Emma Lazarus: Spinster-Versifier Well Worth Knowing*

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Emma Lazarus’s pedigree evokes the Jewish “Mayflower” that left Recife, Brazil with 23 souls fleeing the spread of the feared Inquisition to Portuguese-held territory in 1654. Ironically, the ship’s destination was the New Amsterdam of gruff Director-General Peter Stuyvesant, who resisted acceptance of even a small number of those he considered to be of a “deceitful race” – until a Dutch West India Company decision caused him to modify his stance. Emma’s great-grandmother Grace Mendes Seixas Nathan, born in New York in 1752, left nineteen original poems – including elegies for the premature death of a granddaughter, and on the passing of her own beloved husband Simon. Emma’s great-uncle Moses Seixas, the Newport merchant, welcomed George Washington to a visit to the Touro Synagogue with immortal words that were then echoed back in a famous return letter from the Founding Father. Seixas wrote, “Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People – a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance – but generously affording to all Liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship…” A flair for matching apt words to a meaningful occasion was part of her Sephardic pedigree, too. She proves this with a rhymed iambic pentameter tribute to a relative by marriage -- Jacques Judah Lyons, who served as Congregation Shearith Israel’s spiritual leader for thirty-six years, dying in 1877 while still in active service. I will recite the last two stanzas of her memorial for him.

In Memoriam – Rev. J.J. Lyons: Rosh-Hashanah, 5638

For there is mourning now in Israel,

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The crown, the garland of the branching tree
Is plucked and withered. Ripe of years was he,
The priest, the good old man who wrought so well
Upon his chosen glebe. For he was one
Who at his seed-plot toiled through rain and sun.
Morn found him not as one who slumbereth,
Noon saw him faithful, and the restful night
Stole o’er him at his labors to requite
The just man’s service with the just man’s death.

What shall be said when such as he do pass?
Go to the hill-side, neath the cypress-trees,
Fall midst that peopled silence on your knees,
And weep that man must wither as the grass.
But mourn him not, whose blameless life complete
 Rounded its perfect orb, whose sleep is sweet,
Whom we must follow, but may not recall.
Salute with solemn trumpets the New Year,
And offer honeyed fruits as were he here,
Though ye be sick with wormwood and with gall.

The Lazarus family fortune came from sugar, and allowed for a 19th century life of refinement and pleasure, including, in Princeton University professor and scholar Esther Schor’s words, “servants, tutors…carriage rides, social calls, concerts, and lectures – as well as holidays by the sea.” Thus, Emma’s social position, grounded in her father’s tony “gaslit ellipse of fountains, birdhouses, and statues” in a brownstone at 36 West Fourteenth Street near Union Square, allowed her to hobnob with the Madison Avenue banker and lover of the arts Samuel Gray Ward. It was at his home that she met Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1868 when he was 65 and she 18. He became a kind of perplexing and
sometimes elusive “oversoul” to her, writing, “I would like to be appointed your professor, you being required to attend the whole term.” She invited him to visit her large family at Ryeland Cottage in East Haven, Connecticut. Here is her Petrarchan sonnet describing the charming view it gave of beckoning Long Island Sound:

Long Island Sound
I see it as it looked one afternoon
In August, -- by the fresh soft breeze o’erblown.
The swiftness of the tide, the light thereon,
A far-off sail, white as a crescent moon.
The shining waters with pale currents strewn,
The quiet fishing-smacks, the Eastern cove,
The semi-circle of its dark, green grove.
The luminous grasses, and the merry sun
In the grave sky; the sparkle far and wide,
Laughter of unseen children, cheerful chirp
Of crickets, and low lisp of rippling tide,
Light summer clouds fantastical as sleep
Changing unnoted while I gazed thereon.
All these fair sounds and sights I made my own.

Emerson declined that invitation, but later in life – when he had started his decline into dementia -- Emma visited him and his daughter Susan in Concord, and she was still solicitous toward her mentor, wishing to follow his movements from library to garden. Emerson’s criticism of her poems ranged from characterizing them as “noble” to accusing her of permitting “feeble lines and feeble words.” For nobility, I will cite Emma Lazarus’s “In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport” which was her response to Longfellow’s “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport” (perhaps Longfellow’s poem would have had a more lively tone had the Touro Synagogue not been locked and shuttered on the day he visited).
In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport

Here, where the noises of the busy town,
   The ocean’s plunge and roar can enter not,
We stand and gaze around with tearful awe,
   And muse upon the consecrated spot.

No signs of life are here: the very prayers
   Inscribed around us are in a language dead;
The light of the “perpetual lamp” is spent
   That an undying radiance was to shed.

What prayers were in this temple offered up,
   Wrung from sad hearts that knew no joy on earth,
By these lone exiles of a thousand years,
   From the fair sunrise land that gave them birth!

Now as we gaze, in this new world of light,
   Upon this relic of the days of old,
The present vanishes, and tropic bloom
   And Eastern towns and temples we behold.

Again we see the patriarch with his flocks,
   The purple seas, the hot blue sky o’erhead,
The slaves of Egypt, -- omens, mysteries, --
   Dark fleeing hosts by flaming angels led.

A wondrous light upon a sky-kissed mount,
   A man who reads Jehovah’s written law,
’Midst blinding glory and effulgence rare,
Unto a people prone with reverent awe.

The pride of luxury’s barbaric pomp,
    In the rich court of royal Solomon –
Alas! we wake: one scene alone remains, --
    The exiles by the streams of Babylon.

Our softened voices send us back again
    But mournful echoes through the empty hall;
Our footsteps have a strange unnatural sound,
    And with unwonted gentleness they fall.

The weary ones, the sad, the suffering,
    All found their comfort in the holy place,
And children’s gladness and men’s gratitude
    Took voice and mingled in the chant of praise.
The funeral and the marriage, now, alas!
    We know not which is sadder to recall;
For youth and happiness have followed age,
    And green grass lieth gently over all.

Nathless the sacred shrine is holy yet,
    With its lone floors where reverent feet once trod.
Take off your shoes as by the burning bush,
    Before the mystery of death and God.

Here Lazarus has used ABCB ballad rhyme scheme, iambic pentameter quatrains with exotic Levantine imagery, and she concludes by showing us the door to life and the future, as “the sacred shrine is holy yet.” What about “feeble lines and feeble words”? I believe that Emerson was taking umbrage at archaisms, redundancy, hyphenated phrases,
inversions and pretentiousness of excessive formality that she is sometimes given to. Here is one such example excerpted from her poem “In Exile.” It is about Russian-Jewish immigrants blissfully relocated in Texas. Still, I would have been proud to have penned the following lines!

_In Exile_

After the Southern day of heavy toil,

How good to lie, with limbs relaxed, brows bare
To evening’s fan, and watch the smoke-wreaths coil
Up from one’s pipe-stem through the rayless air.

So deem these unused tillers of the soil,

Who stretched beneath the shadowing oak tree, stare
Peacefully on the star-unfolding skies,
And name their life unbroken paradise.

Emma’s work was not included in Emerson’s weighty anthology of memorable poems, PARNASSUS – which did include 127 American poets and 11 female poets. If he found her philo-Semitic verse too parochial, he surely could have considered publishing the following secular unrhymed sonnet celebrating the glory of the greatest North American waterfall, penned in 1865.

_Niagara_

Thou art a giant altar, where the Earth
Must needs send up her thanks to Him above
Who did create her. Nature cometh here
To lay its offerings upon thy shrine.

The morning and the evening shower down
Bright jewels, -- changeful opals, em’ralds fair.
The burning noon sends floods of molten gold,
The calm night crowns thee with its host of stars.
The moon enfolds thee with her silver veil,
And o’er thee e’er is arched the rainbow span, --
The gorgeous marriage-ring of Earth and Heaven.
While ever from the holy altar grand
Ascends the incense of the mist and spray,
That mounts to God with thy wild roar of praise.

Though Emma took an idyllic vacation at Clifton House on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls in 1865, she and her family could not have been totally oblivious to the Draft Riots that caused smoke and shattered glass in lower Manhattan at the inception of the Civil War, not far from the family brownstone near Union Square. Her poem “April 27, 1865” recreates the capture of Lincoln’s assassin in rhymed couplet iambic pentameter – it is ballad-like, and shows compassion for the cornered murderer, yet the refrain insists with Hebrew Bible sternness that “thy brow is marked with the brand of Cain.”

April 27, 1865
“Oh, where can I lay my aching head?”
The weary-worn fugitive sadly said.
“I have wandered in pain the sleepless night,
And I saw my pursuers’ distant light
As it glared o’er the river’s waves of blue,
And flashed forth again in each drop of dew.
I’ve wandered all night in this deadly air,
Till, sick’ning, I drop with pain and despair.”

Go forth! Thou shalt have no rest again,
For thy brow is marked with the brand of Cain.

“I am weary and faint and ill,” said he,
“And the stars look down so mercilessly!
Do ye mock me with your glittering ray,
And seek, like the garish sun, to betray?
Oh, forbear, cruel stars, so bright and high;  
Ye are happy and pure in God’s own sky.  
Oh, where can I lay me down to sleep,  
To rest and to slumber, to pray and weep?

Go forth! Thou shalt have no rest again,  
For thy brow is marked with the brand of Cain.  
“To sleep! What is sleep now but haunted dreams?  
Chased off, every time, by the flashing gleams  
Of the light o’er the stream in yonder town,  
Where all are searching and hunting me down!  
Oh, the wearisome pain, the dread suspense,  
And the horror each instant more intense!  
I yearn for rest from my pain and for sleep, --  
Bright stars, do ye mock, or, quivering, weep?

Go forth! Thou shalt have here no rest again,  
For thy brow is marked with the brand of Cain.

On the marsh’s grass, without pillow or bed,  
Fell the rain and dew on his fated head;  
While the will-o’-the-wisp, with its changeful light,  
Led him on o’er the swamp in the darksome night;  
And all Nature’s voices cried out again,  
To the weary fugitive in his pain, --

Go forth! Thou shalt have here no rest again  
For thy brow is marked with the brand of Cain.
The pursuers are near! Oh, bitter strife!
Youth, more strong than despair, still clings to life.
More near and more near! They find him at last;
One desperate struggle, and all is past, --
One desperate struggle,’mid smoke and flame,
For life without joy, and darkness and shame.
A prayer ascends to high Heaven’s gate
For his soul, -- O God, be it not too late!
A ball cleaves the air….He is lying there,
Pale, stiff, and cold in the fresh morning air;
And the flames’ hot breath is stifled now,
And the breezes caress his marble brow.

All sorrow has gone with life’s fitful breath.
Rest at last! For thy brow bears the seal of Death.

Emma Lazarus’s life was one of acknowledged talent coupled with social position. Her influential, indulgent father published her first volume of poems when she was a teen of sixteen, and it received a respectable review in the New-York Times. Richard Watson Gilder – editor at Scribner’s and Century Magazine -- was her best friend’s husband, and usually eager to publish such essays as one on ostracism vs. pride in the life of Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, or a pre-Herzl Zionist plea put forth in her “Epistle to the Hebrews.” Gilder also snapped up her Heine translations and experimental prose poems, which appeared as “By the Waters of Babylon” in 1887. Lazarus corresponded with Hawthorne’s daughter Rose Lathrop, received a letter of admiration from Turgenev, had lunch with Robert Browning and invited him to a Jewish wedding during one of her two trips to Europe, and had a personal guided tour of a progressive textile factory presided over by British Socialist William Morris. Given the privileged nature of these interactions, one might ask what led a fourth-generation Sephardic Jew to become a volunteer English teacher, philanthropist-concert planner, member of the Hebrew
Emigrant Aid Society and regular visitor to the newly-arrived on muddy Ward’s Island? Brutal pogroms in Russia starting in the 1880’s – described in a January 1882 *Times of London* article as a “reign of terror” – hold the key to the answer. The subsequent influx of thousands of downtrodden Russian-Jewish refugees put Emma’s loyalty to her less-privileged brethren to a test, and she was determined to be both strong and tenderhearted enough to triumph in that personal trial. Her poem “The Crowing of the Red Cock” blames the pogroms on Christianity’s ancient charge of Deicide, and its flaming consequences. The blaming-in-verse is presented in iambic tetrameter, a ballad meter, with rhyme scheme ABAB and the CC lines as a kind of refrain.

*The Crowing of the Red Cock*

Across the Eastern sky has glowed

  The flicker of a blood-red dawn,
Once more the clarion cock has crowed,

  Once more the sword of Christ is drawn.
A million burning rooftrees light
The world-wide path of Israel’s flight.

Where is the Hebrew fatherland?

  The folk of Christ is sore bestead;
The Son of Man is bruised and banned,

  Nor finds whereon to lay his head.
His cup is gall, his meat is tears,
His passion lasts a thousand years.

Each crime that wakes in man the beast,

  Is visited upon his kind.
The lust of mobs, the greed of priest,

  The tyranny of kings, combined.
To root his seed from earth again,
His record is one cry of pain.

When the long roll of Christian guilt
Against his sires and kin is known,
The flood of tears, the life-blood spilt,
The agony of ages shown,
What oceans can the stain remove,
From Christian law and Christian love?

This brings us to the circumstances surrounding Lazarus’s seminal work, the brilliant, apt, powerhouse, classic New World sonnet “The New Colossus.” In May 1883, an art exhibition was planned in order to help raise funds toward a pedestal for Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi’s statue “Liberty Enlightening the World,” a French gift to the American people. Emma had only seen photos of the statue in its entirety, but the writer Constance Cary Harrison implored her to use her skill to add poetry to the portfolio of writings and sketches to be offered for sale at the exhibition. Here is Harrison’s memory of her part in nudging “The New Colossus” into being:

I begged Miss Lazarus to give me some verses appropriate to the occasion.
She was at first inclined to rebel against writing anything “To order” as it were, and rather mischievously let play the summer-lightning of her sarcasm upon her friend, “the Portfolio fiend,” and the enterprise in general. “Besides,” she added, “if I attempt anything now, under the circumstances, it will assuredly be flat.”

“Think of that goddess standing on her pedestal down yonder in the bay, and holding her torch out to those Russian refugees of yours you are so fond of visiting at Ward’s Island,” I suggested. The shaft sped home – her dark eyes deepened – her cheek flushed – the time for merriment was passed – she said not a word more, then.

Here is the immortal “The New Colossus” – not mounted as a plaque on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty until 1903, 16 years after Emma’s untimely passing at age 38 due to Hodgkin’s disease. From its opening allusion to the Colossus that bestrode the ancient
harbor of Rhodes, to its New World allusion to “huddled masses” leaving Europe and other places for a better life on our shores, complete with alliteration, personification and illumination imagery, there is not one “feeble” word in this commanding, compelling, commiserating, uplifting Petrarchan sonnet.

_The New Colossus_

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.

“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Emma had a sense of humor about being single in an age where women were still defined by their marriages. As she wrote to her lifelong friend and Art Students League founder Mrs. Helena DeKay Gilder, “I am bitterly disappointed in not seeing the slightest prospect of marrying Sir Moses Montefiore – as I had hoped. He is approaching his 99th birthday & has not made any advances to me & I fear there is no time to be lost.” She had compassion for “Harry” Heine, who had lived in a baptized netherworld between two faiths, with the spirit of both Hellenism and Hebraism within him. Here is her soft-hearted attempt to reach out to him – a mixed Petrarchan and Shakespearean form sonnet inspired by his last trip to the Louvre to see the famous Venus de Milo statue before he became bedridden – the statue and devotee both being “maimed.”
Venus of the Louvre

Down the long hall she glistens like a star,
The foam-born mother of Love, transfixed to stone,
Yet none the less immortal, breathing on;
Time’s brutal hand hath maimed, but could not mar.
When first the enthralled enchantress from afar
Dazzled mine eyes, I saw not her alone,
Serenely poised on her world-worshiped throne,
As when she guided once her dove-drawn car, --
But at her feet a pale, death-stricken Jew,
Her life-adorer, sobbed farewell to love.
Here Heine wept! Here still he weeps anew,
Nor ever shall his shadow lift or move
While mourns one ardent heart, one poet-brain,
For vanished Hellas and Hebraic pain.

Lazarus accomplishments not to be forgotten also include expert translations into English of the poetry of Heine, Halevi and Ibn Gabirol, as well as a play published within the pages of her book Songs of a Semite. The Dance To Death is set in 1359 Germany overcome by the ominous Black Plague, which is the backdrop for an interfaith romance couched in a cauldron of anti-Semitic vitriol. In the 20th century, she was honored by the “Emma Lazarus Federation of Jewish Women’s Clubs,” and she provided a role model for such hyphenated identity American-Jewish writers as Malamud, Bellow, Ozick and Roth. She was adamant and prescient about the need for a Jewish homeland a half-century before the Holocaust. As scholar and Princeton University professor Esther Schor writes in the conclusion to her excellent biography Emma Lazarus, Lazarus “remade America in the image of a Jewish calling – a mission to repair the world. And within the hard, cold, haughty visage of Gilded Age America, she discerned a mother’s face.”
Emma Lazarus

Emma Lazarus – now as during the second half of the 19th century – a cosmopolitan folk troubadour for the ages; a gentle yet forceful spinster-versifier well worth knowing.

Works Cited: