

Introduction

Leyb Naydus – Yiddish Argonaut

IT IS EARLY 1943. THE FORTY-SIX-YEAR-OLD NAFTOLI VAYNIG HAS been a woodcutter in Svir, Belarus, for two years. As a policeman in the Vilne Ghetto, he had been shocked at the *Aktion* ordered by police chief Jakub Gens on Yom Kippur, 1941, and, as he fled fifty miles east to Svir, he admonished everyone he knew not to trust the Jewish police.

Vaynig (originally Norbert Roze, born in 1897) was an important intellectual and cultural activist in interwar Poland; indeed, he was one of the foremost Jewish ethnographers and folklorists of that period. While still a teenager he began publishing articles on Yiddish literature. (Yiddish, it should be noted, was not Vaynig's first language. The child of a Polonized family from Tarnów, he only began studying Yiddish in earnest at sixteen.) As his interest in ethnology grew, Vaynig argued strongly for the importance of folksong and folk literature in Yiddish literary history, and for the study of folklore more generally in Jewish historiography. As a cultural activist Vaynig was a forceful advocate for obtaining all manner of ethnographic and folkloric data by mobilizing teams of *zamlers* – “collectors” – trained in the basic tools of ethnographic description, to gather information in situ in Jewish communities large and small. (It is an early version of what today we would call citizen scholarship or “crowdsourcing.”) These principles are laid out in YIVO's (Yiddish Scientific Institute, a prominent Yiddish scholarly and cultural institute founded in Vilne in 1925) influential *What Is Jewish Ethnography? (Handbook for Fieldworkers)*, which Vaynig

co-wrote in 1929.¹ It was a theme he would reprise in a 1934 article in the Yiddish-Polish journal *Landkentenish / Krajoznawstwo*.² This journal, edited by the indefatigable Emanuel Ringelblum – later the organizing force behind the Oyneg Shabes Archive in the Warsaw Ghetto – was dedicated to “questions of knowing-the-land [*landkentenish*] and tourism, the history of Jewish settlements [in Poland], folklore, and ethnography.”³ We see in his work how committed Vaynig was to the program underlying that catalog. Living in a place, and being part of it, meant participating in a complicated and sophisticated intellectual endeavor, one that also required active work and physical engagement – knowing the names on local gravestones as well as the names of the trees which shaded them.

So, in 1943, with Jews penned in ghettos and their lives and cultures threatened with eradication, there is work to be done. After two years of labor in Svir, Vaynig decides to return to the Vilne Ghetto, to his family and his work. Though living in privation, he teaches, he organizes lectures and cultural events, he collects folklore, and he writes. It takes little effort to imagine the peril of impending doom – for themselves, their culture, their civilization – that those who endured it sensed daily, and this drive to save and preserve, felt in many ghettos during the war, remains a remarkable testament. In June of that year, several months prior to the Ghetto’s liquidation, Vaynig completed a long book-length essay on the Yiddish poet Leyb Naydus (1890–1918) in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the poet’s death. Just months later Vaynig would die in a concentration camp in Estonia.⁴

In all that furious activity to collect and preserve what were likely the last living testaments of his culture, one may well ask: Why Naydus? Why this aestheticist decadent, this self-proclaimed dandy? Why this son of a wealthy family, this productive and talented wordsmith who died at the age of twenty-eight, who rarely ventured far from a few locales in his native Lithuania, and who left behind an assortment of largely unpublished poems and translations? And why would Vaynig write a monograph about this enigmatic poet – for which Vaynig was awarded a prize by the Ghetto’s Jewish Council, the capstone to his own remarkable legacy – emblazoning

it with an epigraph from Horace: *Non omnis moriar* – “I will not die completely”? There are any number of possible and plausible answers to these questions. But our most important insights are to be gained by turning our attention to the poet himself, who, along with his work, is now largely forgotten, but about whom I cannot but agree with Vaynig’s ultimate assessment – that he was one of the preeminent innovators in the renaissance of Yiddish poetry.

Naydus’s Life and Work

The contours of Naydus’s life are fairly well known.⁵ He was born in Grodno and grew up on the family estate in Kustin just outside the city. The family, while religious (his pious grandmother left a deep impression on him), was of a maskilic bent, open to the benefits of secular education, especially in literature. Naydus’s father was a well-to-do landowner and factory owner, and Naydus was brought up in a nobility-emulating bourgeois household, in a fine house with elegantly appointed apartments, a salon complete with a well-exercised piano, and surrounding forests and parkland which imbued Naydus with an enduring love of nature.

Starting in 1901 he was sent to several schools in Poland, but was expelled from the last one in 1905 for activities involving the SSRP (the Zionist Socialist Workers Party). From 1908 to 1911 he attended Gymnasium in Vilne, but, though having finished his courses, he declined to take his exams. Except for brief stints, such as a stay in Ekaterinoslav early during the First World War, his life was spent predominantly moving between Kustin, Grodno, and Vilne. A prolific composer and translator, and a gregarious personality, wherever he went he was active in the local literary circles, and in Grodno especially he stood at the energetic center of a young coterie of writers and artists. In Zalmen Reyzen’s reminiscence of his last encounter with Naydus, shortly before Naydus’s death in 1918, he recalls how Naydus “sang Hasidic *nigunim* [tunes] as well as goyish and Gymnasium songs, and declaimed [poetry] and told jokes – how wonderfully he told them! – and played musical compositions on a glass harp, and improvised, and mimicked, creating a mood of true, sincere youthful exuberance.”⁶

Naydus died suddenly in December of 1918, apparently of a heart ailment, and was buried in Grodno. History has a way of mocking poets, and it is a cruel irony for a poet who loved his people and the natural landscapes of his native land that his final resting place, Grodno's Jewish cemetery, no longer exists. It was razed by the Soviet government in the 1960s and a sports stadium was erected on the spot.⁷

Leyb Naydus was a restless wanderer. Not in his life – circumscribed as it largely was by the triangle of Vilne, Grodno, and Kustin – but in his art. His works ranged from his Lithuanian home, its landscapes and lifeways, to ancient Greece and exotic realms. He wrote traditional Yiddish quatrains, but also poured into Yiddish poetry verse forms it had seldom if ever seen: sonnets, terzinas, ghazals, triolets, and so forth. He translated from world literature, including significant translations of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*. In his original work he pioneered the cosmopolitan with titles like "Pan's Flute," "Fata Morgana," and "Con Sordino," and cherished the intimacies of his surroundings with "My Folk," "Lithuanian Landscapes," and "Mother Earth." His literary career spanned a mere eleven years, beginning with his first published poem in 1907 and ending with his untimely death. In that time his output was startlingly diverse and creative, and one is struck by how often the word "virtuoso" is applied to him in critical appraisals of his work. That he languished in relative Yiddish obscurity is likely the result of his first collections having appeared during wartime, when critical response was drowned out by historical events. A goodly amount of his poetry would not even appear until after his death, when dedicated friends undertook the labor of love of issuing his collected works.

The challenge, and in some sense the relief, for a scholar approaching Naydus today is that there is simply a dearth of critical material on him.⁸ Apart from Vaynig's study and the somewhat repetitive encomia of his friends, sustained critical appraisals can be found in only a very small number of articles and essays, which tend to fall into one or another of two camps. The generally favorable ones focus on the vibrancy of his aestheticist and cosmopolitan

works, while dismissing the poetry on Jewish and national themes as sentimental and weak. On the other hand, those who are disinclined to favor Naydus find his world-literary pieces derivative and pat, while only in those works that explore Jewish motifs do they see what would have been seeds for mature development were it not forestalled by his death. That is, each camp likes what the other doesn't, and vice versa. This protean aspect of Naydus entices the modern critic to figure out a way to understand his achievements without simply making him whatever one wants him to be. Mindaugas Kvietkauskas's entry on Naydus in the volume *Writers in Yiddish*, for example, is one of the few contemporary works in English and does a good job of introducing Naydus in context and beginning to open him up to fresh interest and evaluation.⁹ But considering the volume, variety, and value of his poetry, Naydus is due an awakening of interest.

The task I set myself in what follows is not an intellectual biography of Naydus, though I hope it might inspire or promote such a deserving undertaking. Nor is it a tour d'horizon of Naydus's oeuvre. Rather, I want to find a way of reading Naydus that accounts for some of that critical disparity while isolating his remarkable – and neglected – contribution to Yiddish literature *as* a world literature, a part of, not apart from. Naydus criticism, in essentializing one or another idea or theme – his cosmopolitanism or his nationalism – misses the essential hybridity at work in his poetry, a hybridity that is a creative, energetic forward force in Yiddish letters. That he inscribed his sympathies for the Zionist Socialist Workers' Party in many of his poems, for example, need not be at odds with his self-image as a latter-day poetic Argonaut. These aspects of Naydus were part of the same mode of self-exploration.

To achieve this goal I will focus on a selection of the poems themselves, on close readings and explorations of Naydus's poetic landscape, or, as Vaynig calls it, his "soulcape."¹⁰ I am aware that such selective readings open one up to the charge that in picking-and-choosing one, however consciously or unconsciously, predetermines the meaning of the *morceaux choisis*; that one will never fail to find what one is looking for. In Naydus's case, however,

what is there is so multifarious that a simple survey will obscure more than it will reveal. Moreover, Naydus is never coy; no reading of a poem will determine a course that poem does not seek to sail. There is little need, for example, to read anything into a late poetic credo like “I Am the Only One,” because Naydus is not hesitant about what he means:

*Ikh bin der eyntsiker, vos hob
gefunen
In unser mame-shprakh den
sheynem klang;
ikh hob antplekt in ir geheyne
zunen,
kameyes tayere fun raykhstn
blank.*

I am the only one who has found
the beautiful sound in our
mother tongue;
I have revealed her secret suns,
Precious amulets of the richest
luster.

*Ikh bin der eyntsiker, vos hot
farshtanen
Tsu makhn farbiker den groyen
raym;
Azoy vi federn fun di fazanen,
Loykht regnboygndik mayn ferz
gehaym.*

I am the only one who has
understood how
to make the grey rhyme more
colorful;
just like the feathers of pheasants
my verse secretly shines like a
rainbow.

*Ikh bin der eyntsiker, ikh bin der
eyner,
Vos vebt dem luftikstn muzik-
geshpin,
Farshvendt aykh tsirungen,
tshshtralte shteyner
Mit di shatirungen fun faynstn min.*

I am the only one, I am the one
who weaves the most airy web of
music,
bestrewing you with ornaments,
resplendent jewels
in hues of the finest sort.

*Ikh bin der eyntsiker, vos kon
bavegn
in ritmen boygevdike unzer
shprakh,
Vos hot zi opgevendt fun shmole
shtegn,
Un zi aroysgefirt tsum breyt
shlyakh.*

I am the only one who can
with supple rhythms prod our
language,
who has diverted her from
narrow trails
and led her forth to the wide
road.¹¹

A sense of self-importance on the one hand – a hardly bashful and mostly brash stance typical of the decadents – and of mission on the other pervades this poem. The movement of verbs, from the past tense to the present to the modal *can*, echoes this averral that “I am the one who has done, is doing, and can do all of this. And the ‘this’ I am referring to is nothing less than the essential renovation of Yiddish poetic language.” In Naydus’s diagnosis, Yiddish’s poverty is one not of philosophy or content but of form and poetics; he does not opine on what to say, rather on how best to say it. First and foremost, Naydus sees the “web of music,” whose primary components are rhyme and rhythm, as the most important feature of this renovation. What others might lambaste as the whimsies of a rhymester Naydus accepts as the beating heart of the new poetry, the thing that will elevate Yiddish verse to a higher level of quality and significance.¹² Indeed, in the third stanza, when Naydus speaks of “bestrewing” the reader with “ornaments and resplendent jewels,” the verb he uses – *farshvendn* – can also have the sense of “squandering, wasting, or throwing away on.” In this repurposing of critical vocabulary, Naydus seems to be saying that while his critics may think ornamentation – rhyme and rhythm – wasteful, he considers it vital and stakes his claim to artistry on its development.

The second feature of Naydus’s imagined renovation has to do with the ability of Yiddish poetry to take its rightful place on a larger stage. Naydus’s efforts intended to move this poetry from “narrow trails” to “the wide road.” That is, to break out of the narrow confines of the parochial and into the wider world of international letters. This is not to say Naydus dismissed the “domestic” sphere of Jewish life; rather, he felt it incomplete. After all, though he began his writing career composing poems in Russian, he quickly focused his considerable energies on Yiddish, the Jewish associations of which are rather beyond question. That understanding the self requires understanding the other, and vice versa, is the percolating subtext of Naydus’s verse. That Naydus’s poetic project included simultaneously translating Verlaine, composing some of the first sonnets of quality in Yiddish, and writing poems with titles such as “Jewish Terzinas” indicates his commitment to that synthetic proposition.

But Naydus did not understand his own creativity as achieving something *ex nihilo*. His metaphors insist on the innate, the natural, and the organic; he was not creating jewels, he was merely uncovering them. After all, “I am the only one who has *found* / The beautiful sound in our mother tongue; / I have *revealed* her secret suns [...]” Whatever we may describe as Naydus’s innovation, or introduction into Yiddish – whether images from Hellenic myth, European cultural terminology, Romantic eroticism, or the sonnet as the pinnacle of poetic cultivation – he saw as inherently part of Yiddish cultural patrimony. By making use of that patrimony, Yiddish would come into its own, enriched with new artistic possibilities.

Nota Bene

This book has been conceived of as two voices in conversation about the works of Leyb Naydus. The earlier voice, that of Naftoli Vaynig, which was the inspiration for this project, adds an urgency to the topic, a grounding for the stakes of the undertaking, which I could not pretend to offer as eloquently. Vaynig was a leading intellectual light eclipsed by a barbarous moon. But his commitment to Naydus offers us the opportunity to recover not one, but two remarkable voices of Jewish culture in the early twentieth century. That is why I have made Vaynig’s complete essay – *Naydus Studies* – the companion essay in this book.

My own contribution to this conversation takes the form of a series of chapters on some of the more salient of Naydus’s themes and innovations. Salient, that is, from the point of view of early twenty-first century Yiddish, Jewish, and world literary scholarship. By placing these two essays next to one another, the points of overlap and the discontinuities between these sets of observations, at a remove of nearly three quarters of a century, will give a more complete picture of the talents of Leyb Naydus and a greater appreciation of his importance.

To achieve this end I have presented large amounts of poetry in full, in both the original Yiddish and in translation. By his own

admission much of Naydus's poetics is bound up with the musicality toward which he strove. It would therefore disserve his work not to present it in the original, to allow the reader to feel the cadences, to let the rhymes come washing over. By the same token, translation is a necessary component of this project. The translations I have made here are meant to serve the English-reading audience for the sake of content, not artistry. My translations are as a result more literal than literary. (Naydus's poems do beg for the talents of such a translator; and it would be a great pleasure if this book were in some way to inspire an interest in Naydus translation.)

<i>Mayn harts iz ful mit zun un zig</i>	My heart is full of sun and
<i>Mayn gayst – in biml lebt er!</i>	triumph,
<i>Ikh bin a meylekh nokh fun vig –</i>	My spirit's over the moon!
<i>Dokh on a kroyn un stsepter...</i>	I've been a king since my
	swaddling –
	Just one without scepter or
	crown...

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