

The Sound of Every Falling Star: Miriam Waddington's Poetry and Translation of Rachel Korn's Poetry

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Miriam Waddington and Rachel Korn share both a Jewish and a literary heritage. Though their individual histories and writing styles vary, their intersecting voices share a common lyricism and parallel similar thematic concerns. This paper considers Miriam Waddington's history as a poet and how she came to be a translator of Yiddish poetry. Waddington's discussions of poetic theories of translation and the historical, literary, and cultural importance of translation provide a particular lens through which to examine Waddington's work in translating three of Rachel Korn's poems. Likewise Korn's thematic interests allow for an expanded understanding of Miriam Waddington's own poetic concerns, as can be seen through a comparison of a selection of Waddington's poetry with the poems she translated from Rachel Korn's Yiddish originals.

Miriam Waddington (b. 1917) and Rachel Korn¹ share both a Jewish and a literary heritage. Though their individual histories and writing styles vary, their intersecting voices share a common lyricism and parallel thematic concerns. For the purposes of this paper, I shall focus on Miriam Waddington's history as a poet and how she came to be a translator of Yiddish poetry. This shall allow for an examination of her discussions of translation and particularly of her work as a translator of three of Rachel Korn's poems. Korn's thematics are linked to Miriam Waddington's poetic concerns, as can be seen through a comparison of a selection of Wad-

1. Rachel Korn has been described as "the most prominent of the narrators and poets to reach Montreal after the Holocaust" (Liptzin 465). Born in East Galacia, Poland, in 1898, Rachel Korn initially wrote in Polish and identified herself as a Polish poet. Only later, when she learned Yiddish from her husband, did she begin writing in Yiddish.

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Waddington's book-length collection of essays, *Apartment Seven: Essays Selected and New*, includes an autobiographical piece on her experience of growing up as an outsider in Canada. The descendent of Russian immigrants to Manitoba, she quite naturally became a part of the secular and Yiddish speaking socialist community of "romantic enlightened Europeans" (37) living in Winnipeg. Unlike some other Modernist women poets, such as Dorothy Livesay,² who describe their University years as a time of indoctrination into political activism, Miriam Waddington spent her entire young life in this socially active European environment. Her parents eventually moved to Ottawa in 1931 and it was there that she initially became acquainted with the Jewish Montreal artistic and intellectual community. Her youth was one in which she developed an awareness of her status as an outsider or "dirty Jew," and she later incorporated her sense of identity as a woman and as a Canadian into this mix of separateness.

Although Miriam Waddington was writing poetry even as a child, it was during the Second World War that her poetry came to be recognized. John Sutherland published her first work in his modernist and experimental magazine, *First Statement* (1942-1945), ushering her into the literary world. Subsequently, her first book of poetry, *Green World*, was published in 1945 and in the years that followed, during marriage, degrees, social work, and changes in careers, Miriam Waddington continued to write and publish poetry and other works including short stories and critical work (Matyas 9).

Waddington writes, "My own ventures into translation came about, like almost everything else in my life, accidentally" (191). Growing up, Miriam knew Yiddish as well as she knew English, although the language of her own writing has always been English, and at the age of 13 or 14 she translated a few poems from Yiddish to English (*Apartment Seven* 192). Later, after she had graduated from University, she became inspired by a book of poems by the Yiddish poet, J.I. Segal and a friend and poet, Nathan Goldberg, suggested that she try her hand at translation (*Apartment Seven* 191). Although this initial work was informal, she did not find the work of translation to be a casual or simple process. Writing of the choices involved in authentic translation she says, "My translations were free. I tried to capture rhythms but was willing to sacrifice rhyme as long as I could retain the spirit, tone,

2. For a more in depth discussion of Dorothy Livesay's social activism see Peter Steven's *Dorothy Livesay: Patterns in a Poetic Life* and Livesay's own poetic political discussions in *The Documentaries*.

and meaning of the poem" (192). Then, as throughout her career, Waddington believed that translated works should read as if they were written in that language; simply put, that the translations should carry an "equivalent - rather than literal - meaning" (192). She explains how it is almost impossible to understand the literal meaning of a poem, as there are many layers of formal, structural, meaning and that in fact language itself carries with it the baggage of its history. Waddington suggests that "[t]he translator has to know the language well enough to read the silences and somehow carry them into the other language" (192). Thus, translation involves aspects of the entire cultural experience of the language, which is a part of an organic whole involving the written words and the implicit silences.

There have been in Waddington's translations some "basic principles" (192) which have always been employed in the process. Waddington writes: "The first one is that I have to like the poem I am translating; the most successful translation happens with a poem I wish I had written myself. That kind of identification does not always exist, but when it does, I feel that an angel is looking over my shoulder and guiding my pen" (192). There is, then, the suggestion that part of the process involves a mystical kind of collaboration, which is described in the metaphor of the angel that is guiding the work. However, Waddington admits that she has been commissioned to translate poets' work and poems for which she did not have this feeling of kinship, and she has found that in the process, the text itself and the spirit of the language take over and guide the translation (*Apartment Seven* 192-3).

Waddington first encountered Rachel Korn's work in 1958 when she put together a short program for the CBC on Montreal Yiddish Poets; however, she already knew of Korn from her friend, the Yiddish poet Ida Maza. A few months after the program, the poets, whom Miriam Waddington had translated, read their poems in the original and Miriam Waddington read her translations of their work (*Apartment Seven* 191). After meeting Korn, they exchanged half a dozen letters in Yiddish and sent each other their work. Korn wrote that "she felt a spiritual kinship with [Miriam Waddington], and that I had carried her poems into English in a way that not only caught their meaning but had once moved her to tears" (191). Importantly, Waddington writes, "you see and hear your poem filtered through not only another language, but another history. It is the same yet different, and has the new aspects that only a changed location and new context can bring" (191). Translation itself is a creative process, a bringing together of two languages and two histories, and together the poet and the translator create something that, while not altogether different, is a merging of two voices. Both Wad-

Waddington and Korn are concerned with the creative process, one in the writing of poetry and translation and the other in the original creation of a poem.

“The Beginning of a Poem” is the only complete poem that Waddington cites in her essay “Rachel Korn: Remembering a Poet.” It was first broadcast over the CBC in 1958, and was the first translation of Korn’s work into English and the first translation of Korn’s work by Waddington. “The Beginning of a Poem” initiates the poet and the translator into a world of language that is constructed out of pain and sorrow. The first stanza paints in death-like and shadowy hues the sense of standing on the threshold of another world, the world of the poem: “It is the fear, it is threat not to speak of, / It is standing on the threshold of pain, / It is the figure that looms in the doorway, / Shadowy, funereal, and gray” (Korn 13). Waddington’s own poetry also addresses such thresholds of melancholy. In “Tapestry” Waddington writes, “Girls, I will make a tapestry of your sorrows, / Sew sequins for tears into the stuff of the sky / Criss cross your sameness with rainbows” (Waddington 7). The threads that Waddington sews with are the “stuff of the sky,” and in the colours of the rainbow, and although the creative process that she is discussing is the sewing of a tapestry, the poem itself is stitched out of “girl grief.” Of the actual construction of the tapestry she says, “I will pattern waves to the shores of your longing” invoking a kind of sorrow that is associated, like the threshold of Korn’s poem, with desire or longing for what has not yet been realized.

The poets describe the process of beginning a poem as being “seized” in the “cruel sharp claws” of “some eagle-flying notion” (Korn 13) and the preparation for writing is likened to preparing for sacrifice, until “nothing can save you from the angel’s sword” (Korn 13). Like Korn, Waddington discusses the element of otherworldly inspiration as being part of the creative process. As Waddington notes in relation to the creative process of translating Korn’s poetry, there is the sense of an “angel [...] looking over [her] shoulder and guiding [her] pen” (*Apartment Seven* 192). Like the poet Korn, it is as if she has become an instrument for divine creativity. Korn continues in “The Beginning of a Poem”: “Then all grows silent in your deepest self, / You hear the sound of every falling star, / And you become a delicate earthen vessel / Filled with the transparent flow of tears” (Korn 13). While Korn here suggests a mystical experience which takes place in the “deepest self” there is also the sense of a “divine” source that fills the poet in the moment of inspiration. Waddington likewise describes the process of translating her poetry as “entering into its spirit” (*Apartment Seven* 193), and as with the heightening of senses that Korn describes in “the sound of every falling star,” there is the sense of an artistic or spiritual heightening of

awareness that allows the artist to "enter into the spirit" of the artistic moment and "become a delicate earthen vessel" for the language of the Yiddish poet.

The fear and sorrow along with the sacrifice and worship of Korn's "The Beginning of a Poem" shows a reverence for the creative process - one that acknowledges both the divine source of language and the anguished importance of the kind of hearing that is involved in the writing of poetry. The ear tuned to "the sound of every falling star," suggesting a metaphor for every sound and syllable of words and rhythm. Waddington as a modernist poet is concerned with the process and evolution of creating with language. In "About How Hard it is to Find New Words in an Outworn World When You Are not a Magician" the poet is "dreaming" in the manner of Korn's "torrent that sweeps you away" (Korn 13) and her ear is attuned to the suggestions of the inspirational spirit: "I heard new languages / sounding around me words / falling like showers" (*Collected Poems* 163). Like the "sound of every falling star" (Korn 13), the new words fall from above and the poet writes, "I listened / for new rhymes I waited / for words I needed / I felt the earth beating" (*Collected Poems* 163). However, when the poet waits for the new sounds and rhythms, listening in the meadow, there is only silence. Again, in "Looking for Strawberries in June," the poet displays an attitude towards language, in that everything has been done before and used before, and she turns to her historical roots in Eastern Europe, lamenting the loss of a language that was once expressive. She writes: "I have to tell you / about the words I / used to know such / words so sheer thin / transparent so light" (*Collected Poems* 169). She connects these words with an earlier tradition, and like other modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, traces her European lineage back to a time when language still had meaning.³ Waddington writes, "and I used to know / swarthy eastern words / heavy with Hebrew then / I was kidnapped by / gypsies" (*Collected Poems* 169). Although Korn also writes of the creative process and expresses a nostalgia for the old ways of her Eastern European past, she lacks Waddington's modernist obsession with language and its connection to tradition. However, Waddington herself writes of Korn's poetry that there is a change in her use of language towards the end of her writing career: "Her voice

3. Laurie Ricou notes in an analysis of Miriam Waddington's *Green World* that: "Waddington's title is deliberately chosen to declare her rejection of the wasteland, the fragmentation, and the grayness in modern poetry" (335). Therefore, the parallel that I am drawing between Waddington's poetic concerns and those of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound is merely in terms of their mutual concern with history and the lost cultural values that were once implicitly a part of language. For a further discussion see Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*.

remained lyrical to the end, although in her last book she sometimes abandons rhyme, renounces rhetoric, and reduces words to the bare bone, often forsaking the rich metaphors that are so typical of her work" (*Apartment Seven* 195). This suggests that part of Waddington's interest in Korn's work has to do with a parallel evolution of their sense of the old structures of rhyme and rhetoric, and of flowering word structures being a shroud for the "bare bone" of language.

Waddington first translated Korn's poem, "Nuns Who Saved Jewish Children," in 1967. Although it is certainly not unusual for a Jewish poet to be writing about the Holocaust, the focus of the poem is not on those who were annihilated or survived, but rather on "God's eternal brides" (Korn 42): the nuns who took in Jewish Children during the Holocaust. The piece looks at both these Christian women and the iconography and prayers of Christianity. There is, with Korn's nuns, a sense of loss and mourning; they are mourning the loss of Christ, as symbolized by "Mary's downcast eyes" (42), but also the shrivelling of "Their own motherhood," which is "parched and withered / And shrivels in their hands from drought" (42). They also lament the loss of the children's mothers: "Their words walk barefoot through the smoking ruins, / Their murmurous voices rise, grow luminous, / And light the darkness of a Jewish mother's grave" (42). The Christian iconography of this poem is seen "Only from the murals in their church" (42), but it becomes alive "in the hour when angels roam the world, / and mercy knocks at every gentle gate, / The nuns' hearts surely burst asunder / With the birth of a new kind of God" (42). This corresponds with the arrival of the Jewish children who they take into the protective walls of their Christian churches and suggests redemption through "the birth of a new kind of God."

Waddington, in her own writing, most often pairs images of Christian iconography with intolerance and even persecution. In "My Travels," Waddington writes: "I have looked at / beautiful things / in the museums of / foreign countries / all over the world / and I can report / they are still / mourning for Christ / on the tapestries / of Bucharest while / in Moscow the gold / icons are blazing / with the intense / motherhood of dark / medieval madonnas" (*Collected Poems* 155). Indeed, her travels take her from these displays of Christian iconography to the lands of people who actively hate Jews: "And in Hamburg / I discover the / Germans are still / hating the Jews and / in Kiel the same / and in the quiet / gardens of Munich / still the same it / was no pleasure / being a Jew in / Bucharest" (*Collected Poems* 156). Again in "My Lessons in the Jail," Christian iconography is paired by Waddington with suffering and persecution. Waddington writes, "Walk into the prison, that domed citadel, / That yellow skull of stone and sutured steel,

/ Walk under their mottoes, show your pass, / Salute their Christ to whom you cannot kneel" (*Collected Poems* 59). The jail itself, "that domed citadel," is likened to the Christian church, and there is only a thinly veiled allusion to Hitler's intolerance in "show your pass" and "Salute their Christ" (59), a salute that resonates with the Nazi regime. The poet continues to recount the suffering of "this man's longest, bleakest year" and "His halting words" (59-60) and concludes the poem with a salute to "falseness" and the suggestion that as you leave you should "Smile at the brute who runs the place / And memorize the banner, *Christus Rex*" (60). The banner stands as a flimsy icon for the falseness and brutality of the Christian credo.

"The Housemaid" is Miriam Waddington's 1969 translation of one of Rachel Korn's poems. This poem opens with a description of the housemaid's nostalgia for the place of her home. Korn writes, "The orchards of her home / still blossom in her glances" (Korn 16). The first stanza describes the terrain, animals, seasons, and fragrances of this place and the second stanza takes her away from this backward glance by situating the housemaid "faraway" from the "small farm" with the details of her new situation and why she had to leave her home. The poet goes on to describe love letters from home and the long work week of the maid. Miriam Waddington also shows a concern for this triumvirate of issues in a woman's life - nostalgia, love, and the social activist's concern with poverty and work - all of which are revealed in much of the poetry composed throughout the course of her life. Of nostalgia for place, Waddington writes in "Outsider: Growing Up in Canada:"

Although I once wrote in one of my poems that I don't know anymore where home is, here or in Jerusalem, as time goes on I do know that my organic physiological home is Canada - the wintry Manitoba prairie, to be specific. But my spiritual and cultural home is at least partly in Eastern Europe and partly in Jerusalem (*Apartment Seven* 41)

Evidently, as the poet matures her sense of identity expands and she comes to accept the disparate places of her heritage and yet she continues to look back at her childhood home with a sense of nostalgia. Waddington embellishes this theme in her poem "Provincial," which shows a longing for the place where she grew up and the people that inhabited this childhood. Waddington writes, "My childhood / was full of people / with Russian accents / who came from / Humble Saskatchewan" and continues on to describe all the places she has been since this "humble" youth only to conclude: "All kinds of miracles: / but I would not trade / any of them for the / empty spaces, the / snowblurred geography / of my childhood" (*Collected Poems* 237). Unlike Korn's con-

tinued longing for the place of her youth, Waddington's discussion of the Saskatchewan of her childhood is more likely an embracing of her Canadian identity along with an acceptance of the Eastern European and Jewish elements of her identity.

Waddington's concern with language, or what she calls a "passion for clarity" (qtd. in Matyas 9), as a modernist poet is also a part of her more traditionally passionate love poetry. Cathy Matyas writes, "Love, both sexual and non-sexual, is one important aspect of Waddington's work that illustrates the theme of exile" (9). Korn's "The Housemaid" then, reflects Waddington's overarching concern with the theme of exile and its connection to love. Matyas, in her discussion of Waddington's love poetry, writes that "more characteristic of Waddington are lyrics that describe love that is longed for, lost or misunderstood" (9-10). Writing of a love that is lost in "Disposing of Mister Never as a Good Man," Waddington also addresses the issue of passion and, in a sense, the exile of a passionate woman. The poem opens with "A good man / has little need / of a passionate woman" and yet elsewhere and throughout her poetry she is a woman concerned with falling in love and the space in which the poet is able to articulate love. However, her portraits of women are not merely as lovers or those deserted as lovers; she is also concerned with the social conditions of working women. In "Women" she writes, "We were always / the floor-washers and / the jam-makers the / child-bearers and / the lullaby-singers, / yet our namelessness / was everywhere and / our names were written / always in wind, posted / only on air" (*Collected Poems* 278).

Although Waddington over the course of her career as a poet and translator only translated three poems from the larger opus of Rachel Korn's Yiddish poetry, these poems reflect concerns that run thematically parallel to Waddington's own poetry. Perhaps in another sense, in a poem such as "Women," Waddington is referring to her attempt as a woman poet to save Rachel Korn from the "namelessness" of those women whose names are "written / always in wind," by translating the winds of a foreign tongue into the language of the dominant culture in Canada. These poems reflect the lyrical nature and the thematic concerns of both poets, echoing between them a collaborative labour engaged in themes encompassing creativity, the Holocaust, Christian iconography, and the nostalgia for home in the midst of exile. Together, these poets express in sparse lyrical language a sustaining and enduring love.

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