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Beyond Bearing Witness

Avrom Sutzkever's Surreal *Griner akvaryum*

Abstract

This article examines A. Sutzkever's series of Yiddish prose poems, *Green Aquarium* (1953–1954), as an exemplar of an alternative, surreal tradition of Holocaust remembrance that stands in contrast to more austere modes of witnessing. Sutzkever can be understood as one of several refugee poets and artists in the early post-war period whose works mapped out highly imaginative liminal spaces between the past and present, living and dead.

In the mid-1950s, when the Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever looked back on his experiences during the Nazi occupation of Vilna, the colour palette of his memory was green. His series of prose poems, *Griner akvaryum* (Green Aquarium), originally published in the Tel Aviv-based Yiddish literary journal *Di goldene keyt* (The Golden Chain) in 1953–1954, is a symbolist meditation on Sutzkever's experiences in the Vilna Ghetto and as a partisan in the nearby forests. At the beginning of the series, the poetic narrator asks if it might be possible to see the dead once again. What follows is a vision:

“A green knife slit open the earth.
It became green.
Green.
Green.
The green of dark fir trees through a mist;
The green of a cloud with ruptured bile;
The green of mossy stones in a rain;
The green that appears through a hoop rolled by a seven-year-old;
The green of cabbage leaves in splinters of dew, that bloody the fingers;
First green under melted snow in a circle around a blue wildflower;
The green of a half-moon, seen with green eyes from under a wave;
And the joyous green of grass bordering a grave.
Greens flow into greens. Body into body. And the earth stands transformed
into a green aquarium.
Closer, come closer to the green whirlpool.
I look in: people swim here like fish. Countless phosphorous faces.”¹

In this passage, Sutzkever fashions a memorial aquarium out of a mixture liquid and earthen elements, placing his figural world of the dead where the waters above and the waters below meet in a process that evokes the Genesis creation story. According to literary scholar Benjamin Harshav, Sutzkever aspired to write poetry that

¹ Avrom Sutzkever, *Green Aquarium*, translated and with an introduction by Ruth Wisse, in: *Prooftexts* 2 (1982) 1, 99.

“both God and the dead would like to read”, and *Green Aquarium* meditates on the possibility of communicating with that imagined audience through fantastic symbols. Sutzkever’s early life was marked by historic calamities that destroyed his Jewish community, including exile to Siberia during World War I and, later, the Holocaust. To memorialize these events, Harshav explains, Sutzkever “resorted to a poetic pantheon for the dead, a denial of ‘realism’ as a way to assert the subsistence of an annihilated world in some cosmic space.”²

Sutzkever was perhaps the most talented Yiddish writer of the twentieth century. However, the most famous Yiddish speaker to write about the Holocaust remains Elie Wiesel, whose memoir *Un di velt hot geshvign* (And the World Remained Silent) was published in French in significantly edited form as *La Nuit* (or Night) in 1958. Formulating cosmic visions that deny realism was not the project of what are now the most widely circulated memoirs and diaries to memorialise the Holocaust. By the late 1950s, literary works that today constitute a transnational canon were already in circulation, including Wiesel’s *Night*, Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* (If This Is a Man, first published in 1947 and then reprinted to wider renown in 1958), and Anne Frank’s diary (first published in 1947).

Sutzkever certainly shared with writers like Wiesel a commitment to documenting Nazi crimes against Jews. In 1946, he testified at the Nuremberg trials on behalf of the Soviet government and published a memoir, *Fun vilner geto* (From the Vilna Ghetto). In *Green Aquarium*, however, he turned to poetry to do something other than bear witness, demand justice, or lament over broken literary traditions.³ And he was not alone. Sutzkever’s collection represents a more eclectic, even fantastic, tradition of Holocaust remembrance that has been present since the very first years after the war and still influences, in ways that remain largely unacknowledged, both how we remember the genocide of Europe’s Jewish populations and how we link that genocide analogically to other forms of trauma, mass violence, and suffering.⁴ Jewish writers and painters who were Sutzkever’s contemporaries, including figures such as Marc Chagall, Amir Gilboa, Anna Langfus, and Paul Celan, frequently experimented with surreal imagery, symbolism, or hallucinatory narratives to conjure the dead and to imagine their own position as refugees suspended somewhere between past and present.

If survivors have described testifying as a basic need and element of mourning in the wake of the Holocaust, Sutzkever and fellow Jewish artists turned to fantasy and dream imagery to meet another kind of need.⁵ For them, fantasy was a mode not so

2 Benjamin Harshav’s introductory essay in: A. Sutzkever. *Selected Poetry and Prose*, translated by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav, Berkeley 1991, 12. Harshav has claimed that during the destruction of Jewish Vilna, Sutzkever ascribed to poetry a kind of magic power over life and death; Cnaan Liphshiz, reinforcing Harshav’s point, writes that when Sutzkever and his wife were crossing a minefield outside of Vilna to catch a rescue plane dispatched by the Soviets, Sutzkever remembered walking in rhythmic “anapests” and “amphibrachs”, lines of poetic metre, to cross the field safely. Cnaan Liphshiz, Avraham Sutzkever’s Astonishing Escape from the Vilna Ghetto, in: *Mosaic Magazine*, 8 August 2019, <https://mosaicmagazine.com/picks/history-ideas/2019/08/avraham-sutzkevers-astonishing-escape-from-the-vilna-ghetto/> (25 January 2020).

3 As a witness at the Nuremberg trials, Sutzkever “offered carefully detailed accounts, with names, dates, and information precisely documented”, writes Ruth Wisse. In *Green Aquarium*, however, his “radical impulse” was “to rewrite history as poetry”. See Wisse’s introduction to Sutzkever, *Green Aquarium*, 96-97.

4 In my dissertation, I write at greater length about this alternative tradition of remembrance and how it can reframe our understanding of the more austere aesthetic norms of Holocaust remembrance that are predominant in Europe and the major countries of Jewish resettlement today. Kathryn L. Brackney, *Phantom Geographies. An Alternative History of Holocaust Consciousness*, New Haven 2019 (Dissertation).

5 In the preface to *Survival in Auschwitz* (the English translation of *Se questo è un uomo*) Primo Levi wrote that among survivors, “The need to tell our story to ‘the rest’, to make ‘the rest’ participate in it, had taken for us, before our liberation and after, the character of an immediate and violent impulse, to the point of competing with our other elementary needs.” Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz. The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans-

much of recounting their experience but of addressing the dead and figuratively ornamenting the vanished remains of their communities. The hybrid figures and surreal liminal spaces in their work convey both an enduring sense of proximity to the worlds they had lost and, conversely, distance from the living.

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In one vignette from *Green Aquarium*, the poet conjures up a transfigured image of Jews who survived the Nazi occupation in the sewers of Vilna. “Bomke”, Sutzkever writes, was a man who “after a year in darkness, emerged from the sewers, into the liberated city” – and “brought to mind a citizen of Pompey whom the lava had coated with melted diamonds”. In this postdiluvian world, the city of Vilna is smashed to bits that still shine with the life that only just left them. “Facing him, like the trough of a dried-up riverbed, with the sandy silver of dead fish, lies too broad a street, without a single house at its edge.”⁶

Sutzkever’s glinting fish in the dried up riverbed of history can be read as an inverted image of Marc Chagall’s painting *Time Is a River without Banks* (1928), which centres on a winged herring that soars over young lovers in a luminous blue world. Chagall depicted many figures from the animal world, particularly in his paintings that focused on Jewish life in prewar Vitebsk. Not unlike Sutzkever, Chagall developed a visual idiom early in his career that remained consistent as he watched extraordinary historic upheavals, including the Russian Revolution and World War II, transform and destroy his homeland. In Chagall’s paintings, men and women, fish, calves, and clocks defy the laws of gravity and twist toward the sky according to the logic of some surreal centrifugal force. Animality has long been a metaphor for physical and moral degradation in the Nazi camp system; for both Chagall and Sutzkever, however, wings and fish scales register meanings that are not always grotesque. At times, the blurred line between man and beast signals a mode of semi-transcendence. Chagall imagined that the creative thinker himself was part animal, claiming in his autobiography, “I often said I was not an artist, but some kind of a cow” – a figure that appears again and again in works like *The Falling Angel* (1923), *Cow with Parasol* (1944), and *The Flayed Ox* (1947). Sutzkever also used semi-transcendent animal imagery to describe the source of his poetic inspiration in *Green Aquarium*. In a vignette at the conclusion, the soul of a man buried in Vilna exits the grave and passes through the external frame of the poem itself, in the shape of a honeybee. He visits the poet to bury a stinger in his heart.⁷

In Sutzkever’s dream world, bodies do not give way in the afterlife to an eternal soul. Instead, the dead reappear in amphibious form. In another episode of the *Green Aquarium* that describes partisan fighting in the swamps, the narrator reunites with his lost lover, whom he recognises by her ruby ring. “[D]runk with despair and faith”, he describes her transformed body in the hollowed out crypt of a birch tree:

“First pupils of the eyes formed salty – amber fresh from the sea. A moment later – a disheveled head in a crown of thorns. A snake around its neck.
The clothes over the body – frayed, shredded into dangling tatters.
Among them an uncovered body in poppy-red stains.
“Hey, who are you, the bride of the swampking?”

lated by Stuart Woolf, New York 1996, 9.

⁶ Sutzkever, *Green Aquarium*, 118.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

The snake around the neck shook its head. No.
The figure drew closer.
And suddenly – from its left hand there sparkled the ring with the blood
drop of the ruby.”⁸

Sutzkever’s bride of the swampking and poor Bomke who emerges from the sewers with the pressurised diamond remains of Pompey appear in scenes that seem to reflect the psychoanalytic structure of Sigmund Freud’s uncanny: That is to say, a person or place from a former life reappears, in a new or disguised form, inhabiting an ambiguous line between life and death. Recently, a growing number of researchers have become interested in similar uncanny figures in contemporary literature on the Holocaust. In *The Spectral Turn. Jewish Ghosts in the Polish Post-Holocaust Imaginaire* (2019), several articles explore the role of Jewish ghosts in Polish literature – ghosts that either enact Polish-Jewish reconciliation or cast a pall of guilt over enduring antisemitism, haunting old houses that were expropriated from Jews during the war.⁹ In many of these works, the uncanny ghost is ultimately a source of fear and anxiety. In Sutzkever’s early encounters with his own haunting figures in the 1950s, however, fear does not finally overwhelm the poet in his vision of the “countless phosphorous faces” of Jewish Vilna. It is intimacy, and not the uncanny, which is the predominant mood of *Green Aquarium*. Sutzkever uses ghostly figuration to take up the ruins of Vilna, encasing them tenderly, in an auger of silver, green, and red that preserves the dead in a state of suspended animation.

Like the interwar Surrealists, who sought to break down the boundaries between dreams and the rational mind in the wake of World War I, Sutzkever and other Jewish refugee artists were concerned after the Holocaust with the union of estranged worlds. They effected this union by turning to the liminal spaces of oceans and ether and experimenting with the almost talismanic power of language and form. The interwar Surrealists, however, were largely oriented toward a radical political future, interested in unlocking the unconscious in order to access a liberated subjectivity capable of bringing down the bourgeois order. While Sutzkever’s writing in the immediate postwar period certainly engaged with critical questions in Jewish politics, the fantastic imagery in *Green Aquarium* points less toward a radical path forward and instead seeks passage through the collapsed horizons of the past. In her work on the evolution of literary responses to memory of the Holocaust, Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi has identified a recurring character in post-war novels whom she calls “the living dead”. This character is a survivor who “hovers above this world like a shade from Hades”, paralysed by the past and in a state of alienation from the post-war world.¹⁰ While Sutzkever was hardly paralysed in the post-war period after he immigrated to Tel Aviv—he dedicated his considerable energies to reviving the Yiddish literary world—he can be understood nonetheless as one of many refugees interested in mapping out this liminal state between past and present. Sutzkever and other artists in the first decades after the war often figured themselves loosened from the weight of their own bones and suspended at the boundary of land and water, life and death, human and animal. Hannah Pollin-Galay has written that Sutzkever’s mode of witnessing in the wake of the Holocaust was markedly intersubjective, emphasising dia-

⁸ Ibid., 109.

⁹ Zuzanna Dziuban (ed.), *The “Spectral Turn”. Jewish Ghosts in the Polish Post-Holocaust Imaginaire*, Bielefeld 2019.

¹⁰ Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone. The Holocaust in Literature*, Chicago 1980, 95.

logue between himself and other survivors.¹¹ *Green Aquarium* engages in a similar dialogic mode – this time not just with other witnesses who survived, but with the lost themselves.

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¹¹ Hannah Pollin-Galay, Avrom Sutzkever’s Art of Testimony. Witnessing with the Poet in the Wartime Soviet Union, in: *Jewish Social Studies. History, Culture, Society* 21 (2016) 2, 1-34.

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