



## Walt Whitman in Yiddish

Leonard Prager

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 1984 Leonard Prager

---

### Recommended Citation

Prager, Leonard. "Walt Whitman in Yiddish." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 1 (1983), 22-35.

<https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1031>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

# WALT WHITMAN IN YIDDISH

LEONARD PRAGER

---

"WALT WHITMAN'S voracious curiosity about the inhabitants of the city of New York," we read in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, "led him to consider the Jews. Long before the appearance of *Leaves of Grass*, he had published two sizable articles in a newspaper he was editing at the time, recording his impressions of the customs of the Sabbath service that he had witnessed at the Crosby Street Synagogue."<sup>1</sup> Judging, however, by his published works, especially *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's curiosity about Jews was easily satisfied.<sup>2</sup>

In "With Antecedents," he could write, "I respect Assyria, China, Teutonia, and the Hebrews," and with equal impartiality he called on the ancient muses to migrate: "Placard 'Removed' and 'To Let' on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus, / Repeat at Jerusalem, place the notice high on Jaffa's gate and on Mount Moriah" ("Song of the Exposition"). Whitman's synagog visit ("I hear the Hebrew reading his records and psalms") may be one of the few actual as distinct from imagined experiences behind the inspired catalog of universal cadences in "Salut Au Monde!" In this poem, section 11 is addressed to "You whoever you are!"—to everyone, that is—and thus also to "You Jew journeying in your old age through every risk to stand once on Syrian ground! / You other Jews waiting in all lands for your Messiah!" None of these Hebrews or Jews are Whitman's neighbors in New York or Camden; rather they are biblical, mythical, symbolic or at least idealized figures. This is nowhere clearer than in an untitled poem from a MS notebook where the poet announces "a third religion" which is to include and harmonize the "two religious platforms" represented by "the Greek sage" and "the Jew the Christ, the Consolator." Whitman's "divine Jew" in this MS poem symbolizes Judaism *cum* Christianity.<sup>3</sup> Though Whitman noticed actual Jews (whom he called "Hebrews" and "Daughters of Israel"), he left no record of these encounters in his poems.<sup>4</sup> This apparently has not bothered anyone. Indeed, most Jews have a sense of having been too exposed throughout history and find it neither odd nor threatening that Whitman failed to mention them in a contemporary context. But there are sides to Whitman's non-notice that I would like to air.

"Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" ("Song of Myself") is the first great American poet to celebrate the city. Alfred Kazin has summed up the relationship between New York and Whitman in a single sentence: "Whitman found himself as man and poet by identifying with New York." Kazin goes on to say that "Whitman found the model and form of *Leaves of Grass* . . . in the flux and mass of the city—he even compared his book to a

city.”<sup>5</sup> To “flux and mass” one must add “variety.” Whitman is drawn to the multi-colored fabric of New York, the great gathering place of immigrants (“Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week” [“Manna-hatta”]).

He loved foreign words, Indian names, animal sounds, human voices. But he never became aware of the specific sound a Jew makes when speaking a Jewish language. In the Crosby Street synagog he had heard liturgical Hebrew. But he left no record of the impression these alien sounds made, merely of the act of articulating them. In the streets he must have heard Western Ashkenazim speaking Western Yiddish or Ashkenazic German, which he presumably took simply for German. Whitman is a word-hoarder and knows about dictionaries: “This is the lexicographer . . .” (“Song of Myself”). Though his rhythms and his use of various forms of parallelism and repetition echo the Hebrew Bible, he uses few Hebraisms. With respect to the actual speech of Jews, not a single Yiddishism is found in his known lexicon. (How many American writers, not to say New York writers, a century later would find their language free of Jewish influence?)

Now, influence is something which students of literature measure in two directions. Thus we find in the standard Whitman bibliographies numerous items regarding Whitman in France, Russia, Germany, etc., and no fewer items relating to translations of Whitman into the languages of these and other countries. In the wake of Shimon Halkin’s Modern Hebrew translation of *Leaves of Grass* in 1952,<sup>6</sup> several notices enter the bibliographic guides to Whitman scholarship, so that Israel is added to the countries and Hebrew to the languages which lay claim to a Whitman connection. These notices, though, barely suggest the impact of Whitman on Hebrew poets and the interest in his life and works among Israeli students and general readers of poetry. While they do partially help to fill one gap, however, they leave another standing, a quite remarkable one: Not a single Whitman bibliography records any translations into Yiddish, and no one has discussed the subject of Whitman’s influence on Yiddish writers.<sup>7</sup> In the very city where Whitman lived and worked and where a monumental edition of his works appeared, there has gone unnoticed a small corner of the Whitman universe. Neither Whitman nor subsequent Whitman scholarship may have noticed the Jews, but Jews writing in a quintessential Jewish language, Yiddish, especially in New York City, have been much involved with Whitman. In this essay I hope to illuminate this involvement.

I propose to sketch Whitman-consciousness among Yiddish writers by recording all the tangible expressions of such awareness that I have been able to uncover. However, the complete picture requires analytic indices to periodicals of the sort which are still in the process of being constructed for Yiddish scholarship as well as to critical studies.<sup>8</sup> Whitman-consciousness shows itself in Yiddish writing through translations, essays about the poet,

poems about him or addressed to him, and stylistic and thematic influence on individual writers.

Yiddish writers seem to have encountered Whitman through a number of channels. Until recently, most East-European Yiddish writers were also Hebrew writers and they knew German, Polish and Russian as well. When Reb Binyamin (pseudonym of Yehoshua Radler-Feldman), cofounder with Yosef-Chayim Brener of *Hameorer*, translated Whitman into Hebrew in London in the early years of this century, Yiddish as well as Hebrew writers were alive to the novelty. The Rolleston-Knortz translation of *Leaves of Grass, Grashalme*, was available to German readers from 1889. Harriet Stanton Blatch interviewed the Russian nihilist Stepniak in London in that year and learned from him that Whitman was a favorite of his and "an author who is not sufficiently appreciated in his own land."<sup>9</sup> Stepniak had frequent contact with the Russian-Jewish anarchists and socialists in the East End, many of whom read German. Another source of Whitman awareness in Yiddish literature is Russian translations, which date from the 1870s. A close study of Soviet Yiddish verse would probably reveal no fewer Whitman echoes than one finds in the Russian Symbolists. We know that Kornei Chukovsky's translations of Whitman, dating from 1907, have had wide currency in Russia.

It is difficult to say when Yiddish poets began to read Whitman in the original. This process may have started in London and New York in the 1880s, the first decade of the mass migration of East-European Jews. It is certain that at least two of the "social" or "proletarian" poets, as the founders of Yiddish poetry in the United States are known, read Whitman's work: Yoysef Bovshover [Joseph Bovshover] and Moris Roznfeld [Morris Rosenfeld].<sup>10</sup>

Roznfeld (1862–1923), the most popular Yiddish poet America has known, was the less "American" of the two. His literary as well as tailoring apprenticeship took place in London, where he became aware of British literature. He was also influenced by Russian authors and had a rich Jewish background. He owed much to the "grandfather" of American Yiddish literature, Moris Vintshevski [Morris Winchevsky (1856–1932)], who also lived in London prior to settling in New York. Roznfeld, like Bovshover and his contemporaries, was much beholden to Heine and other Germans as well. Roznfeld's name is associated with Whitman largely because of the fourteen-line ode entitled "Walt Whitman," composed shortly after Whitman's death and first translated into English by Samuel J. Imber.<sup>11</sup>

Imber gives what would today be regarded as a highly unscientific transcription of the Yiddish original of "Walt Whitman," together with "a verbal translation instead of a poetical [one]." This is his "verbal translation":

O, you in whose sturdy singer's breast two / abysses have united: the depth of the musing / sky and the depth of the earth, rocked in / stillness; in whose heart the sun shone and / the

moon; where the stars beamed clearly, / entire worlds without number, in whose / heart May was verdant and where the thunder's peal mingled with the twittering of the nightingale; in whose marvelously powerful / song one feels the omnipotence and the splendor of nature— / immortal prophet! I give you praise. / I fall in the dust before your dust and sing.

This poem continues a bardolatrous tradition which saw in Whitman a reincarnation of a biblical prophet. Coming from a Yiddish poet reared on the Bible, the ode's concluding couplet is lavish indeed: "Profet, umshterblekhn, ikh gib dir loyb / Ikh fal in shtoyb istst far dayn shtoyb un zing!" ("Prophet, immortal, I praise you / I fall now into the dust before your dust and sing!"). The speaker is not only sinking to the ground in complete abasement before the memory of the great poet-prophet, but his thorough self-surrender is simultaneously self-recovery, for it fills him with song.<sup>12</sup> Despite this accolade, which has left its mark on Yiddish literature, the Whitman strand, as far as I have been able to learn from a cursory review, is not otherwise manifest in Roznfeld's writings.

Yoysef Bovshover (1872–1915), on the other hand, having arrived in America at the relatively young age of nineteen, was open to American writing and both saluted Whitman and attempted to imitate him. He was so open to America that he even nursed illusions of a poetic career in English and, under the pseudonym Basil Dahl, made some pathetic steps in this direction.<sup>13</sup> A tragic figure who ended his life in a mental institution, Bovshover had an exalted view of poetry and poets. His appreciations of Emerson, Markham and Whitman are largely eulogistic. He concludes his piece on Emerson: "He is, I believe, the greatest American thinker thus far; perhaps Walt Whitman is somewhat greater than he."<sup>14</sup>

Bovshover's essay on Whitman, first published in 1899, seems to be the first prose notice of Whitman in Yiddish. It contains a biographical sketch, an evaluation and selected verse passages in Yiddish translation. A reverential tone is sounded at the outset: "In [Whitman] everything lived, everything moved, perhaps with the same force, certainly with the same depth, as in Shakespeare." Whitman is the poet who expresses the thoughts and feelings of all men. To understand *Leaves of Grass*, one needs to *study* the work, for underlying it are long years of thought and scientific truths. Whitman's poetical beauty, too, is only revealed by rereading. Bovshover notes that Whitman writes "in the style and often in the tone of the Bible. He sings, as the ancient prophets sang. . . ." Bovshover observes also that Whitman "rejected the old, conventional forms of poetry, the verses and rhymes, and chose a personal style." If there is anything to criticize in this style, it is its breadth, in which one can sometimes almost drown. Bovshover concludes by apotheosizing Whitman: "On the heights of Eternity stands the Temple of Truth and Light which he built, and to which the peoples will make pilgrimage as to a sacred shrine."<sup>15</sup>

The translated passages which follow this panegyric are neither accurate

nor felicitous, but they introduced themes which had not been sounded in Yiddish poetry before, themes such as "I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contained" or "And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God." Whitman's "Dweller in Mannahatta my city" ("Starting from Paumanok") becomes in Bovshover "A kind fun shtot nyu york, velkhe iz mayn shtot" ("A child of New York City, which is my city"). Identification with New York City was to become a motif of the Whitman voice in American Yiddish poetry. Bovshover, an anarchist revolutionary, mistranslates Whitman's "Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World" ("Starting from Paumanok") as "Aynzam, zingendik in der vest / Kum ikh kemfn far a nayer velt" ("Lonely, singing in the West, I come struggling for a new world"). For Bovshover, "strike up" may have suggested the workers' struggle.<sup>16</sup>

Bovshover completes his short essay with the legend of a persecuted Whitman and a diatribe against his supposed tormentors. His last line mentions that Whitman has been translated into several languages and Bovshover may have read Whitman in German as well as in English. He does not raise the subject of Whitman in Yiddish. Indeed, it was not until 1934 that a selection of Whitman's poems appeared in Yiddish translation in a separate publication. Prior to this date, individual poems appeared from time to time in periodicals or miscellanies.<sup>17</sup>

A. Eysen [A. Asen (1886–1965)], a dentist by vocation, devoted much of his life to translating British and American authors into Yiddish. Like Bovshover (who translated *The Merchant of Venice*), Eysen was also attracted to Shakespeare, whose *King Lear* and *Sonnets* he rendered into Yiddish. He also translated Byron, Tennyson and Longfellow. His *Volt vitman / finf un tsvontsik lider* is a sixty-four-page brochure with translations of, as the title indicates, twenty-five poems (from *Leaves of Grass*). The brochure has an introduction by Avrom Reyzn [Abraham Reisen], a popular Yiddish poet and storyteller. Following the introduction comes, not surprisingly, Moris Roznfeld's "Walt Whitman," an indication that it had not been forgotten in over four decades. Eysen's sketch of Whitman's life, while naive and bardolatrous, is restrained compared to Bovshover's.

Eysen published translations of individual poems before he ventured to gather them into a brochure in 1934. Five years earlier, he had published translations of "One's Self I Sing" and "A Woman Waits for Me" in *Yidish amerike* (ed. Noyekh Shteynberg [Noah Steinberg]). One can compare these translations with the later versions in *25 Poems* and see how Eysen revised and polished. Eysen's work improves; when compared to the sample efforts of Bovshover, with their anglicisms in addition to their germanisms, Eysen's work is a stride forward. However, his Yiddish is not the best of his day, as can be easily seen in comparing it to a more or less contemporary translation, that of L. Miler [Louis Miller, pseudonym of Eliezer Meler (1889–1967)].

In 1940, Miler, a leftish poet and novelist, published what is to this day the fullest and most satisfactory translation of Whitman's verse and prose into Yiddish. Miler also worked on a critical-biographical study of Whitman's life and writings, which to the best of my knowledge was never published.

Though Eysen's renditions are generally responsible and reasonably accurate, they fail to work as poems in their own right. They are too literal, too stiff and unmusical, in addition to being too *daytshmerish* ("germanized"). Miler's translations, on the other hand, are good literary Yiddish, moving easily across the ranges of formality and informality and utilizing the fusion character of Yiddish for lexical richness. Miler will often use words of Hebrew-Aramaic origin where Eysen stubbornly seeks New High German correlates. To take the sentence, "Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk" (from "A Woman Waits for Me"), Eysen writes: "Gesangen, bafelungen, gezuntkeyt, shtolts, di misterye fun muter-shaft, dos zoymen-milkh"; and Miler translates: "Lider, bafeln, gezunt, shtolts, dos mistish-muterlekhe, di zrie."<sup>18</sup> It is obvious that Eysen is cowed by the original and is trying to be "literary" in the by then (1930s) old-fashioned way of aping Modern German, whereas Miler, at home with a pliable Yiddish, renders the English freely and aptly. Analysis of translations could occupy us for many pages; suffice it to say that Miler's translation, while by no means without shortcomings (e.g., occasional *daytshmerish*), merits study. For purposes of illustration and comparison I give below Whitman's "One's Self I Sing," followed by Eysen's and Miler's translations respectively.

#### One's-Self I Sing

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,  
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse,  
I say the Form complete is worthier far,  
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,  
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,  
The Modern Man I sing.

#### Zikh zelbst zing ikh

Zikh aleyn zing ikh—a poshetn, opgezundeter mentsh:  
Dokh zog ikh aroys dos vort demokratish,

Ikh bazing di fizyologye fun kop biz di fis;  
Nit fizyomye aleyn, oykh nit der gayst aleyn,  
iz verdik far mayn lid—



Ikh zog, fil virdiker iz dos gantse geshtalt un ir fulkomenhayt;  
Ikh zing fun vayblekh, punkt vi fun menlekh geshlekht,

Ikh zing fun lebn, umbagrenetst, groys in laydnshaft,  
in puls un kraft,  
Freylekh, mit frayster tetikayt geboyt,  
loyt dem getlekh gebot,  
Dem nayem mentshn zing ikh.<sup>19</sup>

Ikh zing dem ikh

Dem ikh zing ikh. A poshetn eyntslnem mentshn;  
Dokh zog ikh dos vort demokratisch, dos vort masn.

Fizyologye fun kop biz di shpits-finger zing ikh;  
Nit fizyomye aley, nit markh aley iz muze-virdik –  
Ikh zog: dos gantse vezn iz mer vert;  
Di froy baglaykh mitn man zing ikh.

Dos lebn, rizik-groys in laydnshaft, puls un kraft;  
Freydik, greyt far frayster handlung,  
Unter himlshn gezets –  
Dem modernem mentshn zing ikh.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to sixty-five poems (complete or in part), Miler translated selections from Whitman's preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, from *Democratic Vistas*, and gives a seventeen-page biographical-critical notice, the last, I suspect, to have been written in Yiddish. He is also one of the many Yiddish poets who have written poems which are both addressed to and formally echo Whitman. In "Ikh her dayn kol, volt vitman," a loose and rhetorical agitational poem of the sort common in the 1930s, Miler catalogues: "All in here: / The writer and the painter / The kneader of our bread / And the sweper of our streets / Man and woman, / Brown-skinned and white-skinned, / Jew and Christian / The Greek is here and the Chinese is here, / None greater than anybody else, / None smaller than anybody else" [my translation].<sup>21</sup>

While only two modest collections of Whitman translations have appeared in Yiddish, many Yiddish writers have been variously involved with Walt Whitman, the poet or the legend. There is no telling how many translations linger in manuscript in the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (New York) or other archives. Avrom Valt [A. Lyesin] translated "O Captain! My Captain!" in 1913, though the poem was published for the first time in Valt's collected works in 1938.<sup>22</sup> Valt's translation of this popular declamation piece is skillful. We should also note the reference to Whitman in such works as Vilyem Natanson's [William Nathanson's] *Inteligent, kunst un kinstler / Literatur in likht fun filosofye* (1931), where the author translates sections of "Song of Myself" to illustrate how art communicates both thought



and feeling. The sample passages provide ample proof of the author's literary skill. Natanson (1883–1963) commands a rich Yiddish and is altogether successful, for example, in conveying in Yiddish the lines "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier." His Yiddish reads: "Alts geyt foroys un aroyftsu, keyn zakh vert nisht khorev / Un tsu shtarbn iz andersh fun dem, vos ver es iz hot zikh meshaer geven, un mazldiker."<sup>23</sup>

Avrom Reyzn, in his introduction to Eysen's brochure, seems to be the first Yiddish critic to ask if Yiddish writers had been influenced by Whitman. He names three poets: A. Lutsky [A. Lutsky, pseudonym of Arn Tsuker (1894–1957)], especially in his *Breyshes – in mitn* (New York, 1932), H. Leyvik [H. Leivick, pseudonym of Leyvik Halper (1888–1962)] "in his more optimistic poems,"<sup>24</sup> and Meylekh Ravitsh [Melech Rawitch, adopted name of Zkharye-Khone Bergner (1893–1976)].<sup>25</sup> These three have been affected by Whitman "whether or not they have read him, since the echoes of his poems are in the air." However, and here we are back to bardolatry, "To be influenced by such a poet as Walt Whitman is the same as being influenced by Nature, Life and all that is beautiful, strong and everlasting." Employing the Hebrew-origin *novi* (rather than the European-origin *profet* used by Roznfeld), Reyzn calls Whitman the "Prophet of New America."

Yiddish poets, and not only the three named by Reyzn, often resemble Whitman in one respect or another. But only a discriminating and thorough study can substantiate this intuition. Binyomen-Yankev Byalostotski has not speculated merely, but has pinpointed two poems in which Bovshover borrowed Whitman's long line. In "Revolution," Bovshover writes: "I come like a proud comet, like the sun at sunrise; / I come like an angry tempest borne by lightning and thunder, / I come like flowing lava of volcano-covered volcanoes, / I come like a northern storm that wakes and terrifies oceans" [my translation]. This opening stanza sets the tone for the theme of the poem, the implacable, almost supernatural force of the social revolution. The sentiment might have alarmed Whitman, but the techniques are his. In "Tsum folk" ("To the People"), the repetitive devices also suggest Whitman.<sup>26</sup>

Janet Hadda has examined the New York literary journal *Shriftn* to assess the impact of America on Yiddish writing. Regarding Whitman, she has written: "By taking Whitman as model, one could be a universalist, an American, a free lyricist, a lover—a full-blooded person. And not only Whitman's thoughts, but also his style became an example for Yiddish writers—he (as well as others) taught them to define their lyrical self, to catalog, to describe landscapes."<sup>27</sup>

In one of his early (ca. 1935) poems, "Merts" ("March"), the greatest of living Yiddish poets, Avrom Sutskever, wrote: "Un modne klor / Hob ikh derzen di groyskeyt fun a grezl / Vos lugt aroys fun shneyen vi a shvalb" ("And with strange clarity / I saw the greatness of a blade of grass / Peeping

out of the snow like a swallow").<sup>28</sup> Whitman's leaves of grass and Sutskever's blade of grass are fed by the same springs of universal metaphor. Yet it is impossible not to associate Sutskever's lone blade with Whitman's pervasive image, if only because a sophisticated Yiddish poet in Vilna in the thirties would know about Whitman. The most likely channel for this knowledge would be American Yiddish poetry, but Polish and Russian poetic ferment would also have contributed their share. The distinguished bilingual (Hebrew and Yiddish) poet, Uri-Tsvi Grinberg in Warsaw in 1922 in *Albatros* had listed as one of his seven theses: "For us, modern poets, Walt Whitman is the first and last poet, because he spoke the first and last word." The Whitmanesque spirit of the iconoclastic Yiddish journal, *Albatros*, is best exemplified by another of the theses which declared: "A poet who serves beauty is not a poet." There is absolutely no question about the impact of Whitman on Uri-Tsvi Grinberg, although the extent of technical borrowing cannot be readily determined. Both poets use biblical rhythms profusely and often seem alike simply because of a common prosodic model. A similar problem exists with regard to the American Yiddish introspectivist poets known as the *In zikh* school. Their Whitman flavor has also been attributed to biblical influence by some Yiddish critics.<sup>29</sup>

Yet the involvement of introspectivists with Whitman is clearly sounded in such poems as B. Alkvit-Blum's three-line "Dayne grozn" ("Your Grasses"):

Kh'trakht fun dayne grozn, vitman,  
Un her dem roysh fun groysn  
Shteynernem vald manhetn.<sup>30</sup>

(I think of your grasses, Whitman,  
And hear the roar of the great  
Stone forest of Manhattan.)

This taut poem places the image of the Whitman value-world next to the hard, cold—yet living and great (in more than size)—reality of the metropolis. In the Yiddish, *grozn* ("grasses") and *groysn* ("great") strengthen one another. The "grasses" are, of course, *Leaves of Grass*, and they are more powerful than stone for they help us see that stone, too, *lives*. Whitman, who celebrated the city, its massiveness and vitality, enables the introspectivist Alkvit-Blum to experience the city positively, rather than in the alienated manner of most American writers on the urban theme.

The same writer, in discussing his friend and fellow-poet Ruvn Ludvig [Reuben Ludwig (1895–1926)], confirms the point that Janet Hadda made regarding Whitman's role as model for Yiddish poets. Ludwig arrived in the United States at the age of fifteen and, according to Alkvit-Blum, "sought the wonders of America in Whitman's footsteps."<sup>31</sup> Ludwig died young of tuberculosis, and intimations of his own death rather than Whitman's poetry

may account for the frequency of the theme of death in his work. In "Sing, Stranger," the speaker is impelled, Whitman-like, to experience all, but unlike Whitman he knows he will always remain outside this experience.<sup>32</sup> To the poem "Symposium" he adds a motto or subtitle in English: "What do you see, Walt Whitman?" In this poem, written in 1923, the poet-prophet Whitman returns to discover his vision of America desecrated. But the poem ends with the redemptive image of Queen Mississippi flowing deep and ceaselessly, binding North and South.

American Yiddish poets often celebrate America and in so doing may consciously or unconsciously mimic Whitman. A typical "catalog" poem addressed to America is "America" by H. Royznblat [H. Rosenblatt (1878–1956)]. The first lines read:

Af undzere erd gevandert hot der gayst  
Fun linkoln, zheferson, zhan bron un peyn.  
Af undzer land un unter undzer himl—  
Gezungen hot volt vitman vegn mentsh un got un yam.<sup>33</sup>

(In our land has wandered the spirit  
Of Lincoln, Jefferson, John Brown and Paine.  
In our land and under our skies  
Whitman sang of Man and God and sea.)

Royznblat goes on to list the variety of people, places, trades, goods, pastimes in vast America. The poem is an incantation of belonging and identification. Whitman is invoked as the singer of the original great American poem of the genre and as the symbol of that poem's patriotism.

The celebration of Whitman in Yiddish poetry is often linked with what is felt to be the authentic America of democracy and equality. In certain leftist poets such as Arn Kurts [Aaron Kurtz (1891–1964)] Whitman is deified as the god of the true America, which turns out to be the America of a fixed set of dogmas. In a long free-verse poem entitled "Walt Whitman," written in 1955 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Kurts groups Whitman with approved figures such as Marx, Lincoln, Gorki, John Brown, Tolstoi.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, he introduces Whitman to a group of people who, he claims, will help Whitman to know *himself* better. These new friends include Ho Chi Minh, Chou En-lai and Mao Tse-tung.<sup>35</sup>

Only a careful critical study of Yiddish poetry as a whole will tell us how pervasive and how beneficial the Whitman influence has been. From the instances here cited it can be credited that a Whitman consciousness is present in Yiddish writing. Leo Wiener almost a century ago wrote that "There is probably no other language [than Yiddish] on which so much opprobrium has been heaped."<sup>36</sup> The neglect of Yiddish literature cannot be

dissociated from the history of Yiddish. Whitman scholarship must acknowledge the scores of Yiddish poets who have been inspired by Whitman. It would be un-Whitmanlike not to do so.<sup>37</sup>

University of Haifa

## NOTES

1 *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1973), 15:1570.

2 Whitman's awareness of Jews may, perhaps, have increased in his later years. His closest friend during the last twelve years of his life was Horace Traubel, whose father was Jewish. William White has brought to my attention the following passage from Traubel's *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, (April 8–September 14, 1889), ed. Gertrude Traubel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), pp. 368–369:

I [Traubel] told him [Whitman] I had orders for two big books [*Complete Poems and Prose of Walt Whitman*, 1888], from the Lychenheim boys. W. queried, "Hebrews?" then to my affirmative response: "If I keep on in this way I shall by and by have a Hebrew clientage—and I do not see why I should not—I see every reason why I should: for am I not a Biblical fellow myself—born and bred in Hebrewism—the old forerunners, teachers, prophets?" And he said still again: "And all my Hebrew friends are turning out to be among the young—you would call that an omen, wouldn't you?"

William White has informed me that Morris Lychenheim was Horace Traubel's brother-in-law.

Joseph Jay Rubin, in his *The Historic Whitman* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1973), p. 192, writes: "Responding to all beauty the bachelor [Whitman] spent an evening [in New Orleans] 'superb beyond compare' at the Hebrew Benevolent Association ball among 'lovely Daughters of Israel' and 'elegant Christian maids.'"

3 The Jewish reference in "Song of the Answerer" ("A Jew to the Jew he seems, a Russ to the Russ, usual and near, removed from none." [l. 46]) does not weaken this assertion.

4 According to Edwin Harold Eby's *A Concordance of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass and Selected Prose Writings* (1955; rpt. New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), Whitman in his poetry uses "Hebrew" and "Hebrews" 6 times, "Jew" and "Jews" 4 times, and "Jerusalem" twice. In his prose (see *Concordance*, pp. 793, 812), Whitman uses "Hebrew" and "Hebrews" once each and "Jewry" once.

5 Alfred Kazin, "Fear of the City 1783 to 1983," *American Heritage*, 34 (February/March 1983), 2, 20.

6 See *Aleyesev . . .* [selection and translation into Hebrew, with notes and an essay on the poet's life and works] (Jerusalem: Workers Book Guild, 1952).

7 This is not to deny that an occasional sentence or two has touched on the subject. Thus A. A. Roback in his *The Story of Yiddish Literature* (New York: Yiddish Scientific Institute, 1940), writes that "Many of the better American poets and fiction writers, as well as playwrights, have been translated into Yiddish, beginning with Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, and Longfellow . . ." (p. 277; see also p. 290). The subject has been briefly touched on in Yiddish by Binyomen-Yankev Byalostotski, *Kholem un vor: Eseyen* (New York, 1956), pp. 437–476; Yankev Glatshsteyn, *Mit mayne fartogbikher* (Tel-Aviv: Y.-L.-Perets, 1963), pp. 338–339; Janet Hadda, "Di hashpoe fun amerike af der yidisher literatur," *Yivo-bleter*, 44 (1973), 248–250; and a few others.

In a review of Kathryn Hellerstein's translations from Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's *In New York* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), Haim Chertok writes: "Halpern was an expansive, assimilative poet who wrote in chords reminiscent of Vachel Lindsay and (inevitably) Whitman" (*Jerusalem Post Magazine*, 7 August 1983, p. 12). Halpern is the most accomplished of American Yiddish poets and his relationship to Whitman is worth investigating.

8 The Yiddish Department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has for many years been working on an index of literary materials in Yiddish periodicals. The work has reached the year 1916 and reveals little Whitman material thus far.

9 Harriet Stanton Blatch, "Stepniak at Home," *Boston Evening Transcript* (18 May 1889), 5:1-3. (Cited in Scott Giantvalley, *Walt Whitman, 1838-1939: A Reference Guide* [Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981], p. 96.)

10 Byalostotski has identified the literary influences on the four American "social" poets (Moris Vintshevski, Moris Rosnfeld, Dovid Edlshat and Yoysel Bovshover) as follows: "the Russian social poets Nekrasov, Nikitin; the German Freylograt, von Chamisso and also Heine; the English: Thomas Hood and William Morris; and the humanist-American poets: Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edwin Markham." See Binyomen-Yankev Byalostotski, ed., *Dovid-edlshat-gedenk-bukh* (New York: David Edelstadt Committee, 1953), p. 480.

11 See Samuel J. Imber, ed., *Modern Yiddish Poetry: Anthology* (New York: East and West Publishing Co., 1927), pp. 268-269.

12 Yankev Glatshetyn wrote (in *Mit mayne fartogbikher*, pp. 338-339) of Roznfeld's ode: "He sang his song to Whitman in free verse to give a stylized sense of Whitman's poetry."

13 See *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1956-1981), 1:208; and Mikhl Kon's introduction to Bovshover's *Gezamlte shriftn* (New York: *Fraye arbeter-shtime*, 1911). Moris Roznfeld, following the publication of his *Songs of the Ghetto*, edited by Harvard professor Leo Wiener (Boston, 1898), enjoyed a brief notoriety which helped to embitter his subsequent decline. Roznfeld also attempted to write poetry in English. See *Leksikon*, 8:350-357.

14 Bovshover, p. 328.

15 Bovshover, p. 334.

16 *Vest*, of course, is a gross Americanism. Bovshover's Yiddish (e.g. *eben*, *fir*) is highly *daytshmerish* ("germanized"), since his literary models were largely German, and Yiddish writers of his generation thought that proximation to New High German made Yiddish elegant and more "correct." Bovshover, the most American of the "social" poets, also used Americanisms freely, something which later Yiddish poets in America and elsewhere proscribed. A later Yiddish poet would have written *in mayrev* for 'in the West.'

17 In the *Fraye arbeter shtime* 1, 2 (13 October 1899), p. 9, Bovshover translates into Yiddish section 24 of "Song of Myself." The byline specifies that the translation is from Yiddish. This is the earliest Whitman translation in Yiddish which I have found thus far. Y.-Y. Shvarts translated part of "Salut Au Monde" in 1912 in *Shriftn*. Mates Daytsh translated Whitman in the Chicago *Literarische zamlungen*. In Argentina Kehos Kliger translated Whitman (see *Leksikon*, 8:210). Whitman has also been translated in *Leym un tsigl* (1931). There is no checklist of these scattered translations. Marie B. Jaffe in her essentially facetious *Gut Yuntif Gut Yohr* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, [1969], p. 11) translates "O Captain! My Captain!" Jaffe apparently hopes to amuse the reader by rendering famous poems in an implicitly incongruous Yiddish garb. Such "humorous" efforts are repugnant to the serious Yiddish reader.

18 A. Eysen, *Volt vitman / finf un tsvontsik lider* (New York: Yidish lebn, 1934), p. 25; L. Miler, *Volt vitman / lider* (New York: Kooperativer folks farlag fun internatsyonaln arbeter ordn, 1940), p. 135. Miler's interest in Whitman extended over many years; he published translations of Whitman in *Shriftn* (New York) as early as Summer 1919. There may also be Whitman echoes in his Yiddish play *Mister Mentsh* (translated as *Mr. Man* by S. K. Padover and Chasye Cooperman in *Poet Lore*, 40 [1929], 475–543).

19 Eysen, p. 17.

20 Miler, p. 90. Were he writing today, Miler would probably avoid Germanisms such as *viridik*, *baglaykh*. *Laydnshaft* meaning 'passion' is acceptable.

21 See Nakhmen Mayzl, ed., *Amerike in yidishn vort* (New York: YKUF, 1955), pp. 435–436.

22 Avrom Valt. *Lider un poemen* (New York, 1938), 3:322.

23 Vilyem Natanson, *Inteligent, kunst un kinstler / Literatur in likht fun filosofye* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1931), p. 65.

24 Leyvik is a major figure in Yiddish literature and comparing his work with Whitman's would be valuable even though differences far outweigh similarities. Scattered poems by Leyvik of the pre-Holocaust years seem to show the influence of Whitman—for example, the first and last poems in *Lider* (New York, 1932).

25 Eysen, p. 8.

26 Bovshover, *Lider un dertseylungen* (Kiev, 1939), pp. 34–36, 47–50.

27 Janet Hadda, "Di hashpoe fun america af der yidisher literatur," *Yivo-bleter*, 44 (1973), 250.

28 Avrom Sutskever, "Merts," *Poetishe verk* (Tel-Aviv, 1963), 1:41.

29 Irving Howe writes: "It is hard to determine to what extent the *In zikh* poets were influenced by the notions of contemporary American modernism and to what extent they developed along independent but parallel lines. Experimentation with meter and language, innovations in subject matter and tone were in the literary air throughout the world, and young men as sophisticated as the *In zikh* poets were probably responding to the moment pretty much as were their equivalents in English. Where *Di yunge* still conformed to the norms of metrical regularity and verbal decorum, the *In zikh* poets turned to free verse, were quite happy to play with incongruities of diction and sound, and were more concerned with a fierce individualistic expressiveness than with literary niceties. The poetry of Whitman seems to have had some effect upon them, but writers like Glatstein insist that the cadenced verse of the Bible was by far the greater formative influence." See Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, eds., *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 41. The Yiddish critic referred to by Howe is Yankev Glatsteyn [Jacob Glatstein].

30 B. Alkvit-Blum, *Lider* (New York: CYCO, 1964), p. 77.

31 B. Alkvit, "Ruvn Ludvig," *Inzikh* 5:22[26] (August 1936), 40–43. N.-B. Minkoff has written (in *Leksikon*, 5:7) that "He was perhaps the most American of Yiddish poets in America."

32 Mayzl, pp. 657–658.

33 Mayzl, p. 236.

34 See Arn Kurts, *Lider* (New York: Aaron Kurtz Book Committee, 1966), p. 214.

35 Kurts, p. 215. In addition to this six-page panegyric *cum* ideology, Kurts has written another Whitman-centered poem entitled "Ikh bin gegangen zen volt vitman" (in his *Lider*, pp. 360–361).

36 Leo Wiener, *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century*.(1899; rpt. New York: Hermon Press, 1972).

37 I am grateful to David L. Gold for commenting on an earlier draft of this article. William White brought to my attention significant passages in various sources.