Radical Poets Set Jewishness Adrift

by Emily Warn

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RADICAL POETICS AND SECULAR JEWISH CULTURE
Edited by Stephen Paul Miller and Daniel Morris
University of Alabama Press, 2010

Don’t let the title dissuade you from reading this provocative book. The poets and thinkers represented here, many of them groundbreakers in American literature and thought, don’t know what it means either. That’s the point — to define these terms so as to answer a question that has not yet been posed in American poetry: what is radical Jewish poetry and how is it related to secular Jewish culture?

In good talmudic fashion, editors Stephen Miller and Daniel Morris and their writers tease out the original question into a whole host of them, provoking lively discussion that often addresses some of the most pressing concerns of secular Jews today. What does it mean to claim a Jewish identity or to say that one is a Jewish poet? What is secular Judaism? And is it, in some circumstances, paradoxically religious? When is the intense scrutiny of texts a secular rather than a religious activity?

The proffered answers are worth listening to because this particular group of poets and critics are masters, if not of the Good Name, then of the possibilities and pitfalls of language. They are its provocateurs, taxonomists, gematria-ists, and tour operators, roles that are quintessentially Jewish. This collection does nothing less than establish an important Jewish artistic tradition, and as such, inherently comments and expands upon the larger tradition. The essays elaborate radical Jewish poetry’s founding aesthetic, identify its current practitioners, and canonize its forebears — a remarkable group of American Jewish poets from the last century, many of whom were concerned with social justice: Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Muriel Rukeyser, and Charles Reznikoff.
Being present at the groundbreaking of a tradition must be comparable to overhearing the secret conversations of twelfth-century Spanish kabbalists just before they risked publicly refuting dominant Jewish beliefs and practices. In this case, the impetus for going public is a recently published anthology of Jewish poetry, *Telling and Remembering: A Century of American Jewish Poetry*, whose editor Steve J. Rubin claims to publish the work of writers who “can be classified as American Jewish poets,” a classification one can only assume covers poetry arising from a core Jewish identity grounded in normative Jewish cultural experiences and religious practices. From the editors’ point of view, Rubin’s greatest sin is his failure to provide a theoretical basis for his selections — to ask and answer what Jewish poetry is — a shortfall the editors hope their book redresses.

Yet when the editors and writers seek to answer the question, a kind of attachment disorder settles in. In the fluidity of experience, any fixed identity seems false to them, and they share a predicament with many secular Jews: they feel an intense ambivalence toward claiming a Jewish identity because it presumes allegiance to the all-knowing authoritarian Jewish God, a belief which has often led to religious wars. While “religious texts remain important sources of inspiration,” poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes in “Midrashi Sensibilities: Secular Judaism and Radical Poetics” (her essay in the book), they “no longer possess canonical authority or signify the poet’s allegiance to Judaism as a religious practice.”

In place of a core, or “essentialist” Jewish identity, Charles Bernstein proposes a “performative” one. Bernstein, the group’s seminal thinker, is a Houdini-like poet whose work has confounded neat literary (and now Jewish) definitions ever since he co-founded the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E school of poetry in the 1970s. Bernstein first asked and elaborated on Jewish identity as it plays out in poetic practice at a literary program devoted to the subject at the American Jewish Historical Society in New York in 2003. In his talk, now republished in this book, he asks:

Am I Jewish? Is this Jewish? I am no more Jewish than when I set my Jewishness adrift from fundamentalist religious practice. I am no more Jewish than when I refuse imposed definitions of what Jewishness means. I am no more Jewish than when I attend to how such Jewishness lives itself out, plays tunes not yet played. Jewishness can, even must, in one of its multiple manifestations, be an aversion of identification — as a practice of dialogue and as an openness to the unfolding performance of the everyday. Call it the civic practice of Judaism.

Bernstein views identity as an ongoing performance of an ever unfolding self and its relation to Jewish traditions. Refusing a fixed Jewish identity in favor of an inherently fluid, unstable, and evolving one mirrors the practice of midrash, which according to DuPlessis, is a “continual interpretation and reinterpretation, never complete and never fulfilled.” Therefore this refusal is at its heart Jewish, as Lazer writes in this book in an essay called “Who or What Is a Jewish American Poet”:

The paradox of this particular refusal of identity — the Jew who refuses a Jewish American or Jewish label — is that it has become an identifying Jewish trait.
Adeena Karasick’s performance poem “The Wall” is just one example of how these ideas about identity inform the radical Jewish poetry discussed here. The poem’s subject is the disorderly compendium of texts stuffed into the Wailing Wall, its prayers written in multiple languages, its “tiny scraps of paper on which supplicants have confessed their deepest desires.” In her essay “Imp/penetrable Archive: Adeena Karasick’s Wall of Sound,” Maria Damon writes that the cracks and fissures stuffed with texts represent both Judaism and the female body, “an archive continually reproducing, a repository repositioning itself at every turn.”

Damon lauds the poem as a “cacophony of fonts, formats and voices, illegible print superimposed on photographs, visual and verbal puns, prayers, send-ups and equivocations.” Such language is intentionally opaque and slippery so as to perform an absence, a longing for a missing wholeness and a missing source — both the literal Temple and the absence of the female from its ritual practices and the religious texts that codified them.

On encountering the poem, most general readers will be stymied by its obtuseness, a disorienting meaning-making that Karasick wants us to believe is kabbalistic. It is not about “what is being said,” she writes in her essay on radical poetics called “Hijacking Language: Kabbalistic Trajectories,” “but how language is being manipulated; how ‘meaning’ is determined through an experience of letters.” These assertions do echo the twelfth-century kabbalists’ promise and practice. A mystical union with God could be had through “language-based ecstatic concentration practices,” as Norman Fischer writes in his essay “Light(silence)word.” While the promise of union attracted and still attracts followers to Kabbalah, the esoteric complexity of the practices befuddles and disappoints many of them.
Similarly, radical Jewish poetry promises an experience that expresses the agitated, untethered relationship that many secular Jews experience in relation to normative Judaism. Yet to comprehend the poetry requires the equivalent of the audio tours at postmodern visual art exhibitions — a function that this book provides. The essays by Rachel DuPlessis, Norman Finkelstein, Hank Lazer, and Eric Selinger are especially adept at elucidating the aesthetic and cultural relevance and provocation of radical Jewish poetry.

Norman Finkelstein turns what can be construed as negative — the refusal of an inherited identity — into a process of self-discovery. Dismantling the “first self,” the one that cultural and religious texts and institutions have prefabricated, leads to taking part in, and in this case expressing, the disintegration and renewal of a shifting yet rooted identity.

Of special interest to all readers are essays that answer the question first posed by Bernstein at the American Jewish Historical Society: “Can we say there is a distinctly Jewish component to radical modernist and contemporary poetry?” Placing the major American poets Zukofsky, Stein, Oppen, Rukeyser, Celan, and Bernstein within a Jewish context significantly broadens our understanding of their work. For example, Meg Shoerke discovers poetic and political affinities in the poetry of George Oppen and Muriel Rukeyser. Neither of them, she contends, felt it necessary to reconcile the “pull of different identities,” or the contradiction inherent in writing a spiritually revelatory poetry that is also “profoundly anti-transcendental, due to its focus on the material world.”

Of equal significance are essays that examine how the domain of Jewish poets reaches beyond Judaism. Marjorie Perloff breaks Paul Celan out of “a kind of solitary confinement” wherein he is perceived solely as a Holocaust poet by reading him as a mid-twentieth-century poet. Norman Fischer’s essay delves into the relationship between silence and language that is at the core of both Judaism and Buddhist practices. He argues that living with the phrases of Zen koans or Jewish texts can lead to an experience of language dissolving into what is beyond language. And Benjamin Friedlander’s provocative essay defines secular Jewish culture “as a radical sect within Judaism, one that owes much to the precedent of St. Paul who proclaimed ‘an ethics without adherence to law.’”

An anthology of Jewish essays would not be complete without a dissenter, a writer who questions the very premise of the book. Alicia Ostriker wonders why there needs to be a “polarization between ‘secular and ‘sacred.’” She pokes fun at “radical poetics” as a code for “poetry that avoids sentences… Or doesn’t use uppercase. Or has spaces instead of punctuation between words.” But then she gets down to business. As she defines it, “To be radical is to go to the root of the matter.” Yet as these essays demonstrate, to go to the root of the matter is to arrive at another set of questions. Does the activity of questioning become an identity with which secular Jews are at ease? One answer found in Norman Finkelstein’s essay is the philosopher Marc-Alain Ouaknin’s comment on a quotation from Edmund Jabès:

“‘The Jew not only asks questions, he has himself become a question.’ He is a question without an answer.”

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