

TERRIFIED OF TENDERNESS?

Struggles with femininity in Yiddish poetry.



Joanna Lisek,
PhD, DSc

is a literature scholar, translator, and faculty member of the Department of Jewish Studies at the University of Wrocław.

She studies Jewish poetry and Yiddish culture, especially women's literature. Since 2017, she has edited the series *Żydzi – Polska – Autobiografia* [Jews – Poland – Autobiography].

joanna.degler@gmail.com



Joanna Lisek

Taube Department of Jewish Studies,
University of Wrocław

The word “tenderness” (Polish *czułość*), recently resurging on the wave of Olga Tokarczuk’s Nobel prize acceptance speech, has made its way into high-society salons, the academic milieu, and the public discourse in Poland. Scientific conferences are being organized around the theme of tenderness, and publication and cultural initiatives are being taken that focus on this concept. This themed issue of *Academia* magazine is indeed a case in point.

Yet despite this renaissance of interest that we have observed over the past several months, some

still see tenderness as a value that does not fit into the “big-league” literary and philosophical canon. In the discussions that followed Olga Tokarczuk’s Nobel lecture, tenderness has been contrasted against the sense of national community and other concepts. Some people have been dismayed by the “tiny” or even “naïve” nature of tenderness. These dichotomous juxtapositions that have appeared in the public discourse are very consistent with the discussions that have been held since the 19th century around what is referred to as women’s literature.

Back then, tenderness was not seen as something positive in the context of literature. It was associated with sensitivity, gentleness, sentimentality, and naïvety, and treated as immanent in women’s writing and stigmatized as one of its weaknesses by male literary critics. Tenderness has nothing to do with pathos, it is its antithesis – the lack of the force of pathos was exactly the reason why Balzac criticized George Sand.

*From my darkness,
from my lightness*

For over half a century, this accusation continued to be leveled against all of women's literature. Although tenderness means going beyond one's own "self" and, as Tokarczuk puts it, it "appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our 'self,'" it always remains something personal – it cannot be a collective, common value. Novels written by women were criticized for presenting an insufficiently broad outlook on history, for being banal and lacking seriousness. The Positivist writer Aleksander Świętochowski compared such novels to the contents of a wardrobe: "These novels are nothing more than fancy clothes that in talented hands could create a mosaic background. In the hands of women, however, they have turned into facts in the foreground." This view is consistent with the most famous metaphor used by Władysław Jabłoński in the early 20th century to describe female writers, as "studious weavers of banal reality." It appears that Tokarczuk's speech, in which "[l]iterature is built on tenderness toward any being other than ourselves," has revived this age-old discussion and its arguments.

"Poems, little poems, teeny-weeny poems"

During the interwar years in Poland, disputes over women's literature were waged not only in Polish-language commentaries but also in the growing and lively Yiddish literary milieu. Of course, the dispute over the place of female readers and writers in the world of Yiddish literature stretched beyond the borders of Poland, covering the whole of what was referred to as Yiddishland, and culminated in 1927–1928 with the publication of *Yidishe Dikhterins: Antologye* [Anthology of Yiddish Women Poets], which featured poems by 70 female poets. The book, unique by the standards of the day, was edited by the prominent philologist Ezra Korman, who came under heavy criticism for its publication. Melech Ravitch, at the time one of the most influential figures in the milieu of Jewish writers, argued that what he found in the writings of female Yiddish poets were not literary works but merely "little, littler, and the littlest of poems" (*Literarische Bleter* 1927, No. 21). In Ravitch's reasoning, the concept of "a literary work," which stands in opposition to "little poems," is based on an androcentric definition and evaluation of literature. In his opinion, a woman could only write a true literary work if she deprived such a piece of writing of its inherent femininity and made it universal, or masculine. He expressed this view even more bluntly, in his usual patronizing tone, in a letter

from 1929 addressed to Malka Lee, a poet who was born in Galicia in 1904, raised in a Hasidic family, lived in America since 1921, and was linked to left-wing groups in New York:

Now, I want to tell you a few words, for which you will be angry with me. Your poems are somewhat disheveled, and they should not be so. Understand this. When your hair is disheveled, you tie it up with a silk ribbon, but what must be above all kept tied up are poems. And the band must, first of all, be made of iron, not silk, and, secondly, be on the inside, invisible on the outside (...). In your poems, I can see predispositions to write both pretty as well as more serious pieces. But what I fear is their disheveled nature. Poets should have iron, masculine discipline. The greatest female poet in Germany, Else Lasker-Schüler, calls herself by the male name of "Prinz Jussuf." This tiny bit of discipline determines everything. (YIVO Archives, Malka Lee Collection)

What is particularly interesting in this fragment is the juxtaposition of a silk hair ribbon vs an iron band. The silk ribbon is associated with femininity and correlates semantically to gentleness, to soft caresses. The iron band, in turn, in Ravitch's letter implies discipline, seriousness, and masculinity. It is likewise interesting that he decided to invoke the name of a famous German-Jewish poet. For Ravitch, the fact that Else Lasker-Schüler called herself by a male moniker was something more than just extravagance or a bohemian provocation. Likewise, he did not see this as a sign of her rebellion against social standards. To him, she symbolizes the perfect creative attitude to be taken by a female author – she submitted to the masculine (and by implication proper) rigors of writing to such an extent that she not only ceased to be perceived as a woman in her writings but could even be seen as a man. For Ravitch, the appearance of an element of female empowerment in poetry inevitably introduces chaos, this "disheveled" nature, which must be reined in, restrained with the iron harnesses of a tamed code. Of course, his approach reflects the definitions of womanhood that were present at the time, including in particular the one authored by Otto Weininger, for whom: "A woman – unlike a man – is an unconscious creature without memory, without thoughts, without logic, a creature determined by her drives; she is chaos. (...) A woman is nonsense and nothingness."² Consequently, it comes as no surprise



Joanna Lisek,
Kol ishe – glos kobiet w poezji jidysz (od XVII w. do 1939 r.)
[Kol Ishe – The Voice of Women in Yiddish Poetry (from the 17th century to 1939)].
Pogranicze, Sejny 2018



My Wild Goat:
An Anthology of Yiddish Women Poets, Austeria,
Budapest – Syracuse
– Kraków 2019

¹Trans. Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones, www.nobelprize.org. © The Nobel Foundation 2019.

²M. Janion "Maria Komornicka, in memoriam", in: *Kobiety i duch inności* [Women and the Spirit of Otherness] Warsaw 2006.

ACADEMIA FOCUS ON Literature

Between city and town

that the style of Lee's poetry made Ravitch feel uneasy. She was one of those female poets who attempted to pierce their way through the petrified language to express the female way of speaking, so her poems may sometimes seem odd, because they include an element of otherness, as described by Luce Irigaray:

"She" is indefinitely other in herself. This is doubtless why is said to be whimsical, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious... not to mention her language, in which "she" sets off in all directions leaving "him" unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Hers are contradictory words, somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason, inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids, with a fully elaborated code in hand. (...) One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an "other meaning" always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them. For if "she" says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous.³

Direct references to tenderness in the context of literature were made in 1927 by the Jewish essayist and literary critic Yisroel Shtern on the first page of *Literarische Bleter* (1927, No. 14), one of the most important Jewish literary periodicals in Yiddish. When reading his article *Unzer lezerin oder Shomer hot gevunen* [Our reader, or Shomer has won], we may initially think that the author appreciates the role played by women in the development of Yiddish literature. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that women had been the primary recipients of such writings since their beginning (or since the 13th century). Shtern understands that. He writes that Yiddish literature "was born of a woman. If it had not been for a woman, we would have no book in Yiddish." At the same time, he regards the genetic links between Yiddish literature and the *lezerin* (female reader) as its greatest weakness. He is critical of the Yiddish literature written by his contemporaries and believes that its main flaws lie in the fact that it had grown from the fantasies that women had when sweeping floors, peeling potatoes, and cooking cholent. Balancing between seriousness and irony, Shtern declares that he is a chauvinist, explaining that "chauvinism is probably a type of solace for a man engrossed in sad thoughts." What is more, he believes that the absolute absence of the cult of



womanhood is a characteristic that molds Jewish men: "It is sometimes believed that a Jewish man is (even if only superficially) strict, tough, pedantic, and devoid of tenderness and gentleness, because there is no cult of ladies among us. Other nations gave even their God a mom. Jews only have a dad...."

It might appear that Shtern demands tender, motherly sensitivity, pointing out that they are absent from the Jewish religion and culture. Nothing could be more wrong. When he goes on to discuss female Yiddish authors, he is pleased that there are not so many of them: "It is nonetheless quite good that only very few of our books have moms." In a way typical of the male literary critics of that period, he reduces the creative activity of women to reproduction. To him, female authors are moms of books. However, he believes that women are not predisposed to "give birth" to texts specifically because of the features that – in his opinion – qualify them for motherhood. Their motherliness, defined in terms of tenderness, generates boredom in literature: "When I sometimes go through writings in Yiddish, I see all these pious, quiet, and good women standing next to me. I am flooded with gentleness and mildness. I am like a child caressed by a tender mother. She strokes me, sings me to sleep, cradles me. I fall asleep." As Karolina Szymaniak observes: "In Shtern's approach, women are not champions of change in literature, because literature, as he puts it, does not need a mother, her tenderness and caresses – it needs a tough, male revolution."⁴ The conclusions drawn by Shtern and Ravitch are essentially similar, but the latter is even more blunt in his opinions on women's literature: "Gentleness and sweetness, quietness and virtuousness, kindness, and above all virtuousness, the

³ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke.

⁴ Karolina Szymaniak, "Dwie rewolucje" [Two Revolutions], in Lisek (2010).



virtuousness of a Jewish poetess – I am sick and tired of it.” (*Literarische bleter*, 1927, No. 21)

In other words, male critics accuse female poets of writing “little poems,” showing sleepy gentleness, and being overly virtuous. But how do these allegations compare to the actual poetic strategies used by female Yiddish authors? It turns out that the writings of leading female poets of Yiddishland in the interwar years were actually the opposite of these characteristics ascribed to women’s literature.

Challenges of modernity

Referred to as “the first lady of the Yiddish literature,” Kadya Molodowsky, who was linked to Warsaw (and from 1935 to New York), defined her poetry in the categories of activism. Her writings present a broad cross section of the Jewish community’s experiences in the 20th century as well as clear engagement in social and feminist issues. Molodowsky engages in dialogue with the heritage of her female ancestors and the challenges of modernity. Her works were seen as a manifestation of the revolution taking place in the identity of Jewish women: “She is a manifestation of the turning point in the psyche of a Jewish woman during her transition from *tsnies* (modesty, virtue) to secularism” (*Literarische bleter*, 1933, No. 2).

In Lviv, Debora Vogel, currently the most recognizable Yiddish and Polish female poet, created the project of radically avant-garde poetry based on the foundations of philosophical and theoretical thought and the rigors of logic, distancing herself clearly from lyricism. Vogel is very far from the characteristics stereotypically ascribed to women’s poetry: she consistently avoids subjectivity, tenderness, sentimentality, and any manifestations of emotionality. Her poetry does not stem from the emotional recognition of reality but from pre-emotional cognition combined with

the rigors of logic. She masterfully uses reduction, synthesis, and detail anchored in the sexuality, sensuality, and banality of the phenomena she describes, thus creating what in my opinion is the female variant of masculinized avant-garde poetry.

Seeing

Rokhl Korn, a different poet from Galicia who resided in Przemyśl, opted for a different strategy. She created her own, unique style of poetry and broadened the set of themes touched upon in Yiddish poetry and prose. She subversively adopts the role of a “studious weaver of banal reality,” while simultaneously redefining the divisions into what is banal and what is serious, into what is petty and what is important. She wants to be “a female prophet of the new truth,” the poet of a woman’s everyday life – “the little events in life.” She wants to write about the “dirty work of life.” She guides his readers into the “unknown peripheries of life, where a woman, in the course of these little events, has a built a new, unknown world.” This world is guided by a completely different system of values and hierarchy than the one created by the existing literary canon. Pathos and loftiness are therefore foreign to her. She creates a poetry of everyday life and adjusts the form of her poems, which contain practically none of things that were seen at the time as the essence of poetic sensitivity – rhymes, regularity, or even rhythm. Her poems are very strongly prosaic.

The canon of women’s poetry across the ocean was redefined by such poets as Celia Dropkin, sometimes called the most scandalous woman of the Yiddish literature. Her extreme openness and bluntness in expressing the empowerment of women, their desires and sexual experiences, as well as their ambivalence about motherhood were a novelty in the Yiddish literature. In her love poems, she refers in the erotic context to both paganism and Christianity as well as demonism. Also, there are plenty of sadomasochist themes in her poems. Love, death, and symbols of the broadly understood sacrum create an extremely poignant whole in her poetry, very far from the allegations of virtuousness and gentleness leveled against Jewish poems written by women.

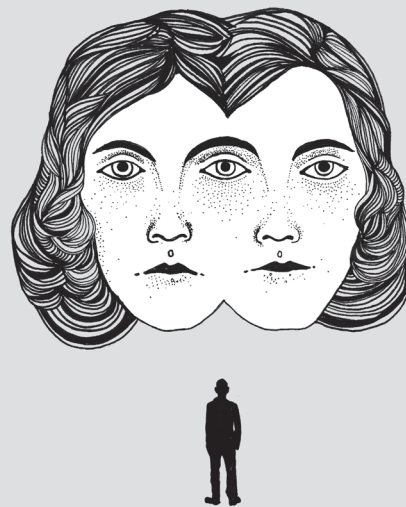
A different path towards overcoming the stereotypes around women’s poetry was chosen by Anna Margolin, who was linked to New York. A key characteristic of her poems might be described as identity transposition, which highlighted the distance between a literary work and its creator, between the author’s identity and the lyrical subject. The poet plays identity games and puts on masks. This correlates to the characteristic emotional coldness of her poems. Intentional elimination, reduction, and the suppression of feelings were the fundamental rules that informed Margolin’s poetry. Fear of the banality of sentimentality lay at the core of her creative strategy: “Margolin constantly struggled with the problem of how to place the world of emotions within her poetic world, a problem which

Towards men

followed directly from her fear of sentimentality.⁵ Her poems could be described as an expression of simultaneous, hybrid subjectivity. In her writings, the identity of the poetic “self,” which manifests itself in different forms, becomes fluid, divided into multiple subjects and internal phenomena. Multiple voices are the poet’s game, through which she escapes from what were stereotypically perceived as characteristics of women’s poetry – directness, intimacy, and the expression of the emotional sphere. The paradox of her poetry lies in the fact that her lyrics are personal, perhaps even contain elements of autobiography, yet simultaneously they are not direct.

Quietness and piousness

I have presented only a few examples of how female Yiddish poets went beyond the stereotypical framework set for women’s literature. Today, their importance in the development of Yiddish literature is commonly acknowledged. But could they hope in their own times that the novelty of their poetry would be appreciated by literary critics? Did male Yiddish authors treat women as equal partners, as fellow poets? In a vast majority of cases, no. Some of the female poets fell silent after publishing one volume of poems (for example Dropkin and Margolin). Paradoxically, the female poet who enjoyed the greatest popularity and approval among secularized critics was Miriam Ulinover, who was closest to the ostensibly condemned delicacy, sweetness, kindness, quietness, and virtuousness. She lived in Łódź and was one of the few religious and Orthodox Jewish female poets in literature. Kadya Molodowsky characterized her poetry in the following way: “quietness and piousness, every word is like taken from a *tkhine* [a Yiddish prayer for women]” (YIVO Archives, Kadya Molodowsky Collection).⁶ The lyrical subject in most of Ulinover’s poems is a girl – a granddaughter who has arrived in a big city and safeguards the rules that her grandmother instilled in her. Her poems are moralizing in their tone and maintain the spirit of neofolk naivety. They were quickly included in school curricula and won popularity, and melodies were composed to their lyrics. Critics approved of Ulinover’s poems as the quintessence of traditional Jewish womanhood. Consequently, we might think that what critics expected in Yiddish poetry was specifically the voice of an innocent girl. Nevertheless, they themselves created literary works that were utterly modern and liberated. In poems written by women, they searched for the virtuousness of their mothers and grandmothers. Here is how David Frishman, a recognized authority on the Jewish



literature, described Ulinover in the introduction to her poetry book: “She is sitting in a quiet corner in front of me (...) and reading.” This quiet corner may be symbolically treated as the place that women were expected to occupy in literature – most female authors attempted to break free from that place, sometimes rebelling against the tenderness that was ascribed to their gender.

A tender language

However, some suggested that the Yiddish language itself was particularly predestined for tenderness (the common use of diminutives, the casual tone of communication, and so on). Isaac Bashevis Singer, the only Yiddish writer to receive the Nobel Prize (in 1978), described Yiddish during the prize ceremony by referring to qualities stereotypically ascribed to women:

The high honor bestowed upon me by the Swedish Academy is also a recognition of the Yiddish language – a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government, a language which possesses no words for weapons, ammunition, military exercises, war tactics; a language that was despised by both gentiles and emancipated Jews. (...) The Yiddish mentality is not haughty. It does not take victory for granted. It does not demand and command but it muddles through, sneaks by, smuggles itself amidst the powers of destruction (...).⁶

Much to the surprise of the audience, he delivered his speech during the ceremony in Yiddish.

DRAWINGS BY ALEKSANDRA CZUŹDŹAK
FROM THE 2019 BOOK *MY WILD GOAT:*
AN ANTHOLOGY OF YIDDISH WOMEN POETS

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⁵ A. Margolin, *Lider* [Poems], Jerusalem 1991, trans. by Abraham Novershtern from *Prooftexts*. 1990 10(3).

⁶ Cited from www.nobelprize.org.