



**Samuel J. Spinner.** *Jewish Primitivism*. Studies in Jewish History and Culture Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. 272 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-2827-4.

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Samuel J. Spinner's recent *Jewish Primitivism* takes as its point of departure the premise that "Jewish primitivism—by Jews of Jews—should have been impossible" (p. 1). Spinner then compellingly illustrates through a series of case studies that Jewish primitivism not only was possible but in fact undergirds a robust body of work, both literary and visual, that blossoms into a complex and multifaceted way of critiquing Jewish aesthetics or ideologies and European modernist assumptions.

"Primitivism," as the term is typically used, refers to a European modernist aesthetic movement that primarily concerned visual art. This movement grew from the belief that "primitive" people, uncorrupted by civilization in general and modernity in particular, were truly free and creative, and as a result, their form of life and art was superior to the "civilized" Europeans. Turn-of-the-century European ethnographers and artists imagined that so-called primitive peoples still embodied the way of life of the "uncultured." Incorporating the "primitives" alleged alternative aesthetic into European art could be used, they believed, as a tool to critique and redirect European existence and art making toward a better end.

In the rich and illuminating *Jewish Primitivism*, Spinner argues that primitivism relates not only to the western European artists looking at far-off colonial territories but also to European Jewish authors and artists looking at Hasidic Jews, or even at themselves, within the continent. Discussing modernist literary works in German, Yiddish, and Hebrew, as well as paintings and photography from early twentieth-century Europe, Spinner establishes Jewish primitivism as a specific aesthetic project appearing across languages and media. This project, he shows, should be considered as participating in, while remaining distinct from, the European primitivist movement in art. Whereas European modernity depended on making distinctions "between the Jew and the Christian, between the *Volk* and everyone else, between the civilized and the primitive," Jewish primitivism revolved around disrupting these very distinctions and "blurring the border between civilized and savage" (p. 2). *Jewish Primitivism* is an enlightening book that not only reveals the Jewish variation of a broader European modernist movement, showing how its specific qualities expand and challenge our understanding of this movement, but also provides significant

tools for scholars to analyze European Jewish aesthetics as a whole.

The book's introduction begins by analyzing the conundrum of Jewish primitivism in its being derived from the dual position of Jews as both subjects and objects of a European cultural gaze. Typically taking Hasidic Jews as their objects, Jewish primitivists deviate from their fellow Europeans artists in two significant respects: first, their quest for the “primitive” did not bring them to seek “savages” outside their own tradition, and second, and relatedly, encountering the savages neither involved visiting ethnographic museums nor traveling to distant shores. Hasidim lived in closer proximity—in the countries of eastern Europe and certain quarters of many western European cities. Jewish primitivist authors and artists could thus observe these “primitives” simply by taking a short trip across the border—sometimes national but often only between neighborhoods. Still, Spinner emphasizes that the idiosyncrasies of Jewish primitivism did not derive only from geographical proximity but primarily from the fact that the primitive “other” was not, ultimately, completely other. Unlike European artists, such as Paul Gauguin, who could live among the so-called savages without entirely becoming one himself, becoming Hasidic was relatively easy for a Yiddish or German-speaking European Jewish man. All an artist needed to do, Spinner prosaically stresses, was “grow a beard, change his clothes, and practice a religion into which he had already been born” (p. 42). The book demonstrates how the uniqueness of the Jewish condition in Europe, which did not allow for clear distinctions between subject and object, civilized and primitive, gave rise to multifaceted critiques of supposedly fixed distinctions, producing a heterogeneous and sometimes self-contradictory project. As the book demonstrates, Jewish primitivism appears across languages and media; it takes part in assimilationist and Zionist projects, revolutionary

and reactionary ideologies, and neo-Romantic and modernist aesthetics.

Chapter 1 explores the origin of Jewish primitivism in the self-contradictory work of the Yiddish author Y. L. Peretz, and the reactions to it. Spinner points to a seemingly internal tension in Peretz: a folklorist who collected Hasidic stories and transmitted them aesthetically on the one hand, and a writer who nears primitivism in his implicit critique of the very same folklorist project in his essays on the other. Spinner argues that Jewish primitivism emerged from critiques of Peretz's mode of aestheticization of Jewish literature, and the nationalizing purpose of folklorism more generally.

After tracing the roots of Jewish primitivism in rejections of Peretz's folklorism and in the critiques of this project, the following five chapters of the book study different aspects of Jewish primitivism. Chapter 2 focuses on the German Jewish authors Josef Roth and Alfred Döblin and the Yiddish author An-Sky, all of whom sought to encounter the east European Jewish primitives in reality rather than in the oral tradition archive. The chapter examines ethnographic documentations appearing in these authors' travelogues alongside representations of Hasidic people and cultures in the literary works they wrote during or soon after these encounters. As Spinner shows, though never quite actually encountering the Hasidic primitives they initially imagined, all three authors nevertheless created primitivist depictions of Jews in their literature. This gap exposes how Jewish authors knew that their primitivism was a product of fantasy. But this was nevertheless a persistent and closely held fantasy, one that reveals in Jewish primitivism the twin desires to locate difference and find acceptance—a wish to become a subject who observes a primitive object.

Contrary to the authors centered in chapter 2, whose recognition of the primitivist fantasy did not affect their own subject observing positions, chapter 3 discusses the work of Franz Kafka, who

digested his ethnographic findings and, as a result, turned the destabilizing gaze back on himself. Structural similarities between two comments from Kafka's diary expose Kafka's version of Jewish primitivism: in the first, he concludes he has nothing in common with Hasidim, and in the second, he states he has nothing in common with himself. As Spinner argues, the salient point here is not only that the "observer" becomes the "observed" but also that Kafka "performs on himself as on the Hasidim the same process of observation, categorization, and judgment" (pp. 86-87). This conflation of subject-object becomes more significant when it appears in stories like "Ein Bericht für eine Akademie" ("A Report to an Academy"), which exemplifies Kafka's mode of critiquing both Jewish and broader European assumptions about the process of identity formation.

After focusing on literary works and the operation of Jewish primitivism around issues of identity, the book's next three chapters turn to aesthetics, developing a dialogue between text and image. Chapter 4 straddles this transition in its discussion of Else Lasker-Schüler for whom Jewish primitivism appears as a unified aesthetic project encompassing her poetry, essays, and drawings. The central aim of this chapter is to investigate the influence of Lasker-Schüler's "society of savage Jews"—which for her designated a social and aesthetic vision about a society of poets bonded by friendship, love, and dedication to a mutual spirit—on the Yiddish and Hebrew poet Uri Zvi Grinberg's right-wing Zionist politics. As Spinner's analysis shows, although Jewish primitivism generally destabilizes identity and thereby contradicts Jewish nationalism, it can become a form of ideological domination.

Whereas in Lasker-Schüler's work the distinctions of image and text seem insignificant, Spinner's final two chapters create more of a dialogue between visual art and literature. Chapter 5 situates the work of the Yiddish author Der Nister within the art criticism of Carl Einstein. In his as-

essment of primitivism, Einstein emphasized its alternative form of visuality and the ways it challenges the traditional European's perception of the viewer's standpoint position. Einstein believed in the possibility for literature to represent the primitivist transformations of seeing; Spinner suggests this potential is realized in Der Nister's literature.

After emphasizing the primitivist function of visuality and its use in transforming the subject position in literature, the last chapter moves in the opposite direction and explores the role of textuality in the photographer Moyshe Vorobeichic's *Ein Ghetto im Osten: Wilna*. This photobook appeared in three bilingual editions in 1931. Contrary to early receptions of this book, which situated it within the framework of Marc Chagall's aesthetics or folklorist ethnographic visual representations of Jews, Spinner argues that Vorobeichic creates a visual Jewish primitivism, "simultaneously producing and critiquing the notion of Jewish primitiveness or authenticity" (p. 151). Vorobeichic achieves this through various techniques, most commonly by juxtaposing images and the texts surrounding them.

The reader's journey through these modernist authors and artists, which reveals the significant and complicated phenomena of European Jewish aesthetics, has far-reaching implications. For one, the revelation of Jewish primitivism can provide art historians a valuable example to study a much-neglected possibility of primitivism in literature. Scholars have often pointed to the language barrier, suggesting it made the migration of primitivism into literature impossible. As Spinner shows, Jewish primitivism—"by Jews of Jews"—bypassed this theoretical obstacle and thus made the transfer between media easily achievable. Properly accounting for Jewish primitivism is valuable not merely for examining the phenomenon of primitivist literature, or for articulations of aesthetic norms among different media, but also because it invites us to reassess the nature of primitivism itself. Appearing at the heart of European capital

cities, and in some cases at the center of the modernist literary canon, Jewish primitivism reveals the multiple colors of primitivism, which now, once again, cannot easily be defined.

The book reframes the discussion on the nature of European Jewish (and explicitly German Jewish) orientalism. Postcolonial discourse has long been recognized as a valuable tool in understanding the nature of the encounter of German Jews with Eastern Jews (the *Ostjuden*) and later also with North African Jewry (the *Mizrahim*). Spinner neither ignores the role of primitivism in European colonialism nor rejects the explicit orientalist and even racist features appearing in some of the works he discusses. Indeed, some encounters of (western) Jewish authors with the Hasidic “savages” discussed in the book seem to reproduce the conventional relations of European colonizing subjects to their primitive non-European objects. Yet Spinner’s constructive engagements with postcolonial theory overcome some common distinctions and provide more nuanced observations. Considering the book’s argument as a whole—namely, that Jewish primitivism was a project shared by western and eastern European Jewish artists alike—disrupts the stability of the West-East distinction so essential to colonialism. Moreover, in redirecting the ethnographic gaze back to the observing self on the personal or broader ethnic level, Spinner suggests that Jewish primitivism was a form of “self-colonization,” and as a result, even “a technique of decolonization” (p. 11). As one chapter shows, decolonization of the self can be transformed into the recolonization of an “other.” These claims exceed the specific discussion of specific authors and invite a further comparative study between Jewish primitivism and other forms of primitivism practiced by artists belonging to ethnic and religious minorities.

One of the many strengths of *Jewish Primitivism* is that it raises a diverse set of considerations. Spinner’s illuminating study is essential reading for those interested in modernist primitivism, in

Yiddish and German Jewish literatures, in the encounter of German Jews with east European Jews, and in Jewish modernism in general.

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