
Reviewed by Dina Ripsman Eylon, University of Toronto, Canada

Am I Jewish or English?
This keeps me in confusion.
I’m both, you see, that’s my final conclusion.
Judaism is my religion. I make it so, clearly.
I adore England, I love it so dearly.
-- Jonah Summerfield¹

With the rise of global immigration to many western countries, Minority Literature has become a new “genre” encompassing literary works written by non-White writers, typically delegated to the periphery. The prestigious English publication, *The Next Generation Poets List in 2004* featured one Black poet, Patience Agbabi, but overlooked the nomination of other Black and Asian writers. Furthermore, the British Arts Council reported that British publishers admit that their lists are “overwhelmingly white.”²

Almost half (43 per cent) of Black or Asian poets in Britain “rate their chances for publication as either ‘poor’ or ‘very poor’.”³

Notions and expressions of marginality⁴ are present throughout Peter Lawson’s book *Anglo-Jewish Poetry: From Isaac Rosenberg to Elaine Feinstein*. The book “focuses on tensions over the course of the twentieth-century between otherness and affiliation in Anglo-Jewish Poetry.” (p.1) Lawson discusses the works of six Jewish poets, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, John Rodker, Jon Silkin, Karen Gershon, and Elaine Feinstein, who, in his opinion, employed an array of biblical themes and imagery, shifting from the Romantic tradition to Modernism.

Lawson treats marginality as a “blessing,” (p. 6) since it allows the writer to break free of mainstream corpus and create a new literary and political realm. His aim is to study how six Anglo-Jewish poets handled their marginality: “How do they give it a voice and make it speak for themselves as Jews, as well as for the other” minority writers. (p. 6) He relates that one of the featured poets, Karen Gershon, viewed her “marginality” as a curse and stopped writing poetry in favor of prose. He reveals that neither Rosenberg, nor Siegfried Sassoon considered themselves as “culturally central.” (p. 7) Sassoon, in fact,

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³ Ibid.
⁴ In the introduction to this book, Lawson outlines the late twentieth-century literary theory of Minor Literature, proposed by French philosophers, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Interestingly, they viewed minority literature as political in essence, and considered Anglo-American literature quite unexpectedly as superior to any European literature, including French literature.

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called himself “an indecisive intruder.” or “the ruminant onlooker.”” (p.7) John Rodker regarded himself as a foreigner in London (Thus, Lawson dubbed him “an exemplary minority Modernist.”) (p.9) Karen Gershon, (née Kaethe Loewenthal) who fled Nazi Germany to England in 1938, persistently talked about her “sense of exile and marginality.” (p.13) Elaine Feinstein, whose work was influenced by the Shoah, rejected British literary movements and idolized American poets. A large part of the book’s Introduction comprises of paraphrasing and quoting from Silkin’s various non-fiction works, such as Out of the Battle (1972), The Life of Metrical and Free Verse in Twentieth-century Poetry (1997), and The First Twenty-Four Years (1987). 5

In the chapter dealing with Isaac Rosenberg’s poetry (1890-1918), Peter Lawson, following Silkin’s stance, classifies Rosenberg as a “First World War, Anglo-Jewish and working-class” poet. (p.5) Lawson readily concurs with Silkin that Rosenberg’s English was “exploratory,” “a minority voice,” not the language of his contemporaries. (p.5) Lawson continues to argue that “Rosenberg is most rewardingly approached as an Anglo-Jewish poet engaged with social and literary hybridity.” (p.19) He suggests that Post-Impressionism influenced Rosenberg’s visual art and poetry. Employing biographical data derived from additional secondary sources, Lawson interprets Rosenberg’s use of the word “Root” as taking on the meaning of “new growth from an old root.” (p.20) In the poem “At Night,” Lawson offers a shaky interpretation to the line “The secret roots of the sun” as metaphorically referencing Jewish roots. (p.21) In the poem “Creation,” Rosenberg writes about the intersection between Judaism and Christianity, where this sort of analysis could have been legitimate. Therein, Lawson identifies the word Root with Judaism, but fails to explain Rosenberg’s ensuing statement “Perfection always is a root.” (p.21) In the poem “Auguries,” Lawson sees “Jewish messianic anticipation” (p. 22) that might be construed differently. In another instance, he peculiarly connects Rosenberg’s verse-play “Moses” to the life and work of Theodor Herzl, the founder of Political Zionism.

Most importantly, it appears that throughout the entire chapter, Lawson neglects to take into account one key factor – Rosenberg’s age. The poet died in WWI at twenty-seven. At times, Lawson draws on materials that Rosenberg wrote when he was fifteen! This could explain the poet’s self-declared social awkwardness and coming to terms with his own Jewish identity at a point when Nationalism reached its peak in Europe.

The next chapter sheds light on the life and work of Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967). Sassoon’s father was Jewish, but Siegfried’s mother raised him as an Anglican; later, toward the end of his life he converted to Catholicism. In addition, as a “Jew,” he displayed tendencies of self-hatred and referred to his “fellow” Jews with intense derogatoriness. The inclusion of Siegfried Sassoon in this work is controversial. The fact that Sassoon utilized biblical imagery in some of his poems does not render him an

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5 Lawson uses Jon Silkin’s literary critique of Rosenberg to voice his own, or rather instead of his own. He cites freely from Silkin’s writings on Rosenberg and agrees with the former’s observations.

6 Earlier in the Introduction chapter, Lawson contradicts himself when insisting that Isaac Rosenberg was a war poet who was “within” the English poetry of his time, while at the same time, claiming that Rosenberg was certainly “outside” this milieu. (p.4)

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Anglo-Jewish poet. Moreover, Lawson’s chapter on Sassoon’s poetry does not seem to address the complexities of the poet’s attitude to Jews and Judaism. In his chapter about John Rodker’s poetic works (1894-1955), Lawson adopts Adam Philip’s portrayal of Rodker and names the latter “a minority Modernist.” (p.77) Rodker published T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and James Joyce despite their overt anti-Semitism. Lawson is quick to mention that Rodker’s close affiliation with the founders of Modernism occurred between 1914 and 1930, “before social and literary antisemitism developed into the fascist politics of Pound and his sympathizers.” (p. 78) Even so, Rodker had to endure literary critique, immersed with prejudice and superstition against his origins and ethnicity. To deflect these blows, he resorted to what could be described as self-denial and self-hatred. Lawson’s depiction of Rodker’s concept of Otherness is well developed and aptly argued, rendering this chapter as the pinnacle of the compilation.

The chapter on Jon Silkin’s (1930-1997) poetry is the shortest in the volume. Notably, Silkin, a poet who lived through both World Wars, confronted fascism and anti-Semitism, particularly in his “campaigning literary journal Stand.” (p.111) Karen Gershon (1923-1993), who immigrated to England as a child, is the least prolific of the six. Unlike the previous essays, in this essay Lawson changeably “considers Gershon’s [diasporic] novels and autobiographies” (p.139) as an aid in examining her poetry.

Elaine Feinstein (1930- ) is the only living writer among the six Anglo-Jewish poets. She has written extensively on Jewish topics, specifically on the aftermath of the Holocaust. Lawson describes her as re-deploying “a biblical discourse of patriarchal power for feminist purposes.” (p. 165) Similar to his methodology in the previous chapter on Gershon, Lawson turns to Feinstein’s prose works to substantiate his discourse on her poetry.

From the onset, Lawson strives to change the reception and prominence of six Anglo-Jewish poets and to challenge the way in which earlier critics and scholars compartmentalized Anglo-Jewish literature. He also enlightens the reader with regard to class and gender issues, which inevitably affected the creative output of these notable poets. Lawson unreservedly believes that “in contrast to received critical opinion, there is an Anglo-Jewish poetic lineage.” (p. 193) In his former work, an anthology entitled *Passionate Renewal: Jewish Poetry in Britain since 1945* (2001), he claims to have shown “recurrent themes and concerns within this lineage.” (ibid.) Considering the position of these poets as minority authors, Lawson’s comprehension and presentation of their desire for inclusiveness is forthcoming and noteworthy. He should be commended for reviving the poetry of these Anglo-Jewish authors and exploring the effects that Otherness and marginality continue to have on British literature.

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7 He frequently lectured in Israel and translated the works of the Israeli Modernist poet, Nathan Zach.
8 This shift in Lawson’s methodology requires further justification.
9 Elaine Feinstein’s website can be found @ www.elainefeinstein.com

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