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Four Theses on Translating Yiddish Literature in the 21st Century

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There's a conversation I find myself having with friends and colleagues who don't read Yiddish; sometimes it's a real conversation, sometimes it's an imagined one. I say, "There's this great Yiddish writer you ought to read" – Sholem Aleichem, or David Bergelson, or Itzik Manger, or Anna Margolin. My friends and colleagues are interested, and they ask for specific recommendations. And then I name a translation, and it's not a great translation, and they read it, and they're disappointed; or maybe, realizing that this is what's going to happen, I back away from my own enthusiasm, and say, "Well, there's no really good translation," and we go on to talk of other things.

The following theses have diverse sources: my general fascination with questions of translation, my own work as a translator, my investigations of the translational work of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, some studies I've made of particular translations of Yiddish texts. Their chief source, though, is a desire to give that familiar conversation a happier ending.

1. It's a good time for translating Yiddish writers in a new way.

A couple of summers ago, I read through most of the English translations of Sholem Aleichem. I was shocked by much of what I read: bad translations, truncated

translations, de-judaized translations, relentlessly unilingual translations, stiffly uncolloquial or pseudocolloquial translations. My first response was to blame the translators, my second to think that translating Sholem Aleichem was impossible. Neither of those responses was altogether wrong. Some of the translators were incompetent or lazy, and translating Sholem Aleichem is at best difficult.

But neither response was altogether right, either; what I wasn't seeing was that the principles by which I was judging these translators weren't for the most part the principles by which they were working, or, for that matter, the principles by which translators of many other Yiddish writers were working.

Their principles, I came to understand, were principles of popularization. These translators weren't for the most part writing for university presses. They didn't provide footnotes, and the introductions they wrote for their work were welcoming and cheerful but not very often scholarly. Their translational changes, whether skillful or awkward, were apparently made in the service of an imagined reader whom they proposed to protect from boredom and confusion and pain. Sometimes, though not often, they said or implied as much. In her preface to the collection of Sholem Aleichem stories called *The Old Country*, Frances Butwin wrote, "Some stories just could not be transplanted and had to be abandoned.… The problem was not only how to untangle [Tevye's] misquotations, but also how to render mistakes in one language within another language into a third language. We simply had to omit many passages." Golda Werman, introducing her translation of David Bergelson's *Departing (Opgang)*, wrote similarly that "the problems of capturing the rhythms of the original language in another tongue are legion. When rendered faithfully, these constructions often grind painfully on the English reader's ear. Since my goal was to make Bergelson's work live in English as it does in Yiddish, I had to make compromises."

Probably there was a moment when such principles and practices made sense. Earlier translators were bringing Yiddish authors to readers altogether unfamiliar with them; for that reason, they may have wanted to move their texts as far as possible in the direction of the general public. More specifically, they may have wanted to suggest to Gentile readers that Yiddish writers were unthreatening and unalien; at the time, that may have been a reasonable strategy.

But times have changed, and translations can change with them. We have seen how Jewish writers can suc-ceed in America even when, or especially when, they present a radically difficult, uncompromised vision of Jewish life. Henry Roth's dazzlingly complex *Call It Sleep* is more widely read than ever; Cynthia Ozick's angrily unassimilated "Envy" is a classic, suitably canonized in the new *Norton Anthology of Jewish American Literature*; Everett Fox's Bible translations give the public nothing of what's biblically familiar, replacing "altar" with "slaughter-site" and "sacrifice" with "near-offering," yet they are best-sellers. We have also seen how Jewish translators who refuse to "make compromises" can create artistically compelling work – not in spite of their refusal, but because of it. Hillel Halkin's translation of *Tevye the Dairyman* is more exact and difficult than Frances Butwin's, but also more alive. Joseph Sherman's new translation of Bergelson's *Opgang* is more complete than Werman's, but gives us a far more resistant and haunting story.

In the world we live in today, we should demand, and can appreciate, English translations of Yiddish writers in their full intensity.

2. Translations of Yiddish writers should give full measure.

No human author is perfect—even Homer nods, and not every word written by a Yiddish writer is pure gold. But many are great writers, and nearly all their words matter. Translations of their works should render them in full.

This would seem an obvious principle, but it hasn't always been such. Consider the beginning of Shlomo Katz's 1954 translation of Sholem Aleichem's *Dos porfolk,* published in the classic Howe-Greenberg *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*: "It was a damp and dreary spring night. The world slept in darkness and in silence. It was a night for weird dreams."

Sholem Aleichem's Yiddish text is considerably less laconic. It starts with a Mark Twain-like word "from the author": "The writer of the story asks the reader not to look for allegories, not to try to guess whom the author had in mind.... " Katz's translation omits this preface as well as the section title, "the fearful night." And when in Sholem Aleichem's text do we get to "it was a damp and dreary spring night"? Not for a while, and in a sense not ever. The text of the story proper begins as follows:

I*t was one of the dark, muddy nights before Pesakh. Everything was wrapped in darkness. Everything slept. It was still and calm everywhere and everywhere. Even the fish in the water were resting, afraid to stick their heads into God's world in this dark, silent, unmoving night. On such a night, there is work and to spare for the Dreamlord. He does not hold back on colors, freely dispensing fantasies never seen on land or sea . . ..*

Shlomo Katz was an impressive figure, editor of *Midstream* and a courageous early writer on Black-Jewish relations. And his truncating translation is far from unique. Henry Goodman's 1961 translation of Moshe Nadir's wonderful sketch, "I: As Echo" cuts Nadir's first two paragraphs; A. H. Gross's 1946 translation of Sholem Asch's *East River* cuts the novel's first sentence – "Let a child's hand only touch a common toy, and the toy becomes alive" – and then, later, cuts two whole chapters!

Cutting Asch's sentence is defensible, perhaps; the declaration is sentimental and abstract. But Asch's sentimentality is both his weakness and his strength. And surely omitting two chapters is simply unacceptable, no matter how long-winded we think Asch is. Nadir, in contrast, is a master of literary economy; why on earth cut him? And who now would not turn with pleasure and wonder from Katz's compressed adaptation to Sholem Aleichem's long-breathed, spooky original? Who would not want the full measure of what our extraordinary writers have created?

3. Translations of Yiddish literature should allow characters their full measure of Jewish competence.

It's obvious that most characters in Yiddish literature are competent speakers of Yiddish. What's less obvious, though, especially to those reading Yiddish literature in translation, is that being a competent speaker of Yiddish means having mastered not just a grammar and a vocab-ulary, but also a set of linguistic and cultural conven-tions. The same is true of English speakers, of course, and of speakers of other languages, though perhaps we're less aware of this competence if, as native speakers, we already possess it.

As competent speakers of English, we know when to congratulate and when to commiserate, how loud and how formally to speak at a funeral or a party or a board meeting, to whom we say "sir" and whom we're allowed to address by first name. We know when profane and obscene language is permitted, required, and forbidden, when "no" means "yes" and vice-versa, which holidays are associated with eating turkey and which with parades and school vacations. If we're speakers of American English, we're likely to possess certain technical vocabularies even if we're not masters of the We have seen techniques in question; we know what it means, for example, to strike out or get to first base or fumble.

The cultural competence of Yiddish speakers is reflected in all these ways, but also in two additional ones. First, there is in Yiddish a set of quasi-technical terms for naming persons and things specifically connected with religion, e.g., the names for the constituent parts and rituals of the sabbath and the holidays, for this life and the life to come, for such religious functionaries as rabiners
and *rebeim* and *rabonim* and *tsadikim*. In "Envy," Cynthia Ozick's anguished Edelshtein writes, "You have to KNOW SOMETHING! At least the difference between a *rav* and a *rebbeh*!" Knowing Yiddish means, among other things, knowing that difference.

Second, there's a set of interjections for our own attitudes toward things we have said or are about to say. James Matisoff 's wonderful book, *Blessings, Curses, Hopes, and Fears*, calls these "psycho-ostensive expressions." By uttering such expressions, Matisoff tells us, Jews recognize or summon or avert good or evil, in relation to themselves or to others, from human beings, demons, or God. *Keyneynhore* (literally, "no evil eye," used, as Weinreich's dictionary says, "in mentioning any gratifying achievement") is perhaps the most familiar of these; other familiar ones are *khas v'kholile* ("God forbid," said in referring to an untoward event that might happen) and *nit oyf keyn yidn gedakht* ("May it not happen to a Jew," referring to an untoward event that has happened already). Matisoff composes a brilliant artificial sentence contrasting two such expressions: "Governer Reygn, *zol er oysgemekt vern, git mayn zun dem profesor*, *a gezunt tsu im, keyn hesofe nit hayyor*"("Governor Reagan, may he be erased, isn't giving any raise this year to my son the professor, a health to him").

Translators of Yiddish writers should retain both these aspects of their characters' Jewish competence. This is not an easy task, because doing so can make the translated texts more resistant and unfamiliar to the un-comprehending Jewish or Gentile reader. But to do otherwise uproots and flattens the characters. Take a couple of small examples of the first type from Norbert Guterman's excellent translation of Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The Mirror." The demon narrator is telling the beautiful Tsirel,

soon to be his victim, that in *ganeydn*, "The wise are the footstools of the beautiful." Tsirel responds, "My *rebetsin* taught me the opposite." Ganeydn means first "the garden of Eden" and then, through a long history of rabbinic interpretation, "paradise." Rebetsin is the feminine form of the word for rabbi, but in practice means "rabbi's wife." Guterman renders ganeydn by "paradise," and *rebetsin* by "teacher." Neither rendering reflects the Jewish specificity of the language or the speakers' competence in using it. Which is not to say that there aren't risks in retaining *ganeydn* and r*ebetsin*, or creating something closer to them in English; such choices would baffle some readers, put off others, perhaps require a footnote. But these risks are worth taking: if translators don't take them, readers encounter far less interesting works of literature. Retaining the psycho-ostensive expressions poses similar risks and offers similar gains. Consider the haunting passage in *Tevye the Dairyman* where Tevye tells Sholem Aleichem about the death of his wife. Frances Butwin has Tevye say, "But first of all, before I go on, I must tell you that I have been a widower for some time. My Golde, may she rest in peace, is dead." Benjamin Harshav's more uncompromisingly literal translation restores an important expression: "In short, I must tell you, first of all first-of-alls, that I was left, may it not happen to you, a widower, my Golde, may she rest in peace, died." The Yiddish expression behind "may it not happen to you" is *nit far aykh gedakht*. It's the sort of expression that Matisoff would call "malo-allo-fugi-tive" – it's a petition to avert evil from someone other than the speaker. In one sense, it tells us nothing. We know that Tevye wishes Sholem Aleichem well, and what we're mostly interested in is Tevye's account of Golde's death. In another sense, though, the expression is part of Tevye's Jewish competence, and, in particular, part of the vigilant Jewish awareness of the barely controllable power and resonance of the words we speak.

Tevye has been left a widower, and is speaking of his condition to the unwidowed Sholem Aleichem. Speaking of so unhappy a condition is dangerous; the words that describe the condition might, in being voiced, actually inflict the same tragedy upon Sholem Aleichem. So Tevye courteously, alertly, almost automatically guards against that possibility. Multiply this small omission on Butwin's part by a thousand, and the consequences are considerable; the characters belong less tenaciously to the Jewish world they inhabit. They have a less earnest, witty, and knowing awareness of the words they speak and of their consequences.

4. Translations of Yiddish literary works should be as multilingual as the originals.

Yiddish literature depicts a multilingual world, and sometimes it depicts that world multilingually. Certain Yiddish writers, that is, have chosen to represent both Yiddish and Hebrew, the Jewish community's two internal languages; or Yiddish and Russian, the most important external language for that community in Eastern Europe; or Yiddish and English, the important external language for that community in America; or all these languages together. When Yiddish writers make such choices, translations of their texts should be as richly multilingual as the originals. They need not be multilingual in the same way; but they should be multi-lingual in some way.

Consider the beginning of Asch's *East River*. It describes a basement room strewn with dilapidated toys. The language is for the most part standard Yiddish, but there are three poignant exceptions: *tedi-ber* ("teddy-bear"), *lali-pop* ("lollipop"), and *kristmes* ("Christmas"). These exceptions reflect Asch's deliberate choices. The first two have no Yiddish equivalents, and Asch selects them for their exactness and their American pungency. The third, *kristmes*, does have an equivalent in European Yiddish: *nitl*,from a Latin word meaning "birthday" or a Hebrew word meaning "the hanged one," or both. So why does Asch choose the American term? Maybe because, in the old world, Christmas – that is, *nitl* – was associated with bigotry; old-world Jews traditionally did not study Torah on Christmas, because it was a day when zealous Christians might seek out congregated Jews to persecute. But here in the new world, Asch seems to be saying, there aren't going to be persecutions of that sort; and in such a world as this, where the Christian holiday will have a different meaning, it should be referred to by a different word. These choices are artistically expressive, as are many of the choices that Asch makes to incorporate, or not to incorporate, American terms into his language. His willingness to speak of *kristmes*, for example, is part of a complex pattern that includes as well his decision to describe what a Catholic priest offers a penitent in a confession booth by the vividly Jewish and Hebrew term *slikhe umekhile* — penitential prayer and pardon – the former component of which specifically, inventively, and audaciously evokes a Jewish prayer, the *Avinu malkeinu* so often recited during the Days of Awe, to describe a Christian ritual!

Gross's translation makes it impossible to see any of this. It's not, I admit, easy to devise satisfactory strategies for making it visible. Italics or boldface to indicate words borrowed from English? Spelling such words to reflect their Yiddish pronunciation? Less direct ways of stressing the Englishness of these words? But if we were convinced, as I think we should be, that the multilingual character of some Yiddish works is essential to their artistic functioning, we could probably invent better strategies than we've devised so far. Sometimes, moreover, reflecting the multilingualism of Yiddish literature is simply a matter of translational nerve. The beginning of Sholem Aleichem's "The Haunted Tailor" is a wonderful mix of mock-biblical Hebrew and mock-realistic Yiddish. How should it be translated? I read a variety of early translations, with their unsuccessful or moderately successful attempts at rendering Sholem Aleichem's variety of languages into a variety of English tones; and, since no translator had had the nerve to keep the Hebrew, and since in general translations are expected to be unilingual, even when the original works are any-thing but, I thought, well, maybe this is the best one can do. And then, one day, I came across the revelatory simplicity of this translation by Leonard Wolf:

Ish hoyo be-zolodievka, there was a man in Zolodievka, a village near Mazapevke, not far from Haplapovitch and Kozodoievka, between Yampoli and Stristch, just on the way from Pistchi-Yavadeh to Petschi-Khvost to Tetreve and from there to Yehupetz. U'shmo shimon-Eliyohu*, and his name was Shimon-Eli*.

The virtues of the above passage are obvious – it's exact, it's exuberant, it's densely contrapuntal. The risk is equally obvious: unintelligibility. What makes me think the risk is worth running, though, is that good writers writing in English and in other languages run a comparable risk all the time, thinking it essential to their art. I'd cite in

this connection a poignant passage from the Korean American writer Chang-Rae Lee's wonderful and widely read *Native Speaker*:

*My mother said to me once that suffering is the noblest art, the quieter the better. If you bite your lip and understand that this is the only world, you will perhaps persist and endure…I will hear her voice always: San konno san itta. Over the mountains there are mountains.***

Our translations of Yiddish literature should offer readers the multilingual complexity its authors sought to record, because that complexity is an integral element of their art. Lee's novel and others like it suggest that such complexity can engage readers rather than putting them off.

I'm not claiming that adherence to these four theses is all that's necessary to produce better English translations of Yiddish literature. Translation is too much of an art, and too little of a science, to be reducible to rules. And the history of Yiddish in English reveals notable successes that don't adhere to one or more of the theses I've stated. Hillel Halkin's brilliant version of *Tevye* doesn't always give full measure; and Saul Bellow's epoch-making version of "Gimpel the Fool" obliterates Singer's exact distinction between being a tam and being a nar.

What I am claiming is this: that Yiddish writers have created great literature; that much of that literature hasn't been adequately translated; and that a strong but unservile adherence to these four theses might free some translators to deal with that work more fully. "Free" may seem an odd word, given that the theses I've advanced here are mostly formulated as obligations – to give full measure, to retain markers of Jewish competence and Jewish multilingualism. I believe these obligations are real, and that we attend too little to what Franz Rosenzweig called "the muse of precision." But with these obligations comes a freedom: the freedom from fear of the audience. What's wrong with the tradition of popularization isn't that it wants to aid the reader – all translation does that. What's wrong is that the reader is being falsely envisaged as naïve and unliterary. If we imagine, instead, English-language readers who seek to confront all that Yiddish literature has to offer, we should feel both free and obliged to give those readers what they want.

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* The chapters in question are 10 and 24 of the first part. To be fair: Gross's translation appeared in 1946, the same year as the Yiddish original; it's possible that the decision to abridge Asch's novel was Asch's as well as Gross's. That wouldn't, in my view, make the decision more plausible; but it would make it less high-handed.

** Chang-Rae Lee, Native Speaker (New York: Riverhead, 1995), p. 333. I take pleasure in citing a passage that's both so remote from Yiddish literature and so akin to it. "Over the mountains there are mountains" might be a proverb spoken by Sheyne-Sheyndl in criticism of Menakhem-Mendl!

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