WHY DEAD MEN DON'T PRAISE GOD: A POSTHOLOCAUST RECKONING IN THE POETRY OF
GLATSTEIN AND OSHEROW
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Franz Rosenzweig's magisterial work *The Star of Redemption* understood Psalm 115 to contain "the root sentence of redemption" (251). Emphasizing the psalm's final verse, Rosenzweig defined redemption in terms of participation in the eternal worship of God; of living in the reality of an ongoing "we" that perpetually blesses the Lord with sounds of hallelujah. The psalm crescendos to this affirmation—"But we will bless the LORD / now and forever. / Hallelujah" (115:18)—and Rosenzweig aptly appropriates it for his theological scheme.[2] So strong is this affirmation that it tends to overwhelm the psalm's penultimate verse: "The dead cannot praise the LORD / nor any who go down into silence" (115:17). Post-holocaust poetry, however, has caused readers to pause on this very verse that, in Jacqueline Osherow's words, "had festered in its psalm / waiting to reveal its acrid heart" ("Dead" 8-9). Where the Book of Psalms takes as axiomatic that the dead cannot praise God (see Pss. 6:6; 30:10; 88:11-13), Jewish poets such as Jacob Glatstein (Yankev Glatshteyn) and Jacqueline Osherow ask of the verse 'why?' and use it as a vantage from which to interpret the holocaust's aftermath. They invite the festering verse to "reveal its acrid heart."

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Such an invitation reflects what Maeera Shreiber has noted as the "troubling" character of Jewish-American poetry. In Shreiber's eyes, Jewish-American poetry works to "profoundly unsettling ends" in order to complicate and thicken dominant understandings of Jewish identity (2). Poetry's troubling, she argues, should not be avoided, but embraced, "cultivated as constitutive of a subject's given complexity" (11). Glatstein's "*Nisht di meysim loybn got*" ("Dead Men Don't Praise God", *Shtralndike* 12-15) and Osherow's "XI (Dead Men's Praise)" demonstrate the troubling dynamic of Jewish-American poetry as they disrupt dominant readings of Psalm 115 and expose its complexity. Thickened in the process is the reader's view not only of the psalm, but of the aftermath of the holocaust that defines the poets' context and concern. Further, these poems make clear what does not surface in Shreiber's discussion: namely, that the troubling character of much Jewish poetry is intimately bound to its intertextual fabric, that it troubles most directly through interaction with precursing texts that furnish at once both a source for poetry as well as an object for revision. Here, troubling poetry is commentary; the "agent of turbulent thought," intertextuality (Shreiber 2).[3]

An exploration of the interaction between Psalm 115:17 and Glatstein's "Dead Men Don't Praise God" and Osherow's "XI (Dead Men's Praise)" shows how each poem's rendering of the psalm verse troubles in order to bring to focus a complex perception of what it is that dies in the holocaust, what makes the dead 'dead' and puts at distance the possibility of praise as envisioned in the psalm. Moreover, reading these texts together shapes our interpretation not only of the holocaust but of the ancient psalm, as the testimony of the modern poems unsettles its concluding affirmation and exposes the psalm's own awareness of danger.

The Dead and the Praise of God in Psalm 115

Without ambiguity or qualification, Psalm 115 asserts "The dead cannot praise the LORD, / nor any who go down into silence" (115:17). The dead do not sing hallelujah (*lo hametim yehalelu-yah*). The psalm does not provide a metaphysics of Sheol to account for the point. It assumes the silence of the dead as an operative fact and proceeds to appropriate its statement within the rhetorical purpose of the psalm. In doing so, it resembles other instances where psalmists press this axiom into the service of a rhetorical aim, most commonly to encourage God to rescue one near death so that God might yet be praised (thus, 6:5-6; 30:9-10).[4] In Psalm 115, however, the psalmist does not employ the axiom as a warrant for rescue, but uses

it to dramatize the impotence of idols. The dead, in their silence, echo the psalm's critical portrayal of idols: "They have mouths, but cannot speak, / …they can make no sound in their throats" (115:5, 7). When the psalm asserts "those who fashion them [idols], / all who trust in them, / shall become like them" (115:8), it connects idols and idol-worshippers, and both with the dead. Through the linkage, it implies that those who give themselves to the worship of idols, like the idols themselves, are essentially dead; and, the corollary, that vitality belongs singularly to those who praise God, to those who sing hallelujah.

As such, the dead provide a marked contrast to the psalm's living "we" who forever "bless the LORD" (115:18).[5] The psalm drives to this conclusion, eclipsing the concern of the preceding verse by its rhetorical placement as an uncontested, final word and through the antithetical structure that counters the dead's not singing hallelujah with the living community's vocalization of precisely that refrain (*anachnu nebarekh yah…halelu-yah*, 115:18). In Psalm 115, "we" are not the dead; we live to continue God's praise and God's praise enables us to continue to live.

Jacob Glatstein and the Dead Men of Lublin

The Lublin-born Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein immigrated to the United States in 1914 when he was seventeen years old. As Janet Hadda notes, "Although [Glatstein] spent virtually all of his adult years living in New York City and reacting to his immediate environment, his birthplace, Lublin, Poland, always remained a powerful, if intermittent, imaginative stimulus" (11). This was evident not only in Lublin's supply of memories, but in the way it provided an arena of continuous concern during the years of the holocaust and its aftermath. The destruction of his family and community in Lublin, tragic in its own right, furnished Glatstein with an emblem of the fate of the Jewish people as a whole that he contended with from afar as a suffering witness, as a poet. No poem shows this better than "Dead Men Don't Praise God," a poem wherein Lublin becomes the place in which all Jews die together and, in a reversal of Shavuot, return the Torah itself to God.

"Dead Men Don't Praise God" reflects the development of Glatstein as a poet. One finds in it the influence of his early *Inzikhist* ("Introspectivist") writing and the significance of his turning more directly to Jewish concerns in the mid-1930s. In 1919, along with N.B. Minkov and A. Leyeless, Glatstein established the *Inzikhist* movement in American Yiddish poetry.[6] Taking aim at the narrow formal aestheticism of the prevailing perspectives of *di Yunge*

("The Young Ones"), especially its contentlessness and preoccupation with
mood, the *Inzikhistn* unleashed their own manifesto in the initial issue of
the journal *In Zikh* ("Within Oneself").[7] It emphasized that, for the poet,
"everything is 'personal'" and, at the same time, opened up the scope of
poetry to include all that might concern the poet as person (Glatstein, Leye-
less, Minkov 779). As Benjamin Harshav notes, "[Introspectivism] mixes
religious attitudes and daily politics, world events and personal emotions,
universal history and Jewish news in one kaleidoscopic whirl. One must
not be misled by the individualism of the label, 'Introspectivism.' Theirs
was a poetry acutely attuned to the historical and political world, however
personally internalized by each poet" (Harshav and Harshav 39). Accord-
ingly, as Harshav continues, Glatstein and the *Inzikhistn* were prepared "to
react naturally, as poets, to the Holocaust, and to grasp it in individual poetic
language, as part of their personal experience" (Harshav and Harshav 39).

    Glatstein's account of his personal experience from the mid-1930s
forward took on an overt Jewish character. The *Inzikhist* manifesto saw no
need to sponsor Jewish thematics: "We are 'Jewish poets' simply because
we are Jews and write in Yiddish. No matter what a Yiddish poet writes in
Yiddish, it is ipso facto Jewish" (Glatstein, Leyeless, Minkov 780). Still, a
considerable shift toward a direct engagement with Jewish concerns begins
to characterize his poetry as the war approached and certainly in its after-
math.[8] In 1934 Glatstein made a return trip to Lublin to visit family and, as
he later noted, he already saw at that time "tragedy on the march" (qtd. in
Tabachnik 49-50). Even before the war, poems written in 1938 such as "*A
gute nakht, velt*" ("Good Night, World") and "*Wegener*" ("Wagons") expressed,
in his words, "the unvoiced fear of a generation" and etched the "shadow of
the yet-to-come" (qtd. in Tabachnik 49-50). As Faerstein notes, "In the late
Thirties, [Glatstein's] bones were 'already creaking / With the dampness of
Jewish weather," The result was poetry, "very personal and very Jewish."
intensifying "impulses that existed from the start" (419-20). If his *Inzikhist*
beginnings kept him alert to the political and historical, from the time of his
visit to Lublin his attention became more keenly Jewish. The catastrophe he
saw approaching in "Wagons" and "Good Night, World" comes to perfect
tense in "Dead Men Don't Praise God" where Glatstein must reckon with
the toll of the holocaust's aftermath in the strikingly Jewish terms of Israel's
ancient covenant.

    As *Inzikhist*, Glatstein understood that "a poem must also be good prose"
(qtd. in Tabachnik 42). This means, on the one hand, that the post-holocaust
poet knows "an obligation to a weakened and grief stricken readership,
an obligation that had to transcend aesthetic concerns…. Because of the
tragedy of his people, he is no longer permitted the luxury of writing in-

troverted and incomprehensible poetry. Rather, he and other writers must accept—however reluctantly—the burden of writing clearly and accessibly" (Hadda 94).[9] On the other hand, it emphasizes that poetry must transcend the projection of mood, mellifluous language and aesthetic experimentation to make a statement. The poet, from the midst of a personal history, must testify. In Glatstein's own words, "The Yiddish poet [after the holocaust] must become the aesthetic chronicler of what happened, and he must fix it for all time" (qtd. in Tabachnik 41). "Dead Men Don't Praise God" appropriates the language of Psalm 115 to chronicle "what happened," not as reportage, but as a statement that fixes event and significance in memorable form and image. Glatstein frames the poem with a quotation of the psalm within a repeated sequence of four lines: "We received the Torah on Sinai / and in Lublin we gave it back. / Dead men don't praise God, / the Torah was given to the living" (1-4, 88-91). Put simply: This is "what happened." Through its mirrored structure, Glatstein's chiasmus in these lines reinforces the people's "giving back," the central act of returning the Torah to God.[10] The chiasmus further brings out the oppositions between Sinai and Lublin, receiving the Torah and returning it, the living and the dead, and the Torah and the absence of God's praise. The oppositions render a certain logic. If the dead do not praise God, it is not because they are incapable of acting—they do, in fact, act when they return the Torah to God. They do not praise God because the Torah which obliges and makes praise meaningful is given to the living and, as the poem notes: "… just as we all stood together / at the giving of the Torah, / so did we all die together at Lublin" (5-7). The dead do not praise God because they are dead, a condition not without agency, but a condition without Torah.

The dead do not have Torah in two senses: first, the collective dying together at Lublin nullifies the Torah which was given as a life-giving promise to the living; and second, the dead have returned the Torah to God, given back in death what this manner of death has itself destroyed. In short, the Torah collapses under the weight of all that happened at Lublin and no longer exists as such; but also, even were Torah to exist, the dead no longer want it. They have given it back, making it impossible to praise God who has ceased to be praiseworthy.

The chiastic pattern also emphasizes the act of the dead as a moment of covenantal dialogue, albeit the final one. As in call and response, the Jewish "we" receives and gives back. A significant returning of what they have received, the act echoes the poet's angry break-up with the world in 1938: "Good night, wide world. / Big, stinking world. / Not you, but I slam the gate" ("Good Night" 1-3)—only now the poet bangs shut the opening on the covenant instead of culture. The act of negation identifies the Jew as

actor more than simply victim, as one who enacts a refusal, a no-saying, when all other forms of agency have been denied in dying. As Anna Nam has understood, the poem's emphasis on Jewish agency takes place amidst an eclipse of divine activity. God is mentioned only twice in the poem, both times in passive roles. Even in its use of the central motif of the Sinai event, the poem emphasizes the people's receiving Torah, but not God's giving it. In the midst of this absence of divine agency, it is the dead alone who act, the Jews who exercise a final self-determination that ends the covenant. A certain dignity and freedom grace the Jewish "we" in this ending of beginnings, the termination of a dialogue that has heretofore run "from beginning to beginning to beginning" (a phrase repeated five times in the poem, "Dead Men" 14, 16, 29, 72, 86). Where the sequence of beginnings has led to death, the dead say, if you will, "no more": "Dead men don't praise God." The final word is faithfully covenantal as a statement directed to God, but decisive in bringing the relation to closure, to silence.

The word of parting is a we-saying: "we gave it back" (2). Drawing upon midrashic tradition, Glatstein accents the Jewish affirmation that all Jews, before and after, were present at Sinai and extends this to the dying in Lublin:

> Our whole imagined people
> stood at Mount Sinai
> and received the Torah.
> The dead, the living, the unborn […]
> And just as we all stood together
> at the giving of the Torah,
> so did we all die together in Lublin.
> From all sides the souls came flocking,
> The souls of those who had lived out their lives, of those who had died young,
> of those who were tortured, tested in every fire,
> of those who were not yet born
> and of all the dead Jews from great grandfather Abraham down. (17-20, 37-44)[11]

In light of Rosenzweig's emphasis on the living "we" in Psalm 115, Glatstein's mirrored "we" of the dead suggests a certain continuity with the psalm, but it is a continuity filled with tension. A united "we" does exist, but only as the dead whose single possibility is to bring the covenantal dialogue to silence. As Shreiber would have it, here the poem troubles the psalm. Where the psalm identified the dead as idolaters, the dead here are those who, on "Shavuoth, the green holiday," accepted the covenant all and one (Hadda 94). If the psalm affirms that "we" are the living who sing hallelujah, the poem reminds that we who have received the Torah are, in fact, the dead. Troubling with intertextuality, the poem not only asserts itself, but takes away the reader's consoling point of entry to the psalm, the assurance of being

in the company of the quick who forever intone God's praise.[12]

Glatstein personifies the collective "we" in the image of a Jewish child with "the tousled head, the pure eyes, the tremulous mouth" (8-9). To him, the poet instructs: "When we were, you were. / And when we vanished, / you vanished with us"(34-36). He was the "songbird" singing at Sinai (27); at Lublin, the sacrificial "dove" with stretched-out neck (70). Glatstein's use of the image of the Jewish child heightens the poem's pathos through its telescoped focus on the individual, the vulnerable, and the precious. Though clearly affective, the image functions in additional, complex ways. First, the child is the object of the poet's address. The poet instructs the child in the connection between Sinai and Lublin and in the presence of all Jews, himself included, at those pivotal moments. When the poet says, "Learn this, my little one," he asks him to master the poem itself and to make its words his own (15). As if to add comfort, the poet bids him: "Shut your eyes, Jewish child, / and remember how the Baal Shem rocked you / in his arms / when your whole imagined people / vanished in the gas chambers of Lublin" (73-77). "Never absent," even in his "vanishing" he does not die alone (32-34); never missing, he must voice the Jewish "we" in the words that the poem teaches: "Dead men don't praise God."

Second, the poem identifies the Jewish child with the Torah: "Little boy … / that was you, then,—the quiet, tiny, forlorn / given-back Torah" (81-83). As such, the death of the Jewish child not only coincides with the return of Torah as a pre-condition or cause, but is itself a return of the Torah that the child embodies. Incarnate in the lives of Jews, the Torah and the covenant it obliges cannot exist in the world in which "we all die together in Lublin" (7). Without Jews, there is no Torah, no covenant—a logic Glatstein will pursue to its radical end in his later poem, "Without Jews": "Without Jews, no Jewish God. / If, God forbid, we should quit / this world, Your poor tent's light / would out" (1-4).

Third, the image of the Jewish child also symbolizes the poet himself, the songbird of Sinai whose song comes to silence as the sacrificed dove (Hadda 84). The poem builds to a climax wherein the little boy stands atop "a forsaken abandoned Mount Sinai veiled…in smoke" and cries out to a dead world ("Dead Men" 80): "we received the Torah on Sinai / and in Lublin we gave it back. / Dead men don't praise God. / The Torah was given to the living" (88-91). This final stanza returns us to the poem's beginning to find that the boy's cry and the words of the poet are one and the same. He has learned the poem; he has become the poet. He gives voice to what Glatstein called "organized silence"(qtd. in Tabachnik 41).[13] The final word is that, for the dead, there will be no more word, at least no word of praise: a silence rendered meaningful and whole, "organized," in the integrity of

the poem.

Jacqueline Osherow and Dead Men's Praise

In a way kindred to Jacob Glatstein, Jacqueline Osherow writes in the
manner of what Susan Gubar has called a "proxy witness," one who testifies
in place of another ("Poets" 165, *Poetry* 171-176). Glatstein's poem spoke
on behalf of the Lublin dead who could no longer speak for themselves,
a community with whom he could identify—"so did we all die together in
Lublin" (7)—but from whom he was geographically distanced and set apart
as their survivor. So, too, does Osherow's holocaust poetry, in works such as
"Conversations with Survivors," find her to be a "ghostwriter" as she gives
voice to the particular ghosts of survivors whose testimony has claimed
her—in "Conversations" the story of Fany Hochmanova Brown, a hatmaker
in Auschwitz (Gubar, "Poets" 181). Such poetry, as Gubar recognizes, is an
instance of "documentary verse," a way of preserving testimony that, on
her own, she "can neither recall nor fully comprehend" ("Poets" 165, 170).
In poetry, Osherow documents her dialogues with Fany, giving textual form
to the witness of another. Where Glatstein wrote "Dead Men Don't Praise
God" at a step's remove from Lublin, Osherow, too, writes as a belated
poet. Set apart in time and place from the holocaust, her anamnesis does
not originate with her but becomes hers to voice and shape, to mediate as
one who comes after.

The title poem of Osherow's 1999 collection, *Dead Men's Praise*, dem-
onstrates in an interesting way her role as proxy witness, mediator, and
belated poet. "Dead Men's Praise," a part of her thirteen-poem sequence
"Scattered Psalms," echoes Glatstein's "Dead Men Don't Praise God" by
engaging Psalm 115:17. In this poem, however, her grappling with the psalm
is already mediated by Glatstein's poem. "Dead Men's Praise" is, at once,
an encounter with the psalm and with Glatstein's appropriation of it. She
confesses her belatedness as the poem begins: "Yakov Glatstein already /
used this verse in a poem" (1-2). If Osherow ghost-wrote a survivor's story
in "Conversations with Survivors," here she bears witness to a proxy wit-
ness, to one who himself testified to what others had experienced and he
had known only from afar. Where earlier she had mediated Fany Brown's
story, here she mediates Glatstein's mediation of both psalm and holocaust.
She is his proxy, as he is for the psalmist and the Jews of Lublin.

"Dead Men's Praise," however, shows Osherow not only speaking for
Glatstein and the psalmist, but speaking to and through them. As mediator,
she brings their words to the present, but also stands between their texts

and the reader. Her proxy is both presentation and commentary. Fittingly, Steven Schneider interprets her poetry as midrashic ("Poetry" 61 and 64, "Contemporary" 205, Rev. 8-9). In writing of the "Scattered Psalms" sequence, he observes that each poem is

> introduced with an epigraph, often two or more verses from the Psalms of David. Osherow will then investigate their meaning in her Psalm, probing the verses for what they may reveal. In this sense, her composition is midrashic, writing 'with' the original Psalms—sometimes incorporated as lines in her poetry—and turning and sifting through the words and verses to discover some new insight. ("Poetry" 64)

Her work, he adds, is "both an interpretation and a textual re-creation of the Biblical Psalms" (Rev. 9). In their midrashic bent, Osherow's poems are "documentary verse," but in a way different from how Gubar had intended the category ("Poets" 165, *Poetry* 145-176). More than a proxy's documenting of another's story, Osherow's poems are texts that read other texts, that refer to and appropriate documents. As a *darshan* in her own right, an interpreter of scriptures, she writes as a reader; she is a poet of documents.

Schneider further seeks to situate Osherow's midrashic poetry within a stream of Jewish-American feminist writing. Likening her to poets such as Alicia Ostriker, Enid Dame, and Marge Piercy, he notes of the group a concern "to give voice to biblical figures, especially women, whose stories have either been muted in the bible or who often are represented as flawed, deceitful, or simply a liability" and "to counter this silence, to challenge the perception of women as inferior, to strengthen Jewish female identity, and to register political and social concerns" ("Poetry" 61). Osherow, as he acknowledges, does not show the same interest in female identity as do these other poets, nor does she write as explicitly about feminist thematics ("Contemporary" 201). Yet her work does signal an assertion of a woman's voice in a persistent claim to read, comment upon and rewrite scripture and thereby trouble, as Shreiber would put it, the construction of a feminized Jew in which women are only rarely heard to speak (34). In her "Scattered Psalms" Osherow not only argues with David (who is invested with the traditional role of the harp-playing psalmist) and, in "Dead Men's Praise" with Glatstein, but becomes their peer, daring to begin "a song of Jacqueline" ("Handiwork" 9) and offer her own "*hallelujah*." Her midrash yields its own psalmody in a woman's voice. Her psalms ask questions of her male precursors; her poems witness to their documents, but do not leave them alone.[14]

In "Dead Men's Praise," Osherow expresses understanding of Glatstein's message that praise had come to an end, but she continues to ask "…if it's heartless / after only fifty years / to think—again—the praise has just

begun" (12-14).[15] Here she returns to the concluding affirmation of Psalm 115—"but we'll praise God / from now on forever" (115:18)—and explores the possibility of singing *hallelujah* after the holocaust. Can the praise that ceased at Lublin be renewed in the second generation? Is there yet an eternal "we" to hymn God's blessing?

Osherow does not imagine that one can justify such praise by thought. No argument can meet the elemental force of Glatstein's challenge. Instead, she says "I'm not suggesting that we think about it / just sing it… / and get in on a little / of its stubborn bravado, / its delirious proof / of itself—*hallelujah*" (20-21, 23-26). In these lines, she unmoors praise from its rational base—its need for coherence—and wagers that singing *hallelujah* furnishes its own justification and good. That which occurs in the act of singing praise is, at once, the cause for such singing.[16] And it is this for which the Jew is chosen: "to be the *we* / who get to say this word / and live forever" (39-41).

Chosen to sing *hallelujah*, the Jew is claimed for "this tenacious language" (37-38), this Hebrew utterance, "a word composed of holy signs / that could actually spell God's name" (51-52).[17] It cannot be sung satisfactorily in English as a "borrowed word" (44)— "pity Handel, gospel singers, televangelists" (42-43)—for such does not sound the divine name that makes it an expression of praise or prayer, a unique saying of "the *we* who get to say this word" (39-40). The signification of God's name distinguishes the Hebrew *hallelujah* from its English counterpart "with its vague exultation and onomatopoeia" (50). At this point, Osherow's poem meditates on the special power of Hebrew, in particular the angels' envy of its use that leads them to steal R. Meir ben Yitzhak's first *Akdamut* and leads the poet to wonder "how David / got away with it" (63-64).[18] As David's psalms have survived the angels' audition, she poses as a goal to write her own *hallelujah*, authentic enough that the angels would steal "a page or two" (75). Can she express the word that, like David's, praises God and pronounces the name? Can she "just sing" *hallelujah* (21)?

So far the poem has hinted at the possibility that Glatstein's was not the last word. But the poet's wondering leads her into new doubt, a chain of "maybes" that unravels her confidence in the virtue of David's psalms, the legend of the *Akdamut*, and ultimately her own effort to praise. "Maybe" yields to "fact": "…my *hallelujah*, / my precious, rising *hallelujah*, / doesn't have the stamina / I need it for, / has, in fact, been burned away / before it could adorn a single tongue / for countless generations of David's offspring" (91-97). Her attempt to voice the eternal praise is doomed from the start by a holocaustic burning away that affords no connection to even another single tongue. Her *hallelujah* cannot endure because there is no full, living "we" to give it voice.

The absence of the living "we" establishes a certain commonplace with Glatstein's poem, but Osherow renders the problem differently. Glatstein understands the loss of the "we" in terms of the dying in Lublin of all who were present at Sinai, including "those who were not yet born" ("Dead Men" 43). The "we" exists, but only as the dead who return the covenant. Osherow, however, suggests that more is at stake than the cremated victims. In contrast to Glatstein, she claims "I'm not talking about the ones who turned to ash— / they're around somewhere, singing *hallelujah*" (98-99). She focuses instead on "the other ones, numberless as stars, / who never got to sing a word at all" (100-101). Glatstein spoke of "those who were not yet born" (i.e., those who, though present at Sinai, had not yet been born, but who would live only to die at Lublin, "Dead Men" 43). Osherow shifts the concern to those who can never be born because of the deaths of their would-be parents, to the unborn offspring of those who have perished. For Glatstein, the collapse of praise owes to the dying of all, from Sinai to Lublin. The truncated life of the Jewish child "with the tousled head, the pure eyes, the tremulous mouth" (8-9) and of all those who have come to "Lublin for the great slaughter" (45) ends the covenant. Osherow, however, speaks not of those whose lives have ended, but of those whose lives have never begun. Theirs is not the burden of tragic experience, but the denial of any experience at all from which praise might have issued. For those who have never lived, the covenant can be neither fulfilled nor returned.

Osherow's conclusion echoes the reasoning of Mishnah Sanhedrin 4.5: "Therefore but a single person was created in the world, to teach that if any one has caused a single life to perish from Israel, Scripture imputes it to that person as though he or she had caused a whole world to perish" (*The Mishnah*).[19] The world that perishes in the death of even one life is the legacy of children that may yet have come from that life (a point the same mishnah pursues in its discussion of Gen. 4:10). It is the silence of that perished world that Osherow confronts in her poem: a holocaust of burning "double helixes" (104)—"every one an unrepeatable / and complex promise, / and, among them, / certainly, at least / a few who might / have liked, even for / an instant, to live forever" (107-113). Their absence denies the possibility of the "we" and with it any praise by the living as well as the dead.

Seeing Osherow's poem in terms of m. Sanh. 4:5, however, hints at another path of interpretation that runs counter to any final absence or silence. The mishnah reads further to state the corollary that if any one saves a single life, Scripture imputes it to that person as if he or she had rescued a whole world. Rescue, it suggests, is possible, but how might that occur? In light of Osherow's poem, in which one faces the absence of the already dead as well as of the elusive unborn, rescue cannot be thought of

as the mishnah ordinarily envisions it: a literal saving of a life from death
and thus the rescue of that person's progeny as well. Instead, "Dead Men's
Praise" effects a recovery of sorts through language. Though her poem
documents the unyielding absence of the collective "we," as an instance of
proxy witness, even for the unborn, it gives to the absent a certain presence
in the words of the poem. "Dead Men's Praise" makes its readers profoundly
aware of the missing—those the poem identifies through signs of absence,
the dead and the unborn—and gives them an ongoing life in the poem
itself. It is the individual poet who may be that one who saves the single
life, and through that act, still more. By her witness to those who do not
live, she saves life with acknowledgement, and thereby approaches a larger
rescue in the language of poetry. The driving force of "Dead Men's Praise"
remains its critical complication of Psalm 115 and Glatstein's protest. Still,
the same language that reckons the absence bids the dead to return, if not
in history, then in the poetry that limns their shadow, that renders it alive
in the imagination of the reader.

From Poem to Psalm

   As holocaust poems, Glatstein's "Dead Men Don't Praise God" and Os-
herow's "Dead Men's Praise" intensify the perception of what *Lager* and gas
chamber have destroyed. The poems dramatize that, along with the massive
loss of life, the holocaust brings about the collapse of covenant (Glatstein)
and the absence of the living "we" within which the Jew praised God and
embraced eternity (Osherow). They depict the end of Torah personified in
the death of Glatstein's "little Jewish child" and all those who came forth
from Sinai forward to die together at Lublin; they chronicle the devastation
of the "we" in Osherow's concluding image of a burning consumption of
the double-helixed DNA of Jews who will never be born. This is why the
dead do not praise God: the truncated life of the boy at Lublin and the
unborn life of the Jewish child never known.
   In their intertextuality, the poems trouble. Read in relation to each other,
they show Osherow's challenge to Glatstein: she asks, is the praise really
over? Raising the question of the possibility of a newly begun hallelujah,
she initially unsettles the authoritativeness of his pronouncement. Then,
however, as she comes to share his conclusion, it takes on the added force
of having been tested by her doubt and subjected to her poetic experiment
to "just sing it" (21), that word of praise that eludes the dead. In Osherow's
poem, the silence of the dead is not only stronger, but seeded in more radical
ground. Hers is not the problem of Torah's demise nor even of the starker

refrain of all dying together in Lublin, but the implication that the death of all takes away the future possibility of "we." The holocaust extinguishes praise in the loss of a community that cannot recover the unborn children.

If the intertextuality of Osherow's poem reshapes the reading of Glatstein's "Dead Men Don't Praise God," the poems yet combine decisively to subvert the concluding affirmation of Psalm 115. Together they trouble the psalm more than each other. Where the psalm points to the ongoing praise of the living, Glatstein stubbornly counters that we are not the living, but the dead. If the psalm suggests that the living vocalize their praise together, Osherow insists that the living are not a "we." These counter-readings enable Psalm 115:17, in Osherow's words, to "reveal its acrid heart" (9) and they ask the reader to re-read the psalm, alert to other possibilities of disturbing harshness. The reader need not go far. In the very preceding verse, the psalm proclaims "the heavens are the heavens of YHWH / but the earth he has given to human beings" (115:16, trans. my own). Though in context it seems to answer the mocking question of the nations, "where now, is [Israel's] God" (115:2), the shadow of the poems transforms the answer into an unsettling notion. To say that "our God is in heaven" (115:3) may be tantamount to saying "our God is not here," a sign of divine absence and abdication that underlies the death of praise.[20]

Though both poems subvert the psalm's affirmation and render the psalm vulnerable to further question, they do not do so with a cynical tone. Rather, they offer lamentation for what has been lost.[21] They organize the silence that surrounds the end of *hallelujah* and leave us with sad and sober songs of their own, with poems that have themselves become new psalms. If not for praise, perhaps the post-holocaust Jew is "chosen for this tenacious language" of lament (37-38). Should voices of the aftermath join together to sing *these* songs, would the effect be ironically to move back closer to the psalm and its final emphasis on a "we"—not a "we" that praises as if a covenant had not been given back, or a "we" unaware of the unyielding limits of repair, but a "we" that yet mourns in requiem, a survivor's *kaddish* for all that has been, as Osherow sings it, "burned away" (95)?

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NOTES

1. The majority of the work for this article was done while on a sabbatical leave from Davidson College, funded by the Boswell Faculty Fellowship. I gratefully acknowledge the beneficence of Tom and Cheryl Boswell and thank them for their generous support. I also want to thank Romana Huk for her close and expert reading of this work and her insightful suggestions for its development.

2. Biblical translations, here and throughout, are from *Tanakh*, unless otherwise noted as my own.

3. Charles Bernstein has written of the Jewish poem as "the agent of turbulent thought," a phrase which Shreiber quotes as being fundamental to her methodology (2).

4. Further, Ps. 88:5-6 and 11-13 offer a certain edge to the issue, understanding death in terms of divine abandonment—an implication that might strike at the motivation for praise as well as its possibility. Depending upon translation, it is possible to read Ps. 22:30 as allowing for the dead's praise of God, but this would seem to be an exception to the common conviction. For a striking example of the rhetorical use of this conviction in Jewish ritual, note the whispered recitation of Ps. 30:10 by traditional Jews as they walk in procession to a burial site, a plea that as one approaches an open grave one may not oneself be swallowed up by its pit. God must keep the mourner safe, so that the mourner may live to praise God. See Heilman, 98.

5. In 115:18, note the emphatic use of the first-person plural pronoun, *anachnu*. Hebrew is what has come to be known as a "pro-drop" language, a language where pronouns can be omitted (or "dropped") when they are inferable from the conjugation of the verb. Accordingly, because the subject is already identified within the verb "*nebarekh*" ("we will bless"), the inclusion of the pronoun "*anachnu*" ("we") adds emphasis to the subject, as if to say, "But it is we, we who will bless the Lord, / now and forever." Along with emphasis, it serves to heighten contrast between this subject and another (here, the "dead"). Thus, R.J. Williams: "When an independent personal pronoun is included as the subject of a finite verb, the pronoun may serve to clarify the subject, to contrast the subject with someone else, to indicate emotion, or to focus attention on the subject" (#106).

6. On the *Inzikhist* movement, see Harshav and Harshav, 36-44. This volume also includes a rich appendix of translated documents from the *Inzikhistn* (773-804).

7. See Glatstein, Leyeless, Minkov, 774-784. Glatstein's disapproval of *di Yunge* is clear: "The 'Young' preached contentlessness and the poetry of bare mood and thus enabled the gray nothings to find a place in Yiddish poetry…. It reached the point where the less a poem said the higher poetry it became…. They were scared of a thought. In addition to contentless, a poet was supposed to be thoughtless" (qtd. in Harshav and Harshav, 787). The manifesto was no less pointed: the method of *di Yunge* was sufficient only "to create poetic vignettes or artful arabesques" that ever fell short of truth (Glatstein, Leyeless, Minkov 775). On the critique of *di Yunge*, see also Faerstein, 416, and Sigal.

8. The question of the stages of Glatstein's poetic development tends to be discussed in terms of an increased Jewishness in his work from the mid-1930s, reflecting the anticipation and impact of the Holocaust. One should heed, however, Hadda's caution against sharply dividing the earlier and later periods as if there were no continuities or parallels between them (22).

9. For Glatstein to speak of poetry as good prose, a pithy continuance of his critique of the poetics of *di Yunge*, implies not only that poetry must make a statement, but that it must do so with a style that does not obfuscate its meaning or merely evoke mood. Thus, Glatstein

writes "Every genuine poet longs for unpoeticalness…. A real poet longs for dry words be-
cause wet words just ooze feeling. A wet word usually means a ready-made 'poetical' word,
and poets avoid such words. Genuine poets love human speech. They love to create beauty
from plebeian unbeauty, from stubborn, blue-collar words that do not easily succumb" (qtd.
in Harshav and Harshav, 803).

10. The chiasmus moves from verb to place, from place to verb (with inversion in the
second sequence). Thus, "We *received* the Torah on *Sinai* / and in *Lublin* we *gave* it *back*" (ital-
ics added, 1-2, 88-89). The chiastic dynamic is further reflected in the exact inclusio that is
created in stanzas one and nine.

11. The midrashic perspective is reflected in Shemot Rabbah 28.6, a midrash that inter-
acts with the testimony of Deut. 29:14-15. Glatstein's poem is at its most expansive when it
lists all those who share in the death at Lublin. Its reference to "great grandfather Abraham
down" ("Dead Men"44) includes biblical matriarchs and prophetesses, Moses and Aaron,
David, the Rambam and the Vilna Gaon. The list concludes with significant personages
from Lublin's Jewish history: Mahram (Meir Gedalyah of Lublin, a 16th-century Talmud-
ist); Maharshal (Shelomoh Luria, a 16th-century Lubliner rabbi for whom the Great Lublin
synagogue was named); the Seer of Lublin (Yaakov Yitzchok, an 18th-century Hasidic rebbe);
and Abraham Eiger (a 19th-century Lublin rabbi).

12. In forging a critical relation with the psalm, the intertextuality of the poem effectively
communicates not only its reckoning of the holocaust's aftermath, but that such a reckoning
is at odds with the concluding vision of the psalm. It communicates doubly, asserting the
poem's "this," all the while making unavoidable that, with respect to the psalm, "this" means
"not-that." It expresses the difference.

13. Here Glatstein speaks of poetry itself as "organized silence," a concept epitomized
in "Dead Men Don't Praise God."

14. Thus Shreiber observes: "[Osherow] insistently writes herself into the poem, de-
manding that she be recognized as more than just a mediating presence" (34). Her demand is
confident more than anxious. That is, in spite of using Harold Bloom's familiar language of
"precursor," I would be reluctant to attribute antagonism to Osherow's poetry. She troubles
in the spirit of midrashic exploration with genuine questions to ask that do not reduce to
her being insecure in the face of influence. On Bloom's perspective, see *Anxiety* and *Map*.

15. Osherow's use of "begun" may be an intentional echo of Glatstein's repeated use of
the phrase "from beginning to beginning to beginning" ("Dead Men" 14, 16, 29, 72, 86), a
sequence of beginnings he sees to have come to an end at Lublin.

16. For an interesting parallel to Osherow, see Wiesel, 202-3; note also the reflections
of Hoffman, 9-23.

17. Here Osherow notes that the word "*hallelujah*" contains within it the letters of the
tetragrammaton.

18. The *Akdamut* is a *piyyut* recited in Ashkenazi synagogues on the morning of Shavuot
immediately prior to the reading of the Torah. Rabbi Meir ben Yitzhak was an 11th-century
rabbi in Worms. The allusion to Shavuot links directly to Glatstein's "Dead Men Don't Praise
God" where it provides the primary temporal setting for the poem.

19. I have altered Danby's translation for gender neutrality.

20. Glatstein himself recognized the acrid potential of this verse in another poem. He
paraphrases 115:16 to read: "The heavens are the Lord's heavens / The earth you have
surrendered to the villain's hand / That he may have complete authority" ("To 5699,"
quoted in Hadda 68-69). Earlier, Sholem Aleichem's Tevye had set the precedent for counter-
commentary: "There I sat, staring up at the sky and thinking of the words of the *hallel* prayer.
Hashomayim shomayim ladoynai—the heavens belong to God…*veha'orets nosan livney odom*—but

the earth He's given to us, the human race, so that we can bury each other six feet deep in it and fight for the honor of crying by the grave…. *Loy hameysim yehallelu yoh*—the dead don't praise God, and why should they?" (43).

   21. Ruth Whitman, in fact, sees "Dead Men Don't Praise God" as "the most monumental lament in the body of Glatstein's work, and indeed, in all Holocaust literature" (8).

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