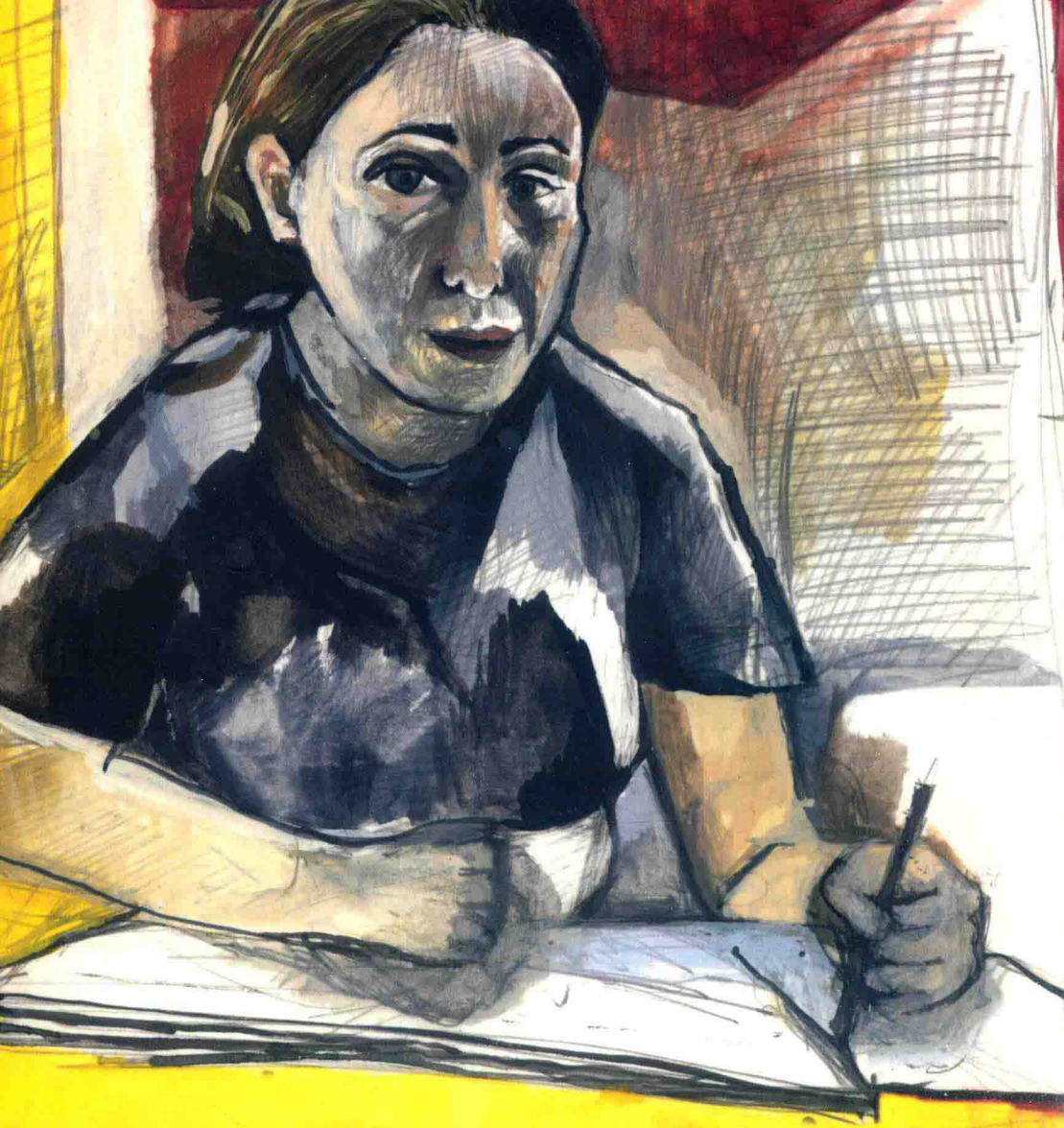

JEWISH WOMEN WRITERS IN BRITAIN

EDITED BY NADIA VALMAN

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JEWISH WOMEN WRITERS IN BRITAIN

In memory of my grandmothers
Etty Weiss née Schechter z"l (1900–1997)
Lily (Leah) Valman née Swiegals z"l (1908–2009)

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INTRODUCTION

Feeling at Home: Jewish Women Writers in Britain, 1830–2010

NADIA VALMAN

In a spare, haunting poem written in 1996, the Anglo-Jewish poet Elaine Feinstein claimed a literary forebear, the young Victorian writer Amy Levy.[1] Appearing to her in a dream set in Cambridge, where both women studied, the ghostly Levy describes her experience of double estrangement—on the one hand as a Jew at the ancient university, on the other as a writer from the philistine environment of bourgeois Anglo-Jewry, where "I am alien because I sing." In the final line of the poem, Levy unexpectedly turns to the modern-day poet with a direct challenge: "A hundred years on, is it still the same?"—the last word a partial echo of "strange" at the end of the previous line. Aurally propelling the reader forward through the twentieth century to the present, Levy's question is ambiguous. It seems partly to express the hope of a woman at the threshold of modernity, conscious of the emergent social and political changes that are set to sweep away the causes of her "unhappiness"; partly a rhetorical question, reflecting with irony on the subsequent failure of such hopes. At the same time, though, it is these very estrangements that provide a productive resource for Levy's work as a writer and, Feinstein suggests, that of her contemporary counterparts. Most interestingly of all, therefore, Feinstein's Levy seems conscious of the lineage she is inaugurating: "I am," she declares, "the first of my kind."

As this collection of essays illustrates, Levy was not quite the first of her kind, but she is an apt muse for the generations of British Jewish women writers who have returned again and again to the experience of alienation, of living between worlds, as a source of critique and creativity. "To be a Jew, a

Briton and a woman," writes the contemporary novelist Tamar Yellin, "means to live in a vortex of contradictory forces: loss, longing, pride, guilt. Exile and alienation. Only by writing is it possible to harness these forces and make my contradictions whole."[2] Initiated in the 1830s as Jews started for the first time to claim a place in the political life of the nation, British Jewish women's literature began with didactic intentions, and a strong strain of political engagement marked subsequent writing as well. In the last century of geographic, demographic, and social change for Jews in Britain, their position was never straightforward. This is evident in Jewish writing of the early to mid-twentieth century, which frequently dramatized the pressure to assimilate, or conform to dominant social and cultural norms, that peaked in the wake of the mass immigration of Eastern European Jews and again in the 1930s with the arrival of refugees from Nazi Europe. Jewish literature also registers the changing class position of Jews in Britain, from the deep fractures between immigrant and native Jews in the late nineteenth century to the rapid embourgeoisement of the postwar years. Across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the meanings of Jewish identity have been reconfigured as social and cultural shifts in British life have altered the terms of national belonging. Once perceived simply as a dissenting religious community, later as an alien race, Jews in Britain—secular, religious, or ethnic—now form part of a postimperial cosmopolitan nation in which cultural heritage, religious affiliation, and local identity intersect in dizzyingly plural ways.[3]

In the last twenty years, the history of British Jewry has been rescued from obscurity by the path-breaking work of a new generation of scholars.[4] Their studies have documented the religious and ethnic subcultures of Britain's Jews and argued strongly for an understanding of how public debates involving Jews repeatedly intersected with key questions of national identity, memory, and belonging. For the most part, however, historians of British Jewry have paid little attention to gender.[5] As an oral history research group noted in 1989, "Jewish women's experiences and perceptions have either been obscured or absorbed into descriptions of men's lives."[6] British Jewish literature, in the same way, has typically centered on the drama of the Jewish hero. For Arnold Wesker in *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1956), Alexander Baron in *The Low Life* (1963), or Bernice Rubens in *The Elected Member* (1969), for example, the symbolic story of the Jewish minority experience in Britain is that of a young man burdened with existential questions and torn apart by the competing demands of family expectations and personal aspirations. While some women writers, including Rubens, Elaine Feinstein, and Betty Miller,

reproduced this trope in their novels, others expanded the Jewish cultural narrative in new directions with fiction and poetry exploring the female body, maternity, sexual politics, and the transmission of memory.

Jewish Women Writers in Britain aims to examine the distinctive perspectives that women have brought not only to interpreting their experience as Jews but also to imaginatively transforming it for a wide general readership.[7] Subjectivities produced by dislocation, for example, are the incentive for a great deal of literary inventiveness. Experiments in narrative autobiography by the refugee writer Karen Gershon and in dramaturgy by the playwright Diane Samuels pursue multiple ways of representing the radical disjunction between young and adult self. Both the Victorian Amy Levy and the contemporary Ruth Fainlight explore precarious states of social and sexual inbetweenness in their poetry. In Sue Hubbard's innovative forms of public poetry, reflections on place and belonging spring directly from Hubbard's uneasy sense of displacement in her Home Counties upbringing. For Ova, half-Jewish poetic persona of the modernist Mina Loy, meanwhile, the experience of alterity is formative in shaping an assertive opposition to all ideologies of exclusion, including antisemitism and imperialism.

Such partial Jewish identities provide complex perspectives on questions of affiliation and belonging. Almost all the writers discussed in this book have an oblique, complicated, or mobile relationship to Jewishness, and it figures in their work in highly varied and often unexpected ways. Grace Aguilar came from a pious family but as a female was religiously undereducated and more familiar with contemporary Christian values than Jewish texts; Amy Levy had a secular upbringing and an intellectual interest in "the Jewish question." For Anita Brookner, Judaism is universalized and understood as a "moral code"; for Mina Loy it is a psychic or philosophical inheritance. The refugee writers discussed in chapter 5 were defined as racially Jewish by the Nazi regime but considered themselves Germans. Others, like Linda Grant and Jenny Diski, evince a strong sense of Jewish ethnic belonging without a religious dimension. For Ruth Fainlight, meanwhile, militant secularism goes hand in hand with a strong identification with a Jewish history of persecution.

A further complicating factor is the extent to which Jewish identity has been inflected by the class structure of British society. For nineteenth-century writers like Aguilar and Lily Montagu, the sharp social divisions between lower- and upper-class Jews disturbed and confused their sense of a common religious culture. Twentieth-century writers have sought, on the other hand, to explore the differences and specificities of working-class and middle-class

Jewish identity. For Grant and Diski, however, class was a system into which they, raised in immigrant families, did not clearly fit. Furthermore, some of the writers in this book seek to question the notion of stable or tangible personal identity, Jewish or otherwise. In Anita Brookner's novels, assimilation—the movement between Jewish and English identity—is represented not as an outcome but as an ongoing and incomplete process, in which identities are always in flux. In the theater of Diane Samuels, the body of the Jewish woman is remarkable for being unmarked—for its potential to "pass" and disappear from visibility. Shaped on the one hand by the changing status and experience of Jews in Britain, and on the other by variations of class, family background, birthplace, political commitment, and religious affiliation, these writers attach radically different meanings to Jewishness.

The other key contribution women writers make to the representation of British Jewish experience is their thoroughgoing interrogation of Jewish domestic life. The mythology of the Jewish family goes back to the mid-nineteenth century, when Grace Aguilar used it as part of her argument that Jews were worthy of full political equality in England, proclaiming: "The virtues of the Jews are essentially of the domestic and social kind. The English are noted for the comfort and happiness of their firesides, and in this loveliest school of virtue, the Hebrews not only equal, but in some instances surpass, their neighbours."[8] This perception persisted even at times when public responses to Jews were at their most hostile or baffled: journalists observing Eastern European immigrants in early twentieth-century London, for example, often commented on the "happy and contented home life" that Jews managed to sustain despite conditions of overcrowding and poverty.[9] In writing by Jewish women throughout this period, however, we see very different perspectives on the popular idea of the warm, cohesive Jewish family. Many of the writers examined in this volume suggest that, far from offering a refuge from the external world, the domestic realm is where external social and political hostilities are projected inward and brutally played out on an intimate level. In the work of Eva Figes and Anita Brookner, harrowing experiences are submerged or displaced but surface irresistibly in domestic life. More directly articulated rage is evident in the writing of Diane Samuels and Jenny Diski, where the dislocated or disrupted Jewish family is a site of rejection and betrayal rather than protection. In contrast to the familiar narrative formula of the Jewish hero in conflict with an emasculating mother figure, these texts foreground more ambivalent, more bewildering relationships between mothers and daughters. For many, it is essential to understand the dynamics of

dysfunctional families not via the customary narratives of stereotype but as a crucible of historical trauma.

It is not only in terms of subject matter that the work of these writers is interesting. They engage, also, with a series of aesthetic questions uniquely arising from their positions as women and as Jews. Victorian Jewish poets, for example, were writing in a period when poetic authority was characteristically invoked through intertextual relationships to existing literary traditions, and grounded on a close relationship between poetry and religion. If unable to share the Christian assumptions of Victorian poetics, some, like Amy Levy, were nonetheless able to lay claim to specifically Hebrew poetic forms, such as the lyric tradition of deferred resolution or the lament of exile; or, like Nina Salaman, to forge a link through translation to a heritage of classical Jewish poetry. Alternatively, like Grace Aguilar and Alice Lucas, they adapted Christian models of didactic or devotional writing for use in Jewish contexts. A different kind of adaptation of familiar literary form can be seen in the rewriting of the *Bildungsroman,* the novel of personal development, by refugee writers. And while Anita Brookner's measured sentences invite comparisons with Jane Austen, her narratives of perilously repressed emotion implicitly critique the control they enact at the level of style.

An unavoidable challenge for the writers under discussion here is the prevalence of stereotypes of Jews in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary culture. Some, like Miller or Loy, reproduce traits attributed to Jews in this period and associate Jewishness with a neurotic hypersensitivity, or (conversely) an uninhibited physicality. Critics have been particularly perplexed by Jewish writers who deploy the language of race. Amy Levy and Mina Loy both knowingly use terminology, recognizable from the lexicon of antisemitism and eugenics, that associates Jews with physical and psychic pathologies—a move interpreted alternately as ironic or self-hating.[10] Yet this persistent difficulty in pinning down their tone points to a more productive way of reading their work: as a deliberate attempt to destabilize clear signifiers of identity. Thus the mix of incommensurate linguistic registers in Loy's poetry forms a polyglot, "mongrelized" discourse in which all category systems lose authority. Elsewhere Loy, as well as other writers explored here, invokes semitic stereotypes to mess more creatively with them. She recasts the "wandering Jew" of Christian legend and recent European history as a "wondering Jew," the intellectually restless subject of modernity—at home in language rather than any place.

Regarded in the context of their reflections on the condition of Jews and women, then, the experimental aspects of these writers' work come more

fully into focus. Levy's subtle modulations of poetic form, for example, can be seen as a challenge to the universal assumptions of genre conventions. The ungainly lines of Loy's poetry, similarly, signal a reverence for the imperfect, unruly, vulgar body that expresses her opposition to English xenophobia. Betty Miller's psychological portrait of a Jew divided between ethnic belonging and assimilation leads to an ongoing exploration in her fiction of the self as fundamentally divided between instinct and conformity. Writers attempting to represent direct or inherited memories of the Holocaust, meanwhile, push their creative practice in a number of disparate directions, from the oblique suggestiveness and abstraction of Eva Figes's fiction, to Anita Brookner's use of understatement and narrative omission, to Diane Samuels's on-stage deployment of the shadow, connoting simultaneous absence and presence. In Sue Hubbard's site-specific poetry, in contrast, the familiar trope of the Jew as exile, and the binary of belonging/non-belonging central to the concerns of many Jewish writers, are themselves challenged as Hubbard considers instead the ways the self is constituted as a product and process of the spatial relations it inhabits.

While the work of many of the writers discussed in this volume is shaped by their ambiguous place within British culture, for others it is Jewish institutions and customs that have alienated women. As far back as the nineteenth century, British Jewish women's writing established a tradition of critique. Emily Marion Harris, Amy Levy, and Lily Montagu in the late Victorian period used the form of the novel to uncover the interior life of the contemporary Jewish woman, suggesting an imminent crisis in Anglo-Jewry if the vocational and spiritual potential of women continued to be suppressed. The prophetic feminist voice is present in the poetry of Mina Loy, too, when she points out the survival among secular Jews and Christians of religious beliefs about the impurity of the female body—which she proceeds to flout.

For other writers in this volume, however, critique was more often directed at a complacent and unthinking majority culture. Sue Hubbard's poetry, inscribed on the windows and walls of Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, is a ghostly reminder of the forgotten role of the Jewish minority in the city's industrial past. In reanimating the hidden lives of a Jewish woman deported from Guernsey, or of a Jewish child refugee superseded by her gentile adult self, Julia Pascal and Diane Samuels use the occluded figure of the Jewish woman in history to reconsider Britain's self-narrative as a safe haven for the persecuted. These literary acts of memorialization go back even further, to the early Victorian Celia Moss, writing of Jewish women massacred

in medieval York. While Moss's male contemporaries publicly embraced British identity and repeatedly insisted on their patriotism, Moss boldly reminds her readers of Britain's history of intolerance. In the interwar period Mina Loy and Betty Miller similarly offer a view of England from the margins; in their writing Jews are associated with the pleasures of the body, throwing into stark relief the repression and froideur of the English. Although the history of British Jewish literature is often told as a trajectory "from apology to revolt," it is clear from the writers in this volume that to follow a line of Jewish women's writing from the nineteenth century to the present day is to follow a company of rebels all the way.[11]

Jewish religious ritual plays an intermittent role in the writing examined here, from the devotional texts composed by Victorian poets to the festive eating in Miller's fiction to the many writers struggling against human fallibility and the inadequacies of language to observe the religious injunction to remember. The trope of Exodus, the wandering in the desert, the figure of Moses as leader: scriptural references, often radically rewritten, continue to inform the work of Loy, Figes, and Feinstein. But what should also be noted is the potential for transgression inevitably provided by a religious framework. In the specific context of the loss of Jewish lives in the Holocaust, Ruth Fainlight's rejection of all categories of identity is both a logical and a sacrilegious response; even more peculiarly fraught are her images of transcendence through bodily pain. The memoirs of Eva Figes, Jenny Diski, and Linda Grant, meanwhile, are also deliberately taboo-breaking: candid accounts of childhood neglect and adult hostility that knowingly contravene the commandment to honor one's parents.

Yet in what is surely the most transgressive novel by a British Jewish woman writer in recent years, Naomi Alderman turns to a subject that has been all but absent since Grace Aguilar and Lily Montagu first wrote about God and gender in the Victorian period. Alderman's novel *Disobedience* (2006) is set in the insular milieu of contemporary north London ultra-Orthodoxy—synonymous, in the mind of Ronit, the alienated heroine, with retrograde sexism and social conformity.[12] But the novel juxtaposes the conservative social world of Orthodoxy with its sinuous textual culture: witty, erudite Talmudic addresses to the reader exploring concepts in Jewish thought, such as the commandment to be happy, the meaning of the Sabbath, and, above all, the importance of free will—the capacity to disobey. It is this principle that brings together the novel's two protagonists, once schoolgirl lovers—Ronit, the prodigal who has fled to America to live a free and secular life, and Esti,

who has outwardly conformed and remained silent about her sexuality. Both protagonists finally forge a difficult bond between incompatible aspects of themselves, recognizing not only the legitimacy of their desires but also their attachment to home. The novel proposes that Orthodox Judaism (in which ethical conflict is central) in its British incarnation (which honors habits of discretion and respect for privacy) is a surprisingly favorable environment for queer Jews.

Disobedience points toward new directions for British Jewish women's writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While earlier generations were haunted by a traumatic European heritage or wary of a history of British antisemitism, poets and novelists now imagine relationships to Jewishness that are no longer exclusively dominated by the past. The ongoing story of Jewish writers' vigorous engagement with a religious establishment and social conventions that constrain women's public freedoms nonetheless continues. And while the theme of conflicted Jewish identity still forms the core compelling subject of their writing, it no longer leads inevitably to bleak paralysis but opens up, instead, to a future of new retellings.

Notes

1. Elaine Feinstein, "Amy Levy," *Collected Poems and Translations* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 156.
2. Tamar Yellin, "The Newspaper Man," in *Mordecai's First Brush with Love: New Stories by Jewish Women in Britain*, ed. Laura Phillips and Marion Baraitser (London: Loki Books, 2004), 57–70 (57).
3. On the history of British Jewish writing from the late nineteenth century to the present day, see Bryan Cheyette, "Introduction," *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland: An Anthology* (London: Peter Halban, 1998), xiii–lxxi.
4. Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656 to 2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); idem, *Radical Assimilation in English Jewish History, 1656–1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture, 1840–1914* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Eugene C. Black, *The Social Politics of Anglo-Jewry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); David Cesarani, *The Making of Modern Anglo-Jewry*, 1880–1920 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Tony Kushner, ed., *The Jewish Heritage in British History: Englishness and Jewishness* (London: Frank Cass, 1992); Tony Kushner, *Anglo-Jewry since 1066: Place, Locality and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008). On contemporary British Jewry, see Howard Cooper and Paul Morrison, *A Sense of Belonging: Dilemmas of British Jewish Identity* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991).
5. Exceptions include Tony Kushner, "Sex and Semitism: Jewish Women in Britain in War and Peace," in *Minorities in Wartime: National and Racial Groupings in Europe, America and Australia During the Two World Wars*, ed. Panikos Panayi (London: Berg, 1993); Rickie Burman, "The Jewish Woman as Breadwinner: The Changing Value of Women's