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Stopping by the Woods: Classic American Poems in Yiddish
« Stopping by the Woods » : poèmes américains classiques en yiddish

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article interprète et analyse les versions yiddish de grands poèmes américains : « The Raven » de Poe, « Hiawatha » de Longfellow, « Song of Myself » de Whitman et « Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening » de Frost. Les données translinguistiques sont mises en relation avec les idéologies sociales et culturelles telles que le professionnalisme poétique, l'américanisation, le socialisme, la conservation de l'identité ethnique et l'expressivité personnelle/culturelle. Somme toute, la visée première de cet article est d'« expliquer » un texte en fonction de son contexte culturel, qu'il soit américain ou juif.

Stopping by the Woods: Classic American Poems in Yiddish

Albert Waldinger

Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912), the most famous Jewish immigrant autobiography of its time, recounts her futile attempts to restore the taste of Russia through eating American cherries:

> And if I should return to Polotzk, and buy me a measure of cherries at a market stall, and pay for it with a Russian groschen, would the market woman be generous enough to throw in (the) haunting flavor (of bygone fruit)? I fear that the old species of cherry is extinct in Polotzk (quoted in the introduction to Antin by Sollors 1997, xii).

As a result, she found herself in limbo, despoiled of the bracing stay of an accustomed delight. However, her tasting to the full of American strawberries did reconstitute the fruit she had eaten twenty years earlier, restoring the freshness of childhood, a near Adamic experience with the power of strengthening her for the difficult but ideal-driven adulthood of the New World. The new strength was born of the unity of seemingly hostile identities and times and made up what Werner Sollors calls "invention" (in *The Invention of Ethnicity* 1987), and it was through such "inventiveness" that reputed American Yiddish poets (Aaron Glanz-Leyeles, Abraham Liessin, Solomon Bloomgarden [Yehoash], Louis Miller, Berl Lapin and Meyer Tkatch) managed to bring back the Old World savor while making it smack of the American future.

In fact, Aaron Glanz-Leyeles (1889-1966) was the first to show the full motivation of such "nativization" in the early years of the 20th century. He began with Poe, whose "Raven" he translated (Harshav 1986, p. 8) and whose intricate meters and rimes he valued highly as a master of technique—in such "Annabelle Lee"-like poems as "Yuola,"

where the mystical goddess has an attraction "whose wave I cannot refuse" (Harshav 1986, p. 87). But Leyeles was much more than an esthete; in 1919 he founded (with Jacob Glatshteyn) the poetic school of "Introspectivism" (*Inzikhizm,* literally "In-Self-Ness"), according to which "free meters" should "follow the bent" of alienated and expressionistic desire (the phrase is from Glatshteyn's 1972 essay on Leyeles, p. 44). Thus he invented the persona of Fabius Lind, the forgotten urbanite whose poetic diary registered everything from painfully fleeting time to disgust with the flesh (Harshav 1986, pp. 137-138). The result was a Jewish version of Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock (1910) mixed with Bellow's Augie March (1953), one persona spanning two World Wars in New York City.

Of course, Leyeles continued to think of Poe as the poet of modern horror, to be paired with Baudelaire as the diver into the urban depths—"Late Hour" of 1948 spoke of "…a horror tale of Edgar Poe,/ A commentary on the spleen of Baudelaire" (to rime with "*malheur"* [Yid. *malyer*], Harshav 1986, pp. 172-173). This is a long way from the Second Avenue Yiddish musical theater in which an actor sang— "Columbus, I've got no bone to pick with you at all/ And you, sweet America, no hair from your head should fall" (quoted in Hana Mlotek, "*Louis Fridzel, an umbakanter Yidisher muziker"* ["Louis Fridzell, an Unknown Yiddish Musician"], *Forverts,* Aug. 23, 2002, p. 14). Nor is it close to the sunny translation of the "Star-Spangled Banner" by Berl Lapin (1889-1952), also a translator of Frost (Hana Mlotek,"*Berl Lapin, a poet fun 'Di Yunge'"*—"Berl Lapin, Poet of 'The Young Ones'" [name of a poetic school devoted to Revigoration and Urban Regionalism], *Forverts,* Oct. 18, 2002, p. 14).

But it does approach, while explaining, excusing and refining, the early curse of Ellis Island as an "Isle of Tears," as the first station into "Columbus' Damned Country" (Mayzel 1955, p. 12). Still, passing the statue on Columbus Circle, Leyeles saw the "*conquistador*" as harmlessly "believing and disappointed " (1968, p. 65) and then turned to accentuate the positive in an examination of Poe's value to Jewish liberation in the "Land of Columbus"—"Poe whispers, 'O man, know well thy cloudy underside, ignite thyself thy sole and single light'" (1963, p. 98 from *Poe vispert, du mentsh, tsind on dayn eygen likht*[1]).

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1 All translations from the Yiddish are by the author of this article. Transcriptions follow the system used by the Yiddish Scientific Organization

In other words, the awareness of individual freedom and release from communal command and superstition meant embodied truth—and thus poetry; both together ("Truth and Poetry") combined to make up the "immortal instinct of the Beautiful" in Poe's *Poetic Principle* (1984, p. 76). For a Jewish writer, the emphasis had to be on Truth, an urgent matter, wrote Uri Zvi Greenberg in 1920's Warsaw—*"gramen-shtramen"* ("rimes-chimes") created only a trivial "tintinabulation" (see Feldman 1986, p. 27).

Moreover, according to both Poe and Leyeles, the poet could only attain the heights of harmony by first "diving into the depths of the densely dark self" (1963, p. 99 from *toykh arop in shvartsen zikh, gedikht* riming with *gerikht* or "doomsday" in a complex seven-line stanza). It is significant of the optimistic American 19th century that William McGuffey, way back in 1879, attacked such a "Fortunate Fall" as no more than Gothic "morbidity"; at the same time, he felt the need to include Poe in his *Sixth Eclectic Reader* for his "care and skill in the construction" (1962, p. 409).

For Leyeles, on the other hand, technique was secondary to the Jewish immigrant self as expressed in Yiddish, not English, with the result that the "Promised Land through its blessing straightened the back of my yearning" (1963, p. 105 from the majestic *hot mit brokhe oysgeglaykht dem rukn fun mayn garn)*. Of course, on the material level, America enabled the "Jewish tribe" to "eat regularly and sleep in one's own bed" (1963, p. 90)—as Mary Antin had recited with twelve-year old pomp to the assembled pupils of Chelsea Grammar School near Boston: "We weary Hebrew children have at last found rest…" (1912, p. 242). But Leyeles emphasized the "spiritual level" in the chance to be oneself, Enlightenment (*Haskole*) in the Jewish-Yiddish and American sense, not the freedom to assimilate to America and reject the Jewish past. Moreover, it was a "fortunate" paradox that America encouraged him to strive after the "shine and sparkle of a non-American iota of self" through Yiddish—which best expressed the "Jewish point" [*dos pintele yid*] of redemptive personality. Such recovery in language (*a yidish vort,* superficially no more than "A Yiddish word", but deeply and substantively one resonant with the homelike past) became "his mission, his passion and the sense of his life" (1963, p. 104). In the words of Yiddishism, "No-one knew before

(YIVO) and Sol Steinmetz's *Yiddish and English* (University of Alabama: 1986: 108-111).

Leyeles that the poor [and homeless] jargon of Yiddish was capable of singing with a broad-chested and full-throated baritone" (see Glatshteyn's 1968 introduction to a selection of Glanz-Leyeles' *Poems and Plays*: xviii).

Unexpectedly, Poe the "morbid" idealist contributed to such Yiddishism in the poems of Abraham Liessin (1888-1938), former editor of the *Zukunft* ("The Future") which set the tone for fine Yiddish prose and poetry. "Nevermore" (*keyn mol meyr,* "No time more") adapts Poe's 19th century to the Jewish "I" of 1931: instead of the Poe narrator, the center of the poem is the struggling Yiddish poet in New York—whether in the person of Mani Leib, the self-styled cobbler-'Young One' from the Bronx or the poverty-stricken Moyshe Leyb Halpern—who recreates the American voice despite the planes overhead (Mayzel 1955, p. 192). The scene is set: *Hot amol azoy gegosen oykh in yener nakht fun osyen/ Ven es hot zikh Poe gematert in zayn Bronkser shtiybel shveyr* (190, "So did it *rain and pour* throughout this *Autumn night/* When Poe tortured himself *hard* in his Bronx room" (where *shveyr* ["hard"] rimes with the hypnotic and harmonious refrain announced by the title (see Poe's analysis of "*The Raven"* in *The Philosophy of Composition* 1984, p. 27*)*. The Yiddish adaptation responds directly to Poe's evocation—"Ah, distinctly *I remember* it was in the bleak *December*/…Eagerly I wished the *morrow*—vainly I had sought to *borrow*/ From my books surcease of *sorrow* [*hot zikh gematert*]…Lenore/ Nameless *here* for *evermore "*(a recall of "tapping at my chamber door," the whole quoted in Anderson 1989, p. 255).

The *osyen* or "Autumnal Mood" which Liessin substitutes for "Bleak December" is a Russian borrowing (*osen'*) from a land where Fall opened naturally and immediately into Winter, thereby exemplifying the language's "fusional" tendency to expropriate the vocabulary of its Slavic surroundings in order to realize independent self (Harshav 1990, pp. 28-29 restates these insights of Max Weinreich, a founder of the Yiddish Scientific Organization [YIVO], formerly of Vilno, Lithuania, but now active in New York City). It is not merely a chronological part of the year but a "Blues-like Season of Discontent." Weinstein (2001) puts it into historical context: "European Jews didn't just invent Yiddish; Yiddish helped them invent themselves" (23) in the affirmations and negations of their collective and individual personalities.

Believers in "the melting pot of immigrant Americanization" stressed only affirmation, as did Mary Antin. But these failed to see that "the Jew who has lost the Jewish fire and become a mere elementary grasping animal" is the real danger to America, as Randolph Bourne, writing in *The Nation* of 1916, understood the crisis of the newcomer. The retention of collective and individual "expressiveness," as witnessed by translation into Yiddish, for example, was especially important in a young country without "folk tradition and folk-styles" (Bourne 1996, p. 99).

Longfellow, long before regionalist short story writers like Hamlin Garland and Sarah Orne Jewett, a fellow native of Maine, tried to provide an antidote by translating the great books from the European past—for example, the Finnish epic *Kalevala* whose meters were "nativized" into *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855)—and by contributing Acadian and Jewish local color in *Evangeline* (1847) and *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863). Mary Antin was especially impressed by these "smooth lines that sang themselves" and was thrilled to receive a selection of Longfellow's poems from her Chelsea grade-school teacher. It was a tribute from an "American" to her own budding Americanism (see pp. 215-216 of *The Promised Land*).

Like Mary Antin, Poe admired Longfellow's "graceful insouciance" (in "Waif"), but he also called him "the Great Mogul of the Imitators" (1984, p. 81, p. 761) and wrote lengthily of Longfellow's "shameful plagiarism," complaining that such a central poem as "A Psalm of Life" was really "German throughout" (1984, p. 765). And there was some truth to his complaint: the Cambridge academic was, after all, as derivative and unworldly as some of the American Transcendentalists and the German Romantics. Nevertheless, he managed to evoke concrete "native American scenes" which were much admired by the Jewish immigrant eager to belong.

One of these, Yehoash (1870-1927), translated *The Song of Hiawatha* into Yiddish in 1910, the same year he completed his translation of the Book of Isaiah in his Yiddish Bible (see Waldinger 1998, *Babel* [44/4], pp. 316-317). Leyeles praised this latter work to the skies as the high point not only of Yiddish literature but of universal creation as a whole, and as the fruit of Yehoash's lifelong dedication to Yiddish, including a career as a trend-setting poet and a serious Introspectivist (1958, p. 33, p. 35, p. 147). The achievement was simultaneously American and Jewish and by it he succeeded in

"striking Yiddish roots in American soil, life and breath for as long as the Jewish People would last —that is, forever" (Glanz-Leyeles 1958, p. 42). It is in this "transnational " context (to recast Bourne's 1996, p. 93 title) that the dual ethnic flavor of Yehoash's *Heyavata* must be understood. It was meant not only as proof that the American past could be furthered by a flexible and expressive Yiddish, but also as a step toward meaningful "absorption"—not evasive "assimilation "—of this tradition.

For example, the translation comes equipped with a key of main characters and ethnic and geographical information at the very beginning (Yehoash 1910, pp. vi-xiii): not only Nokomis, Hiawatha's *grandmother* (*di bobe fun Heyavata,* his Slavic *bobusya*─Rus. and Ukr.─but also the proper stress of "Gitche Manito" in *Gitchménito* (vii) and an explanation for "Gitche Gumee" on whose "shores" Hiawatha was born (Longfellow 1863/1922, p. 119) on the "five Great *Lakes*" or *ozeres* (Ukr. *ozero,* Yehoash 1910, vi). It is especially important to appreciate the power of the Yiddish form of this description, of the "rushing of great rivers" (emphasis added to Longfellow 1863/1922, p. 113) with a Hebrew "noise" or *raash* combined with a Germanic alliterative pair equivalent to the original—*shtarke shtromen,* (Yehoash 1910, p. 3) —in addition to the environment of Slavic "meadows" (*lonkes,* Pol. *lãnka*) and "prairies" (*stepes,* Rus. *step'*). Accordingly, Yehoash even details the epithets applied to his Indian hero—"The Wise Man," "The Teacher," and "The Son of the West Wind" (1910, p. vi) in order to prepare his readers for Longfellow's summing up of the Indian Messiah as "The Prophet" and "The Deliverer" (1863/1922, p. 116).

The Yiddish is considerably more humane and emotive—for this reason, Isaac Bashevis Singer, the 1978 Nobel Prize Winner for literature, said to the members of the Swedish Academy that it was a wonderful tool for the characterization of people (though not for bureaucracies) (1978, p. 4). For example, instead of the "stiff upper lip" of Longfellow's "Dear old Nokomis" (1863/1922, p. 135), Yehoash pulls out all the stops—"Sweet *little* grandmother Nokomis"(1910, p. 117 from the diminutive *ziyse babenyu Nokomis*). In his version, she is not only a "beloved and respected ancient" but a wise and warm family member, like the generalized *zeyde* (from Rus. *ded/dedushka* or "grandfather") applied to all old people in the community of Chekhov's tales, for example. Moreover, instead of Hiawatha's relatively unfeeling evocation of his homeland as a "native hearth" whose "firelight is very

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pleasant" (Longfellow 1863/1922, p. 135), Yehoash has a charged "It dearly warms the heart with homelike fire" (1910, p. 117 from *Se varemt liyb dos heymish fayer*). But even more intimate and tender are Yehoash's "Pines which whisper into one's ear" (1910, p. 5 from the alliterative *sosnes…shushken* and in contrast to Longfellow's plain "singing," 1863/1922, p. 114).

Moreover, still more important was Yehoash's desire to restore the force of Yiddish as an epic language with epithets and structures suitable to "grand themes"—after all, it had been such in the Renaissance past, when Eli Bachur Levita (1469-1549) wrote the *Bovo bukh* or "Book of the Knight Sir Bovo d'Antona", a mixture of courtly romance and epic (Baumgarten 1993, pp. 219-220). Thus, Longfellow created a Prologue which passed on a heritage of traditional dignity from "whence" his American poem derives; however, the Yiddish, after first asking an unassuming "from where?", proceeds to release a charged pair of Hebraic "sources"—*mayses un sipurim* ('tales and stories') in place of Longfellow's simple "stories." The "legends and traditions" to which these belong (Longfellow 1863/1922, p. 113) are then folkloristically and Slavicly embodied in *skazkes* (Rus. *skázka* or 'fairy tale', Yehoash 1910, p. 3).

Both Longfellow's original and Yehoash's translation are full of personal epithets as suiting at once an American Indian poem and an epic work. Nokomis is described as "Daughter of the Moon" (Longfellow 1863/1922, p. 120) but this identification is linked more tightly in the Yiddish—she is " Nokomis-Child-of-the Moon" (1910, p. 35) and the important body parts are affixed like an epithet to the "singer of tales," for one—"From Nevedeha's lips" (*Fun di lipen Nevedehas,* 1910, p. 4)— and the latter is subsequently assigned the Hebraic and Psalmic role of *menagen* or "musician" (repeating rather exactly Longfellow's analytical compound "From the *lips of* Nawadaha/ The musician, the sweet singer," 1863/1922, p. 114). Of course, nature is rendered even more in the style of an epithet-like taxonomy than the original in compensation for Yiddish's lack of zoological terms— "The blue heron, the Shuh-shuh gah" (Longfellow 1863/1922, p. 114) is shortened to "The blue fowl, the Shushuga" in Yehoash (1910, p. 4). Again, the atmosphere of the whole is imaginatively evoked by the *mayselekh* or "intimate tales" which alliteratively join "hills and dales": in echo of Longfellow's "moor and meadow" (1863/1922, p. 135), Yehoash has *zump-lender un lonkes* (emphasis added to "swamplands and meadowlands," 1910, p. 119).

Related to this formulation in pairs, an epic scheme, is the desire to create verb-final position maxims which pattern the entire symbiosis between Minnehaha ("Laughing Water") and Hiawatha: "Men imperious, woman feeble" (Longfellow 1863/1922, p. 137) is rendered in terms of "strong vs. weak"—*shtark der man un shvakh di froy iz* (Yehoash 1910, p. 128), in which Yiddish places "being" at the end, as if both to emphasize it (unlike German, final position is an abnormal and thus stressed position for Yiddish verbs) and also to make it fit into the falling meter of the *Kalevala*, Longfellow's source. But Yiddish is naturally dactylic, both in word and sentence stress (Weinreich 1954, p. 4), so there was no special effort needed to adapt the meter in translation. Likewise, the contrast between man and woman, central to the "love story" of "The Song of Hiawatha"*,* was an easy fit for the patriarchal Yiddish-speaker. Among other attractions, it offered something with which he could easily identify, in the process opening up the "wilds" of American nature to him. Therefore, it became only natural for Leyeles to give way to "Indian reflections" (*Indianer trakhtungen*) and imagine the "waves [*inden*] with white manes" like "horses" pounding to the beat of his emancipated desires (1963, p. 102).

As a part of his "Revolt from the Village," one heavy with nostalgia like its Jewish counterpart, Edgar Lee Masters imagined his Spoon River Poet, "Petit," speaking in scorn of his "petty" verse: "Tick, tick, tick, what little iambics/ When Homer and Whitman roared in the pines" (1920, p. 89). Likewise, in an Introspectivist "position paper" of the same year, Leyeles stated that "Whitman launched the new era by renouncing the canonized poetic language [of Hiawatha and 'Petit'] which had dominated British poetry and whose tradition was omnipotent in America as well" (Harshav 1986, p. 791). He reiterated the Jewish "canon" of folk song, whether metrically artificial ("Heinesque") or populistically genuine, and described the new style as maintaining its orality, though now with the distinction that the spoken language would not imitate the folk but would follow "the more conscious part of the Jewish people", its intellectuals and poets (Harshav 1986, p. 791). Such a person was Malka Heifetz Tussman, who "discovered" Whitman's "Personalism" in Milwaukee, adapted his prosody to her creations in Yiddish, and held to his theme of populist identification in such titles as *I Am Also You* (Falk 1977, p. 7, pp. 17-18).

Leyeles echoed this title upon discovery of "the magical word 'I am'" (1963, p. 104), not only as an isolated and individualistic composer in words like Poe but also as a "word-spinner" like Walt Whitman, one who "wanted to turn the week into a holiday" (lit., *yom tov* or "good religious day," 1963, p. 99) through both style and content and who identified with the whole of the people—"I am all men/ I roll upon my heart the many heavy stones" (from *ikh katshe oyfn harts azoy fiyl kashes-shteyner,* 1963, p. 113, my emphasis). Thus he produced an inclusive list (as in *Leaves of Grass* and also in Frost's *North of Boston*): on it were not only "Abe Lincoln and Jefferson" but also "Emerson, John Dewey and Eugene Debs" (1963, p. 108); not only "Isaiah and Herzl" but also Yiddish poets like "Glatshteyn and Berl Lapin" (1963, p. 109) and Yiddish revolutionary "Lekert" or Hirsch Lekert, Vilno shoemaker and common man hero of the Jewish Socialist Bund (see 1963, p. 111). Through them, his goal was to "illuminate the sounds of Yiddish with a cosmically bold glow" (1963, p. 106). Accordingly, Leyeles saw universalist—rather than narrowly ideological—meaning to Isaiah's "The lion shall eat straw with the ox" (11: 7) [2] and the Socialist-trade unionist Louis Miller (1866-1927, see Cahan, 1969, p. 303, p. 412), a Yiddish translator of Whitman, hewed to this general line in his original "I hear your voice, Walt Whitman." This was a "larger than wage-earning life" version of Whitman's "Song of Occupations" and in it the highly urban "sewing machine operator" was one with the "farm hand and the miner"; likewise, both "Jew and Christian" are working-class Americans and Miller imagines himself like Whitman accompanying their work. They have one hope: to become "marching men" (like Sherwood Anderson's novel of the same name) with a "red flag over their heads," fellow sufferers of the Triangle Fire of 1911 commemorated by a recent monument ("*binyan fun Triangel sreyfe betseykhent vi an ondenk punkt* "/"Building of Triangle Fire Signified as Memorial Point", *Forverts* [April 4, 2003], p. 24), and agitating with the voices of John Brown and Sacco and Vanzetti, American radical heroes as late as the 1960's (Mayzel 1955, p. 432, pp. 435-436; see also Miller 1940, p. 40 and Whitman 1983, p. 171).

But such marching took place in *Leaves of Grass* without benefit of Marx: Whitman's "Starting from Paumanok" writes of "marches humanitarian" (1983, p. 12, *mentshheyts marsh*, Miller 1940,

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[2] The Old Testament here used is the bilingual *Holy Scriptures.* Jerusalem: Koren, 1992.

p. 15), reflective of the Jewish/Yiddish value of *mentshlekhkeyt* or "humanity" as the proper or "species self" of a mother's prescription to her son to "act like a *human being*" ("*zay a mentsh"*) or *A Mentsh Solstu Zayn (*"You Should *Be a Decent Human Being*"), the name of a Second Avenue Yiddish Show in one of Avraham Reisen's stories (1933, v. 9, p. 67). Leviant (1992) describes it as the ethical quality suitable for the "poor, unsophisticated Jews of Eastern Europe, children and adults, workers and petty merchants," all of whom needed philanthropy, "settlement care," social activism, and above all respect (xv). Thus, Socialism meant not so much an ideology as an interpretation of freedom as "the possibility of living out one's individual life [and Jewish fate] unhampered by outdated inequality" (Miller 1940, p. 217). Instead of the abstract and foreign "Libertad!" (Whitman 1983, p. 15), Miller (1940, p. 15) has the concrete "liberated!" (*bafreyte!)* through the shelter of the United Hebrew Trades.

It also meant the development of a persona that refuses to make invidious class distinctions; in Whitman's social irony—there was little room for a wry point of view in the struggle for earnest awareness—the "cosmic john" addresses a "common prostitute" (1983, p. 311) as the member of a despised class and profession. For Miller, however, she is only "ordinary" (*geveynlakh)*—a shop girl could be likewise despised—and instead of the over-elegant "Be composed, be at ease with me" (1983, p. 311), as if Whitman were stooping to treat her with exaggerated politeness in order to make his egalitarian point, Miller (1940, p. 59) has the direct "Don't be startled, Be still in my presence" (*shrek zakh nit, zay ruhik mit mir*), as if comforting an innocent, victimized child. Whitman describes himself as "liberal" and "lusty" (1983, p. 311), with the irony of sexual desire mixed with the earnestness of egalitarianism, whereas Miller (1940, p. 311) interprets these traits as 'free' (*fray)* and 'having a lust for life' (*lebenlustik)*, thus possessing all of the seriousness of a total life led to its full within 'nature' (*natur)*.

In order to fathom this greater lust, it was first necessary to meditate on the self and declare the equality of its parts: "I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul, / The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me, / The first I graft and increase upon myself, *the latter I translate into a new tongue*" (emphasis added to Whitman 1983, p. 39). In other words, the unitary or "monadic" world, in which there are no anti-democratic classes and

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no elite devotions, is in command over dualistic discrimination, and the world of Jewish Eastern Europe, overwhelmingly and abnormally "spiritual" and sanctimoniously divided, is to be superseded and "interpreted" (*taytsht…oys*) in a "new sense" (Miller 1940, p. 95), one which Whitman's Yiddish translator conceives in the traditional terms of Bible commentary (see Noble 1943) while applauding the "new wine in new bottles" which hint that there is no hell outside an unliveable life within society. What's more, Whitman expressed (1983, p. 39) a preference for the mother with which Miller, stemming from a culture where "*mame*" signifies everything practical and energized by life, could only agree: " And I say there is nothing greater than the *mother of men* " (*muter fun mentshen,* Miller 1940, p. 96).

With the inclusion of such traditional ideals (both Jewish and non-Jewish) as "perfect matriarchy and perfect patriarchy", Whitman wanted to create an "assuming" and accepting "democratic epic," different from such poems as "Song of Hiawatha" in that the hero whose deeds are sung represents the whole people, a sum of individuals in collective contemplation. The aim of this *Song of Myself,* its contemplation divided into numbered coda, was to be "self-transcending" and open to all kinds of "indirection" in the form of mystically conceived symbolism instead of standard heroic narration or description (Pearce 1961, p. 71). The self had the power of swelling to a primordial but always renewed "kosmos"; however, instead of defining it as "fleshy and sensual" (Whitman 1983, p. 42), Miller (1940, p. 96) draws on his own theological/interpretative tradition by calling the persona "bodily" (*gufik*) and "sinful" (*zindik*) from the Jewish-Puritanical collocation "the sinful body" (*der zindiker guf*). At the same time, he respects the non-chronological nature of the "meditations" by marking them with an "egalitarian" bubble rather than a number—after all, the hermeneutic rules for interpreting the Old Testament stated that the Holy Text had no "before and after," no sequence to take into account.

Consequently, the entire work was at once whole and "holy" (1983, p. 42) or *heylik* (Miller 1940, p. 97), and the latter sees the democratic self as restoring divine value to everyday objects, as a receptacle of divine (or ideally "natural") prophesy (without however placing the divine location in the "other-worldly"). In any case, all was equally wondrous, especially when touched by twofold charisma in the sense of "Two Holinesses" (*Tsvey heylikeyten)*, a story by Zalman Libin (born in 1872, arrived on the Lower East Side in 1880) in which

the scroll of the Five Books of Moses shares honors with the "scriptures" of Socialism (1934, pp. 240-244). Miller, as a Jewish Socialist, was, like Whitman, well-versed in "intermingling" the sacred and the profane in the most profane activity. Thus "building houses" is more than a list of building materials, and even when Whitman deals with a process like "nail-making," his listing is somewhat perfunctory (1983, p. 175). However, Miller (1940, p. 47, p. 220) translates this with reinforced concreteness: through the Slavic *tsvekes* (from Ukr. *tshvyakh*)—Slavic is the linguistic receptacle for everyday things in Yiddish—and through a thoroughgoing description of the "making" as "molding in a foundry" or *giysn*, a specific, complex and valued method of production. For him, the democratic epic meant a detailed record of the acts of democratic man, not merely his transcendental probing.

This—"reach" which must "exceed man's grasp," according to the optimistic Browning—was everywhere "onward and outward" in Whitman; even the grass over the graves is "out of hopeful green stuff woven" and hints that "to die is different from what one supposed, and luckier" (1983, pp. 26-27). However, such a fate is only rarely providential and positive; as the *Ethics of the Rabbinical Fathers* relates—"the store is open and the storekeeper's [implacable] hand records [the purchase]" (*Standard Prayer Book* 1917, p. 281). Thus, in Robert Frost, the forward movement of man is always stopped by refractory nature, no matter how beautiful; an attention to the detailed workings of this ultimate reality results in lyricism sobered by awareness.

In order to supply the grounding for his "Star-Spangled Banner", Berl Lapin rendered "The Road Not Taken" in which the vision of the "traveler" who "looked down…far" into the "undergrowth" (Frost 1966, p. 223) is checked by a "reality-principled" wanderer who "goes deep into things and is *confounded*" by the "wild growth" (emphasis added, *vi tiyf er geyt/ fardreyt… vildgeviks*). He is then struck with the futility of the "grasping" (*greykhen,* Lapin 1940, p. 130).

Of course, Frost's "millennial sigh" at the end of the poem realizes this futility. But Lapin makes plainer the heaviness of the recognition—not content with "ages and ages hence, "he adds a "chain" or *keyt* of "ages" perhaps modeled after the traditional *keyt fun doyres* or "chain of generations," riming with *farsheyd* or "cruelly separated,"

not merely "diverged" (Frost 1966, p. 223). The Yiddish poet bows his head to "the parting of the ways": instead of "I *took* the one less traveled by,/ And that has made all the difference," he writes—"And I? I *take* the way that no-one *takes*,/ So everything *is* the way *it is*" (my emphasis on the general validity of the tense from *Un ikh?—nem dem veg vos keyner geyt/ Deriber* iz *itster alts azey* [Lithuanian pronunciation], see Frost 1966, p. 223/ Lapin 1940, p. 130). Both Longfellow's "postcard" majesty and Whitman's "indirection" was, in the final analysis, foiled by "the woods."

A short poem, therefore, seemed a stronger metaphor than the epic for the Jewish immigrant experience—in fact, Poe had insisted on the hypnotic suggestiveness of lyric and "Song of Myself "was indeed composed of lyrical "chapters." For this reason, Berl Lapin and Meyer Zimel Tkatch (1894-1967), both first-class Yiddish lyric poets according to Glatshteyn (1947, pp. 395-403, pp. 266-272), chose to confront the mellifluous quandary of "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" (Frost 1966, p. 194).[3] As Tkatch points out, dealing with the criticism of his own poetry as well, Frost created a mixture of the "Element of Fable" plus a "moral" at the end, and he quotes approvingly from Frost's definition of a poem as "beginning in delight and ending in wisdom and discovery" (1965, p. 7, p. 8).

The first "delight" of Tkatch's translation is dynamism: his "stopp*ing,*" an English continuous and active form, becomes the participial *opshtelendik,* which is further intensified by the separable prefix *op-* or "down"—the horse performs the action of "setting himself down" in front of the woods. What's more, this *op-* continues into the second stanza as a rendition of "To stop (without a farmhouse near)"- *vos ekh* shtel zikh op *nit lem a hoyz* (1965, p. 42). His second delight is the sensitive use of Slavic vocabulary—"My little horse must think it *queer*"/ *Mayn ferdl* zet es modne *oys* (emphasis added to "It sees out" or "seems" and the characterization). This word is a popular oral judgment, "stylish" (Rus. *modnei*) converted to "strange or peculiar" as in "A strange thing" or *a modne zakh*, and thereby backs up Tkatch's statement that Frost created poetry from "prosaic American English" (1965, pp. 7-8); the Yiddish equivalent is the selection of affective Slavic responses which evoke rural plain speech. Lapin, moreover, has the same goal; though far less dynamic, he has the "farmhouse" standing far away "in the village path," the *shtetl-shliakh* (from Ukr.

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[3] See Appendix.

shlyakh or "way," 1940, p. 129). The new immigrant is far from the "beaten path" of his shtetl, in the ambiguous wilds of New York City.

Moreover, in comparison to Tkatch, Lapin does a more complete job of stressing the rimes at the ends of the stanzas and even causing a repeated sound to span the poem from beginning to end; just as Frost chimes *iy* ("here" and "queer" to "deep" and "sleep," 1966, p. 194), so does he fuse the lines together with *ey*—"stay here and *stop*" (*blayb do shteyn*), "alone" (*aleyn*), and "go to sleep" (*shlof tsu geyn*, 1940, p. 129), thereby giving extra point (and hypnotic poignancy) to the repeated "And miles to go before I sleep" (from "And miles of road until I go to sleep"—*Un meylen veg biz shlof tsu geyn*, Frost 1966, p. 194/ Lapin 1940, p. 129). It is only necessary to compare the rather bumpy and anti-climactic refrain of Tkatch: "I drive farther before I fall asleep" (from *ekh for vayter eyder ikh shlof ayn*, 1965, p. 42).

He even adds "alone" (*aleyn)* to "The darkest evening of the year," thereby putting an extra foot on a graceful but unemphatic line. This is a major statement of obtrusive individuality, the kind that advocates of "Americanization" disliked. Lapin, not cowed by the greatness of his poetic source, makes the poem his own, appropriates it for the emotional use of his community, and expresses the particular loneliness of an immigrant outcast, no mere "*astonished* little horse" (*dershtoynt*, a Germanic word) but a bewildered human being.

Tkatsh likewise emphasizes the lonesomeness of the horse whose "bell is answered only by the *soft noise of wind and snow*" (from the inverted and slightly unnatural *dem klang fun gleklekh entfert blois/ Fun vint un shney a veykh geroysh*, 1965, p. 42): *geroysh* or "faint and inclusive noise," the muted result of *royshen* or "to be loud with a rushing sound." But Lapin (1940, p. 129), while failing to stress how the snow "drowns" the cries for help, plays up its inviting nature—"the *continual* fall of *down-like* snow" (…*fal fun shney-pukh nokhanand* in which the persistent snow-fall rimes with "harness bell" (*klung fun zayn geshpan*) and prompts the question, "Is a mistake *existing*?" (*Tsiy iz a toes do faran?* / "To ask if there is some mistake?" (Frost 1966, p. 194). Both try to deal with the "sweep" of the snow (Frost 1966, p. 194), with the gliding coverage of its motion, suggesting a dangerous, warm and yet blurred oblivion. Both put forward this perspective of forgetfulness through the substitution of a new—and rural American—rhythm of experience, one to which Poe, Longfellow and Whitman contributed. By trying to reproduce this rhythm, the translation of American poetry

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into Yiddish meant a tense and ambiguity-ridden expression of dual identity.

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Appendix

Transliteration : *A vald-bazukh in a shney-nakht*
(A forest-visit on/in a snow-evening)

kh' veys vemens vald es iz, mir dakht,
I know whose wood it is, to me it seems

khotsh hoyz zayns shteyt oyf shtetl shliakh;
Though house his stands on village path;

er vet nisht zen, vi kh' blayb do shteyn
He will not see how I stay here stand

un zayn farshnaytn vald bavakh.
And his snowed-in wood watch over.

mayn kleyner ferd muz zayn dershtoynt
My little horse must be astounded

tsu blaybn, vu s'iz nisht bavoynt
To stay where it is not inhabited

lem vald un taykh-mit ayz fartsamt,
Near wood and pond, with ice framed

in shvartster nakht fun yor-aleyn.
In the blackest night of year-alone.

 er fregt mit klung fun zayn geshpan,
He asks with ring of his harness,

tsi iz a toes do faran?
Question particle-is a mistake here existing?

altz shvaygt-bloys shtiler vint un roym
Everything is still, only quiet wind and space,

un fal fun shney-pukh nokhanand.
And fall of snow-down in succession.

der vald iz fintster, tif, un sheyn
The wood is dark, deep and beautiful

nor ikh-ze flikhten far mir shteyn
But I see duties before me standing

un maylen veg biz shlof tsu geyn,
And miles road till sleep to go,

un maylen veg biz shlof tsu geyn.
And miles road till sleep to go.

Original
Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose woods these are I think I know,
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

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ABSTRACT: Stopping by the Woods: Classic American Poems in Yiddish ─ This essay interprets and analyzes in detail the Yiddish versions of great American poems: Poe's "The Raven," Longfellow's "Hiawatha," Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." An attempt has been made to relate all cross-linguistic data to cultural and social ideologies like Poetic Professionalism, Americanization, Socialism, Preservation of Ethnic Identity and Personal/Communal Expressiveness. In other words, the main intent of the essay has been to "explicate" a text by reference to its cultural context, whether American or Jewish.

RÉSUMÉ : « Stopping by the Woods » : poèmes américains classiques en yiddish ─ Cet article interprète et analyse les versions yiddish de grands poèmes américains : « The Raven » de Poe, « Hiawatha » de Longfellow, « Song of Myself » de Whitman et « Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening » de Frost. Les données translinguistiques sont mises en relation avec les idéologies sociales et culturelles telles que le professionnalisme poétique, l'américanisation, le socialisme, la conservation de l'identité ethnique et l'expressivité personnelle/culturelle. Somme toute, la visée première de cet article est d'« expliquer » un texte en fonction de son contexte culturel, qu'il soit américain ou juif.

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