yiddish comments on the poem . . . Like the persistent debate about whether the Holocaust is sui generis or one in a long line of catastrophes, this urge to see the consistency in Glatshteyn's poetry while yet claiming its fundamental divergence from all things prior to 1938, exposes the ideological crisis of those years, and the ways in which Jews clung to the hope that things might yet go on" (*Discovering* 62).

person" (779). Insofar as the Introspectivist poet seeks to represent to the world through the self, they are, necessarily, deeply embedded in the historical and social conditions of their time.

As Glatshteyn would write a year later, reflecting on the First World War: "In our time of millions slaughtered, so many souls wandering without redemption, when science is dumbfounded, a poet is left only with his poetry, only with his art as a lantern in the dark corridors of life's labyrinth" ("A Quick Run Through Yiddish Poetry" in Harshav and Harshav 788, Benjamin Harshav's translation). Despite an insistence that they are "Jewish poets" only because they "are Jews and write in Yiddish," when confronted by the looming threat of the Holocaust to the Jews as a result of their Jewishness, Glatshteyn recognizes that "fragment[s] of his previous incarnation or of his hereditary self" are the tool he needs for navigating this particular dark corridor ("Introspectivism" 780, 778). The *In zikh* poet recognizes in themselves a fragmentary multiplicity, but crucially cannot separate their inner world from their membership within the community and their participation in the world.

Despite the poetic speaker's insistence on their independence and singularity we are tempted to read *"A gute nakht, velt*" as others have done, as a call for the entire Jewish community to return to their isolation. After all, the sufferings the speaker describes are little more than the inherent features of the modern world and the price of Jewish participation within it: assimilation, failed democracy, all the "liberators". Like in "*Havdole*," the speaker here longs not for a return to some idealized past (because the ghetto is dirty, sad, and full of garbage) but for a life free from the taint of modern, Western culture. In that case, the "ghetto" may be a wholly arbitrary image — in *Inzikhistn* terms — a part of the poet's "hereditary self" that they can call on simply to represent a world outside of the modern.[102] Regardless, such a return is, of course, impossible — as impossible as God creating a new world or releasing Jews from the covenant — not only because a return to that past way of living is necessarily unachievable, but because Jewish life *itself* has been hobbled and changed by its own interactions with the world (it is referred to as *tsehoykert*, "hunchbacked" several times throughout this poem). Unlike the emotional

[102] That reading is complicated somewhat by the composition history of the poem, however, and the specifically *Jewish* crises that the poetic voice is responding to, as well as the "*yidishe lebn*" that provides them the final comfort.

political speeches that the poem's tone and structure recalls, "*A gute nakht, velt*" is not a call to action: the singularity of the voice, and the impossibility of its desired goals work to prevent any outcome. This is a poem of symbolic renunciation, purely symbolic, because it is directed not to the Jewish people, but to the non-Jewish world.

The most fascinating feature of this poem when read as a monologue is the fact that it is addressed to the non-Jewish world in a language that the world cannot understand. Anita Norich takes this to indicate that Glatshteyn is *not* in fact addressing the non-Jewish world, but speaking figuratively about that world to the community of Yiddish writers that surrounds him. This is a fair assumption: why would someone direct an extended monologue at a people who cannot comprehend even a word? Norich claims, instead, that Glatshteyn is engaging with the "charged question" that "Yiddish modernists could never escape: who will read their poems?" (47).[103] Norich argues that the poem points to a *lack* at the heart of the Jewish artistic, religious, or cultural projects that Glatshteyn locates in its relationship to modernity and, as such, he is calling indirectly on the Jewish people to reject the modern, Western, non-Jewish world. In this understanding, the addressee of the poem is the broad community of Yiddish writers and artists concerned with their own audiences and readership. As such, the poem might be understood less as a response to the specific events Glatshteyn witnessed in Europe, than to the broad failure of the modern world to provide a space for, to recognize, Jewish cultural and artistic projects.

It is possible, however, to take the poem at its word, and read it as choosing to speak to the non-Jewish world in Yiddish *because* it cannot understand. The poet's long monologue paints a picture of having being shunned and ignored by the world, and responding to the world's apathy — to the failure of Western culture — by (perhaps preemptively) rejecting it in favor of a return to an imagined Jewish past: "Not you, but I slam the gate" (3). The insistence in this first stanza on the poet's pride and autonomy in this decision reads as bitter and derisive, marking the lines that follow, the celebration of the dirtiness of the ghetto as gleefully ironic, especially when calling the non-Jewish world "unclean" by contrast. All of

[103] This certainly is something that Glatshteyn and his contemporaries were concerned about. A 1920 issue of the journal *In zikh* explicitly claims that Yiddish literature does not have readers, "and this is especially true for Yiddish poetry." See: "Reflections" in Harshave and Harshave 791 Benjamin Harshav's translation.

this is contained, or represented, perhaps, in the idea of an emotional speech directed at an audience who cannot understand a word. I am suggesting that in calling out to the non-Jewish world in Yiddish, the poetic speaker is recognizing the insurmountability of the apathy (or rejection) that inspired the poem, and formally reifying it.

אַ גוטע נאַכט, כ׳גיב דיר, וועלט, צושטייער
אַלע מיינע באַפרייער.
נעם צו די יעזוסמאַרקסעס, ווערג זיך מיט זייער מוט.
קראַפיר איבער אַ טראָפן פון אונדזער געטויפט בלוט.
און איך האָב האָפן אַז כאָטש ער זאַמט זיך,
גייט אויף טאָג-איין-טאָג-אויס מיין וואַרטן.
ס׳וועלן נאָך רוישן גרינע בלעטער
אויפ אונדזער בוים דעם פאַרקוואַרטן.
איך דאַרף קיין צו דלד אמות,
פון וואַגנערס געץ-מוזיק צו ניגון, ברומען.
כ׳קוש דיך, פאַרקאָלטנט יידיש לעבן.
ס׳ווייַנט אין מיר די פרייד פון קומען.

Good night. I give you, world, a donation
All my liberators.
Take the jesusmarxes, choke on their courage.
Die over a drop of our baptized blood.
And I have hope that although he lingers,
My waiting goes up day-after-day,
Green leaves will still rustle,
On our tree, withered.
I do not need consolation,
I go back to my four cubits,
From Wagner's pagan-music to melodies, humming.
I kiss you, messy Jewish life.
It cries in me the joy of coming.

There is no need for the world to be able to comprehend the words of the speaker's rejection, because the poem suggests that this rejection is, ultimately, *not* "at [their] own command" (7) but rather the attempt to take control over a situation that is out of their hands.[104] In this way, the poem's rejection of the world is analogous to the project of speakers of Lamentations or "*El khanun*": an affective monologue directed at a nebulous addressee who cannot hear and will not respond. "I do not need consolation," the voice proclaims (36).

[104] Norich compares the speaker here to an employee who announces they are quitting their job to save face while being fired (*Discovering* 50).

Within the tradition of catastrophe literature that begins with Lamentations, the rejection of consolation *is* a rejection of the divine. Alan Mintz makes the distinction clear in the context of the Hebrew Bible: lamentation, as a kind of speech, is self-affirming, a distinctly human attempt to "express the horror and contain its effects" (*Hurban* 41). Consolation, on the other hand, comes from the outside, it is God reaching out to humanity, "ending the silence of confirming the persistence of the divine commitment" (41). "*A gute nakht, velt*" has historically been read as a cry for a return to Jewish self-sufficiency and (though their eyes are firmly set on the world) the poetic speaker here employs this implicitly theological language to muster the full weight of literary tradition behind their rejection of the world. There is nothing the world could possibly offer in response that would be sufficient, and the final line of the poem — which turns away from the world for the first and only time in the poem to focus on an entirely internalized emotion — completes that rejection. The refusal of consolation and return to the "*yidishe lebn*" confirm the disavowal of the world announced in the poem's first lines. It does not matter if the world cannot understand, only that the speech was made, and that the poetic voice was able to give voice to this desire and the pain that inspired it.

Sleep, God of Mercy

As it announces a total rejection of the world, "*A gute nakht*, *velt*" initially does so in language drawn from a poetic genre that is not part of the tradition of Jewish catastrophe literature, the lullaby. The title itself carries connotations of comfort, recalling the domestic tranquility of childhood; it hardly prepares us for the intense affective shift that characterizes the rest of the poem. The nostalgic comfort of the opening phrase is immediately undone by the second line, a sudden tonal shift that enacts in the small scale the same betrayal attested to by the poetic speaker: the illusion of comfort and solace, followed by the revelation of depravity and filth.[105] At the same time, it gestures toward the final line, which returns us

[105] Norich finds the "apposition" of the phrase with "world" and "whole wide world" of the title and first line respectively, "shocking," arguing that the intimacy of the farewell placed in contrast with the breadth of the address reveals a "suicidal desire" in Glatshteyn's poem — that is, she sees contained in his apposition the utter finality of the poem's message (49-50). It's difficult to see the line as *quite* so shocking without drawing as Norich does on the composition history of the poem to guide her interpretation of it.

to that same place of safety. Although, as we noted above, it is a symbolic rather than physical return, the first and final lines of the poem are the only places in which we see the hint of positive emotion, or even the possibility of comfort.

We might then read this poem as further invoking the kind of domestic or even nursery texts that we associate with childhood, another nostalgic space of memory and longed-for returns. Folk, nursery, or other children's songs are a common structural and symbolic reference point throughout American Yiddish poetry, and (though less common in this context) can even be found among these collections of Holocaust poetry. Molodovsky's poem "*Khad gadya*" ("One baby goat," *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* 47-8) for example plays with a nostalgic call back to childhood in her use of the titular folk/children's song, often sung at seders.[106] Both Glatshteyn and Molodovsky use these genres as a means to open and close their poems, employing them as affective frameworks — a small reference to a lost childhood innocence, perhaps — for poems that read more like enraged political diatribes, or abstract reflections on their own relationship to their craft, to shape the readers' emotional progress through the poem. In contrast, H. Leyvik (pen-name of Leyvik Halpern) is committed to an exploration of the possibilities of domestic and familial poetic forms, and in the process composes what is perhaps the most intensely unforgiving Holocaust poem I have encountered.

Leyvik (along with Arn Tsaytlin) was part of an earlier generation of Yiddish poets in the United States known as *"Di yunge"* ("The Youth") and in the first decades of the twentieth century was among the most popular and widely read Yiddish poets in America. A major cultural figure even through the Holocaust, in 1946 Leyvik was asked to be part of a contingent of the Jewish World Congress to visit the displaced persons camps in Europe.[107] A year earlier, Leyvik published his own poetic response to the

[106] This is one of the many poems in *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* which makes no mention of the Holocaust. One of the recurrent themes in this collection, however, is the recollection of Passover and seders as a point of reference and nostalgia for an idealized past, as we saw in the previous section with the poem "*A briv tsu eliyahu hanavi*".

[107] Leyvik published his experiences and thoughts in a journal-style collection titled *Mit der sheyres hapleyte* (*With The Survivors*). "*Sheyres hapleyte*" or שארית הפליטה is a biblical term (from Ezra and Chronicles) of two words for things that remain, are left over, or survive, that was adopted by organizations within the DP camps to advocate for the displaced persons.

Holocaust, the aptly titled *In treblinke bin ikh nit geven* (*I Was Not in Treblinka*). Like the other collections we've discussed, Leyvik's collection is not singularly focused, but approaches the Holocaust and its impact on the author's life from various angles: religious, cultural, responses to news, and so on. More inclined to the use of regular rhyme and formal metrical schemes than Molodovsky or Glatshteyn, his use of forms uncommon within the tradition of Jewish catastrophe literature reaches its apex in *"A reboyne shel oylem vig-lid*" ("A Master of the Universe Lullaby"):

אַ רבונו של עולם וויג–ליד

שלאָף, גאָט צבאות, הינטער פלאַמען,
הינטער גליענדיקער שוועבעדיק,
היינט ביסטו מיט אונדז צוזאַמען
אויף אַן אָפּגעברענטער ערד.

ליגסטו מיט אונדז אין נצח-פיבער
אין אַ קאָנצענטראַציע-צעל,
שלאָף, אל רחמן, קדוש, גבור,
מיטן קאָפּ צום תליונס שוועל.

כאַפּסט זיך אויף אַ ווייַלע זיצן —
ניט דערהערט און ניט דערזען —
אויפן שטייַנער-דיל צו קריצן
דיינע לוחות, דיברות צען.

פאַלסט צוריק-צו צום אָנוכי
מיט די ליפּן, מיט די ציין,
חלום, גאָט פון הימלען הויכע,
אויף אַ האַרטן, קאַלטן שטיין.

דו, דער פאָטער פון אברהמען,
טראָגסט זיין זונס עקדה-האָלץ,
אונדזער אַלטער יחוס-נאָמען
לויכט מיט געלער לאַטע–שטאָלץ.

אַלע בליצען, אַלע זונען
מאַכן זייער פייער צו,
דו האָסט וויידער אונדז געפונען —
שלאָף, אל רחמן, האַ–לע–לו.

שלאָף, אל רחמן, מלך אביון,
זייט בייַ זייט מיט אונדז אין שווייג,
ס׳וועג דיך פישקע, ס׳וויגט דיך טוביה,
ס׳היט געטריי דיך באָנטשע שווייג.

A Master of the Universe Lullaby

Sleep, God of Hosts, behind flames,
Behind burning swords,
Today you are together with us,
On an earth consumed by fire.

You will lie with us in eternal-fever
In a concentration–cell
Sleep, God of Mercy, martyr, hero,
With your head on the hangman's doorstep.

Take a moment to sit —
Unheard and unseen —
To engrave on the stone floor
Your tablets, your ten commandments.

Fall back to the "I"
With your lips, with your teeth,
Dream, God of High Heavens,
On a hard, cold, stone.

You, Father of Abraham,
Carry your son's *Akedah*-wood,[108]
Our old ancestral-name
Shines with yellow patch pride.

All lightning, all suns
Cease their own fires
You have found us again —
Sleep, God of Mercy, hallelujah.

Sleep, God of Mercy, King of Paupers,
Side by side with us in a cage,
It rocks you Fishke, It rocks you Tevye,[109]
It protects you faithfully Bontshe Shvayg. (*In treblinke bin ikh nit geven* 88-9)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we find that the poem's title already contains the essence of its concern: the relationship between the poetic speaker and the addressee (in this case God). The lullaby, as a genre,

[108] Referring to the episode in Genesis 22 known as the "Binding of Isaac" in which God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son as a test of his faith, but seeing Abraham's commitment, provides a substitute at the last second.

[109] It is likely that here Leyvik is referring to Tevye the dairyman, the famous Scholem Aleichem character. The name in Yiddish is spelled "טבֿיה," "Tevye" but is here "טוביה," "Tuvia, or Tuvye" —note the additional "ו". However, the name of Scholem Aleichem's character in Hebrew is often spelled with that additional "ו," (and often the non-Jews around Tevye refer to him as such). For that reason, I have translated it as "Tevye." In addition, Fishke (*der krumer*) a novel by Mendele Mocher Sforim) and Bontshe Shvayg (the title character of a story by Y. L. Peretz), the two other names that surround it, are both significant figures in Yiddish literature, the creators of which, together with Scholem Aleichem, are considered the three most significant figures in the development of modern Yiddish literature.

brings with it particular connotations. As with Glatshteyn's "good night," there is a domesticity to the lullaby, it is a genre of familial comfort and of safety. Most importantly here, there is an implicit relationship between speaker and addressee built into the idea of the lullaby: they are soothing melodies, sung by parents to put their young children to sleep. The English word is derived from "lull," to calm or soothe to sleep; the Yiddish term, "*vig-lid*" from the words for "cradle" and "song" further emphasizes that connotation. The speaker of a lullaby occupies an implicit position of power over the listener, and an accompanying responsibility (and desire) to care for the one they are singing to. This is difficult to reconcile with the use of the formal or liturgical epithets for God, beginning with "*reboyne shel oylem*" ("Master of the Universe"), and continuing throughout the poem. In fact, though they range from solemn to scathingly ironic, there is no mention of God in the poem that is not accompanied by an epithet. This not only creates distance between the speaker and God, through a recourse to formal language and reminiscent of specific liturgical practice, but it establishes a power dynamic at odds with that implicit in the lullaby: each epithet, if taken in earnest, emphasizes the extent and reach of God's power. As such, as early as the title we are presented with a relationship between speaker and addressee that draws on two contradictory sets of generic and linguistic assumptions, and our only options are to read the poem as deeply ambivalent or confused about that relationship, or as intensely derisive.

Regardless, what remains true is that this poem, like Glatshteyn's and Molodovsky's above, structurally precludes the possibility of a response. It's easier to see here than in the earlier poems: the goal of a lullaby, as the name implies, is to send someone to sleep, a response (at least an immediate response) is only possible if the lullaby is unsuccessful. There is an assumption of silence contained in the genre the poem announces itself to be. In this way, we might read the final line of the poem — which places several of the most famous figures of classical Yiddish literature together in a cage with God being slowly rocked to sleep — with double meaning. Not only is Bontshe Shvayg one of the most pathetic characters in Yiddish literature (famously taking all the abuse hurled at him in life in complete silence, and in heaven asking only for a hot bread roll with butter as his reward) but by ending with a reference to Bontshe, the poem closes on "*shvayg*," "silence."

This is a somewhat melodramatic close, true, but the entire poem is built on a kind of overwrought disconnect between its formal qualities and its content. The regularity of the poem's construction — seven stanzas, each with four lines in an unbroken A/B/A/B rhyme scheme, and following a fairly consistent metrical structure — perfectly captures the expectations of the announced genre. The content of the poem stands in stark contrast to the calming consistency of its formal patterns. The complexity or scorn that characterizes the speaker's relationship with God notwithstanding, the portrait the poem paints of the status and fate of the Jewish community's destruction is terrible, and final: the Jewish people are "consumed by fire," as early as the first stanza, and the blame for that is clearly placed on God. As the Jewish people are destroyed, the poem claims, God will be there with them, facing the same fate.[110]

What remains with the reader, however, is not the despairing image, nor is it the series of biblical, liturgical, or other figurative references conjured throughout the poem. Rather, what lingers is the distance between the poem's construction and its content: the distance between its aural qualities (rhythm, rhyme) and its meaning. In this way, despite drawing from a literary form not strictly or exclusively Jewish, Leyvik's poem satisfies any possible understanding of Roskies' notion of "sacred parody". Leyvik here renders the affective landscape of this poem unsettling and destabilizing for the reader by drawing on their expectations for the mundane genre of lullaby, and transforming it into a scathing monologue against God, of His responsibility for the Holocaust.

This is a monologue poem — all lullabies are, ultimately — a single-voiced speech made by the poetic voice to a silent addressee, a textual space into which the reader steps as an outsider and as a kind of witness to the development of a relationship between speaker and listener, whether that listener be God or the entire world. But the lullaby is a particular kind of monologue: it carries expectations not only about the specific relationship between the speaker and the addressee, but also about the presence of certain recognizable formal qualities. This is also true of the two other forms of monologue we discussed

[110] This is a sentiment that is echoed by other poems of the Holocaust, most prominently in Glatshteyn's *"On yidn"* ("Without Jews"), which I will discuss in the next chapter.

above, the prayer poems of Molodovsky and the political diatribe that is Glatshteyn's *"A gute nakht, velt*," but both of these authors are far less committed to carrying that form/content disconnect through the entire poem. Unlike Molodovsky and Glatshteyn who draw on traditional forms as a way of framing their work and shaping the reader's initial encounter with the text in order to suddenly shift them into a different relationship with God, or with the world, Leyvik is never willing to sublimate the traditional genre that he is utilizing or parodying in favor of his message. This is what makes "*A reboyne shel oylem vig-lid*" effective (and affective) as a Holocaust poem: the form and the content are inseparable.

Leyvik reminds us of the importance of the non-semantic features of his poetry not only because he is so committed to the form, but because it is *so* distant from the content, and so unignorable — reading this poem out loud, you naturally fall into the regular rhythm of the poem, even when it might be at odds with the normal rhythms of speech. The dissonance between form and content highlighted in the act of reading aloud returns us to the problem we identified in the poem's title: the impossibility of determining whether the poem is ambivalent toward God or actually hateful. Reading this alongside other Holocaust poems that that draw on traditional forms as a vehicle for their emotional speeches thus forces us to recognize the essential role that structure, form, and voice play in shaping our encounter as readers with these poetic texts.

This is also the value of reading *all* of the poems in this chapter through the lens of monologue. Really, there is nothing about the category that is essential to comprehending the workings of these poems: a careful reading with a mind to the relationship of the speaker and addressee, or the assumption of response, or the place of the reader within the poetic frame is perfectly doable without recourse or mention of the idea of the monologue. Instead, monologue is useful as a lens not because it reveals something that was not there, but because it brings into focus essential features of these poems that had previously been overlooked in favor of broad symbolic, religious, or political readings. Monologue is valuable as a way of approaching this poetry because it prioritizes the idea of a poetic speaker (who is not necessarily the author) *in relation to* another figure, or object, upon whose textual existence the entire poem turns. This figure need not be real or concrete, and certainly they do not need to actually be

listening, even within the framework of the poem, but the speaker of the monologue strives to *be heard* in the abstract sense — the poems discussed in this section are the outpouring of emotions that need to be given direction in order to be expressed.

In the Jewish literary tradition that began with Lamentations, the most common and effective place to direct these emotions is toward God, not because He may respond (and, in fact a central assumption of the tradition is that He will not) but because it allows the poets to draw from a shared pool of poetic structures, language, and reference that the biblical text inspired. These Holocaust poets transform this tradition, true, but I am not sure that any of the terms we have to describe that transformation — sacred parody, symbolic inversion, counter commentary[111] — sufficiently account for the relationship that these poems have with the traditions in which they find themselves. All of these terms imply a static object that is taken up, transformed, and then returned. They are all an attempt to explain the complex relationship emergent in each of these poems in terms that are clear and digestible to those of us who weren't there, who aren't embedded in this literary tradition both by virtue of being Yiddish writers, and more importantly by being in the process of responding to a catastrophe *ourselves*. Rather than taking the transformation of these older traditions as a goal of this poetry, as the majority of scholars who discuss this phenomenon do, approaching these poems first as monologues, that is to say, as the emotional expression of a relationship between speaker and addressee, may push us to see this kind of transformation as a tool for expressing the specifics of that relationship at a given moment in time.

The poems we have discussed here frame themselves in conversation, necessarily one-sided, with a force much more powerful than them, and in each case the speaker strives to have their demands and desires heard, though they are expressed in ways that seem futile. God won't undo covenant or make a new world; no one can return to a nostalgic past of the pre-modern world; God will not simply drift away from existence and into sleep. At the same time, the speakers of all four of these poems are deeply

[111] Roskies says that these latter terms capture the same tradition as "sacred parody," but were employed by scholars who saw this as a distinctly modern phenomenon, while he claims that it is a fundamental feature of the tradition of Jewish literary response to catastrophe.

committed to their role — however uncomfortable it makes them feel — as representatives for the Jewish people as a whole, both those who have been murdered and, even moreso, those who remain.

Caught in this fraught space, the attempt to strike a balance between those two roles, the monologue seems even more appropriate when we consider the other place in the Western literary tradition where it is most common: the stage, where it often serves to mediate between the private, internal world of the speaker's emotions, and their public face. In speaking for the Jewish people, these poems are not concerned with the knowledge that their demands will not be met, or their speeches responded to, in fact, they take pains to construct their poems such that they structurally preclude that possibility.

Once we recognize the necessary absence of the addressee, the *reader* is drawn into the poem in a way that they could not have been before. If these poems are the textual expression of the collective emotions of the Jewish community channeled through a singular artistic voice then, though addressee is irrelevant, they do need to be heard. Much like with figurative language, traditional forms of communication — prayer, speech, lullaby — function here to establish a common ground through which the reader can form a connection to the poetic speaker. In this way, the speakers of all of these poems work to create a community of readers, each occupying the dual position of witnessing the poet's own experience and as *themselves* members of the collective whose suffering is being given voice.

Unlike with figurative language, the connection made here is not necessarily aimed at establishing empathy with the poetic speaker, but rather that the reader is forced to reflect on their own position within the framework of the poem, and thus in relation to the events the poem is responding to. The reader, like the absent addressee, becomes a vital force in enabling the poetic speaker to be heard, bearing witness to the suffering for which they stand, and the long history that is being destroyed with it.

Chapter Three: If There Is A God…

Throughout the previous chapter, we read and engaged with a set of poems that confronted the destabilizing uncertainty of the Holocaust and of the position of the poetic speaker by directing their attention and their words to a God who would not and could not, respond. The interpretive framework I introduced in order to better illuminate the relationship between the poetic speaker and the divine was that of monologue, because monologue as a mode of speech gives primacy to the speaking voice and in doing so, at least in our case, structurally precludes the possibility of a response. The speaker needs to be heard, the monologue needs to be delivered *to* someone, but that figure is granted no space within the framework of the poems we examined.

But what of this absent God? I want to recognize and acknowledge, however, that I did not examine in any substantial way the nature or character of God, even as it was implied or constructed by the poems themselves. This was an intentional feature of the chapter's structure and argument, done so in order to mirror and thus highlight the noticeable absence of the divine from the poems themselves, except in highly mediated forms, often present most through comparison and analogy with other figures, such as the Yiddish literary characters of Leyvik's lullaby. The risk of this approach, which this present chapter aims to address, is misrepresenting the concerns of the corpus of American Yiddish Holocaust literature, as if it as a whole rejects or dismisses the divine. This is not the case. These poems continually turn toward the divine: asking questions, crying out for help, chastising God for not intervening, and hopefully invoking a possible (future) messianic redemption.

Nor is it the case, as scholars have claimed in the past, that the theological imagination of this Yiddish poetry is of minimal or secondary concern to the poetry composed in the presence and immediate wake of the Holocaust. I use the phrase *theological imagination* here to broadly refer to reflection on the meaning and nature of the divine, on the particular relationship the Jewish people have with God, and the attempt to understand the past, present, and future of the Jewish people refracted through the lens of this relationship. In order to distinguish between this concern of the poems and discussion of its content and internal workings, I am also going to refer below to its "religious themes," by which I mean the notable

and demonstrable use of elements of the Jewish liturgical and Jewish catastrophe literature traditions: allusion, reference, metaphor, etc. In that way, I see the religious themes of a given poem working in concert to shape and articulate its theological imagination, a relation of part to whole.

Although in the field of Jewish Studies the distinction is not clearly defined, I'm not arguing that these poetry collections are intentional, analytical, systematic, or argumentative explications of Jewish theology. Rather, they are partial, uncertain, internally (and intentionally) contradictory explorations and testing grounds for possible interpretations of the events of the unfolding Holocaust: rarely do these poems make *any* claims, and when they do, those claims are couched in layers of uncertainty, hypothetical, and poetic speculation.

It is difficult, in fact, within the corpus of Yiddish Holocaust poetry, to find moments in which there is a marked *absence* of things that might be called religious. Faced with and responding to large, sweeping destruction by dint of their Jewish identity, there is often little distinction between poetry that confronts the fate of the Jewish people, or the future of Jewish identity, or even the specific, individual murder of family members, from reflection on the history of Jewish persecution, marginalization, and the special relationship with divine that imbues that history with meaning. I don't mean to suggest that simply classifying all Yiddish Holocaust poetry as "religious" or "theological" is a meaningful gesture, nor that Jewish identity and history can be reduced to or neatly categorized as such. To make that claim would be to dismiss numerous centuries-old, complex, and intersectional histories of Jewish self-definition, and rich histories of political, religious, and scholarly debate over what it means to live a Jewish life. Instead I want to suggest that not only do the mechanisms and tools available to Yiddish poets confronting catastrophe carry liturgical and theological meanings and histories themselves, but also that, as we've been discussing in the previous chapters, these American Yiddish Holocaust poems situate themselves firmly within those traditions, and are deeply concerned with the theological implications of the Holocaust, even as the Holocaust itself is ongoing.

If there is a feature that unifies the corpus of this early Yiddish Holocaust poetry in the United States, it is uncertainty: about the extent of the destruction; about the fates of families, friends, loved ones,

homes; about the implications of the destruction for the Jewish life in the present; about the possibilities for consolation, for a relationship between God and the Jewish people to be meaningful, or anything but a reminder of His failure to act; and, most of all, about the shadow that hung over the future of Jewish life and Jewishness itself as the full extent of the destruction became clearer. Those writing in the United States during the war spend almost no time on the question of *why* the Holocaust happened — that task would be left for writers in the decades to follow (especially those whose works would find their way into the English-language canon of Holocaust literature). Instead, the Yiddish poetry we are examining is preoccupied with the more immediate concern of how to live, and how to retain a Jewish identity in relation to a God who may very well be the direct cause of the death of six million of their friends, family, and people.

This chapter argues that these poems actively work to claim uncertainty as a positive and generative feature of their theological imagination, against a literary and liturgical tradition in which definitive interpretations offer little space for hope or comfort. That is: to retain and dwell in uncertainty, and to play with multiple, incomplete possibilities offers a generative space of meaning-making and a bastion against the possiblity that either God has abandoned the Jewish people, or that the Holocaust is itself a punishment inflicted on the Jewish people by God. The cloud of uncertainty that characterizes the poems of this chapter is not the same ontologically threatening "unknowability" that so concerns post-Holocaust writing, and that we've seen emerge as a core assumption of scholarship in the previous chapters.

This chapter thinks with poetry as *poiesis*, a way of generating meaning and knowledge that allows this Holocaust literature to perform that work of generative uncertainty that this chapter traces. In the first section of this chapter, I draw on a body of literature that emerged in response to and alongside postwar, Christian "Death of God" theologies at the nexus of literary theory and Christian theology that is now called "theopoetics". Placing the discourse of theopoetics in conversation with the work of Arn Tsaytlin, this chapter demonstrates the value of resisting the desire for singular interpretive responses to the Holocaust in our encounter with poetry that turns its attention to the divine. The final section of the

chapter offers a case study in a handful of poems by Yankev Glatshteyn which offer hope in uncertainty and opening the door to new ways of imagining the relationship between the Jewish people and the divine that do not require absolving Him of guild or explaining the Holocaust in any sort of framework, but turn around the human relationship and a constructed ethics of interpersonal care.

Theopoetics and Poetic Uncertainty

The term *theopoetics* is generally traced to Stanley Romaine Hopper in the early 1970s, in response to a seeming failure of inherited forms of thinking, and "traditional symbol systems" for capturing and representing the experience of being in the modern world, and of talking about God (Hopper 207).[112] The essay in which he presents this term emerges from two decades spent reflecting on the relationship between poetry and theology, and part of Hopper's ongoing thinking with the "death of God" theologies that emerged through the late 1950s and into the 1960s. Hopper's own "death of God" theologies, and his turn to theo-*poesis* rest on the notion, drawn from Heidegger, that the history of Western logocentric thinking, and of language itself prevents theology from gaining significant insight into the nature of the divine: "insofar as our language and speech retains either wittingly or unwittingly the models for world or for self of the classical, dualistic, absolutistic, or intellectualistic kind, it perpetuates and propels the sickness it would cure" (151).[113] In some ways his approach to theology comes to look like apophatic, *via negativa* theologies of his predecessors, insofar as Hopper proposes to "accomplish the negative and to focus on our uncertainty infinitely in order that the Deity, the positive, that which is already given, might be glimpsed through his creative Presence" (168).[114] Although emerging from very different concerns, already we can see something of a parallel to that distrust of language, and of inherited models of linguistic and representative expression that has preoccupied those

[112] Citations of Hopper's work are from *The Way of Transfiguration: Religious Imagination as Theopoesis*, a collection of essays spanning Hopper's career that trace the development of his conception of poetry as a way of *doing* theology. Where necessary, reference to specific essays will be included in footnotes.
[113] See, especially: "The 'Eclipse of God' and Existential Mistrust" (1970) in *The Way of Transfiguration*, 146-73.
[114] Apophatic, or negative theologies postulate that because our language lacks the mechanisms for articulating the fullness of the divine, we can approach God through statements about what He is *not*. This is in contrast to, or complementary to, *cataphatic* theologies that make positive claims about what God is.

writing about the Holocaust and about Holocaust literature: both begin with the fundamental assumption that the subject of which they speak is necessarily beyond linguistic expression, or has somehow exceeded the possibilities of our available expressive mechanisms.[115]

What distinguishes Hopper is his turn to radical metaphor as a means of performing that negative, and to modern (i.e. mid-twentieth century) poetry as a space in which this was *already* occurring.[116] Hopper's argument in part prefigures a more recent turn in the study of "lived religion" that focuses its attention on practice and action. Hopper is concerned as he puts it with the creativity and action in theology: when the "*doing*" of theology in Hopper's terms is not about reinvesting in established arguments and wresting meaning from preceding argument, rather "the *doing* of theology has to do with evoking the *logos,* with bringing the god to presence" (208). Thus, with desire to step outside of logocentric speculation, and to centralize the imminence of experience as a *doing* of theology, Hopper turns to poetry,

> for the poet presents experience, with all its ambiguities and indeterminacies, and in such a way that its truth is not so much *looked at* from the outside as it is participated in and appropriated from within… Modern poetry is at once a meditation and a challenge, a confession and a prophecy, an accusation and a prayer. It is essentially a poetry of inwardness; and here, if anywhere, the Jacob heart of humankind is wrestling through the night of its despair and doubt with the strong Angel of its newer self. (20)

There is a dialectical movement to Hopper's characterization of modern poetry that centralizes the struggle for meaning over the possibility of its creation. It strives for a "non-knowing" that, rather than ignorance, is characterized by poetry's ability to dwell with tensions, to hold in concert things otherwise seemingly in opposition. This "non-knowing" is Hopper's term for what I've above called a generative uncertainty, the foregoing of authoritative truth claims in favor of the multiplicity of potential that uncertainty offers. Hopper discerns in modern poetry a liberating approach to language, a kind of radical

[115] Thomas J. Altizer, in a response to "The "Eclipse of God' and Existential Mistrust" remarks that Hopper's "one original" contribution to the metaphorics of God's "eclipse" is: "that God is absent or silent in what we know and experience as history. Or, at the very least, what the West has known as history has veiled God in dark" 159. Co-implicating language and Western history, Hopper's argument in this sense is remarkably similar to the broader argument that produced Adorno's famous dictum "*nach Auschwitz Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch,"*"Cultural Criticism and Society" 34.

[116] Throughout, Hopper talks about *modern* poetry and *modernist* poetry, and there is a distinct blurring of terminology there. It's possible that the two are synonymous in his usage; I've opted for modern throughout, as a way of distinguishing this poetry from the past, rather than marking it as art of a particular artistic movement.

commitment to the plurality of signification, of metaphor, to the point that knowledge itself becomes unstable. This characteristic would draw many scholars of Holocaust literature to German-language poetry of Paul Celan, for example, in whose poetry they find a similar rupturing of signification.[117]

If the implications of all his claims above are true — that modern poetry is *at once* the articulation of experience *lived*, at play with and comprising a series of continual contradictions, and "essentially a poetry of inwardness" (20) — then it would reasonably follow that the fundamental subject of modern poetry in Hopper's conception is the poet themselves, in all their fragmented, multiplicitous possibility. And this is what we find, twenty years later, when Hopper turns to the work of Ezra Pound and Franz Kafka to expound his theo-*poesis*. He ultimately comes to the conclusion that "we are the eye of God. Thus man is, metaphorically speaking. God's moving metaphor, moving through the opposites into the novel occasions of God's creative intent; he moves from the enigmas into the mysteries, and when he moves, he brings God's ultimate star down to his mediate shore" (224).

For comparison, consider another articulation of the modern poetic self, written in 1919 and published in the first issue of *In zikh* by Arn Glanz-Leyeles,Yankev Glatshteyn, and Nokhem-Borekh Minkov. What distinguished the *In zikh* movement, as Sarah Ponichtera notes, was their insistence on the inseparability of the poetic self from "the social world in which each individual is embedded, a world which is understood to be culturally and historically contingent" (298). They announce:

> [Writing poetry] *In an introspective manner* means the poet must really listen to his inner voice, observe his internal panorama — kaleidoscopic, contradictory, unclear or confused as it may be. From these sources, he must create poetry which is the result of both the fusions of the poet's soul with the phenomenon he expresses and the individual image, or cluster of images, that he sees *within himself* at that moment [. . .] The human psyche is an awesome labyrinth. Thousands of beings dwell there. The inhabitants are the various facets of the individual's present self on the one hand and fragments of his inherited self on the other. ("Introspectivism" 774-5 Norich's translation, emphasis in original)

Viewing the self as refracted through the "present" and "inherited" selves speaks to the core of these Yiddish poets' understanding of their positionality: as immigrants from Eastern Europe with Western educations and embedded in modern American literary culture, each poetic expression a complex

[117] See for example, Langer, *the Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*; Rosenfeld, 84-90; and many of the essays, from both scholars and writers, in Berel Lang's *Writing and the Holocaust*.

negotiation of multiple histories and presents. Ponichtera argues that this varied cultural history "would naturally lead to a certain division within the individual's consciousness, an awareness of radically divergent ways of thinking, and indeed of perceiving the world" (299). There is ambiguity in the statement's representation of the individual psyche, in particular in its contrast between the present and inherited selves, as if the internal world is reducible to a normative binary conflict, so common in American Jewish history, of tradition and modernity; in contrast, "both the present and the past are seen as having 'thousands' of faces, any of which the individual might come across unexpectedly" (Ponichtera 299); the Introspectivists saw these internal worlds as comprising a proliferation of multiple, fragmented "selves," co-present and inextricable.

The journal *In zikh* had ceased publication by the end of 1940. The poetry that its founders, most notably Yankev Glatshteyn, published during and in the years immediately following the war, has been little studied, and the scholarship that does exist tends to elevate the specific Holocaust thematics of the poems over analysis of their formal or poetic qualitites. Yet, as we will see below and in Chapter Five, this conceptualization of the poetic self — in which the irreconcilable contradictions of the modern world are mirrored in the fragmentary inner self, and thus emergent in the relation of poetic speaker to poetic utterance to object of address (whether that is the world, the self, or the divine) — carries through as a central feature not only of Glatshteyn's Holocaust poetics, but as a common thread through much American Yiddish Holocaust poetry.

The shared foregrounding of uncertainty as both necessary and generative feature of the construction of poetic voices, and the centralizing of the relationship between the poetic self and its communities and histories makes theopoetics a useful framework for approaching Holocaust poetry that turns its attentions to the divine. The sub-field of theopoetics has developed significantly since Hopper's initial coinage, but the central assumptions remain the same: as L. Callid Keefe-Perry puts it, theopoetics is "an acceptance of cognitive uncertainty regarding the Divine, an unwillingness to attempt to unduly banish that uncertainty, and an emphasis on action and creative articulation regardless" (205). Put another way, there is a central apophatic assumption to theopoetics, but rather than seeking to *overcome* the

unknowable or unspeakable nature of their poetic subject, theopoetics takes that irreconcilable uncertainty as an invitation to multiple possibilities.

For Arn Tsaytlin, this sense of continual tension and irresolvable contradiction is one of the central facets of the experience of *Zayn a yid"* ("Being a Jew"):

זיין אַ ייִד

זיין אַ ייִד הייסט אייביק לויפן צו גאָט,
אפילו אַז מ׳איז אַן אַנטלויפער;
דערוואַרטן צו הערן אַ ליאַדע טאָג
(אפילו אַז מ׳איז אַ כופר)
ס׳קול פון משיחס שופר.

זיין אַ ייִד הייסט נישט קענען אַרויס פון גאָט
אפילו אַז מע וויל עס;
נישט קענען אויפהערן תפילה צו טאָן
אפילו נאָך אַלע תפילות,
אפילו נאָך אַלע אַפילו׳ס.

Being a Jew

Being a Jew means eternally running to God,
even when you are an escapee;
waiting to hear any day
(even if you are a heretic)
the sound of the Messiah's *shoyfer*.[118]

Being a Jew means not being able to escape God
even if you want it;
not being able to stop praying,
even after all the prayers,
even after all the *evens*. (216)

Tsaytlin, writing this poem in the mid-thirties, having just arrived in the United States, is notable in this context because he was not a member of the *In zikh* group (being, in fact, one of the poets against whom the *In zikh* poets rebelled), demonstrating the significance of this uncertainty and duality of existence beyond the introspectivist modernist ideology of Glatshteyn and others.

In "*Zayn a yid*," to be Jewish is to be perpetually caught in a relationship that transcends your own actions and desires, but also to be in constant tension with that relationship, and to be continually

[118] Heb: *Shofar*, the ceremonial ram's horn blown in the synagogue during the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur prayers.

negotiating a relationship both with God and with the self. Carefully balanced between the two stanzas, the poem's structure and form insist on the inextricability of both of these desires. To be Jewish, here, is a *process*, movement toward and away from, not cyclically but simultaneously: irreducible, inescapable, and always unfinished.

Arn Tsaytlin's two-volume 1967, *Ale lider un poemes: lider fun khurbn un lider fun gloybn* (*All Songs and Poems: Poems of Destruction and Poems of Faith*), from which I took this poem, expands this uncertainty to frame the entirety of the collection: within its pages, although the category of "*Lider fun dritn khurbn"* ("Songs of the Third Destruction") exists, there is nothing to distinguish the "poems of faith" from among the dozens of poems contained within. Rather, the insistent mutual co-presence of the two themes within Tsaytlin's poems suggests that the title should be read as an inclusive description. Though the poems in this collection confront the Holocaust as a challenge to faith, and to the relationship between the Jewish people and the divine, across the scope of these near-thousand pages of poems, the theological threat of the Holocaust is distinguished from those events and disasters that preceded it in *degree and proximity only*, rather than in kind. The internal category noted above, "Songs of the Third Destruction," explicitly situates the Holocaust withn a continuum of destructions that began with the First Temple, and its counterpart literary response in Lamentations.[119] Within the pages of this collection, as the title suggests, a poem of destruction is *always* a poem of faith.

That does not diminish the struggle that faces the speakers of the poems contained within. Rather, at the core of Arn Tsaytlin's Holocaust poetic corpus is the same struggle faced by the poetic speakers of Lamentations: the struggle to maintain hope for the redemption that faith promises, even in the face of a catastrophe at a scale (seemingly) beyond comprehension. As a final, illustrative example for the moment, "*Tomer*" ("If") represents a small subset of Tsaytlin's wartime and post-war Yiddish poetry that directly reflects on the implications of the destruction for the possibility of Jewish faith. *"Tomer*" is undated, though its placement within the collection may suggest that it was completed shortly after the end of the war. Like the poems we will discuss below, "*Tomer*" centralizes *uncertainty* as a generative response to

[119] See, for a specific example, "*Yisroel's ashn"* ("Israel's Ashes"), which I discuss in the Conclusion.

the threat of the Holocaust to overwhelm faith and hope. What distinguishes this very short poem is that it explicitly recognizes the tension that this uncertainty creates, and tries to model it anecdotally for the reader.

טאָמער

ס'האָט אַ יונג יידיש קינד אין אַ לאַגער
געשריבן אַ ליד. זיינען דאָרט,
אינעם ליד, געווען שורות אַזעלכע: ווער ווייס?
טאָמער איז פֿאָרט פֿאַראַן גאָט... טאָמער פֿאָרט...

אַן אָבגרונט פֿון יאָמער.
אַ פּערל פֿון טרייסט.
אַ פּערל פֿון טרייסט
אין אַן אָפּגרונט פֿון יאָמער.

ס'קאָן נישט פֿאַרגעסן מיין האַרץ יענעם טאָמער.

If

A young Jewish child in a *lager*
wrote a poem. There,
in the poem, are such words: who knows?
If there is a God… if there is…

An abyss of lamentation.
A pearl of consolation.
A pearl of consolation
in an abyss of lamentation.

My heart cannot forget that *if*. (77)

There is a dreamy quality to this poem as it meanders its way through odd enjambment,[120] half-completed thoughts, and repeated, hopeful incantations. The details we are given in the first two lines are sparse, making it impossible to know if it was written in response to some specific piece of news, or if the poem to which it referred actually exists. Yet, lack of historicity doesn't undercut the thematic purposes of the poem, which reflects on the possibility of conjuring hope from a seemingly hopeless situation.

The poem's insistence on uncertainty as a positive quality makes it especially useful exploring the possibilities of approaching these poems as more than just expressions of belief, however frustrated or confused. Rather, this chapter asks what it would mean to read these poems in both form and content as

[120] Sentences that continue over multiple lines without punctuated or grammatical pause, as in the first two lines.

commenting on the nature of that faith, to recognize that these these poems are generating something through their poetics and, furthermore, to take seriously these, in Tsaytlin's words, "poems *of* destruction and poems *of* faith" (my emphasis) in the sense both of being *about* and *commenting* on destruction and faith, and of being *constituted by* destruction and faith.

To consider the poem in this way would be to highlight the irreducibility of the conditional conjunction of its title, which the poetic speaker draws from the internally referenced child's poem. Framing the poem as both title and final word, *"tomer*" ("if") repeated throughout like an incantation, mirrors the poetic speaker's relationship to the uncertainty that the word represents. The speaker's inability to relinquish this possibility becomes — modeled and explicated in the middle stanza — the core of the ultimately hopeful disposition of the poem. The alternative that remains unspoken, that characterizes the "abyss of lament," and that underpins both the child's question is the total negation or absence of God. If we read the 'who knows?' that opens the child's poem as rhetorical, then it implies an *assumption* that the opposite is true, marking God's existence with only the slimmest of possibilities. If we read it as a direct interrogative, then the poem, "*Tomer*," offers itself as an answer to question, though the answer is itself indefinite, a kind of apophatic position in which they are *only* able to say that the possibility remains, but also cannot say there is *not* a God. "*Tomer*" actively works to reclaim that quasi-apophatic uncertainty as a positive quality against the looming and implicit background of an existence devoid of God.

The middle stanza is overloaded with symbolic significance, both in content and structure. The contrast between "*yomer*," ("lamentation" or "tears") and "*treyst*," ("consolation" or "comfort") invokes a crucial theological-conceptual distinction that moves through Jewish liturgical and catastrophe-literature tradition, and which we discussed briefly in the previous chapter. As Alan Mintz notes, in the context of the Hebrew Bible:

> Lamentation, taken generically rather than as a particular text, can be understood as a record of man's struggle to speak in the face of God's silence . . . Consolation, on the other hand, is what is given from outside. From across a transcendental space, God's word breaks through to man, ending the silence and confirming the persistence of the divine commitment. In the covenantal relationship, the discourse of lamentation is the discourse of Israel; consolation is God's. (41)

Although I've translated the poem in this way above to highlight the parallel language, the thematic contrast between "comfort" or "consolation" and "lamentation," coupled with the metaphorical insistence on the tiny, fragile, valuable nature of that retained consolation echoes the familiar movement between lamentation and a turn toward the possibility of communication with the divine that we traced in Lamentations. Unlike the monologue poems of the previous chapter, however, it is precisely the *possibility* of communication from God that provides that comfort here.

"*Tomer*" also structurally mirrors its prophetic and lamentationary predecessors, in particular with the middle stanza: a four line stanza in which the third and fourth lines are repetitions, in reverse order, of the first two lines. In formal terms this is known as a *chiastic* structure. In the Western literary tradition, *chiasmus* is associated most closely with epic poetry and the Hebrew Bible and is often thought to have been developed as a mnemonic device and aid to memory and recitation. Within the Hebrew Bible, it is found most prominently in the apocalyptic, prophetic texts and, crucially, Lamentations.[121]

Visibly different from the rest of the poem, the chiastic structure of the middle stanza marks it as a self-contained thought, able to be read and encountered independently of the rest of the poem, as if it has meaning-making capacity on its own. Consolation and lamentation are intertwined, and lamentation — not the catastrophe itself, but the desire and need "to speak in the face of God's silence" (Mintz 41) — figured as the problem to be negotiated.

God Himself is absent from this poem, just as He was absent from the monologue poems of the previous chapter. The poem's refusal to step outside of the realm of the hypothetical, however, overcomes that absence and refigures it as the generative foundation for the poem's theological imagination. The final rhyme ("*yomer"/"tomer"* "lament/if") connects this chiastic middle stanza to the rest of the poem, and anchor to the poem as a whole, and thus symbolically offering that "*tomer*" as a solution to the

[121] Bringing both of these traditions together: outside of the scope of this dissertation, but an extremely important text of Holocaust literature, Yitzchak Katzenelson's *Dos lid funem oygehargetn yidishn folk* (*Song of the Murdered Jewish People*) also has a chiastic structure across its fifteen cantos, as David Roskies has pointed out, and contains many of the features of epic poetry we would recognize from the classical world. Roskies, *Literature of Destruction* 517.

otherwise unsolvable struggle between speech and silence: even without confirmation, or assurance, this "if," this small and fragile possibility, is *itself* meaningful. That is: here, the presence or absence, the speech or silence of God is not what is at stake, but rather this poem sees as emergent in the child's hypothetical, and embodied in the irreducible "if," a means of forming a relationship to the divine in the absence of any evidence to His presence or existence.[122]

As a readerly disposition, theopoetics, like monologue, does not add anything to the poetic text that is not already contained within. Rather, it pushes us to foreground both the inextricability of form and content and the necessary uncertainty that characterizes the speaking voices, and to recognize that uncertainty is a critical, generative, feature of the poetics of these Yiddish poems. In characterizing the motivating force of modern poetics, Hopper, incidentally, contrasts it with the poetics of the Hebrew Bible:

> Jeremiah's view is steady, whole, clean-cut; the others blur, and speculate, and ponder. And here appears the essential difference between the biblical poetry and that of the moderns: the presupposition of Old Testament poetry is *faith*, the covenants and promises, the Divine-human encounter in the fullness of its religious immediacy; whereas the presupposition of the moderns is just the reverse of this—it is the absence of faith, the nihilism in the heart when God is gone, the metaphysical anguish of the soul now way-lost, wandering in a universe which it no longer comprehends, encountering the nothingness within when all the stabilities are gone. Jeremiah's verse begins with affirmation, Spender's with the word *Perhaps!* (22-23)[123]

Hopper speaks with the doubled confidence of scholar and theologian, through which he can make such sweeping and grandiose claims and mark such a radical rupture at the heart of modern poetry.

Yet his characterization rings uncannily close to the way in which Holocaust literature is described by authors and scholars alike, with the significant distinction being a discrete, nameable event as the point of rupture. It also echoes the distinction I made in the previous chapter regarding the impossibility of God's speech implicit in the monologic poems we discussed above. At the heart of Hopper's rupture is the condition of modern life itself, a nebulous and unplaceable shift in perception and

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[122] Ultimately, God's non-existence would pose as little theological problem as God's definitive existence (as the former would render theology irrelevant), provided one can be sure of a position: the issue here is that we do not know, and none of our previous evidence seems to suffice.

[123] Of course, Hopper's characterization of the Hebrew Bible here is reductive. As we saw in Chapter One, Lamentations — which within the biblical and Western tradition is attributed to Jeremiah — is anything but whole, clean-cut, and steady.

the experience of the world. His observations are a valuable framework for considering this Yiddish literature, once we account for the absolute centrality of the Holocaust. At the core of the modern condition of poetry for the American Yiddish poets we are reading, likewise for Jewish theologians — even so-called Jewish death-of-God theologians such as Richard Rubenstein — is the radical, destabilizing violence of the Holocaust.

In the case of "*Tomer*," *perhaps* becomes a means for revisiting the poetic origins of catastrophe itself. The allusive structure and language of the middle stanza reflects outward from its invisible center, shaping the poem around it. It is this inseparability of structure and content that marks the poem as self-awarely *theopoetic*. "*Tomer*" is an exercise and exemplar of the fusion of form and content to generate meaning that could not exist without the non-semantic features of the poetry — those features that *enable* a multiplicity of meanings to emerge from the encounter with a poetic text, depending on what a given reader, at a given moment, brings with them. We might call this *po(i)esis* to visually mark the implicit etymological duality that Hopper's neologism intentionally conjures: the meaning that is emergent in the conjunction of semantic and structural features. Theopoetics, then, as an interpretive approach to this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry, allows us another route away from a literalist approach to poetic interpretation in which meaning is purely derived from the semantic content of the poem's words. It allows us as readers to focus on the *necessity* of poetic structure and form to recognize that to engage critically with poetry is to encounter a distinctive form of creative abstraction and meaning-making.

Holocaust as Negative Epiphany

What theopoetics allows us to *avoid*, most directly**,** is the kind of stark and hierarchical distinction that Roskies and Diamant draw when they claim that, "with *Shtralndike yidn* (Radiant Jews; 1946), his first postwar collection of poems, Glatstein became a theologian, *not merely a poet of the Holocaust"* (119, my emphasis). There is a clear hierarchy in Roskies and Diamant's claim: to be a theologian is to transcend *mere* poetry of the Holocaust. Roskies and Diamant are not alone in marking a

distinction between the tasks of the Holocaust poet and Holocaust theologian; they write from within a long history of discussion and debate surrounding the theological implications of the Holocaust, as well as debate about the appropriateness of interpreting the Holocaust in theological terms. At the same time, their claims that Glatshteyn became a theologian is oddly without explanation, given their own characterization of Glatshteyn as "one who had [until 1943] snubbed his nose at overtly Jewish themes" (28), and that his reputation for secularism if not over irreligiosity continues to play a central role in scholarly characterizations of his life and work.[124]

I will return in a moment to Glatshteyn, and a close examination and case study of some of his Holocaust poems that directly address the relationship between God and the Jewish people. Before that, however, a brief overview of the troubled relationship between Holocaust theology, history, and literature will provide background not only into the scholarly contexts that inform Roskies and Diamant's distinction, but also make clear the extent to which the theological imagination present in Glatshteyn's two collections of Holocaust poetry challenge the divisions, categorizations, and timeline of Holocaust theology in the United States.

One of, if not *the* most vocal opponents of Holocaust theology, historian Steven Katz argues that the core failures of theology are, first, that it attempts to fit the Holocaust into a pre-existing interpretive framework that is not derived from the data of the Holocaust and, second, that he does not believe there to be a "direct, and preferred, theological meaning to be drawn from the exceptionality of this event, at least not as I will describe and interpret this singularity" (162). Katz' critique is sweeping, and he applies it equally to Christian and Jewish theologies that span a variety of interpretations of the Holocaust (162). Because of the totalizing phrasing of his claim, and because of Katz' own prominence among the group of writers and scholars we can roughly categorize as "historical exceptionalists" — those who argue that the Holocaust is in some way a historically unique event — his objections serve as a valuable space to unpack the discourse on Holocaust theology and to think through the ways in which the broad discourse that

[124] See Zumoff's introduction to *I Keep Recalling*; Hadda; and, Fogel.

developed around Holocaust theology has intersected with and influences the study of Holocaust literature.

Theology, for Katz, runs counter to the duty the historian owes to the historical data, which must, it seems, be privileged in any sort of interpretive act. The argument Katz levels against theology understands it as a broad form of non-reflexive interpretive act, in which a "deeply held prior position," as he puts it, obfuscates or in more extreme cases even contradicts verifiable historical facts. In general terms this is a rejoinder to be aware of internal bias in the interpretation of history, and would be perhaps a fair question to pose to those for whom theology has, or should have, the same relationship to the Holocaust as the work of the historian. That is, Katz's critique of theology as "unconvincing," seems to read it as little more than bad history (164).

Central to his objection is the implicit desire for a singular theological interpretation to emerge, grounded in the event itself (though it remains unclear what that precisely means) that is more convincing or more satisfying than others. His most obscure critique takes on the *plurality* of theological interpretations of the Holocaust and seeks to return it as a critique of the enterprise of Holocaust theology itself: "Any theological position, at present, is compatible with the singularity of the Sho'ah" (163). By this, Katz is introducing a particular criticism of theologies that claim the Holocaust requires us to either alter our perception of the modern world, or alternately of radical changes to the nature of Jewish existence. Instead, Katz foregrounds the "singularity" of the Holocaust as the criterion against which effective or "convincing" theological arguments are to be measured. One of the unmentioned effects of this shift of burden is the implicit dismissal, on the grounds of Katz' own deeply held prior position, of any theology that imagines the Holocaust as comprehensible and contiguous with history, Jewish or otherwise.

Katz assumes no two Holocaust theologies to be compatible. He is not without justification for this, of course, since it would seem clear that the grounding for a "death-of-God" theology of the Holocaust, for example, is the sublimation or delegitimation of other theological interpretations. "It may be," he writes, "that one or other of these alternative positions is true, but so far none has made a

convincing case for itself" (163). All constructed from a shared set of data, the events of the Holocaust, to the outside observer a the strength of a given theological interpretation rests primarily (or only) on its argumentation and rhetoric. Yet, the possibilities introduced by theopoetics, and by the juxtaposition and co-relation within this corpus of American Yiddish Holocaust poetry challenges the need for any alternative to be privileged over another; the emphasis on uncertainty we see in these poems offers us a perspective that embraces multiplicity and contradiction as an essential feature of the working-through of theology, of its comparative poetics.

The debate regarding the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust serves as the central context for Katz' objections to theology; he seeks distance from the possibility that his work might be interpreted as somehow theological (162).[125] It remains unclear why history and theology ought to be held to the same standard, except insofar as he seeks to defend himself against claims of theologizing: Katz lack of concern, for example, for artistic representations of the Holocaust seems to indicated acknowledgement, if not tacit acceptance, of ways of relating to the Holocaust not measured according to historicity.

The fields of Holocaust theology and Holocaust literature, especially as they developed in North America, are united by a core assumption: that the Holocaust marks a point of rupture between past and present, between our expressive capacities and the reality of the concentration camps. As Zachary Braiterman put it, noting an assumption shared and articulated at different times notably by Richard Rubenstein, Emil Fackenheim, Arthur A. Cohen, Irving Greenberg, and any number of prominent theologians of the Holocaust: "Auschwitz represents a theological point of no return" (5).[126] The proliferation of theological work on the Holocaust in North America through the 1960s, especially after the publication of Richard Rubenstein's *After Auschwitz* in 1966, reinforces both the intensity of the felt rupture, and its secondary quality, which Katz takes up as his primary historical term, its "uniqueness." Braiterman terms this trajectory of post-Holocaust theology "antitheodical," insofar as it is united by a

[125] For an overview of the debate, see especially Alan Rosenbaum's edited collection *Is the Holocaust Unique?* And Katz' own *Historicism, The Holocaust, and Zionism*.
[126] See Rubenstein; Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*; Fackenheim, *Quest for Past and Future*; Cohen; and Greenberg.

rejection of the other dominant strain in Holocaust theology, present during the Holocaust among orthodox theologians, which seeks to reconcile the destruction within a theodical, covenantal model of history, most often by expounding upon the possible reasons for God punishing the Jewish people.

In the literary world, that language of rupture quickly transformed into a failure of *language*, of representation, and of the possibilities of knowledge.[127] There are two claims that have served as the center of scholarly reflection on the relationship between literature and the Holocuast. First, Theodor Adorno's too-often quoted and misquoted dictum, "*nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch*" ("after Auschwitze, writing poetry is barbaric," 34), which is held up most commonly as a broad claim about *impossibility* of producing literature in the wake of the Holocaust.[128] Second, is Elie Wiesel's only slightly less frequently invoked assertion that "A novel about Treblinka is either not a novel, or not about Treblinka" ("The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" 7). Though Wiesel's claim seems less totalizing, over the course of his career he repeated it frequently, regularly substituting one camp for another — Auschwitz, Majdanek, Sobibor — depending on the specific text he was critiquing, indicating the scope of his belief that the concentration camp, and perhaps the Holocaust itself by extension, was beyond the capacities of those who were not there to represent.

In the United States, the insistence on unrepresentability has manifested in two ways. First, as an ethical question about individual texts of Holocaust literature, especially prose fiction, and the duty they may owe to history. This became, for critics and scholars such as Berel Lang, the primary criterion upon which Holocaust prose was to be judged, according to a measure of "authenticity," defined narrowly as historical veracity. Lang, in fact, would extend this to *all* representations of the event: "It is this impulse for historical reference, I have been suggesting, that ought to underwrite Holocaust discourse, with the standard by which it is then to be judged (a necessary if not sufficient condition) being that of history as it

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[127] As we saw in previous chapters, boundaries between ontological, phenomenological, and epistemological claims about the nature of the Holocaust (metonymized in scholarly discourse on Holocaust literature as "the concentration camp," and in the United States, "Auschwitz,") are difficult to delineate.

[128] See: Berel Lang (ed.) *Writing and the Holocaust*, a collection of essays from scholars and writers about the state and possibilities of Holocaust literature. Adorno's claim is cited by a full half of the essays in this collection, and never translated or understood the same way twice.

sets the limits for representations of the Holocaust" (32). This line of discourse saw its claims put to significant test finally in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the publication and following revelation of the fictionality of Benjamin Wilkomirski's (née Bruno Grossjean's) *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, which sparked significant, and ongoing, debate about the relationship between trauma and memory in the case of the Holocaust.[129]

Second, and more centrally tied to the United States' specific politicization of the Holocaust, this sense of unrepresentability has manifested in the dual elevation of the Holocaust survivor as the primary source of authority and as having the primary right to literary, even fictional representations of the Holocaust, and a simultaneous growing sense of panic over the nascent impossibility of ever understanding or representing the Holocaust as survivors age and die. This served as a central conceptual feature of the representation of the Holocaust in the US public sphere, and is deeply ingrained in the memorial culture of the United States, as embodied in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).

One of the USHMM's central, implicit metanarratives is that there is no meaning to the Holocaust per se: that we learn things about it and derive lessons from it, but that these are not imminent to the Holocaust itself. Avril Alba, in a comparative study of the "memorial museum" as a novel phenomenon in Holocaust museums, argues that the USHMM constructs Auschwitz as a "negative epiphany" for the world, a singular, revelatory, and theologically coded moment that manifests not the presence of God, but His absence (40).[130] A negative epiphany lays bare the fundamental moral and divine emptiness of the modern world. In this understanding, the Holocaust may never be understood, insofar as it reveals nothing to us except absence and loss. We are asked to accept that while we may empathize with and learn moral

[129] See especially Stefan Maechler's *The Wilkomirski Affair* and Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. For an odd, but perhaps indicative usage of the Wilkomirski example from a field outside of Holocaust literature and Holocaust studies, see Amy Hollywood's *Acute Melancholia*, in which she concludes, with Maechler that there is some truth to Grossjean's claims *beyond* the historical, some *traumatic* truth that exceeds or transcends its historical fictionality. (See Mächler; LaCapra; Hollywood)

[130] Alba borrows the term from Susan Sontag's *On Photography*. Neither Sontag nor Alba offer a specific definition, but Alba emphasizes its apophatic construction insofar as it rests "upon an understanding that it is the diametric opposite of the understanding of an 'epiphany' as a form of positive, direct, transformative divine revelation" (208-9n9). (See Sontag)

lessons from the survivors and victims of the Holocaust, understanding is beyond even their perception; Auschwitz is a world apart from ours.

I've drawn on Alba's characterization of the USHMM for three reasons. First, because of the centrality of the museum to the legacy and memory of the Holocaust in the United States. Second, because of the ways in which the USHMM's own epistemology of the Holocaust, as described above, is itself representative of the long and complex history of political, ideological, and historical negotiation that characterized Holocaust memory in the decades of its planning and construction (see Linenthal). Third, and finally, because Alba's description of the USHMM as encoding the Holocaust as a "negative epiphany," drawing on Susan Sontag's response to the first pictures of concentration camps published in the New York Times, is indicative of the unspoken theological coding that characterizes all three of the discourses we noted above.[131] Though they have different names for it, and mark its effects in different ways, three strands of argument that we have touched on so far — theological claims of the Holocaust as a rupture that demands a new theology; historical claims that the event was unique, and literary claims that the Holocaust is unrepresentable — all begin from that core, shared assumption noted above, that there is *something* to the Holocaust that is fundamentally *other*, that exceeds our available frameworks for understanding and expression.

The theological coding of claims to the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust is hard to ignore: to place an event beyond representation, beyond comprehension, means that all we are left with is the possibility of describing what it is *not*. The Holocaust is not only unimaginable to those who were not there, but it has even has been charaterized as unrepresentable or unspeakable even for those who experienced it. As Elie Wiesel put it: "Between a survivor's memory, and its reflection in words, his own included, there is an unbridgeable gulf" (*A Jew Today* 234). To deny the ability of even those who experienced the Holocaust to represent it in language, and thus placing it firmly beyond, and thus

[131] Alba notes that "While it is unclear whether Sontag intends to connect her term with its specific, Christian understanding, she is indeed invoking a sense of 'mystery' and 'incomprehensibility' in her use of a theological term to describe a historical event and its documentation in photographic record" (208-9n9).

representative of, the limitations of language itself: something that can be experienced, yet remains wholly indescribable, not unlike the long tradition of apophatic theology itself.

George Steiner explicitly connects this quality of unspeakability to the divine, drawing on Wittgenstein's understanding of the "limits of language" as being coterminous with "the world" itself, and the persistent notion within Christian theology that God "seems to transcend the capacities of language either to define or analogize truthfully" ("Metaphor" 154). For Steiner, too, the Holocaust marks a radically transformative moment in Judaism, and it is the *introduction* of something beyond language:

> One of the consequences of the Shoah, or Holocaust, is to have transported (violently, irreparably) into Judaism, both religious and secular, the hermeneutic dilemma. The problem as to whether there is a human form of language adequate to conceptualize and [sic] understanding of Auschwitz, as to whether the limits of language do not fall short of the limits of the Shoah experience, is now ineradicably installed in Jewish existence. (155)

In some ways, Steiner is merely articulating a problem that had been central to both theological and literary discussions of the Holocaust for some time. Yet, by claiming that Auschwitz introduces *both* problems to Judaism simultaneously, Steiner inextricably links the project of Holocaust literature to the project of Holocaust theology. Prior to the Holocaust, Steiner claims, God had been in constant dialogue with the Jewish people, or with individuals; the radical rupture of the Holocaust breaks that connection, apparently permanently: "The question of Auschwitz is far great than that of the pathology of politics or of economic and social-ethnic conflicts (important as these are). It is a question of the conceivable existence or nonexistence of God" (170). As such, the persistent act of writing becomes *itself* a theological process for Steiner, a continual attempt to reshape language or reclaim access to a world in which dialogue with God is possible.

Steiner imbues Holocaust Literature as an entire enterprise with the same theological duty that was taken up by the poetic speaker of Lamentations: the task of finding a linguistic framework that makes it possible to describe their suffering in order to reclaim dialogue with the divine. For Steiner, however, this is an already-decided problem because he begins from the understanding that the Holocaust is fundamentally unrepresentable and, as such, a radical transformation must occur in the linguistic and, by extension, theological mechanisms by which the Jewish people understand themselves. If so, the ongoing

attempts to write even in the face of an unrepresentable event should *instead* be seen as a metonym for the larger and more troubling process of Jewish communal and individual identity reformation and reconstitution in the face of the Holocaust. This would, however, return us to Berel Lang's claim that literature ought to be written, and thus read and judged, in the service of history.

Ultimately, to view the repeated, ongoing attempts to find an adequate langauge with which to speak about the Holocaust as *failures* against the ontologically other, *mysterium tremendum* that is the Holocaust would be to mischaracterize the task of literature as the search for a singular, authoritative representation.[132]

The implicit assumption imagining Jewish futurity in the face of the Holocaust is always a *theological* task underlies Roskies and Diamant's ability to make the clear distinction between poetry and theology in their characterization of Glatshteyn's *Shtralndike yidn*. Roskies and Diamant don't expand on this distinction, but as they continue, outlining in brief what they term the "liturgical turn" in immediate postwar Yiddish culture and including Kadya Moldovsky among the those who "consolidated" that shift (along with Chaim Grade), it becomes clear that it involves an elevation of the Yiddish language as "*loshn-hakdoyshim*, the language of the martyrs," and a turn toward collective confrontation with God:

> The 'we' of these poems [Glatshteyn's "*Nisht di meysim loybn got*", "The Dead Don't Praise God" and Molodovsky's "*El khanun*," "God of Mercy"] is the Jewish body politic, still grievously wounded. Only when facing off against a diminished, intimate, Yiddish-speaking God does it feel itself empowered. (119)

Even the language that they use to describe the God of Glatshteyn and Molodovsky's poems, and the combative stance implicit in their characterization of that relationship ("facing off") echoes a clear line of interpretation, especially of Glatshteyn, that we can trace at least as far back as Rosenfeld in the mid-eighties. This distinction assumes that the task of the poet-theologian, and the task of the non-theologian Holocaust poet are somehow different, as if the former is searching for something the latter is not, or speaks with an authority not granted the non-theologian poet.

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[132] The phrase '*mysterium tremendum*" or "tremendous mystery" belongs to Ruldoph Otto, who used it to develop a phenomenology of the encounter with the divine. It was borrowed explicitly by Arthur A. Cohen in his Holocaust theology, *The Tremendum*, specifically because of the impossibility of understanding beyond experience that Otto's phrase invokes.

Roskies and Diamant's characterization of the "liturgical turn," as they call it, elevates theology to some abstract or idealized height such that it can only be undertaken in very particular ways and under very particular circumstances and, in doing so, implicitly diminishes the value of the poetic in comparison, as if the two have not been inextricably intertwined since the birth of Jewish catastrophe literature. Yiddish language Holocaust poetry is always preoccupied with the inextricable push toward and flight from the divine that Tsaytlin described as central to "being a Jew". Rather than Glatshteyn suddenly transcending to the rank of theologian, as Tsaytlin's poetry above and Glatshteyn's below demonstrate, to respond to poetically Holocaust and its implications for God's existence and relationship to the Jewish people is to enact a continual process of self-reflection, refusing to offer interpretation, but rather *imagining* a multiplicity of future relationships and experiences. That is, Yiddish language Holocaust poetry is always already, if not theo*logical*, then certainly theo*poetic*.

Without Jews There Will Be No Jewish God

The opening line of Glatshteyn's 1946 poem, "*On yidn*" ("Without Jews) sets the stage for the poem's extended contemplation of the inseparable connection between the fate of the Jews and the fate of God: "Without Jews there will be no Jewish God" (1). There is no uncertainty to the claim here, no hope for redemption in the finality of this shared destruction. Shifting uneasily from the intensity of the first line's future tense construction, the second and third lines offer both an explanation of the stark opening, and introduce a sense of restrained uncertainty in their conditional construction. As the first stanza continues, returning to the originary point of that shared fate and deepening the affinity between God and the Jewish people — "and we formed you in our image" (7) — the poetic speaker offers a new perspective on Jewish history as the gradual creation of "the Jewish God." Then, at the climax of that creation, when "the Jewish God" is named as such, the poem suddenly, dramatically, changes:

אָן יידן

אָן יידן וועט נישט זיין קיין יידישער גאָט.
גייען מיר, חלילה, אַוועק פון דער וועלט,
פאַרלעשט זיך דאָס ליכט פון דיין אָרעם געצעלט.

ווייל זינט אברהם האָט דיך אין וואָלקן דערקענט,
האָסטו אויף אַלע יידישע פנימער געברענט,
פון אַלע יידישע אויגן געשטראַלט,
און מיר האָבן דיך געפורעמט אין אונדזער געשטאַלט.
און יעדן לאַנד, אין יעדער שטאָט
איז מיט אונדז אויך געווען אַ גר
דער יידישער גאָט.
און יעדער צעשמעטערטער יידישער קאָפּ
איז אַ פאַרשעמטער, צעבראָכענער, געטלעכער טאָפּ,
ווייל מיר זיינען געווען זיין ליכטיק געפעס,
דער וואָרצייכן פון דיין ממשותדיקן נס.
איצט ציילן זיך אין די מיליאָנען
אונדזערע טויטע קעפּ.
ס׳לעשן זיך אַרום דיר די שטערן.
דאָס געדעכעניש פון דיר ווערט פאַרטונקלט,
דיין מלכות ווערט באַלד אויפהערן.
דער גאַנצער יידישער פאַרזיי און פארפלאַנץ
איז פאַרברענט.
אויף טויטע גראָזן וויינען די טויען.
דער יידישער חלום און די יידישע וואָר געשענדט
זיי שטאַרבן אינאיינעם.
ס׳שלאָפן עדות גאַנצע,
עופה׳לעך, פרויען,
יונגעלייט און זקנים.
אפילו דיינע זיילן, די פעלדזן,
די שטאַמיקע ל״ו,
שלאָפן אַ טויטע, אַן אייביקן שלאָפן.

ווער וועט דיך חלומען?
ווער געדענקען?
ווער וועט דיך לייקענען,
ווער וועט דיך בענקען?
ווער וועט כו דיר, אויף אַ פאַרבענקטער בריק,
אַוועק פון דיר, כדי צו קומען צוריק?

די נאַכט איז אייביק פאַר א טויט פאָלק.
הימל און ערד אָפּגעווישט.
ס׳לעשט זיך דאָס ליכט אין דיין אָרעם געצעלט.
ס׳פלעמל די לעצטע יידישע שעה.
יידישער גאָט, ביסט שוין באַלד נישטאָ.

Without Jews

Without Jews there will be no Jewish God.
If we, oh horror, leave the world
the light from your poor tent will be extinguished.
Because since Abraham recognized you in the cloud
you have burned in all Jewish faces,
radiated from all Jewish eyes,
and we formed you in our image.

In every land, in every city
there was also a convert with us
the Jewish God.
And every smashed Jewish head
is a shamed, broken, divine container,
because we were your bright vessels,
the proof of your tangible miracle.

Now they number in the millions
our dead.
The stars around you are being extinguished.
The memory of you is becoming darkened,
your kingdom will soon cease.
Everything the Jews have sown and planted
has burned.
On dead grass the dews weep.
The Jewish dream and the Jewish reality defiled —
they die together.
Entire communities sleep,
infants, women,
the young and old.
Even your pillars, your rocks,
your original thirty-six,
sleep a death, an eternal sleep.

Who will dream of you?
Who remembers?
Who will will deny you,
who will yearn for you?
Who will leave, on a bridge of yearning,
in order to return to you?

The night is eternal for a dead people.
Heaven and earth wiped clean.
The light in your poor tent is being extinguished.
The last Jewish hour is flickering.
Jewish God, soon you will be no more. (*Shtralndike Yidn* 37–38)

This unsettling tonal shift returns the poem suddenly to the present tense, the previous lines' history now lost with each Jewish death.

The speaker of "*On yidn*" is a prophet of the people speaking back to God, foretelling His destruction. Beginning in the collective second-person, in a reversal of the language of Deuteronomy itself in which the terms and consequences of covenant are laid out, the poetic speaker forcefully reminds God of the duties He owes to the Jewish people, and of the bond that connects them.[133] For Alvin

[133] See Deuteronomy 28:15-67.

Rosenfeld, the God of "*On yidn*" is desperately diminished in the face of the "overpowering terror" of the Holocaust, and the poetic speaker here steps into a position of authority grounded in a Jewish theological understanding of history in which the relationship of God and the Jews is necessarily reciprocal, and "the destiny of God is as much tied to that of His people as the other way around" (*A Double Dying* 123). In this way, the poem reads as a warning to God against inaction, an entreaty to remember *His* duty to the Jewish people, and to intervene.

Reading this poem as a monologue, as we did in the previous chapter, the abrupt shift to the present tense of the second stanza would undo the small amount of hope contained in the conditional construction of the second and third lines. In the face of this disaster, even the implicit language of Deuteronomy no longer suffices, replaced instead with repeated invocations to and insistence on the utter finality of this destruction. Covenantal history is cyclical: destruction follows transgression, and is followed in turn by redemption; finality can be *felt* but it has little place within a covenantal paradigm of history. As the end of the second stanza announces that the *lamed-vavniks*, the thirty-six righteous people whose lives and actions balance out all the evils in the world "sleep a death, an eternal sleep" (31), all possible hope for redemption is undone. The ultimate implication would be the poetic speaker announcing to God, and to the people, the unpreventable end of both covenant and of God.

Addressing the poem to a God who not only will not reply, but also *cannot*, presents the poem as a monologic contemplation of the Jewish people's destruction as a theological event. With each line, the poem circles around the ever-present, if implicit, possibility of a world without God: if God's fate is truly inextricable from that of the Jewish people, then the finality of this poem's final line seems incompatible with Jewish theology.

Yet,\ the God within the lines of "*On yidn*" is always qualified, it is always the *"yidisher got*," the "*Jewish* God" whose fate is bound to the Jewish people, who is being destroyed. The poetic speaker here is not concerned with, not responding to, the full scope of deaths caused by the Nazis or the war, but to the religious fate of the Jewish people specifically, to the existential threat this destruction poses to the

future of *Jewishness*. The poem seems to offer little consolation — if we recall the distinction at the heart of Tsaytlin's *"Tomer*," that consolation is offered by God, and lamentation belongs to the people in the face of God's absence — and certainly no easy answers; perhaps, it suggests the best one can do is take solace in the fact that God has not abandoned the Jewish people, even if that means accepting that the Holocaust can overwhelm even God.

This poem offers *little* consolation, but it does offer some. If we take seriously the central claim of the poem, that the Jewish God will perish with the Jewish people, as the poetic expression of a theological possibility, then we can begin to recognize the more radical possibilities contained within. Much of Holocaust literary scholarship focuses on the possibility of a broken or abandoned covenant, a theme that would be taken up with equal concern by Holocaust theologians in the 1960s and onward. Insisting on this as a *shared* end for both God and the Jewish people might then be read as evidence of the preservation of the covenant even into the complete and total destruction of the Jewish people. This poem may suggest that *shared* destruction is, instead, the *completion* of that covenant.

This is a troubling possibility if we imagine an audience and readership made up primarily of survivors of the Nazis and witnesses (who were not present in Nazi-controlled Europe), who then have to reckon with a world without that relationship to God, and a Jewish existence shorn of its core religious foundations. The poem does not insist on this reading, however; it insists on nothing except the first line. The rest of the poem is couched in layers of futurity, hypothetical, and conditional relationships, and while it expands the implication of the initial claim — "Without Jews there will be no Jewish God" (1) — by the final lines, total destruction is visible, even imminent, but still remains incomplete: "Jewish God, *soon* you will be no more" (41).

The absolute certainty of the first line's future-tense claim creates the space of possibility within which the rest of the poem dwells. With the total destruction of the Jewish people, the destruction of God is assured, true, but the poem writes *against* that certainty: that the speaker can make this assertion is itself testament to its incompleteness and thus to the potentiality that this space of uncertainty and hypothetical offers. Far from the diminished and overpowered God of Rosenfeld's reading, the Jewish

God of *"On yidn*" persists and prevails even to "the last Jewish hour" (40). The central notion around which the poem turns, then, is the implicit promise within its claim that as long as the destruction of the Jewish people is not *total*, as long as *some* Jews remain, so, too, will the Jewish God.

Though not explicitly addressed, the central irony of speech that declares the total destruction of a community which includes the speaker themselves serves as an underrecognized foundation for understanding the theological imagination that runs through several of Glatshteyn's poems. For example, we can look, once more, at "*Roykh*" ("Smoke"): there is a decided absence both of Jewish bodies and of God throughout this short poem, where the former is transformed by the crematoria into a rough form, an essence, the titular smoke, and the latter rendered simultaneously absent and present by the confusing image of the poem's final couplet.

רויך

דורכן קרעמאַטאָריע־קוימען
קרויזט אַרויף אַ ייד צום עתיק יומין.
און ווי נאָר דער רויך פֿאַרשווינדט,
קנוילן אַרויף זיין ווייב און קינד.

און אויבן אין די הימלישע הויכן
ווייגען, בענקען הייליקע רויכן.
גאָט, דאָרט ווואו דו ביסט דאָ,
דאָרטן זיינען מיר אַלע אויך נישטאָ.

Smoke

Through crematoria-chimneys
a Jew curls upward to the Ancient of Days.
And as soon as that smoke disappears,
his wife and child float up.

And above in the heavenly heights
cries, yearns holy smoke.
God, wherever you are,
we are all also not there. (*Shtralndike Yidn* 16)

As in "*On yidn*," the fate of the Jewish family in this poem is absolutely certain: their death has long since passed, and their bodies already incinerated. In the moment they reach heaven, however, rather than marking the specific absence of the divine, we are offered only jarring uncertainty as to His location and

the renewed insistence on our co-absence in that unknown non-space. The repetition of appearance in disappearance in the second stanza, in which the heavens are filled with the "holy smoke" of the dead, and the paired prepositions that form the end-rhyme of the final couplet, *do/nishto* (here/not here), remind us that without the presence of the divine, the heavens themselves are a non-space, defined as we are in the final line, by absence.[134]

Most have read this final line as insisting on God's absence in the face of the Holocaust, a meditation on His abandonment of the Jewish people. Barnet Zumoff and Hershl Hartman, shape their respective translations of that final couplet in order to emphasize that resounding absence:

> O God, up where Your glories resound,
> Not even there can we be found. (7-8, translated by Barnett Zumoff)

> God, wherever you choose to be
> There, too, one cannot find such as we. (7-8, translated by Hershl Hartman " Smoke")

These translations echo Rosenfeld's reading of the poem: he notes the "theological paradox" of the final lines, in which "the destroyed Jews will become absent company for an Absent God," reading the poem as a "double negation" of both man and God (26-7). "Both in this poem *are not*" (27). Rosenfeld continues, as we discussed above, to claim the poem's exploration of the negation of poetry itself (it's in this context that he pronounces the impossibility of metaphors for Auschwitz). Both of the translations above foreground this double absence, but the further emphasize the *continuation* of God in another place: His "glories" continue to resound (7, trans. Zumoff); or it was His *choice* to be absent from the Heavens (7, trans. Hartman).

The Yiddish, and the poem itself, is more ambiguous however: God's *absence* is the only thing that is certain, and while we are tempted to read that absence as implying presence elsewhere, we, like the poetic speaker, cannot claim that with any certainty. The rhyme that opens the poem offers a possible alternate reading that invokes the shared destiny of God and the Jewish people, an unsettling pairing of a name for God with the source of the Jews' destruction (*krematorye-koymen/otik-yomen*), reinforcing either a direct connection between the two, or the destruction of God in the same cremation. Invoking the

[134] I discuss this poem at more length in Chapter One.

same shared fate that we saw centrally occupy the speaker of "*On yidn*," this opening couplet casts a more tenuous shadow over the final lines, introducing the possibility that the "holy smoke" (6) that fills the heavens comprises *both* God and the Jews; and the complex co-location of presence and absence of the final line concludes the poem with an intense *uncertainty*. Even if both are gone, the fate of the Jews and the fate of God remains inextricable, and "our" presence is defined only insofar as God is absent.

Of course, there is little solace or comfort found here. Rather, "*Roykh*" offers another perspective on the persistence of the relationship between God and the Jewish people, and the impossibility of even God entirely vacating that responsibility. It would be difficult to expect more from eight short lines; as much as they circle continually around uncertainty, these poems also refuse to claim interpretive authority (despite what others have claimed *of* them). Melissa Raphael makes a similar point about Holocaust theologies, noting that few if any theologians of the Holocaust offer their works as anything but "partial and limited responses to the questions raised by the radical evil of Auschwitz" (5). Even Tsaytlin at his most theodical — who among all the Yiddish poets whose work we are examining, is the only one to offer Holocaust poems that seem to understand, or attempt to understand the Holocaust as firmly *within* a covenantal, theodical framework — cannot claim more than the hope for faith among destruction. As a point of comparison, Tsaytlin's poem, "*Emune*" ("Faith"):

אמונה

וואו וואוינט אמונה? ווילסט געפינען
איר וואוין — צום יאוש גיי און פרעג.
דורך זיינע לענדער גייט דער וועג.
עס וואוינט אמונה אויף רואינען.

אויף דעם אַנטבלויזטן פונדאַמענט
פון אַ געביי, וואָס איז פאַרברענט,
טוען די טרערן אירע רינען.

די טרערן שפיגלען אַ באַגינען,
וואָס ליכטיקט-אויף אין פירמאַמענט
אַריבער איר און די רואינען.

אין אירע טרערן לייכט באַגינען
בשעת זי זיצט און ברעכט די הענט.
און האָסטו יאוש נישט געקענט —
אמונה וועסטו נישט געפינען.

Faith

Where does faith live? If you want
to find where it lives — go to despair and ask.
Through his lands the path leads.
Faith lives in ruins.

On the bare foundation,
of a building, which is burned,
do her tears run.

Her tears reflect a dawn,
that lights up a firmament,
over her and the ruins.

In her tears shines the dawn,
while she sits and wrings her hands,
and if you have not known ruin,
you will not find faith. (150)

This poem's insistence on the relationship between suffering and faith carries with it echoes of Job: it is enough for the poet to announce that faith can be found in the midst of disaster. Note, however, the distance of the poetic voice: entirely constructed in the second person, the speaker does not include themselves *necessarily* as one who has found faith, nor do they mark that search as complete. Here, even in a poem that to an outside audience might read as remarkably tasteless, we are reminded that it is *faith*, not *God* that is found in ruin, and that faith is a disposition, a choice made by suffering humans about how they understand and interpret that suffering. It offers *no* certainty. Rather, this is an assertion of *hope*, of faith searched for and clung to as a source of solace amidst destruction.

Glathsteyn's poems take as their grounding assumption the notion of a linked destiny, a fate shared by God and by the Jewish people. In the final section of this chapter, I will offer a close reading of two of Glashteyn's poems, one from his 1943 collection *Gedenklider* (*Remembrance Songs*), and the other from *Shtralndike yidn* (*Radiant Jews*, 1946). These poems foreground that shared destiny by portraying an anthropomorphized God among, and suffering alongside the Jewish people. The comparison of these two poems serves first the minor goal of demonstrating that the liturgical or theological turn that Roskies and Diamant note in *Shtralndike yidn* is a continuation of themes and

concerns that preoccupied the previous collection. Second, and more importantly, these poems present the humanized God, "diminished" and "intimate," true, but not to be contended with, but rather to be encountered as a fellow-sufferer, as a witness to a destruction that threatens to consume and overwhelm God and the Jewish people, and to be cared for as one would care for a comrade, a family member, in pain. As such, in presenting this suffering God, these two poems imagine another way of construing that relationship that centralizes its reciprocity. The interaction between man and divine becomes an emergent act of radical vulnerability, precarity, and uncertainty, and covenant — as the name given to the enactment of that relationship — no longer understood as a feudalistic relationship of power and protection, is reimagined as emergent in the act of *care* for a fellow suffering individual.

Listen, He Is Unhappy

Glatshteyn's 1943, "*Got iz a troyeriker maharal*" ("God is A Sad Maharal") invokes a specific moment in Jewish history and folkloric memory in other to enact a radical transformation in the God it portrays, having Him furtively sneak into a synagogue to pray, weep, and be afraid among and indistinguishable from the others inside. Living through the late 16th and early 17th century, the Maharal, Rabbi Yehuda Leyb ben Bezalel, is an important figure in early modern Jewish intellectual and philosophical history, especially as a scholar of Jewish mysticism. Through serving as Rabbi of Mikulov (in the present day Czech Republic) for the majority of his career, the Maharal is best known not for his scholarly works, but as the center of one of the most enduring pieces of European (Ashkenazi) Jewish folklore. He created a golem to protect the Jewish community of Prague.[135]

[135] Though the history of the golem — a creature of human form, though unable to speak, created by man (usually a Rabbi) out of mud, clay, or sometimes wood — is much older, finding its origins as Curt Leviant notes in a Telmudic mention of a Babylonian Rabbi "creating a man" (*The Golem* xiv), it was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that legends of the Maharal's golem began to emerge. The ending of the story has a distinct flavor of European legend to it; many of the legends of King Arthur, for example, conclude in the exact same way, with the messianic promise of a savior returning at the time of most need. However, in the earliest versions of the legend, the golem is created to perform personal tasks for the Maharal. It was not until Yudl Rosenberg's 1909 *Niflo'es Maharal* (in English as *The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal*), by far the most popular version of the story, that the golem is created "not to help with domestic chores but to fight the false accusation of ritual murder leveled against the Jews— the infamous blood libel, the thousand-year-old European Christian canard that Jews need the blood of a Christian child to bake matzas for Passover" (*The Golem* xvi). According to Leviant, the notion of the golem-as-protector, now so central to the story itself, is purely a creation of Rosenberg, transformed into part of the

The story usually goes like this: it was a period of great turmoil for the Jews of Prague, with attacks and violence in their ghetto increasing, and authorities turning a blind eye. There were even rumors that the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, who reigned from Prague, was going to order the Jews expelled or killed, further fanning the flames of violence and hatred. To protect the Jewish community, the Maharal, spiritual leader of the community, created a golem of clay from the river. He was called Yossele, the affectionate diminutive of Yosef. The Maharal would deactivate Yossele before *shabes*, so as to let him rest and to avoid violating the commandment not to work. One day he forgot, and Yossele destroyed large parts of the ghetto. The Maharal was forced to deactivate him permanently. The body of the golem was then stored in the attic of the Prague synagogue until such a time that he would need to return to defend the Jews of Prague once more.

To render God here as a Maharal, lamenting the destruction his creation has caused, immediately sets us outside of the entire issue of blame, or anger. The Maharal is a heroic figure in Jewish folklore: though his golem destroyed the Prague ghetto, he is remembered for the act of creation, not destruction; neither is he blamed for not preventing it, but lauded for deactivating Yossele after the fact. We are reminded of God's covenantal role as teacher and protector, and pushed by this analogy to keep that in mind through the poem, even as we are told that He has brought on perhaps the end of days.

גאָט איז אַ טרויעריקער מהר״ל

גאָט איז אַ טרויעריקער מהר״ל.
אַ שטראַל פון זיין גוטסקייט
פאַלט אויף אַ פונצטערער וועלט.
ער זיצט ביים קוואַל פון זיין וואונדער
און וואַרפט אַריין שוועָרע שטיינער.
הער, ער איז אומגליקלעך איינער.
די פאַר׳גולמ׳טע שטראָף איז שוין מער נישט זיינע —
זי האָט אים איבערגעמעכטיקט,
יעדער זיפֿץ איז געַרעכטיק.
יעדער געשריי צעבליצט די פאַראיינזאַמטע הימלען.
די אייביקייט דערלויפט צום משוגע׳נסטן פינאַל.
גאָט איז אַ טרויעריקער מהר״ל.

legend partly as a result of its popularity, but also significantly because Rosenberg, employing a well-worn authoritative device, claimed to have been simply translating a "three hundred year old manuscript" he found in the library of Metz, written by the Maharal's son (*The Golem* 5).

גאָט איז אַ טרויעריקער מהר״ל.
דער שאַל פון שופר
יאָגט אָן אין וואַלט אַ ימים–נוראימ׳דיקן צימער.
דאָס האַרץ פון גרויסן שטראָפער
איז ביטער און צעבראָכן.
נישט ער האָט אויסגעטראַכט אַזוי פיל בראָכן.
ער ווערט פאַרשעמט און קליין אין געמיט,
ווי יעדער דערשראָקענער ייר.
שטילערהייט וועט ער זיך אַריינ׳גנב׳ענען אין שול.
אַן איינגעהילטער אין טלית וועט ער שטיין
אין פּאָליש ווי אַ בעל–תשובה
און רייסן די פאַרטונקלטע הימלען מיט געוויין.

א ווינט גיט א האַרבסטיקן ציטער.
אַ בוים גיט זיך אַ צעוויג.
אַ בלאַט גיט א פאַל.
גאָט איז אַ טרויעריקער מהר״ל.

God Is A Sad Maharal

God is a sad Maharal.
A ray of his goodness
falls on a dark world.
He sits at the spring of His wonder
and throws in heavy stones.
Listen, He is unhappy.
The golemed Punishment is now no longer His —
it has overpowered Him.
Every sigh is right.
Every scream flashes through the lonely heavens.
Eternity hurries to the maddest of finales.
God is a sad Maharal.

God is a sad Maharal.
The call of the shofar
lets loose in the forest a trembling like the Days of Awe.
The heart of the great punisher
is bitter and broken.
Not he who thought up so many catastrophes.
He becomes ashamed and His heart sinks,
like every frightened Jew.
Silently he will sneak into the synagogue.
Wrapped in prayer shawl he will stand
in the anteroom like a repentant
And tear at the dark heavens with his weeping.

A wind blows an autumn tremble.
A tree sways.
A leaf falls.
God is a sad Maharal. (*Gedenklider* 68–69)

God is present and among the Jewish people here, humanized and overwhelmed by fear and grief: instead of asking why He has allowed His creation to run wild and destructive, the poetic speaker instead asks us, directly, only to "Listen," because "He is unhappy" (6). This God is offered as an equal, not ineffable and certainly not omnipotent, but like "every frightened Jew" running to the synagogue to seek repentance, tragically ironic as the image may be (20). We are asked, in that moment, to attend to His suffering as we would any other, just to listen.[136]

By the second stanza, the tragedy that God laments has multiplied beyond even His recognition ("Not he who thought up so many catastrophes" 18), though the poem also takes care to recognize and acknowledge that God does not shy away from His own culpability in this destruction: "He becomes *ashamed* and his heart sinks" (19, my emphasis). It is the period between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and those gathered in the synagogue are praying to God to absolve them of their sins and assure their prosperity for the new year. In this line, as the sound of the shofar rumbles through the air, we realize the full implications of God's failure here: these prayers are now beyond His power to answer; these catastrophes were not only beyond His control, but even His imagining. As such, the poem paints a portrait of the divine who *not only* suffers alongside the Jewish people, but also suffers *because* of His ultimate responsibility for the catastrophes that now beset them.

The God of this poem stands and prays along with the repentant Jews during this critical liturgical period, as if asking for atonement Himself — perhaps putting us as readers in the position He would have otherwise occupied, with the ability to pass judgment, or to forgive. However, the poem is not invested in that decision — and certainly makes no hints toward any resolution of it. Instead, the closing lines seem to indicate that this is not a passing thing, but a new and permanent feature of the world:

> A wind blows an autumn tremble.
> A tree sways.
> A leaf falls.

[136] Critically, although not a concern here per se, the poem is careful not to avoid the issue of ultimate culpability: "punishment" is His creation, and both God here and the poetic speaker recognize that the source of His despair is the fact that He no longer has control over creation — perhaps not just punishment, but the world itself. "*Yeder zifts iz gerekhtik*," we are told, "every sigh" is "true," "correct," or even "just" (9).

God is a sad Maharal. (25-8)

To end the poem on this image requires us to imagine a God totally bereft of any omnipotence or omniscience, and to approach God with a sympathy and compassion that sits uneasily in a relationship of such disparate power as that of covenant.

Melissa Raphael argues that the sense of betrayal felt by the first generation of Holocaust theologians in the United States, such as Richard Rubenstein, and shared by survivor-writers such as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, emerges as a response to placing particularly high value on omnipotence as a defining feature of the divine. She notes

> the classical attribute of omnipotence and mercy is still predicated of God and the protestor is angry that God chose to refrain from its exercise. Were God less supremely powerful, the protestor might feel compassion for God: as it is, he feels betrayed. Conversely, if God cannot, after all, be confessed as a saving God but has proved ineffectual, then while he cannot be blamed for his desertion, his humiliation and exposure as unequal to the demands of history render him a God not worth professing. (*Female Face* 35)

The God of *"Got iz a troyeriker maharal*" is certainly not a saving God, but crucially — contra Roskies and Diamant — neither is He confronted, humiliated, or abandoning the Jewish people. He is ashamed, and the poem acknowledges that the shame is justified, but humiliation, as an affect or emotion, *separates* one person from a group, marking them out as having failed — humiliation is imposed from the outside. Instead, the shame we witness God experience works in the opposite way, to make Him understandable and sympathetic: "He becomes ashamed and His heart sinks, Like every frightened Jew" (19-20).

By humanizing God through the mechanism of shared affect, and shared outlet, making Him recognizable to us and exposing His internal, emotional world, *"Got iz a troyeriker maharal*" introduces an ethical element to the relationship we as readers have to this God, bound up in the exhortation in the first stanza, to "Listen, He is unhappy" (6). This is the only moment in the poem that breaks the otherwise third-person narration, addressing the reader directly. The singularity of this direct address signals the importance of this line to understanding how *we*, as poetic addressee, stand in relation to the God of the poem. Certainly we have a kind of readerly power over Him, the power of judgment and decision; the power to listen or ignore, yet, at the same time, if we take care to follow the poetic speaker's call, then we

understand that to "listen" is not to cast blame, but to be attentive to the other and to understand their unhappiness as such.

We are asked to focus only on the *fact* that He is unhappy. A simple thing, but it bears repeating that from a position that imagines the divine omnipotent and ineffable, to acknowledging and granting God these fallible, human emotions, may be unthinkable, let alone Him being unhappy because His creation has overpowered Him, run rampant across the world, and now threatens the destruction of God and the Jewish people. As such, within the imperative construction of that line, we are already confronted with a novel relational position vis-a-vis the divine, one that rejects the otherness of God entirely. I'm reminded in this moment of "*On yidn*," and the poetic speaker's insistence, of God, that "we formed you in our image" (7), another reversal, or undoing of the traditional dynamic of power in favor of *affinity*. The God of this poem possesses an emotional world akin to our own, and the poetic speaker compels us to attend to that, to recognize, for lack of a better word, the humanity of God as a being deserving of our attention, sympathy, and care.

Melissa Raphael's feminist theology of the Holocaust builds on and transforms Emmanuel Levinas' theorization of face-to-face encounter with the other as imparting on us an ethical demand and duty to (at the very least) not cause harm (Raphael 100–15).[137] Raphael's theology differs from the theological imagination we are tracing in Glatshteyn's poem in several crucial ways: first and foremost, it is deeply invested in reclaiming a space for women and women's experiences of the Holocaust within the discourse of Holocaust theology, which has been and continues to be dominated by male voices and to assume a male perspective in its accounting for the experience of the Holocaust. This is a theology of relation, of the experience of one person in contact with another, and while I argue for similar ethical and theological claims emergent in this poetry, I do not want to downplay the significance of the specific experiences of the inmates from whose testimonies Raphael develops her theology: these American Yiddish poets, like the speakers of their poems, are acutely aware of their own positionality, and their own relationship to the Holocaust turns around that specific position. I will discuss this at length in the next

[137]See especially "The Paradox of Morality: Interview with Emmanuel Levinas" (in Bernasconi and Wood 68–80)

two chapters. What I am suggesting, here, instead is that Raphael's theology of relation offers a parallel movement to that we are tracking in Glastshteyn's poems, that grounds its theological perception in the recognition of the frailty and vulnerability of the suffering other, and take pains to attend to and care for the one in pain.

What Raphael suggests in constructing her theology, is that the suffering face — in this case "the almost erased human face" of the women inmates — holds a particular kind of authority, not because of any force they can exert, but rather because of their extreme vulnerability (104). Raphael argues that once we suspend our concern for a patriarchal (omnipotent, omniscient, reinforcing of earthly power hierarchies) God, we can conceive of covenant as a relationship of care and love, of "mutuality and reciprocity" between humanity and God, thus to "conserve the personhood of self and other by relation is also to conserve the framework and possibility of covenantal relationship" (88); "Relationship was a clothing of the naked; a re-touching of the divine image" (105); God emerges in and from the act of caring for the other. In the midst of the suffering of Auschwitz, often selfless acts of interpersonal care allowed for the careful preservation of humanity in the women inmates, and "when human personhood is carefully tended so as to remain reflective of the divine personality it images, then the divine personality achieves immanence *by* its reflection" (88). The *selflessness* of this act is highlighted in the next poem we will discuss, in which the act of caring for a suffering God in the face of His inability to offer solace or comfort in return is the central thematic feature of the poem.

I am not suggesting, however, that we can derive the same developed theology from Glatshteyn's poems; that would run counter to the poems' own refusal to offer any guidance. In fact, the final lines are the most enigmatic by far, leaving us only with the lingering sense that this humanized, relatable God is part of a new and permanent state of being: just as leaves fall in the autumn, so is God a sad Maharal, a creator unable to contend with the destructive tendencies of His own creation. The poem has little to say on what this new situation means for the future of the Jewish people, or the catastrophe still going on at the time of the poem's publication. As a response to the Holocaust, the speaker of this poem only offers us

a disposition of care, a recognition that despair can be so great as the transcend the human world and engulf even the divine.

Published three years later, Glatshteyn's *"Mayn vogl-bruder*" ("My Wander-Brother") offers an almost identical characterization of the divine — sad, powerless, and in need of care — which extends that of "*Got iz a troyeriker maharal*" and thus serves as a useful point of comparison for thinking through some of the further implications of this novel relationship with the divine. This poem begins where the previous concluded, with God and the poetic speaker relating to each other through intimate, familiar terms. God remains defined by His emotional world, by sadness, the same quality we were made suddenly aware of in the previous poem, but here His presence has been welcomed, and actively embraced by the poetic speaker, who talks with God as equals, and who sits with Him in silence.

מיין וואָגל–ברודער

כ׳האָב ליב מיין טרויעריקן גאָט
מיין וואָגל–ברודער.
כ׳האָב ליב זיך צוזוזעצן מיט אים אויף אַ שטיין
און אויסשטומעלן פון זיך אַלע רייד.
ווייל אַז מיר זיצן אַזוי ביידע געפֿלעפט,
ווערן אונדזערע מחשבות באַהעפט
אין שווייגן.

מיין מידער גאָט פאַררויכערט אַ פּאַפּיראָס
און פאַרציט דעם ערשטן רויך.
ס׳צינדט זיך אַ שטערן, אַ פייערדיק אות.
זיינע גלידער בענקען נאָך שלאָף,
די נאַכט ליגט אונדז צופוסנס ווי אַ שאָף.

מיין טייערער גאָט,
וויפיל תפילות צו אים האָב איך פאַרשוועכט.
וויפיל מאָל האָב איך אים געלעסטערט,
דורך די נעכט,
און געוואַרעמט די שרעקעוודיקע ביינער
ביים פייערטאָפּ פון וויסן.
און דאָ זיצט ער, מיין חבר, נעמט מיך אַרום,
און טיילט מיט מיר דעם לעצטן ביסן.

דער גאָט פון מיין אומגלויבן איז פּרעכטיק,
ווי ליב איז מיר מיין פאַרשלאַפּטער גאָט,
איצט ווען ער איז מענטשלעך און אומגערעכטיק.
ווי דערהויבן איז דער שטאָלצער יורד,
ווען ס׳מינדסטע קינד איז מורד
אין זיין געבאָט.

דורך יבשות און ימען,
וועלן מיר שוין אַזוי בלאָנדזשען און בלאָנדזשען צוזאַמען.

צו אַ דרעמלענדיקן גאָט טראַכט איך אַזוי פון זיך:
ס׳שטרעקט זיך אָפט אין דער וואַרעמסטער היימישקייט —
אַווילדע פרעמד.
און נאָך איידער מען באַנעמט דעם סוד דערפון,
דערפילט מען אַז די אייגענע איבעריקייט
האָט זיך צעבליט ווי מאָך אויף מצבה.
איז דאָס די שטאָט וואָס איך האָב געבויט?
איז דאָס די גאַס וואָס איר האָב איך אָנגפאַרטרויט
יעדער נאַכט פון מיין זכרון?
וויפיל זומערן זיינען מיר דאָ געקומען צו–חלום?
אַהער בין איך געקומען זיך פאַרוואָרצלען און פאַרשטאַמען,
דאָ האָב איך געוואָלט פאַרפלאַנצן שטילקייט
אויף אַן אייגענעם לעבעדיקן בית–עולם
פון טאַטע–מאַמע.
ווייל טויט האָב איך דאָרט געהאַט איבערגענוג.
אַהער בין איך שוין געקומען, אַ יורש פון טויט,
אַן אַנטרונענער.

דו רעדסט פון זיך,
שווייגט מיין וואָגל–ברודער,
און איך טראַכט פון אונדז אַלעמען,
אַזוי צו זאָגן:
וויפיל חורבן דאַרף אַ פאָלק פאַרטראָגן,
אַז ס׳זאָל אין אויפבוי אַלץ נאָך גלייבן.
איצט אַז ס׳וואַלגערט זיך אין שטויבן,
איז דאָס פאָלק געטלעכער פון מיר.
ס׳וועלן נאָך פעלקער קומען זיך בוקן
צו זיין ווייטיק.

אָבער גאָט, מיין ברודער,
צו וואָס האָסטו אַזוי דערהויבן מיין פאָלק
און צעשטערנט זיין אומגליק
איבערן גאַנצן הימל?

ווייטיק, בלוט, געלעכערטע הענט,
רחמנות פון אויסגערונען אָדערן —
אַ קינדערשער משל מיט נאַרישע רייד.
איך האָב עס געכפלט אויף זעקס מיליאָן,
איך האָב דעם משל געגעבן באַשייד.
מיין פאָלק, מיין זון, מיין טרוים.
וועט אייביק בליען געקרייציקט אויף אַ ליכטיקן בוים.

מיין גאָט שלאָפט און איך וואַך איבער אים,
מיין מידער ברודער חלומט דעם חלום פון מיין פאָלק.
ער ווערט קליין ווי אַ קינד,
און איך וויג אים איין אין חלום פון מיין פאָלק.
שלאָף, מיין גאָט, מיין וואָגל–ברודער,
שלאָף אָריין אין חלום פון מיין פאָלק.

My Wander-Brother

I love my sad God,
my wander-brother.
I love to sit with him for a while on a stone
and silence all the speech from myself.
Because when we sit like this, both confused
our worries become entwined —
in silence.
A star ignites, a fiery letter.
Its limbs yearn for sleep,
the night lies at our feet like a sheep.

My dear God,
how many prayers to him have I desecrated.
How many times have I blasphemed Him,
through the nights,
and warmed my frightened bones
at the firepower of knowledge.
And here He sits, my comrade, and hugs me,
and shares with me that last bite of His food.

The God of my disbelief is glorious —
how dear to me is my sickly God,
now that He is human and unjust.
How elevated is the proud fallen one,
now that his least child has revolted
against his commandment.
Through lands and seas,
we will wander like this and wander together.

To a dreaming God I think this to myself:
into the warmest hominess often stretches —
a wild strangeness.
And even before we understand the secret of it
we feel that our own redundancy
has flourished like moss on a tombstone.
Is this the city I built?
Is this the street to which I entrusted
every night of my memory?
How many summers did we come here to dream?
To here I came to place my root and stem,
here I would have planted silence
in the living cemetery
of my own parents.
Because I had had more than enough of death there
To here I have now come, an heir of death,
An escapee.

You speak of yourself,

Silently says my wander-brother,
and I think of all of us,
and say:
How much destruction should a people bear,
that they should still believe in rebuilding everything.
Now that it wanders wallowing in dust,
the people is godlier than I.
Other people will come and bow
to its pain.

But God, my brother,
Why did you glorify my people,
and scatter[138] its misfortune
across the entire heavens?

Pain, blood, perforated hands,
pity from emptied veins —
a childish fable with foolish words.
I have multiplied it by six million,
I have given the fable a solution.[139]
My people, my son, my dream
Will forever bloom crucified on a bright tree.

My God sleeps and I watch over Him,
my tired brother dreams the dream of my people,
he becomes small like a child,
and I rock Him to sleep in the dreams of my people.
Sleep, my God, my wander-brother,
sleep into the dream of my people. (*Shtralndike Yidn* 39–41)

There are a number of ways to read this poem: It would be easy to read the poem as a commentary on a hierarchical relationship between man and God, and thus to see it as making a claim about God's benevolence toward the poetic speaker (and the Jewish people) despite their turning away from Him. Given the friendship and care that the humanized God of the poem gives to the poet, such an interpretation would lead us to read this as a kind of apologetic for faith in the face of catastrophe, reminding us that God remains with the Jewish people even as they turn away from him.

Edward Alexander, on the other hand, reads the poem as an exercise in Glatshteyn articulating his own ambivalence toward Jewish religious belief in the face of the Holocaust. This reading builds on Glatshteyn's reputation for distancing himself from, or even actively disavowing Jewish religious practice

[138] *Tseshternt.* Lit: destroyed, demolished, from *"shtern*" to hinder or demolish. The poem here plays on the homophony *"tseshternt"* and "*shtern*" ("star").
[139] *Basheyd*. Alternatively: an interpretation.

in the years prior to the Holocaust, as we touched on briefly at the opening of this chapter. Alexander argues that Glatshteyn "looks upon this religion to some extent as an outsider, one who has become alienated from its language and beliefs, and who revisits it nostalgically" (24). For Alexander, "*Mayn vogl-bruder*" is the ultimate expression of an ambivalence born of a "mixture of skepticism and belief, of aggression and reconciliation," raising the important questions of whether this frail and "lovable God [is] really the God of the Jews, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (26). Invested in reading the poem as if an unmediated expression of the author' own internal world, of Glatshteyn's belief, it is not surprising that Alexander comes to finally assert that the poem refuses to step out of that ambivalence, ending with a "very small, childlike, helpless God, entirely dependent on the few remaining Jews willing to dream Him into existence" (26).

Alexander's reading is incomplete, however, even without placing this poem in conversation with "*Got is a troyeriker maharal"* because it does not account for the reciprocity of the relationship described here. The first stanza is *far* from ambivalent. Even if the central line from which Alexander draws his reading, a line that has found some notoriety among scholars of Holocaust literature apart from the poem itself "The God of my disbelief [or unbelief] is glorious" (19), presents a complex and possibly ambivalent disposition toward the the divine, the overarching affect of this poem, the warmth and love the poetic speaker feels for this "sad God" is entirely unqualified (1). This emotional connection, the deeply interpersonal language, even the collective "we" used to refer to the poetic speaker and God used throughout the poem asserts that this relationship here is of a different order than an individual addressing even a diminished God toward whom they are ambivalent. It is not an attempt to reconcile this God with that of Jewish history, as Alexander seems to desire, but to accept this God, "small like a child" as He is, to attend to His sadness and suffering, and "rock Him to sleep in the dreams of my people" (68). The actions God takes toward the poetic speaker, in turn, are distinctly human gestures, acts of caring performed by one person to another — hugging, sharing food, sleeping comfortably and safely in another's presence.

Rosenfeld's own reading of the poem which foregrounds its affective landscape, results in a characterization of the divine similar to ours. Contra Alexander, God for Rosenfeld:

> is gravely demoted and translated into humbler, sadder terms. Like the wandering Shechinah (divine manifestation) mentioned in numerous *midrashim*, he is more the victim than the master of his people's fate and has become, like another displaced and weary Jew, worn down and almost exhausted by the burdens of a difficult history. One feels pitying affection for him rather than any awe. (122)

In the place of confrontation, Rosenfeld reads "a genuinely felt pathos, that which belongs to family feeling at its most intimate and compassionate" (122), built on the understanding we noted above, and again with "*On yidn*," that the fate of the Jews and that of God is inextricably linked. Rosenfeld, however, places this poem in a different trajectory fromours: where we read Glatshteyn's poems as expressions of a changing, multifaceted attempt to imagine multiple theological possibilities in the face of the Holocaust, Rosenfeld understands them to be situated along a single developing theological line of thought that *culminates* in "*On yidn*."

In our reading above, we understood the opening cry of "*On yidn*" — "Without Jews there will be no Jewish God" (1) as announcing a *future* condition, and through the poem's development, concluded with its taking comfort in the miniscule solace that God remains present with the Jews even to their last breath. Rosenfeld, on the other hand, reads that cry as announcing the *present* condition of the Jews, or, at least an *inevitability*. He reads the poem as a definitive statement on the permanent disempowerment of the divine: "In Glatstein's post-Holocaust rewriting, though, there is no *tikkun*, or healing of the cosmic rupture, but only the shards of the disaster piled up to evidence the extinction rather than the effulgence of the creative fire" (124). We might credit this to his use of Nathan Halper's translation of the poem, which renders it in the *present* tense: "Without Jews, there is no Jewish God" (123).[140] This reading is easy to sympathize with, especially given the complexities of despair and hope that underlie "*On yidn*'s" initiating cry, yet as we mentioned above, there are no certainties to "*On yidn*," and Rosenfeld reads the poem as far more declarative and the action as far more complete than the Yiddish poem itself suggested.

[140] As opposed to the line itself, which is in the future tense, an incomplete action or a prediction.

As a result of that slightly altered first line, the overall emotional character of the poem, as Rosenfeld encounters it, is more akin to pity than the mutual care we are describing. Even without reading the first line differently, this is certainly a possibility borne out by the poem, a result of a focus on different poetic priorities rather than necessarily traceable to an alternate translation. Those priorities focus Rosenfeld's attention on the ways in which Glatshteyn's theological imagination might be read in the service of a linguistic-poetic mission, rather than for their own sake. This is a poetry of survival, Rosenfeld claims from the beginning, and his reading of Glatshteyn is always in the service of that goal. At the end of his discussion of Glatshteyn's poetry, Rosenfeld returns several times to the question: "what to make of a diminished thing?" For Rosenfeld, this is Yiddishkeit, Jewishness, and the question of how to survive as a Jewish poet "when the greater part of the Jewish world that one has known" has been destroyed (124). Glatshteyn's Holocaust poetry, for Rosenfeld, can be read as a kind of *bildungsroman* of a poet reclaiming symbolic purpose in the newfound urgency of preserving the Yiddish language and Yiddish poetry as an expressive form that might render *something* of the Holocaust meaningful in human terms.

If this is, indeed, a poetry of survival, then to limit that survival to the Yiddish language, and in doing so dismiss (perhaps ironically) discussion of the divine as a metaphorical or symbolic representation of the struggle for identity and poetry in the face of destruction undercuts the centrality of the theological imagination, of God at least as an addressable other, to the entire conceit of Jewish catastrophe or survival poetry. Crucial to imagining a Jewish futurity, then, is reckoning with the necessary transformation that must take place in the relationship between the Jewish people and God. This requires a reading of the poems in this chapter that embraces not only the necessary incompleteness of individual poems, but also the discordance of theological imagination that emerges within and among collections of poems, rather than reading them as a singular developing trajectory that culminates in a authoritative statement about, for example, the irretrievable absence of the divine.

That said, Rosenfeld's answer to the question he poses of Glashteyn again and again, of what to do with Yiddishkeit as a Yiddish poet post-Holocaust, arrives at a remarkably similar position to that

which I am suggesting of Glatshteyn's most speculative theological imaginings: "What to make of a diminished thing: Nothing less than a thing of beauty, to be fulfilled and cared for, watched over and preserved in its sacredness" (126). Here (unlike the language, in Rosenfeld's argument) this does not need to lead to restoration, or to any kind of attempt to regain what was lost, but instead remains in that position of care, insisting on the importance of this new relationship: "The God of my disbelief is glorious — / How dear to me is my sickly God, / Now that He is human and unjust" (19-21).

The conclusion of "*Mayn vogl-bruder*" leaves us with the image of a relationship grounded in a chosen reciprocal bond: whether we read "*bruder*" ("brother") as familial or camaraderie, any sense of God possessing power over the poetic speaker has been done away with. In fact, by the final stanza, the poetic speaker's characterization of their disposition toward God has shifted *further* toward the kind of selfless care that Raphael noted, as an older brother caring for a small, childlike sleeper. God, dreaming and rocked to sleep in the arms of the poetic speaker, has already taken explicit responsibility for the death of "six million," and announced those dead as "godlier" than He (62, 51). That articulation is not new information for the speaker. Rather, it seems to serve the same function for God as the monologue poems of our previous chapter did for their speakers: a necessary, perhaps cathartic pronouncement to whomever might be listening, the performative gesture of accepting that responsibility.[141]

The abrupt transition from God's speech to Him asleep only reinforces the very human nature of this divine, and of the relationship between speaker and sleeper: as one person to another, separate from any divine action, culpability, or covenantal concern. Much like the God of Leyvik's lullaby, the speaker here has power over the vulnerable, sleeping God, true, but as Raphael reminds us, there is a distinct ethical power in that vulnerability as well, insofar as it, one vulnerable person to another, demands care. At the close of the poem, the divine's existence is a product of and *ensured by* the care the speaker gives Him, just as the speaker survived previously through the human warmth and gestures of God in the second stanza (17-18), a relationship of mutual trust, rather than contract or coercion. The poem provides

[141] It's also worth acknowledging the intense and direct critique of Christianity that is the penultimate stanza, though it's not entirely clear where agency lies in that stanza.

no pathway toward understanding, even in His admission of culpability; God provides little by way of explanation. His speech is more a cry of anguish than a response to the speaker's questions (58-64). Yet, it does seem to indicate a possible future for this relationship if it is built not on the desire for an impossible knowledge, but on the acceptance of the need, and obligation for care manifest in the closing lines.

Conclusion

If, as I said at the opening of this chapter, there is a feature that unifies the theological imagination of this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry it is a radical uncertainty about the possible future for the Jewish people. What emerges from their poetic responses to the Holocaust, however, is not a cripppling inability to speak, as Holocaust scholars have characterized the literature that would emerge from the concentations camps and elsewhere in the years after the conclusion of the war. Preoccupied with *"why*," those post-war writers were faced with a fundamentally unanswerable question. In this poetry, rather, composed in the midst of the destruction, the questions is less *why* than *how*: how to live, how to continue, and how to reconcile the survival of one witnessing the Holocaust from the United States with the possibility of a complete destruction of the communities of European Jewry.

By actively accepting the complexity of their own positions, and the *uncertainty* (perhaps even unknowability) of that *why*, the poems we have discussed in this chapter open space for a multiplicity of hypothetical futures to emerge, both with and without God and, crucially, without privileging any particular path forward. There is never a question, in any of the collections of poetry I have encountered, of an end to the search for understanding: not only do these poems not claim to *be* the end, but offer *nothing* that helps us better perceive the nature or intent of the destruction. That is a project only taken up in the later years. Even in the most generative moments, such as the two final Glatshteyn poems discussed above, little is offered to guide us toward any of the futures, we are left only with the foundations for *yet another* positionality; the poetic speaker is satisfied with presenting us with an experience of this new relational disposition, and says nothing of its potential as a basis for further theological imagination. This

refusal to close the door on other possibilities, even those that contradict a given poem, is what allows the landscape of these poems' collective theological imagination to resist a singular interpretation.

It is difficult to conceptualize a reading of poetry that rests on attentiveness to its uncertainty, and it would be disingenuous of me to claim that *my* readings are the terminus of the discussions of these poems. I am insisting only that if we are to acknowledge and engage with Yiddish Holocaust poetry as such, then relegating its theological imagination to a secondary position — a stepping stone toward more lofty humanist reflections about the state of man, or metatextual goals about the possibility of reclaiming a meaningful place for literature as a tool for explaining the world, let alone the Holocaust — does little more than reduce the *poetics* of these poems to some barrier to meaning, just as we saw with metaphor in the first chapter. Rather, as the example of Glatshteyn's poetry above demonstrates, central to the formation and transformation of Jewish existence in the face of, let alone in the wake of the Holocaust is the *question* — not the answer — of how to maintain a relationship with the divine *without* absolving Him of blame for the Holocaust and, most importantly, without seeking to justify the destruction.

In this chapter, and the two that preceded it, we've looked in depth at the ways in which these poems take up the duty or obligation to respond to the Holocaust, and the mechanism by which they enact those responses: metaphor, monologue, and foregrounding uncertainty as a space of theological imagination. Each of these tools, though reduced or dismissed as secondary by previous scholarship, has played a central role in each of these poems, not only in shaping their response to the Holocaust, but also placing each poem within a number of traditions and contexts, drawn from Jewish history, Jewish theology and liturgy, and from modern literature and life. We have looked outward from the poetic texts, to how they interact with and form a response to the horrors of the world around them. In the following chapters, we'll reverse that gaze. The language of uncertainty, vulnerability, and precarity offer a crucial entree into the next two chapters' discussion of how this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry constructs the subject-positions of its own poetic speakers: themselves *surviving*, not subject to the physical threat of the Holocaust, but tasked with a felt duty, a need, to speak for and on behalf of the Jewish community as a whole facing existential assault. The next two chapters examine what it means for the speakers of the

poems to position themselves in relation both to the dead and to the communities around them in much the same way Glatshteyn's speakers constructed their relationship to God; what it means, ultimately, for these poems to *bear witness* to the Holocaust.

Chapter Four: I Was Not in Treblinka

As a categorical marker, "Holocaust literature" has been much less capacious and much more ideologically charged than the name itself might suggest. The definition offered by Roskies and Diamant that I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation is worth revisiting: "Holocaust literature comprises all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it" (2). Roskies' and Diamant's aim in constructing this definition was to avoid the essentializing claims of the definitions that preceded theirs, an attempt to embrace the multiplicity of literatures to emerge from the Holocaust. As I described in the introduction, however, by framing inclusion in the genre around the impact of a literary text on public memory, thereby judging a text's artistic value on its reception history, *or* on how it was shaped by memory this definition offers an especially narrow frame for including texts written during the war, which remain largely unread by later generations and, of course, cannot be shaped by memories of events that have not yet concluded.

When Roskies and Diamant discuss the works produced in the United States during the war they do so through the framework of "literature of mobilization." In doing so, they limit both their analysis and the appellation "Holocaust literature" to outward facing texts that aim at motivating some kind of collective or political action. This is one of the few moments when American Yiddish Holocaust literature features in this anthology, and it is, of course, Glatshteyn's *"A gute nakht velt,"* which they read as rejecting the non-Jewish world and calling for a return to Jewish isolation in response to the rising antisemitism in Europe. To call this poem "literature of mobilization" ignores all the ironic features of the poem that despair because of the *impossibility* of that return. This interpretive framework is certainly supported (and, as we saw above, the poem bears multiple and often contradictory readings), but it rests on a reductive understanding of the poem as little more than a naive reflection on the power of Jewish self-sufficiency to motivate and enable artistic expression.

Furthermore, the imposition of this criteria of "shaping public memory" and category of "literature of mobilization" precludes our encounter with literature on its own terms insofar as it only acknowledges as meaningful these texts' outward facing aspect. In addition, as the brief example above

illustrates, it does not leave space for the kind of ambivalence, hesitance, or even contradiction that is ubiquitous across the tradition of catastrophe literatures. For example, including Glatshteyn's *poetic* text among a group of "mobilizing" texts otherwise composed of journalistic writing and reportage, as if its poetics are secondary to its superficial call-to-action, defining the *literary* qualities of this poem in terms of its historical positionality. Finally, it relies on the same tendency toward retrospective reading that we noted in our previous discussion of the poem that ascribes more knowledge to Glatshteyn — or at least more *certainty* — than the poet could have had.[142]

Insofar as Roskies and Diamant's definition also implies a *reading practice*, in the case of wartime writing outside of Europe we are pushed to highlight the impact this literature has had on a post-war understanding of what was happening in the "Jew-Zone". In this sense, although the category of "literature of mobilization" is decidedly limited in its scope, because it is oriented toward Europe and toward the saving and rescue of Eastern European Jewry, Roskies and Diamant preempt arguments against the inclusion of, for example, the works of Yankev Glatshteyn or Arthur Koestler based on their geography. In doing so, Roskies and Diamant open a space for broader and more critical engagement with other wartime literatures being produced in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere, that is deeply invested in the events happening in Europe, but lacks the easy categorical quality of being produced inside its borders. Furthermore, and more directly, in creating this category of "literature of mobilization," Roskies and Diamant push us to read this wartime writing as revealing a counterhistory that challenges the still extant (though now less prevalent) myth that the "Free Zone" did not know what has happening to the Jews in Nazi-controlled Europe. As such, though not engaging with the texts we are reading, it provides a useful basis for comparison, insofar as this American Yiddish literature reveals not a counterhistory, but instead expresses a deep awareness of the *contingency* of the community within which and for which it writes.

This American Yiddish Holocaust literature expresses little desire for political mobilization, but instead pushes its readership to reflect on their own position and their own relationship to the events

[142] This is, of course, an ahistorical kind of categorization not least because no one was mobilized by this literature.

already underway in Europe. Even Glatshteyn at his most political in *"A gute nakht, velt*" gestures toward a symbolic mobilization at best, pushing instead for a deeply critical reflection on the promises of modernity. A literature of mobilization, on the other hand, assumes a readership that is *unaware* of the destruction of Europe's Jews. This American Yiddish literature takes at least a growing awareness of the full extent of the Holocaust for granted, understanding that the majority of its readership retains close cultural, if not familial connections to Eastern Europe. As such, it is much more invested in describing the position of its own community of readers: Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants whose identities are tied up in those very communities being destroyed, who find themselves in a nation that has offered them at best a lukewarm reception.

These authors' wartime literary production is characterized by reflection, self-criticism, and an orientation toward the future. As such, it requires a reading strategy that begins by examining how the literature constructs itself in relation to the communities of Eastern European Jews being destroyed. Where Roskies and Diamant's geographically informed system of categorization delimits their engagement with this literature to its effects on the political or historical discourses of the time, by focusing *first* on the ways this literature articulates its own positionality in relation to the Holocaust, we are able to examine it outside of the retrospective and externally imposed framework of historical impact.[143]

The reading strategy I offer here eschews external systems of categorization. Recognizing that these poetic relationships to the Holocaust are not static or fixed, but rather continuously reformed and renegotiated in response to piecemeal news about the events in Europe — long before they could be understood as a unified collective, "the Holocaust" — this reading strategy emphasizes the multiplicity

[143] A note here on terminology: What I call here the positionality of the text vis-a-vis the Holocaust is identical with the notion I will develop below as the diegetically constructed subject-position of the witness. We might, following Agamben, also call this the "subjectivity" of the poem: it is admittedly odd to talk about a text as having subjectivity, but once we recognize the functioning of a poetic speaker as part of the textually construed world, we can begin to think about the ways in which that same text articulates the subjectivity of that speaker/speaking position as a framework for encountering the poem itself. Subjectivity, in this sense, is both a rhetorical construction within the poem, and a product of our recognizing and emphasizing the active presence of a poetic voice that motivates the imagery and progression of a poetic text, distinguishing in the "I" who "was not in Treblinka" a speaking voice that is neither identical to, nor necessarily bears any relation to, Leyvik himself.

and contingency of those relationships as central to the concerns of this literature, and as the core of our analysis. In foregrounding the uncertainty that these texts are responding to, I am proposing a reading that highlights the introspective poetics at play in these texts, both as a means to articulate their relationship to the Holocaust, *and* as a model for their readers' own burgeoning awareness that they, too, are contained within and affected by the ongoing events of the Holocaust.

This chapter and the one that follows aim to develop, articulate, and explore the possibilities emergent from our reading strategy. This chapter situates this reading strategy within the theoretical landscape of Holocaust literature and the study of the Holocaust more broadly through an examination of the critical categories by which we understand and classify those people who lived through the years of the war, specifically that of "witnesses" to the Holocaust, a position that has become subsumed into the biographically restricted category of "survivor". The collapsing of these two categories — itself a product, as we will see below, of the treatment of survivors' memories as sources of historical data in both academic and legal contexts — effectively restricts the authority to speak about a historic event not only just to those who experienced it, but to those who experienced it in *specific, culturally determined ways*. That is, to assume that to "witness" or "bear witness" to the Holocaust one must be a "Holocaust survivor" is to reinforce the already extant boundaries over what constitutes a Holocaust survivor itself , which regularly exclude those who were, for example, in hiding, in transit, or on the borderlands of Nazi-controlled Europe. This risks presenting the Holocaust as a singular set of experiences against which others can be judged, and ranked according to their suffering, a proess of exclusion that was common among survivors themselves in the early postwar period.

Further, by limiting "witnessing" to the direct experience of the concentrationary world, such a categorization risks undermining not only the traumatic nature of witnessing, understood in the common sense of viewing or encountering a crime or violence without being its direct victim, but also the specificity of the concentrationary experience itself, insofar as the survivor comes to be defined and thus valued by their ability and willingness to testify, not by their experiences per se. Defining the survivor, as Dori Laub, Elie Wiesel, and others have done, in terms of their testimonial act — that is, in terms of

having borne witness — is a pointed refusal to acknowledge the constructed nature of all testimony, all literature, all speech acts. More troubling, however, is that this refusal and the corollary insistence on treating literary expressions of Holocaust experiences *as* witness-statements (testimony), has the effect of transforming its constructed and literary aspects into spaces for critique: where a literary reading would recognize aspects such as metaphor, gaps of memory, or shifts in perspective and attention as necessary and generative, imposing an external, legalistic framework that is only interested in drawing verifiable data from these texts opens a space in which these can be mustered as evidence for the *ahistoricity* of testimony.

In order to redress that categorical collapse, this chapter draws on discourses and conceptions of "witnessing" that utilize the Holocaust as a case study but do not take place within the narrow field of Holocaust literature (or even Holocaust history) in order to propose a new understanding of "the witness" within the temporal framework of wartime literary production as a subject position that no longer requires physical location in the camps and ghettos. Chapter Five builds on this through a close examination of several examples and mechanisms by which these poets attempt to articulate their own position with regard to the ongoing destruction of European Jewry and insofar as they imagine they and their community of readerships' relationship to the communities destroyed. By reintroducing to the discourse of Holocaust literature a marked distinction between "survivors" and "witnesses," these chapters offer critical insight into the conceptual limitations of collapsing those two categories, reclaiming "witnessing" as an experiential category that produces distinct forms of knowledge and discourse.

While the following chapter will offer a selection of poems to this end, I am wary of theorizing a poetics without reference to poetry. To this end, I'll turn now to a poem by H. Leyvik, among the most significant figures in Yiddish poetry in the United States at the time of the Holocaust. This poem will serve as a repeated touchstone throughout this chapter that will allow us to reorient our theoretical discussion around this particular set of American Yiddish Holocaust poetry, in part because none of the theorists, philosophers, or scholars we will discuss below examine this literature.

More directly we are interested first in developing from this a *reading strategy* and, as such, returning to a single poem will not only allow us to work through this strategy as it emerges, but also to highlight its scope and limitations. I make no claim that this is an exhaustive reading strategy. Rather, in its focus on diegetic constructions of subjectivity it engages with poetics as a site of meaning-making in and of itself, no longer secondary to historical or biographical concerns. In this way, I offer here a new model of reading that allows for the formation of new textual networks and communities across historical and geographical boundaries and, indeed, opens the possibility for further comparative analysis beyond the case of the Holocaust itself.

The poem from which the collection's title is taken, "*A treblinke kandidate"* ("A Treblinka Candidate") is an illuminating example because it offers us nothing in the way of historical knowledge about the events of the Holocaust, *except* insofar as the poetic speaker understands their own relationship to, and place within, the unfolding events of the Holocaust. Leyvik's collection *In Treblinke bin ikh nit geven* (*I Was Not In Treblinka*) emerges from a deep concern with his own position, trapped between a world of safety and a world that is actively driving the Jews into concentration camps. Leyvik's poem is valuable as a recurring touchstone in particular because of its speaker's continuous and explicit preoccupation with trying to articulate their own liminal position: defined by the looming (inevitable but continually unfulfilled) *potential* for their own destruction, this poem insists on the distinctiveness of the position without divesting the victims of the Holocaust of the specificity of *their own* experience. This poem's foremost aim, ultimately, is to claim for its speaker the ability to speak of the Holocaust at all.

אַ טרעבלינקע-קאַנדידאַט

אין טרעבלינקע בין איך ניט געווען,
אויך ניט אין מאַידאנעק,
אָבער כ׳שטיי אויף זייער שוועל
און אויף זייער גאַנעק.
שוועל — גאָטס גרויסע וועלט
מיט א יענע-וועלט-וועראַנדע,
שטיי אין און איך וואַרט,
גרויסע וועלט, אויף דיין קאָמאַנדע:
— יודן-קאָפּ, אין גאַז-קאַמער אַריין!

אַלץ אַרום איז געטלעך–פיין,

וועלדער שאָקלען זיך מיט פרומע קעפ,
איבער אַלע בערג און איבער יעדן סטעפ
דרייען ווינטן זיך אין קאַרעהאָדן,
און די זון איז לויטער, אָנגעלאָדן
מיט אַן איבערגוס פון פלאַמען,
וואָס פון זייער פלאַקער שטאַמען
אַלע פייערצונגען פון מאַידאנעק.
צו פאַרגיין אין אינקוויזיציע–תענוג
האָב איך אין מיין לעבן שוין געהאַט
ניט איין אָנבאָט, און איך שטיי
ביי דעם לאַגער פון דער וועלט אין ריי
אַ פאַרצייכנטער טרעבלינקע–קאַנדידאַט.

A Treblinka Candidate

I was not in Treblinka
Nor in Majdanek,
But I stand on their threshold[144]
And on their balcony[145].
Threshold — God's wide world,
With an other-world-veranda,
I stand and I wait,
Wide world, for your command:
Jewish-head[146], into the gas chamber!

Everything around is godly-fine,
Forests sway with pious heads,
Over all mountains and over every steppe
Words dance in circles[147]
And the sun is clear, charged
With an overflowing of flames,
Which from their flares come
All fiery tongues from Majdanek.
To fall into the inquisition-delight
In my life I have not yet had
One offer, and I stand
In line for the camp of the world
A recorded Treblinka candidate. (*In Ṭreblinḳe Bin Ikh Niṭ Geyen* 11)

The poem is undated, though the collection was published in 1945. The opening lines of the poem locate us and the speaker in the period after the liberation of Majdanek by the Soviets (in July, 1944).[148] A temporally ambiguous space, the speaker is able to speak of the camps in the past tense ("I was not

[144] Threshold or doorstep.
[145] Porch, stoop, balcony.
[146] Leyvik uses the Germanic form "*Juden"* here, rather than then Yiddish "*yidn"*.
[147] *Karahod* is a fast-paced dance performed by a group in circles, with linked arms.
[148] Treblinka was closed in late 1943.

in…"), but also to locate themselves in the present as remaining on their threshold ("I stand and I wait"). The temporal ambiguity mirrors the symbolic importance of the specific place the poet situates themselves: "on their balcony," "threshold" "veranda" all of which are domestic spaces of transition, belonging to but not wholly contained within a house or structure. The most notable thing about these two specific threshold spaces, balconies and verandas, is that in their primary contexts they are intended for *observation*: they are symbolically contained within the home but physically contiguous with, and used to interact with the outside world. The rhyming pair in the second and fourth lines of "Majdanek" and "*ganek*" ("balcony") reinforces through the pairing of the camp's name with the domesticity of the latter term (even compared to "*shvel*" or threshold, which is more poetically ambiguous and thus less mundane). The two spaces are linked through a shared sense of dislocation. Just as the image of the balcony is marked both spatially and temporally, here "Majdanek" signifies much more than the physical site, especially given that the speaker admits no direct experience of the camp, standing with Treblinka as metonym for the genocide as a whole.

Jan Schwarz, one of the only scholars to write on Leyvik's poetry in English, constructs his reading of this poem around this rhyming pair, arguing that we should read the rhyme as *disjuncture* insofar as it "illuminates the gulf that separates Leivick and the victims of the Holocaust, opposing his domestic life in the safety of New York with that of the victims in the death camps" (72). Schwarz' brief discussion of this poem is aimed at demonstrating the extent to which the author identified with the victims of the Holocaust and, as one of the most significant figures in the cultural world of Yiddish New York, mustered that identification into the creation of a community of support for recently arrived survivors, encouraging them and aiding them in publishing their memoirs and testimony. Oriented toward reading the poem as illuminating the author's personal response to the Holocaust, Schwarz offers some insight into the wartime actions of Leyvik as a member of the Yiddish literary community during and immediately after the war. Such a reading reproduces the problem inherent in Roskies and Diamant's definition above that values, and thus reads the poem first in the service of providing verifiable historical data. That is to say, we learn nothing about the *poem* itself.

By highlighting *only* difference here, Schwarz overlooks complexity of the "threshold" image at work in the poem: *"ganek*" certainly carries mundane domesticity, but, as we saw above, when paired with the announcement that the poetic speaker is standing "on the threshold" of the two camps, it is difficult to support a claim that they are invoking a *gulf*. Rather, the poetic voice speaks from within a symbolically transformed world in which the threat and stakes of the Holocaust are no longer tied or limited to the borders of Nazi-controlled Europe, but threaten to engulf any and all "Jewish-heads" at a word (10). There is a sense of overwhelming inevitability to the poem as a whole, that will ultimately culminate in that order, expressed in the final line of the first stanza, to enter into the camp. This is a rupturing line, breaking both the regular rhythm and the partial schemes of rhyme and assonance that carried through the lines preceding it. The dissonance of this line serves to underscore both that sense of inevitability and the impossibility of predicting when the command will be heard: the rupturing interjection is visually marked with a dash, a typographical choice that plays with the norms of Yiddish typography (in which dashes are the most common way of marking direct speech), and thus further distances this line from the rest of the poem.

At once implicated within and distant from the events represented by Treblinka and Majdanek, Leyvik's poetic speaker stands in a space from which they can observe the world-encompassing destruction they will narrate in the second stanza, grounded in the realization that they could, at any time, be counted among the victims: "I stand / in line for the camp of the world / a recorded Treblinka candidate" (21-2). This revelation situates the speaker in a particular kind of poetically inscribed relationship with those who *were* in Treblinka and Majdanek, the silent third party that occupies the space between the speaker and the reader. I am not suggesting that the poetic speaker has access to a privileged knowledge, in the way that scholars and critics consistently assert of survivors. Rather, the speaker of this Yiddish-language Holocaust poem constructs a distinct perspective on the Holocaust within the framework of the poem as an event that engulfs the entire world and to which all Jewish lives are subject.

Distinct from those who *were* in Treblinka and Majdanek, and from those who could claim the title "survivor," the poetic speaker of "*A treblinke -kandidat"* is distinguished not by entry into *l'univers*

concentrationnaire, but by the careful construction of their own position in relation to those who *were*. What marks this relationship as significant, as we will discuss below, is that it is founded on the realization and articulation of the extent to which the contingency of their own continued survival is made evident and visible by the existence of the concentration camp and by the events of the Holocaust. This self-aware positioning, as constructed by the poem itself, is what I am calling, and will develop further throughout this chapter, the subject-position of the "witness".

Thus far scholarship has granted near-exclusive claim to the title "witness" to the Holocaust survivor as an attempt to give voice to the privileged knowledge of the Holocaust that we understand the survivor to possess. Insofar as we are employing the term, survivors are not excluded from occupying this position, but it would no longer be defined in terms that grant them singular access to it. Rather to be a "witness" to the Holocaust emerges from the attempt to articulate the relationship between speaker and event, to narrate that experience of contingency produced by the encounter with the genocidal acts of the Holocaust, of which the concentration camp experience is one (albeit extreme) form.

In order to theorize the kinds of knowledge that the subject-position of "the witness" can offer to us as scholars of the Holocaust, we will first need to articulate the ways in which the witness and the survivor are distinct and, in doing so, illuminate some of the implications that our existing epistemology of witnessing (in which the survivor and witness are coterminous) has had for the construction of the genre of Holocaust literature. Although within the field of Holocaust literature, the category of "witness" has been deployed, and then qualified, to reify the absolute privilege of the survivor to speak about the Holocaust experience, beyond the borders of that field significant work has been done to critically interrogate "witnessing" both on its own terms and as a historically determined position. In particular the works on which we will draw below, which use the Holocaust and Holocaust literature as their critical case studies, have gravitated toward thinking of witnessing in these relational terms.

As "witness" and "survivor" converged in Holocaust literature criticism, the literary artifacts that are produced by them, that is Holocaust literature and Holocaust testimony (assuming a distinction can be made between those) metonymically took on the same aura of sacredness that has been ascribed to the

survivor themselves. We need only recall the terms with which Alvin Rosenfeld described the texts of the Holocaust, noting that we need a "working theory of the miraculous to describe the mere existence" of recovered texts:

> That certain books have come down to us at all is nothing short of astonishing, and we can never distance ourselves from an accompanying and transfiguring sense of awe as we encounter them. A manuscript written secretly and at the daily risk of life in the Warsaw ghetto; buried in milk tins or transmitted through the ghetto walls and at the last moment finally transmitted to us—such a manuscript begins to carry with it the aura of a holy text. Surely we do not take it in our hands and read it as we do those books that reach us through the normal channels of composition and publication. (17)

This position approaches the Holocaust text as though it, too, were *other*, a piece of another world somehow smuggled out to us, consistent with the notion of *l'univers concentrationnaire* of which Rosenfeld is a vocal advocate, but far from alone. Insofar as this sacredness became attached to *survivor* texts (because Rosenfeld here talks about the physical artifacts that emerged from the Nazi-controlled Europe), it was an extension of the aura of untouchability that surrounded survivors themselves. This textual hermeneutic was not an inevitable or natural outcome of writing about the Holocaust, but rather is reflective of a carefully constructed interpretive history that emerged alongside the publication of Holocaust texts in the United States. In its attempts to shield the literary from accusations of historical inaccuracy (such as might lend fuel to Holocaust deniers) early scholarship sought, if indirectly, to remove literary testimony from the realm of critique entirely through a continual insistence on the radical insufficiency of language to account for the Holocaust itself.

Invoking, whether intentionally or not, terminology drawn from apophatic theology such as "unspeakable" or "unknowable," early scholarship on Holocaust literature sought to distance it from comparison in such a way that the general readership encountered the Holocaust first with the understanding that even the literary text in their hands could never fully grasp the events to which it refer. Designating the survivor as the sole source of authority and access to the Holocaust, where even their own words fail, elevates the text itself to the level of the miraculous: Rosenfeld's use of "accompanying and transfiguring sense of awe" intends to invoke an experience theologians have termed the "numinous" to describe the encounter with the absolute other that is the divine. This results, when approached through

the lens of "awe," in the conflation of a survivor and their written or spoken testimony, to the point that critiquing even constructed and edited literary testimonies such as memoir, can be claimed as tantamount to questioning the validity of the survivor's experience.

The most prominent instance of this occurring was in a lecture given by Elie Wiesel in the late nineties: responding to Alfred Kazin's doubts about the literary realism of his translated memoir *Night*, Wiesel accused Kazin of lending credence to Holocaust deniers. "Memory," he claimed earlier in the lecture, "implies personal witness," and as such his remarks about Kazin imply, any critique of the *textual representation of memory* becomes a critique of the experience of personal witnessing itself ("Looking Back" 14). Between Wiesel and Rosenfeld's comments, we are left with — as Rosenfeld himself put it — the ability to engage with these texts only with this requisite "sense of awe" as if they are transparent lenses through which readers may, like pilgrims to a holy site encounter the unmediated Holocaust experience of their authors.

The prevalence, authority, and accompanying sacredness of the Holocaust survivor in the scholarly discourse surrounding Holocaust literature goes some way to explaining the continued desire of scholars to employ qualifying terms for anyone who was not located in what Roskies and Diamant called "the Jew-Zone." Writing about the poetry of Yankev Glatshteyn, Roskies and Diamant employ a particular pair of qualifications, notable not only for the extremity of the binary they enact, but because the terms are assumed to be self-evident and never defined: "real witnesses" and "proxy witnesses" (3, 5, 156). The latter term is used to distinguish those who were writing outside of Nazi-controlled Europe. Others have used such qualifying terms before, though most often nebulously applied to post-Holocaust writers, and even to those as distant as the so-called "third generation" (grandchildren of Holocaust survivors) This binary construction re-emerges in different forms throughout Roskies and Diamant's anthology, underwriting an implicit categorical and hierarchical distinction between survivor-writing and recovered documents on the one hand, and all the literatures of the "Free zone" and of "proxy witnesses" on the other, a distinction that threatens at times to contradict their own anti-essentializing project.

This binary also serves as yet another reading strategy within the anthology, as for example Roskies reads it into Glatshteyn's collection *Gedenklider*, arguing that Glatshteyn delineates between a "Jew-Zone of the mind and a real Jew-Zone" as though, for a poet writing in the United States for a network of readers and fellow mourners and reflecting on the implications of the Holocaust for a still-unclear Jewish future, such a distinction is meaningful. At the heart of this chapter, and motivating the formation of this new conception of "the witness" is the assertion that for the scholar or reader of literature — particularly of poetry — who seeks to engage with the literature on its own terms, continuing to hierarchize literature in terms of the experience of the author only functions to devalue any literary production *not* done in the service of documenting history, and further devalue those forms and styles of literature that have no interest in "documentary realism." As such, in order to re-encounter this American Yididsh literature, and to bring it into the discourse of Holocaust literature, we will need to reimagine the fundamental notion through which we define the central corpus, the survivor-witness, and to begin the work of separating those two terms.

Survivor-As-Witness

Of all the significant systems of categorization that have been put in place by scholars and critics in order to distinguish the various spaces for and modes of study within the vast corpus of Holocaust literature, none have been more persistent than whether the author was a survivor or not — most importantly, whether they had been a concentration camp inmate. In its initial development, the field was primarily interested in the memoiristic and testimonial writing of survivors and, as such, claims about what constitutes Holocaust literature (that is, what *counts as* Holocaust literature) established temporal, geographical, and phenomenological divisions derived from the reflective writings of those who emerged from the concentration camps. We have seen this clearly already, embedded in the claims addressed in previous chapters that the Holocaust defies explanatory frameworks, that it is beyond historical comparison, that it is unspeakable, unrepresentable, or unknowable to anyone who wasn't there.

In the years following the end of the Holocaust, the *idea* or *figure* of the survivor — a set of abstract notions, not entirely derived from individuals — came to signify far more than just the people who had physically lived through the war. Not only does the survivor have access to a "special kind of knowledge" granted them from their experiences in the camps, but they also became the bearers of a complicated and not entirely positive legacy of reception, ignorance, and denial (Hilberg 187; Weissman 92). They were representative of the Holocaust itself, and its place within a post-Holocaust and post-war world. Imbued with a kind of sacredness, grounded in the metaphysical and epistemological *otherness* ascribed to the spatio-temporal world of the Holocaust, the survivor became the absolute authority in speaking about the Holocaust and, as such their writings stood as a measure against which other texts that might claim inclusion within the category of "Holocaust literature" would be compared.[149]

Roskies and Diamant's definition is most successful in fact in avoiding reinscribing precisely this hierarchical division: by setting its stakes at all of Nazi-controlled Europe, conversation is shifted away from the concentration camp as a space of absolute and radical otherness.[150] Widening the geographical spectrum, as it were, is particularly useful for the period during the war — as their anthology reflects — because there was no writing emerging from the camps at that time. What developed within the field of Holocaust literature, and what Roskies and Diamant are writing partly in response to, is a hierarchization of literary value with survivors of the concentration camps at the peak, joined by documents from the ghettos if and when they are recovered, such as those preserved by the *Oyneg shabes* in Warsaw. This is not necessarily unique to Holocaust literature, but — as with many of the ideological markers of the field — is reflective of the way in which the Jewish community oriented itself in the years after the Holocaust. Raul Hilberg notes in particular that, although there is no clear or rigid definition of what constitutes "a Jewish survivor," there was an

[149] In some ways the centrality of the survivor to the study of the Holocaust is understandable, the outcome of a commendable desire to not see the victims of the Holocaust rendered invisible by statistics, an ongoing attempt at a kind of social resitution as Hilberg puts it (187).

[150] Certainly such a move runs the risk of diminishing the variety of experiences within each of these categories, but given the insistent focus prior to this 2015 anthology, on the various literatures of camps and ghettos, that is less of a concern.

> unmistakeable rank order among the Jewish who lived through the wartime Nazi years. In this hierarchy, the decisive criteria are exposure to risk and depth of suffering. Members of communities that were left intact and people who continued to live in their own homes are hardly considered survivors at all. At the other end of the scale, individuals who emerged from the woods or the camps are the survivors par excellence. (187)

That the study of Holocaust literature should mirror this hierarchy, to the point that (paraphrasing Hilberg above) the works of writers who resided in communities not affected by the war are hardly considered Holocaust literature at all, is not surprising, but neither was it inevitable. Rather, it is a product of the history of the public reception of the Holocaust and its survivors, a history that elevated the survivor to the position of authority through a series of performative and discursive gestures that had the effect of transforming them into *witnesses*.

If there is a particular historical moment that fixed the image of the survivor in the public consciousness, at least of the United States, as the bearer of Holocaust memory, it would be the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961. Over the course of the trial, the prosecuting attorneys paraded an overwhelming number of survivors to the stand to testify in varying levels of detail and accuracy, and to recall their own experiences of the crimes committed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe. The Eichmann trial has been discussed at length by historians and others, but for our purposes it is worth noting some of the ways in which it was distinguished, especially from the Nuremberg Trials of the late 1940s.[151] This is in some ways the inevitable point of comparison, given that it was the other major legal recourse in the wake of WWII. Unlike the Nuremberg Trials, which were aimed at establishing the collective guilt of the German leadership, government, and nation, here the discussion focused on the precise opposite: the responsibility of a single individual for their own actions as part of the collective.

We can understand the trial as a performative exercise as much as a legal event. As Annette Wieviorka notes, the prosecutors transformed the trial into a

> lesson in history. For the first time, the Holocaust was linked to the themes of pedagogy and transmission [...]] For the first time as well, a historian, Salo Baron, then a professor at Columbia

[151] See, especially Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, which discusses the trial primarily in its effects on elevating the survivor-as-witness to this place of centrality. For more in-depth historical study of the trial, see especially the work of David Cesarani, such as *Becoming Eichmann*, and *After Eichmann*. See also Deborah Lipstadt's *The Eichmann Trial* and, of course, Hannah Arendt's deeply controversial report from the trial itself *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the plethora of scholarship written in response. (Cesarani; Lipstadt; Arendt)

> University, was called to the witness stand to provide a historical framework for the trial, and not a single question was raised about the relevance of a historian's testimony. (57)

Not only was Baron among the pre-eminent Jewish historians of the time and able to contextualize the actions of the Nazis as a whole, but during his testimony, he used the town of his birth, Tarnowas an example of the devastation of the Jewish population by the Nazis. As such, he occupied a double position, first and foremost in the role of historian as expert witness, but additionally in raising the example of Tarnow he steps into the role of speaker for the victims of that city, thus positioning himself as an individual morally *among* (but not one of) the victims of the Holocaust.[152] The goal of the prosecution's performance of history is captured (albeit from the opposite direction) in this duality of Baron's position: in their approach to Eichmann, the prosecution aimed to establish publicly that a single person could be not only a critical actor in a nation-level military and criminal event — even if they were not the leaders of the nation — but that specific actions of an individual were legally, politically and, most importantly, historically significant.[153]

One of the most powerful performative tools used by the prosecution, and one of the primary mechanisms of their pedagogical display was the active and highly visible presence of the specific (carefully selected) individual victims, given the time and space to articulate their own memories. The presence of survivors in the courtroom, haltingly recounting their experiences during the Holocaust transformed the individuals into metonymic symbols for the almost-unimaginable statistics of the Nazi genocide. Each of these individual speakers, while testifying, was called to stand in for everyone whom they saw being killed, everyone they knew who had died and, ultimately, for the entire population of the murdered Jews of Europe whom Eichmann was symbolically, though not legally, being held accountable for. The actual information that these survivors presented (which was fragmentary and often historically

[152] See "Eichmann Trial -- Session 12 and 13 -- Testimonies of A. Less and S. Baron". RG-60.2100.025, Accessed at United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of The Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archives of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Baron's testimony occupies much of Sessions 12 and 13. He brings up the example of Tarnow beginning at 34:55. (*Eichmann Trial -- Session 12 and 13 -- Testimonies of A. Less and S. Baron*)

[153] There was some debate over the actual level of leadership that Eichmann, as an *Obersturmbannführer* had: one of the prosecution's aims was to emphasize his level of control and power, and on the other side of that, Hannah Arendt argues that the rank (equivalent to the field-grade rank of lieutenant-colonel in the US Army) was a career-stop rank for anyone who was not stationed on the front, and as such though it represented some level of power, it was symbolically representative of the limits of Eichman's upward mobility.

inaccurate) was of secondary importance to their physical and performative presence in the courtroom, the *fact* of their existence and survival was rendered as testimony in and of itself.

Annette Wieviorka refers to the trial's impact with the grandiose phrase "the advent of the witness": the moment in which the survivor was transformed into "the bearer of history" (88). The survivor/witness, she argues "became an embodiment of memory, attesting to the past and the continuing presence of the past. Concurrently, the genocide came to be defined as a succession of individual experiences with which the public was supposed to identify" (88). Wieviorka is describing a shift in the way the history of the Holocaust would be written and discussed in the years following the Eichmann Trial. However, the transformation she points to in this moment has implications for the study of the Holocaust in general. In the transformation of survivor into witness we thus see the concretizing of the ideological position that would be most often articulated by Elie Wiesel, but which is upheld in part in the absolute authority granted to the survivor in Holocaust literature, namely that the survivor themselves *are* testimony.[154]

Holocaust literature, with survivor testimony as its benchmark for scholars, is a corpus that sits uneasily between the realms of history and literature.[155] This is in part because of the specific speech act that sits at the core of the genre, and that enacted this transformation of survivor into witness: the act of testifying. Testifying is a complex notion, not least because it already denotes that duality captured in Wiesel's claim above: to testify means both to make a statement, to bear witness, *and* to serve as proof.[156] The "witness" as a subject-position, however, is defined fundamentally by the act of testifying. As such, this is also the moment in which the documentary artifact of this testifying, that is, literary testimony, took on the extra-literary function of providing, as James Young has put it, "testimonial *proof* of the events it

[154] "Look at the [memorial] stones. They are testimonies, as are our lives" Wiesel said in a lecture delivered at Yad Vashem in 2002. The phrase "living witness" has been used in other contexts to articulate this same sentiment.
[155] Furthermore (though Wieviorka does not expand on this), insofar as the survivor is also testifying to the "continuing presence of the past," we might also trace to this moment one of the key psychoanalytical conclusions about the Holocaust (and from it, about trauma) understood as an temporal moment that the survivor/witness remains trapped within. This would argue further for their authority as sources of information, as their special knowledge of the Holocaust is no longer rendered *entirely* in terms of memory, but also in a kind of traumatic re-living. See Felman and Laub, *Testimony*.
[156] We might also think of the religious history of the term, and its relationship to the sacredness imparted onto the survivor in this moment of speaking, as discussed above.

embodies (“Interpreting” 403). Until the literary turn of the 1980s, and continuing into the present, texts of the Holocaust have been insistently read in this way, as though they were literal, unmediated representations of the experiences of the authors, and judged according to the same criteria as one might the work of a historian. Some scholars, such as Berel Lang, sought to detach representations of the Holocaust from their artistic or literary (that is to say, constructed and mediated) qualities altogether, arguing that history ought to set the standard for how Holocaust representations are to be judged (*Holocaust Representation* 32).

Writing about the entire corpus of Holocaust literature (including writings by non-survivors), James Young notes that writers themselves broadly embraced this role, at least as a rhetorical positioning. Writers, he notes, were compelled to

> assume the role of *witnesses* to criminal events, actually rehabilitating the mimetic impulse in these writers rather than weakening it. For many Holocaust writers and critics have assumed that the more realistic a representation, the more adequate it becomes as testimonial evidence of outrageous events. And as bearing witness became the aim of this writing, "documentary realism" has become the style by which to persuade readers of a work's testamentary character. (“Interpreting” 406 emphasis in original)

In literary terms, this resulted in the further exclusion of certain forms of writing, reinforcing a hierarchy in which genres that announce their proximity to real life, namely novelistic and memoiristic prose, are elevated. As a *reading strategy*, this is, albeit from the opposite temporal direction, precisely the problem that we discerned in Roskies and Diamant’s category of “literature of mobilization” insofar as it retroactively imposes upon literary texts criteria for judgment that are fundamentally non-literary. This hierarchization also results in the antipathy toward figurative representation and metaphor that we noted in earlier chapters.

Once articulated in terms of *witnessing*, the testimonial act becomes the defining feature of the image of the Holocaust survivor, now not only mediating between past and present, but also acting as an emblem of the post-Holocaust reception, of the “continued presence of the past” (Wieviorka 88). As Wiesel said in his preface to the second English translation of *Night*, “For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead *and* for the living” (xv emphasis in original).

Reimagining the existence or function of the Holocaust survivor in these discursive terms, it is easy to see why early scholars of Holocaust literature — and those who examined testimony through different lenses — were often unwilling or unable to address the constructed (literary, rhetorical) nature of the testimonies, whether spoken or written, composed and delivered by survivors.

Witnessing, Testimony, and Trauma

In the landscape of post-Holocaust literature, there are few places in which the operation and complexities of the memory of the Holocaust are made either more central or more visible (fittingly), than Art Spiegelman's graphic retelling of his father's Holocaust experiences, *MAUS*. Constructed in multiple, embedded narrative and graphic layers that regularly explicitly acknowledge their own constructedness, and their troubled relationship with historical truth, *MAUS* remains the central case study for literary scholars who wish to discuss both the complex transmission of memory through the act of testimony, and the difficulties in receiving and processing those memories.[157]

The definition of "witnessing" that emerges from Richard Glejzer's analysis of *MAUS* is particularly illuminating first because it attempts at constructing an epistemology of the act of witnessing, and second because it highlights one of the major assumptions that has emerged from locating the position of the witness in the testimonial act. Namely, Glejzer accepts the assumption that witnessing is a position *necessarily* produced by remembrance, and thus is shaped by the particular operations of *memory*. As Glejzer defines it "witnessing is constituted by memory and the necessarily conflicting epistemologies that result from memory's re-constitution, its re-membering of an impossible link between

[157] This is partly because of the form, which maps the epistemological difficulties faced by writers and speakers of testimony onto the visual landscape of the graphic memoir, making it decidedly easier for Holocaust scholars to illuminate these point of tension by grounding their discussion of competing epistemologies in the relation of image, text, and narrative. Partly, as well, because as Dominick LaCapra argues, *MAUS* is not really about Vladek (the author-narrator's survivor father) Holocaust memories, but rather is more directly concerned with Art's (the author-narrator) *own* positionality as a member of the so-called second generation. Children of survivors like Spiegelman, born after the war, LaCapra notes, sit in troubled relationship to the fact that their parents experienced the Holocaust and, more specifically, to their lack of knowledge about that experience. The most problematic aspect of *MAUS* in LaCapra's reading emerges from *that* subject-position, rather than that of the witness, insofar as it documents the temptation and attempts of Art to capture that absent memory and, in doing so, "convert the Holocaust into a founding trauma and thus a paradoxical, perhaps impossible source of meaning and identity" (177).

seeing and knowing" (127). A definition shared by other scholars, especially those who focus on *MAUS*, Glejzer's definition understands witnessing to be a subject-position that one steps into in the attempt to narrate remembered experience, and is defined primarily by the fundamental disjuncture between the self at the moment of experience and the self at the moment of recollection. This is distinguished in Glejzer and in much of contemporary scholarship by the reference to the moment of experience as a "trauma" that is fundamentally irreconcilable and often granted those same transcendent qualities that we have seen ascribed to the Holocaust as a whole: atemporal, beyond language, unspeakable.

Deferral to trauma as a mechanism for explaining the operation of testimony is both common and problematic. In listening to survivor testimony, Glejzer argues, we are not really encountering even their subjective experience of the Holocaust, but rather a "working-through" of the speaker's own relationship to their memory and, via their memory, to the past. Most importantly for our purpose, this reliance on an unbridgeable gap between experience ("seeing") and comprehension or articulation ("knowing"), insists that witnessing is fundamentally a product of *non-knowing*, fixing us within that same epistemological position we saw above, in which historical truth becomes the missing object against which all other kinds of knowledge are compared.[158]

The centrality of trauma within discussions of post-Holocaust memory in the United States especially has been heavily influenced by the use of survivors as analytical case studies by scholars of psychoanalysis or, more specifically, scholars employing psychoanalysis as a framework for the study of literature. The most prominent articulation of this in the context of Holocaust survivors comes from Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub who, working through the dual discourses of literary theory and psychoanalysis, hold that *only* in the act of testifying — of speaking the traumatic experience to another person — does the trauma become constituted as a known and identifiable event at all. In this way, both the speaker and listener become mutually implicated as "participant and co-owner of the traumatic event" (57). As Glejzer puts it, they claim that the event becomes clarified and made visible in the testimonial

[158] A slightly different kind of non-knowing than Hopper spoke about, differing primarily in the individual's disposition toward that which cannot be known.

act, such that the two are indistinguishable in terms of what can be known (130). This is a strange claim to make as it seems to devalue the specific experience of the individual in making the listener as, if not more central to the process of understanding an experience than the survivors themselves.[159]

Testimony, for Felman and Laub is a *process* that aims to reveal some kind of *truth* about the events experienced or witnessed that can only be accessed cooperatively through speaking with an attentive and responsive addressee.[160] Developing from an examination of the Holocaust, they broadly define testimony as fragmented, "composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (Felman and Laub 5). This understanding of the testimonial act places them firmly among those we have discussed at length above, making the same foundational assumptions about the *unknowability* of the Holocaust. This is clear in this definition and informs their analysis at every step. The "witness" (the one who is able to testify), in their terms becomes defined as someone who directly experienced some kind of trauma, but is *incapable* of understanding and thus articulating that experience. Though we are not attempting to gather historical data, whether it is mediated by the figure of the survivor, the inaccessibility of trauma, or the literal walls of the concentration camp, we are left facing yet another theory that renders the Holocaust fundamentally *beyond the expressive capacities of language*.

That commitment to inexpressibility results in Dori Laub's radical contention that "the event produced no witnesses" (80). Laub grounds this claim in the same two assumptions we see throughout the scholars above: that the traumatic subject does not have complete access to their own experiences, and

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[159] We might point out that we find in this statement an implicit, but brash justification for the importance of the psychoanalyst in "making known" the events of the past. We need only to recall the significant role that Israeli psychologist Elitsur Bernstein played in getting Binjamin Wilkomirski's (Bruno Dössekker, née Grosjean) fabricated Holocaust memoir, *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*, published to grasp the problematic relationship that interventionist psychoanalysis has had in the case of Holocaust memories. See especially Stefan Maechler, *The Wilkomirski Affair*, and Anne Whitehead, "Telling Tales".

[160] In addition to the *direct* Freudian psychoanalytical lineage evident here (and that Felman provides early on, 13-15), we can trace a distinct conceptual line to a reader-response theory of literary analysis. Reader-response criticism rose to prominence around the 1960s, roughtly the same time as studies of the Holocaust began in earnest in the United States. This school of thought held, in analogous terms to Laub and Felman's two explanations above, that meaning is not inherent to the literary text, but is constituted or constructed by the reader *in the act of reading*, and that the text itself has no inherent meaning apart from that which emerges from the reader's encounter with it.

that they are *entirely* inaccessible to those who did not experience them directly, except as mediated by the survivor's already partial language. Where Laub takes this further, however, is in arguing that not only did those outside the camps not "witness" the Holocaust (because witnessing *requires* the kind of direct experience that results in unprocessed trauma) but that those *within* cannot be considered witnesses because the entire structure of the concentration camps was designed to destabilize the relationship between experience and knowledge (81).

In order to make this claim, however, Laub has to develop an even more radical epistemology of witnessing than he and Felman had thus far: "A witness is a witness to the truth of what happens during an event" (80). "Truth" in this case means a whole or complete knowledge of an event: "The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event—of its dimensions, consequences, and above all, of its radical *otherness* to all know frames of reference— that it was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine" (84). This is, of course, unachievable by any person of any event.

As such, we have reached the limit of the utility of Felman and Laub's notion of the witness because it is built on a conception of trauma as existing in a theoretical space outside of reality: "the traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal reality,' such as causality sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after" (69). The oddity of this lies in the fact that although pointedly drawing a line between the historical event and the "traumatic event" ("although real") Laub continues to measure the value of the expression of the traumatic event in terms of how much access it grants us to the historical.

Truth in this sense is not the burden of the witness to bear nor is it derivable from — let alone identical to — experience. Even if it were possible to know the "truth" of an event, this could only ever be done after the fact, with access to a vast amount of resources and information. There is something deeply dissatisfying about Laub's theorization of the position of the witness, not least because he was one of the founders of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, one of the largest collections of survivor testimony. The problem, I think, is once again emergent in the language that we use to talk about

the Holocaust: "the Holocaust" as a phrase implies a singular object that can be known in and of itself, rather than a term we have come to use as shorthand for *both* the large-scale historical phenomenon, *and* the collection of the individual experiences of the millions who perished, survived, or lived through a particular time and place in world history. I am not finding fault in the term "the Holocaust" necessarily; rather, the problem here lies in the particular collapsing of testimony and history that occurred throughout the post-war decades and informs the historical study of the Holocaust, in particular when informed by the study of trauma. Laub holds each individual testimony as responsible for *The Holocaust*, and their own experiences are to be measured and valued only insofar as they grant us access to the totality of "the event". In this way, in fact, Laub is slipping into the same kind of sacralization we see in Wiesel's notion of the survivor-as-testimony, insofar as he argues that from "witness" one should be able to discern the whole — each witness stands as representative of the entirety of this monolothic category we call "the Holocaust" — and if we cannot (or if they cannot) then they are not a witness.

Here, and in light of these problems, I want to introduce my working definition of the witness, before briefly discussing some of the theoretical justification for such a definition. Rather than being the product of a process of recalling individually experienced traumatic events, as it has been largely defined within the US academy, there is nothing inherent in the notion of the "witness" that *requires* it to be locked into a temporal relationship. One of the features of the traumatic experience according to those scholars above is that it is a moment detached from chronology, an "atemporal signifier" — in fact, as Glejzer reminds us, this is built into the relationship between memory and the past itself, where memories are sets of experiences, affects, and inferences and only in the *recollection* do we attempt to situate those experiences and emotions into a temporal framework. This is no different than how St. Augustine phrased it, a millenia ago, to use Amos Funkenstein's evocative phrasing: the past is a product of the present, and "the contents of the soul at present" (7).

Where these trauma-focused scholars falter is in their distinguishing some kind of objective reality against which the kind of knowledge produced *in witnessing* ought to be measured. Even setting aside for a moment the fact that Laub's definition of the witness as "witness to the *truth* of what happened

during an event" assumes that *any* event can be fully known, Laub is falling into a particular trap that comes with conflating memory and history (80). No witness to anything can grasp the full truth of an event because their knowledge is limited to their own experience of that event, bounded by time, human senses, and — in these extreme cases especially — the urgency of physical survival and need.

Instead, I am proposing that we understand the position of the "witness" to be textually and discursively generated but not held to the standard of historical data. In some ways this follows those scholars above whose attempt to detach from testimony the search for historically verifiable information is partly borne of a desire to minimize the chance of a survivor's testimony being written off *because* of historical inaccuracy (and an attempt to explain and justify the inevitability of historical inaccuracy within any and all testimony). However, if we are committed to the idea that we are not searching testimony for historical data, then we must also revisit the continuing assumption that an author's own biography (itself historical data at the individual scale) can tell us anything significant about the functioning of the testimony as a textual or discursive object.[161] This is not, of course, to suggest that we accept *as* testimony in the legalistic sense any statement from anyone at any time, but rather that if we take seriously the notion of the "witness" in the case of the Holocaust *as* a discursive position, then we have to consider that it is a position that can be adopted by any text *insofar* as the narrative voice of a text is never fully identifiable with its author.

The "witness" (in the case of Holocaust literature) can be thought of as a purely discursive position that is engendered by a text's construction of itself *in relation* to the Holocaust. This allows us to claim those limitations to knowledge that troubled the scholars above — time, human senses, physical position, emotions — and even the notion, problematic as it is, that the experience of an event may be fundamentally unknowable, not as limitations, but as defining features that mark a specific textual moment, and the specific subject-position of the witness. That is: insofar as a text steps into the position of "witness" it does so by acknowledging and engaging with the boundaries of a particular kind of experience, by acknowledging its *own* positionality. A witness, then, does not speak of an event and in

[161] As I have repeatedly insisted of the literary, I am now extending this to testimony as a discursive concept.

doing so fail to comprehend the event-as-a-whole, but rather the event exists *as experienced by a given person* at a specific time, place, and with access to specific forms of information and knowledge. This overwhelming insistence on the specificity of the individual subjectivity is partly what makes poetry a valuable test case for this kind of literary witnessing: especially in the case of Holocaust poetry, it offers us an acute awareness of, and even takes as its subject, the limitations of its own perspective and position.

One feature of this definition that I have yet to address directly is that is does not grant anything particular to the Holocaust itself. As I have argued throughout, I have yet to be convinced that the Holocaust admits anything that might be considered unique, especially in its effects on literature, any more than every historical event is a product of a singular combination of the temporal, geographical, social, and political conditions that produced it. What unites these poetic speakers, rather, is a shared set of experiences, a common vocabulary drawn from literary, religious, and historical frameworks: that is, rather than the Holocaust itself being unique, it is the communal perspective from which these authors write and to whom they speak that places this poetry in conversation, and that allows us to speak of them in common thematic, structural, and conceptual terms. Insofar as I understand "witness," then, to emerge from a literary text's awareness of its own limitations and relationality, there is nothing about the Holocaust that creates the conditions for this poetry, *apart from* its significance for the community that is in the process of bearing witness. Thus, in detaching the position of witness from temporal and geographical proximity, and reconceiving of it in terms of relationality, reflexivity, and identification, we open the space for comparative work not only beyond the space and time of the Holocaust, but also beyond the Holocaust itself.

Reflecting on the study of wartime Yiddish culture more broadly in the US, Anita Norich notes that

> Authenticity in our time and place is increasingly based on personal claims to experiences that might, in Jewish terms, best be thought of as liminal. Those who can avow that they have *been there and done that* (I mean it literally), or that they at least have close relatives who *suffered that*, cannot easily be disputed or ignored. (*Discovering Exile* 10)

This is a generalized form of precisely the issue we have been addressing throughout this dissertation: the restricting of authority to speak about the Holocaust to those whose experience adhere to this very limited understanding of authenticity, those survivors who were there, in the concentration camps, and who came closest to suffering that fate in the gas chambers. Recognizing that this literary work, that witnessing itself, produces a discourse of knowledge that is not represented by the limited (and liminal) authoritative voice that is survivor-memory-as-historical-data — that cannot be accounted for by interpretive frameworks built on studying survivor writing — this model of reading offers a route toward a more complex and thus more complete understanding of the Holocaust as a historical event, and as an event *lived through* in myriad ways.

This is not a challenge unique to the study of the Holocaust. Rather, it is a problem endemic to the study of the histories and literatures of marginalized and oppressed communities throughout the world. Recent historiographical discourse utilizes the metonymic term "the archive" as a means highlight the sources, object, methodologies, and ideologies that persist within the study of history that not only characterize historical objects as resistant to change, but simultaneously reinforce normative, and hegemonic narratives about the past viewed through the lens of the present (see, for example, Taylor). This is, in one sense, another way of describing the problem that Roskies pointed to in Kremer's encyclopedia, and that he and Naomi Diamant (perhaps unintentionally) replicate in their own encyclopedic project, insofar as they end up reinscribing the same periodization and binaries they had attempted to overcome.

The "archive" as both physical site and set of historiographical ideologies establishes and maintains the boundaries of authority by making invisible the construction (and constructedness) of power relations within historical narratives. This may occur through less direct and malevolent means, through for example the lack of reflexiveness in the writing of history: uncritically adopting a particular perspective and thus implicitly insisting on its natural position of authority in the historical record. We might think of the ways in which whiteness and maleness underwrite popular discourses of history in the United States, including that of both Holocaust history and American Jewish history: the emergence of

the term "Ashkenormativity" in recent discussions of American Judaism points to the continuing attempt to make visible these structurally hidden biases and perspectives.[162] There are significant stakes for historians who work on oppressed, dispossessed, and marginalized communities in challenging the power of "the archive" to determine, as Saidiya Hartman put it, "what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor"(xiii).[163] In drawing attention to the constructed boundaries of authenticity, and its elevation as the primary condition for authority, Norich approaches with different language an identical problem *within* Jewish history, a problem we have been addressing throughout this dissertation.

Without wanting to overstate the relative moral urgency of our task here, the study of Holocaust literature continues to be a space of authoritative narratives in which the boundaries of who "is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor" not only remain unchallenged, but continue to be constructed as both moral and natural (Hartman xiii) .[164] The moral outrage that has met claims that the Holocaust is even examinable, or that survivors' memories are other than transparent windows to history

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[162] Constructed as a parallel to the more prominent term "heteronormativity," which calls attention to the assumption of both heterosexuality and a binary model of gender identity both historically and in contemporary culture. "Ashkenormativity" refers to the continued marginalization of the perspectives and existence of Sephardic, Mizrahi, and other Jewish traditions, cultures, and communities insofar as popular conversations around Jewishness, Jewish identity, and Jewish history are told from the perspective of the Jews of "Ashkenaz," more or less coterminous with Europe (beginning with communities in the Rhineland in the 15th century). Though controversial, this has become an important term in drawing attention to the functioning of the same kind of hegemonic operation of "the archive" as a model of history within discourse and scholarship on Jews and Judaism especially in the United States and the academy. The term rose in visibility and popularity in the middle of the 2010s, in part due to the popularity of Jonathon P. Katz' article in *New Voices* (10/22/2014), "Learning to undo Ashke-normativity," though the particular issue of the erasure of other diasporic Jewish cultures has been long attested to ("Learning to Undo Ashke-Normativity - A Jew in the Motherland").

[163] I include the full quotation here because it is important both in its statement and in its reach: "Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and the authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor" (xiii). Hartman's work is both experimental and powerful: she constructs from the limited evidence that exists in the archives, and much of that from those who were invested in rendering her subjects invisible, complex narrative histories of young black women at the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States. She offers a distinct challenge not only to the metaphorical archive as described above, but also to the limitations of the literal archive, and of the aim of history as a field and discourse to present a narrative, however incomplete, of the past. This is not an authoritative version of events, but an actively and unapologetically ideologically motivated attempt to read the past differently than it has been presented. In fact, in her continual announcement of her own stakes, ideologies, and speculative limitations, we might also think of Hartman's work through the lens of a "literature of witnessing" that I am attempting to theorize above.

[164] Acknowledging, of course, that the history of the Holocaust is being told, to a greater or lesser extent, as part of the education curriculum in most of the Western World.

can be thought of in this sense as another tool for reinforcing the hegemony of the Holocaust archive. Literature can and has been part of this archive, the history we have discussed throughout this dissertation of survivor memoir being employed *as* documentary history, the lengthy work undertaken to find a framework for reading lyric poetry as history, and the continued disavowal of fiction are all examples of literature's use within the maintenance normative historical structures. This is not inevitable, however, especially with literature: Glatshteyn's "*Roykh*" above demonstrates the limited and reductive reading that is required in order to put a poem to this kind of historical work. Scholars such as Hartman work to draw from archival material a set of narratives, histories, and interpretations that set the archive working against itself, in order to offer a counter to histories that have been presented as necessary, as inevitable.

Through the lens of literature and poetics, this reading strategy works toward analogous ends — though the implications differ significantly — in constructing a vocabulary that attempts to move beyond the singularity of Holocaust literature as it has been described and studied. In developing this definition of "witnessing," I take this literature to be producing particular forms of knowledge and discourse that exceed the possibilities of Holocaust literature when understood through the framework of survivor memory, or when measured according to extrinsic and retroactive criteria such as political motivation. This Holocaust poetry, in particular, presents a distinct challenge to the desire to read literature in the service of a survivor-centric model of history because it offers no certainty about the future itself. Rather it imagines a multiplicity of possible futures, not claiming authority for one or the other. I read these poems as offering an alternative model of historical experience grounded in literature as a way of encountering the world: of discovering language, experimenting with the possibilities of expression and failed expression, and of articulating one's position in a complex historical, social, and affective moment. In doing so in eschewing questions of historically or biographically derived authority, this reading strategy aims to develop a model of witnessing that gestures not only to experiences and expressions beyond the reach of the Holocaust archive, but also beyond the Holocaust itself, toward a comparative literature of witnessing constructed through a textually engendered relationship of empathy and identification.

The following chapter takes up this task by returning to and continuing our direct analysis of this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry. Before doing so, however, it is important to establish that although this reading strategy derives first from a close reading of these poems, it has been informed by a particular trajectory of post-Holocaust philosophical reflection on the nature of witnesing in academic contexts very different from the trauma and psychoanalysis-informed scholarship above.

Between Survivors and the Dead

There has yet to be a concerted study of the Holocaust, its literature, or its survivors, that does not (even if only tacitly) accept the notion that there is some unknowable, unspeakable, or otherwise inaccessible core to the experience of the Holocaust. This is not limited to the scholars above who develop a vocabulary of trauma from the study of survivors, nor is it limited to those who would think the Holocaust as ontologically distinct from the world in which we live, and who would seek to draw moral boundaries across what literature or scholarship ought to engage with. This second set of scholarship that I will engage with is equally invested in this unknowability; the difference is where they locate that unknowability. The scholars below are not invested in maintaining the notion that the Holocaust is unique, or even distinct necessarily from other kinds of human experiences, but rather use the Holocaust as an example *in extremis* because of the plethora of literature that has emerged from it and the particular care with which this literature has been composed. They become invested in *other* dichotomies that are reproducible in different conditions, in particular ruminating on the relationship between death and survival as existential criteria, and figuring the witness as existing in a space between the two, rather than firmly within the latter category.

An example (both positive and negative): Gary Weissman, examining Elie Wiesel's influence on the discourse of Holocaust unknowability, argues that the elevation of the survivor as the sole source of access to knowledge about the Holocaust rests on the conflation of "historical knowledge" and "experiential knowledge" (91). In similar terms to Glejzer (though not in conversation), Weissman seeks to draw out two different epistemological frameworks for encountering the Holocaust, where one is

understood in terms of data, and the other in terms of the experience of the survivors. I offer this rephrasing to highlight the importance of *survivors* to Weissman's understanding of the Holocaust, insofar the binary he constructs between "historical knowledge" and "experiential knowledge" seems to euphemistically disguise the actual operative dichotomy in his work.

> This term [the Holocaust experience] refers not to the experiences of the millions who died of starvation, disease, beating, hanging, bullets, or gassing, but rather to the wartime experiences of individuals who *survived* the Holocaust. Survival is a necessary part of the Holocaust experience when the *full* experience of the Holocaust is implicitly understood to include not only wearing the yellow star and starving in the ghetto, but learning that most or all of one's family has been killed; not only deportation to the camps, but liberation and emigration; not only being engulfed in the catastrophe, but bearing witness to the catastrophe in its aftermath. (92 emphasis in original)

That is, what matters for Weissman is the boundary between the survivors and the dead. Looking back on the history of post-Holocaust scholarship and criticism, Weissman's goal is to shift our conversation away from the rhetoric of unknowability by introducing different categories of knowledge that each have different stakes. Phenomenology is retrospective, he implicitly asserts, and as such any conversation about the experience of the Holocaust *must* be reserved for survivors, because we only have access to this data. The Holocaust experience must therefore encompass the period up to the point at which such reflection can begin, and include the act of reflecting itself. This is a reasonable distinction to draw, first because it stresses the importance of distinguishing between historical data and phenomenological accounts. Second, because it opens space for the discourse on the operation of memory — remembering, forgetting, rearticulation — to be reimagined not as imposing limitations on knowledge of the Holocaust as we saw above, but as a central generative part of the experience of surviving the Holocaust itself.

However, in establishing this dichotomy, Weissman reinforces the already prevalent hierarchy between the survivors and the dead by equating the experience of those who died in the Holocaust with historical data. In doing so, he implicitly claims that their experience is knowable or discernible from the historical information we have. Furthermore, it perpetuates the elevation of a relatively minor population as somehow representative and emblematic of "The Holocaust" in the same way that Laub held witnesses to account. Not only does the quotation above describe a very limited set of experiential circumstances that exclude anyone, for example, in hiding, but in addition, we should always recognize that to survive at

all places one in a minority among those who *did* enter into the ghettos and camps. Certainly, as we will see below, many survivors are quick to remind us of this fact. Finally, because it is constructed retroactively, it is worth keeping in mind that the notion that survival *can* be held as representative — that the survivor has some kind of privileged access to information, experiential or otherwise — is itself very much a product of the post-Holocaust social and political landscape, of how survivor communities oriented themselves in the years after the war.[165]

Though derived from comments Elie Wiesel has made, even Wiesel himself cannot fully commit to this hierarchy, as he has insisted on several occasions, "the past belongs to the dead" (Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration" 7) Reflecting on his own and other survivors' memoirs just a year before his death, Primo Levi explicitly and repeatedly insists that

> we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses [...] we survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch the bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the "Muslims," the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose depositions would have general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception. (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* 84)

As such, if we recall the ambiguous use of qualifiers in Roskies and Diamant's anthology, "proxy witnesses" especially, to refer to those who were not present within the borders of Nazi-controlled Europe, we find a similar distinction made here by Levi between those who died at the hands of the Nazis, and those who survived. Thus emerging from Levi is a countermodel of witnessing to that which we saw above in which the survivor's speech is enabled by a relationship to, we might call it an inherited burden of speaking *for*, the dead, those who cannot speak for themselves. This countermodel provides a space for correlation with the definition I offered above: if we consider the survivors to have privileged access to some unrepresentable experience then we implicitly re-assert that the Holocaust itself has some quality of its own that can only be accessed through a direct, physical encounter. If, however, we extend

[165] Moreover, the list of post-Holocaust experiences that Weisman highlights as critical to the experience of survival does not contain a single *positive or reparative* aspect of survival. "Survival," is thus understood in terms uncomfortably similar to the notion of trauma-as-continuously present that Weissman writes against. The survivor remains wholly defined by and containable within their traumatic experiences and, as such, this definition not only reinscribes the criteria Hilberg noted above that broadly equates suffering with authority, but in order to understand why the experience of survival is the "full" experience of the Holocuast, we are asked to implicitly accept that that *more* suffering grants *greater* authority.

Levi's claim that the dead and the so-called *Müselmanner* are the "true witnesses" then we are locating that unknowable quality in the experience of radical dehumanization and, ultimately, in death, two qualities that the Holocaust imposed upon its victims with extreme force, but that are not exclusive to those spaces and historical moments.[166] What enables the survivors to speak, Levi implicitly claims (and as we will discuss further below) is their proximity not to this experience, but to those who fell victim to it.

In part because it emerges from his broader philosophical inquiry into the communicative possibilities and limitations of language itself, rather than emerging from the study of literary or legalistic testimony, Jacques Derrida's understanding of the position and function of witnessing offers a particularly illuminating challenge to the otherwise rigid authority of the survivor-as-witness.[167] Like the scholars above, "witnessing" for Derrida is inseparably tied to the textual artifact that it produces, "testimony," and though Derrida turns to the Holocaust in order to ground his ideas, it is in poetry, here specifically in Paul Celan's *Aschenglorie* ("Ash-Glory"), that he finds his richest material. There are two things I find especially generative in Derrida's complex (or at least exceptionally dense) reading of Celan: the first is the way in which Derrida marks the distinction between testimony and proof, another way of theorizing the relationship between historical information and the information testimony can provide. Second, and most important for our own conception of the poetics of witnessing, is the way in which Derrida defines the preconditions for witnessing itself. Though beginning from a reading of Celan, Derrida builds outward toward a notion of witnessing as not necessarily dependent on physical existence within the camp, nor of the author's biographical history, but grounded in poetics itself.

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[166] Several scholars have devoted significant attention to the question of why this term, *Müselman* (Muslim) became the dominant metaphor within Auschwtiz, pointing to both a shared history between Jews and Muslims of exclusion within the European states, as well as a complex historical figuration of these two groups within the public and philosophical discourses of modern Europe. See especially Gil Anidjar *The Jew, The Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Anidjar).

[167] A through-line for much of his writing, the idea of witnessing is partially derived from Derrida's own thinking on apophatic theologies. It is closely tied to his notion of the "secret," a shorthand he uses throughout his work for thinking through the complex relation between saying and not-saying things that we know but cannot (or will not) fully communicate to one another. For one example of critical analysis of Derrida's famously esoteric writing especially as it applies to "testimony," the concept he takes up directly in his work on Celan, see Barbour's *Derrida's Secret* (Barbour)

It is worth taking a moment, given the breadth and general inscrutability of Derrida's philosophical writings, to contextualize his readings of Celan within (one small aspect) of Derrida's broader language philosophy. Most importantly, Derrida's reading of Celan is, like those scholars we have been discussing up to this point, predicated on the existence of an unknowable, unrepresentable *thing* that sits behind the witness-poems, and to which they refer — the thing to which they bear witness, we might say — and to which we as readers will never have access. This is not limited to his analysis of Holocaust, or even poetry in general, but central to his entire language philosophy is a recognition and insistence on the irreducibility of a given linguistic expression, and the corresponding difficulty (or perhaps impossibility) of reading a text as if it gives us direct or even indirect access to its referents, in our case, the historical events to which is seems to refer. As he says of "*Ashenglorie*," the central poem from which he build the particular understanding of witnessing we are drawing from: it is difficult *not* to read the poem as referring to specific things, "to dates and events, to the existence or experience of Celan," but because the poem never *names them* explicitly, we as readers can never step outside the realm of inference and speculation (Derrida 67). "The possibility of a secret" (something unspoken and known only to the speaker that may change the entire meaning of the words they have said) "always remains open and this reserve" of possible meaning "inexhaustible": that is, we can never claim with *certainty* that we know to what the poem refers (Derrida 67).

The "irreducibility" that Derrida invokes in not *so* different from those notions of "unspeakability" or "uniqueness" that have plagued our discussion thus far that we cannot see similarities at the heart of these two kinds of claims, both of which, as I mentioned briefly above, are derived initially from apophasis, the speaking about something only by denying that it can, will, or should be spoken about. Testimony, Derrida seems to say, like the witnesses themselves and the experience to which the bear witness, are "singular" and "irreplaceable". All *we* have access to is their linguistic representation of a thing that they (not we) experienced, and as such the physical events remain fundamentally inaccessible

to us.[168] For Derrida, however, and many of the post-structuralist linguistics and language philosophers who preceded him, this is *not* a facet or characteristic of the Holocaust or indeed of any traumatic experience, but is something inherent in all language and text (and especially prominent in poetry, which plays intentionally on the edges of language's referential qualities). This, I think, makes *all* the difference: the Holocaust remains a mystery *only* insofar as we cannot access reality as such via any linguistic representation; Derrida's claim says nothing about the Holocaust itself, but rather everything about the communicative functioning of language.

Derrida's own anti-interpretive positioning results in a reading that is primarily focused on the meta-referential qualities of Celan's poem: what the poem says about the communicative possibilities of poetry itself and, by extension, the act of bearing witness itself.[169] Derrida's first goal is to sketch out the problematic results of assuming that *bearing witness* is equatable to *providing proof*, in the same ways we saw implied above. Insofar as the addressee of the testimonial act, he argues, will never have access to the thing the witness saw, the promise implicit in the act of bearing witness — that underlies and grounds the authority of the witness — cannot be a truth claim about the things or events that were witnessed. We cannot use testimony, Derrida claims, to determine whether an event occurred according to a historical metric of truth. Rather, all we can derive from testimony is a set of claims about the relationship of the speaker (witness) to the testimony itself. The witness, Derrida tells us, "marks or declares that something *is or was present to him* that is not so to the addressee to whom he is joined by a contract, an oath, a promise" (78, my emphasis). Derrida's phrasing here is carefully indicative of the stakes of witnessing: "present *to him*" marks the stakes of the testimony as purely subjective, even relational, and the gap that forms the impetus for testimony — something present to the witness that is not to the addressee — is a function of subjectivity rather than necessarily specific experience.

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[168] While this is true of all narrated experiences and reportage, we understand this implicit in everyday communication, it is still worth reminding ourselves of this because of of the way in which trauma scholars such as Felman and Laub, in their insistence on the active presence of the listener to testimony as a co-owner of event, and indeed the language of trauma-as-eternally present seems to deny.

[169] Like Felman and others, Derrida particularly concerned with the implications of "*Aschenglorie's*" unremittingly obscure final lines: "*Niemand / zeugt für den Zeugen*," "No one / bears witness for the witness".

The *temporal qualities* of this claim are especially important to our own understanding of witnessing as a textually inscribed subject-position. Those scholars we discussed above, especially in the case of the Holocaust, define witnessing in distinctly *temporal* terms: the subject-position of the witness, as Glejzer, Felman, Laub, and others have defined it is produced or occupied in the attempt to narrate a past experience. Derrida, on the other hand, specifically marks this relational position as unbound by the temporal qualities of the *act* of bearing witness itself: although the speech or writerly act always occurs post-facto (even if only by a few moments), once we have understood witnessing to not be about the events or things witnessed, but about the perception and relationship generated, temporal distance is no longer *required*. "Even if it were still contemporary at the moment of attestation, it would still be inaccessible, as *perceived* presence, to the addressee receiving the testimony" (77 emphasis in original). Witnessing, at this moment in Derrida's understanding, is the attempt to communicate the uniqueness of a subjective relationship between the speaker and object of testimony.

Taken to a more radical extreme than I want to here, Derrida proposes that at a certain point we become unable to talk about Celan's poem as *about* anything beyond itself, and instead we can read it only, as Derrida does, insofar as it examines its own *poetic possibilities*.[170] As such, though drawing from Derrida, I am not certain that his conclusions about Celan's poetry as a kind of purely introspective poetics offers a pathway forward for interpretation beyond the philosophical, foremost because this kind of approach is significantly limited in its readership. Although this is an insightful and detailed examination of the poeticist functioning of much poetry, Holocaust or otherwise, I am also interested in the kinds of interpretations available to readers who are not so meta-linguistically sensitive, and who do come to these poems with the assumption that the things they recognize as references do point to *something*, even if they cannot say for certain what it is. Rather, recalling a phrase I used in the first

[170] This seems to be what Derrida means when he later says, "Suppose that we refrain, as I would wish to do here, from 'commentary' on this poem. Even before doing so, in any case, and whatever the poem or its signatory *means*, whatever he intends to be bearing witness to, one cannot link *a priori* this figure of the oath to that of bearing witness, which comes up at the end" (82). That is to say, we cannot logically infer the relation of these two figures from just the fact that they both appear in the poem. In true Derrida form, however, he goes on to link them *a posteriori*.

chapter, instead of searching for certainty, readers build from this observation (or assumption) of reference — our understanding that the poem reaches out to other people, times, and texts — as a means to open up and form boundaries around a constellation of interpretive possibility.[171]

It might be helpful to step back from Derrida at this point, to reconfigure all of this for our purposes in conversation with our American Yiddish Holocaust poetry. To see this poetry as *bearing witness* in its own right (rather than as secondary, pseudo-, or proxy- witnessing) is to see it as inviting us, as readers, to step into a particular perspective that is singular to the poetic voice, regardless of the temporal or physical distance between the poetic speaker and the Holocaust itself. Rather than emerging out of direct experience, then, we instead understand the subject-position of "witness" as constituted by the referential limitations of language itself. As such, we can understand why these scholars consistently turn to poetry as the textual basis for developing these complex claims about the relationship between events, text, and speech. We might think of poetry, or more specifically, *poetics*, as a mechanism for making visible — for making the reader aware of — and inviting the reader into a space of play with the referential and structural possibilities (and limitations) of language, and in the case of Holocaust poetry, inviting them to recognize the singular subjectivity of the poem itself. In doing so, in the same way we saw with explicit or clearly marked metaphors, metonyms, and other kinds of symbolic language, one of the aims here is to push the reader to acknowledge the *necessity* of "irreducibility" or "unrepresentability" not as a failure of language, but as what makes interpretation possible at all.[172]

To this end, the purposefully open (and vague) definition of the witness that begins Derrida's essay is especially applicable to our poets, writing in the United States. "Perhaps," he says of the image of ash as a figure of annihilation in Celan's poem, "that would lead us to think of this fearful thing:

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[171] Put slightly differently: *I*, like most readers, approach a poem that claims to be about something *as if it is, in fact, about something*, even if I can never be certain what that thing is. The act of reading (and the necessarily simultaneous act of readerly interpretation) for the majority of readers assumes the possibility of communication, and the existence of an implied world beyond the boundaries of the text itself. Otherwise, a Holocaust poem could never be a Holocaust unless it announced itself explicitly: this was the same dilemma we encountered in Rosenfeld's reading of Glatshteyn's *"Roykh*".

[172] This is what draws these scholars to Celan, among the most iconoclastic of Holocaust poets.

> the *possibility* of annihilation, the *virtual* disappearance of the witness, but also of the capacity to bear witness. Such would be the only condition for bearing witness, its only condition of possibility as condition of its impossibility — paradoxical and aporetic [. . .] *as soon as* it is guaranteed, certain as *theoretical proof*, a testimony *can no longer* be guaranteed *as* testimony. For it to be guaranteed as testimony it cannot, it must not, be absolutely certain, absolutely sure and certain in the order of knowing as such. (68)

This final sentence, the paradox of testimony, is the central concern that motivates his entire analysis of witnessing, and leads to the ultimate claim that "all responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language," because, as I noted above, in poetry we find the linguistic and textual enactment of the same epistemological paradox he finds situated at the heart of the act of witnessing (Derrida 66). For Derrida, poetry is the necessary genre for testimony because poems are always expressing the impossibility of expression.

Possibility is what allows for witnessing, specifically the *possibility of annihilation* "without remainder, without memory, or without a readable or decipherable archive" (Derrida 68). We cannot determine for someone else what constitutes an encounter with the possibility of annihilation, and especially not for a poetic speaker whose very existence is similarly a construction of the text. That is, *possibility of annihilation* itself is what marks the position rather than the realization of that possibility: where the latter is decidedly within the purview of historical data, the former remains experiential and subjective. As such, the borders and boundaries that have been so intrinsic to the study of Holocaust literature (and here we need only recall Roskies and Diamant's pragmatic binary of "Jew-Zone" and "Free Zone") stumble insofar as they impose a reductive and extrinsic set of historical or biographical criteria on a rather more complex set of *literary circumstances*.[173]

Although he is much more invested in direct experience, Giorgio Agamben's conception of the witness complements Derrida's, insofar as — though in his own terminology — he also insists that

[173] This is not to say that what counts as Holocaust literature is *entirely* a matter of self-definition (certainly I acknowledge the complicated implications of that claim) because for scholarship, or even reading, to take place there must be *some* boundaries — but in *our case* especially, with a group of Yiddish-speaking, Eastern European immigrant Jewish writers composing during the Holocaust or in its immediate aftermath, the exclusion of their writing from the realm of Holocaust literature on geographical terms, or on the basis of a definiiton that *requires* temporal distance, seems increasingly arbitrary. Even within Roskies and Diamant's anthology, insofar as literature from outside of Europe is certainly part of the post-war landscape of Holocaust literature, it appears that the unique combination of *wartime writing in the United States* (that is not aimed at political mobilization) means that this literature merits less discussion or exclusion.

possibility, rather than its realization, is what defines the witness. Like Derrida, Agamben upholds the notion that there is a gap, a "lacuna" at the heart of survivor testimony (12). Though not especially interested in divesting the Holocaust experience of its mystical/theological qualities, Agamben's conception of this "lacuna" emerges fundamentally out of his *rejection* of the "unspeakability" of the Holocaust.[174] Rather, Agamben locates this lacuna in the figure of the *Muselmann* as described by Levi above: "we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch the bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the "Muslims," the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose depositions would have general significance" (*Drowned* 84). The *Muselmann* (here "Muslims," but rarely translated in scholarship) is a strange term endemic to the camps of Auschwitz that refers to the specific group of inmates who stopped actively working toward surviving and, instead, simply began going through the motions of existence.[175] Adopting this binary, Agamben is primarily interested in understanding how this "lacuna" is produced by the phenomenology of the camp, and the particular position of the survivor as such. His primary goal is to account for what testimony *is* and *does*, once we have accepted that it does *not* speak to or for the historical data or details.

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[174] He rejects this overarching notion on two grounds: first, as we saw ourselves above, because of its roots in Christian apophatic theology. Agamben argues that because apophasis is a method of *praise* in its theological contexts, a kind of silent devotion, to attribute these same qualities to the Holocaust "regardless of one's intentions, this contributes to its glory" (33). Furthermore, placing the Holocaust in the same discursive position as the divine implicitly disconnects it from the human causal nexus that allows us to understand the events of the Holocaust in real and historical terms. Second, Agamben reiterates the argument we made above that recognizes the symbolic-linguistic elements of the Nazi genocide as central to their project. Where my critique was derived from examining the linguistic implications of the Nazi's use of Jewish trope and history to create a symbolic landscape of erasure, Agamben sees in this language work a reflection of the operation of modern biopower (the modern form of state power that seeks to transform biology and life into a political issue). Simplifying his argument slightly, Agamben here notes that by rendering the victims of the Holocaust unable to speak for themselves, to "dictate the history of the Lagers" he says citing a comment an SS guard made to Primo Levi, the Nazis succeed in separating biological life from subjectivity. As such, to render the Holocaust as "unspeakable" is to enact the very desubjectification that the Nazi's own language policy sought to achieve.

[175] These are not without their problems as categories, of course, and certainly don't take into account the radical complexity of the experience of an individual under conditions of extreme oppression, but these are the terms that Agamben uses, that Levi developed through his own post-war memoiristic and reflective writing. There is not a clear line between the two, and both Agamben and Levi note *bidirectional* movement is possible if only rarely attested to: one usually *becomes* a *Muselmann*, if not lucky enough to find a position in the camp that gave them access to extra food, shelter, warmth, etc. In addition, this binary is difficult to separate from Levi's moral framework, captured especially in the essay "The Gray Zone". Cf. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Drowned and the Saved*.

Critical to his conception of the camp is the reframing of the boundaries and symbolic borders of the camp from the physical spaces and into human terms: the *Muselmann* becomes the "central non-space" around which the symbolic geography of the camp revolves, and the primary boundary is no longer the door of the crematorium, but *Selektion* itself, in which the human action of judgment formalizes one's transformation into *Muselmann*. The death that results from selection is not what distinguishes the *Muselmann* for Agamben — and here he is differentiated from Derrida — but is an almost inevitable outcome; rather, the *Muselmann* is "the point at which human beings, while apparently remaining human beings, cease to be human," an individual reduced to a purely biological existence, divested of subjectivity and personhood (55). Agamben spends considerable time mapping out the characteristics of the *Muselmann*, because it forms the critical foundation for his notion of the witness, insofar as he sees the goal of witnessing as speaking for these people who can no longer speak for themselves: "whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness" (34). Thus the position of witness first comes to be defined entirely in terms of its relationship to Levi's "complete witness," the victims of the concentration camp. The importance of the witness here, what *defines* testimony, does not lie in the specific experience of the survivor or witness — not, we might say, in the facts and details of their testimony — because their experience of the camps was not the norm. Rather, testimony *speaks for* someone for whom speech is impossible.

Agamben's most direct formulation of this relationship: "the subject of testimony is the one who bears witness to a desubjectification" (120-1). Agamben aims to reinforce for us the importance of the continued insistence on the part of survivors such as Levi that they are speaking for or on behalf of those who not only cannot speak for themselves, but who experienced something the witness has not and could not have experienced. The enabling feature of the *witness* in Agamben's conception is thus much more closely aligned with our commonsense understanding (derived from a courtroom setting) than the normal usage within Holocaust scholarship. There is a constant vacillation, Agamben implies, between the need of a witness to claim a position of subjectivity that allows them to speak, because all they can recount are

their own experiences, and the simultaneous need to decenter themselves within the testimony — to disavow that subjectivity insofar as he, like Levi, insists that it belongs to those who *cannot* speak, but of whose experience the testimony can say nothing.[176] Testimony, as such, is a placeholder for that thing that cannot exist: the words of those victims of the camps who have been rendered speechless, first through their transformation into the *Muselmann* and then by their deaths.

Within the opening lines of the poem, the speaker of Leyvik's "*A treblinke-kandidat*" establishes two criteria that unambiguously situate them in the position of witness, both according to my definition and to the criteria we have discussed from Derrida and Agamben: "I was not in Treblinka, / nor in Majdanek, / But I stand on their threshold." They *were not* in the camps themselves, yet they might have been, and they still may cross that threshold. Given the relationship between the title and the first lines, and the positioning of the speaker on the "threshold" or "doorstep" of the camps, we are faced with a poem about *possibility* and *potentiality*. Derrida marks the realization of this possibility of annihilation as the foundation upon which the possibility of witnessing is formed; Agamben is more oblique. Agamben musters a complex argument that locates subjectivity itself as emergent from the

> capacity to have or not have language. The subject is thus the possibility that language does not exist, does not take place — or, better, that it takes place only through its possibility of not being there, its contingency [...] Testimony is a potentiality that becomes actual through an impotentiality [sic] of speech; it is, moreover, an impossibility that gives itself existence through a possibility of speaking. (145-6)

What the witness does, in these terms, in *bearing witness*, is reify the impossibility of speech that defines those for whom they are speaking through, ironically or paradoxically, the witness' affirming the possibility of their own speech *on behalf of* those who cannot speak. Insofar as the witness exists *in relation* to those whose desubjectification they are bearing witness to, implicit in their own speech act is a

[176] Agamben is, in fact, restating a claim he made in the sentence that precedes this quotation, which I have relegated to this footnote because it is, frankly, unnecessarily convoluted: "Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and here the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject, to identify the 'imagined substance' of the 'I' and, along with it, the true witness" (120)

recognition of this contingency, the arbitrariness, we might say, of their own ability to speak (and all the requirements for that, such as their continued existence).

The speaker of Leyvik's poem is entirely occupied with precisely this potentiality. As I suggested above, one of the central conceits of the poem is establishing the relationship of the speaker to those who *were* in the concentration camps. Occupying a position from which they can observe the full extent of the destruction of the Holocaust, the physical language in which this position is grounded (threshold, balconies) quickly gives way to the central characteristic that defines the speaker's position: that they are, themselves, awaiting the coming order to death.

A Treblinka-candidate

I was not in Treblinka
Nor in Majdanek,
But I stand on their threshold
And on their balcony.
Threshold — God's wide world,
With an other-world-veranda,
I stand and I wait,
Wide world, for your command:
Jewish-head, into the gas chamber!

Everything around is godly-fine,
Forests sway with pious heads,
Over all mountains and over every steppe
Words dance in circles
And the sun is clear, charged
With an overflowing of flames,
Which from their flares come
All fiery tongues from Majdanek.
To fall into the inquisition-delight
In my life I have not yet had
One offer, and I stand
In line for the camp of the world
A recorded Treblinka candidate.

Over the course of the second stanza, through a series of abstract pastoral metaphors, the Holocaust is removed from the boundaries of the concentration camp, and transformed into an event that not only spans the entire world, but in which all the mechanisms of existence — earth, plants, the sky, the sun — are figured as either victim or perpetrator. Linking the sun's rays to the fires of Majdanek furthers both the totality of the destruction being faced here, but also the apparently *inevitability* of the speaker's own

eventual entry into the "fiery" Majdanek.[177] The speaker's own admission that they have never experienced this kind of prejudicial violence (drawing on their reference to the "inquisition") serves to reinforce their position *as* witness, insofar as it recognizes that their speech is enabled not by an experience they have had but by the qualities that they share with those who have entered into the "camp of the world," and the accident of their own survival. After all, we are only told one feature of the speaker: that they are Jewish.[178] Once the Holocaust is stripped down to its barest elements in this way, in which Jewishness is the sole and sufficient condition for death, and the *entire world* becomes implicated in the genocide — once "camp" becomes "camp of the world" — anyone who was not in Treblinka bears an analogous relationship to the victims of Treblinka and Majdanek that Levi articulated between the survivor and the *Muselmann*, able to do nothing except bear witness to those who saw and experienced something they did not.

As the titular poem of this collection, I argue — as I have above with Molodovsky's *"Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn"* — that it serves as a framework for our encounter with the collection as a whole, offering a poetic justification for the collections' ability to adopt this position of witness, of speaking for and on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. As such, the title of the collection in this case works in conversation with the collection's enigmatic epigraph

אָ וועֶר וועט אויף די סליאַדן פון טרעבלינקע–גאַנג
פאַרגעבן דיר די שולדן פון געזאַנג?

> Oh, who will on the path of Treblinka-march,
> Forgive you the guilt of singing? (Schwarz 71 Schwarz' translation)

Jan Schwarz actually spends a considerable portion of his (albeit brief) discussion Leyvik's collection with this epigraph. Schwarz' uses this epigraph, and the reading of "*A treblinke-kandidat*" that follows from it to portray the collection as a whole as emerging out of Leyvik's guilt over "having the privilege" to write poetry in New York during the Holocaust (71). The quotation certainly, and clearly, expresses a

[177] There is a theological undertone to this poem's characterization of *nature* in terms that are coded Jewish — the world is "*getlekh fayn*," the forest sways are reminiscent of rhythms of study in a Yeshiva — insofar as it imagines the fire of the Majdanek/sun engulfing all of *creation* in that biblical sense of the term.
[178] This is the only feature we know of them apart from the fact that they were not in Treblinka or Majdanek.

kind of identification with the victims, but it is not clear at all from the epigraph, nor the poem itself, that this identification is reducible to empathy and guilt. I have included Schwarz' translation above to illustrate the interpretive difficulty here, signaled by the fact that the epigraph is a rhyming couplet. That is, there is no reason we ought to ignore the epigraph-as-poetry in its own right, and rather than accept the inevitability of a specific reading, to examine the multiple possibilities for interpretation. For example, we might otherwise translate the line as: "Oh who will on the path of Treblinka-march / Forgive you the responsibility of singing?" Although I have only changed one word, I would suggest that it leads to a different reading of the entire second line (and thus the sentence as a whole). This reading turns on a poetic usage of "*shuld,*" in which it is understood in its broader connotation of "responsibility" rather than the narrow legalistic sense that the English word "guilt" conveys. *Shuld* more generally carries a sense of fault and blame, something that might be imposed externally, where "guilt" in English, as an affect outside of its legal usage, is a decidedly internal process, and bears little relation to external conditions. In this case, it seems to bear both of those meanings more evenly. As such, we might be reminded that "*fargebn*" just like its English cognate "forgive" also carries broader connotations, especially in the sense of "granting relief from," as we might say "to forgive a debt."

Though perhaps a less straightforward and singular affective reading as Schwarz', the poetic structure of this epigraph points toward a similar kind of duality in place that we saw in the title poem itself: it is not a simple case of guilt and distant identification, but rather that the poetic speaker of each of these poems understand themselves to be taking on, or inheriting, the burden of speaking poetically (or perhaps at all) for those who complete that journey to Treblinka. It is crucial, though easy to dismiss, that this epigraph is located on the *path toward* Treblinka rather than in the camp itself, a similar liminal space, analogous if not identical to the "line" in which the speaker stands at the close of *"Treblinke kandidat*". Once we have recognized the oddity of that specific location, our reading directly attends to the primary ambiguity of the epigraph itself, which is that of address. Schwarz reads the "you" as clearly directed at Leyvik himself, invoking those on the road to the death camps as the cause of his own sense of guilt and shame. It is equally possible, however, to read this as specifically directed toward those victims,

as extending to them an offer of relief for this specific burden — more directly put, to those who *also* find themselves on the path to Treblinka, but who, at the moment of this poetic utterance, have stepped beyond the gates, and can no longer "sing". Understood within the broader traditions of Jewish response to catastrophe, in which poetry holds a near-sacred place as *the* medium for such speech, we are thus invited to read the collection itself as taking on part of that burden, as the testimony to Leyvik's poetic witness, the textual embodiment of the relationship the speaker establishes with the victims.

The poem's ability to establish this relationship also emerges from its particular temporality: the speaker grounds themselves very much in the *present*. Although the opening lines seem to set the poem up to be working through some past or recalled experience, the quick transition to present tense unsettles our ability to encounter the poem through a temporal lens. In the dramatic shift of tense, the poem affirms the continuing effects and presence of the Holocaust, and we are tempted to speak of it in terms used by trauma scholars: we might say that the poem affirms the continuous presence of the traumatic past. Yet, the admission of the first couplet steps outside of the classical terms of trauma by denying the poetic speaker the kind of direct experience that scholars, as we saw above, are so insistent upon. Instead, the sudden and permanent shift to present tense transforms the speaker's relationship to the Holocaust, such that their Treblinka-candidacy can no longer be thought of in temporal terms, but rather has become a characteristic of their existence. The change of tense thus also marks a rapid shift into the symbolic or figurative, in which the speaker's *lack* of direct experience forms the basis of their ongoing contingency: *that they were not in Treblinka*, the arbitrariness of their continued existence, comes to define the speaker through the rest the poem just as it comes to redefine the world solely in terms of those who are and are not Treblinka candidates.[179]

Memory, as we have seen, stands at the heart of the most prevalent definitions of Holocaust literature. As in Roskies and Diamant's definition, even the most capacious attempts at encapsulating the corpus of Holocaust seems to require not only establishing the post-facto nature of the literary event, but

[179] That is to say, reaffirming the oldest of Biblical binaries, who are and who are not Jewish, given that is the sole criteria, within the framework of the poem, upon which such candidacy is based.

hinges on the complexities and obscurities of memory to mark the relationship between the literary and the historical. That is, when literature is read as if it were legal testimony, memory — with its requisite limitations, gaps, and failures — is employed as a blanket category that intends to explain both the fact that these texts are recalled, and all of the *literary* aspects of these texts. "Memory" becomes a shorthand in scholarship on Holocaust literature that is invoked in order to avoid having to critically engage within the constructed nature of the literature text, to encounter literature *as literary*. The *presentness* of this poem thus might pose a significant challenge to its inclusion in a category that is defined by memory-work. "*Treblinka-kandidat*," insists that it is *not* a doing the work of memory, but is responding to something innate and imminent in itself and in the world, something that emerged from the Holocaust, certainly, but not something found in the past.

The notion of "witnessing" that we have proposed above offers a model of encountering these texts that does not rely on the operations of memory and, more importantly, that allows for the inclusion of texts such as this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry that were composed *while* the Holocaust was underway. The position of "witness" has two common features: first it requires us as readers to recognize both the particularity of the speaker's own subject-position, and of the speaker's own reflexive awareness of that position. This requires a reading strategy that does not engage with these texts through external biographical or historical criteria, but understands the text to be responsible for constructing and announcing its own position: that something was present to them — that they saw, heard, or understood something — that is inaccessible without *us* as readers being able to place ourselves into that position, without understanding the nature of the relationship the speaker is constructing between themselves and the victims of the Holocaust.

The second feature of these witnessing texts, most evident in Leyvik's "*Treblinka-kandidat,*" is that this relationship is built on the radical and often sudden revelation of the speaker's own inclusion among the *potential* victims, and the implicit ineffability of their own continued existence. The shift of tense in the third line of the poem as we discussed above marks this realization with full force. In doing so, the poem also shifts the perspective of its community of readers, who almost certainly were *also* not in

Treblinka or Majdanek, and thus encounters them in this poem not as memories, but like the speaker, as a fundamental enabling feature of their lives: that they are able to be reading this poem at all is grounded in the shared knowledge that they were *not* in the concentration camps. Memory works here neither for the speaker or the reader, as both are constructed by the poem as having been physically distant from the concentration camps.

The category of "witness" here, understood as constructed discursively in the diegetic establishment of a relationship between speaker (or poetic voice) and the Holocaust, is not exclusive and certainly does not offer an exhaustive lens for examining Holocaust literature, but rather seeks to provide a framework for discussing texts thatcannot readily be understood through the lens of memory. Purposefully limiting the category of "witness" to the *diegetic* — that is, grounding it in the way the text constructs its own subjectivity, rather than drawing from details of the author's biography or history — is not only a means of challenging the tendency toward authorizing Holocaust texts biographically, but also offers the possibility of a text adopting the position of witness partially, or temporarily, in the moments in which it comes to reflect on its own subject-position and the effects of that on its relationship to the Holocaust. As such, we might think of "the witness" as a subject-position that is concerned first and foremost with critical self-reflection, and understanding or elucidating a poetic speaker's own position and relationship to the Holocaust. Memory can play a role in that reflexive operation, but as we can see in the case of these poems in which the Holocaust is spoken of as a present and continuing event, it is not a *necessary* feature.

This is the framework we take into the next and final chapter. Acknowledging and understanding that our discussion of this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry in this chapter has been limited to a single poem, the following chapter will examine a series of mechanisms with which this poetry constructs and critically reflects on its own relationship to the Holocaust. Using the category of witness, as we have come to define it, with specific attention to those qualities of reflexivity and contingency, the following chapter grounds this reading strategy in two case studies, recurrent images across several poems: the first, of ghosts and specters; the second of letters received from the Warsaw Ghetto.

Poetry of witnessing is multi-vocal: the poetic speaker is simultaneously reflecting on their own positionality, on their ability to speak, and to *speak for* the victims with whom they form a relationship (*who* they bear witness to), and at the same time, a community of readers for whom this literature serves as a collective voice. Rather than functioning to mobilize its readership politically, this poetry is representative of the reflexive tradition that typified the Yiddish-language Holocaust literature of this period in the United States: if it can be said to be aiming to mobilize its readership, it is in the direction of *community*. Where, as we saw in the first chapters, figurative language and poetics serve as a means to construct a community of readers, then the construction of subjectivities that we see throughout this poetry of witnessing — which utilizes the same rhetorical and figurative operations — illuminates the basis for that community, creating a vocabulary by which this community of witnesses can articulate its own position within the emotional landscape of the Holocaust.

Chapter Five: No Letters Arrive Anymore

A literature of witnessing does not require the writer or the poetic speaker to have been physically present at the events to which they are bearing witness. As we saw in the previous chapter, this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry presents an image of the Holocaust unbound from the geography of Europe, engulfing and implicating the entire world, and to which any and all who recognize themselves as caught up in, or who are forced to confront the contingency of their survival in the face of its unfolding destruction must bear witness.

I recognize, and it is worth reiterating, that I am using the term *witness* here in a way that differs both from its everyday usage, where it is often limited to physical sensory perception, and its usage in court and legal settings, which I discussed in the previous chapter. The Eichmann trial had the curious effect of offering us two models of witnessing in the case of the Holocaust survivor: both the legalistic sense of one who offers their own experience as evidence toward a judicial proceeding, and by their presence at an event testifies to its having take place, *and* one who in testifying comes to metonymically represent the much larger community of victims, both dead and surviving. In the way the crimes of the Nazis were characterized during the Eichmann trial and, indeed, continue to be characterized today, the roles of witness and victim are synonymous.

In the previous chapter, and below, I argue for the need to distinguish between these two roles, with an emphasis on how the specific experience of the individual shapes their relationship to the events about which they speak. It is to recognize that each act of witnessing and of bearing witness offers first and foremost not access to the historical event, but rather, as I said in the previous chapter, to the event *as experienced by the speaking individual*, filtered through their specific access to information and foreknowledge, their individual understanding of the events *as they encountered them*. Thus to encounter these Holocaust poems as a literature of witnessing is to foreground their phenomenological qualities, and to recognize not only the necessarily limited nature of an individual's perspective at the time of experience, but also that their relationship with that experience changes with time. Furthermore, when we no longer approach literary texts with the desire to mine them for historical data, but rather as expressions

of a relationship between speaker and event, this changeability becomes a *generative* quality — both figuratively, in the sense that it allows us greater interpretive insight into the speaker's relationship to the event, and literally, in the sense that we, as readers of these texts, are *ourselves* witnessing the speaker's discursive construction of their own sense of self in relation to the transformative events they are describing.

At the close of the previous chapter, I highlighted two critical features of the subject-position of the witness. First, it centralizes and illuminates the specificity of the speaker's own positionality through engaged self-reflection. Rather than being invested in transmitting information about the Holocaust, this poetry of witnessing tells us first and foremost about the speaker's *relationship* to the Holocaust. Second, it emerges from the realization, often jarring and sudden, of the speaker's *inseparability* from the community of the dead. These two features are part and parcel of the same process: in Leyvik's poem, the speaker's ultimate realization is of the *potentiality* and *inevitability* of their own annihilation, that they exist in a liminal position, suspended between present life and certain death alongside their communities in Europe. Each of the poems below sees its speakers confront an analogous relationship: these speakers all recognize themselves as among both the living and the dead, as belonging simultaneously to both and, as a result, to neither.

Though they encounter this realization through distinct discursive and poetic frameworks, and each employs its own metaphor for explicating this — night and day, sleep and wakefulness, life and death, speech and silence — each metaphor is, ultimately, irresolvable within the lines of a given poem. The speakers each come to realize that their existence is defined by this *liminality*, this persistent, irresolvable duality.[180] Moreover, each of the speaker's below comes to recognize that this liminality brings with it the particular duty to serve as a mediating force between living and dead, to make known the events of the Holocaust, and to safeguard the knowledge and memory of the dead in perpetuity.

[180] Akin to the *contingency* of the existence of Leyvik's speaker in Chapter 4, though there I opted for the latter term because it provided a clearer link to Agamben's theorizing work.

We must distinguish explicitly between the *writers* of these poems and the voices that speak within them: we cannot infer from a poetic utterance the thoughts, feelings, or opinions of its author, just as we cannot on the face of any speech act assume it to be a direct reflection of the interiority of its speaker. This does not mean that these poems stand in isolation from the world however — they are not self-contained aesthetic objects — but rather that we cannot *assume* a certain disposition, belief, or perspective based on what we know or what is generally known about its author.

This assumption of correlation between author and text is a persistent feature in the study of Holocaust literature, as we have seen above, and of Yiddish literature in general. For example, Anita Norich claims of Molodovsky's "*El khanun"*: "Hers was a sentiment widely shared by secular Yiddish poets who not only failed to find any spiritual solace or divine plan in those days of horrible revelation, but who also found attempts to find such solace an obscenity in literal view of the dead and dying. (39) Though a compelling claim about the intentions behind the arresting final lines of the poem, it tells us little about the poem itself. More than that, the sweeping generality of this claim falters when we consider the collection as a whole. Take, for example, the lines "God of Abraham,/ make us a second Creation" (1-2) that punctuate Molodovsky's *"Havdole,*" composed during the same period and published only a few pages after *"El Khanun,*" or the messianic turn in the closing lines of the collection's titular poem, "*Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*". Taking a single poem in isolation as representative of the inner disposition of its author is ultimately difficult to justify when, within the pages of the same collection, there are poems that take the exact opposite position. The desire to assume continuity between author and text is difficult to resist, especially in the case of the Holocaust, and of course given the particular cultural schooling many of us have received in how to approach such a Holocaust text: solemnly, with reverence, perhaps even beyond criticism.[181]

Yet, this poetry *does* reach out beyond its own borders: it is replete with allusion, metaphor, and symbolism; it employs and transforms recognizable poetic form; it invokes moments and discourses from

[181] The fact that this is poetry might bring additional baggage. For example, given the persistent association of poetry with a Romanticist elevation of authorial inspiration and genius, we still often hear poetry discussed in terms of its unmediated access to the interiority of the poet.

Jewish history and theology. Because the poems regularly contain no explicit mention of the Holocaust, in order to recognize and name them as "Holocaust" literature *at all*, we must accept that they do not exist in isolation. There is an implicit tension in a reading strategy focused on the emergent subjectivity of a poetic speaker within a specific poem when analyzed comparatively or as part of a particular collection, not to mention when read with the assumption that this subjectivity is not strictly identifiable with that of the author. The difficulty lies in striking a balance between recognizing that a literary text is embedded in a series of contexts — temporal, linguistic, cultural, individual — while simultaneously recognizing that it is not wholly determined by, nor reducible to those contexts.

Poetry of witnessing is necessarily multi-vocal: the individual perspective discernible within a poem relies on a complex interplay of discourses and references.[182] These poems also speak to multiple audiences: a diegetic audience, a community of implicit readers and, in the case of the Holocaust, a community of those who will never be able to read these poems — those in Europe whose fate was the catalyst for this poetry. Here we can talk, as we did in previous chapters, of these poems drawing from a *shared vocabulary* inferable from fundamental features of this poetry itself when considered in literary and historical contexts. This vocabulary emerges from a *multiplicity* of discourses and traditions that inform this poetry, and in which it situates itself both diachronically and synchronically. For example, for Molodovsky to date her poem "*Briv fun geto*" at 1941 is to mark it as occupying a particular temporal relationship to the unfolding events of the Holocaust that we can examine in conversation with, but not

[182] The reading strategy I am both proposing and modelling here opens space for further study that foregrounds the polyphony of Holocaust literature, and all literatures that confront catastrophe, tragety and destruction: each text emerging out of a complex negotiation of historical, theological, cultural, and literary antecedents that might inform the particular response a given text and speaker takes. In understanding this poetry as a literature of witnessing in this phenomenological sense, not only can we more deeply understand the complex constructions of self that populate both the Holocaust literature we are discussing, and *all* literatures of witnessing, but it also opens space for further and closer analysis of other kinds of Holocaust and tragedy literature. We might, for example, revisit *other* testimonial literatures to emerge from and response to the Holocaust, to imagine new categories, such as literatures of *victimhood*, of *resistance*, of *survival*, foregrounding the distinctive qualities and perspectives that each offers. We may even begin to speak of each of these categories in similar terms to that which I've been using to discuss *witnessing*, as diegetic and discursively constituted subject positions that are *not mutually exclusive*, but are able to coexist within the covers of a single collection, or within the pages of a single text. Even within the framework of Jewish catastrophe literature there are multiple, competing models for response, from martyrdom to active resistance, from rejection of the divine to acceptance of God's punishment. All literary texts are discursive negotiations; catastrophe literature, deeply embedded in its historical, theological, and literary contexts is no exception.

reducible to the poem's own possible composition history. We can see this most clearly in "*El khanun*" in fact, which was written and first published in October 1944 but, when included in *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* has the year "1945" appended to it (see Hellerstein, *A Question of Tradition* 465; Norich, *Discovering Exile* 190) Neither composition history nor authorial statements on text and intent are dismissed, but become one among a nexus of secondary referents that we might draw on in order to inform a reading that necessarily begins with the literary text itself.

With that in mind, this chapter explores the mechanisms by which the speakers of this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry position themselves as witnesses to, and in relation to the Holocaust. Constructing their existence in relation to a complex and overlapping past and present, these poems constantly reflect on the possible implications, and as-yet-unknown implications of the disaster for themselves, their communities, and for Jewish existence itself. None of these poems are held as authoritative or exhaustive models of Holocaust literature, or of a literature of witnessing, even within the corpus of American Yiddish Holocaust literature. Reading these poems together, however, highlights a common pattern of development from personal reflection toward an emergent sense of communal identity, responsibility, and continued reflection on the place of the individual within a tragically constructed community. Each of these poems draws on particular sets of literary devices and strategies in order to reveal and confront the complex relationships at work between the poetic speaker, the dead, and the living present in which they find themselves. Understood within the framework of the poetics of witnessing explicated in the previous chapter, this chapter reads these poems as part of an ongoing process of reflection that exceeds the individual text and collection, as attempts to articulate new communal formations and to imagine possible futures within and against an overwhelming threat of total annihilation.

This chapter comprises case studies of two recurrent scenes in this Yiddish Holocaust poetry. The first examines late-night visitations by ghostly or dream-like visions associated with the destroyed Jewish communities of Europe. The second set of poems narrates receiving letters from ghettos. Though one is supernatural, the other decidedly more worldly, both of these sets of poems involve speakers' encounter

with objects (or subjects) that seem to exceed interpretive possibility. Rather than seeking to demystify, the speakers respond by reflecting on their *own* liminality in relation to the worlds of the living and dead. Recognizing the presence of these ghosts or letters as insistent markers of a relationship of affinity and responsibility that persists beyond the geographical and temporal boundaries of the Holocaust itself, the speakers of these poems understand themselves to be taking on the responsibility of safeguarding and making known the events to which these figures and letters attest, of *bearing witness* even in the commonsense understanding.

At a certain point, each of these speakers turns their gaze outward, from the singular speaking "I" to a tragic "we" that collectively inhabits the position of witness. Gesturing toward a set of possibilities, rather than a clear or singular vision of identity, this poetry ultimately understands witnessing as both a communal project and a project *of* community. As such, this chapter demonstrates that this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry foregrounds the poetic speakers' ongoing attempts to formulate a foundational vocabulary through which a contingent future communal existence can be imagined and given voice. Recognizing the need for an ongoing negotiation between past and present, living and dead, and contending with new information and experience, a poem of witnessing cannot be evaluated as a singular, final, or authoritative expression,[183] but rather each poem must be understood as part of a *process* of articulation and re-articulation critical to the continuing act of bearing witness.

The reading I undertake in this chapter, in conversation with the atemporal, excessive, and otherworldly figurations of the poems I examine, offers a model of Holocaust literature that steps outside the terminology and concerns of archival history. The understanding of "witnessing" that has previously motivated the study of Holocaust literature has resulted in a hierarchization of literary texts and expressions that restricts the authority to speak to those who were in physical proximity to, or who

[183] And, as such, is beyond the question of "incompleteness" or, rather, steps outside of the discourse of the Holocaust being beyond the literary or representative capacities of language, because the continual, perhaps palimpsestic process of writing and rewriting eschews the possibility of judging a single instance of poetic or linguistic expression as final, authoritative, or complete. A Holocaust response emerges from multiplicity of expressions that contain radically different, often contradictory possibilities and perspectives, thus revealing once again that the claims of the Holocaust's ontological otherness, its inexpressibility, are extra-linguistic, grounded in moral and normative judgment.

directly experienced the concentration camp. This reading strategy offers a countermodel of literary engagement not determined by biographical or retroactive historical factors (such as political impact). Rather, "witnessing" as a diegetically constructed relationship reflects the attempt of historically embedded subjects to produce responses both prior to and outside of the concerns of the historical archive, resulting in a literature motivated by contingency, multiplicity, and uncertainty.

This American Yiddish Holocaust poetry is a test case in literature that moves beyond the authority of post-Holocaust scholarly categorizations, the source of persistent claims that the Holocaust defies comparison. In contrast, this poetry continually gestures outward to historical and literary precedent, community, and the future. Though its composition history allows us to see more clearly its complex relationship to the field of Holocaust literature, the operation of witnessing does not rely on the terminology or authority of archival history. Rather, in centralizing the language of relation and of witnessing, made visible through the encounter in this chapter with ghosts, agential documents, and the persistent presence of multitudes of the dead, this chapter establishes the framework for a literature of witnessing not grounded in the specificities of the Holocaust, but in the relationships made possible through reflecting on one's position *as* and *within* a community under existential assault.

An Eternal Shadow in A Non-Existent House

Arn Tsaytlin's Holocaust poems are haunted. By night the speakers wander their homes, surrounded by flickering shadows and strange noises; or, half-asleep they step into dream-like visions of silent houses and ruined cities. Spaces that were once comforting and familiar have now become disorienting, alien landscapes in which time and space seem to shift endlessly. Here, the speakers are assailed by specters ("*geshpenster*"), ghosts and spirits ("*rukhes*"), abyssal hounds ("*hund fun obgrunt*"), shadows ("*shotn*"), and demons ("*shed*"). Like the spaces they inhabit, these phantoms are strangely familiar yet unidentifiable. They threaten, mock, and violently attack the speakers. Even being aware that they are dreaming does not bring the speakers' relief; these apparitions exert a presence that extends

beyond the realm of sleep and into the waking world. They exist on the boundaries of sleep and wakefulness, often trapping the speakers in that strange space halfway between the two.

מערדער פון געשפענסטער

צווישן צאַנקענדיקע שימערן,
שאָרך פון שאָטן און פייף פון מויז,
האָב איך געוואַנדערט איבער צימערן
פן אַ הויז.
איז אַ לוירדיק געשפענסט
אַרויסגעשפרונגען פון אַווינקל
און ביים האַלדז מיך אָנגעכאַפט: רערקענסט?

האָב איך זיך צעשריגן: מערדער פון געשפענסטער,
קום און הרג׳ע דאָס געשפענסט!
מערדער פון גע —

און כ׳האָב זיך אויפגעכאַפט. ביים ברעג פון בעט
בין איך געזעסן און צו זיך גערעדט:
אַ געשפענסטער–מערדער… אויב אַזאַ מין פאַך
איז פאַראַן, וואָלט עס געווען אַ וואוילע זאַך.
כ׳וואָלט דינגען אַזאַ איינעם, ער זאָל הרג׳ענען די רוחות,
וואָס פייניקן מיין מאָדנע עקזיסטענץ:
אַ לעבן נאָך דעם אומקום פון אַ פאָלק און אַלע ליבסטע,
אַ לעבן נאָך אַ לעבן אַ פאַרברענסט.
וואו קריג איך אַזאַ מערדער?
1946

Murderer of Specters

Between flickering shimmering,
Rustle of shadow and whistling of mice,
I wandered through rooms
Of a house.
A specter lying in wait
Jumped out from a corner
And grabbed me by the throat: Do you recognize [me]?

I shouted: Murderer of specters,
Come and kill this specter!
Murderer of spe-

And I woke up. By the edge of the bed
I was sitting and said to myself:
A specter-murderer. . . If such an occupation
Existed, it would be a good thing.
I would hire one of them, so he could kill the ghosts,

That torture my strange existence:
A life after the destruction of a people and all loved ones,
A life after a life burned away.
Where do I find such a murderer?
1946 (48)

Persisting across multiple poems and through into the early postwar period the visions and experiences of these ghosts are not offered to readers as obscure symbols or metaphors.[184] In fact, the speakers seem to have no interest in attempting to interpret or clarify the nature, purpose, or identity of these ghostly presences at all. Rather, they seem to recognize implicitly that these apparitions possess an agency and will beyond the speaker's knowledge or control; neither identifiable beyond the categorical terms I listed above, nor reducible to or recognizable as individuals, these specters cannot be explained away. In each case, perceiving some affinity with these spectral visions, the speakers instead begin to reflect on their *own* positionality,

Following the speakers themselves, this section does not seek to explain the phantoms away as symbols, metaphors, or references, but rather understand the *encounter* with them as a catalyst for confronting, examining, and articulating the poetic speakers' relationship to the Holocaust both as past *and* as present. We are not interested in the specter itself, but in how the speaker *responds* to this encounter. This first section argues that the recurrent encounter with ghosts and specters allows the speakers to recognize their own troubled, even ghostly existence, trapped between the worlds of the living and dead and unable to fully inhabit either. As such, this section demonstrates that what haunts these speakers is not the ghosts they encounter, but the realization that this inspires: the liminality of their *own* positions as witnesses to and living remnants of a world destroyed.

The process by which these speakers come to recognize their positions, and the language through which they do so is varied. In the early postwar poem "Murderer of Specters," this begins with a recognition of the contingency of the speaker's life, defined only as "after the destruction of a people," and "after a life burned up" (17, 18). Possessing no positive qualities of its own (except for "strange," 16)

[184] "Murder of Specters" is dated 1946, "Hound from the Abyss" to 1943.

this speaker's present is defined through its past or, more precisely, through the peculiar accident of their survival. We might say this speaker's past is defined not by their experiences, but by the destruction they did not experience themselves. In the same way, the speaker of "Hound from the Abyss" looks outward in the daylight; having fled the hound, they see their "life" — both in the sense of survival and in the sense of their own present — waiting to tear them to pieces, just as the hound did in their dreams.[185] And though the speaker of "*Hunt fun obgrunt*" claims triumph, they are ultimately trapped in a perpetual battle between the hound of their dreams and their own threatening, looming, life.

הונד פון אָבגרונט

אין מיטן נאַכט האָב איך זיך אויפגעכאַפּט: פון אַ קאָשמאַר
בין איך געלאָפן: פון א הונט, וואָס האט געריסן פון מיר שטיקער
און מיך געשלעפט אין אפגרונט. כ׳האָב אין שלאָף געוואוסט,
אַז ס׳איז אַ חלום — און איך בין פון יענעם כלב,
דעם רייסער, בייסער, פליקער,
דעם מאָנסטער פון דעם תהום, אַנטרונען צו דעם אויפזיין.
כ׳האָב זיך צולאַכט: איצט טו מיר עפּעס, רשע.
ביים ראַנד פון בעט בין איך געזעסן און געשטאַרט
צום פינצטערן פענצטער. דאָרט, אונטערן פענצטער,
ביים בלייכן זוים פון שלאָפנדיקע גאַסן,
האָט ס׳לעבן בייז געלויערט. ס׳האָט געוואַרט
אויף טאָג, כדי צו רייסן פון מיר פּאַסן.
נאָר איך האָב מער פון מורא נישט געוואוסט.
איך האָב געזאָגט: אויך דו ביסט נאָר אַ חלום.
און וועסטו, לעבן, שלעפּן מיך צום תהום
און רופן: נאַ דיר, תהום, צעמאָל אים —
וועל איך באַפעלן זיך אַליין: וואַך אויף!
וועל איך באַפעלן זיך אליין: אַנטלויף!
אַנטרינען וועל איך צו דער וואָר און וואַכקייט
פון דעם טויט — און דו וועסט בלייבן שטיין
געשפּענסטיק און פאַרלוירען אין דיין שוואַכקייט,
ווי יענער הונט, וואָס כ׳האָב אָט ערשט און מיטאַמאָל אים
שטיין געלאָזט מיט גאָרנישט אינדערמיט
פון אַנ אָפּגעהאַקטן חלום.

1943

Hound from the Abyss

In the middle of the night I woke up: from a nightmare
I was running: from a dog, that tore pieces from me

[185] Both the hound, and the specter "*loyern*": they "lie in wait" as I have translated it above, though we might render it as "lurking," with connotations of spying, anticipating some threatening or menacing action.

And pulled me into the abyss. In my sleep I knew
That it was a dream — and from that cur,
The ripper, biter, plucker,
The monster[186] from the chasm, I fled to wakefulness.
I laughed: do something to me now, villain.
At the edge of the bed I sat and stared
At the dark window. There, under the window,
In the pale edge of sleeping streets,
My life lay evilly in wait. It waited
For day, in order to tear strips from me.
But I knew no more of fear.
I said: You are also just a dream.
And you know, life, if you carry me to the abyss
and call: Here, you, abyss, grind him up —
I will order myself: wake up!
I will order myself: run!
I will escape to truth and vigilance
from death — and you will remain standing
on the other side, robbed of your plunder,
specter-like and lost in your weakness,
like that hound, which I just left
standing there with nothing in the middle
of an interrupted dream.
1943 (60–61)

Through their encounter with these otherworldly figures, the speakers of these poems begin a discernible process of self-transformation that involves recognizing themselves in relation to the victims of the Holocaust, and confronting the burden that they understand this relationship to bring with it. Over the course of several similar poems, Tsaytlin's speakers, and the speaker of Glatshteyn's longer poem "*Nakhtlider*" ("Nightsongs") each then turn their attention outward, in the attempt to articulate communal identity, a collective "we" formed in response and in relation to the suffering to which these speakers bear witness.

The most troubling aspect of the specter is, we might say, its *presence*, both in the sense of its threatening physical proximity and agency, and its temporal existence in the poetic present, unable to be relegated to the past from which it seems to stem. The specter *cannot* be reduced, dismissed, or confined, at least not by the speaker: it seems to belong as much to the world of the living as of the dead, a tangible

[186] Here, Tsaytlin transliterates from English: the Yiddish literally reads "*monster.*"

connection between the two. The speaker of "Hound from the Abyss" laughs triumphantly at waking from their troubled nightmare, believing that the boundary between the two worlds was a firm protection from the tormenting hound (6-7), only to have that sense of safety immediately dismissed: the hound, this speaker realizes, is not a function of their dreams, but a persistent feature of their current life. Even that life, we soon learn, threatens to destroy them, and for all their posturing, by the conclusion of the poem they are in no different a situation than when they first woke.

Annette Wieviorka characterizes the Holocaust survivors during the Eichmann Trial as "an embodiment of memory, attesting to the past and *the continuing presence of the past*" (88 my emphasis). Like Wiesel's notion of the survivor's *life itself* as testimony,[187] Wieviorka's "continuing presence of the past" offers little in terms of historically verifiable access to the past. Both the speaker of *"Hund fun obgrunt*" and "*Merder fun geshpenster"* trouble the distinction between past and present: for the former, the persistent hound follows them like a shadow, equally characterized as a figure from their dreams and as their "life" itself (11). The speaker of the latter poem defines their life only in terms of "after," which, though chronologically situated, cedes all definitional authority to the memory of the past. For both speakers, these threatening specters are understood not as visitations of the past, but rather of the present *encountered through the past*, of the relationship the speaker has to the destroyed world.[188] In these ghosts, hounds, and demons, the speakers of Tsaytlin's poems find themselves confronted by, and in conflict with, the fact that they can no longer accurately distinguish between past and present, that they are perpetually trapped in a space between the two. Through the language of memory, scholar, survivor, and here, poetic speaker frame the witness to the Holocaust as occupying a temporally liminal space, one in which the past and present are converge and, perhaps, are inextricable.

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[187] See Wiesel's address given at Yad Vashem in April 2002, "Whoever listens to a witness becomes a witness" (Wiesel, *Whoever Listens to a Witness, Becomes a Witness.*)**.**

[188] At several points I've returned to Amos Funkenstein's paraphrasing of Augustine as a point of reference. But here it is worth taking a phrase from Augustine himself as reference: "Wheresoever then is whatsoever is, it is only as present. Although when past facts are related, they are drawn out of the memory, not the things themselves which are past, but words which, conceived by the images of the things, they, in passing, have through the senses left as traces in the mind. Thus my childhood, which now is not, is in time past, which now is not: but now when I recall its image, and tell of it, I behold it in the present, because it is still in my memory" (*Confession*s,"Book XI).

The most jarring absence from all of these poems is identifiable people. They are spoken about collectively, in the abstract, as belonging to the past ("a life after"), and symbolically. However, where many of the poems we discussed earlier pressed against the limits of the expressive capabilities of metaphor and symbolic language, Tsaytlin's speakers embrace the figurative fully, as if they have no other tool. Like memorial stones, artifacts, and, as we will see below, letters received from those who have died, the symbolic force of all of these images lies, ironically and tragically, in the *absence* that makes their *presence* possible. Ghosts, phantoms, specters, and even shadows are symbolically rendered as a present reminder of the absence of the individuals, and the world, whose deaths make up the destruction to which these poems respond. As such, in the encounter with these ghosts the speakers also find themselves confronted, often violently, with the fact that although they understand themselves in relation to a destroyed past — as artifacts of a non-existent world inexplicably persisting into the present — they are *not* ghosts. They belong as much, or as little, to the world of the dead as they do to the world of the living.

This is one particular expression of a more complex liminality — being continually torn in two directions, between the destroyed world and the living — that persists throughout Tsaytlin's wartime poetry. For example, "*Zontik af vashington skver*" ("Sunday in Washington Square" 48-50) is dated 1942 and already speaks of Poland as lost, "surrounded by flames of murder," and existing only insofar as the speaker sees it in front of them. "Arn Tsaytlin," a named character in the poem, wanders aimlessly through the park indecipherable to those around him. Physically present but isolated from all of those around him, the "Arn Tsaytlin" of that poem is unable to draw a clear boundary between the destroyed Poland and the world in which he moves physically.[189] He is "there" in New York, but sees only the "world lost." "Tsaytlin" of this poem lives what the speaker of Glatshteyn's "*Nakhtlider*" ("Nightsongs," *Shtralndike yidn* 48-53) calls a "half-life," perpetually trapped between the world of his everyday life, and the lost world, destroyed. The speaker of "*Merder fun geshpenster*" describes their "strange life" as "*a lebn nokh a lebn a farbrenst*," a "life after a life burned up" (18). The lurking vision waiting to tear the speaker apart, in "Hound from the Abyss," is the fearsome specter of *both* dreamed past and lived

[189] See Chapter One for a longer discussion of this poem.

present. The speaker of "*A shotn in varshe*" ("A Shadow in Warsaw") can never leave the destroyed and phantom Warsaw of their nightly visions (44-46).

These poems document moments of irruption, of the speakers being suddenly overwhelmed by the revelation of their own liminal positions. "I live," declares the speaker of one of Tsaytlin's later Holocaust poems, "between nightmare and insanity" ("*Mayn adres*" *Ale lider un poemes*, vol. II 26). In "*Zontik af vashington skver*," we see "Arn Tsaytlin" embodying the position of witness that is manifest in these poems of haunting: in front of him he sees two worlds at once, and he stands — though those around him cannot see it — as the representation of that lost world, removed and displaced into a mundane morning scene in Washington Square. This "Arn Tsaytlin" *himself* is a kind of specter haunting the park, simultaneously occupying both worlds, defined only by his presence there and the presence of Poland to him. The speakers thus far are trapped between various worlds, sleep and wakefulness, life and death, past and present, New York and Poland. In each instance, the encounter with others, whose intentions and meaning is indiscernible or inaccessible, forces the speakers to reflect on and confront their own positionality, articulating (with greater or lesser certainty or detail) this overwhelming sense of not belonging to any one space, of lives defined by the contingency of their own survival.

The emergent awareness of this liminality, being trapped inextricably between the world of the living and the world of the dead, becomes the central focus of Tsaytlin's 1944 poem, *"A shotn in varshe*" ("A Shadow in Warsaw"). Here, the spectral space of a Warsaw home, and the encounter with speaking phantoms of household objects establish the *permanence* of this duality for the speaker. Perpetually trapped between these two spaces, "*A shotn in varshe*" differs from these other haunted poems not only in its focus on domestic spaces, but in its repeated and explicit admission that this is *not* the Warsaw of history, but rather a manifestation of the speaker's own troubled positionality. It begins, as it were, where the previously discussed poems end. The ghostly imagery is doubled: though the majority of the poem is a tour through the dream-like "non-existent" Warsaw, the phantom objects that populate this space call the *speaker* "shadow" and order them to leave. The speaker's admission in the final stanza that they are "an

eternal shadow in a non-existent house" invites us to revisit the spaces through which they moved as reflections of their own shadowy, double existence.

Central to the position and functioning of the witness, as we have been discussing it thus far, is an awareness of one's own complex relationship to the past, to the community, and to the distant destruction of which they are speaking. "*A shotn in varshe*" occupies this position from its beginning, acutely aware of the dual position of the witness in both the distant, destroyed world, and the present space of their writing. From that foundation, "*A shotn in varshe*" explores the second critical feature of the witness, which we will see as the explicit subject of Glatshteyn's "*Nakhtlider*" below: the responsibility this liminal positionality brings. The witness, by virtue of their unique positioning, seems to feel obligated to articulate their position and, in doing so, render the distant events of the catastrophe (whether that distance is geographical or temporal) visible to the community of readers implicitly constituted by all acts of writing.

Writing takes on a moral urgency through the first stanza of the poem. The plethora of communicative and representative objects that populate this dreamed-up Warsaw — "spectral portraits," empty beds, telephones, writing table — are the only identified or named features of the space, thus mirroring the memorial function of the act of writing that produced the poem. The experiences and visions attested to in the poem are conjured and created by the act of writing, even within the diegetic frame; the metafictive opening lines begin the poem by blurring the relationship between the act of writing and the completed poetic text. We are reading these words *as* they are being written, the poem announces, as if experiencing these visions alongside the speaker, while simultaneously being offered an entree into the mind of the speaker/writer in their creative process.

This string of phantom representative objects culminates in the singular image of an unfinished manuscript, "an unfinished line: / The lines lie like a corpse / that was not brought to a cemetery" (15-17). An uncomfortable mirror image of the speaker themselves in the opening lines, it is unclear how these unfinished lines sit in relation to the poem currently being composed as we read it. The act of writing, however, is explicitly linked to funerary rites and customs,[190] imbuing writing, poetry, with the same

[190] A connection we will see again in Molodovsky's "*Briv fun geto*" below.

religious import as proper burial. As such, completion of a poem becomes marked as a sacred duty, and the *inability* of the speaker to complete the poem, to step outside of the "non-existent house," might be seen as a failure of the responsibility they owe to the dead to see these ceremonies carried out. The layering of this metaphor extends to the poetic text in our hands, drawing us into the frame of the poem, and reinforcing *our* position as witnesses to the experience of the poetic speaker.

אַ שאָטן אין וואַרשע

דער מענטש, וואָס זיצט דאָ איצטער אין נוי-יאָרק
און שרייבט אין שפּעטער נאַכט די ווערטער אָט-אָ-די,
עפּנט אַ טיר, וואָס איז שוין לאַנג נישט הי,
אין אַ וואַרשע, וואָס וועט מער נישט זיין,
טאַפּט אַ וואַנט, וואָס פּאָספּאָריזירט אָן ממשות,
בלייבט שטיין פּאַר געשפּענסטיקע פּאָרטרעטן,
האָרכט, צי ס׳פּייפן נישט מייז
הינטער שוואַרצע טאַפּעטן,
און וואַקלט זיך צווישן בעטן,
וואו קיינער ליגט נישט.
פון אַ לאַמטערן קעגנאיבער אויף דער גאַס
פאַלט אַ געלער פּאַס,
לויפט פאָראויס, ווייזט דעם וועג צו אַ שרייב-טיש,
טיילט אויף אַ שטויביקן כתב-יד,
און אין כתב-יד — אויף אַ נישט-פאַרענדיקטער שורה:
די שורה ליגט ווי אַ מת,
וואָס מ׳האָט נישט געבראַכן צו קבורה.
ווי אַ פאַרטאָגיקער חלום בלייבט די קיך.
איך קריך
אויף פיר
ארום אַ הויכער טיר;
דערנאָך
שטיי אין און וואַש זיך ביי קראַנען,
וואָס זיינען שוין לאַנג נישט פאַראַנען.

דער שוואַרצער גלאַנץ
פון טעלעפאָן-טרייבל טוט מיך דערמאָנען
אַלטע נומערן פון טעלעפאָנען.
זאָל איך אָפּרופן, זאָגן, אַז איך בין געקומען?
אין טאָפּ די בלומען,
אין טאָפּ פי פאַנטאָמיקע בלומען,
דערהערן מיין געדאַנק און באַנג
שעפּטשען זיי אויס זייער שרעק:
נישט וועק.
ס׳אַ זינד.
פון זינט
דייטשע באָמבעס האָבן זיך געשאָטן
איבערן הויז,
האָט דאָ קיינער נישט געטראָטן.

שטער נישט, שאָטן.
גיי אַרויס.

ענטפער איך:
כ׳בין אַ מענטש אין ניו-יאָרק און אין וואַרשע אַ שאָטן,
אַן אייביקער שאָטן אין אַ נישט-פאַראַנען הויז.
ניין, כ׳קען נישט פון דאַנען אַרויס,
פון דעם נישט–פאַראַנענעם הויז
אין אַ געוועזענער וואַרשע.

ניו–יאָרק, 1944.

A Shadow in Warsaw

The person who sits here in New York
and writes these words late at night,
opens a door that has long ago disappeared,
in a Warsaw that will no longer exist,
touches a wall that phosphoresces without substance,
remains standing before spectral portraits,
listens, if mice are whistling
behind black wallpaper,[191]
and wobbles between beds,
where nobody lies.
From a lantern across the street
falls a yellow ray,
runs forward, shows the way to a writing table,
points to a dusty manuscript,
and in the manuscript — on an unfinished line:
The lines lie like a corpse
that was not brought to a cemetery.
Like a dream at daybreak the kitchen pales.
I crawl
on all fours
around a tall door;
afterwards
I stand and I wash myself at the taps
that have long since disappeared.

The black gloss
of the telephone-receiver reminds me
of old telephone numbers.
Should I respond, saying that I have arrived?
In a pot the flowers,
in a pot the phantom flowers
hear my thought and regret
they whisper out their fear:
Don’t wake.

[191] Another image that recurs, notably in “Murder of Specters” to establish the poetic speaker’s night time soundscape.

It is a sin.
Since
the German bombs poured
over the house,
no one has set foot here.
Disturb not, shadow.
Leave.

I answer:
I am a person in New York and a shadow in Warsaw,
an eternal shadow in a non-existent house.
No, I cannot leave here,
from this non-existent house
in a past Warsaw.
New York, 1944. (46–48)

When the dead finally speak, they order the poetic speaker to leave. In response, the speaker doubles down, arguing not only that they belong there, but that it is beyond their power to leave, that they are inseparable from this shadowy non-existent world of ghosts and phantoms. We might understand this disconnect between the desires of the dead and the abilities of the poetic speaker as emblematic of the struggle of the poetic witness with the complexity of their positioning, at once attempting to fulfill their memorializing function, while simultaneously coming to terms with the realization that they, too, belong at least in part among the victims being mourned. "*A shotn in varshe,*" with its insistent return to phantom and incomplete artistic or communicative objects, might then be understood as depicting the poetic witness' struggle to claim a language by which they can articulate, to themselves and to the ghosts who bid them to leave, the complexities of their liminal positions.

Tsalytlin's characterization prefigures and parallels the responsibilities that would be both claimed by and placed upon Holocaust survivor in the years and decades following the war, even more so in the years following the Eichmann trial.[192] Understanding this poetry as constructing a broader poetics of "witnessing" does not preclude claims to authority made by survivors, but rather positions the category of "witness" in conversation with that of "survivor," among others: the latter is dependent on the author's biography, and is then itself used as a framework for reading their literary texts. In contrast, to describe

[192] See Chapter Four.

this poem as constructing a community of witnesses, as I do above, is to draw attention to the relationship engendered by the claims made within the poem itself, regardless of the authorial intent or composition history.

These poems of witnessing are not concerned with relaying information about the Holocaust itself — they insists, in fact, that they know very little — but rather look inward, to reflect on and attempt to articulate the ways in which the presence and fact of the Holocaust alters the life and self-conception of the poetic speaker themselves, and the implicit community of readers who share their position. Tsaytlin's poetry of witnessing traces its speakers' slow realization that their lives are irrevocably altered by their own, very particular Holocaust experience, and that in mourning and speaking for the victims, in bearing witness to the Holocaust, they are also speaking for themselves.

A Living Monument

Drawing on parallel language of nightly vistations, wanderings, and encounters with apparitions of the dead, Yankev Glatshteyn's *"Nakhtlider*" ("Nightsongs") brings together and extends the developing realization we have seen in Tsaytlin and models it in a single poem, an extended portrait of the double-life of the witness and their tortured role as keepers of memory.[193] Though I only include excerpts from later sections below, the opening section of the poem, a languid but melancholy reflection on the speaker's life in light of those whom they lost, is significant insofar as it firmly establishes the second as either a dream or at least a vision encountered in the darkness of the night. Shifting suddenly from the specific, individual loss of the first section ("my brothers, they are with me" 10), the second is an overwhelming explosion of speech from "millions of dead":

2
ס׳ שטרעקן זיך צו מיר מיליאָנען טויטע הענט.
זיי אונדז אַ לעבעדיקער מאָנומענט
פון אומגליק.
מיר וואָס זיינען נישט געקומען צו קבר ישראל,
לאָמיר זיין אין דיר באַגראָבן.

[193] "Nightsongs" is a title Glatshteyn gave to several of his poems, part of a broad and persistent motif of "night" as a space reflection. Earlier poems with this title, or a variant of it, such as the one in his 1937 collection *Yidishtaytshn* were idyllic, and contemplative in nature, unlike this version.

זאָל דיין האַרץ ווערן אונדזער בריידער-קבר,
און דיינע אויגן שפּיגלען פון אונדזער יסורים.
זאָלן זיי דעם בונד מיט אונדזער טויט פאַרזיגלען.
דער געשריי פון יעדן פאַרפיניקטן אבר
זאָל דיינע חלומות שרעקן
און פון פּחד-שלאָף דיך וועקן.
קלאָג אַריין אונדזער טויט, אין דיינע לעבעדיקע מעת-לעתן.
לעב אונדזער טויט, דערהייב אים איבער אַלע פריידן.
ס׳קענען אונדז נאָך, חלילה, גאַנצע יידישע דורות פאַרגעסן.
ווער דער מעבר-יבוק צווישן לעבעדיקן אייניקל
און פאַרברענטן זיידן.

2[194]

Millions of dead hands stretch out to me.
Be for us a living monument
Of misfortune.
We who never made it to a Jewish grave,
May we be buried in you.
May your heart become our communal grave,[195]
And your eyes mirrors of our suffering.
May they seal the bond with our death.
May the cry from every tortured limb
Frighten your dreams
And wake you with nightmares.
Lament our death in your living days.
Live our death, elevate it over all joy.
It may yet be, God forbid, that entire Jewish generations will forget.
Become the Ford of Jabbok[196] between living grandchild
And burned grandfather. (*Shtralndike Yidn* 49–50)

The final two lines of above, a complex and layered Biblical reference, complete the commandment of the second line by grounding the position of the witness both within Jewish history,

[194] I am focusing here on sections B and C. This poem has an odd publication history in Yiddish: originally published in Glatshteyn's 1946 collection *Shtralndike Yidn* (*Radiant Jews*), the poem consisted of four sections of varying length that together tell a (relatively) cohesive framing narrative of the poetic speaker readying themselves for bed and contemplating their life (1), ostensibly before the vision described in this section (2) appears to them. That first section, as well as the short, lamenting stanza that opens section 3 (below) were both omitted when the poem was included in the 1967 collection *Kh'tu dermonen* (*I Shall Record*, as the collection itself translates it, but we might also render it *I do recall*) (Glatshteyn, *Kh'tu Dermonen*). It is unclear how much of a role Glatshteyn himself played in compiling this latter collection: in his introduction, Glatshteyn credits a group of "Bergen-Belseners" (survivors of Bergen Belsen) for putting the collection together, but in the same introduction offers an explanation for why *he* chose the title. Though I am working from the earlier publication, this later revision (the omitted lines are the only differences) could be read as indicative of a broader shift toward the centralizing the communal voice of this poem: the sections that are removed are those that reflect in more mundane terms on the individual situation of the poetic speaker's experience, rather than abstract, figurative, or collective imagery of mourning and remembrance.

[195] A potter's field, or common grave. This is likely also a euphemistic reference to the mass graves of the Holocaust.

[196] Glatshteyn uses the Hebrew place name here, מעבר־יבוק (*mayver-yabek*). Barnett Zumoff, who translated Glatshteyn's 1967 anthology, *Kh'tu dermonen* (see above, note 9), chooses to translate this simply as "bridge".

and by inscribing their duty with a kind of divine mandate. The Ford of Jabbok is first encountered in Genesis 32:23 as the proximal location where Jacob wrestles with an angel and is thus renamed "Israel" (Gen 32:29), a singularly important moment in the mythic history of the Jewish people. The space is renamed by Jacob as "Peniel, meaning, 'I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved'" (Gen 32:31).[197] The biblical image here signals a moment of dramatic transformation and rebirth: Jacob is renamed Israel because he contended "with beings divine and human, and prevailed" (Genesis 32:39). The new identity Jacob receives is created in response to conflict, but it also acknowledges and accepts that conflict as a permanent fixture of his identity thereafter — it marks the past and remembrance of the past as critical to the self-conception of *Israel* in the present.[198]

As a plaintive entreaty from the amorphous voice of the dead, this request is loaded with irony: rather than figuring the speaker as Jacob, transformed by overcoming their struggle, the speaker becomes the space in which that struggle takes place, ceding their individuality in favor of their function as representative. Reinforcing the liminal position of the speaker, the space of rebirth and transformation is here mapped onto the generational link between grandchild and grandfather, with the speaker — rather than the parental figure one might expect — standing in as mediator.[199] The specificity of the biblical reference here signals the complexity of the speaker's position: both essential to the familial bond and, at the same time, sitting uneasily within those categories. As the link between living and dead, the duty of the speaker emerges in direct contrast to the previous line of the poem: entrenched in a commandment to action, ensuring that "entire Jewish generations"*do not* forget (2.14). To become the "Ford of Jabbok" is

[197] "וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲקֹב שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם פְּנִיאֵל כִּי־רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים וַתִּנָּצֵל נַפְשִׁי: " Translation from Sefaria.org.

[198] Among the plethora of Biblical and Jewish historical imagery that Holocaust literature draws on in order to articulate its response to the events, the use of this Biblical event has the potential to offer the most intense critique of the discursive attempt to place the Holocaust outside of a (Jewish) historical continuum, by linking it to the foundational event of the nation-as-such. We might be tempted to draw conceptual or methodological connections to Second Isaiah (40-54) and others that follow it, in which the prophetic speaker re-narrates Jewish history from creation itself in order to account for the specificity and extremity of Israel's present condition of exile in Babylon, and to incorporate it back into Jewish and or Messianic history.

[199] Certainly one might infer that the speaker is thus occupying the position of mother or father here, but tying the speaker down to a specific role seems less generative here. Rather, we might instead understand the *need* for this mediating figure to emerge from the *absence* of the parental linkage -- of a generation or more between figurative grandparent and grandchild lost to the destruction of the Holocaust.

to adopt the responsibility of bearing witness in every sense: to become representative figure on whose shoulders the memory and knowledge of the Holocaust rests.[200]

Speaking in the voice of the dead who entreat, or command, the poetic speaker to accept the duty with which they are being tasked, this second section of "*Nakhtlider*" constructs the witness as in pain and in mourning. Burdened by the duty not only to remember, but to *feel* the pain that was experienced by millions of dead, the entire existence of the poetic speaker is implicated in this process. The speaker of "*Nakhtlider*'s" nightly movement is through a "cemetery in miniature" (3.14) a space over which they are the caretaker and to which they have sole access: invisible to others, its geography indefinite and changeable. The speaker of *"Nakhtlider*" understands this space as representing their inherited responsibility for the dead, space within which they can perform that duty and the emotional weight it brings.

The third section of the poem enacts that liminality on two fronts. First, a response to the command of the "millions of dead" in the previous lines, this section stages the speaker's acceptance of that duty and attempts to figuratively characterize the complexity and liminality of this new relationship as they understand it. A long symbolic description of the speaker as a gravekeeper, over the course of this section, their thoughts wind from the past associated here with night — in which they enter this secret space populated by the dead, which "stranger's eyes don't see" (13) — into the present, of dawn, when that cemetery becomes inaccessible, its door shut (35-6). The onset of day also shifts the poetic speaker's gaze toward the future. Finally, with sleep, comes a projection into an unknown set of possibilities, the

[200] Interestingly, there is the possibility of a double reference in the invocation of *"mayver-yabek,"* the Ford of Jabbok, insofar as it was also the title of a significant seventeenth century kabbalastic funerary handbook, published in Italy by Aaron Berechia Modena. In his broader discussion of Jewish deathbed ritual and practice, Avriel Bar-Levav describes *"Ma'avar Yabok"* as "the classic Jewish book for the sick and dying in the early modern period," which with its "immense erudition" and "kabbalistic background" provided the "theoretical base" that would enable the spreading and enshrining in tradition of new European Jewish deathbed rituals and practices (99). Modena's text was translated into Yiddish by Ellus bat Mordecai and published in Frankfurt an der Oder in 1704 (See "Ellus Bat Mordecai, Scholar and Translator" in Emily Taitz, *JPS Guide to Jewish Women* 135-6). Glatshteyn's familiarity with this text notwithstanding, that the image of crossing over the Jabbok was fixed in at least some part of the Jewish community and tradition as a metaphor or figure for the movement between life and death reaffirms the important duality of the witness as described above. (Bar-Levav; Taitz et al. 135–36)

final stanza full of unanswered and unanswerable questions and worries about a future after the speaker's own death, over the eternal fate and responsibility of care for the dead (47-56).

The speaker of "*Nakhtlider*" shares significant similarity with the speakers across Tsaytlin's poems, all of whom struggle to articulate the nature of their liminal positioning as witnesses, caught between the worlds of the living and dead. By night, all these speakers' enter into dream-like landscapes of ambiguous geography and layout, surrounded by memorial objects. Similarly to the speaker of "Sunday in Washington Square" who insists that those around them cannot see their inner torment, the speaker of "*Nakhtlider*" has secret life among the dead that is *invisible* to the people with which they interact during the day: "Among people — perfectly eloquent, / calm, with tact and polish. / But in my room I am a gravedigger / of a cemetery in miniature" (8-12).

What *distinguishes* the speaker of "*Nakhtlider*" as a witness, however, in contrast to Tsayltin's tormented speakers, is that they do not seem hesitant or unwilling to take on this burden. "It is extraordinary"[201] we are told, "to spend an entire day / among millions of the dead, a half-living corpse" (4-5). The speaker of "*Nakhtlider*" more readily accepts the fact that their life vacillates between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Their ability to accept this liminality may be the product of the distinctive affect of "*Nakhtlider*" as compared to all the other poems we have discussed in this dissertation: perhaps uniquely, the speaker of *"Nakhtlider*," does not *only* feel a "special sadness" in their interactions with the dead, but they *also* feel a "special joy." "*Bazundere(r)*," the Yiddish term I have translated here as "special" might also be translated as "distinctive," "separate," or "particular," and should be understood as marking a specific, even privileged kind of access to the affects it modifies. Neither their joy nor their sadness is exclusive to *them* per se, but rather, within the context of the stanza, are both inextricable from each other and from the particular liminal position they occupy.

3
אַז איך וועל שטאַרבן וועט שטאַרבן מיט מיר
אַ בזונדערע פרייד,

[201] Also: marvelous, miraculous, the Yiddish offering the same connotations of both abnormal and positive.

פון אַ באַזונדערער טרויעריקייט.
סי׳איז וואונדערלעך צו זיין אַ גאַנצן מעת-לעת
צווישן מיליאָנען מתים,
אַ האַלב–לעבעדיקער מת.
דאָס האַלבע לעבן אין מיר איז טויט.
לעבעדיק אין מיר איז דער האַלבער טויט.
צווישן מענטשן — אַ גאַנצער בעל-דברן,
געלאַסן, מיט טאַקט און פאָליטור.
אָבער אין מיין חדר בין אין אַ קברן,
פון אַ בית-עולם אין מיניאַטור.

פרעמדע אויגן זעען נישט,
ווי אין מיין קליינעם חדר עפן איך אַ טיר,
און צווישן קברים הייבט זיך אָן מיין נאַכטיקער שפּאַציר.
(וויפל ערד, משטיינם געזאָגט, דאַרפן רויכן?)
פאַראַן דאָרטן טאָלן און הויכן
און באַהאַלטענע, פאַרדרייטע שטעגן,
וואָס קלעגן אויף אַ גאַנצע נאַכטיקן גאַנג.
אין דער פינצטער לויכטן מיר אַנטקעגן
פּה–נטמנם,
מיט אַ יעמערלעך געזאַנג.
ס׳בליען קברים פון דער גאַנצער
פאַרטיליקטער יידישער וועלט,
אין די דלד אמות פון מיין געצעלט.
און איך בעט:
זייט מיר אַ טאַטע, אַ מאַמע,
אַ שוועסטער, אַ ברודער,
קינדער אייגענע, לייבלעכע קרובים,
ווערט וואָר ווי צער,
פון אויגן בלוט און פלייש,
זייט צו מיר געשטאָרבן,
לאָזט מיל משיג זיין און אָנען
דעם חורבן פון מיליאָנען.

פאַרטאָג פאַרמאַך איך די טיר,
צום בית-הקברות פון מיין פאָלק.
איך זיץ ביים טיש און פאַרדרימל זיך
מיטן ברומען פון אַ ניגון.
דער שונא האָט אויף זיי נישט געהאַט קיין שליטה.
טאַטעס, מאַמעס, קינדער פון וייגן,
האָבן אַרומגערינגלט דעם טויט און אים איינגענומען,
אַלע קליינע קינדער זיינען פאַרוואונדערט
געלאָפן דעם טויט-שרעק אַקעגן,
אָן געוויינען, ווי פאַרוויגטע יידישע מעשהלעך קליינע.
און באַלד האָבן זיי אויפגעפלאַקערט אין פלעמלעך,
ווי קליינע אַדוישעמלעך.

ווערט האָט נאָך, ווי איך,
אַזאַ אייגענעם, ביינאַכטיקן,
טויטן גאָרטן?
וועמען איז נאָך דאָרטן אַזוי באַשערט ווי מיר?

אויף וועמען וואַרט אַזוי פיל טויטע ערד ווי אויף מיר?
וועָן איך וועל שטאַרבן,
ווער וועט אַרבן מיין קליינעם בית–הקברות,
און דאָס ליכטיקע געשאַנק,
פון אַ נר תמיד׳יק יאָרצייט ליכט,
אין אייביקן געקאַנק?

3[202]

As I die with me will die
A special joy,
From a special sadness.
It is extraordinary to spend an entire day
Among millions of the dead,
A half-living corpse.
The half life in me is dead.
Living in me is the half death.
Among people — perfectly eloquent
Calm, with tact and polish.
But in my room I am a gravedigger
Of a cemetery in miniature.

Strangers' eyes don't see,
How in my small room I open a door,
And among graves I begin my nightly walk.
(How much dirt, after all, does smoke need?)[203]
There are valleys and hills,
And hidden, twisting paths,
Sufficient for a whole night's walk.
In the dark facing me shines
Grave openings
With a heart-rending song.
Blooming graves of the entire
Annihilated jewish world,
In the four cubits of my dwelling.
And I beg:
Be for me a father, a mother,
A sister, a brother,
Children of my own, blood relatives,
Become as true as sorrow,
Of my own blood and flesh,
Be dead to me,
Let me understand and comprehend
The destruction of millions.

At dawn I shut the door,
To the cemetery of my people.
I sit at my table and doze off
To the hum of a melody.

[202] This first stanza was omitted in the version of "*Nakhtlider*" included in the later collection *Kh'tu dermonen*.
[203] See also, Glatshteyn's own poem "*Roykh*" ("Smoke") discussed at length in Chapter 1.

The enemy had no power over them.
Fathers, mothers, children in their cradles,
Had circled around death and conquered it,
All the little children astonished
Ran to meet the fear of death,
Without tears, like little Jewsh bedtime stories,
And soon they blazed in little flames,
Like tiny little Gods.

Who else has, like me,
His own kind of nighttime
Death garden?
Who is destined for this like me?
For whom waits as much burial dirt as does for me?
When I die,
Who will inherit my little cemetery,
And the shining gift
Of an eternal memorial candle
Forever flickering? (*Shtralndike Yidn* 50–52)

What Glatshteyn here calls a "half-life" and Tsaytlin calls being a "shadow," and Leyvik's speaker's characterization of their existence as permanently "waiting in line at the camp of the world" ("*A treblinke-kandidat*" 22), are synonymous with what I have called the *subject-position of the witness*. We might call this *contingency*, as we did in the previous chapter after Agamben, to emphasize the precarious unknowability of their futures. Here, however, because Glatshteyn's and Tsayltin's speakers both position themselves as both *within* and perpetually caught *between* the worlds of the living and dead, I prefer the descriptor *liminal*, drawing inspiration from Leyvik's threshold and boundary metaphors, because it grants equal significance to both worlds (where *contingent* implicitly marks one as undesirable, threatening). Tsayltin's various figurations of the poetic speaker as tortured, haunted, and tormented by the spirits of the dead begging to be recognized and heard differ only in affective disposition from Glatshteyn's sad-yet-joyous gravedigger. Each description situates the speaker as a static point — like the Ford of Jabbok — that connects living and dead, past and future.

For both, however, the realization of the liminality of their positioning, and that this is a permanent and determining factor of their present existence also brings with it a recognition of *responsibility* both to the living and to the dead, to *be* that connecting point. This process, which we see

modelled in all of the poems I have discussed thus far, albeit through a wide range of metaphorical figurations, is the poetic speakers attempt to work through, understand, and articulate their position *as witnesses* in relation to, and constituted by their relationship with, the Holocaust.

Neither of the authors directly experienced the events of the Holocaust, both were in the United States at the time, and none of the speakers claim that experience either. Rather, their geographical distance is the enabling condition of their survival. It is because they were "not in Treblinka, / nor in Majdanek" (1-2) to recall Leyvik's poem, that they are able to speak at all, let alone to speak with or for the dead, and why they feel the *need* to speculate about their relationship to the Holocaust. Unable to consider themselves as separate from the world destroyed, these poems, read individually and together, form an ongoing attempt to understand what it means to now live such a "half-life," to exist as "a shadow in a non-existent house," or to serve as a "living monument."

These speakers are not the dead, however, and though they understand themselves to be "among millions of dead" the liminal construction of their position demands a different perspective. This distinction is evident in the regular turn to the collective voice that we noted above. In each case, the process of articulating their own position sees these poetic speakers take up the collective "we," to speak not only for the dead, but also for the living and for the Jewish people as a whole as they look toward a possible future. We can recognize a similar transformation to that which we identified in Lamentations: the individual position of the poetic speaker is not dissolved into or lost with the emergence of the collective voice, but rather serves to highlight the possibility enabled by the liminal position of the witness to speak both *for* and from *among* that community of suffering that is itself being created in act of speaking.

As the third section of "*Nakhtlider*" comes to a close, the speaker turns their attention away from their wanderings in the graveyard among the dead and toward the broader world and future, prefiguring the opening of the final section, a moment of radical redefinition of the Jewish people as a whole. On first reading, the list of questions that close this third section seem rhetorical, rather than genuinely inquiring. Given the staging of this section as a contemplation of the speaker's own death, it is tempting to accept

the questions as unanswerable. In this way, they would offer a thematic parallel to the claim that opens the section — "As I die with me will die / A special joy, / From a special sadness" (3.1-3) — by reaffirming the particularity, and intense separation between the two sides of their "half-life," and lamenting the loss of that liminality with their own death. Once the speaker dies, the questions imply, the fear expressed by the dead in the previous section, that "entire Jewish generations will forget" would be fulfilled. Understood in this way, they are directed at the speaker themselves, a kind of voiced inner monologue.

If we instead understand these questions as directed outward to the reader or the broader Jewish community, they are less a lamentation than they are a shift in the perspective of the speaker themselves. "Who *else* has, *like me*" (3.47 my emphasis) is a gesture toward affinity markedly different from the internally focused language of the poem thus far. This question is the first time in the poem the speaker directly raises the possibility of a connection between themselves and someone else living: the first section was wholly solitary, and the beginning of this section noted how invisible their second, nighttime life was from those with whom they interacted during the day. In the context of these final lines, we can reread that earlier distinction —"Among people — perfectly eloquent / Calm, with tact and polish" (3.9-10) — as introducing the speaker's own performative public identity. In looking back on those lines, we can see within them the implicit possibility that the people with whom they interact *also* have a hidden, inner world.[204] Overlooked by the speaker themselves in the opening lines, we can understand these questions as a reflective pause that acknowledges the possibility of a connection otherwise unseen, and begins a move toward the collective or communal voice that we will see emerge intensely, and suddenly, in the final section of the poem.

The fourth and final section completes this move without hesitation. As if re-enacting the same command or entreaty that the "millions of dead hands" imparted on them in the second section, the poetic speaker here now implicates the entire Jewish people as witnesses. Shifting suddenly into the collective

[204] In Chapter 1 and briefly above, I noted a similar lack of vision or awareness experienced by the speaker of Tsaytlin's "Sunday in Washington Square." Tsaytlin's speaker ends there, however, caught in their own vision of the past, and unable to perceive others beyond their surface — just as they cannot understand the "world lost" that he carries with him.

"we," the speaker is no longer distinguishable from the community in which they find themselves, and for whom they speak. Rather, the entire Jewish people becomes *entirely* redefined as a "sect of mourners" (*"sekte aveylim,*" 4.11-12), that is through the performative act of mourning.

This definitional transformation is complex: we understand "sects" to be formed by *separation*, distinct in belief or action from the larger group from which they were formed. It is unclear, ultimately, who is included within this newly formed group: it seems too simple to say that those who did not perish in the Holocaust are members of this sect, though it certainly seems implicitly limited to members of the Jewish community. Given how established this identity seems to be, however, part of a routine familiar to the speaker, the speaker may be restricting membership in this "sect" to those who were also distanced in some way from the world of the Holocaust, or to a temporal community that includes not only those who survived, but all Jews in the post-Holocaust period. Such a marker implies a particular relationship between living and dead that would imply a need for mourning: familial, communal relations. It also requires an audience and context within which these funerals must be performed, someone who *doesn't* have that same relationship to the dead ("If *someone* should ask" 4.3 my emphasis); that is, publics whose identities were in no way threatened with destruction. (It would be reductive to establish a binary categorization by naming this a "non-Jewish" public, though that is one shared feature of those who weren't targeted by the Nazis.) Relying on the relational quality of the category "sect" to define the "mourners" here, whoever is included, the community is fundamentally defined by its performative acknowledgement of those who are *excluded* or absent; that is, this "sect" necessarily excludes those "millions of dead".

4
וואָס זיינען מיר איצטער,
אַ פאָלק, אַ ראַסע, אַ גלויבן?
טאָמער וועט דיך עמעצער פרעגן,
וואָר זיינען די מענטשן,
וואָס גייען דער וועלט אַנטקעגן,
מיט שווייגנדיקע אורנעם,
דורך נאַכטיקע וועגן?
וואָס באַטייטן זייערע פנימער,
פאַרשעמטע, פאַרמעקטע?
דערצייל אים:

מיר זיינען אַ סעקטע,
אַ סעקטע אבלים.

אבלים, יסורים-אַרמייער.
מיר גייען, מיר גייען —
טרויער–מאַקאַבייער.
מיר גייען איבער דער וועלט בפרהסיא,
מיר פירן אונדזער גרויסע לוויה-פּראָצעסיע.
זיי קומען ריי נאָך ריי.
לוויה איינס, לוויה צוויי, לוויה דריי.

מאשין-ביקסן האָבן געקלאַפּערט.
קאַלַך-אויוונס האָבן פּעגלאַקערט,
מ׳האָט דאָס אַש אויף פּעלדער גיך צעאַקערט.
אָבער לוויות ציען זיך געלאַסן
מיר גייען פּאַמעלעך און פּאַרוואָגלעך די גאַסן.
מיר זיינען די געדענקערס,
מיר קומען דערמאָנען,
מיר פירן, מיר פירן מיליאָנען.
צו דער לעצטער לוויה איז נאָך ווייט,
ווי ווייט.
מיר האָבן צייט, מיר האָבן צייט.

זייער גאַנצער טויט מוז אויסגעלעבט ווערן.
דער צעשאָענער, צעברענטער, פאַרפיניקטער טויט.
דער אייגנסטער, באַרעכטיקטער סוף כל אָדם,
וואָס ס׳האָבן אים מבזה געווען די חיות.
מוז אין גאַנצן אויסגעלעבט ווערן,
דורך לוויות, לוויות, לוויות.

מיר האָבן נישט קיין געהיימען ריטואַל.
אַלע אונדזער סודות זיינען גרוילן אַנטפּלעקטע,
אויב עמעצער וועט פרעגן,
זאַג אים, דערצייל אים:
מיר זיינען אַ סעקטע,
אַ סעקטע אבלים.
מיר מוזן אַפּגעבן כבוד דעם גאַנצן טויט,
ביז דאָס לעבן אליין וועט ווערן דערהויבן.
מיר גלויבן,
ס׳מוז אויסגעיאָמערט ווערן
דער לעצטער געקלאָג,
און דעמאָלט וועט ערשט קומען נאַכט,
און ס׳וועט קומען טאָג —
ערשטער טאָג.

4

What are we now
A people, a race, a religion?
If someone should ask you,
Who are the people,
Who go to meet the world
With silent urns,

On nocturnal paths?
What is the meaning of their faces,
Ashamed, effaced?
Tell him:
We are a sect,
A sect of mourners.

Mourners, suffering-armies,
We go, we go —
Sadness-Maccabees.
We walk across the world openly,
We lead our great funeral procession.
They come, row after row,
Funeral one, funeral two, funeral three.

Machine guns have rattled,
Lime-ovens have flared up.
They have quickly plowed the ash on the fields.
But funerals extend calmly.
We walk slowly and wander the streets.
We are the thinkers,
We come to remind you,
We lead, we lead millions,
To the last funeral, still a long way,
So long.
We have time, we have time.

Their entire death must be lived out.
The shot, burned, tortured death.
Their own, justified, end of man,
That had degraded its existence.
It must be lived out entirely,
Through funerals, funerals, funerals.

We have no secret ritual.
All of our secrets are horrors unveiled,
If someone should ask
Say to him, tell him:
We are a sect,
A sect of mourners. (*Shtralndike Yidn* 52–53)

Mourning belongs to the living, an act performed by duty or decision that establishes the mourner in a particular relationship of responsibility to the dead not shared by those not participating. Here, it is a symbolic re-enactment of death at both the collective and individual level. Funerals are reimagined as a mechanism for making publicly visible the horrors of the Holocaust. To "live out" ("*oyslebn vern*") their deaths in this context is not to claim direct experience, but rather to engender a relationship with the dead

that recognizes the mourner's own performative distance from the acts that are being ritualistically recreated. "*Oyslebn*" is usually understood in the context of an entire life; it carries connotations of completeness, perhaps up to the moment of death. If by their own liminal position between the worlds of the living and dead, the speaker of "*Nakhtlider*" is able to ensure that future generations do not forget the dead, then the final section of the poem expands this to *all* Jewish life in the post-Holocaust world. As such, we see in this final section a model for *how* the Jewish community is to become that "living monument": their entire existence is reinscribed as an act of ritualistic recreation and funereal mourning.

In being defined by the act of mourning, this community symbolically reorients itself *around* those who died, who now form their symbolic and ritualistic center. We are confronted, in this stanza, with a dramatic transformation of the conditions of communal belonging, one that — in concretizing the act of mourning as its definitional foundation — challenges the possibility of continuity with the past. Instead this tragic "we," the communal identity now being created *simultaneously* asserts affinity with and necessary separation from the world lost and the millions of dead. As such, the act of *mourning* here should be understood in the same terms as we've been consistently discussing the act of *witnessing,* as a commitment to making known the experience of the victims of the Holocaust, and an acknowledgement of one's own relational position to those victims.

The oft-repeated impetus of survivors to bear witness to, make known, and testify to the Holocaust — the continual invocation of the Jewish commandment "*Zakhor*," "remember" — offers a parallel movement of individual experience transformed into collective knowledge. As such, the command can also be understood through the lens of "witnessing," insofar as, within the framework of a novel, memoir, or poem, it disrupts the balance of separation and identification. As we discussed in the previous chapter, much survivor writing still draws distinctions between their own position as survivor and the experience of the dead. An awareness of, and diegetic commitment to examining the implications of their own position as survivors in relation to those dead for whom they purport to speak would mark the survivor as stepping into the subject-position of the witness. We saw this at work in the case of Primo Levi, whose own claim that survivors are an "anomalous minority" and "not the true witnesses," despite

using the term differently, is engaged in the same process we have described above of establishing his own position in relation to, but explicitly distinct from, that of the dead (*Drowned and Saved* 84). Survivor writing would thus prove a useful case study in texts that shift in and out of the position of the witness as we understand it, as the focus and perspective of a memoir or piece of reflective writing changes and flows from internally to externally focused, and back again.

Because it does not rely on the biographical or historical experience of the author, or the compositional context and history of the text, the notion of the witness put forth here, as a diegetic subject position, and a function of the text itself, is capacious enough to account not only for this distanced Holocaust poetry and the writings of survivors, as well as literature produced after the war by those who were not there. Furhter, the notion of the witness as I am developing is not restricted in any way to literature of the Holocaust. At its core it requires only a reflexive engagement with the positionality of the poetic or narrative voice in relation to the historical events to which it responds, foregrounding the duality, the "half-life" that this engagement produces (or makes visible).

None of these poems claim to offer insight into the experience of the victims. The speakers, whether haunted by the spirits, or keeping the graves of the dead, are all acutely aware of their *own existence in the present*, and outside of the sphere of the Holocaust's destruction. The encounter with demons, phantoms, ghosts, or nebulous collections of the unnamed dead serves as a space for reflection that jolts the poetic speaker into an awareness or articulation of their own liminal position. The speakers refuse to define or clarify their visions into mundane or worldly categories; even the most interventionist speakers still turn away and inward, to lament the fact that they will never be rid of the specters that haunt them. Both by their very nature, and by their insistent irreconcilability, the encounters these speakers have with spirits and specters distance this literature from the concerns of historical expression.

Instead, these poems turn their attention toward their own relationship with those dead they encounter. Their concerns are experiential rather than interpretive. If I were to frame this in terms of its mechanistic function, we might understand the these ghosts as a poetic device for making visible the *inability* of historical categorizations, geographical security, or historical data and information to account

for the experience of the poetic speaker as a witness to the Holocaust — as one who observed, but did not directly come into contact with (as spirits and specters move outside the corporeal world) the Holocaust. In each encounter with the dead, the speakers' primary concern is *what kind of relationship* they have to those who died, whether borne of familial connections, friendship, or even just an unnamed responsibility that is thrust on them by dint of their being alive and being writers. Haunted by spirits, the speakers of these poems come to realize their *own* otherworldliness (whether we call it "liminality" or a "half-life"), and in doing so, across this poetry we see these speakers begin to adopt that position of *witness* as a relationship of responsibility to the dead.

The recognition and movement toward witnessing, and the transformation of the individual experience into a communal formation, identity, or performance does not require being haunted by ghosts. Rather, these spirits serve as one recurrent poetic mechanism throughout the corpus of American Yiddish Holocaust poetry we are examining, by which the poems can make visible and articulate the positional transformation that we trace here. Because it is the *encounter* with these spirits, rather than the spirits themselves, on which the poems focus, we can trace a parallel transformation across poems that encounter other kinds of agents or objects.

Offering another, decidedly more mundane example of how the subject position of the witness begins to be articulated in Yiddish Holocaust poetry, the next section of this chapter is a case study of poems that encounter letters received from Nazi-controlled Europe. Though entirely worldly objects, this section demonstrates that the act of receiving, reading, and emotionally responding to these letters pushes the poetic speakers once again toward examining their relationship to the dead, and has the same transformative effect as the night time appearance of the ghosts of the dead.

Three Lines on a Card, No More

In 1941, mail was still able to leave the Warsaw Ghetto. The process of creating the ghetto began shortly after Warsaw was captured by the invading Germans at the end of September, 1939. The process was long and administratively complex, but the ghetto was firmly established and its gates were closed on

November 16, 1940. Mass deportations would begin in July of 1942.[205] The population of the ghetto at its was just under 400 000, most of whom were Jews, though both the population and the physical borders regularly changed. During 1941, the Nazis began their policy of systematically starving the population of the ghetto with, unsurprisingly, the harshest restrictions on rations falling on the Jews (see Roland 101-5).[206] Combined with disease, lack of sanitation, and lack of medical care, around one quarter of the ghetto's population would die before the deportations even began.

The Jewish community of New York, however, knew few of these details. Reflecting on that time some thirty years later in 1973, in a chapter of her serially published memoir, Kadya Molodvosky wrote:

> ס׳איז געווען די צייט וועו ס׳איז געהאַנגען דער פינצטערער וואָלקן איבער די אידן אין פוילן. מען האָט נאָך ניט געוואוסט קיין פרטים, נאָר מען האָט געפילט אַז עס טראָגט זיך אַ שטורעם איבער אידישע קעפּ און איבער יעדער פריילעכער באַגעגעניש ציט זיך דער וואָלקן.
>
> That was the time when dark clouds hung over the Jews in Poland. We did not know any details, but there was a feeling that a storm was rolling in over Jewish heads, and over every happy encounter the clouds rumbled. ("*Baym hirshbeyns in hoyz in nyu-york*" 59)[207]

Molodovsky's autobiographical writings, like all works of memory, plays loosely with linear time: rather than marking the dates calendrically, they are recalled according to their emotional weight and intensity. In the same paragraphs, she describes writing her novel, *Fun lublin biz nyu-york* (*From Lublin to New York*), which was serialized daily in the Yiddish newspaper *Morgn-zhurnal* (*Morning Journal*) between May 30 and August 11, as well as writing "the poems that would later be in the book *Only King David*

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[205] Although most scholarship focuses on specific moments in the history of the Ghetto, in particular the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, or on particular organization and communities, such as the *Oyneg Shabes*, there are several histories of the Warsaw Ghetto available. See, for example: Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939-1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*. I am, however, acutely aware of the fact that these histories regularly and uncritically draw on memoir, diary, and testimony as transparent historical sources (though rarely, if ever, the sole source of information). Historians of ghetto life are particularly burdened by the need to rely on such memorial documents, given the centrality of the Ringelblum Archive (the documents collected by the *Oyneg Shabes*) as a source of information.

[206] For the details of the hunger and sanitary conditions of the Ghetto, see especially: Charles G Roland, *Courage Under Siege: Starvation, Disease and Death in the Warsaw Ghetto*.

[207] "*Baym hirshbeyns in hoyz in nyu-york*" ("At the Hirshbeyn's Home in New York,") is chapter 55 of her memoir, *Mayn elterzeydns yerushe* (*Of My Great-Grandfather's Heritage*), published serially between 1965 andd 1974 in the journal *Svive*, of which she was the editor. Kathryn Hellerstein provides a useful overview of Molodovsky's memoiristic style in the introduction to her selected translations of Molodovsky's poetry, see *Paper Bridges* pp. 18-46.

Remained" (60), the latest of which are dated at 1945.[208] There are three features that define this period, the latter half of this chapter of her memoirs: receiving news, her immediate and visceral response to that news, and the act of writing, all of which are inextricably linked. As she recounts on the following page, likely referring to 1943:

ס׳האָבן אָנגעהויבן די ביטערע ידיעות וועגן חורבן פּוילן. ביי מיר האָבן פון אויפרעגונג אָנגעהויבן רייסן די פינגער פון די הענט. איין פינגער האָט אַזוי אָנגעריסן אַז מען האָט אים געמוזט אָפּערירן. עס איז פּאַר מיר געווען אוממגעלעך זיך צו פארנעמען מיטן זשורנאַל.

אין יענער ביטערער צייט האָב איך געשריבן די לידער וואָס זיינען שפּעטער אַריין אין בוך „דער מלך דוד אַליין איז געבליבן". כ׳האָב כסדר געזען פאַר די אויגן אַ חרוב–געוואָרענע אידישע וועלט, אידישע שטעט, חורבן און וויי. דאָס בוך האָב איך אַ נאָמען געגעבן „דער מלך דוד אליין איז געבליבן", וואָס דאָס האָט געדאַרפט זאָגן אַז דאָס פאָלק איז נישטאָ מער, ס׳איז נאָר געבליבן דער מלך דוד אַליין מיט זיין טרויער–קרוין אויפן קאָפּ.

> The bitter news began to arrive about the destruction of Poland. I began in frustration to tear at the fingers of my hands. One finger was so torn up it had to be operated on. It was impossible for me to keep myself occupied with the journal.
>
> In that bitter time I wrote the poems that would later be in the book *Only King David Remained*. I constantly saw in front of my eyes a Jewish world, Jewish cities being destroyed, destruction and pain. I gave the book the name *Only King David Remained* to say that the people was no more, the only thing that remained was King David alone with his sadness-crown on his head. ("*Baym hirshbeyns*" 60)

Although most of the poems in the collection do not directly address the Holocaust, as we noted in the Chapter One, Molodovsky understands the collection as a whole to be "*hurbn-lider*," Holocaust poems. Rather than offering a linear or chronological account of her literary production during the period of the war, Molodovsky offers an account that implicitly frames these poems as emerging *not only* as a natural product of her affective response to the incoming news of the Holocaust, but also as the only outlet she had left after the violence she inflicted on herself in immediate reaction to that same news.[209]

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[208] This is also when Molodovsky writes her diaristic novel, *Fun lublin biz nyu-york*, which involves a young woman fleeing Europe as a refugee and settling in New York, "The difficulty of travelling from one land to another and of adjusting to new conditions lays heavy on my heart" ("*Baym hirshbeyns*" 59). In the introduction to her recent translation of the novel, Anita Norich notes that the sentiment expressed above differed somewhat from Moldovosky's original notes on the novel: "I knew how hard it was to get used to a new milieu, with an unknown language. In those days it was a desirable subject because those who came from Europe struggled hard before they were able to fit into this new environment." "Introduction," *A Jewish Refugee in New York,* translated by Anita Norich*,* xx.

[209] Kathryn Hellerstein doubles down on this imagery of the "inconsolable" artist whose only outlet is their work, in introducing and framing her translation of the collection ("Introduction" 41-2). I discuss this at more length in Chapter One.

Molodovsky's memoirs are no more a reflection of the specific historical details than the poetry that she composed during the same period. Written three decades later, in light of a long poetic career, and with the full scope of hindsight available to her, this chapter, "*Baym hirshbeyns in hoyz in nyu-york*" is a particular attempt at narrativization. The play with chronological time at work in the chapter — placing it in the service of affect and compositional unity — is common in the writing of memoir, a function of the act of remembrance itself. The search for continuity through selective remembrance is what makes narrative memory possible in the first place. Analogous to the historians' ascription of significance to certain events over others, the writing of memoir is a work of reflexive interpretation.[210]

There is nothing different, ultimately, about reading a memoir than reading a work of fiction, except the culturally inscribed assumptions we bring to bear about the relationship between the author and the narrator.[211] As a result, though we should not treat the memoir as granting any *special* insight into the internal world or intentions of its author, we position it among the corpus of Molodovsky's responses to the period of the Holocaust. That is, we can use this as one among many tools in conversation with her poetic texts to draw out commonalities and themes that motivate the collection and her wartime literary composition.

The central event of this chapter — receiving news from and about the Jews of Eastern Europe, and the emotional and literary responses that this engenders — is re-enacted in several of Molodovsky's poems and will serve in this section, along with a poem by Arn Tsaytlin, as a case study in how the subject-position of the witness comes to be poetically articulated. Specifically: we will look at poems that

[210] This is understudied within the field of Holocaust literature, in part because it would require the ability to compare multiple instances of a memoirist revisiting the same events. Naomi Seidman's work on Elie Wiesel's auto-translation and practices of rewriting has been very influential for my own thinking on Holocaust literature in general, and is among the only studies to address this subject. Her focus on translation, and this early stage of Wiesel's literary career means that there is space still for comparative study of his corpus of Holocaust writings, including the chapters of his later memoirs *All Rivers Run to the Sea* that revisit his time in the camps with the explicitly stated aim of providing a corrective to what he claims are misinterpretations of (the religiosity) of his camp experience. As noted above, Kathryn Hellerstein provides a significant commentary on Molodovsky's memoir in her own account of the poet's life included in her introduction to *Paper Bridges*, see especially 18-.

[211] This is perhaps best described by Philippe Lejeune's notion of the "autobiographical pact," which describes the set of assumptions about authenticity, authority, and veracity that readers of contemporary autobiography bring with them into the encounter with memoiristic and autobiographical writing, a product of the genre's history and reception in the West. See, *On Autobiography*.

narrate the encounter with letters and documents received from the (Warsaw) Ghetto. Artifacts of the Holocaust themselves, having emerged from behind the walls of the ghettos, these letters are significant *apart from* their content, as physical objects that carry an implicit history. Passed from hand to hand from Europe to the United States, these letters represent not only the persistence of an intimate connection between distant individuals, but also the symbolic completion of a journey that many of the writers would never be able to make. Furthermore, the act of reading these letters, or simply proximity to them in the case of Tsaytlin, reinforces the specific personal relationship that a letter sent and received represents, and the individual responsibility that these poems see as implicit in that relationship.

These letters are among a small handful of "object-poems" within the corpus of Yiddish Holocaust literature from this period. "Object poetry," so called for its focus on specific, often mundane physical objects, is united as a genre solely by the presence of that central object, uniting the various threads and thought lines that the poems take.[212] Object poems vary greatly in most aspects: neither the level of detail given about the specific object upon which the poem focuses, nor the centrality of the object that inspires the poem are consistent. In this case, acting as a de facto memorial, the insistent physical presence of the letters allows the poetic speaker to position themselves in relation to, as witness to, and ultimately as caretaker for the world the letters come to metonymically represent. Just as with the specters and ghosts of the previous poems, here the content of the letters is not made accessible to us as readers, it is not offered for our interpretation: we are given insight only into the affective response of the poetic speaker to the letters — both as physical and textual objects.

I have insisted throughout, though it bears revisiting here, that although Molodovsky or Tsaytlin certainly *may* have received letters from the ghetto, we cannot infer from these poems the existence of

[212] This is more or less its only unifying feature: poems might use the object as a beginning to launch into an introspective journey, or, as is most common in English-language object poems, they may take the form of a poeticized description of the object. The latter form covers a large spectrum of abstraction and aestheticization, from the simplicity of a few lines to longer symbol-rich descriptions . This latter category is often referred to as *ekphrastic* poetry, from the Ancient Greek word for "description," especially with regard to poetry that takes the form of *narrative* descriptions of images depicted in artworks. Perhaps the most famous example in English is John Keats "Ode on a Grecian Urn." We find similar poems peppered throughout the corpus of this American Yiddish Holocaust literature as well, such as Molodovsky's "*Tsu a kinds portret*' ("To A Child's Portrait"), or Arn Tsaytlin's "*A varshaver vizit-kartl"* ("A Warsaw Calling Card").

actual letters. Their inaccessibility is a critical, and purposefully constructed poetic feature that redirects our readerly attention to the speaker's *response* to the letters. It also serves as a continual meta-poetic reminder of the fact that this encounter is, itself, constructed. Without wanting to reduce the complexity of either central device, like the ghosts and specters of the previous poems, in the most fundamental sense these letters are poetic artifacts that illuminate the relationship between the speaker and the Holocaust. The sparse details that we *are* given are thus inseparable from the affective and contemplative response they inspire in the poetic speaker, and the complex relations and positioning that are made visible in the poetically constructed encounter between witness and object.

Recognizing the full affective weight and implication of these artifacts of the Holocaust, the speakers of these poems do not fall silent, nor do they lament the impossibility of knowing the unwritten words behind the page. Rather, these poems provide a model of witnessing the Holocaust that emerges neither from direct knowledge nor experience, but from the textual representation and instantiation of a relationship — of the letter-as-relationship — and that is continually recreated and reaffirmed through the presence of these objects. To read a letter from the ghetto, these poems claim, is to accept the responsibility that this textual encounter bring and the knowledge and relationship it engenders; it is to become a witness to the Holocaust.

This section argues that these poetic speakers encounter letters from the ghetto as atemporal markers of a relationship that persists beyond the death of the letter-writer, using the encounter to reframe themselves as witnesses to the Holocaust *in perpetuity*. Just as we have not been searching poetry for a window into the author's intentions, disposition, or affective world, we are not approaching these poems expecting to find evidence of the author's real encounter with a letter from the ghetto. Instead, I argue, these poems model for their communities of readers *how* to encounter Holocaust texts *as witnesses* — both how to read them and how to approach them as objects in such a way that does not reduce the letters to their informational content — and of the responsibilities implicitly adopted by those who would bear witness. These letters produce the same effect and possess an analogous or even identical ephemeral agency to the ghosts of the previous section's poems. As catalysts for their own affective responses to the

Holocaust, the insistent presence of the letters within these poems grounds the Holocaust in personal, relational terms, endowing the speakers with the task of safeguarding these objects, and of bearing witness to them and the events they metonymically represent.

Molodovsky's "*Briv fun geto*" ("Letters from the Ghetto") offers little concrete in terms of the letters' content, instead focusing on the physical and symbolic *presence* of the letter itself. The description at first seems dismissive of the mundanity of the words written on these cards, collapsing all of them into a singular image — "three lines on a card, no more" (2) — as if the reassurances they contain are designed to be misleading, to fall short of the reader's expectations. The poem's structure mirrors this image: three short stanzas for three short lines. The first lines of the second stanza seem to offer yet another set of descriptive possibilities for the letters content — "A line about everyone's health, / Each one mentioned by name, You shouldn't need to worry" (5-7) — three descriptive lines that underscore the relationship between this poem and letters themselves. This layered structural mirroring *both* reinforces the insistent presence of those letters (as if they even influence the way we encounter the poem) and at the same time reminds us that letters themselves are invisible to us as readers.

For the reader, the poem itself takes on some of the representative qualities of the letters. That is, just as the speaker attempts to find meaning in the "white gaps" (8), in the second stanza, we are tempted to locate the significance of this poem in the absent letters themselves. Withholding the content of the letters pushes us to recognize that their value lies not in their content — again, the first stanzas seem to go out of their way to insist on this — but both in what they represent and, crucially, in their persistence as physical objects. The final lines of the poem focus on this latter quality: in the hands of the speaker, the letters will last "until the end of generations" (12), imbuing the speaker with the responsibility of safeguarding them while simultaneously being a painful reminder that they may have already outlived their writers.

בריוו פון געטאָ

אייערע קורצע בריוו —
דריי שורות אויף אַ קאַרטל, ניט מער.
ווי יעדע מייל וואָלט צוגעלייגט אַ שטיין —

אַזוי זיינען זיי שוועך.

אַ שורה וועגן אַלעמענס געזונט,
ביים נאָמען יעדערן דערמאָנט,
מען זאָל ניט דאַרפן איבערקלערן,
און רחמים בעט דער ווייסער בלויז אויפן פּאַפּיר,
אַזוי מסתמא איז דער כתב פון טרערן.

די קורצע בריוו —
זיי ליגן ביי מיר אַלע אויפגעקליבן,
ביז סוף פון דורות וועלן זיי פאַרבלייבן.
איך זע די ציטעריקע האַנט, וואָס שרייבט זיי אוצט,
איך ווייס די פייערדיקע האַנט,
וואָס וועט מית רחמים דעם בלויז דערשרייבן.

1941

Letters from the Ghetto

Your short letters —
Three lines on a card, no more.
As if every mile had laid on a stone —
That is how heavy they are.

A line about everyone's health,
Each one mentioned by name,
There's no need to worry,
And the white gaps on the paper beg for pity,
No doubt the writing of tears.

These short letters —
They lie with me all gathered together,
Until the end of generations they will remain.
I see the nervous hand, that writes them now,
I know the fiery hand,
That will write the gaps with pity.

1941 (*Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* 11)

The insistence of the poem on the letters-as-objects, possessing irreducible significance independent of content, shapes the way we encounter the sparse descriptions we *are* given of them. They possess three features: they are written on cards, they are little more than a list of names and a note about each person's health, and they carry a weight "as if every mile had laid on a stone" (3). Inscribed and kept as a reminder for generations, the list of names on these cards are eerily similar to memorial plaques, funeral inscriptions, headstones. Stones laid one upon the other, as the weighty simile above describes,

marked burial sites as cairns and makeshift memorials long before the Jews adopted the practice of placing a stone on a grave as a marker of having visited.[213] Cairns, too, rarely contain textual information, but signify by their presence the act and importance of death and of remembrance. The poem works intensely to make the *physicality* of these letters present to us, to let us as readers see that the objects themselves bear meaning and that the words on the cards cannot be understood apart from the significance of their context or their form.

Without recognizing the importance of the weight and presence of the letters, it would be easy enough to read this poem as just one among many that announce the failure of language to represent the experience of the Holocaust. That reading is justified by the poem, and it is in some ways encouraged as a starting point, insofar as this is how the poetic speaker seems to diegetically interpret the letters: they respond most intensely to the "white gaps on the paper" (8) that announce the emotions and histories that these letters represent, but could not be put into words. Ultimately, however, neither we nor the poetic speaker can *ignore* the objects in favor of some hidden meaning behind the words, because the cards themselves carry meaning. "All gathered together" with the poet, the cards take on the same cairn-like quality (11) — each serving as a reminder of an individual but together forming a memorial totality that seems to signify far more than any individual object.

A layering of physical and temporal journeys, we are reminded at the poem's close of the physical distance that the letter had to travel even to be read, and the dating of the poem to 1941 offers a glimpse into the practical necessities of sending a letter out of the ghetto at that time. These letters would have passed through the hands and institutions of people and countries that viewed the writers as enemies or worse. The fact that these letters exist at all, especially in the hands of a reader who is both safe and who can keep these letters in perpetuity, the poem seems to imply, is significant in and of itself, lending further weight to the importance of these letters — and thus of this poem — as a permanent reminder of the world that is being destroyed.

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[213] Nobody seems to know *why* this custom exists — or whether there is any religious reasoning for it — nor do they know how long this custom has existed, but it was certainly practiced in the 1940s.

The identity of the new actor introduced in the penultimate line, the "fiery hand" that "will write the white gaps with pity" (or, alternatively, "mercy," 14-15) remains unknown. However, this new presence offers a gesture outward, beyond the intimate relation of sender and receiver, implicitly raising questions of responsibility, agency, and blame. In direct contrast with the "nervous hand" (13) who penned the letters, both "fiery" and "mercy" are common poetic and liturgical descriptors for the divine; we could read this either as hinting at a possible future divine intervention, or more directly placing blame or complicity with God. In contrast, however, a more cynical reading might place emphasis on the invocation of "fire" here, raising images in the minds of the reader of the fires of destruction, or even for the contemporary reader, of crematoria (though in that we bring knowledge of events that postdate the poem's composition).[214] Fire is a longstanding metaphor for destruction, and this interpretation would understand the poem to be offering a much more despairing commentary on the fate of the letter sender. Furthermore, this reading would imply a diegetic commentary on the *presumed* fate of that "nervous hand" (13) within the framework of the poem.

These letters possess agency of their own, separate from their reading and reception. In Molodovsky's poem above, the speaker takes pains to recognize the multiple agential forces at work in inscribing the letters. The letters possess all the intentional, affective, and agential force of the ghosts in the previous poems.[215] The speaker is an *enabling* force: they do not impart agency, or significance, into the content of the letters, but by receiving them, reading them, and presenting that encounter to us, they allow the letter to be known, and thus to serve for themselves and for us the symbolic, metonymic function that we understand letters from the Holocaust to serve.

The speaker's claim to know and *be able to identify* all of the agential forces at work here reifies their function as *witness*, and the poem as a product of bearing witness. That is, standing apart from both these figures, the poetic speaker-as-witness marks the persistence and importance of these documents

[214] Certainly this was not part of the composition, given the kinds of historical information Molodovsky would have had access to at the time of this poem's composition, but it is very difficult for us now to consider "fire" in the context of the Holocaust *without* making this connection.
[215] We might think of "ghostliness" as a quality here that intends to describe the *presence* of these objects, and the recognition of their agency independent of both the reader and the lack of specific individual human actors.

beyond their inscription. By virtue of their distance, the witness here is able to place the letters within a context broader than their own content would imply — to recognize their metonymic possibilities — and thus is able to make known both the historical, and theological consequences of the artifacts they hold.

The letters at the center of Arn Tsaytlin's "*Briv fun varshaver geto*" ("Letters from the Warsaw Ghetto") are equally obscure in content, and insistently serve the same metonymic function as a perpetual reminder for the speaker of the fate suffered by the Jews of Warsaw. These letters' agency is the central focus of the poem, acting independently of their reading and reception. The distance adopted by the poetic speaker further emphasizes the independent action of the letters themselves. Given their intense emotion, it is easier to imagine the letters in "*Briv fun varshaver geto*" as actual individuals than it is to recognize their memorial function. Yet, though each letter seems to be representative of an individual, when they act it is as a collective, as a mass that extends beyond the poetic speaker's own drawers (note the universal call of the first line). Unlike in Molodovsky, however, the letters are the *only* ones who act within the poem: the speaker addresses them, but they do not require the presence of the speaker, nor the act of reading, to enable their movement.

בריף פון וואַרשעווער געטאָ

בריף פון וואַרשעווער געטאָ דערהאַלטן, באַהאַלטן אין שטילע שופלאָדן!
ביינאַכט, וועַן עס גייען נשמות פון זייערע גופים אַרויס,
פאַרלאָזט איר מיט בראַנדיקן ברויז
מיינע שופלאָדן
און לאָזן זיך אַרויז
אָנקלאָגן גאָט, מיט די הימלען זיך לאָדן.

Letters from the Warsaw Ghetto

Letters from the Warsaw Ghetto received, hidden in quiet drawers!
At night, when the souls from their bodies leave,
You leave with blazing anger
My drawers
And set out
To accuse God, to file suit against the heavens. (78)

These letters represent the dead in two ways. First, in the figurative sense that we have discussed above, standing for the dead as the sole remnant that their geographically distant friends and family may

possess, and as a metonym for the host of familial, communal, and historical connections that are lost with the destruction of Europe's Jews. Second, in speaking for and "filing suit against the heavens" (6) on behalf of those whom they represent in the first, metonymic, sense, they take on the role of *legal* representation. By introducing legalistic discourse and action against God, Tsaytlin's poem steps into territory that is intimately familiar to Jewish catastrophe literature, and would become a central part of the theological discourse on the Holocaust in the years after the war: interpreting the events as inexplicable in Jewish theological terms, and thus as evidence of the breaking of covenant (understood to be a contract) between God and the Jewish people.[216] In their ability to speak for the *entire* Jewish people, not limited by calendrical time, in their particular, covenantal relationship with God, the agency these letters possess expands beyond the individual and historical realms, to become objects of *theological* significance as both evidence *and* witness themselves against the divine.[217]

The more energy and intensity the letters possess and the more capacious their ability to act, the more politically, morally, and theologically charged the act of keeping those letters becomes. The poetic speaker who keeps these letters hidden away is thus implicated as witness to the crimes of the Holocaust, and charged with preserving these artifacts. Keeping the letters hidden in drawers becomes reimagined as an act of safeguarding, where it might have been read otherwise as an attempt to distance themselves from, or ignore the letters. Although on first reading, the speaker seems to be calling out to their *own* letters in particular, the opening line is a generalized and sweeping rallying cry that mirrors the structure of those used by political movements of all kinds. The mass of *all* letters (from the ghetto) hidden in drawers *anywhere* is mustered as a symbolic reminder of the dead for the entire community of people who retained or attempted to retain these communicative ties to Nazi-controlled Europe. Calling out to these

[216] Thus implicitly — if they have the basis to file suit — rejecting the possibility that the Holocaust could be punishment for sin, in which case God's actions would be perhaps contractually/covenantally justified.
[217] As we saw in Chapter 2, in our discussion of "*Nisht di meysim loybn got*" ("The Dead Don't Praise God"), Jewish tradition holds that all Jewish people, past, present, and future, were attendant at the giving of the Torah and the establishment of covenant (thus marking covenant as made simultaneously with the Jewish people as a collective, and with each Jewish person individually).

letters reminds the poem's readers of their *presence.* Even hidden and forgotten, even when the owners of the drawers are asleep, these otherwise mundane objects bear meaning and significance.

Though the poetic speaker has little active presence within the poems, they are still a critical force in shaping our understanding of the letters' symbolic significance, not least because the letters are *even more* obscure and nondescript than in Molodovsky's poem. Where we were given a brief and nebulous overview of their content by Molodovsky, here the only thing we know for sure is that somewhere, hidden away in some drawer, there *are* letters received from the Warsaw Ghetto. In recognizing the agency and presence of these letters, even just as an unseen potential in others' drawers, these poetic speakers are able to find a language to articulate their own position and response to the Holocaust. Placing themselves in this relationship to the agential letters, which operate with a certainty and affect that seem both very distant from, and to exceed the expressive capacities of the speaker, these speakers are able to mark the boundaries of their own action and responsibility: symbolically witnessing the nightly movement of these letters, their role is to announce and make known the presence, and significance, of the letters themselves.

These poems take steps to delimit the possibility of dismissing the letters as mere representative objects to be read through to get to the hidden content or meaning. The primary poetic device at work across these poems is *personification*, the imbuing of inanimate objects with human qualities. Personifying these letters, ascribing to them or recognizing in them the human, agential qualities we have discussed above, functions as the symbolic expression of the relationship being articulated between speaker and object. However, the agential power of the objects in both cases seems to exceed the ability (or desire) of the speakers to express or control: they leave their drawers when people are asleep ("souls have left their bodies," 2). In this way, the letters are able to represent the personal loss suffered by the speaker, the receiver of the letters — of the individual friends and loved ones who sent them, as Molodovosky's poem emphasized — and, at the same time, to stand for the loss experienced by the Jewish people as a whole, acting as collective in their assault on the heavens.

Furthermore, it is difficult to accept that these letters act in this way, night after night, without understanding their "blazing anger" to be at least shared by the poetic speaker. We can understand the

importance of the letters, both here and across the poems discussed in this section, not simply as a reminder of the importance of physical artifacts of the Holocaust and of the persistence of memory "until the end of generations" as Molodovsky put it, but also in their function as loci and catalysts that allow these poetic witnesses to understand and find ways to express their affective responses to the Holocaust. Recognizing that the responsibility for (and ability to) taking up this case against God belongs to the letters might thus be read as emerging from the inability or unwillingness of the poetic speaker to overlook their own physical distance and safety in order to claim that position themselves. Rather than diminishing the significance of the relational positioning of the poetic speaker, engaging with these poems through the lens of personification reinforces the centrality of this relationship, and further emphasizes the focus of these poems on the attempt to articulate the speaker's own role and responsibility as an *enabling force* that empowers the dead to speak.

At the levels of the individual letter, the pile of letters, and the collected mass of the Jewish communication and remembrance, these objects come to symbolize the relationships that unite the individuals within a community, and that form the community itself. The *experience* of these objects and their insistent presence, even only in its imagined potential, create the conditions by which the speaker of this poem can engage with and find form for their own sense of the radical, divine injustice of the Holocaust. Both the documentary function of "letters" as a concept and their place within historical and legal discourse is grounded in an understanding of letters as a direct representation of those who wrote them. Thus, reading a letter is implicitly understood to involve symbolically transcending the barriers of space and time that separate writer and reader. Inherent in this understanding is the same problem of approaching text as if it grants transparent access to its author that we have seen plague the study of other forms of Holocaust literature.

Here, rather, the representative capacity of the letter is confronted directly: the letter's own presence stands for both the *absence* of the writer, and the present-absence of the poetic speaker in their current location (and thus, by extension not in Poland). The encounter with the letter thus becomes an experience of witnessing. The speaker here must encounter not only the destruction that has occured to

their people, but also the traumatic and unresolved complexities of their own survival and positioning. The letters thus come to doubly represent the speakers' own liminal positionality: as recipients and, in both cases, keepers and guardians of these letters, they must reckon with their newfound function as mediator — links, connections, bridges — between the world of the living and the world of the dead, mapped onto the geographical movement of the letter itself.

That is, the existence of the letter in the hands of the speaker-recipient implies a journey that can no longer be retraced but that *must* be retraced in each encounter with the letter in order to understand its meaning even in a superficial way, to understand its function as a communicative object, as *a letter*. That is the ghostly quality of these letters: in each reading, the speaker-recipient must not only recreate the full history of its transmission to a hand and place necessarily beyond reach, but also to reconcile their own existence within the letter, *as recipient*, and with it their history of absence, the contingency of their own survival, and now-*permanent* existence defined by a relationship to a world that no longer exists.

By not responding to the content of the letters, but rather to their insistent *presence* as physical objects and the embodied history of inscription, transmission, and reception that this presence implies, the poetic speakers alter our own experience as readers. If we were to assume a *real* letter necessarily stands on the other side of this poem, as a literal reading might lead us to, we would read the speaker as a barrier to our own access to these arteficts of the Holocaust. By limiting our focus in this way, however, these poems insist that the letters themselves cannot be read separately from the speakers' encounter with them. As such, we, as readers, are asked to adopt a position of witness to the poetic speaker's own encounter with the destruction of their people, acting as an enabling force that allows *that* encounter to be heard and known.

These are both poems about witnessing the Holocaust. At the heart of each is a complex and developing relationship between reader and a textual object or set of objects that forms the catalyst around which a response to the Holocaust can begin to be formed. In this sense, the diegetic relationship of poetic speaker to letter mirrors one possible formation of readerly response to the poem itself. For the reader to

encounter this poem as a response to the Holocaust is necessarily to position themselves as witness to the poetic speaker's own articulation of their experience of destruction and loss.

Molodovsky's "*Briv fun geto"* insists on the necessity of the reader and receiver of these letters, through the introduction of the first-person in the final stanza. In Tsaytlin's poem the speaker remained absent from the action of the poem, a motivating force more than a diegetic actor. In contrast, the final stanza of Molodovsky's poem reframes the previous stanzas as arising out of direct physical interaction and proximity. The speaker is suddenly described as an individual sitting with these letters, gathering them together, as if to remind *us* that it is only in the act of receiving, holding, and reading these textual objects that the potential meaning of a letter, both semantic and symbolic, can be made visible. In doing so, the analogous positioning of the reader becomes evident as well: holding the poetic text in our hands as we read, the reader is thrust into a new and undefined relation to the poem as the act of reading itself becomes overloaded with meaning.

Letters from the Ghetto

Your short letters —
Three lines on a card, no more.
As if every mile had laid on a stone —
That is how heavy they are.

A line about everyone's health,
Each one mentioned by name,
There's no need to worry,
And the white gaps on the paper beg for pity,
No doubt the writing of tears.

These short letters —
They lie with me all gathered together,
Until the end of generations they will remain.
I see the nervous hand, that writes them now,
I know the fiery hand,
That will write the gaps with pity.

1941 (*Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* 11)

Introducing the poetic speaker as a distinct, present diegetic actor foregrounds the significance of the individual witness in creating the conditions through which these letters can serve as the broad

symbolic and metonymic representations of the Holocaust that we implicitly (and historically) recognize them to be. Furthermore, it grounds this representative capacity in the personal relationship between sender and receiver. The abrupt disappearance of the second-person address of the first line, speaking directly to the *writer* of the letters, is accounted for by its perfunctory claim that establishes, without question, the metaphoric function of those letters: that is, the poem's first line is an announcement of recognition and establishes for us, as readers, the knowledge necessary to understand that, for the speaker, these letters represent intimate, human relationships.

As such, the contrast between the opening line of the first stanza and the third, between "*your* short letters" and "*these* short letters" is jarring, as if in the space between the possibility of direct communication has been lost, and all that is left is for the speaker to address themselves, and the reader of the poem. This abrupt shift in circumstance is concretized by the sudden emergence of the first person pronoun, as if to reinscribe that broken communication in the poem's structure itself — between the "you" of the first stanza, and the "I" of the third, lies the full spectrum of possible interpretation and motivation behind both the letters actual content, and their implicit content (hidden in the "white gaps" 8).

The introduction of the first person pronoun recasts the previous observations about these letters as *subjective*, introducing the possibility that the second-person address was an attempt to bridge a divide between sender and receiver that is already impassable. Rereading the two lines from the first stanza that mark the physical characteristics the letters ("As if every mile had laid on a stone — / That is how heavy they are," 3-4) instead as an articulation of the *experience* of reading them, that is, as phenomenological, shifts our perspective on the poem's concerns. No longer is the poem *only* making a broad and sweeping metaphysical claim about the necessary significance or intensity of objects that emerge from the Holocaust, as some scholars have described such texts as possessing. Rather, this intensity emerges as a product of the poetic speaker/reader's own affective response to the documents themselves. The contents of the letters thus becomes even less important, because what is foregrounded here is the relationship enacted through the act of sending and receiving: the letters become symbolic first of a familial or communal bond maintained across time, distance, and horrific unspoken experience. Understanding the

poem as a phenomenology of witnessing the Holocaust, *via* the encounter with an artifact of the ghettos, raises the small but emotionally significant question of whether the "tears" that write the white gaps of the letter belong to the letter's writer, or to the one reading them.

The final stanza insists on the centrality of the poetic-speaker qua witness in making it possible for the Holocaust to be recognized and known via these letters. The letters themselves act as an affective counter-archive of the Holocaust, testament not to the historical data and facts of the destruction of Europe's Jews, but to the personal relationships and communicative networks that persist beyond the borders and years of the ghetto. These are not the authoritative sources of the documentary historian's archive that I spoke about in the previous chapter; the empty content of these letters largely precludes their utility for the purpose of history. Rather, the speakers of both of these poems actively announce their inability or unwillingness to perform — or to allow *us* to perform — the interpretive work that would be necessary to draw historical insight from the letters.

This is the initial condition of the letters in Tsaytlin's poem, after all: these letters are hidden away rather than performing some kind of public memorial duty. The poems in Molodovsky's letter perform only for the speaker themselves; their lack of content prevents them signifying such a complex relationship and history for others. The singular focus on introspection and emotional response, then, acts as these speakers' attempt to construct a different kind of authority than that offered by the historical document, borne of an individual, emotional relationship engendered and symbolized in the act of receiving and reading a letter: relationship-as-history, community-as-archive.[218]

While Molodovksy's poem marks these letters as memorials, symbolically rendering them as the plaques and stones that traditionally occupy those roles, *these* memorials are decidedly private in nature. Both of these poetic speakers highlight the intimacy and privacy in the act of reading. Tsaytlin's speaker keeps the letters hidden away from others' eyes (though they are able to move of their own volition);

[218] We see a similar phenomenon emerge in the final section of "*Nakhtlider*," in which the entirety of Jewish existence becomes reimagined as a performative, ritual, reenactment of the deaths of the Jews of Eastern Europe; a constant procession of funerals until an unnamed, messianic time, when the reenactments will be complete and a new world will be born.

Molodovsky's speaker positions themselves among the letters, claiming a physical connection, a commingling in the act of reading with those represented. Like lighting a *yortsayt* candle,[219] or reciting *Kaddish* in memory of the deceased,[220] though enabled by, and made meaningful by the recognition of the communal connections made symbolically present in its enactment, the act of reading here is an *individual* and *private* act of commemoration and mourning. Though in isolation, each letter marks an individual victim and tragic death. Taken together, they can be read as an ad-hoc *yizkor-bukh*[221], but instead of documenting the destruction of a geographically locatable community, a city or shtetl, the pile of letters in each case mark the boundaries of the speaker's own community: all of the networks at which they stood as the connecting point, now lost.

These poems not only remind us of the importance of the individual witness as a site for Holocaust remembrance, but also insist that the act of witnessing is itself harrowing. We should not dismiss the personal trauma, these poems imply, of someone forced to watch their world be destroyed, their only source of information being small pieces of paper with little more written on them than the names of those loved ones whose fate remains otherwise unknown and unknowable. This is both a necessary outcome of, and commentary on the historical conditions under which these poems were produced. Although *now* a recognizable and nameable event, among the *most* identifiable events of recent history, composing their poems in the middle of the 1940s, there was no established language by which to refer to the broad set of events that we now call "the Holocaust". Although the speakers recognize that they bear a responsibility and burden to make this destruction known, as many survivors would remark in the years immediately following the war, the impetus for gathering and preserving these collections, these archives, is personal rather than historical. These letters represent the friends and family who composed

[219] Also: "Yahrzeit". A 24-hour burning candle lit to mark the anniversary of a loved-one's death. These are sometimes also lit on Yom Kippur, and some people also light *yortsayt* candles on Yom HaShoah, Israel's official Holocaust memorial and remembrance day.
[220] The prayer for the dead.
[221] Memorial books collected by community organizations to commemorate and memorialize destroyed Jewish cities, towns, and communities.

them, each relationship significant enough to bear writing from behind the walls of the ghetto. These objects are perhaps the last thing the speaker has that was in direct contact with the writer.

Legible both individually and as a collection *only* to the speakers themselves, this mass of letters archives the *specificity of loss e*xperienced by the poetic speakers. They are not for public view. As such, these poems strive to highlight the isolation of the distant witness, watching their families and friends being destroyed in Europe, before the intervention and concerns of history and documentation. In doing so, these poems thus offer a model of witnessing and of experiencing the destruction of Europe's Jews that speaks directly to the situation of its contemporaneous readership, many of whom would have found themselves confronting similar situations. More than that, however, by grounding the experience of witnessing the Holocaust in an individualized sense of loss, and mundane experience of receiving a letter, these poems create a model of empathetic witnessing that is able to persist even beyond the immediate context of its initial publication — that is, within which its readers, even now, can place ourselves.

Underscoring the centrality of these communicative networks and relationships to her poetic project, Molodovsky returns to this same theme in a poem titled, *"Es kumen nit mer keyn briv*" ("No Letters Arrive Anymore"). Dated 1945, this poem's focus on letters allows its readers to place it in direct conversation with "*Briv fun geto,*" (in some ways the emotional completion of the journey that began in that poem dated 1941). It is also one of the very few of Molodovsky's Holocaust poems to explicitly attempt a response to the final years of the Holocaust or, more specifcally, to the theoretical possibility of the Holocaust as an event with a beginning *and* an end. Further, of those few poems this is the only one that uses a concrete and mundane point of reference. The others are abstract and metaphysical, addressing God or reflecting on the messianic promise of redemption (at times hopeful, and at others resigned).

Here, with "*Briv fun geto*" in mind, the simplicity of the opening declaration carries the full weight of the date at the poem's close, as poignant a declaration of loss and despair as any in the collection. The first stanza is simple and direct, the situation clear: by the year to which this poem is dated, communication from Europe has ceased. There is no mention of Europe, Warsaw, or the ghetto here to explicitly indicate the Holocaust-specific focus of this poem, but temporally continuous

"anymore" of the title invites us to recognize this situation as the end of a process of which, within the pages of the collection, *Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn*, we have only one clear precedent in "*Briv fun geto*".[222] This poem announces its similarity structurally as well, both comprising three short stanzas that begin with a mundane description, shift through an emotive middle stanza before turning their attention to the divine in the closing lines. The final dates serve as a shorthand, temporally grounded, explanation for the differences in perspective, and resignation, between the poetic speakers.[223]

עס קומען ניט מער קיין בריוו

עס קומען ניט מער קיין בריוו,
קיין וואָרט,
קיין גערייס —
ניטאָ ביי וועמען צו פרעגן.
די שטילקייט ווערט הוילער,
און קלערער,
און וויסט —
פאַר דעם וואונדיקן פרעגער.

אין די אויגן ניטאָ קיין געוויין.
אַלע גלידער פאַרקלעמט.
עס ליגן שערבלעך פון אומגליק.
ביי מיר אין די הענט.

איך וויל דערפילן אַ כוח פון לעבן,
אַ געשריי,
אַ געוויין איך וויל דערהערן.
אַ שטיקל פייער אין הימל
וויקלט אויס זיך אין גאָרניט —
אין רויך.
אָט אַזוי-אָ מסתמא
ביי גאָט אין דער הויך —
וויקלט אויס זיך אַ יידישער שטערן.

1945

No Letters Arrive Anymore

No letters arrive anymore,
No word,

[222] An equally plausible translation of the title might be "No more letters arrive" or "Letters arrive no more". I chose the former to highlight the temporality of the title, choosing "anymore" to indicate the change in state, though that is discernible easily in both the alternative translations noted here.
[223] Just as we cannot assume a correlation between the poetic speaker and the author, we also cannot assume a singular poetic speaker between poems.

No greeting —
Nothing to ask of anyone,
The silence grows more hollow,
And clearer,
And dismal —
For the wounded asker.

In my eyes there is no pain
All limbs are grieving.
Shards of misery lie
In my hands.

I want to feel a breath of life,
A cry,
A lament I want to hear,
A bit of fire in the sky
Taking shape[224] in nothing —
In smoke.
Oh that is the way, probably
With God upon high —
A Jewish star takes shape.

1945 (*Der meylekh dovid aleyn iz geblibn* 82)

The physical presence of the letters received in the previous poem reinforces the intensity of their *absence* here, in the final year of the Holocaust. Read in conversation with "*Briv fun geto*," the mundane markers of basic communication that were easily dismissed when the communication was still possible — words, greetings, inquiries — become overloaded with absent meaning: "The silence grows more hollow, / and clearer, and dismal" (5-8). The continuing presence of the banalities such as "a line about everyone's health" (5) that served as a source of comfort for the 1941 speaker now, in their absence, become fully realized as symbols of the *possibility of communication* and, thus, the faint possibility of future reunion, now lost.

[224] This is a complex verb that can mean both "taking shape" or "developing" *and* "unwinding" or "unfolding," depending on the use of the reflexive or reciprocal pronoun "zikh". I've chosen the former meaning as it seems more fitting to the scene being described: the yearning desire for something to emerge out of the despairing emptiness that signifies the silence of the poem's title. However, Kathryn Hellerstein opts for "unravels into nothing" and "a Jewish star unravels" (*Paper Bridge* 411), in part deriving from a thematic through-line in her translations of Moldovsky's Holocaust poetry highlights Molodovsky's concern with the failure of poetic language in the face of the Holocaust. See Hellerstein, "A Yiddish Poet's Response to the *Khurbn*. Kadya Molodovsky in America." Indicative of both the significance of Hellerstein's reading, and the decidedly limited amount of scholarly work that has been done on Molodovsky's Holocaust poetry, Heather Valencia adopts both the same translation, and the focus on meta-poetics for her own examination of Molodovksy's poetry. See Valencia, "Only King David Remained…" especially p. 13 n. 18.

Crucially, this is not a *new* situation for the speaker of "*Es kumen nit mer keyn briv.*" The title marks the permanence of this condition, and the first stanza reinforces this reading. The translation I have offered above aims to highlight the stative quality of the speaker's pronouncements in the first stanza: this is the normal conditions of the speaker's present. Bereft of communicative ties, even those as simple as greetings, and thus ("nothing to ask of anyone," 4) without any source of information about the fate of those in Europe, the poetic speaker has nowhere to turn except inward. The close of the first stanza sees the "wounded asker" overwhelmed by that silence, left only to reflect on their isolation and misery.

In this way, "*Es kumen nit mer keyn briv*" presents its reader with an image of the witness in utter isolation, directly mirroring the title image of the collection, King David mourning, alone, having not only outlived his son, but unable to be with him at the moment of his death. Through these poems, both Tsaytlin and Molodovsky create a representative model for their readership of witnessing destruction and having to find the means to articulate not only the experience of that trauma, but their own positionality, marked by having been physically absent from the site of destruction. The simple act of sending and receiving a letter, and the encounter with a received letter as an artifact of a now deceased friend or family member is an experience universally understandable, and a common image in dramatic literature. Grounding their experience of witnessing and loss in these mundane objects and familiar (and familial) experiences allows the poetic speaker to create a meaningful, relatable framework both for their own articulation, and through which the poem's readers, regardless of their own positioning, can grasp and empathize with the nebulous and overwhelming sense of destruction and mourning that is being confronted in this poetry.

Conclusion

At the outset of *A Double Dying*, Alvin Rosenfeld argues that we "lack a suitable hermeneutic" for reading and responding to Holocaust literature, "just as we need, but do not have, a working theory of the miraculous to explain the mere existence of other texts.

> That certain books have come down to us at all is nothing short of astonishing, and we can never distance ourselves from an accompanying and transifiguring sense of awe as we encounter them. A manuscript written secretly and at the daily risk of life in the Warsaw ghetto; buried in milk tins or transmitted through the ghetto walls at the last moment; finally transmitted to us — such a manuscript begins to carry with it the aura of a holy text. Surely we do not take it in our hands and read it as we do those books that reach us through the normal channels of composition and publication. But how *do* we read it? At this point in the study of Holocaust literature, the question remains open-ended. (17 emphasis in original)

I discussed this claim at length in Chapter One, but certain aspects and implications of it are worth reiterating in this context. Emerging from an interpretation of the Holocaust grounded in binary and spatial language, Rosenfeld marks the process of transmission accounted for above as miraculous because the border between our world and the world of the Holocaust, *l'univers concentrationnaire*, is understood to be impassable and impenentrable. Drawing on survivor writing imbued with apophatic theological terminology, as I noted in Chapter Four, the interpretive framework — the phenomenology of Holocaust literature — implicit in this "miraculous" account of textual transmission requires a fundamental suspension of the impulse to analysis and critique. Though styled as a two-part suggestion and rhetorical question, the closing lines of the passage above introduce explicitly the radical claim (to the point of unsustainability) underlying all of *A Double Dying*, and Rosenfeld's work on Holocaust literature in general, that we *cannot* read these works in the same way as others.

Juxtaposing the secrecy and risk with which he defines the composition history of Holocaust texts with the "normal," that is, known and knowable publication and dissemination processes of other texts, Rosenfeld overlays a now-familiar spatial binary onto the composition history of the letter, the diary, or any other text that emerged *from there*. Figured in apophatic terms, the texts themselves become imbued with the selfsame quality of unspeakability that is implicit in the "other kingdom" and *"l'univers concentrationnaire*" language from which he here draws. The phenomenology that Rosenfeld calls for in this passage must not only necessarily work within the epistemological boundaries of this spatial metaphor, but also act to reinscribe those boundaries, maintaining the "aura" of holiness that is associated with the space of the Holocaust.

As I have already shown, such a reading strategy, such a phenomenology, results in an approach to text that severely limits readerly possibilities, obscuring the text, and refusing interpretive critique.[225] Ultimately, within the framework of this phenomenology, the question of "*How do we read it*?" is almost disingenuous, because surely the answer is already given to us: "with a transfiguring sense of awe" (17).[226] What results is the restrained and restrictive appeal to literalness in service of preserving this awe that I discussed at length in earlier chapters.

These poems of witnessing offer another model, one that is permeated equally with awe and with the desire toward understanding and interpretation beyond the literal. Central to the conception of a poetics of witnessing is a critical self-awareness on the part of the poetic speaker, and an examination of their own position in relation both to the Holocaust and to the representative objects of the Holocaust that inspire the poems, whether letters or ghosts. Such an awareness simultaneously constructs, acknowledges, and pushes against the limitations not only of the witness' knowledge and expressive capabilities, but also their own critical interest. None of these poetic speakers *care*, especially, to relate the content of their letters, or to interrogate the specific individuality or representative mechanics of the ghosts that confront them; rather, they interrogate the encounter itself and their own place within it.

The reflexive turn we see in each of these poems is an act of incipient boundary-making, the rhetorical and symbolic marking of an individualized framework of inquiry. Neither the content of these letters ("three lines on a card, no more"), nor the nature of the spirits are the subject of this poetry.[227] Instead, each poetic speaker and each individual poem begins by laying out the boundaries of its own *interest*, as a critical part of the process of poetic articulation.

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[225] I do not do it here, but a version of this transmission-focused reading practice is often undertaken by literary scholars, but they are focused on the text *we* have as readers. By shifting our focus to the diegetic letters, we can understand them as symbolic constructions that attempt rather to model for us the experience of encountering representations of the destruction, rather than the reception history and transmission of *actual* text, which is more aligned with the historian's project than that of the reader of literature.

[226] I am intentionally offering a restrictive version of the question "How do we read it?" here to illustrate the point. Of course, even *with* the requirement that our reading strategy produse that "transfiguring sense of awe" there are many readerly avenues and approaches one might take. However, given the approach that results throughout *A Double Dying*, it is clear to me that this restriction is more than incidental, and the literalness of Rosenfeld's reading strategy seems entirely in the service of producing this "awe," in part by refusing the possibility of critique.

[227] Nor the unanswered "Do you recognize me?" of *"Merder fun geshpekter*" (7).

It is also at this stage that our place as readers in relation to this poetry is most readily visible. The desire to encounter Holocaust texts, regardless of their origin, in such a way that preserves the holy mystery of their composition and transmission is fundamentally at odds with that we know of the constructedness of the literary. If the *experience* of reading these Holocaust texts does produce the effect that Rosenfeld suggests, might it be a product of the text itself? The "weight" of the letters that Molodovksy's *"Briv fun geto*" insists on, the powerful silence of their absence in *"Es kumen nit mer keyn briv*," and the blazing anger of Tsaytlin's "*Brif fun varshaver geto*" could be understood to be analogous, if not identical, to the "holy aura" that Rosenfeld identifies. The distinction, however — the *necessary* distinction — would be to recognize this not as a product of the document's composition *history* (neither the poem nor the letters), but an element of the text itself, an emotional response to the encounter with these letters and, perhaps, modeled and re-enacted in the encounter with the poem.

As such, the "awe" that Rosenfeld identifies might be better read as a catalyst and feature of a poetics of witnessing: it is a product not of some mysterious ineffability of the text, but rather of the necessary gap between an experience and its reflection in words.[228] The tensions of similarity and dissimilarity within which metaphor is most powerful; the unanswerable monologue; the continued, contradictory, and necessarily irresolvable search for a theological language within which the Holocaust can be poetically encountered — each of the poetic tools, mechanisms, and themes we examined in the preceding chapters operate in a space not of ineffability and unspeakability, but of carefully chosen and constructed representative and poetic boundaries, within which the willingness, ability, and concern of the poetic speaker is carefully mapped and articulated as part of the process of poetic expression.

The poems discussed above are certainly not exhaustive of the mechanisms and possibilities by which the liminal subject-position of the witness is encountered and articulated within this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry. However, confronted by both these letters and by the spirits, ghosts, and phantoms of the previous section, these poetic speakers offer a model of encountering the Holocaust that

[228] I am here echoing a quotation from Elie Wiesel that has shaped a lot of my formative thinking and critique about the state and mythos of Holocaust literature and survivor testimony: "Between the survivor's memory and its reflection in words, his own included, there is an unbridgeable gulf" (*A Jew Today* 234).

neither precludes awe nor is preoccupied with it. The desire toward understanding that occupies each of these poems — the space beyond the literal — is grounded in reflection on positionality, rather than on confronting the ineffable or unapproachable knowledge of the Holocaust. Within the context of these poems, events in Europe that would come to be known collectively as the Holocaust are *not* new knowledge — in fact the final lines of Molodovsky's *Briv fun geto* tells us that everything communicated in the letters arises from the speaker's own inference and pre-existing knowledge. That Tsaytlin need not interrogate the identity of the specters, nor look beyond their superficial appearance to understand their symbolic power is evidence to the same. The entire existence of Glatshteyn's speaker in "Night Songs" is predicated on an intimate familiarity with the fact, scope, and finality of the destruction. Perhaps the intricate specificities of historical detail are not known to these speakers in the ways they will come to form part of historical and popular discourse of the Holocaust and Holocaust memory in the decade after the end of the war, but central to each of these poetic collections is an unwavering certainty about the radical existential disruption the Holocaust engenders, even as early as 1941.

Instead, narrating themselves faced with agential representatives of the dead and destroyed communities of European Jewry, these poems, and others like them, offer a phenomenology of encountering the Holocaust that emerges not from its (un)knowability,[229] but rather from the emergent recognition that this encounter brings of the poetic speaker's own contingency. Though the content of the letters is never divulged to us as readers, it is not out of a desire to preserve its mystery. Rather, the content is ultimately insignificant compared to the fact of the letter's existence and the relationship the poetic speaker constructs in response to its receipt. Likewise, the ghosts and spirits need not signify beyond their presence, because that presence itself — constant, independent — continually informs and alters Tsaytlin's speaker's conception of their own life.

These ghosts, like the nightly visions of Glatshteyn's speaker, are a logistical, ordering force: they mark and divide day from night, waking life from dreaming. They are a fundamental feature of the

[229] Or from the corollary and common deferral of knowability onto a privileged minority, whether that is the survivors or the dead.

experiential landscape of the speakers whom they haunt or visit. The space thus created by this poetry, in and through the act of witnessing, is one in which the living and dead coexist, inextricable and in continual conversation. The past and the present, in the poems we have seen above, and throughout the previous chapters, are mutually constitutive: before the intervention of history, and not reducible to the operation of memory, the act of witnessing is a reflection not only on the past, but on the present *as shaped by* and *as shaping* the past.

Poetry of witnessing is preoccupied with the future. These poems operate within a space of uncertainty and, as with each of the examples in this chapter, none have answers to offer. Molodovsky comes the closest, but even her gestures toward the future are couched in modality: they are hopes, desires, wishes, but they are not definitive claims. The loss to which these poems respond — the crisis that they confront as witnesses — is more than physical destruction, it is the loss of communal, Jewish futurity. We see this most clearly in Glatshteyn's "*Nakhtlider*," in which the only image of the future is an endless, ritualized repetition of the past and the desperate hope for a quasi-messianic rebirth.

מיר האָבן נישט קיין געהיימען ריטואַל.
אַלע אונדזער סודות זיינען גרוילן אַנטפלעקטע,
אויב עמעצער וועט פרעגן,
זאַג אים, דערצייל אים:
מיר זיינען אַ סעקטע,
אַ סעקטע אבלים.
מיר מוזן אַפּגעבן כבוד דעם גאַנצן טויט,
ביז דאָס לעבן אליין וועט ווערן דערהויבן.
מיר גלויבן,
ס׳מוז אויסגעיאָמערט ווערן
דער לעצטער געקלאָג,
און דעמאָלט וועט ערשט קומען נאַכט,
און ס׳וועט קומען טאָג —
ערשטער טאָג.

We have no secret ritual.
All of our secrets are horrors unveiled,
If someone should ask
Say to him, tell him:
We are a sect,
A sect of mourners
We must show respect to all of death,
Until life itself becomes elevated.
We believe,

That it through tears must be cried
The last lament,
And then first will come night,
And day will come —
The first day.
(4.37-50)

The coming of the Messiah is a common theme among this American Yiddish Holocaust poetry. Although this is perhaps unsurprising given the symbolic force of messianism within Jewish liturgical and historical imagination, I suggest that we can understand this recourse to the messianic imagination, to time beyond time, as a *reaction* to these speakers finding themselves in the position of witnessing. Arn Tsaytlin is the most invested in this thematic, with numerous poems that specifically and explicitly address the limitations and possibilities of messianic redemption for freeing his speakers, or the Jewish community, from the burden of their traumatic memories. Others have written at length about the complexities of Molodovsky's messianic vision, which blends her hopes for poetry and the place of the poet with an apprehension about the likelihood of any kind of redemption.[230] None of these poets, or the speakers of their poems, fully commit themselves to that ideal, but rather turn toward themes of "new creations" or "second beginnings" (ala Molodovsky's "*Havdole*") because it seems to be the only possibility that exists *outside* of history, outside of the continual need for reflection and community constitution in light of the past. A second creation, the coming of the Messiah, is thus offered as the only possible respite for one who has stepped into the position of witness, from the burden of *speaking* and of being that "living monument" between past and present; a complete break with the past.

Leyvik's speaker's vision of a "camp of the world," and the utter inevitability of their own destruction that I spoke about at length in the Chapter 4 offers a vision of one imaginable future, in which there is nothing that is *not* implicated in the destruction, and time itself is little more than waiting in line to enter the camp. Looking outward, rather than focusing on the internal struggle of the poetic witness, Leyvik's vision sits in frightening relation to that of Molodovsky or Glatshteyn — not because it is

[230] See especially, Hellerstein's introduction to *Paper Bridges* (17-60), and her chapter "A Yiddish Poet's Response to the *Khurbn*: Kadya Molodowsky in America," and Heather Valencia's lecture "Only King David Remained: Reactions to the Holocaust in the Poetry of Kadya Molodowsky".

unimaginable, but perhaps precisely because it describes the world from which the speakers of "*Havdole*" or "*A gute nakht velt*" flee into conditionality, or that lies on the other side of the lines of broken communication for the speaker of *"Es kumen nit mer keyn briv*": the total destruction of the Jewish world.

Between this future, and that of "*Zontik af vashington skver"*, in which the destruction of the Jews is known only to the traumatized witness lies an entire nebulous spectrum of American Yiddish Holocaust poetry that is preoccupied with the future of its speakers, its community, and the possibility of Jewish existence. This poetry of witnessing thus emerges in direct response not only to the Holocaust, but to the radical loss of any kind of grasp or certainty about the future that the Holocaust engenders. Not simply what the Jewish community will look like in the wake of this ongoing set of events, but as Leyvik's poem implies, whether there will be a Jewish community at all. Though I recognize that we've ventured back into language of unknowability, we are far from the metaphysical and sacred ineffability of the Holocaust that previous scholars have been insistent on preserving. Rather, this poetics of witnessing is firmly grounded in an uncertainty of self, of collective identity, and of action: what will *we do*, and who will *we be*, if and when these events are to come to an end?

To be a witness is to occupy a space without definitive answers, a space that continually reconstitutes its discursive boundaries in response to the new information and new experiences that come with the passage of time and the operations of history and of memory. Poetic witnesses are rhetorically constituted through a careful negotiation and articulation of relationships with the past, through tradition, symbolism, and memory objects, with the present, and with the uncertainty of the future. Each of the poetic mechanisms we have discussed in this dissertation — the arrival of a letter; the experience of an apparition; the recourse to, rejection of, or transformation of Biblical metaphor; the turn toward, rejection of, or reimagining of a relationship with God, or with each other — can be understood as one among a constellation of reference points, vocabularies, and loci that allow poets and the speakers whose voices occupy their poems to grapple with that positionality.

At the close of the previous chapter, I highlighted two critical features of the literary subject-position of the witness. First, it centralizes and illuminates the specificity of the speaker's own

positionality through engaged self-reflection. Rather than invested in transmitting information about the Holocaust, this poetry of witnessing tells us first and foremost about the speaker's *relationship* to the Holocaust. Second, it emerges from the realization, often jarring and sudden, of the speaker's *inseparability* from the community of the dead, and the duty that this inclusion imposes on them in relation to the dead. The nature and extent of this duty differs, but each of the poems examined in this dissertation as a whole accept that to have a relationship to the dead — or to the living — brings a measure of responsibility, to speak with and to speak for, to make known.[231]

Witnesses are not singular authorities on the events to which they bear witness; even in the legal world this has never been the case. Rather, they offer a specific vision of an event filtered through a complex subjectivity. It is only in the discourse and scholarship on Holocaust literature since the Eichmann trial have we begun to inscribe the witness with a unique and authoritative perspective. The model of "the witness" I have offered here makes *no* claims to represent history as such; this is a literary position separate from (though in conversation with) history and historical memory. To understand the *act* of bearing witness we need to recognize and make our first interpretive priority the articulation of the witness themselves.

Bearing witness, that is, is a discursive act of relational self-constitution: these poetic speakers (and, I would argue, all acts of testimonial witnessing understood as rhetorical and textual gestures and actions) are not recounting the historical events per se, but are *narrating themselves in relation* to the events of the past, in relation to the present, and in relation to the communal and individual identities implicated in this act of witnessing.

To read American Yiddish Holocaust literature through the lens of "witnessing," and to recognize the complex sociality of that position, is in some ways to destabilize the Romantic notion of the elevated individual that has inspired scholarly treatment of the Holocaust survivor's privileged representative authority. It is to accept, implicitly, that to write Holocaust literature is *always* necessarily to enter into a

[231] We might recall Melissa Raphael's femnist theology of Auschwitz in this regard, to understand some of the implicit responsibility that emerges from recognizing oneself in relation to the suffering of others. Raphael is, of course, heavily informed by Levinas.

conversation with the victims, survivors, other witnesses. Perhaps we have arrived at another gap in the argument against metaphor, insofar as it assumes that physical destruction is all that is being mourned. The rich metaphorics that inform these ghost and letter poems, as well as the biblical and theological poems of the previous chapters, offer a space for conceptualizing the subject position of the witness *through* the languages and discourses that shaped its relationships and communities. To bear witness in this way is *also* to account for, speak for histories, cultures, literatures, theologies, traditions, and communities being actively destroyed and lost. For the poetic witness to construct a relationship with the *people* being killed, and the communities being destroyed is to enter into those histories and traditions, and to recognize oneself as *part* of them.

The category of the witness, understood as a poetic operation of critical self-reflection, functions in part to remind us, as readers and as scholars of the Holocaust and its literature, that no poem exists in isolation, just as no poetic speaker, nor poet, separates themselves from their communities of family, friends, other poets, and of their readers. In introducing the language of witnessing into the study of Holocaust literature, and even more so through the case of this geographically distant American Yiddish literature I am opening space for a new discourse of relationality in the study of Holocaust literature, for new categories of literary imagining and expression that are neither beholden to the biographies of the authors, nor read as singular, impenetrable or, crucially, unchangeable expressions of some fundamental truth. Without precluding other *kinds* of reading, the category of "literature of witnessing" implies only a focus on the diegetic self, how a literary speaker constructs themselves in relation to the other people, places, and events with which it speaks.[232] "Witnessing" as a reading strategy, as a critical vocabulary, takes as its central assumption that a text does not exist in isolation, but is a point in an ongoing *process* of reflection and articulation of the self in relation to the communities in which they live, a conversation that inspires new perspectives and encounters with the self, with the past, and with others.

[232] It may even enable a renewed set of conversations around the constructedness of memoir and testimony, an issue around which the field of Holocaust literature has been left behind by history and other fields who utilize testimony.

Conclusion

There is a persistent and intense irony to Jewish literary responses to catastrophe. From Lamentations through the the literature of the Holocaust, at each stage writers have turned first to their inherited traditions: whether liturgical and theological, historical, or literary, the feature that seems to unite those responding to catastrophe and destruction across the generations is the seeming failure of *everything* that preceded them to account for their present experience. The diachronic tradition of Jewish catastrophe literature is temporally connected through a *rejection* of the tradition itself.

Take, for example, Arn Tsaytlin's *"Yisroel's ashn*" ("Israel's Ashes")

ישראל׳ס אַשן

וועָן ירמיהו זאָל איצט זיצן אויף ישראל׳ס אַשן,
וואָלט ער נישט אויסגעקלאָגט קיין איכה
און וואָלט די חורבות מיט קיין טרערן נישט געוואַשן.
עפענען דעם קוואַל פון זיינע טרערן וואָלט נישט קאָנען
גאָט אליין. צוגלייך מיט די מיליאָנען
פון פאַרברענטן פאָלק וואָלט ער געשוויגן
דאָס געהיימסטע שווייגן.
איצט איז דאָך געשריי אפילו ליגן,
אפילו טרערן זיינען נאָר ליטעראטור,
אפילו תפילות לייגן.

1945

Israel's Ashes

If Jeremiah were to sit now on Israel's ashes,
he would not have cried out Lamentations,
and would not have washed the ruins with his tears.
Opening the spring of His tears could not be done by
God Himself. Likened to the millions
of burned people He would have kept silent
the most secret silence.
Now even screams are lies
even tears are only literature,
even prayers are put down.

1945 (59)

Dated 1945, and framed within Tsaytlin's collection between a poem dated 1944 and one dated 1942, it is difficult to take at face value the claim that Jeremiah or, in his place, the speaker of this poem — and, perhaps, by extension, Tsaytlin himself — would have remained silent. None of these writers remained silent, nor did those that would follow them in the years and decades after the Holocaust: despite

continual proclamations to the contrary, a repeated refrain that language cannot represent their experience, that *nothing* can explain the horror of the Holocaust, inevitably they write.

What, then, to make of a tradition built on a refusal of its own authority? To date, scholars have understood claims such as that of the poem above (though there is no scholarship on this poem) at their word, reflections on the irreconcilability of the available tools of mourning and interpretation, drawn from the tradition of responses to catastrophe that precede them, with the destruction of European Jewry at the hands of the Nazis. Understood in this way, David Roskies' category of "sacred parody" seems particularly apt (*Against the Apocalypse* 20) . Comparing themselves to Jeremiah, the traditionally enshrined composer of Lamentations, the poetic speaker invites us to recall the moment in Lamentations when Jeremiah makes an identical gesture:

> What can I compare or liken
> To you, O Fair Jerusalem?
> What can I match with you to console you,
> O Fair Maiden Zion?
> For your ruin is vast as the sea:
> Who can heal you? (2:14)[233]

Analogy, metaphor, and comparison, offer a dialectic of similarity and difference. Here, too, the poetic speaker of *"Yisroel's ashn*" simultaneously claims radical distance from and affinity with the prophet lamenting the destruction of Zion. To invoke tradition in order to reject it is still to figure oneself and one's present experience in dialogue with, in a relationship with, a specific, chosen moment from the past. Like the apophatic instinct that has led scholars, survivors, and others to declare the Holocaust *unknowable* or *unspeakable*, the impossibility of speaking silence leads inevitably to inscribing categorizing and describing *l'univers concentrationaire* in the process of refusing the possibility of description. The irony at the heart of the ongoing tradition of Jewish catastrophe literature, embodied by Tsaytlin's poem above and reflected in each of the poems discussed in this dissertation, is the willful desire to offer an interpretation, to respond, to speak, and to bear witness *without* claiming the authority to do so. Each of the poems examined in this dissertation is an attempt to speak for a community being

[233] מָה־אֶעִידֵךְ מָה אֲדַמֶּה־לָּךְ הַבַּת יְרוּשָׁלַם מָה אַשְׁוֶה־לָּךְ וַאֲנַחֲמֵךְ בְּתוּלַת בַּת־צִיּוֹן כִּי־גָדוֹל כַּיָּם שִׁבְרֵךְ מִי יִרְפָּא־לָךְ: {ס} *Sefaria.org*

destroyed without precluding other voices, without silencing, as Jeremiah perhaps tried to, the voice of Zion herself.

It has become something of a custom in studies of Holocaust literature in the last few decades — especially studies which focus on literature written by the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors — usually somewhere in the introduction, to apologize for the texts chosen, for the work itself, and offering as reasoning the fact that survivors are aging and, as a population, are slowly disappearing. In the absence of survivors, these studies assert, literature gains some authority: it becomes the sole source by which we might enter into the world of the concentration camp, to understand something of what it was like. Certainly the moral urgency with which these apologies are offered is understandable, especially if (and, really, *only* if) we understand knowledge of the Holocaust to be knowledge of the *experience of surviving* the Holocaust, and if we understand each individual survivor's story and history to be able to stand metonymically for the entire population of survivors *and* of the dead. That, without directly confronting the implicit understanding we have in the United States that "Holocaust survivor" *really* means "survivor of a concentration camp". If we take seriously, however, Elie Wiesel's own claim that "between the survivor's memory and its reflection in words, *his own included*, there is an unbridgeable gulf", then that urgency is less obvious, since, by Wiesel's own words, even *he* cannot describe in a meaningful way the experience of the Holocaust (*A Jew Today* 234).

This dissertation enters into the study of Holocaust literature at a time when many of the categories and borders that define it through the latter half of the twentieth century are being challenged, reshaped, and mobilized in the name of including voices previously silenced. Yet, at its core, the field retains the terms by which it was originally conceived and defined: survivor-centric, in the first case, and giving primacy to reflective, memory literature. This need not be the case; perhaps, were Jeremiah there with the poetic speaker in 1945, he, too, could not have cried out Lamentations, because the destruction he would have been lamenting had not visibly, concretely come to an end — at least not enough to narrativize them, and to offer a singular, authoritative voice directing the people toward the future.

To invoke tradition only to refute it is also a validating gesture. If the present were fully explicable by the past, there would be no need for outcry, for new poetic expression. Clearly, however, there is: the poetic speaker wouldn't need to decry the value of screams, of tears, of prayers, were none forthcoming. These kinds of emotional outpourings are insufficient within the framework of "*Yisroel's ashn*" because they cannot offer the same kind of emotional denouement of Lamentations 3:40. Still, it seems as though they must be voiced, because what else but speech could make a silence "secret"? It ought to go without saying that, at least within the traditions that inform our poems, catastrophe literature is a tradition never entered into willingly. Rather, as we have seen throughout, the speakers of these poems feel the impulse, the responsibility, even the duty to speak and to make known the events to which they bear witness. The approach this dissertation has taken to the American Yiddish Holocaust poetry in the chapters above begins with a recognition of the need for expression that rejects explanatory authority and, in doing so, positions the poetic voice as an unwilling participant in the traditions within which they speak.

This dissertation began with the question of why this American Yiddish Holocaust literature had been largely excluded by scholarship, by encyclopedic projects, and by definitions of the genre of "Holocaust Literature". In some ways, the history of the field and its development offered one simple answer to that question: the scholars who shaped the study of Holocaust Literature generally could not read Yiddish. At the same time, as my introductory overview of the field showed, its terms and boundaries emerged from a complex set of debates over Holocaust memory, memorialization and, crucially, over who was granted the authority to speak or write about the Holocaust at all. The central space and voices have, until very recently, all been granted to survivors. The study of this wartime Yiddish poetry is not intended to silence survivor voices nor is it being proposed as a means to fill the void left by an aging survivor population. Rather, in the field's search for new bodies in which to locate authoritative memory, and the scramble to enshrine canonical texts, some of the gaps left by its history have become visible in ways they had not been before.

The speakers of each of these poems, individuated and collective voices, speak from among and on behalf of a community under threat of total destruction, a community that includes the dead, survivors of the concentration camps, and those geographically removed from Europe who, as a result of that distance, are forced, years and decades before philosophers and academics in the United States would, to encounter the Holocaust as an existential, conceptual threat to Yiddish and Jewish culture, to their identities as individuals and as communities. These poems are deeply introspective, while remaining continually preoccupied with the duality of their positions within and among communities made up of individuals mourning the loss of their own, personal worlds: families, friends, homes. This American Yiddish Holocaust literature reminds us that no poem, no piece of literature, and no act of mourning is separable from the communities within which it occurs.

Carolyn Forché, in the introduction to her anthology of twentieth century poetry that responded to conditions of extreme duress, of death, destruction, imprisonment, *Against Forgetting*, identifies a particular category of poetry designed to stand on its own as a testament to the disasters about which it writes. She calls this category, "poetry of witness" (Forché 1–47). Forché's own poetry is preoccupied with the same problem: how to bear witness to events that she did not experience. She locates this category between "personal" and "political" poetry, "the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary" (Forché 31). Poetry of witness, Forché says, exists in the space between: in what she calls the "social," the Levinas-inspired space in which we are vulnerable to the other, in which our existence and ability to speak is dependent on the mutual care of those around us (Forché 31).

As Forché put it in her follow-up anthology, which traces the same tradition diachronically in English-language poetry,

> In the aftermath of Auschwitz, we begin with a heteronymous self and understand Descartes' subject/object constructions as a two-century-old denial of the primacy of the other and of relation. We abandon this denial to enter into an intersubjective sphere of lived immediacy. In the poetry of witness, the poem makes present to us the experience of the other, the poem *is* the experience, rather than a symbolic representation. When we read the poem as witness, we are marked by it and become ourselves witness to what it has made present before us. Language

> incised the page, wounding it with testimonial presence, and the reader is marked by encounter with that presence. (Forché and Wu 26)

It was by accident that I stumbled across Forché's anthologies. I was finishing writing Chapter Five, and had begun to think about the ways in which I might continue to develop this project. In Forché's two anthologies, we encounter another version of this positionality, though one that is still limited by an approach that rings much closer to Rosenfeld's and Langer's, more akin to testimony in the courtroom or Fortunoff Video Archive sense; it is in Forché's usage, "a mode of reading rather than of writing, of readerly encounter with the literature of that-which-happened, and its mode is evidentiary rather than representational—as evidentiary, in fact, as spilled blood" (Forché and Wu 21).

I was disappointed to read these lines, naturally, but still motivated: in their continued adherence to reading poetry in the service of history, my encounter with Forché's anthologies and thinking allowed me to recognize that the reading strategy that I outlined in the final two chapters of this dissertation was capacious enough to *include* two anthologies of diachronic, multilingual poetry that understand the relationship of poetic witnesses to the events about which they speak to be analogous to evidence. That is, an *evidentiary* poetics is one among a constellation of dispositions that a poetry of witnessing may recognize and centralize — in encountering the poems in her anthology *as if they were* (courtroom) evidence, Forché is not necessarily making a claim about the poems themselves, but rather about the relationship her reading strategy prioritizes. Although presented with little comment, throughout the two anthologies there are dozens of poems from a variety of languages, cultures, and time periods, and responding to any number of disasters, both from within them and from significant physical (and even temporal) distance, that could be placed in direct conversation with the poems in the chapters above

There is space for other literature to be examined through this lens, not limited to those contained in Forché's. Within the framework of the Holocaust, our understanding of literature written at a generational remove from the destruction of Europe's Jews, that of the so-called Second or Third Generation whose familial histories and identies are caught up in a perpetual relation to the past, may yet be deepened by a focus on how the subjects of those texts are diegetically constructed. So, too, is there

room for examining wartime literature in Europe outside of the concentration camp, insofar its speaking voices reflect on the distinctive positions in which they find themselves, recognizing the contingency of their ongoing survival.

This reading strategy need not be limited to Holocaust literature: literatures written by diaspora communities whose homelands are beset by genocide and mass killing, for example, may readily be brought into conversation with this American Yiddish Holocaust literature. Further, the continued specter of historical atrocity haunts the modern world, and many, especially marginalized, dispossessed, displaced communities for whom imperialism and colonialism — even in supposedly post-imperial or post-colonial nations — are a constant presence continue to compose literature that refuses a distinction between past and present, and through which a discursive act of relational self-constitution serves as a means to encounter the past and present as inextricable.

Poetic witnessing is a process of articulating one's own position as and among a community, for creating networks of relation with those to whom, and about whom, one speaks. It is an *ongoing* process that inspires re-articulation, repetition, transformation, and response: it includes the kind of dialectical movement of past and present that motivates the working of metaphor, metonymy, and comparison; it includes speech without clear purpose but which needs to be spoken; it includes reimagining and reconstructing relationships with the divine beyond feudal hierarchies. To understand these poems as poetry of witnessing, then, is to understand that what draws us to the *literary* and *poetic* as a space of expression is that it is capacious enough to include multiple, even contradictory perspectives and, as such, that it invites — *demands* — continued, comparative, even challenging readings, rereadings, and interpretations.

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"Chaim Potok and The Holocaust," *Studies in American Jewish Literature,* 40.1, 2022, pp. 18-42.

Book Chapters

"We Have No More Prayers: Speech, Silence, and Communal Identity in American Yiddish Holocaust Poetry," *American Examples: New Conversations about Religion, Vol. II*. Samah Choudhury, Prea Persaud, and Michael J. Altman, eds. University of Alabama Press. Forthcoming, 2022.

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

Articles

"Unity, Hope & The Fight Against Satan: Marching in the Streets of Melbourne," Under Review at *Killing the Buddha*.

Book Reviews

"Love is Death: Miriam Karpilove's *Judith*." (Paris: Farlag Press, 2022). *In geveb.* Forthcoming.

Review of McGilligan, Patrick. *Funny Man: Mel Brooks*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2019). *Jewish Film and New Media*. Forthcoming.

Review of Barnouw, David. *The Phenomenon of Anne Frank*. Translated by Jeanette K. Ringold. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), *Reading Religion.* 2018, online.

Pedagogy

"Supporting Your Post-Coursework Graduate Students," Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, Indiana University, 2022.

"Introduction to the Study of Religion," Syllabus, American Examples, 2021.

Translations

Translation of Alexander Spiegelblatt "Repairing Love," Yiddish Book Center, 2019.

Translations of Volf Sambol, "*Dos eybike lid*," and Zoshia Mekhanik, "*Dos lid fun a shnayderin*" in Toltz, Joseph and Boucher, Anna. "Out of the Depths: Complexity, Subjectivity and Materiality in the Earliest Accounts of Holocaust Song-Making." *East European Jewish Affairs.* Dec 2018, Vol. 48, Issue 3, 309-330.

AWARDS AND HONORS

2021	Department of Religious Studies Graduate Research Fellowship, Indiana University
2020-21	College of Arts and Sciences Dissertation Research Fellowship, Indiana University
2020	Department of Religious Studies Graduate Research Fellowship, Indiana University
2020	Sanders-Weber Fellowship, Indiana University
2019	Department of Religious Studies Graduate Travel Fellowship, Indiana University
2019	College of Arts and Humanities Institute Graduate Travel Fellowship, Indiana University
2019	Sara and Albert Reuben Fellowship to Support the Study of the Holocaust, Indiana University
2017-19	American Academy of Jewish Research, Special Initiatives Grant, Indiana University and Purdue University
2017	Borns Jewish Studies Grant-in-aid for Summer Research, Indiana University
2017	Yiddish Book Center Translation Fellowship, Yiddish Book Center
2017	Newton P. Stalknecht Memorial Essay Prize, Indiana University
2017	C. Clifford Flanigan Memorial Colloquium Prize, Indiana University

2016 George and Monique Stolnitz Yiddish Prize, Indiana University
2016 Newton P. Stalknecht Memorial Essay Prize, Indiana University
2016 Comparative Literature Departmental Travel Fellowship, Indiana University
2016 North East Modern Languages Association Graduate Travel Fellowship
2015 C. Clifford Flanigan Memorial Colloquium Prize, Indiana University
2015 Friends of the Borns Jewish Studies Program Fellowship, Indiana University
2014-15 Borns Family Fellowship, Indiana University

INVITED LECTURES

2021 "Letters from the Ghetto," Occasional Introduction, Borns Jewish Studies Advisory Board Annual Meeting, June 6.

2019 "Conspiracy Theory as Modern Epistemology," Miami University of Ohio, November 12.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Papers Presented

2022 "'Between nightmare and insanity': Aaron Zeitlin's Ghosts," Religious Studies Graduate Conference, Indiana University Bloomington, April 8-9.

2020 "*Keyn vort, Keyn Geris*": Letters from the Ghetto in American Yiddish Holocaust Poetry, Association for Jewish Studies Conference, December 13-17.

2019 "*Got, mayn bruder*": Yankev Glatshteyn's Holocaust Theologies," Association for Jewish Studies Conference, December 15-17.

2017 "Translation; or Yiddish in America: Ozick, Singer, on the Future of Yiddish," Indiana University Jewish Studies Graduate Conference, February 9-10.

2016 "Wolf, Woman, Wo[lf]man: Angela Carter's Little Red Riding Hoods," Indiana University Comparative Literature Graduate Conference, Bloomington, April 1-2.

2016 "'And over our heads the hollow seas closed up': An examination of boundaries, meanings, and spatial relations in Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*," Indiana University Jewish Studies Graduate Conference, February 11-12.

2016 "'My name is Lizzie Bennet': Narration and Interpretation in The Lizzie Bennet Diaries," Northeast Modern Languages Association Conference, March 23-26.

2014 "'An unbridgeable gulf': Memoirs and Memory in Elie Wiesel's Holocaust Writings," The Future of the Past: Representing the Holocaust, Genocide, and Mass Trauma in the 21st Century, July 6-8.

Discussant

2022 "Closing the Door on Grammar as A Gatekeeping Device," East Central Writing Center Association, April 1.

2018 Roundtable, Renaissance Refugees Symposium, Indiana University Bloomington, September 22.

2016 "The Internal Logic of the Text," American Literary Translator's Conference, October 6-9.

Campus or Departmental Talks

2020 "We have no more hymns: Form and Voice in American Yiddish Holocaust Poetry". Jewish Studies Faculty-Graduate Workshop, Indiana University Bloomington, September 25.

2017 "The Beth Din as 'Court of the Future'," C. Clifford Flanigan Memorial Colloquium, Indiana University Bloomington, April 14.

2015 "'…there are no more lamentations': Tradition and Response in Kadya Molodovsky's 'God of Mercy'," C. Clifford Flanigan Memorial Colloquium, Indiana University Bloomington, April 24.

Faculty Workshops

2020-21 *American Examples*, Department of Religious Studies, University of Alabama

2021 "Teaching Mass Atrocity: The Holocaust, Genocide, and Justice," Curt C. and Else Silberman Faculty Seminar, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Indiana University
Note: I was Instructor of Record for all the courses below.

Culture, the Arts, and Society
Visualizing the Holocaust: Stage and Screen (Fall 2019)

Introduction to Popular Culture
We Are Not Alone: Fear and the Paranormal (Summer 2020, Online)
Cults, Cryptids, and Conspiracies (Fall 2018)
Representing the Holocaust (Spring 2018)
Technophobia (Fall 2017)
Facing Death (Spring 2017)
Confronting Catastrophe (Fall 2016)

Writing the World
Bad Company (Spring 2019)
Dysfunctional Couples (Spring 2016)
Strange New Worlds (Fall 2015)

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Grant Administration

2017-19 American Academy of Jewish Research Special Initiatives Grant

Conferences and Workshops Organized

2021 "Thriving in Graduate School" workshop series, Indiana University Bloomington, September 22, October 20, November 15.

2020 Comparative Literature Graduate Conference, "Eat Your Words," Indiana University Bloomington, March 6-7.

2017-19 Indiana University-Purdue University Graduate Jewish Studies Workshop Series
Indiana University February 26, 2019
Indiana University, February 25, 2018
Purdue University, February 26, 2017

2018 Comparative Literature Graduate Conference, "The End of the World: Tragedy, Catastrophe, Apocalypse," Indiana University Bloomington, March 2-3.

2018 Jewish Studies Graduate Association Conference, "Jewish Storytelling: Traditions and Transformations," Indiana University Bloomington, February 8-9.

2017 Jewish Studies Graduate Association Conference, "Dreams of Home: Home and Homeland in the Jewish Imagination," Indiana University Bloomington, February 9-10.

2016 Comparative Literature Graduate Conference, "Crystal Queer," Indiana University Bloomington, April 1-2.

2016 Jewish Studies Graduate Association Conference, "Kissing the Mezuzah": Jews Between Public and Private Space," Indiana University Bloomington, February 11-12.

Pedagogy Events Organized

2022 "Instructor-Student Communication: Supporting Mental Health, Respecting Boundaries," Indiana University Bloomington, April 6.

2022 "Mystery and Mastery: Graduate Master's Learning Community," Indiana University Bloomington, February 18, 25, March 4.

2022 "Coffee Talk: Mental Health for Students," Indiana University Bloomington, January 29.

2021 "Thriving in Graduate School: Adjusting the Trajectory of Your Research Plan," Indiana University Bloomington, September 22

2019-20 Department of Comparative Literature Peer Teaching Observation Initiative, Department of Comparative Literature, Indiana University.

2018 Teaching Workshop on Syllabus Planning and Design, Department of Comparative Literature, Indiana University.

2018 Comparative Literature Teaching Roundtable Series, Department of Comparative Literature, Indiana University.

Pedagogy Presentations

2022 "Establishing a Daily Writing Routine," Supercharge Your Dissertation, Indiana University Bloomington, May 3.

2022 "Holistic Tutoring: Supporting Emotional Development and Tutor Self-Care," Indiana University Writing Tutorial Services, April 26, 29.

2021 "Grad School Hacks," Indiana University Bloomington, December 9.

2021 "Thriving in Graduate School: Being Strategic About Graduate Work," Indiana University Bloomington, October 20.

2021 "What A Way To Make A Livin': Tutoring Job Documents," Writing Tutorial Services Working Group, Indiana University Bloomington, September 21 and 24.

2021 "There's a Skeleton Living Inside of You: Teaching Essay Structure," Writing Tutorial Services Working Group, Indiana University Bloomington, April 28 and 30

2021 "Lecture Series: College-level Writing Expectations," Indiana University Bloomington, July 1, 6, 8, 13, 15.

2018 Teaching Workshop on Syllabus Planning and Design, Department of Comparative Literature, Indiana University.

2018 Religious Studies Pedagogy Roundtable: Writing Assignments, Department of Religious Studies, Indiana University.

2018 Religious Studies Pedagogy Roundtable: Associate Instructor/Professor Interaction, Department of Religious Studies, Indiana University.

DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE

Co-Chair, Student Advisory Board of Comparative Literature, 2017-18; 2019-20.
Academic Coordinator, Student Advisory Board of Comparative Literature, 2015-16, 2020-21.
Secretary, Jewish Studies Graduate Student Association, 2017-18.
President, Jewish Studies Graduate Student Association, 2016-17.
Vice-President, Jewish Studies Graduate Student Association, 2015-16.

OTHER WORK

2021 Article Writing Group Facilitator, Indiana University Writing Tutorial Services.
2020-21 Dissertation Group Facilitator, Indiana University Writing Tutorial Services.

2019-	Graduate Writing Tutor, Indiana University Writing Tutorial Services
2014	Researcher, Sydney Jewish Museum
2012-14	Student Mentor Coordinator and Administrative Assistant, University of Sydney Faculty of Arts and Sciences Student Support Services
2013-	Yiddish translator.

LANGUAGES

Yiddish: Excellent reading skills, speaking and writing competence.
German: Reading proficiency with the aid of a dictionary.

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Association for Jewish Studies
American Academy of Religion
American Literary Translators' Association

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