

PASSIONATE RENEWAL

JEWISH POETRY IN BRITAIN SINCE 1945

REVIEW BY MARGE CLOUDS

The marriage of superb craftsmanship to the tragic sense of reality is the formula of true poetry” according to the Russian-born exile, Joseph Brodsky - and like Brodsky, six of the 20 Jewish poets represented in this anthology were uprooted from Europe. Their “tragic sense of reality” heightened by feelings of dislocation and loss is much in evidence, and, apart from the poignancy of many of their poems, sometimes in the power and compression of their measured words, they accomplish both parts of Brodsky’s definition of a “true poem”. Gerda Mayer’s *Make Believe* is one such; and so is *In a Cold Season* by Michael Hamburger, about Adolf Eichmann, which, with words and rhythms like insistent drumbeats, is most moving and memorable.

The focus of this anthology is intended as “the specific experiences of being a British Jew” with all the tensions of that dynamic heritage, so most of the poems have been chosen because of Jewish themes and concerns. Fortunately a bibliography of the poetry volumes of the contributors is included for further reading, as it would be a mistake to think that their imagination is tethered only to this fixed Judaic post. Ruth Fainlight, for example, is represented by a generous 15 poems, many of a confessional nature, but these are by no means her best work, some of which on quite different themes are startling in their innovatory brilliance. The editor has nevertheless wisely chosen to allow each poet several pages, rather than the bitty one or two pieces some anthologies allocate - although of course this has meant leaving out many other talented voices.

The poem *In Early Spring* by A C Jacobs combines the beauty of “local habitation” (in this case Hampstead Heath) with thoughts of inspiring poetic forebears such as Halevi, Bialik, Heine and Rosenberg (yet not forgetting “broken poems that were made in the enclosures of insanity”). The “passionate

renewal” of their great sound has provided the stirring title of this anthology. This deep sense of history takes many forms: there are places as in Jon Silkin’s chilly evocation of York, *The Coldness*, and people - as in *Whatever Happened to Isaac Babel?*, Bernard Kops’ poem of disillusion.

There are many grandfathers in these pages, and grandmothers too. The work of Chagall is fancifully evoked by the gifted Budapest-born George Szirtes. Then one of the younger poets, Jonathan Treitel, writes of Rabbi Yehudah Loew of 16th Century Prague, supposedly the creator of the Golem, in a most skilful, amusing and thoughtful account of the Golem’s tasks, both in the Prague Ghetto and in modern-day Golders Green. History, ritual and myth all merge in the beautiful image of “through the red wine, let light shine deep” in Danny Abse’s tender lyric poem, *O Taste and See*.

A number of the poets are also translators, and many are anthologists as well. Peter Lawson in his very helpful Introduction suggests that the latter “are arguing for a literary context in which they feel they have a place - albeit unfixed both in tradition and contemporary practice”. Certainly many Jewish poets feel the kind of “inbetweenness” where words are their only home, but there are always others, like the two (unnamed!) British Jews who did not wish to contribute to this collection because they did not want to be labelled as “Jewish” poets. Irony is never far from perceptions about what being “Jewish” means. The Jewish Kafka never used the word “Jew” in his writings, but he is thought of not only as a seminal writer of the 20th Century but as an acclaimed and powerful influence on all Jewish writing since. A thought provoking paradox!

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VERTICAL

Who told me my place?

It takes generations

To breed such a true believer,

Centuries to produce

Someone who instinctively knew

The only movement possible

Was up or down. No space

For me on the earth’s surface:

Horizontal equates with delusive

When only the vertical

Remains open to my use. But

I am released by language,

I escape through speech:

Which has no dimensions,

Demands no local habitation

Or allegiance, which sets me free

From whomsoever’s definition.

Jew. Woman. Poet.

Ruth Fainlight

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in Britain Since 1945*

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