



**IN GEVEB** A JOURNAL OF YIDDISH STUDIES

**Tradition, the Individual Talent, and Yiddish**

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*In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies* (December 2015)

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# TRADITION, THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT, AND YIDDISH

Hana Wirth-Nesher

**Abstract:** *This article juxtaposes T.S. Eliot’s manifesto, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” with the study of Yiddish literature in an attempt to understand the place of Yiddish scholarship within the humanities more generally. Focusing on the field’s both dialectical and transitory characteristics—Yiddish as an international fusion language and as a bridge to Jewish modernity—this article argues that Yiddish literary studies can represent a model that promotes dialogue between cultural and scholarly communities while appreciating the very brevity of life—of the individual and collective.*

In 1919, T.S. Eliot published what has become a classic essay on literary production, “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In that essay he states the following:

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art that preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to exist *after* the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered . . . Whoever has approved this idea of order . . . will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was originally published in two parts in *The Egoist* (1919) and then collected in the volume *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays* (London: Methuen, 1920). The original essay in *The Egoist* can be found in [the digital collections of the Brown library](#). This quote is from *The Sacred Wood*, 55.

Given Eliot's seminal role in the construction of literary modernism, which held sway for most of the twentieth century and that continues to be influential, and given the central position of anti-Semitism in his concept of modern culture, I derive great pleasure in juxtaposing his manifesto, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," with Yiddish, a move that would certainly have earned a place for me in the nethermost regions of Eliot's and Dante's Catholic hell. Yet Eliot's understanding of how culture advances remains a useful tool for taking stock of literary studies, and in particular Yiddish literary studies, in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Two assumptions underlie his statement about the process of innovation in literary traditions:

1. That there is an identifiable canon of works that constitutes a tradition, and that this corpus is extensive (note the emphasis on *whole* existing order). In Eliot's words, "He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his private mind—is a mind that changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing en route, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer." (55) Notice that the framework for the tradition is both a nation ("his own country") as well as Europe, and therefore it encompasses Homer along with Shakespeare.
2. That any addition to that tradition, any work of literature considered worthy enough to be included, would require that the author, the individual talent, be in command of that tradition and in dialogue with it, and that the tradition itself would be altered by the new work that joins its ranks. In other words, the present would alter the past.

An illustration is in order, and for that I turn to Virginia Woolf during the London Blitz, which did not spare her home and library near Russell Square. At a time when her work in the British Museum library was repeatedly interrupted by gas masks, air raids, and running for shelter to London's underground, she recorded in her diary that she had found a very specific way to reaffirm what she valued in life: she set out to reread all of English literature from Chaucer, through Shakespeare, from Wordsworth through Austen, Hardy, and Dickens—in short, what was deemed the entire literary tradition to her own day.<sup>2</sup> She did so to fortify her soul; it was both a patriotic and a therapeutic act. During that time she also composed her last novel, *Between the Acts*, whose very structure is derived from the systematic unfolding of Britain's literary history. She did not regard this savoring of the tradition by her own individual talent as reneging on her bold and longstanding challenge to that tradition from the perspective of a woman writer. For Woolf, this literary tradition was in the process of being altered, both by acknowledging gaping omissions, i.e. recognition of the great works that *had not* been written by the likes of a Judith Shakespeare, and by recognition of the works that *had*—Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Woolf's own daring novels. For Woolf, it was

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<sup>2</sup> Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, eds., *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Harcourt, 1980), VI: 466.

possible to reimagine English literature because there was a consensus about the existing tradition—a vast repertoire, but not so vast that it could not be acquired by a passionate, avid reader.

Those of us who were trained in the 1960s and 70s can recall the reverence reserved for such omnivorous readers, for scholars like Eric Auerbach. Berlin born, stripped of his position at the University of Marburg in 1935, after the Nazis came to power, Auerbach spent the war years in what was perceived as an outpost in Istanbul, writing his magnum opus, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*.<sup>3</sup> Who among us and our mentors did not imagine Auerbach as a hero of literary and culture study?<sup>4</sup> *Mimesis* commences with Homer and ends with Woolf, encompassing Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Chrétien de Troye, Rabelais, Stendhal, among others. He had all of civilization, at least all of European civilization, in his head, which is what mattered to him at that time and place. In the sublime isolation of his exile from the Europe that he revered and that had cast him out, he drew the map of world literature as it was known at the time, largely, of course, written in French.<sup>5</sup>

Today, there are no Auerbachs and no Northrup Fries<sup>6</sup> to chart the map of a literary tradition considered prerequisite for the individual talent to make his or her contribution. Such magisterial works tend to be read as acts of hubris that mistake what is actually a local tradition for a universal literary and cultural system. One of the pitfalls to be avoided in literary study today is proposing a “totalizing” or master narrative as it relies on a magnitude of power and privilege that is suspect. The recent *New Literary History of American Literature* published by Harvard University Press, for example, begins with a disclaimer. What is new about this literary history, assert the editors, is that it does not present one integrated, organic view of literary history, but instead, gathers together a group of contributors, each analyzing a specific moment and a specific expression of culture within the year they were assigned.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a review of the first volume of this flagship new series of literary histories begins with this assessment of the entire enterprise of literary history: “Teaching literature to perpetuate a separate culture and identity would seem no longer appropriate . . . Harvard University Press has come to the rescue with a spectacular collage challenging our very idea of literature as a monument, and proposing instead a patchwork of activity whose vitality lies in the sense that all is open to question and discovery.”<sup>8</sup> In short, there can be no presumption of comprehensiveness.

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

<sup>4</sup> *Mimesis*, from its initial chapter comparing the Bible and the Iliad (the sacrifice of Isaac and the scar of Odysseus), has often been read as Auerbach’s passionate preservation of a Judeo-Christian culture with which he identified and from which he was banished by the Nazis.

<sup>5</sup> Pascale Casanova’s book on world literature, written only a few years ago, still identifies France as the true Republic of Letters; myths die hard). Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>7</sup> Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, eds., *A New Literary History of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Sanford S. Ames, Review of *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier, *SubStance* 20, no.3 (1991): 137.

The perpetuation of a separate culture and identity appears no longer to be welcome in the academy, in literary studies as well as in fields like history and anthropology. Master narratives are being resisted in an attempt to understand the interconnectedness of texts and cultures. In other words, Eliot's given "tradition," of source materials is no longer self-evident, often for ideological and/or ethical reasons. Scholarship instead seeks to give voice to the silent, to empower, to decentralize, or to cast a wider net. This hesitation to offer master narratives also results from new information technologies. There is too much information for a single integrated picture of the literary field, and hence, the modest admission that fragmented knowledge is a more honest expression of what it is that we can ever really know, and of what it is that we can never fully know. Take note of the first-rate journal edited at the Hebrew University entitled *Partial Answers*. All of this, of course, comes at a price.

So where is Yiddish when it comes to tradition and the individual talent?

At a time when literary studies in general, as expressed in canon formation, fields of study, departments, and other manifestations of the organization of knowledge, have relinquished the goal of mapping out the tradition, the mammoth effort to preserve Yiddish literature, often digitally, is ironically at its peak. And it is relatively safe to assume that a "tradition," in Eliot's terms, can be traced, with more or less emphasis on individual writers in accordance with the agenda of each individual scholar. There may be debate over who constitutes a major or minor figure, but an existing corpus of Yiddish literature has become available to the next generation of scholars, indeed accessible, and it is not beyond the scope of an individual to master a core tradition. Moreover, it is unlikely that a heretofore unknown manuscript will dramatically alter what has been acknowledged to be that tradition.<sup>9</sup>

The insistence and dedication that marks this mapping of a canon must be regarded within the specific context of the history of Yiddish. The field of post-war Yiddish studies has predictably been marked by erasure and loss and is understandably often motivated by preservation, articulated in an elegiac mode. How can it be otherwise when the object of that scholarship is a language that was nearly annihilated? Therefore, postwar Yiddish study has had a sense of urgency about it, from the taping and documenting of the survivors of Yiddish civilization in Europe to the monumental efforts to create archives, libraries, and electronic databases of the writings produced in worlds erased by violence, neglect, or indifference. The period of rescue that aims to store, map, catalogue, and document is gradually coming to an end, now that the majority of Yiddish books are available electronically from the Yiddish Book Center and work proceeds apace to catalogue all signed articles in the Yiddish press in the Index to Yiddish Periodicals. For established literatures, safeguarded by nations and enduring institutions, the motto of Harvard's *New Literary Histories* may indeed be applicable: "teaching literature to perpetuate a separate culture and identity would seem no longer appropriate." But is this really the case when it comes to Yiddish? In some sense, no—and in some sense also yes. I will return to this momentarily.

In order to provide an answer to this question Eliot's concept needs to be revised to accommodate the situation of Yiddish literature. As I have just said, it is unlikely that

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<sup>9</sup> Whether this is applicable to Soviet Yiddish writing will need to be addressed by specialists in that field.

a new individual talent—a writer—will publish a work of such originality, or that an entirely new genre will emerge, that will alter the literary landscape of Yiddish dramatically. Granted, this prediction is based on a particular model of literary production that assumes that literary works are usually generated by individuals whose familiarity, indeed their mastery, of the language and literary tradition from which they are composing their work, results from lived experience beyond the classroom, library, or summer camp. Such a model depends on a language's attachment to a vernacular community, in the sense that Jeffrey Shandler uses the term in his anthropological look at current Yiddish practice outside of Haredi communities.<sup>10</sup> Granted that the very term "community" in today's world also means virtual community and granted that Yiddish tweeting, blogging, and surfing is alive and well on the Internet, the effect of this on Yiddish cultural production has yet to be seen. But I would maintain that without a Yiddish community in a more traditional sense, the corpus of Yiddish literature will probably not be affected in the near future, and since it is a manageable corpus, this should be a boon for literary research. Yet, it also means that the intellectual excitement generated by the present altering the past cannot be relied on for inspiration, in the way that Salman Rushdie has been read back into Dickens, Joyce, or the Brontes, or Woolf can be read back into Jane Austen, or Derek Walcott can be read back into T.S. Eliot.

If that is the case, what can be the source of innovation in Yiddish literary studies? It will clearly have to come from the readings of these works, from innovative methods of analysis, and, most significantly, from a generation of scholars for whom Yiddish is not a native language, nor is it the language of their separate culture and identity, intent on perpetuating as an exclusive closed system. It is important to distinguish between the cultural critiques currently being written *in* Yiddish (in the *Forverts* among other venues) and scholarly works *on* Yiddish literature and culture. The former is an admirable and poignant undertaking in the service of fostering an international community of Yiddish readers. It is a special community speaking among themselves. But scholarship *on* Yiddish speaks to a far broader community, usually in English, and is almost inevitably comparatist, in the sense that it situates that scholarship within the histories, ideologies, and methodologies currently employed in the humanities. So even when that work is synthetic and aims for a master narrative, it is generally informed by other bodies of literature, languages, cultures, and perspectives. Today's scholarship bears the imprint of two major developments: a post-Soviet world, where the Soviet-Yiddish canon is being explored by specialists in the field who are the first post-Soviet generation, and young scholars who have by and large been educated in a comparatist framework, and who are not native speakers.

To put it another way, at this critical crossroads in Yiddish studies, in this transition from native speakers in a separate community to non-native speakers inhabiting several communities, young scholars "choose Yiddish," the title of a recent [collection of essays](#) by a generation that takes Yiddish seriously and that is reinventing the field. In the introduction to that volume, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that two tropes persist about Yiddish: 1) that it is dead; 2) that "we are now in a post-ideological period of Yiddish studies." "How does one

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

envision a field,” she asks, “whose language is said to be dead and the study of which has been damned for so long for fear of its ideological investments?”<sup>11</sup>

In a recent article in the *Forverts*, and now in translation on *In geveb*, Mikhail Krutikov also discusses the issue of how to envision the field. He rightly points out that Yiddish studies, from its inception, has always turned to problems and themes that are under discussion in the “broader world.” According to him, modern Yiddish culture developed in response to the emergence of nationalism before and after the First World War. In a similar manner, we could argue, the issues of contemporary humanities and literary research, such as gender studies and queer theory, political theory, post-colonial studies, or Holocaust studies are setting the agenda for innovation in Yiddish literary study. But where, Krutikov asks, is Yiddish study for its own sake, *lishmo*? Where is literary history, lexicography, bibliography, or the history of the language? Do we have to make our peace, he says, with such “fragmentation” of the field?<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Krutikov justifiably asks elsewhere in his article, how will this next generation of scholars acquire a mastery of Yiddish language and culture so that they have the basic tools to undertake innovative research? Let’s assume that this latter issue of language acquisition has to do with the place of Yiddish instruction in institutions of higher learning, and that it is a strategic, organizational, and budgetary problem. Therefore, it is an obstacle that can be overcome. (For the sake of argument, let’s be optimistic about this.) The question that remains is the nature of the knowledge that is generated, and the inspiration or motivation for making it new. And what, after all, is “fragmentary knowledge” that we should be so worried about it? And, for that matter, what would innovative research be that exists *for its own sake*?

There are two issues here: the first is competence and responsible research, and the second is innovative intellectual inquiry. Regarding the first, no field of study should compromise on competence, but how to define competence is not self evident. Linguistic competence may indeed be clear, but there is no consensus when it comes to defining a research problem or to acquiring a canon or tradition in the humanities today. If every writer draws a circle according to a geometry of his own making, as Henry James put it, how big must that circle be for literary studies to be competent?<sup>13</sup> As I have already mentioned, sweeping studies like those undertaken by Dov Sadan are greatly respected for their achievements but are currently suspect as productive approaches in the humanities.<sup>14</sup> Ironically and aptly, Dan Miron’s sweeping and monumental study, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary*, astutely argues against all totalizing models of literary systems, advocating a method that identifies thick cultural moments of contiguity that do not add up to a linear literary history, in this case, in a

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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Foreword: Yiddish Studies: Toward a Twenty-First-Century Mandate” in Lara Rabinovitch, Shiri Goren, and Hannah S. Pressman, eds., *Choosing Yiddish: New Frontiers of Language and Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), xi.

<sup>12</sup> Mikhail Krutikov, “Vi brengt men arayn khidushim in der yidish-forshung,” 18 January 2015, *Forverts*, <http://yiddish.forward.com/articles/184574/yiddish-studies-from-a-new-perspective/?p=all#ixzz3PAdOhvOx>. This article has been translated and slightly modified here: <http://ingeveb.org/articles/yiddish-studies-from-a-new-perspective>

<sup>13</sup> Henry James, *Roderick Hudson* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917), vii.

<sup>14</sup> Dov Sadan, *Avney bedek* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz ha-meuchad, 1962).

field referred to as “Jewish literature.”<sup>15</sup> So going back to Eliot’s individual talent, and to Krutikov’s timely question about the source of innovation in a field where the object of inquiry in terms of its corpus is fairly fixed, it becomes even clearer that innovation will depend on new approaches to literary and cultural studies.

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Since the study of Yiddish literature, from the outset, employed concepts developed in the broader world—from nationalist ideologies to Freud and Jung—the current employment of postcolonial theory, gender studies, or globalization is a continuation of a sound, indeed, a necessary strategy for intellectual vibrancy. There have been many attempts to mainstream Yiddish and Jewish, literature—via semiotics (Binyamin Harshav), Holocaust literature (David Roskies), minority literature (Chana Kronfeld), postcolonialism (Marc Caplan and Naomi Seidman), to name a few. In a recent issue of *PMLA*, Lital Levy and Allison Schachter present their case for mainstreaming in showing how Yiddish literature plays a major role in the concept of Jewish literature as both a local and a transnational phenomenon. In this essay, Jewish literature becomes an exemplar of current theories of world literature, which focus on the circulation and distribution of writings, thereby challenging the neat division of literary canons into circumscribed places like nations.<sup>16</sup> By aiming at a readership of literary theorists and comparatists, the recent special issue of *Poetics Today* devoted to Modern Yiddish Literary Studies also aims at mainstreaming Yiddish scholarship.<sup>17</sup>

The collective critique of the term “nation” and its relation to language leads me to some concluding remarks.

Nation-states often are assumed to take on the duty of safeguarding linguistic and cultural practices; no nation-state safeguards Yiddish. Yiddish, its speakers and its writings, have always been transnational. The high value attributed to the concept of the transnational in the humanities today, in history and literary study, is derived from the subject position of being inside a nation, from an agenda for research that restores the complexity of human collective achievements over time that were not confined within national boundaries. Such an agenda aims to give voice to marginal groups *within nations*, once perceived in a wider context, and to look for affinities and alliances that cross national boundaries and that complicate identity. Yiddish study has the same effect of challenging monolingual and homogeneous views of national identity everywhere that it is read and studied and promoting pluralism, according to the particular canon and literary history of its locale—America, Israel, Russia, Poland, etc. Yet the history of Yiddish study, as we all know, has also made preservation of language and culture an ethical imperative, sometimes preservation for its own sake, preservation as elegy. The dissonance between these two aims requires some attention.

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<sup>15</sup> Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Lital Levy and Allison Schachter, “Jewish Literature/ World Literature: Between the Local and the Transnational,” *PMLA* 130, no. 1 (January 2015): 92-109.

<sup>17</sup> Hana Wirth-Nesher, ed., *Modern Yiddish Literary Studies*, special edition *Poetics Today* 35 no. 3 (Fall 2014).

Furthermore, research on Yiddish literature and culture is almost entirely conducted in the English language, not only because this has become the lingua franca of the academic world, but also because there is no academic discourse in the language of the literature under study as there is with languages safeguarded by nation-states. As the enterprise of Yiddish literary scholarship—conferences, publishers, and readers—is taking place in the English language, what effect has this had and will it have on the methodologies that are employed, and on the nature of the research questions that are proposed? How many studies will integrate Yiddish texts into larger research projects, and how many will be exclusively devoted to Yiddish topics? Jeremy Dauber, in the epilogue to *Choosing Yiddish*, puts it well: “It may be that Yiddish studies, as a mode rather than a specific corpus or core area of study, will be a crucial part of many scholars’ work.”<sup>18</sup>

Will the existence of a literary tradition that has largely been mapped and that is no longer changing in dramatic ways (in T.S. Eliot’s sense) mean that the field lends itself to more comprehensive and panoramic studies than other linguistic and literary traditions? Will the urgency in preserving it also require a wider scope, and master narratives? Perhaps, but also not necessarily, the very concept of what is a literary text, what Eliot assumed and what has fueled much Yiddish literary scholarship up to now, is no longer common ground. For some time now, the very category of literature has expanded well beyond the singular work of a singular author as object of inquiry; there is now only a fine line between literary and cultural studies, as “traditions” proliferate.

What then can Yiddish scholarship bring to the humanities that stems from its particular history, circumstances, and tradition? I believe Yiddish scholarship has two salient and valuable features: it is both dialectical and transitory. As a fusion language and international culture, it is always in dialogue with other languages and cultures. It is inherently dialectical and comparative. Secondly, even the great classic Yiddish modern authors, devoted as they were to their vision, their craft, their readers and their language, knew that they were a bridge, a transition, a fragile persevering moment. At the end of the day, dialogue across the boundaries of individual and group identity and a keen awareness of being transitory—these are two aspects of Yiddish, of its tradition, that each individual talent engaged with it knows very well. Dialogue outside of one’s own community and an appreciation of the brevity of life—individual and collective—used to be called wisdom, a word seldom heard at the university these days. Yiddish can bring it back.

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<sup>18</sup> Jeremy Dauber, “Epilogue,” in *Choosing Yiddish*, 379.