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*Recovering "Yiddishland": Threshold Moments in American Literature* (review)

Benjamin Schreier

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(Review)

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Ranz was a member of the youth resistance, active in Habonim D'rur, which co-operated with other groups, including Hashomer Hatzair and Gordonia. Indeed, Ranz' role in D'rur had brought him to Bedzin in the first place and accounted for his presence there under the Nazis.

There are special insights in the memoir about the challenges of self-defense in the ghetto, about reliance for a time on a clothing manufacturer in Bedzin named Albert Rosner to shield resistance members, and also about the important role played by traveling women couriers in the Jewish underground, including the sisters Frumkah and Chantziah Plotnizka of D'rur and Tosia Altman of Hashomer Hatzair. Among youth, at least, there was not complete isolation from events in other ghettos around Poland.

After liberation at Buchenwald, Ranz accompanied a group of 427 youths who were taken from Buchenwald to France in June 1945 for rehabilitation, where they were cared for thereafter by the *Ouvre Secours des Enfants* (O.S.E.). He was a counselor in the group and edited the Yiddish newsletter of Buchenwald survivors in France for a time. Later, in 1950, after first being united with his former girlfriend from Bedzin, who also survived, Ranz came to New York to make a new life, settling in Brooklyn. For many years, Ranz was an active leader of a Buchenwald survivors group, interested in keeping alive remembrance of what happened there, and in recent years he taught history in senior citizens' groups in several New York City colleges, including Brooklyn College.

Kenneth Waltzer  
Michigan State University



***Recovering "Yiddishland": Threshold Moments in American Literature***, by Merle L. Bachman. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008, xxviii+326 pp.

This is an interesting book. The underlying assumption running through Bachman's arguments, and on which she ultimately rests her key claims, is expressed on the first page: there is an "underground stream of Yiddish, feeding into the great river of American literature" (xix). The book's goal is to illuminate points of contact between this Yiddish "stream"—to which the author was never historically proximate—and a larger American tradition—in which the author is historically at home. Bachman is chiefly interested in an occluded tradition of Yiddish modernism; acknowledged (something resists the term "canonical") poets like Glatshteyn, Leyvik, and Vaynshteyn make important appearances in her book, but she spends the lion's share of her time—more than 100 of her 282 non-bibliographic and non-index pages—with the non-canonized Mikhl Likht, a case for more attention to whom I, at least, no expert in Yiddish literature, consider Bachman to have made. Conspicuously—that is, in a book putatively about the situation of specifically Yid-

dish literature—the first two works Bachman tackles (in a chapter each, for a total of seventy pages) are Abraham Cahan's *Yekl* and Anzia Yeziarska's *Hungry Hearts*, both of which, though tales of Yiddish-speaking immigrants, were written in English. Rounding these discussions out with a chapter devoted to how Yiddish poets represented African American experience, Bachman's book presents an often engaging attempt to, in her appropriation of Jeffrey Shandler's term, "take... 'Yiddishland' seriously, as a cultural space and imagined location, a production of the varied efforts of immigrant writers from the 1890s through the 1930s, and largely within the sphere of New York" (xxi). But taking this "cultural space and imagined location" seriously, of course, is neither an easy nor a self-evident procedure, especially for a literature that was always imbricated in other national and generic traditions. As Bachman reminds us, Yiddish literature is in so many ways inaccessible. Bachman's book thus aims at an "imagined" recovery of a cultural location that may not have ever existed, at least in the positivistic sense a putative "recovery"—her important term from the title—might suggest.

From the outside, Bachman's inclusion of Cahan's and Yeziarska's English works might seem odd—even inconsistent—until we confront the book's central concept, the *threshold*. (In fact, I could never quite suppress a suspicion that these two chapters on well-recognized Jewish-American writers were included in the interest of marketability, but the book does offer a rather less cynical explanation.) A spatial metaphor, the concept of the threshold, looks initially like an attempt to illuminate the multivalent transit that Yiddish-speaking and—writing immigrants to America engaged in; as Bachman writes in her Introduction, "'Space' here is a way of making visible (or legible) the subject's own critical shifts in perspective" (xxii). These immigrants were poised between nations, cultures, genres, classes, and languages, and their literature, Bachman (not surprisingly) insists, reflects this multivalent status. Bachman emphasizes the state of being *in der fremd*, which she often leaves untranslated, but uses to mean something like being "in the strange" or "in the other," "in the place-of-the-other," something distinguished, however, from being in exile (*goles*), insofar as writing in Yiddish "creates a Yiddish space in the place-of-the-other" juxtaposed with (or against) America (165-66).

It doesn't take too long to figure out that Bachman's interest in the metaphor of the threshold is rooted far more in its illumination of her relationship to "Yiddishland"—running through the book is the conceit (a bit annoying in its frequency, if you ask me) of "the Yiddish student," an "alternate subject position," as her "strategy for negotiating the pitfalls of nostalgia associated with recovering or 'going back' to Yiddishland" (xxiv)—than in its illumination of the position of the historical residents and producers of Yiddishland. Thus, a text like *Yekl* functioned as a threshold between realistic portrayal of immigrant life and vaudeville parody, but it also functioned as a threshold or introduction to the Yiddish-speaking Lower East Side ghetto for English-speaking American readers, and even more significantly, at least for this book, it can function still as a threshold between Bachman's "Yiddish student" and Yiddishland. Thus, the book's interest is in threshold authors, writers

who not only mediated between Jewish and gentile, between immigrant and established, and between erstwhile European and identifiably American, for example, but more significantly can still mediate between an unassimilated past and an assimilated present. Indeed, it is here that the book provides its greatest gift, the notion of “writing post-assimilation,” which Bachman claims “means that it is possible to acknowledge anew one’s relationship to the rupture of the past”; she wanted to write this book, she explains, “to honor [her grandparents’] language and culture,” which undeniably persists, but whose “rich totality” has not survived in a way that is self-evidently alive or useful for her (xxviii).

But the great conceptual achievement of this book—the notion of reading “threshold” texts as a way to inscribe the condition of being “post-assimilation”—ends up being disturbingly undertheorized. Bachman argues that writing post-assimilation implies at the very least the need to “recreate displacement,” to “restore the hyphen” that keeps Jewish and American identities at arm’s length (7). If one of the features of being a “post-assimilation” Jew is that “Yiddish is constantly under erasure” (8), that the “cultural memory” of a Jew is littered “with over-determined fragments” of “an incomprehensible whole” that are always caught up “in a process of synecdoche that seems to conceal as much as it reveals” (19-20), Bachman never satisfyingly accounts for her claim to Yiddish, for the right by which she embarks on her act of “recovery,” which she describes as a “project to map the psychic territory, project the cultural imaginary onto the ‘real,’ attempt a ‘cultural translation: an ethnography, if you will, via the imagination” (24). Bachman claims that she wants to avoid the “pitfalls of nostalgia,” but a frighteningly racialized notion of nostalgia seems ultimately the only thing that can lend coherence to her enabling description of the Yiddish student: “She has been physically exiled from an actual city or village—but feels cast adrift from a particular past and a cultural time-space that reaches into the present, whose fluctuating, ephemeral realm she has stumbled into more than once. Because of cultural loss, she is left with fragments; but paradoxically, the fragments point forward as well as back” (31). Her term “cultural loss” is troubling; implying that the cultural produce of “Yiddishland” is proper to her, it can only make sense if we are to assume that a racialized Jewish identity can carry cultural content across generations. Needless to say, this radicalism also endangers her argument for radical transfer between the Yiddish and American literary traditions. Bachman’s concepts of the threshold and the post-assimilation occasion are powerful ones, and deserve further exploration and elaboration, but only if we can also find some way of imagining Jewish identity outside the fascism of race.

Benjamin Schreier  
Penn State University

