

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/westminsterresearch>

**“A small, fierce being”: Jon Silkin, Isaac Rosenberg, and the
definition of the Anglo-Jewish poet
Copley, H.**

This is an accepted manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Textual Practice, DOI: 10.1080/0950236X.2020.1839954.

The final definitive version is available online:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1839954>

© 2020 Taylor & Francis

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

**“A small, fierce being”:
Jon Silkin, Isaac Rosenberg, and the definition of the Anglo-Jewish poet**

Dr Hannah Copley

Lecturer in Creative Writing, University of Westminster

Article word count 7,707

h.copley@westminster.ac.uk

Abstract

Despite being “one of the most distinctive and distinguished of those British poets who began to publish in the 1950s”,¹ the writer, editor, critic, and translator Jon Silkin remains a largely forgotten figure in contemporary poetry. However, with the publication his *Complete Poems* in 2015 and the availability of his archive, there has been a renewed critical interest in the charismatic, prolific, and contentious poet.² Drawing heavily from Silkin’s unpublished correspondence, this article contributes to this revival by exploring his place within the post-1945 Anglo-Jewish community and his relationship to his Jewish identity and cultural heritage. In particular, it investigates how the First World War poet (and fellow Anglo-Jew) Isaac Rosenberg became a vital means through which Silkin articulated his poetic identity as one caught between two hyphenated cultures and histories and defined his relationship with his Anglo-Jewish contemporaries.

Keywords: Jon Silkin, Isaac Rosenberg, contemporary poetry, Jewish poetry, war poetry, British poetry

Article

i.

Born in London in 1930 to a Jewish family of Lithuanian heritage, Jon Silkin authored over thirty collections of poetry, as well as publishing a number of acclaimed critical works, edited anthologies, translations, and articles.³ Educated at Dulwich College and Wycliffe College, he left school to begin a series of jobs, including an insurance clerk, a journalist, a grave digger, and a cleaner. Although he had self-published his first volume of poems, *The Portrait, and Other Poems* in 1950 (shortly after completing two years of national service) it was not until he was fired from this last role for attempting to organise a worker's union in 1952 that he dedicated himself to poetry and poetry editing full time.

Using his £5 redundancy pay, he founded *Stand*, a magazine that he intended “would ‘stand’ against injustice and oppression and ‘stand’ for the role that the arts, poetry and fiction in particular, could and should play in that fight”.⁴ Based first in London, and then in Leeds and Newcastle, *Stand* came to represent the left-wing, socially engaged, and determinedly internationalist position of its founding editor. It championed writers from across the world, particularly Eastern Europe and nations under Soviet Rule, publishing translations and essays, and it ‘stood’ for a version of alternative, culture that Silkin viewed as being at odds with the Movement and its associated concerns.⁵ This approach also resulted in the 1973 anthology, *Poetry of the Committed Individual*. Edited and introduced by Silkin, it featured fifty-seven poets from around the world (twenty-seven of the poets were in translation) and called for a more open, inclusive version of British culture – one which rejected the “little Englander” outlook of Movement poets such as Philip Larkin and which instead advocated learning, in “however limited a way, something of what sensuous powers and moral entrapments feel like in Iowa, Teesside, or Prague (quite apart from what Amman, Jaffa, and Hanoi can tell us)”.⁶ Only by looking for kinship and inspiration beyond the narrow perimeters of the mainstream, Anglican English experience, Silkin argued, could “preparations be made for a continuously vigorous and changing culture.”⁷

This “vigorous” determination to bring about change, and the rejection of perceived or real cultural and imaginative borders was typical of Silkin's approach as both an editor and a writer. Within the pages of *Stand*, as well as within his collections, this translated into a willingness to provoke, challenge, and overthrow the established order of English poetry, both in terms of the contemporary scene, and the literary canon. This was particularly the case in regard to the tradition of war writing, and the position

that particular poets and poems held in the public imagination. In 1960, Silkin, alongside his editorial team, published a special issue of *Stand* entitled “The War Poets”.⁸ Dedicated to the poetry of the First World War, the issue included articles on Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Edward Thomas, Edmund Blunden, and Robert Graves. It also featured new work from a few carefully selected contemporary writers, including Emanuel Litvinoff and Herbert Read.

Typical of *Stand*'s alternative position, the special issue did as much to interrogate the sentimentalised notion of the War Poet as it did to celebrate the work of those writers who fought and died between 1914 and 1918. In articles such as Joseph Cohen's “The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman” for example, the place of Owen and Brooke in political and popular nationalistic discourse was called into question. Cohen interrogated the public and political preference for certain war poets over others, turning the gaze away from the work of each writer and onto the society that consumes it.⁹ “If the third World War got underway tomorrow”, Cohen wrote, “someone would be sure to ring up the Press between the first warning whistle and the pulverizing atomic blast a few minutes later to ask ‘Where are the War Poets?’”¹⁰ In place of any new writing, two figures – Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen – “would be immediately invoked”, despite the fact that “their positions of war were diametrically opposed”. This detail was, according to Cohen, “no longer relevant”, as “their function as war poet has been modified, and the term itself, artificial from its conception, has now taken on an even more questionable usage.”¹¹

Cohen's interrogation of the “war poet” called for a critical re-appraisal of the archetype – a call that was echoed throughout the special issue of *Stand*. In questioning the figure of the war poet, he asked that the public reconsider who are remembered and recited, and why this should be the case. One particular example of the misrepresentation, and even jingoism, that the article sought to expose was Edward Blunden's 1958 pamphlet, *War Poets 1914-1918*.¹² The thirty-page British Council publication came under fire as an “obnoxious and disturbing example” of the “character manipulation” prevalent in public commemoration. Noting the pamphlet's overwhelmingly positive critical reception, Cohen dismisses it as nothing more than “an exercise in hero worship” – a de-humanising portrayal that enshrines its subjects as “Wordsworthian happy warriors in a Georgian Valhalla” rather than ‘sensitive, expressive human beings who went into the army for non-heroic reasons’.¹³ In this unequivocal dismissal of Blunden's ‘stellarification’ of the poets of the First World

War, Cohen defends those who have been overlooked due to the fact that they either remained alive or “neither looked nor sounded like a hero and could not be fashioned into one”.¹⁴ In particular, he draws attention to the figure of Isaac Rosenberg, who is granted only a single line in Blunden’s book, and who, as a Jew and a private who joined for financial reasons, did not fit into the carefully constructed mould set aside for the “archetypal spokesmen”.

Cohen’s choice of Rosenberg as an eloquent and under-appreciated anti-hero of the First World War appeared at a time when the young soldier-poet was practically forgotten in popular and critical circles. *Poems by Isaac Rosenberg*, edited by Gordon Bottomley and featuring an introduction by Laurence Binyon, was published in 1922 but quickly disappeared from print.¹⁵ So too did Rosenberg’s *Collected Works*, published by Chatto and Windus in 1937.¹⁶ While Silkin was in possession of these collections, and published a number of Rosenberg’s poems in issues such as *Stand: The War Poets*, it was not until Ian Parson’s 1979 edition of Rosenberg’s work that he again reappeared,¹⁷ and even then it is not until the last fifteen years, with the publication of his poems, plays, and letters in 2003 and 2004 that he has achieved anything close to the critical and popular recognition that Cohen – and Silkin – believed he deserved.¹⁸ Yet despite Rosenberg’s relative obscurity at that time, Cohen’s article was an apt choice for this special issue of *Stand*, given the First World War poet’s profound impact upon Jon Silkin’s style and poetic selfhood. In the same issue, Silkin writes an essay dedicated to Rosenberg – one of many across his career – in which he praises the poet’s balance between naturalism and symbolism, and alludes once again to Blunden in his concluding remark that “no omission, or glancing reference obscures this remarkable achievement”.¹⁹ Cohen’s and Silkin’s articles, complementary in their subject matter and political leanings, both position Rosenberg as an alternative artistic figure. He is depicted as resolutely outside of the popular canon of war poetry, yet his artistic legacy is championed by both above the more popular soldier-poets featured in the special issue.

Beyond the 1960 issue of *Stand*, Silkin consistently demonstrated the profound influence of Rosenberg – and of war poetry in general – both upon his approach to poetry and on his identity and responsibility as a writer. His edited works on the subject – *Stand: The War Poets* (1960), *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (1979), *The Penguin Book of First World War Prose* (ed. with Jon Glover, 1989), *Wilfred Owen: The War Poems* (1994), – reflect the decades that he spent publishing and

promoting the work of First World War poets and prose writers, in particular those, like Isaac Rosenberg, who might otherwise have received less public attention.²⁰ Similarly, his critical work – “The Poetry of Isaac Rosenberg (1959),” “The Forgotten Poet of Anglo-Jewry (1960) [on Isaac Rosenberg],” “Rosenberg’s Rat-God (1970),” *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (1972), “For Rosenberg,” (1976), “Triumphant Silence: Some Aspects of Sidney Keyes, 1922-1943,” (1980), “Keith Douglas” (1981) and “Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg” (1986) – shows his long-term engagement with war writing, and highlight the place that Rosenberg occupied within Silkin’s critical consciousness, both in terms of his inheritance as an alternative, anti-mainstream poet and his identity as an Anglo-Jew.²¹

This interest extended to Silkin’s poetic work. There are numerous mentions and allusions to Rosenberg across his oeuvre. These relate to the First and Second World War and to Silkin’s own Jewishness, but also to surprising and seemingly unrelated subjects, such as the poet’s sexual relationships. These surprising references suggest that it was Rosenberg’s mode of expression, regardless of his subject, that provided the inspiration for Silkin’s approach as a poet. In “Deficient”, for example, first published in the 1961 collection *The Re-Ordering of the Stones*, Silkin alludes to “the sunk silences / Rosenberg speaks of” in his convoluted depiction of urban life.²² Later, in *The Little Time-Keeper* (1976), he dedicates the poem “The Marches” to Rosenberg, and refers to himself in relation to his predecessor – “we are two / in the forest’s numerology” – within the main body of the piece.²³ In the sequence “Going On”, which appears within the 1980 collection *The Psalms and Their Spoils*, Silkin uses an excerpt from Rosenberg’s poem, “The Unicorn” – “They wail their souls for continuity” – as the epigraph to a poem that speaks in intimate terms of love, sex, and procreation.²⁴ In the same collection he pre-empted the train sequence “Joy, lined with metal” with the line “joy – joy – strange joy – ‘Returning, we hear the larks’”, also by Rosenberg (as well as referencing Keith Douglas in the poem “I In Another Place”).²⁵ In the 1983 pamphlet, *Autobiographical Stanzas* Silkin frames a representation of his own military service within the context of Rosenberg’s description of his experience as a soldier. Rosenberg’s explanation that “the actual duties ... are not in themselves unpleasant, it is the brutal militaristic bullying meanness of the way they’re served on us. You’re always being threatened with ‘clink’”, becomes the means by which Silkin begins his own depiction of his time as an unwilling eighteen-year-old soldier:

Effort in winter. I was returning to
 the camp, conscripted by the infantry
 at eighteen. Coldness, pricking moisture
 in slivers, I began a run, for camp
 frightened me. Charge, sentence, and clink
 at eighteen; odd conjunction of fear
 with boredom made a threat, which the army
 materializes, replica of exact
 brutality, its mintage, boys.²⁶

Finally, in his most explicit poetic engagement with his predecessor, in “The Life of a Poet” (published posthumously in the 2002 collection, *Making a Republic*), Silkin sets up Rosenberg as the alternative, archetypal “Poet” first referenced by Joseph Cohen in *Stand* back in 1960. At the same time, he situates him in relation to the varied, international traditions of Jewish writing, as demonstrated by his other reference within the poem’s epigraph to the Jerusalem-based poet Dennis Silk:

*i.m. Isaac Rosenberg, in the First War
 For Dennis Silk*

Rosenberg, you do not talk easily. You write
 and life springs up poems like warriors,
 in the war, which killed you.
 Lion-tongued enabling
 angel who seeks
 the incarnate female soul, ‘shekhina,’ you cry out
 as the steel fragment enters you.

[...]

The small fierce being, you, midsummer frost.²⁷

Jewish history intertwines with a military one in this intertextual and dialogic poem. Evoking the works of the “small fierce” Rosenberg, Silkin marries his own life as a post-Holocaust Jew with his life as a child witness to war through the violently “torn” defenses of the First World War poet. The poem’s “steel fragments” create a connection between the post-1945 Jewish poet and his deceased predecessors.

Spread over decades, these poetic, critical, and edited publications together convey the fundamentally important role of Isaac Rosenberg within Silkin’s imagination. Published in a variety of contexts – in relation to war poetry, Judaism, modernity and machinery, belonging, sexuality, poetic selfhood – they paint a picture

of an equally “small fierce being” whose creative consciousness and self-expression was profoundly shaped by his relationship to the (at that time) little known war poet. Indeed, Rosenberg’s effect upon Silkin was so great that it shaped the latter’s relationship with his contemporaries, even going as far as to define his own self-categorisation (and subsequent partial exclusion) as an Anglo-Jewish writer. In championing Rosenberg – at all costs – Silkin was forced to confront his own heritage and position in relation to many of his contemporaries. His public and private dealings with publications such as the *Jewish Quarterly*, *The Jewish Observer*, and the *Jewish Chronicle* on the question of Rosenberg’s legacy and status – as well as his own – throughout the 60s and 70s showed his willingness to aggravate those around him in his “vigorous” pursuit of a “changing culture” and Rosenberg’s place within it. Silkin’s passionate championing of the war poet became the means by which he set out his own creative vision of what it meant to live and write as a Jew in England and beyond after the Shoah. Equally, his celebration of the ‘minority’ and ‘plural’ Englishes of Rosenberg in relation to his fellow war poets, expressed in both the introduction to *Poetry of the Committed Individual* and that of *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, allowed another means by which to challenge and expand the parameters of poetry in post-war England.²⁸

ii.

While Isaac Rosenberg may have been published and celebrated within the pages of *Stand*, elsewhere he remained an obscure and largely overlooked figure, overshadowed by his more famous fellow soldier-poets, and pigeon-holed as a war poet, a label that overlooked the fact that the majority of his work was concerned with social, literary and cultural struggle and self-definition, rather than with trench life.²⁹ His own fluidity as an artist, his pride in his working-class circumstances, and his refusal to be labelled as simply a Modernist, a Jewish writer, or a Georgian poet, often left him at odds with his both his patrons and critics. As he admitted in one letter:

[...] whether it is that my nature distrusts people, or is intolerant, or whether my pride or my backwardness cools people, I have always been alone.³⁰

As Peter Lawson observes, Rosenberg’s admittance of his life-long isolation “articulates the awkward, tongue-tying tension” of an identity caught in the hyphen between Anglo-Jewishness.³¹ Yet despite the importance of his Jewish heritage to this

struggle, after he was killed in action in France on 1 April 1918 he also remained largely absent from the pages of publications such as *Jewish Quarterly*, *The Jewish Observer*, and the *Jewish Chronicle*, with Jon Silkin being one of the few writers who continued to argue for his inclusion within the Anglo-Jewish canon. And just as Rosenberg found himself at odds with his contemporaries, it was Silkin's championing of Rosenberg that led to his increasing absence from the pages of these publications.

In one of the first articles published in the newly formed *Jewish Quarterly*, the poet Dannie Abse – a friend and contemporary of Silkin and the co-editor of the left-wing journal *Poetry and Poverty* – set out his definition of what makes a Jewish poet. What differentiated a Jewish poet from a poet who is a Jew, argued Abse, was not subject matter but tone:

To be a Jewish poet means more than to produce poetry that is pervaded by an Old Testament fury or by a certain prophetic quality; rather it is to accept a unique situational predicament, a fugitive otherness resulting from a historical tradition of exile.³²

According to Abse's definition, the First World War poet Isaac Rosenberg did not have the right approach to the historical issue of exile and otherness. He was not a Jewish Poet, despite his Jewish faith and the importance of his Jewish culture and heritage to his style and subject matter. He did not always accept or cherish his otherness, but at times resented or challenged what he felt to be an unjustly isolated position. This can be found in the poem "The Jew", which alongside celebrating Rosenberg's Jewish faith and identity, presents a picture of the poet suffering under the weight of isolation and hatred:

Moses, from whose loins I sprung,
Lit by a lamp in his blood
Ten immutable rules, a moon
For mutable lampless men.

The blonde, the bronze, the ruddy,
With the same heaving blood
Keep tide to the moon of Moses,
Then why do they sneer at me?³³

Yet Abse's appraisal overlooks poems such as 'Chagrin', which in its depiction of a people 'Caught and hanging still. | From the imagined weight | Of spaces in a sky', offers – despite the angst contained in its depiction of suspension and space - a vision of a diasporic community.³⁴ Equally, the resentful tone of 'The Jew', and the sense of

hurt felt so keenly in the final, unanswered question, is not always replicated in Rosenberg's other explorations of his hyphenated identity. In "Break of Day in The Trenches" Rosenberg aligns himself with the "queer, sardonic" figure of the "droll" rat, wryly noting its "cosmopolitan sympathies" and suggesting the advantages of being able to move between camps.³⁵ In this point Rosenberg shows his self-awareness of the different version of 'English' that he offers from figures such as Sassoon and Owen.³⁶ In his alignment with the rat he evokes both the wit and conceit of the English Metaphysicals and his keen sense of his own 'minority' status within the 'major language'.³⁷ By subverting and playing upon the traditional slur of the Jew as vermin, Rosenberg embraces his otherness, and the particular viewpoint it gives him. In an earlier poem "The Flea", Rosenberg also evokes the "droll rat", this time alongside other unwanted "vermin" such as "the flea" and "the spider", describing the ability of the rodent to "dart and flit" as a "torch to light my wit".³⁸ The poem ends with Rosenberg making direct reference to his position as one hyphenated between cultures and familiar with exclusion:

O cockney who maketh negatives,
You negative of negatives.³⁹

Despite its focus on negativity, this final image is ambiguous in tone. Evoking in its title the poem of the same name by John Donne, and exhibiting the linguistic playfulness as its namesake, Rosenberg's repetition of "negatives" ironically creates a positive, as his minor status as one writing of his difference and otherness within the language and poetic tradition that has in part othered him allows him to escape the rules that come with acceptance and membership within the mainstream and artistic elite. As a "negative of negatives", Rosenberg retains the freedom to "dart and flit" between genres, styles, and cultures, along with the nimble rat and flea.

The contrast in tone between these poems exhibits the unfixed, dynamic, and changeable nature of Rosenberg's sense and negotiation of his identity as an artist and poet. Yet returning to the *Jewish Quarterly* and their definition of the archetypal Jewish Poet, it was arguably this fluidity, dynamism, and contradictory self-exploration that led to Rosenberg's exclusion by Dannie Abse. In the 1955 piece, entitled "Portrait of a Jewish Poet", Abse championed instead another poet, Emanuel Litvinoff, who he believed to be "first" true Anglo-Jewish poet. Litvinoff was born in 1915, only three years before Rosenberg's death at the Somme. Like Rosenberg, he grew up in London's

East End, the son of Eastern European immigrants (Litvinoff's parents emigrated from Russia while Rosenberg's came to England from what is now Latvia).⁴⁰ While Silkin was a longstanding champion of Litvinoff (he published him numerous times in *Stand*, including directly alongside Rosenberg in his War Poets special issue), he did not agree with Abse's choice, or with his definition of the archetypal Jewish Poet, particularly if it meant the exclusion of the poet who best embodied his own idea of Jewish otherness and hybridity. By his own admission, Silkin adhered to the opinion that to be a Jew was to inherit what he called a "historical sense" of otherness and persecution.⁴¹ Yet the condition that Abse places on this otherness – that it must be not only accepted, but also unequivocally accentuated and embraced – did not fit with his vision of poetry as a means of cross-cultural communication and social outreach. Nor did it speak to his ambivalent sense of his own identity – a sense that found its model in the deliberately contrary figure of Rosenberg.

Writing on the influence of Rosenberg on Silkin's creativity and identity as a poet, Jon Glover has suggested "Rosenberg held a position for Silkin as someone who consciously stood apart not only from the formal organisation of culture and society but also from what counted as prosody and word order".⁴² On a more personal level, the formative years of the First World War poet also offered a model for the later poet's own sense of hyphenated identity. Writing to the Department of Architecture at Civic Design as part of a shared effort (with Geoffrey Hill) to have a plaque erected in the East End in honour of the poet, Silkin explained how "Rosenberg's work was crucially formed by that fusion of English and Jewish cultures found in a particular and productive tension in the East End of London".⁴³ He then goes on to connect this tension to his own sense of a fused and difficult cultural and geographic inheritance:

My father, who is a Jew, and was born and reared in the East End, is himself a product of this particular fusion, and I believe it is a valuable one.⁴⁴

The letter, composed in an effort to ensure the legacy of the relatively under-appreciated war poet, conveys the personal influence of Rosenberg upon Silkin's identification as an Anglo-Jewish and post-War poet.

In Silkin's poetic representation of his Jewishness, and particularly of his sense of his position as a Jew "after Auschwitz", we again find a perspective as isolated as the war poet who wrote of his own "Spiritual Isolation":

My Maker shunneth me.

Even as a wretch stricken with leprosy
 So hold I pestilent supremacy.⁴⁵

In Silkin's work, Rosenberg's "pestilent" status, often represented by the poet through the figure of the "droll" rat, is reimagined as the "lonely" and hunted fox. Yet in Silkin's representation of his own outsider status we find both a nod to his earlier forbear and more overt search for a diasporic community:

My country is a fox's country

But I a fox am bred
 From out a hollow land of horns groined red
 With hounds and men and secret faith and trysts
 Beneath my orphanage of angry hills.⁴⁶

The last lines of "No Land Like It" – "There is no land or part of this land for any of us / And no land is like this" – imply a community of fellow sufferers. Equally, the poem confirms the unfixed and diasporic nature of this community, as the poem leaves only a "hollow ... orphanage of angry hills" as the true chosen land.

This bleak and contradictory sense of identity, community and belonging continues in another of Silkin's fox poems, "This Dreaming Everywhere", which was published alongside "No Land Like It" in Silkin's first collection, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Moving away from a first-person narrative, the poem again begins with the figure of the exiled and hunted fox:

The angry fox
 Found himself dreaming in the hostile desert.
 [...]
 ... What gesture, he demands, sent him here,
 Condemning him to trot in the black
 Gaze of the sun.⁴⁷

As the piece goes on, we find a fiercely determined creature, entirely alone in the "terrible desert of his dreaming":

This was how he came,
 And this is how he has come to die.
 For another country is another desert
 Another enemy in wait.

As "No Land Like It" draws to a close, the dying fox is left to cry out a lonely "Halloo" in search of another voice. Instead, he finds only "the terrible desert of his dreaming".⁴⁸ The emptiness of the final "Halloo", like a call into darkness, suggests a

community, and assumes a reader, whilst at the same time affirming the loneliness and hopelessness of the fox's (and subsequently the poet's) position. The isolation of the creature, waiting to die in "another country", feels reminiscent of Rosenberg in "No Man's Land", left behind by his "cosmopolitan" counterpart. In Silkin's search for a community of exiles, his "halloo" travels backwards, seeking out the figure of Rosenberg as the forbear of his loneliness.

Silkin's fox poems express a sense of troubled isolation in keeping with Rosenberg's 'spiritual Isolation'. His creature, alone and exiled "in the terrible desert of his dreaming" echoes Rosenberg's reflection that in both his art and personal life he had "always been alone".⁴⁹ It is therefore unsurprising that Silkin objected to the earlier Jewish poet's exclusion from the canon put forward by Abse in *Jewish Quarterly*. In terms of his contribution to the magazine, Silkin reacted to the exclusion in two ways, both of which also reveal his admiration for the First World War poet, and his willingness to take a 'stand' for his particular beliefs.

iii.

Firstly, despite the fact that the editorial team echoed Abse's opinion, Silkin continued to contribute to the journal, as well as to other publications such as *The Jewish Observer* and *Jewish Chronicle*. His continued involvement attests to his determination to offer an alternative view on the future of Jewish writing in Britain. It also reveals his willingness to antagonise those around him in pursuit of what he believed to be a morally right and truthful representation of his faith and the post-war world, as well as the fact that Silkin's antagonism did not preclude friendship and respect.

In terms of Silkin's poetic contributions, on a number of occasions his submission of what he deemed to be a "Jewish" [the poet's words] poem was returned to him with a letter praising yet ultimately rejecting his contentious and overly politicised approach. Jon Kimche, then-editor of *The Jewish Observer*, went as far as to argue that one piece, which addressed Middle Eastern Judaism and its relationship to both Christianity and Islam, was too "tremendously powerful" to be included. Kimche explained:

Because it was so good its effect on our mixed readership might be too strong for our liking.⁵⁰

Another letter, this time from Tosco Fyvel, literary editor of *Jewish Chronicle*, hands back the poem “The Church is getting short of breath” with “a heavy heart”, explaining that “It is felt here that JC [sic] is perhaps not the place for a critical appraisal of the church”.⁵¹ Given the opening lines of the poem, which eventually appeared in *The Little Time-Keeper* – ‘Sabbaths of the pensive spread buttocks. / Conscience, the size of a dried pea, / chafes over the pews flesh sweating / / its Sabbath juice’ – it is not hard to see why Fyvel and Kimche might have felt reticent to publish a poem such as this.⁵² In these submissions Silkin deliberately copies and accentuates the uncomfortable rhetoric of Rosenberg, forcing the editors of each magazine to come out against his particular style, thus reinforcing the deliberate alienation that leaves him at a remove from the poetic communities of these journals.

As well as submitting poems, in the first few years after the publication of Abse’s article, Silkin also continued to contribute articles and letters to *Jewish Quarterly*. In one, published in autumn 1955, he responded to the question of Jewish cultural survival with an imperative very different from Abse’s.⁵³ In the wake of the creation of the state of Israel, he suggested that if a diasporic Anglo-Jewish culture was to survive, then it must begin to look outside its own “community of experience”.⁵⁴ Instead of focussing upon the “fugitive otherness” of historical and modern Judaism, Silkin asked that the “Jewish experience” be put into dialogue with other “communities of suffering”.⁵⁵ More conciliatory (and better written) than his poetic submissions, the 1955 article nevertheless continues to assert an alternative model of community and representation from the one put forward by the editorial board. Rather than emphasising the particularity of the diasporic Anglo-Jewish experience, as Abse had done, he advocated a pluralistic, connective approach, asking that it be portrayed as just one example of a number of minority groups who have suffered.

In a 1958 article, entitled ‘Some Reflections on Anglo-Jewish Poetry’, intended as the introduction to a poetry anthology issue of *Jewish Quarterly*, Silkin also implored his readership and community of Jewish poets to look to the future. In it, he writes of roots and rootlessness, a recurring trope within Rosenberg’s work, declaring it to be the “distinguishing mark” of Anglo-Jewish “distinctiveness”. However, as he went on to explain:

My poetry reflects the rootlessness of my Jewish community, but it reflects as well, I think, the rootlessness many of us felt then, and do still feel, a

rootlessness generated by the War, an isolation increased by the chaos in which we grew up.⁵⁶

Just as Rosenberg rooted the poppy “in man’s veins”, removing this emblem of the First World War from any fixed location and replanting it in a fluid, transitory, and universal soil,⁵⁷ what Silkin calls for here is a recognition that rootlessness is a condition local to all those who experienced the War, in whatever capacity. While Rosenberg may have been unappreciated during his own lifetime, and excluded from the pages of *Jewish Quarterly*, in this rewriting of roots Silkin allows him to transcend the specificity of the trenches and become a spokesperson for the post-1945 experience. The fluidity that left him on the periphery of Modernism, War writing, and the Jewish literary scene, becomes, through Silkin, the means through which to learn, in “however limited a way, something of what sensuous powers and moral entrapments feel like in Iowa, Teesside, or Prague”.⁵⁸ In this redefinition of the Jewish, British, and universal post-War experience, we can see how Silkin uses Rosenberg as way into his own, later “preparations” for the “continuously vigorous and changing culture” that he advocates in the pages of *Stand* and *Poetry of the Committed Individual*.⁵⁹

However, while this focus on pluralising and uniting “communities of suffering” shows Silkin’s commitment to what he saw to be a more open, inclusive, and worldly vision of art and culture, in the second way that he chose to respond to Rosenberg’s exclusion from *Jewish Quarterly* we find a more problematic approach to the question of community and taking a “stand”. It is fitting that Silkin defined his work as that of a “committed individual”,⁶⁰ because whereas his public articles exhibit the qualities of the former half of this label, his private response reveals the antagonism that also drove his actions and defined his peripheral position within the various poetic communities that he sought to address.

In 1966 Sonntag and *Jewish Quarterly* were involved in the organisation of a symposium on Jewish writing to be held in Israel. Already enlisted to go along and give papers on the subject of “Anglo-Jewish writing” were Dannie Abse and Emanuel Litvinoff; however Silkin’s archived correspondence from the time reveal how he put it to Sonntag in forceful terms that he should also be part of the delegation.⁶¹ After some persuasion, Sonntag agreed, and commissioned Silkin to write a paper on the subject of contemporary Anglo-Jewish poetry. At this point however, Silkin began to reveal another motive for wanting to attend beyond that of celebrating the magazine and the culture that surrounded it. Confirming, by letter, that he would send a draft of

his speech to Sonntag as a matter of urgency, he concludes on a strange, apparently unconnected note. In his final paragraph he turns to the subject of Isaac Rosenberg, and again berates *Jewish Quarterly* and its contributors for excluding him from a feature on important Anglo-Jewish writers:

I am sorry you or Dannie or Jeremy – or all of you, omitted Isaac Rosenberg. He’s the best of the lot.⁶²

Given that the first example of Rosenberg’s exclusion took place over ten years before, this final point is unexpected. So are Silkin’s subsequent actions, all of which can be gleaned from Sonntag’s reactions. The next letter from Sonntag, dated less than a month after Silkin berates the editor on behalf of Rosenberg, responds to the draft speech that the poet had presumably recently sent through. Sonntag’s letter expresses surprise and disappointment at Silkin’s chosen subject matter:

I read your paper, and I am surprised that you should consider this suitable for the occasion.⁶³

As Sonntag reveals the subject matter of Silkin’s speech, the willingness of the poet to antagonise is left in no doubt. Rather than writing about contemporary Anglo-Jewish poetry – the topic allocated to him as a condition of his inclusion in the party – Silkin submitted an impassioned defence of Rosenberg and his continuing relevance to Anglo-Jewish writing and culture. Sonntag goes on to reject the piece, informing Silkin that he must either re-write his speech to fit with the aims and agenda of *Jewish Quarterly*, or else he would not talk.⁶⁴

The most revealing part of this exchange, aside from Silkin’s willingness to deliberately antagonise Sonntag to make a point, is the different priorities of the two men. For what seems clear from Silkin’s careful interpretation of Rosenberg’s work in his own critical and poetic writing is the vital and continuing role that the war poet played in shaping his approach. What is poignant about the rejected submission to Sonntag, despite its apparent ill-fit for the intended conference, is the fact that for Silkin an article about Rosenberg did fulfil the brief. Writing on the future of Anglo-Jewish Poetry meant writing on its past, and the role that these “relations” played in shaping the words and “criteria” of the living.⁶⁵ For Silkin, Rosenberg remained contemporary, and for that reason a defence of his poetry was a pressing and relevant choice of subject matter.

Perhaps in part due to this exchange, Silkin ceased to contribute to *Jewish Quarterly* after the mid-1960s, though he subscribed to both publications up to his death.⁶⁶ In turn, *Jewish Quarterly* distanced itself from Silkin. Silkin succeeded – through his stunt with Sonntag – in fully attaining the alienation that he celebrated in Rosenberg. This uneasy relationship with Sonntag and the editorial board of *Jewish Quarterly* continued for the rest of Silkin’s life. In a 1973 interview with the *Vanderbilt Poetry Review* he explained that whilst his “being a Jew” informed both his “historical sense” and his creative impulse, he nevertheless understood that he stood apart from the Anglo-Jewish artistic community:

I’ve caught myself continually trying to belong to a community. I despise it in myself to some extent. It’s as though I were trying to please the good parent community, and I think, “Why the hell should I?” and “Why do I have to please people?”⁶⁷

It was not until 1993 that Silkin resumed his relationship with *Jewish Quarterly*, submitting a number of poems to the then-editor Michael Lazarus, including “The Jews in England”, “The Jews of England”, and “Motherland”, with the accompanying reflection that “I seem to be writing poems which are more and more to do with the Jews. I do not know why”.⁶⁸ But perhaps the best way to understand Silkin’s enduring but fraught relationship to *Jewish Quarterly*, and through it his own Jewishness, is through Jacob Sonntag’s original description (or disclaimer) of Silkin in the pages of *Jewish Quarterly* back in 1958:

The views expressed by the writer ... may not be shared by other Anglo-Jewish poets and novelists ... Nevertheless, as an expression of an *individual view* by one who is deeply and wholly engaged in writing *English poetry*, it deserves the closest attention by *everyone* concerned with *Anglo-Jewish writing*, its present and its future. [Italics added]⁶⁹

The italics highlight the distinction that Sonntag makes between Silkin – an “individual” writing “English poetry” – and many of the readers he sought to address. The description confirms Silkin’s own assertion of his individuality – a state that finds and thrives off conflict, but that as a result, leaves him apart from the “communities” that he fought to create, expand, and challenge. Just as Rosenberg flitted between camps, often finding more in common with the “cosmopolitan” rat than his fellow soldiers, patrons, or poetic contemporaries, so did Silkin in part choose to inhabit the peripheral “fox’s country” that he describes in his poetry.⁷⁰ He was, as Sonntag noted,

always “wholly engaged”, throwing himself into writing, editing, translating,⁷¹ or championing the work of poets such as Rosenberg. Yet the irony of this engagement, just like the ironic tension contained within the title of “committed individual” was that his insistence on taking a “stand” often left him standing apart,⁷² both during his lifetime and after his death.

Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the permission granted by the executors of Jon Silkin’s literary estate for me to quote from Silkin’s correspondence and papers. I would like to thank Jon Glover and John Whale for their helpful comments in the early development of this piece, as well as the journal’s anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

Notes

¹ Rodney Pybus, “Jon Silkin: Obituary”, *The Independent*, 1 December 1997.

² Jon Silkin, *Complete Poems* [eds.] Jon Glover and Kathryn Jenner, (Manchester: Carcanet, 2015); Jeremy Munday, “Jon Silkin as Anthologist, Editor, and Translator”, *Translation and Literature*, (25), 2016, 84–106; Emma Trott Contiguous Creatures: Literary Ecology, “Organic Poetry” and Jon Silkin’s Flower Poems, *Anglistik*, 27, (2), 2016, 125-145.

³ Silkin’s *Complete Poems* comes to just over 1,000 pages.

⁴ “A Short History of Stand Magazine” < <http://www.standmagazine.org/about-us> > (accessed 7 January 2018).

⁵ Adam Piette, “Pointing to East and West: British Cold War Poetry”, in Kendall, Tim, [ed.] *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 634, 637, 638. This “alternative” position was articulated by Silkin in his published conversation with the critic and poet Anthony Thwaite, in which he defined himself - and his magazine - in opposition the “little Englander” ideals of poets such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and others loosely categorised together within the Movement, advocating instead a poetry of “communication”, “change” and “consciousness raising”. Jon Silkin, Anthony Thwaite, “No Politics, No Poetry”, *Stand*, (Vol. 6, no. 2, 1963) 16.

⁶ Piette, “Pointing to East and West”, 634; Jon Silkin, “Introduction” (1971), *Poetry of the Committed Individual: A Stand Anthology of Poetry*, (London: Gollancz, 1973), 20-21.

⁷ Silkin, *Poetry of the Committed Individual*, 21.

⁸ *Stand: The War Poets*, ed. Jon Silkin, Gene Barrow, John Rex, Geoffrey Matthews, T[ony]. W. Harrison, Richard N. Coe, vol. 4, no. 3, (1960).

⁹ Joseph Cohen, “The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman”, *Stand: The War Poets*, 21-25.

¹⁰ Cohen, “The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman”, 21.

¹¹ Cohen, “The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman”, 21.

¹² Edmund Blunden, *War Poets 1914-1918* (London: Longman, 1958).

¹³ Cohen, “The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman”, 23-24.

¹⁴ Cohen, “The War Poet as Archetypal Spokesman”, 24, 25.

¹⁵ Isaac Rosenberg, *Poems by Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Gordon Bottomley (London: Heinemann, 1922).

¹⁶ Isaac Rosenberg, *Collected Works*, eds. Gordon Bottomley, Denys Harding (London: Chatto and Windus, 1937).

¹⁷ Isaac Rosenberg, *The Collected Works of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Ian Parsons (London: Chatto and Windus, 1979) [It is from this edition that all poems and letters are referenced].

- ¹⁸ Isaac Rosenberg, *The Selected Poems of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Jean Moorcroft Wilson (London: Cecil Woolf, 2003); *Isaac Rosenberg, Selected Poems and Letters*, ed. Jean Liddiard (London: Enitharmon Press, 2003); Isaac Rosenberg, *The Poems and Plays of Isaac Rosenberg*, ed. Vivian Noakes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For an overview of Rosenberg's history in and out of print, see Tara Christie, "For Isaac Rosenberg": Geoffrey Hill, Michael Longley, Cathal Ó Searcaigh", in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, 542-543.
- ¹⁹ Silkin, "Isaac Rosenberg: The war, class, and the Jews", *Stand: The War Poets*, 36.
- ²⁰ *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. by Jon Silkin (London: Penguin, 1979); *The Penguin Book of First World War Prose*, ed. by Jon Silkin and Jon Glover (London: Penguin, 1989); *Wilfred Owen: The War Poems*, ed. by Jon Silkin (London: Sinclair Stevenson, 1994).
- ²¹ *Out of Battle* originated from a proposed PhD project to be undertaken by Silkin whilst at Leeds. Silkin, "The Poetry of Isaac Rosenberg," in *Isaac Rosenberg*, Exhibition Catalogue (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1959); Silkin, "The Forgotten Poet of Anglo-Jewry," *Jewish Chronicle*, 26 August 1960; "Rosenberg's Rat-God," *European Judaism*, vol. 4 no. 2 (Summer 1970); *Out of Battle: The Poetry of the Great War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); "For Rosenberg," *New York Review of Books* (19 February 1976); "Keith Douglas", *Agenda*, vol. 19, nos. 2-3 (1981); "Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg," in *English Literature of the Great War Revisited*, ed. by Michael Roncoux (Presses de L'UFR Université Picardie, 1986) [proceedings of symposium]; "Critics and the Literature of the First World War," *British Book News* (November 1987).
- ²² Silkin, *Complete Poems*: "Deficient", 196.
- ²³ Silkin, *Complete Poems*: "The Marches", 468.
- ²⁴ Silkin, *Complete Poems*: "Going On", 511.
- ²⁵ Silkin, *Complete Poems*: "Joy, lined with metal" 538.
- ²⁶ Silkin, *Complete Poems*: "Autobiographical Stanzas: The armed", 572.
- ²⁷ Silkin, *Complete Poems*: "The Life of a Poet", 746.
- ²⁸ Peter Lawson, 'Towards A Diasporic Poetics: The Case of British Jewish Poetry', *European Judaism*, Volume 47, Number 2, Autumn 2014, 31.
Silkin, *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, 36.
- ²⁹ Peter Lawson, *Anglo-Jewish Poetry from Isaac Rosenberg to Elaine Feinstein*, (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2006), 19; Featherstone, Simon, "Isaac Rosenberg, Israel Zangwill and Jewish Culture", in *War Poetry: An Introductory Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 77, 72-89.
- ³⁰ "Rosenberg to Miss Seaton", Spring 1914, in Isaac Rosenberg, *Collected Works*, eds. Gordon Bottomley, Denys Harding. London: Chatto and Windus, 1937, 201.
- ³¹ Lawson, *Anglo-Jewish Poetry*, 31.
- ³² Dannie Abse, "Portrait of a Jewish Poet", *Jewish Quarterly*, vol.1, no.4 (spring 1955), 16.
- ³³ Rosenberg, *Collected Works*: "The Jew", 101.
- ³⁴ Rosenberg, *Collected Works*, "Chagrin", 95; Lawson, Towards A Diasporic Poetics: The Case of British Jewish Poetry', *European Judaism*, Volume 47, Number 2, Autumn 2014, 33.
- ³⁵ Rosenberg, *Collected Works*: "Break of Day in the Trenches", 103-104.
- ³⁶ Silkin, *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. by Jon Silkin and Jon Glover. London: Penguin, 1989, 36.
- ³⁷ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, 'What Is a Minor Literature?', *Mississippi Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Essays Literary Criticism (Winter/Spring, 1983), 16.
- ³⁸ Rosenberg, *Collected Works*: "The Flea", 76.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ As a fellow Londoner, and the son of an East Ender of Lithuanian extraction, Silkin felt an affinity to both Litvinoff and Rosenberg, despite the difference in their birth dates and circumstances.
- ⁴¹ Peter Marchant, Jon Silkin, Michael Waters, "Attend to the Unnecessary Beasts: a Conversation with Jon Silkin", *Vanderbilt Poetry Review*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 1973), 28.
- ⁴² Jon Glover, "The 1959 Isaac Rosenberg Exhibition in Leeds: Annie Wynn, Jon Silkin and Isaac Rosenberg's Work among the living", paper given at *Whitechapel and War: Isaac Rosenberg and his circle*, University of Leeds, 6 July 2008.
- ⁴³ "Jon Silkin to Mr Kelsall, 11 November, 1983". University of Leeds, Special Collections: Brotherton Collection, Jon Silkin Archive, BC MS 20c. Brotherton Library, Leeds.
- ⁴⁴ "Silkin to Mr Kelsall", 11 November, 1983.
- ⁴⁵ Rosenberg to Jacob Leftwich", late 1917, *Collected Works*, 266-267; Rosenberg, *Collected Works*: "Spiritual Isolation", 46,
- ⁴⁶ Silkin, "No Land Like It", *Complete Poems*, ed. Jon Glover and Kathryn Jenner. Manchester: Carcanet, Northern House, 2015, 28.

-
- ⁴⁷ Silkin, *Complete Poems*: “This Dreaming Everywhere”, 37.
- ⁴⁸ Silkin, *Complete Poems*: “This Dreaming Everywhere”, 36.
- ⁴⁹ “Rosenberg to Miss Seaton”, *Collected Works*, 201.
- ⁵⁰ “Jon Kimche to Jon Silkin”, 4 August 1961, Silkin Correspondence, (BC MS 20c Silkin /8 /JEW-3).
- ⁵¹ “Jon Kimche to Jon Silkin”; “Tosco Fyvel to Jon Silkin”, 30 April 1976, Silkin Correspondence, (BC MS 20c Silkin /8 /JEW-3).
- ⁵² Silkin, *Complete Poems*: “The Church is Getting Short of Breath”, 480.
- ⁵³ Silkin, “Letter: Cultural Survival”, *Jewish Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 2 (autumn 1955), 36.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁶ Silkin, “Some Reflections of Anglo-Jewish Poetry”, *Jewish Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3. (winter 1958) 9.
- ⁵⁷ Rosenberg, *Collected Works*: “Break of Day in the Trenches”, 103.
- ⁵⁸ Silkin, *Poetry of the Committed Individual*, 20-21.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ “Jon Silkin to Jacob Sonntag”, early July 1966.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*; “Jacob Sonntag to Jon Silkin”, 31 July 1966.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ Silkin, “Poetry of the Committed Individual”, 18.
- ⁶⁶ Silkin’s archived library, access courtesy of the Silkin estate and Brotherton Special Collections.
- ⁶⁷ Silkin, in “Attend to the Unnecessary Beasts”, 28.
- ⁶⁸ “Jon Silkin to Michael Lazarus”.
- ⁶⁹ Jacob Sonntag, “Editorial Introductory Note to Jon Silkin’s ‘Some Reflections on Anglo-Jewish Poetry’”, *Jewish Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3 (19) (winter 1958), 9.
- ⁷⁰ Rosenberg, *Collected Writing*: ‘Break of Day in the Trenches’, 103; Silkin, *Complete Poems*: “No Land Like it”, 28.
- ⁷¹ Silkin’s work as a translator of Hebrew poetry was not without incident, in part due to the fact that although he had lessons as a young child and then took a beginner’s course when he moved to Newcastle, Silkin was unable to speak or write Hebrew, and so translated in collaboration with other poets and translators. This led to a number of heated exchanges and artistic disagreements not dissimilar in tone to the correspondence between Silkin and Sonntag. See Jeremy Munday, “Jon Silkin as Anthologist, Editor, and Translator”, 91.
- ⁷² Silkin, *Poetry of the Committed Individual*, 21.