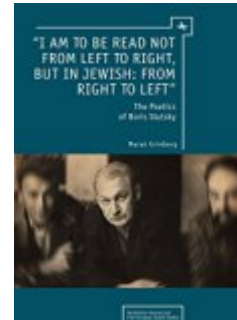


Marat Grinberg. *"I am to be read not from left to right, but in Jewish: from right to left": The Poetics of Boris Slutsky.* Borderlines: Russian and East European Jewish Studies Series. Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2011. 482 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-934843-73-4.



Reviewed by Henrietta Mondry

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

This original and engaging book is devoted to the interpretation of the poetics of an important Soviet poet, Boris Slutsky (1919-86), in the context of his Jewishness. Marat Grinberg states that his new reading of Slutsky collapses a number of central Russian and Soviet literary paradigms. It also challenges the interpretative stereotype of Slutsky as a quintessentially Soviet poet. He agrees that Slutsky's verse is inseparable from the events of his time and that his worldview was thoroughly Soviet. But after the collapse of Nikita Khrushchev's liberal Thaw reforms, he expressed his disillusionment in his poetry. Grinberg reminds his readers that the Nobel Prize-winning poet Joseph Brodsky saw Slutsky as "an exclusively Jewish figure ... biblical, prophetic and messianic." Grinberg states: "Neither a Russian-Jewish hybrid, nor a linguistic fusion, his original poetics, embodied in his diction, testifies to the unique thoroughness and inventiveness with which he breaches and bridges the two most basic and profound tenets of his fate: his language and his Jewishness" (p. 35).

Grinberg does not deny that Slutsky existed as a Soviet man and a Soviet Jew, serving as an officer during World War Two and later as a poet writing about the war from the position of a Soviet patriot. Slutsky was also implicated in the anti-Boris Pasternak campaign that surrounded the publication of *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) abroad. Yet Slutsky always saw his anti-Pasternak speech as a mistake. The speech did not affect the place that Pasternak occupied in his poetic life. In fact, Pasternak always remained Slutsky's "intertextual counterpart" (p. 24). In terms of the Jewish theme in Slutsky's work, Grinberg notes that dozens of poems that he analyzes in the book do not necessarily contain a Jewish theme. In application to the notion of a Jewish poetics, he maintains that instead of a search of "a Jewish poetics" "we could and should speak of biblical poetics, a rabbinic poetics, of modern Jewish or a modernist Jewish one, or indeed broadly *a secular Jewish poetics* as a separate category" (p. 27). In his methodological search, Grinberg is sympathetic to the view that the term "Jewish culture" should be replaced by

the plural “Jewish cultures.” He uses this approach in analyzing Slutsky’s poetry.

His reading of Slutsky’s poems of the cycle “Poems about Jews and Tatars” (1940-41) stresses that already in 1940 Slutsky was convinced that Jews stood on the brink of total annihilation. Notably in his Holocaust texts, Slutsky “employs both sides of Russian historical memory, the Jewish and the general Russian, to ingrain the Holocaust into the Russian verse” (p. 91). Grinberg’s analysis demonstrates how the poet’s meta-poetics and hermeneutics “fuse into a coherent, original mode of thinking” (p. 97)—something that most Soviet poetry devoted to the treatment of the war and the Holocaust does not achieve.

Part 2, devoted to the theme of “the poet-historian,” maintains that his poetic constructs have “historiographic nature” (p. 109). For Slutsky time was intrinsically historical. He thus fell out of the high modernist defiance of time in his deliberate attention to the historical process. Grinberg adds a “fresh term”—“transplantation”—to his unraveling of the poet’s historiography. He borrows it from Dmitry Likhachev’s work on premodern Russian literature and applies it to Slutsky’s turning to the Hebrew Bible. “Transplantation is built into his spatial poetic project, as through the device he links his Biblicisms with Russian literary origins, formed also by the transplanted Bible and Byzantium” (p. 110). His transplantation is aimed at leaving a trace of his historical era. Slutsky’s project is branded as moral and political. In his representation of Joseph Stalin, for instance, Grinberg sees an embodiment of primordial iniquity and views it as being close to Hannah Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil. In the poem “The Incident,” written in the early 1970s, “the incident” refers to the postwar campaigns against the Jews orchestrated by Stalin. Slutsky associated the campaigns with the winter of 1953, the date of the Doctors’ Plot. Grinberg shows that Slutsky viewed the events in a metaphysical light, rather than as political or anti-Semitic events. Grinberg

asserts that similarly to how a premonition of the destruction in “Poems about Jews and Tatars” “prompted the main directions in Slutsky’s artistic thinking, Stalin’s final assault forced the poet to exercise his exegetical tools to the fullest” (p. 133).

Part 2 of Grinberg’s study concludes that Slutsky’s case defies and overturns familiar paradigms. Slutsky’s response to the war and Stalin’s anti-Semitism was markedly different from the typical reactions of the representatives of his generation. Here again Grinberg shows that Slutsky’s confrontation with the rhetoric of Jews as “rootless cosmopolitans” runs in two directions: meta-poetic and exegetical. The two merge in the figure of a poet who transformed his personal and creative crisis into a “midrashic cipher” (p. 135). Moreover, the poet transformed a historical curse into a restorative blessing.

Part 3 is dedicated to intertextual links with Russian and Russian Jewish texts which allude to the New and Old Testaments and to Slutsky’s polemical position toward various cultural paradigms and stereotypes. Within this tradition Grinberg defines what he terms “the innovation” of Slutsky’s construction of his Jewishness: “In contrast to a predominant paradigm, which posits Jewish heritage as an anthropological remnant or a biological appendage, Slutsky weaves together a poetics in which Jewishness acts as a composite unifying presence” (p. 402).

Although not an easy read, this well-researched and well-argued book is a significant contribution to the field of Russian Jewish literature and the broader field of Jewish studies.

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