

# Modernist Yiddish Aesthetics, I. L. Peretz's Middlebrow Yiddish Poetics, and the Place of Yehoash in Modernist and Middlebrow Literary History

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Yehoash (the pen name for Solomon Bloomgarden, 1870-1927) was a revered Yiddish poet during the interwar period, the Holocaust, and the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> This essay establishes a critical methodology for recovering the work of this important Jewish poet. Before Yiddish poetry became closely identified with modernism, Yehoash's inclusive and comprehensive aesthetic received broad approval for its function as a bridge between the sacred and secular dimensions of modern Jewish experience.<sup>2</sup> That bridge offered the possibility of cultural survival during the Holocaust, especially for American Jews whose Yiddish speaking relatives were being murdered in Europe. Although the conservative, preservative function of Yehoash's poetry runs counter to progressive modernist notions of emancipation from tradition, it serves an important role in the ongoing restoration of Yiddish literature after the Holocaust. Even the skeptical modernist Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein, a writer whose interwar practices of inward looking Introspectivism run counter to Yehoash's encyclopedic poetics, goes so far as to say that Yehoash foresaw the catastrophe of the Holocaust and strove to provide "a guarantee against the decline of our language" by "rescuing thousands of Yiddish words" from the "here and newness" and "say it straight compulsion" of an interwar international Jewish world whose creativity had been diminished by violence and assimilation (Glatstein, *in tokh gekumen* 65-66). For Glatstein, Yehoash's project of "renewal and revitalization" through the "harmonizing" of the modern and the traditional (Glatstein 67) represented a fulfillment of the "organic integration" (Winer 93) of secular and sacred literature, a process popularized in the early twentieth century by the revered Yiddish writer I. L. Peretz, and continued by Yehoash after Peretz's death in 1915. Yehoash's

*chumash far kinder* [*Bible for Children*] was a popular text for children who could not read Hebrew, his trilingual (Hebrew, Yiddish, and English) edition of *pirke avot* [*Sayings of the Fathers*] made Jewish learning available to a variety of readers, his translation of the *Tanakh* [Hebrew Bible] was a best seller, particular in an inexpensive two volume posthumous edition published during the Holocaust, and his later poetry (1919-1921) captures the “entire horror” of a catastrophe to come. Yet perhaps because the sacred and secularizing dimensions of textual Jewishness interact in such strange ways in Yehoash’s poetry, and perhaps because these interactions offer strikingly different insights into Yiddish representations of modernity than those provided by more well-known modernist Yiddish poets, the work of this important poet remains obscure and forgotten.<sup>3</sup> This abandonment is especially troubling because Yehoash’s work was so highly regarded as a symbol of the redemptive power and tenacious toughness of Yiddish culture during the Holocaust. When the inhabitants of the Vilna ghetto looked for an example of consolation and hope in March, 1943, they staged an exhibition of Yehoash’s literary career, celebrating the triumph of Yiddish as an enduring force in Jewish culture.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I suggest that Yehoash’s construction of a comprehensive, encyclopedic notion of textual Jewishness can be recovered if we read his work in terms of “middlebrow” patterns of literary textual production and consumption. Jewish literary histories that center around modernist aesthetics have left no place for Yehoash and the nearly messianic role he played in Jewish literary history. The middlebrow project of broad based cultural self definition begun by I. L. Peretz and continued by Yehoash, on the other hand, enables us to understand why such a wide variety of Jewish readers found their own hybrid dilemmas expressed in Yehoash’s poetry. When Yehoash juxtaposes traditional Jewish conventions, literary norms, and traditional modes of representation with modern experiences of disorientation, disgust, wonder, and (often sexualized) astonishment, for example, he creates a “bundling” of optimism and “general terror” (Glatstein, *in tokh gekumen* 66) that contrasts sharply with interwar modernist assertions of artistic autonomy, independence, and emancipation from tradition.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, his literary construction of Jewish cultural multiplicity, irreducibility, and incommensurability is accomplished through an aesthetic that insistently resists modernist claims of emancipatory originality. In particular, Yehoash’s “beloved as text” poems stand in stark contrast to modernist Yiddish representations of textuality in history and poetry. I suggest that, in addition to critical Yiddish traditions based on loss, exile, rupture, and destruction, we consider more popular Yiddish traditions based on a playful, expansive, irreverent understanding of Jewish “middlebrow” identity as multiple, irreducible, and contiguous (rather than continuous or discontinuous) with itself.

### Middlebrow Yiddish Literature and the Question of Tradition

The critical commonplace that Yiddish modernism created a new form of “secular scripture” (Hoffman 147) to be studied as assiduously as sacred scripture has validated the translation and close analysis of Yiddish poems as serious literature, but it has also created a significant rift in Jewish literary scholarship. It is clear that we know too little about the kinds of literary traditions against which modernist Yiddish poets were rebelling and towards which Yiddish poets might have looked during the Holocaust. To rely on a notion of Jewish “tradition” that is restricted to liturgical literature or to proto-modernist predecessors as the countertext upon which Yiddish literary modernist aesthetics are based, as many critics have done, is to work in a semi-darkness in which only those poems amenable to modernist readings give light. Clearly, readers of Yiddish poetry read and were moved by texts other than those produced by modernist poets. The poet A. Glants-Leyles’s complaint in 1937 that “those who could understand the Yiddish modernists had stopped reading Yiddish, while those who still read Yiddish would not understand the modernists” (Miron 177), for example, suggests that the absorption of Yiddish modernism into English-language modernism (an assimilationist reading practice in which Yiddish modernist poetry served as a “primer” for mainstream modernism) was threatened by other forms of literary consumption. Those who “still read Yiddish” were often readers who resisted assimilation, since they were still literate in a Jewish language, but their tastes and interpretative abilities were incommensurate with the high degree of sophistication needed to read and enjoy Yiddish modernist poetry, or modernist poetry in any of the international languages to which they were exposed in the diaspora.<sup>6</sup> These readers were drawn to the counterbalancing presence of “cultural poets” like Yehoash whose focus was not on modernist experimentation but with the recreation of “themes and characters from the Bible, from all periods of Jewish history, from Hebrew poetry in Spain and the Kabbalah, as well as topics from Oriental and European literature and philosophy and [...] images from recent Jewish history, ideological movements, and migration” (Harshav, *Meaning* 171). This poetry “carries substantial chunks of Jewish experience and has much to offer a contemporary reader” (*Meaning* 172), but it remains largely unknown and untranslated, chiefly because literary critics have paid more attention to the Yiddish modernist project of replacing tradition with secular texts than with reading, translating, and studying the ways in which sacred and secular textual traditions were revised, produced, and consumed during the interwar period. In a strange twist of fate, the uneasy coexistence of modernist and middlebrow Yiddish poetry was resolved by a post-war critical removal of the middlebrow from Jewish literary history.

This was certainly not the case in 1927, when the Jewish poet Phil-

lip Raskin published his *Anthology of Modern Jewish Poetry*, a collection of poetry originally written in English or translated into English from Yiddish, Hebrew, or Russian and compiled to show “young American Jewry” that there remain poets “of their race who are engaged in creating Beauty and fashioning wings for the dollar-laden frame of our existence” (Raskin 12). Raskin included the “cultural poets” in his anthology along with modernist poets, and he focused particular attention on the New York based, Lithuanian born Yehoash.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the interwar period and during the Holocaust, readers who still read Yiddish read Yehoash, not necessarily because his poetry was easier to understand than modernist poetry but rather because it translated the contradictory secular and sacred components of an increasingly bifurcated experience of Jewishness in which “most speakers of one Jewish language [Hebrew or Yiddish] didn’t know or didn’t read the other” (Harshav and Harshav, *Sing, Stranger* 25) without trying to resolve their contradictions. In Yehoash’s terms, he sought to represent the “web” of Jewish life, not to extricate himself from it. Whereas modernist Yiddish poetry aimed to change the conventions of art and strained against the limitations of language and perception, Yehoash’s poetry, much like middle-brow literature, aimed to develop and expand the cultural reference points available to a wider variety of readers, including those whose knowledge of Jewish culture was at best piecemeal.

Despite his obvious cultural and literary significance, however, Yehoash remained largely ignored between the 1952 publication of a selection of his poetry translated into English (financed and published by the Canadian Yehoash Committee) and the 2006 publication of thirty six of his short lyrics in Benjamin and Barbara Harshav’s most recent anthology, *Sing, Stranger: A Century of American Yiddish Poetry* (2006).<sup>8</sup> Part of the reason for this neglect is that the heterogeneous culture Yehoash represented as a “culture poet” was never the coherent culture or hegemonic chain represented by the modernists. Amidst the upheavals of assimilation in North America and pogroms and emigration in Eastern Europe, for example, Yehoash positioned his poetry as the textual “bridge” between modernity and tradition in his poem *der brik* “The Bridge,” and he imagined himself as a “blind waker of the dawn” who cast the act of reading as a joyous, erotic, semi-sacred process of “catching a surprise in my glance / as I weave the jokes from your hand into bright cloth” in “The Disrupter” (*in geveb* 2: 138). He presented Yiddish poetry as “threads strung over an abyss / Cobwebs spanned across a pit,” then challenged readers to wonder at the beauty of this fragility and to wonder whether they were “better than the morning dew” in “Dew” (Goldstick 25), and he composed poems of consolation in which the Jewish people gather themselves around a single voice, and “drink, drink, and wash their hearts” as the voice “like a mighty water spreads, and pours itself over all our distant paths” in “Deliverance”

(*in geveb* 1: 273-75). His many messianic pogrom poems, especially “Upon the Destruction” in which he promises to build poems “everlasting to the sun, / towers upon towers to the sun” amidst a “world reduced to dust” (*in geveb* 1: 278), inspired the more famous Yiddish poet Abraham Sutzkever’s stunningly generative generosity towards the dead of the Vilna ghetto.

Although it is clearly far more derivative and reliant on Biblical and mystical Jewish sources, Yehoash’s poetry, like modernist Yiddish poetry, is the product of a radical extension of nineteenth-century Jewish dialogues between traditionalism and various forms of revisionism. Both nineteenth-century *maskilic* Yiddish writers (anti-traditionalist *Haskallah*, or “Jewish Enlightenment” proponents) and the modernist Yiddish poets who succeeded them employed a subversive polemical strategy that Jeremy Dauber identifies as “audience differentiation and targeted allusiveness” (314) in his ground breaking study, *Antonio’s Devils: Writers of the Jewish Enlightenment and the Birth of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (2004). In contrast, Yehoash compiled a variety of seemingly derivative poems that refused to engage with the differentiating strategy of using parody, satire, and polemics through which nineteenth-century and modernist Yiddish poets targeted and attempted to convert their audiences to specific ideological and aesthetic positions. Instead of advocating a particular “Yiddishist” style, Yehoash collected styles. The widely popular volumes of poetry to which I referred to above and to which I will refer in this essay, *gezamelte lieder fun yehoash* [*Collected Poems of Yehoash*, 1907 and 1910], and *in geveb* [*Woven In 1919-1921*], for example, include emotional renderings of sexually and theologically charged Biblical scenes, reinterpretations of Biblical tableau from a variety of literary perspectives (including British Romanticism, which led to the representations of Job as a Byronic hero, and German Romanticism, which casts Saul as an authentic, doomed “man of feeling”), fables and biblical commentaries in which Hasidic mysticism vies with Talmudic interpretations, “nature poetry” that mixes mystical reflections on the presence of God in the world with contrived and artificial love poems, and poems on national themes in which Zionism, assimilative nationalism, exilic laments, and socialist protests commingle. Each type of poetry is organized into broadly delineated categories so that readers, depending on their interests, can move from one volatile, contested subject position to another. Yet neither volume made any claim to Jewish literary continuity, nor did Yehoash attempt to create a “tradition” or “countertradition” by synthesizing separate categories into a refined whole. He refused to write manifestos, and he worked from a principle of inclusion in which the sacred and the secular coexisted, rather than a principle of differentiation by which sacred meanings were negated or betrayed by secular contexts.

To readers influenced by modernist assumptions about individual creativity, it was not that Yehoash was too much like those whom he influ-

enced, especially the Introspectivists, who viewed poetry as emanating from within the consciousness of the individual as the outside world impinged upon it, but rather that as a “reflective” poet he was too passive, not present enough in his work, too conventional and imitative rather than radically revisionary.<sup>9</sup> At a period in Jewish literary history that has repeatedly been characterized as defined by modernist innovations, Yehoash was a “middle-brow” writer writing for (or creating through his writing) a “middlebrow” audience. To readers accustomed to modernist literary practices, Yehoash and his readers lacked the critical faculties (especially skepticism and self-ironization) necessary to *care enough* about the battles of differentiation and self-articulation related to Zionism, communism, secularism, atheism, and various separatist and assimilationist ideologies that were raging around them. This apparent lack of innovation was (and still seems to be) suggestive of a bourgeois complacency that was viewed as just short of outright assimilation in its disengagement from literary, cultural, and political debates.<sup>10</sup> The charge of bourgeois complacency has some merits. Yehoash’s poetry was directed toward Jews in the United States, Canada, Europe, and South America who, while not necessarily part of the middle class, had aspirations toward a cultural identity in which exilic suffering was both a matter of physical violence and a sense of bewilderment, a guilty apprehension regarding the fading of traditional knowledge, a desire to be reminded of interpretative and linguistic habits that were increasingly marginalized by modern mainstream educational systems (especially in the United States, Poland, and Russia), an irritation over the domination of Christian notions of materialist suffering and redemption, and a disorientation regarding the cost of assimilation.

Yehoash’s literary output is thus far more “middlebrow” than modernist, particularly in the way that it deliberately makes appeals to readers who value the subtle revision of literary traditions and genres over radical critiques of those traditions and genres. Furthermore, Yehoash’s poetry serves a doubled function as pedagogical and entertainment literature, and it continues popular literary trends such as a nineteenth-century bourgeois German Jewish fascination with Judaism’s relationship with exoticized Oriental cultures that were considered outdated and ideologically suspect during the interwar period. Other literary functions associated with the middlebrow, including escapism, vicarious and superficial engagement with dramas of radical change, the imitation and reproduction of cultural norms for interpretation, voyeuristic literary titillation and exoticism, translations, paraphrasings and redactions of difficult texts, offer Yehoash’s readers a cultural and literary education that was not available to readers through traditional religious or educational systems. This inclusiveness demonstrates a commitment to a form of engaged but non-normative Jewishness that was completely unlike the radically revisionist modernist commitments

articulated and practiced by modernist poets.<sup>11</sup>

### **Bewildered Reading: The Beloved Sacred Text**

Mary Grover's comment that "middlebrow culture became menacing once it attempted to engage with the complexities which the educated had decided were beyond the consumer" (Grover 18) is especially pertinent to the pre-war, interwar, and post-war critical reception of Yehoash's poetry. By self-consciously and dramatically attempting to carry a tradition through his poetry, Yehoash was in fact fulfilling, although not in the refined way its originator intended, I. L. Peretz's early utopian modernist project of creating a transnational Yiddish literary republic in which the boundaries of culture, not geography, determined nationhood. Whereas cultural elites in Europe and the United States attempted to educate the broadening reading publics of their nations through an immersion in "classical" literature and through the construction of literary traditions, Peretz argued that the "folk" traditions of Yiddish culture were a deep source of cultural meaning. Peretz called for Yiddish literature to synthesize the competing claims of modernism, folk culture, assimilation, and sacred literature so that Yiddish writers transformed themselves into

bold innovators within the context of an unbroken continuity. They had to redefine the essence of the specific civilization of which the folk was the historical carrier; retell the quintessential myths of the folk, project its values in new and updated symbols, guide the folk in its attempts to adapt to modern conditions and mentality while remaining itself loyal to its basic civilized ethos and mission; awaken it to the challenges of modernity, as well as to those of meeting them without self-effacement; inculcate self awareness, a sense of purpose, a perspective of goals and the steps that had to be taken for those goals to be realized. In short, the intellectuals were both to learn from the folk and teach it, educate themselves by delving into the cultural depths and thus become educators. If they could live up to both these tasks, they would be in a position to liberate the folk by activating its own hidden resources of dormant energy [and producing a literature] at once and at the same time informed by both the tenets of modernism and the traditional ethos of the folk (Miron 81).

The earnestness with which Peretz viewed the relationship between modernism and a traditionalist folk ethos is commensurate with his dedication

to the importance of integrating the sacred texts of Judaism into a secular literary context in order to “fashion a modern Jewish culture rich enough to compensate for the decline of religious tradition, the absence of political power, and the steadily rising waves of social ostracism, violence, [and] hatred” that marked Jewish life after 1905 (Wisse 107). Peretz’s own attitudes towards religious movements that he considered to be part of “folk” culture, especially Hasidism, a widely popular revisionist form of Jewish mysticism,<sup>12</sup> were deeply ambivalent, and this ambivalence often manifested itself in complexly deceptive satires. As a result, he was particularly attentive to the problem faced by writers who revised and “refined” prior Jewish sacred and secular texts, and he offered considerable guidance to those writers who followed him as cultural ambassadors for an extraterritorial textual “Yiddishland.”

The character of this guidance is most forcefully evident in Peretz’s letters to Yehoash, who was his most famous protégé. In these letters, Peretz’s own violent reaction to his nineteenth-century poetic predecessors emerges as he points out the importance of distinguishing between viable Jewish folk traditions and the notoriously middlebrow poetry of Heinrich Heine.<sup>13</sup> In an important 1907 letter chastising Yehoash for writing escapist “nature-descriptions” and romance poetry instead of more socially and culturally engaged poems, he laments Heine’s influence on Yiddish literature in particular and on Jewish writing in general. Peretz writes, “I curse the days when I read him, and the night, his artificial, counterfeit, ‘genial’ mockery, joking in him is nothing but – impotence, in the best case: self-contempt. We do not need jokers driving – we need prophets and leaders” (Peretz 242). Because Heine “makes a wry face” in front of the world rather than “privately in front of the mirror,” writes Peretz, he is one of the “marshalikim” (literally strutting military fops or “field marshals” but better translated into English as “arseholes”). After the pogroms that followed the 1905 failed revolution in Russia, Peretz argues that Yiddish writers need to be “prophets and leaders,” not “clowns” who parade their artistic impotence and conflicted self-hatred in public by satirizing, as Heine did, the self-deceptions attending Jewish assimilation and acculturation into an equally self-deceiving and increasingly hostile German middle class. To Peretz, Heine is an “infection” to which many, including himself, have succumbed, and he feels sick, “as if an anvil fell on me,” when he finds out that the mock-morose infectious remnant of a Jewish love affair with Heine “breathes” out of Yehoash’s “nature descriptions.” This is particularly unfortunate because Yehoash’s poems, he points out, were greeted with enthusiastic expectations in Warsaw. Yehoash’s failure is a public, international one for Yiddish writers, and it is significant that, while after 1907 his correspondence with Peretz ceases, he suppressed the 1907 edition of his poems in favor of a more comprehensively heterogeneous edition of 1910.



Anthologists have repeated Peretz's remarks and have used them to frame discussions of the relationship between Yiddish poetry and other European poetic forms. The editors of *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (1987), for example, quote part of Peretz's letter to bolster their claim that Yiddish poets "resented and resisted" the nineteenth-century models they inherited (Howe, Wisse, and Shmeruk 20). For Peretz and for subsequent literary critics, Heine's poetry is an obstacle that repeatedly intrudes itself into Jewish literary history with its inauthenticity, its challenges to conceptions of Jewish identity, and its simultaneous criticism of and participation in the linguistic games of assimilation. Peretz is most worried, however, that Heine's influence will divide Yehoash from his Jewishness by encouraging him to assimilate too many English/American words, phrases, and ways of thinking into his poetry, in the process making Yiddish a foreign language (like German) and himself a foreign poet (like Heine). "Take some advice from your elder," Peretz writes, "deliver yourself from the English-American style, come back to us, back flowing! Back to quaking-lamentations!" (Peretz 242). This advice suggests that what is most problematic is not simply Yehoash's imitations of Heine but also his attendant concessions to his American Jewish readers and their middlebrow sentiments. For Peretz, Yehoash's transgressive absorption of the language of Heine's middlebrow culture is a form of linguistic apostasy, a straying from the foundation of Jewishness. An imitation of Heine, for whatever purposes, Peretz argues, runs the risks of literary impotence, muteness, and inauthenticity. This concern was prevalent among Yiddish writers, many of whom mocked "tongue tied, inauthentic" bourgeois attempts to use Hebrew and German as a means of "elevating" spoken and literary Yiddish (Mann 688).

Whereas Peretz was violently opposed to Yehoash's attempts to bring Heine into the world of modern Yiddish poetry, I suggest that Yehoash reflected the concerns of a stratum of Jewish readers whose ambivalences and confusions, especially regarding the nature of sacred texts in relation to the diasporic experience, he sought to address in his poetry. Much of Yehoash's *gezamelte lieder fun yehoash* [*Collected Poems of Yehoash* ], for example, is devoted to "*blummen un derner*" ("flowers and thorns"), bittersweet, melancholic short lyrics that imitate Heine by evoking the betrayals, the grudging acceptances of falsehood, and the fettered resentments of the "Youthful Sorrows," "Lyrical Intermezzo," and "Homecoming" sections of Heine's *Buch der Lieder* [*Book of Songs*, 1827, 1837]. This affinity with Heine, which is evoked not only through formal similarities in rhyme, rhythm, and diction but which is also evident in the poems' mocking and self-mocking tone, masks a significant difference between the two poets' representations of melancholic exile. Repeating Peretz's violent reaction to Yehoash's interest in reappropriating a popular assimilated Jewish poet

effaces this difference and at the same time diminishes the possibility that Heine's middlebrow audience was still, in one form or another, present in Jewish culture. In fact, close attention to one of Yehoash's adaptations of Heine's "beloved as false text" poems suggests that he was well aware of the drama of falling away from the sacred dimensions of Jewish experience. Far from succumbing to Heine's apostasy, he was interested in the loving bewilderment with which many Jewish readers approached sacred Hebrew texts.

In a short lyric that toys with the conceit of the beloved as a text from which the lover/reader is estranged or exiled, Yehoash adapts Heine's "Upon my sweetheart's pretty eyes" for his own uses. For Heine, the beloved's body is an anti-text that points out the falseness and bad faith of the entire sonnet sequence that precedes it:

Upon my sweetheart's pretty eyes  
 I make the finest canzoni;  
 Upon my sweetheart's lips, likewise,  
 I make the best terzinas;  
 Upon my sweetheart's cheek I devise  
 The grandest ottave rime.  
 And had my sweet a heart, upon it  
 I'd make the most resplendent sonnet. (Draper 56)

As a performance of "stylized despondency" that bewilders the reader who attempts to distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic, and the stock commonplaces of misogynist resentment and petty trauma from the complex interactions between feeling, thought, and language that German bourgeois literary culture thought it was producing (Pfau 422), Heine's poem undercuts the association between exilic melancholy and literary creativity.

In Yehoash's hands, however, exile is tied not merely to bourgeois languages of self-alienation. It is also part of a drama centered on an inability to read the intersections between sacred and secular discourses. The beloved's body becomes a lexicographic challenge, a matter of finding one's way through a linguistic maze:

I would have learned seventy tongues  
 In the time that it takes me to glean  
 Your eye-language, and learn by rote  
 What in the world it may mean ...

Often I think I have found  
 Your secrets I seek to query,  
 I think I know every dot  
 In your Gazes Dictionary.

Then a sweet wink shows up

On your eyebrows in the dark –  
 And your blue eye plays the music  
 Of a spanking new spark ...

I shall die not knowing for sure  
 The deep meaning of your gaze;  
 Sometimes I doubt if you  
 Can find yourself in the maze ...

(Harshav and Harshav, *Sing, Stranger* 80-81)

Yehoash grafts conventions of medieval Hebrew and Arabic poetry, in which the tears of the beloved resemble letters written on her cheek, onto the popular love poem in order to consider how conventions of authenticity and artifice function as part of the process of translation. Whereas Heine uses Italian poetic forms as points of reference to suggest the impossibility of disentangling the artifice (or authenticity) of poetic form from the artifice (or authenticity) of feeling, Yehoash depicts the interaction between the beloved and the lover according to a mystical hermeneutic that draws from popular Hasidic approaches to reading sacred texts, including the practice of searching for “white letters” hidden within the text of sacred scriptures. For Heine, writing to a self-deluding audience that includes both anti-Semitic German and assimilated Jewish members of the bourgeoisie, the radical question is whether or not the beloved has a heart that can produce a text that is legible beyond its mere form, whether affective expression can be constituted outside convention. For Yehoash, writing seventy years later for an audience that includes assimilated Jews whose experiences of displacement have produced bewilderment in addition to the delusions of assimilation, the issue is whether the beloved’s mysterious textuality produces a tangle of interpretations that estrange “deep meaning” from both the interpreter and the interpreted or whether that tangle is itself productive in its resistance to the formal properties of normative, traditional modes of interpretation. The scholar of Jewish mysticism Moshe Idel describes this mode of reading as “less dependent upon the original content of the canonical texts and guided more by the individual’s spiritual propensities” (Idel 235), and it is clear that for Yehoash bewilderment, rather than certainty or self-delusion, is an important dimension of the interpretation of sacred texts.<sup>14</sup>

Reading this tangle of interpretations according to modernist conventions of alienation and emancipation from tradition significantly limits the possibilities of its play as a commentary on the problem of reading sacred Jewish texts from multiple positions of estrangement. In the first stanza, for instance, Yehoash mocks the Septuagint lore surrounding the translation by seventy rabbis of the *Tanakh* [Hebrew Bible] into Greek. This translation, a Jewish “internal translation” that was created for a diaspora readership with little opportunity to learn Hebrew, was reinvented by later Greek Christian

thinkers as a one way “bridge” between Jewish and Greek cultures and, ultimately, as a textual bridge *from* Judaism to Christian typological appropriations of sections of the *Tanakh*. The Christian theological purpose of this bridge, of course, was to cut the Jewish text off from its roots (Seidman 48-54). Instead of validating the myth that seventy rabbis produced one and the same translation, Yehoash suggests that a translator might as well learn seventy languages in the time it takes to memorize the “eye language” of the beloved by rote, according to Jewish custom. His deft play on the politics of translation and repetition either forces the eye (or reader’s “I”) back to the “eye” language of the original Hebrew or forces the eye to confront the translated, now inaccessible “bridged” Christian simulacrum. For the Jewish reader who read only Yiddish and recited Hebrew from rote memory, however, the beloved as text is also foreign, even though the languages share a similar alphabet. The immediate “eye” difference, which precedes the experience of a different vocabulary, is that Yiddish vowels are actual letters, whereas Hebrew vowels are not letters but are instead indicated by dots or lines. In Yiddish, Hebrew words are either written without vowels or, as is often the case in Soviet Yiddish texts, are spelled phonetically using Yiddish vowels. There is a long tradition of distinguishing between Hebrew vowels (sometimes figured as the “soul” of the word, or the sound of music) and consonants (figured as the “body” of the text, or the “holes touched by the fingers), and this tradition was particularly important in early modernism (Seidman 181). Possibilities multiply to encompass tensions between the languages of Babel and a sacred irreducibly singular language, Christian fantasies of a perfectly translated text of unfulfilled Jewish “types,” and even the strangeness of switching from Yiddish to Hebrew, languages in which the same letters have wildly different possible significances, ranging at their most extreme from the repository of sacred divine sparks (Hebrew) to the decay, degeneration, and betrayals of the diaspora (Yiddish).

It is as difficult to separate artificial secular desire from sacred love of a text as it is to construct a stable, fundamentalist sacred text. In fact, the fundamentalist desire to reduce the “beloved as text” to a dictionary or a code to be deciphered causes the confusion in the first place. How is one to know whether one is being teased by a text, flirted with by a text, or baffled by a text’s mysteries and highbrow difficulty or whether one is simply baffled by one’s own approach to the text as a beloved, a condition in which one would have to confront one’s own emotional, cultural, and interpretative impoverishment rather than the text’s? In Heine’s poem, the beloved’s presumed heartlessness is a screen for the poet’s own inability to compose a sonnet and for his own artistic impoverishment, an impoverishment that becomes his text, since there is no sonnet for the reader to read. In Yehoash’s poem, there may or may not be a text, and it may or may not be sacred, depending on the sincerity the reader grants to the text, but there is

always a reader/interpreter/poet who is enlivened by (and never evacuated by) the joys of seeing the “deep meaning” of the text reflected as a beloved’s gaze. The sacred text is a tangled maze of feeling, glances, and looks, and this maze prevents the text from finding itself. Literal, fundamentalist readings are impossible and made ridiculous in the poem, but there is no corresponding validation of the searcher’s perspective, no celebration of the joys of interpretation. Rather, the poet, the text, and the reader are porous, capable of absorbing and being absorbed in one another. Yiddish makes a sacred Hebrew text strange, but this strangeness engenders bewildered fascination, not bewildered impotence. Whereas Peretz does not trust the interiority of the Yiddish reader and prefers to think of the poet as a “leader and prophet,” Yehoash enables the reader to play the role of the instigator of active, multiple, often incommensurate dramas of self-discovery, self-criticism, and (although often deceptive) self-congratulation.

### Crossing Burning Bridges

Peretz died on April 3, 1915, and although an estimated hundred thousand Jews accompanied his funeral procession to the Okopowa Street Jewish Cemetery in Warsaw, his project of using modernist sensibilities to refine folk traditions into a modern Yiddish culture collapsed during the waves of emigration and displacement that attended the Russian wars in Poland and the Ukraine between 1917 and 1922. Instead, the dominant Yiddish literary modes became Expressionism in Europe and Introspectivism in North America. Both movements advocated a break with traditional Jewish texts, distanced themselves from popular forms of Jewish mysticism, and elevated Yiddish to the language of Jewish modernity. The Introspectivists, in particular, extended the way Yehoash toys with the foreignness of the sacred Hebrew text by emphasizing the “foreignness” of both their language and of the traditional Jewish hermeneutic traditions they wished to challenge. Jacob Glatstein, the foremost Introspectivist during the interwar period, writes

We have no tradition. Our roots perhaps barely touch the roots of previous Yiddish poetry [....] Hence the authenticity of the Inzikhist [Introspectivist] poems from a purely poetical, artistic point of view, but also – and this is inevitable – the impression of foreignness in the eyes of those who regard Yiddish poetry *merely* as part of Jewish culture, who are looking for thread weaving, who emphasize, throughout, the word “Jewish” (Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish* 794).

As a literary and cultural aesthetic in which modernity’s irreparable rupture with historical progress requires the poet to observe and reflect experience

through chaotic juxtapositions of language and context, Introspectivism sees the Yiddish poet's consciousness as an "internal panorama – kaleidoscopic, contradictory, unclear or confused as it may be" produced by "the internalized, personal engagement with the external world – in oneself" (Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry* 774-75). The beloved is no longer the text, the beloved land is no longer the book; rather, the poet's internal world is all.

Glatstein's poem "1919," written in response to the destruction of Jewish life in Galicia (Ukraine) during the Russian Revolution and Civil War and representative of Yiddish modernism at its most concise, conveys the sense that Jewish existence, especially its generative genealogical potency, has been reduced to a "kleyn'tshik pintele a peylekhdiks" (a tiny round dot representing the vowel "i" in Hebrew or the letter "yod," which looks like a single quotation mark and which is a consonant, "y," in Hebrew and the vowel "i" in Yiddish):

Lately – no trace left  
Of Yankl, son of Yitskhok,  
Just a tiny round dot  
Rolling crazily through the streets  
With hooked on, clumsy limbs.

(Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish* 209)

The yod and the "i" form the first two letters in Yitskhok (Isaac's) name, but all that is left of his birthright for his son Yankev (Jacob) is the short "i," which when connected to the yod forms the sound of the long vowel, "I." As Benjamin Harshav points out, this truncation of Jewish identity to a *pintele yid* is a paradoxical figure (Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* 189). It represents the tenaciously irreducibility of Jewish identity, yet its diminutiveness is an unwelcome commentary on the minority status of Jews. Glatstein's play on words initially suggests a modernist freedom through minaturization. If the birthright is reduced to a single sound, "I," then the poet is free from tradition and its requirements. He is not, however, free from history, nor is he in control of his movements. Instead, he is beset by falling newspapers that squash his head and stain the world red as he "spins in ether for eternities, / Wrapped in red veils" (Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish* 209). Written as the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, was negotiating for minority rights for Yiddish Polish Jews in the wake of the Ukrainian pogroms that marked the Russian Civil war,<sup>15</sup> Glatstein's poem highlights the contradiction between the powerlessness of Jews whose culture was being destroyed by violence and the pressure to assimilate in the aftermath of the First World War and the survival of an enduring Jewish presence in the world, much reduced and mutilated, but still moving. As Glatstein represents archetypal Jewish history, Isaac has indeed been sacrificed, not to God but to the modern

world. Only the first letter and the first vowel of his name still remain in the form of his son, Jacob, spinning rather than progressing through the generations of history.

Yehoash's "I could have learned seventy languages" and his other prewar poems of bewilderment served as important precursors for the Introspectivists, a debt Glatstein acknowledges in a 1952 essay commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Yehaosh's death.<sup>16</sup> Yet the contrast between Glatstein's radical rewriting of the sacrifice of Isaac in "1919" with Yehoash's 1920 poem, "From the Ashes," reveals the extent to which high and middlebrow Yiddish poetry draw from sources, sacred and secular, that positioned each poet quite differently in relation to his audience and that continue to place each poet inside or outside the North American academy. Yehoash writes,

Hurry to the bridge, the bridge still burning  
And say what has happened:  
Everyone, everything, still burns,  
Searching, rummaging with a strange hand  
To rake from the coals

The wounds you have concealed (*in geveb* 2: 112).

In contrast to Glatstein's radically reduced "yod," Yehoash focuses on the popular image of the text as a bridge between the sacred world and the secular site of Jewish historical trauma.<sup>17</sup>

The stark differences between these two metaphors for the role of the poet reflect important differences between the sacred textual sources from which modernist and middlebrow Yiddish writers draw their imagery. North American Yiddish modernists like Glatstein, preoccupied with making new forms in a new world, tend to refer to the process of making and maintaining the world in *Genesis*. Middlebrow Yiddish poets like Yehoash, on the other hand, refer repeatedly to *The Book of Job*, which Yehoash translated into Yiddish in 1910 in the daily newspaper *der tog* as well as in book form. *Job* is also a creation story, in that its centerpiece is God's long speech detailing all that he has created, but unlike *Genesis* its focus is on the problem of what kind of words to use amidst a life of physical and spiritual suffering in the Jewish diaspora. In contrast to Glatstein's reduction of modern Jewish life to a letter and a vowel careening down a street, Yehoash represents Yiddish witnessing as a bridge between the secular and the sacred, between the human and divine. Like the burning bush that is never consumed, the bridge still burns, but the bridge between the Jews of Galicia and Jews around the world, a bridge made from stories of suffering that have been concealed and scabbed over by the false prospects of assimilation or of peaceful coexistence with Christians or Ottomans, must be recognized. Accordingly, Jews around the world must, like Job, acknowledge this suffering, but for Yehoash the work of the Yiddish poet is

not to worry about fragmented identity, lost genealogical potency or abysses of meaninglessness that have been bridged by bad faith, as Glatstein does. Rather, following Peretz, Yehoash advocates uncovering those aspects of Jewish identity that have been concealed behind the veneer of assimilated life, the internal bridges (linguistic, cultural, literary, sacred, secular) that speak to the possibility of tradition as a process of “dynamic transmitting and receiving further in continuous reconstruction” (Winer 94). This response to catastrophe is particularly important to recover now that modernist dramatizations of “self-splitting” moments of impotence, disorientation, and guilt that “discredit authoritarian discourses” (Gubar 252) have dominated characterizations of both early twentieth century “pogrom” poetry and later twentieth-century Holocaust poetry.

During and after the First World War, Yehoash’s poems focus on consolation, not on the desolation of Glatstein’s “tiny round dot” or on the playful linguistic games of translation that characterize his earlier poetry. In a series of earlier poems, *Ashmedai* (1916), *deroyzen* [“Deliverance” 1916], *iber’n tehom* [“Examining the Abyss” 1917], *derleyzung* [“Redemption” 1919], and *oyf di hurbos* [“Upon the Ruins” 1919], for example, Yehoash combines motifs from Jewish folklore, including the tormenting of Jews by the demon Ashmedai, to create a “tangle” of responses to disaster (*in geveb* 1: 194-203, 273-75, 278). Messianic mysticism, well-known passages from the Book of Job, and mystically inflected secular Yiddishist notions of the poet as prophet, all coexist within the same textual space. The result is an emphasis on the poet as the mystical creator of new worlds, one who can make sparks that “kindle the dead threads of the web” of Jewish tradition into new life (“Redemption”), a “master weaver” whose arms can “build towers upon towers everlasting to the sun” (“Upon the Ruins”). For Yehoash, the “dot” is a final remnant that can be animated by Jewish readers, as is clear from his 1920 poem, *der punk* [“The Dot”]:

How will the tree hear itself when the thunder blocks its  
path?

How will the wood struggle in the teeth of the saw?  
And how will your tin sword fare against the axe of  
Ashmedai?

A dot in the ash remains for you, under it there is  
A keeper of the watch, but in a second the vise will pinch,  
And a sickness of the mornings will lull him to sleep.  
One desire alone will you carry on your blue lip,  
And you will murmur a final petition to your guard,  
“Give not,

Do not give, hot blood, white anger, a sharp tongue  
That demands or blasphemes, curses or mocks,  
But make strong the heart, and strengthen the hand, to



protect the dot  
That flares in the wind – the final remnant of your  
mercy. (*in geveb* 2: 159)

Whereas Glatstein's reduced Jewish dot is set in perpetual, random motion by the forces of history, shorn of its covenantal meanings and lineage, Yehoash's *punk* is a remnant of the divine that remains among the ashes. This divine spark figures prominently in strands of Jewish Lurianic mysticism (after the sixteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Ben Solomon Luria), which conceives the act of creation as a "shattering of the vessels" [*shevirat ha-kelim*] produced after God contracted himself from the world and sent ten vessels into the world to carry his light. Whether the shattering of the vessels and the dispersal of shards of their light into the world is a catastrophe that explains exile (*goles* in Yiddish, *galut* in Hebrew) and requires the largely symbolic restoration of each spark to the higher orders of being, on the one hand, or whether the gathering of light provides opportunities for engagement with the divine in everyday life, on the other, has been a matter of considerable debate among scholars of Jewish mysticism. A tradition of interpretative mysticism identified by Gershon Scholem and adopted by many writers and poets after the Holocaust suggests, along the lines articulated by Glatstein in "1919," that exile is a condition of rupture and trauma and that the condition of history is the condition of failure. As Scholem puts it, "in all the expanse of creation there is imperfection, flaw, Galut" (Scholem 45). Another strand of thought, originating in Hasidic traditions, articulated by the middlebrow twentieth-century poet, essayist, and theorist Abraham Heschel, and developed by Yehoash, suggests that while it may be easy to read exile as disaster and catastrophe, the condition of weary exhaustion, which Yehoash, echoing the resentful *ennui* of Heine's speakers and protagonists calls "a sickness of the mornings," is also a condition of opportunity for creating intersections between "divine pathos and human piety" (Idel 231-32). Modernist writers and modernist influenced literary critics tend toward the former interpretation. Middlebrow Yiddish literature is far more invested in the latter, not only because it offers consolation, but because it makes reading poetry an active process of engagement with secular and sacred history, not a mysterious attempt to decipher the past as if it were "a mysterious book [...] written in a secret code that becomes meaningful only when someone is able to fathom its secrets" (Idel 101).

In 1912, in his popular column "in mayne vinkele" [*In My Corner*] published in the Warsaw newspaper *Haynt*, Peretz emphasizes the importance of choosing to view history as something about which one could speak, not remain silent as if before a hostile mystery. Writing to Jewish readers "who were made nervous by his attacks on Polish anti-Semites" (Wisse 104), Peretz complains about this silence:

This Yiddishkayt with a shrunken heart, whose cremated liberal hopes and Messianic aspirations rest under the ashes without a single remaining Jewish spark, with no trace left of the *pintele yid* except for a drop of fear – mute fear – this Yiddishkayt wants us to keep quiet! These Jews ask us for pity’s sake to keep silent. We do have pity – on them! (qtd. in Wisse 104).

Glatstein’s response is to symbolize this trace of the *pintele yid* in modernist terms, as a “crazy rolling dot,” his glasses splattered with red newspaper ink reporting the news of pogroms. Writing at the same time as Glatstein but following Peretz rather than chiding him, Yehoash secularizes the expression of piety into the act of creating, reading, and interpreting Yiddish texts, which he represents as the act of not merely finding the dot in the midst of ashes but of protecting it as it flares in the wind.

In the face of dislocation and upheaval, Yehoash transforms Lurinic pessimism into a form of mystical optimism in which multiple forms of engagement with Judaism and Jewish traditions are possible. Unlike the more pessimistic mystical doctrines by which texts and traditions are “redeemed” by transgression, blasphemy, and poetic wrath, a modernist literary tradition (Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse* 310), Yehoash engages with multiple, often mutually antagonist forms of regeneration, to emphasize the importance of interpretative symbiosis. In a literary climate dominated by Expressionism’s violent repudiation of Jewish traditions,<sup>18</sup> particularly Chaim Bialik’s angry pogrom poem, “In the City of the Slaughter,” Yehoash, like Peretz, emphasizes the importance of interpretative symbiosis as he refuses to identify with even the modernist project of vocal refinement advocated by Peretz. This emphasis on encyclopedic preservation, a form of continuity expressed as radical inclusiveness, was not popular in an age of ideological and aesthetic self-definition. Nor is it popular today, when only two percent of Yiddish books have been translated into English or other languages. If those books, especially books of poetry, are to be translated well, we need to be attentive to the full range of possible interpretative positions and traditions collected in Yehoash’s “gaze’s dictionary.” Those positions include Introspectivist emphases on the validity of internalized experience and Expressionist hostilities towards traditional Jewish hermeneutics, but they are not limited to them and they also include the perspectives against which Introspectivists and Expressionists rebelled. Without those “middle-brow” perspectives, Yiddish literary modernism and Yiddish literary history become purely conjectural, subject to mythologizing (especially regarding their origins), and ultimately misleading. For example, modernist strategies of recreating, revising, or annihilating sacred Jewish traditions through literary violation and transgression have been represented as part of a normative

Jewish literary tradition by David Roskies in his ground breaking books, *Against the Apocalypse: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* and *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*. As a modern extension of seventeenth-century radical mystical traditions, this narrowing hermeneutic represents only one of many threads which, given the multiple modes of education open to Yiddish writers in the twentieth century, need to be understood as part of the “tangled maze” of Jewish literary history.<sup>19</sup> The sacred dimensions of Jewish experience, which form a continuum for Yehoash with the secular dimensions of his “gaze’s dictionary,” are not limited to traditional Jewish hermeneutics, nor are they the exclusive provenance of esoteric mysticism. Rather, they are part of a web of meanings that we can better explore through an understanding of Yehoash as a poet who fulfilled Peretz’s modernist mission of refining folk traditions but who also devoted himself to representing those traditions in their partially assimilated forms, forms shaped by the bafflement of many immigrant Jews as they encountered fading and waning Jewish traditions. Fittingly, when Yehoash published a two-volume collection of poetry, intended as a companion piece to his translation of the entire Jewish Bible from Hebrew into Yiddish, he called the book *in geveb*, or “Woven In,” a title whose emphasis on the inextricability of Jewish life from its multiple sacred and secular contexts, however bewildering, is diametrically opposed to Introspectivism’s definition of poetry as *in zikh* [in oneself]. The spirit of inclusiveness suggested by Yehoash’s title runs counter to the trends of modernist particularism, and it offers an important and valuable strategy for reexamining texts produced and consumed by Yiddish writers and readers during times of catastrophe and during times of regeneration.

### Notes

1. See Roback, *Yiddish* 265, Kruk 462, and Glatstein, *in tokh gekumen* (In essence) 65-67. See also Witt’s exhaustive bibliography of Yehoash’s publications and translations and “Yiddish Poet Hears Praise of His Work.”
2. Rudashevski 134-35.
3. Recent critical trends in scholarship in Yiddish literature point towards a growing interest in writers whose work falls between modernist, nationalist, and folk traditions. Naomi Seidman’s *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (2006) considers the contexts in which Jewish immigrant literature was produced and consumed in ways that significantly complicate previous studies of “punctual events” that are absorbed and translated into a transhistorical Jewish “Literature of Destruction” (Roskies 1-5). Dan Miron’s recent call for critics to revisit pre-Holocaust interpretative methodologies that are not marked by a formalist “obsession with order and continuity” (275-76) but rather by complex “abnormalities” (18) extends Seidman’s argument. Miron suggests that

critics develop a methodology based on “contiguities” and “tangentialities,” rather than on more normative discourses of continuity and discontinuity based on affiliations. Miron concentrates his attention on mobile, multiple, and irresolvable points of contact (whether “fleeting,” or “only touched by the wind of language,” as Walter Benjamin so provocatively writes in “The Task of the Translator”) within a “borderline” of Jewishness (Miron 306-07; Benjamin 81).

4. See Yitskhok Rudashevski’s description of the “exalted” mood of the celebration in Zapruder 222-23. See also Kruk 460-63, Rudashevski 136, and Sutzkever 26-27.

5. Because Yehoash emphasizes the poet’s role as a reflector, rather than initiator, of consumable literary tradition, his work has been regarded as derivative and unoriginal, “classical” rather than “modern” and “aristocratic” rather than spontaneous (Roback, *I. L. Peretz* 265). For a discussion of middlebrow literature’s function in class-based cultural maintenance, preservation, and reinforcement, see Hess.

6. See Harshav, *Polyphony* 25 and Cohen 121-22.

7. Bassin includes forty three poems by Yehoash in his anthology of American Yiddish poetry. Six of Yehoash’s poems were translated into Hebrew in Moshe Basuk’s anthology of Yiddish poetry. For a complete catalogue of Yehoash’s poetry in Yiddish and in translation, see Witt.

8. For example, three of the five Yiddish poems (out of 539 total poems) in the latest anthology of urban modernist literature, *Burning City: Poems of Metropolitan Modernity*, Ed. Rasula and Conley, are by Yehoash. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav’s translations of Yehoash’s poetry in *Sing, Stranger* is more representative and suggestive but avoids his pogrom poems.

9. Roback, *The Story of Yiddish Literature* 208, Waxman 1023.

10. See Miron 175.

11. Those poets, especially H. Leivick, and Peretz Markish, advocated, respectively, the replacement of traditional “books [and] sermons” (Krutikov 207) and the breaking of “Abraham’s idols” (Szymaniak 67-68) with, respectively, “sounds, songs, drinks, all kinds of colors [...] from ourselves, from our life, from our gloom, sadness, and sorrow” (Krutinov 207) and “the yearning and striving for a home of unknown spirit-lands [...], that anxious wandering and seeking, incarnated in sounds, movements, melodies and plastic colours” (Szymaniak 75). For a more radical break with the past in post Holocaust poetry, see Gubar. For critical controversies in Yiddish literary history, see Wolitz.

12. See Idel 205-47.

13. As Thomas Pfau argues in *Romantic Moods*, the objective of late Romantic lyric turns towards melancholy and resentment was viewed as the means by which bourgeois German culture could mediate between the juggled world of “quotidian existence (its countless topics, agendas, and debates,

along with so many official memories and competing genealogies)” and “the realm of the ‘symptom’ – things left inexplicit, elided, or wholly expunged from public perception and memory” (411). For Peretz, Heine’s refusal to take seriously Romantic interiorized psychodramas and his mockery of the attendant emphasis on art emerging from loss and trauma is a refusal to “grimace in front of the mirror.” A reader is never sure whether Heine is poking fun, (re)circulating clichés, or making utterances born out of genuine alienation and the pain of exile, figured always as a psychic, affective, and aesthetic distance from the beloved rather than a physical exile.

14. For a fascinating discussion of popular mystical Hasidic hermeneutics related to “white letters,” see Idel 234-47.

15. See Katz 279-86 and Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* 188-90.

16. See Glatstein, *In tokh gekumen [In Essence]* 64-69.

17. Readers familiar with Abraham Sutzkever’s much-translated and anthologized poems from *Burnt Pearls*, composed in the Vilna ghetto between 1941 and 1946, will immediately recognize Yehoash’s poem as an important influence.

18. This repudiation of tradition is not so much “modernist” as it is a modern expression of a form of Jewish mysticism that developed around the Messianic cult of Sabbatai Zevi. See Scholem 140-41.

19. See Scholem 78-141.

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