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Yael S. Feldman. Modernism and Culture Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literacy Bilingualism

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examines the literary-historical and psychological problems surrounding "cultural transfer" and bilingualism, specifically in connection with the exchanges between the mother tongue (*mame-loshn*) and the holy tongue (*leshon ha-kadosh*). Furthermore, she applies a sophisticated understanding of such issues to a number of poems by Gabriel Preil. These are substantial achievements, especially since few critics of Jewish literature possess a general theoretical perspective, have mastered the secondary material in Hebrew and Yiddish, and can juxtapose theoretical considerations with close readings of specific texts.

Gabriel Preil was born in Estonia in 1911 and moved to New York with his mother in 1922. His work is most familiar to American readers from the collection entitled *Sunset Possibilities and Other Poems*, translated by Robert Friend (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985). What is most obvious about Preil is also most astonishing: he lived virtually all but the first eleven years of his life in New York, yet he produced some of the finest examples of twentieth-century Hebrew poetry.

After an introduction and two chapters that survey Hebrew literature from 1880 to 1940, Feldman turns to the bilingual condition of Hebrew and Yiddish writers and discusses the wrenching ambivalences in their work and in its subsequent reception. According to her thesis, Preil is emblematic of the tensions that have characterized modern Jewish literature to the extent that it has been suspended between Hebrew and Yiddish. As Feldman observes, the young Preil was influenced by the established Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein and, together with the Introspectivists of New York, contributed Yiddish poems to the journal *In Zikh* during the 1930s.

Feldman reviews the "deep-seated clash of loyalties" to Hebrew and Yiddish that marked Preil's creative development (p. 41). She also explains that the continuing biases against Yiddish have produced stubborn misconceptions of Preil's early verse. Moreover, Feldman provocatively suggests that the bilingual phenomenon may have been more crucial to Preil's poetic career than were specific intertextual influences. In general terms, this indicates that interlinguistic processes may at times overshadow the intertextual struggle between authors and their precursors.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the most successful in Feldman's book, for they interpret Preil's poetry from a challenging new standpoint. When Preil responds to his grandfather's Talmudism, for example, "cultural transfer" rears its Janus-faced head. Preil does not engage in simple nostalgia, but

Yael S. Feldman. *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1986. xii, 224 pp. with bibliography and index.

Yael Feldman's study is a significant addition to the emerging canon of critical works in English on Hebrew and Yiddish literature. Apart from a dozen or so prior titles, most of the major books have been published in Hebrew or Yiddish. In her monograph on Gabriel Preil, Feldman transfers her familiarity with Israeli scholarship to the American academic milieu and adds a broad awareness of literary interrelations. This book is evidence of continuing vitality in criticism on Jewish literature.

Feldman advances the state of current research in two respects. She

rather seeks to invent a viable literary tradition when he likens his poetic activity to the rabbinic preoccupations of his ancestors.

Sometimes it turns spring, lines of verse
 hover in the air and my hand
 is drawn to catch them, as if
 they were flashes of a *sugya* in Grandpa's mind.

(p. 45)

Preil's strongest work may be traced to the strategies of defense involved in his efforts to produce an original Hebrew voice from conflicting Hebrew, Yiddish, and American English sources.

In her compelling chapter entitled "The Return of the Repressed: Preil's Yiddish sources (*In Zikh*)," Feldman examines the links between the poet's early poems and Introspectivism. She refers to Harold Bloom's theories of misreading (p. 59) and explains that Preil lays the foundations of his work by incorporating some, and rejecting other, Introspectivist principles espoused by Glatstein, A. Leyeles, and their circle. According to Feldman, Y. L. Teller is the most directly linked figure among New York Yiddish circles. Hence she selects a late poem by Preil entitled "Yehuda Leib Teller" (1977) as the point of departure for a further probing of Preil's Yiddish connection.

The analysis stops short at this stage, following an effective comparison between two Yiddish poems by Preil and Teller; Feldman does not discuss Preil's Yiddish work at length until a later chapter. She maintains that "unlike his close friend Teller, Preil could not adopt fully the 'poetics of hardness,' which the *Inzikhistn* inherited from the Imagists, because of his *double literary loyalty*" (p. 69). The terminology of hard versus soft and Imagism versus Romanticism is perhaps unsatisfying. While Preil's "Wonder Mirror" indeed uses more adjectives than Teller's "Wind," Feldman does not fully demonstrate that his Hebrew loyalties prevented him from emulating the Introspectivists. In the future, she might devote a valuable essay to specific instances of Yiddish-Hebrew transfer in Preil's work, including the associated dimension of metaphorical "carryover."

The intervening chapters 6 and 7 are highly technical, in contrast to those that precede and follow them, and do not advance the overall project. Even an avid formalist may question Feldman's decision to analyze a poem of catastrophe, "Words Are Gone," first and foremost at the level of

meaningless syllables (pp. 99–105). While it is true that meaning has been shattered by the crises of the twentieth century, this does not necessarily justify subordinating thematic depth to rhythmic structure. Nevertheless, Feldman shows a laudable commitment to literary qualities.

In chapter 9, Feldman effectively returns to the center of her study on Preil and cultural transfer by examining the problematics of translation. This issue is particularly relevant to Preil's poetry, since Preil translated his own poems as early as 1936. The interpretive readings in the final two chapters suffer, however, from a continued reliance on the periodizing labels of "hard" Yiddish Imagism and "soft" Hebrew Romanticism. In addition, because Feldman's monograph does not follow a linear chronology in its treatment of poems, it effaces some differences between the stages of Preil's literary career.

Feldman ultimately claims that Preil's modernistic writing is "paradigmatic of the Jewish bilingual tradition" (p. 166), in which Yiddish has been repressed. While Feldman successfully elucidates several instances of transfer between Yiddish and Hebrew in his poetic development, her final thesis depends on unreliable labels: Preil's Yiddish Imagism destabilizes Hebrew Romanticism, thus allowing a new synthetic Modernism to emerge. This fractured conclusion perhaps reflects the continued ambivalences of our time, which have not overcome the "unfortunate dissociation between the conscious (Hebrew) and unconscious (Yiddish) layers of the writers' psychic activity" (p. 11). So long as Yiddish remains a suppressed and marginal language, scorned by most Jews in Israel, America, and elsewhere, we may not be able to reach a balanced perception of cultural transfers from Hebrew to Yiddish and back to Hebrew. Alluding to Freud's remark about making the unconscious accessible to consciousness, we might paraphrase one prevalent attitude: Where Yiddish was, there Hebrew shall be. "Cultural transfer" has, in this case, enriched modern Hebrew literature and hastened the bankruptcy of Yiddish letters.

Yael Feldman's *Modernism and Cultural Transfer* takes an important step in the right direction, analyzing Gabriel Preil's poetry against the background of interlinguistic relations. It reinterprets a small number of Preil's poems in connection with the rise of Hebrew letters and the decline of Yiddish. This distinguishes Feldman's book from most postwar American scholarship, which, like Preil in his renunciation of the mother tongue, has left Yiddish in the ashes. To preserve continuity with the past, our challenge is to remain multilingual, following the transmigrations of Hebrew rebo

while retaining a European identity through “the languages of the nations” and by affirming the past and future of Yiddish.

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