Polish Jewish Culture beyond the Capital

Centering the Periphery

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To the Jewish artists, writers and poets, musicians, theater and cabaret performers, architects, filmmakers and moviegoers, patrons of the arts, teachers and journalists, and communal and youth movement activists of Polish lands: We stand on your shoulders.
Elkhonen Vogler, Forgotten Poet of Yung-Vilne, in Vilna and the Litvak Borderlands

Justin Cammy

Elkhonen Vogler (1907-1969) was among the most important poets of the literary and artistic group Yung-Vilne (Young Vilna), the last of the major Yiddish modernist groups in interwar Poland. He drew inspiration from Yung-Vilne's pride in its hometown through a poetics of *landkentenish*, engagement with local human, cultural, and physical geographies. His two book-length narrative poems of the 1930s, set in the countryside where he grew up, staked a romantic claim to nature as a defining part of Litvak identity. Vogler took Yiddish poetry out of the city at a time when Jewish urban life was oversaturated with internal political divisions, challenging economic conditions, and anxiety about the rising influence of rightwing nationalists in Poland. Though the demands on the Yiddish poet to promote an ideological cause were intense, especially with the Soviet Union across the border, Vogler preferred writing about the flora and fauna of the Polish-Lithuanian-White Russian borderlands to provide local audiences and a transnational Yiddish readership with a concrete geography through which to embolden their sense of *doikayt* (hereness), a principle of diasporism in which Jewish life was informed by local languages, local folkways, and its embeddedness in a specific landscape. In so doing, Vogler steeled readers against the logic of Zionism and territorialism that argued that the future of Polish Jewry lay elsewhere and imaginatively resisted the domestic nativism in the 1930s that sought to deny Jews their place in Poland. If the social landscape of the eastern European city and the mythopoetic world of the shtetl were already well-established settings for modern Yiddish literature, Vogler sought to secure Litvak Jewry's organic roots in the region by reading its fate in and through a visceral connection with pastoral environments that lay just beyond city limits. His focus drew that which was of peripheral concern to many other interwar Yiddish writers to the heart of his aesthetic project.

What were the psychological and social conditions that led Vilna-born Elkhonen Rozhanski, who would later adopt the pen name Vogler, into the Lithuanian countryside
and to emerge as the neofolk romantic of his generation of local writers? As a child, Khonen (as he was known by his family), or Khonke (as he was called by his friends), was sickly and awkward looking. He was teased with the nickname “snub nose,” a painful slight that, at a young age, taught him about the cruelty of human interactions and piqued his interest in alternative sources of fellowship. Tragedy struck the Rozhanski household in 1914 when his father died suddenly. Khonen became an orphan, and his family fell into a poverty that was even deeper than Vilna Jewry’s already acute wartime conditions. His older sister, Sore, recalls that they were so poor that their mother could not afford to buy them shoes, forcing the children to walk around during the summer with sores on their feet. Khonen’s mother and her four children moved to a village near Wilkomierz (Yid. Vilkomir), northwest of Vilna. While their mother wandered the neighboring villages bartering her late husband’s clothes for food, the children found themselves on their own to explore the region’s forests, lakes, and rivers. It was Khonen’s first extended exposure to pastoral life and to a world where Lithuanian, Polish, and Belorussian peasants; local tribes of Roma; and Jews interacted. The young boy insisted on watching the sunset whenever possible and collecting his own fruit to eat from the trees. Though the move from a three-room flat in Vilna to a single room in the countryside was not easy for his mother and siblings, young Khonen experienced nature as a generative source.

The stress of supporting a family of four as a single mother eventually took its toll on Khonen’s mother. When winter arrived and the children could no longer bathe in the river, she begged their landlord to allow them to use his bath once a week. On the eve of Passover 1916, Khonen’s mother collapsed, a victim of malnutrition or typhus, as she prepared to go to the butcher to beg for food to prepare the festival meal. The Rozhanski children were now on their own. Nine-year-old Khonen was placed in a hospital and then in an old-age home until a place could be found for him in an orphanage, where he lived until he was sixteen. He increasingly withdrew into himself, keeping his poetic scribblings a private matter. Khonen’s orphanage was close to a river, and he often would take a book with him and walk along its shore until he reached the forest, where he was free to read and write undisturbed. He carried with him into adulthood the imprint of nature’s abundance, which became a convenient contrast to his own poverty and sense of abandonment.

When Khonen completed the course of study at the orphanage, he was sent to a vocational school run by the relief organization Help Through Work to learn a trade to support himself. His artistic talents earned him certification as a commercial painter. Like Mani Leib, the immigrant Yiddish poet in New York who offered thanks that “I’m not a cobbler who writes, but a poet who makes shoes,” Vogler would observe the following about himself: “By day he paints signs, but at night by the walls, / he composes poems and speaks to himself. / The dangling cigarette between his lips is his sadness, burning / until his tears
extinguish it.” Work was sparse, and though he never asked for a handout, his siblings often helped him get through the week by providing him with a meal or some pocket money.

By the late 1920s, the ambitious teenage writer could no longer keep his poetic aspirations under wraps. He sent several pieces to the Yiddish press for consideration and was surprised to find one of his poems published in Warsaw’s *Shpraitsungen* (Fresh growths) in 1925. It was at that moment that he assumed the literary pseudonym Vogler, or “wanderer.” Since all pseudonyms are meant to project some aspect of a writer’s self-image, Vogler’s called attention to his fate as an orphan, to his sense of apartness from the social demands of urban life, and to the symbolic, associative quality of his literary style.

It was around this time that a new literary coterie emerged in Vilna, designed to foster the creativity of young Yiddish writers and artists. Khonen was among the most devoted early members of what would later come to be known as Yung-Vilne, a group of poets, writers, journalists, activists, and artists who were united by pride in their hometown, a commitment to new experiments in Yiddish creativity, and a shared generational experience (all were born on the cusp of World War I and marked by war, displacement, the spirit of revolution, the struggle for Polish and Lithuanian independence, and the assertion of Vilna as a major center and exporter of secular Jewish culture). Yung-Vilne would gather on Sabbath afternoons to engage in their own form of spiritual fellowship. While the gang grew increasingly animated the more they imbibed, Khonen often retreated into himself, sometimes not saying a word for hours at a time: “He kept everything inside.... He needed devoted friends to help him get by, whom we referred to as ‘Khonke’s nannies.’”

Vogler’s poetry was a reflection of his reserved personality. When the group was first introduced together in print in the pages of the daily *Vilner tog* in 1929, he self-consciously presented himself as inhabiting “a palace of [his] own silence” where he sat alone on a throne. His friends in Yung-Vilne kept a close eye on their sensitive colleague. Henekh Soloveytshik, who worked summers alongside local peasants in the country, invited Vogler to join him there to provide him with some relief from a summer in the city. When in Vilna, Vogler spent most of his spare time between the reading room of the Strashun library, the city’s most prestigious Jewish library, and Velfke’s tavern, a favorite haunt of the Yung-Vilne writers, local intellectuals, and draymen. He was so poor that often, after nights of debate and drink, he could not afford to pay the watchman the measly tip required to permit him back into the courtyard of his apartment on Stefańska Street. He would wait by the gate shivering until someone else came home or fall asleep on the street until someone left for work at dawn so as to piggyback in on another’s contribution.

Vogler transformed his loneliness and poverty into the very subject of his writing. He increasingly lost himself in a highly stylized symbolic poetics, as when he offers an interpretation of his craft in the second issue of the *Yung-Vilne* magazine:

The world is—a book by a crazy poet
The days and nights watch over him—they stand on guard;
The villages—are its fallen pages
And the cities—are its hard covers....

... Every letter—is a peasant, every word—is a family
The diacritics the dots and the dashes—are the animals,
Dogs and wolves who bark, howl and moo, and then fall silent,
But people weep and their tears are the commas.⁸

Vogler manufactures an entire imaginative universe through his focus on components of language and textuality and their comparison to the local peoples, animals, and places with which he is most intimate. The hard covers of his books that feel to him as heartless as the modern city, the fallen sheets of the poet’s notebook that are like forsaken provincial villages, and the anthropomorphizing of grammar as a peasant family situate his poetic project in a specific cultural space. In order to be moved by such verse, readers must learn to read associatively, to accustom themselves to unusual syntax, and to come to terms with Vogler as a folk modernist whose metaphoric landscape invites them to relate to sociocultural and natural features of the region in new ways.

It is important here to acknowledge the influence of earlier writers who cleared creative ground in developing a distinct environmental poetics informed by the local borderlands. With Warsaw as the largest Jewish city in Europe (and the center of Yiddish publishing) and Łódź as its industrial powerhouse, Vilna was a provincial city that sought to make up for what it lacked in demographic or economic influence by building on its reputation as a center of both traditional and secular Jewish cultural innovation. Accordingly, local writers grew interested in localism and regionalism as a way to claim their place on the Yiddish cultural map and to resist the neocolonial dangers of a Yiddish Republic of Letters dominated by Warsaw.⁹ It was not uncommon for Litvak poets, especially once they found themselves elsewhere, to write affectionately about Lite (Lithuania) as their homeland. Dovid Eynhorn, born in Wolkowysk (Yid. Volkovysk; now in Belarus) in 1886, opens an early edition of his collected works with the words "My soul belongs / my soul belongs to my town, located / on the soil of Lithuania."¹⁰ His early poems explore the same birch trees, streams, and meadows that would animate Vogler several decades later, as when Eynhorn confesses in his poem “Lite” (1906), “The land hypnotized me.”¹⁰

If Eynhorn planted the seeds of inspiration, Moyshe Kulbak realized their full potential. Born in 1896 in Smorgon, a town east of Vilna in present-day Belarus, Kulbak was the most important and charismatic Yiddish poet in Europe during Vogler’s youth. His influence left an indelible mark on students coming of age in Vilna in the 1920s, when he taught at its Yiddish-speaking gymnasium. By then, Kulbak had already penned one of the most beloved Yiddish revolutionary poems, “Di shtot” (The city; 1919). But it was his 1922 epic Raysn (the Jewish term for White Russia) that established the model for celebrating the human diversity
ELKHONEN VOGLER, FORGOTTEN POET OF YUNG-VILNE

and natural wonders of this corner of eastern Europe, as when he stages cross-cultural desire through an erotic encounter between a Poseidon-like Lithuanian rising from the waters of the Niemen River greeted by the supple waves and modest beauty of the Viliye (Pol. Wilia), situating his writing amid the major rivers than run through the region and cross its political borders. In Raysn, Kulbak explores the simple folkways of a rustic family of Jewish raftsmen and their relations with local peasants to celebrate the ethnic hybridity of the borderlands. He followed it several years later with the ode “Vilne” (1926), in which he invites the city to be read (and thus interpreted) as a kind of sacred text (“You are psalm spelled in clay and iron”; “You are a dark amulet set in Lithuania”; “You are a psalm written on the fields”). The poem revels in (rather than evades) the tension between tradition and modernity, establishing Yiddish as an integrative force and imagining an urban built landscape and atmosphere that is sated with Jewishness. Kulbak’s Vilna was not just a literary subject but an entire sensory experience, a humanist evocation of Yiddish sacred space. Vogler later acknowledged just how profound an influence Kulbak was in legitimating Vilna and the broader region in which it was located as a literary subject: “Kulbak’s shadow is intertwined with my own. The two cannot be separated. ... I recall waiting for him by the door of the Real Gymnasium on a wintry day just to be able to look at him in the face and hear his voice.... He was summer in Yiddish literature.... In Kulbak, Jews and White Russians lived in peace. The bounty of the land united them. Kulbak’s writing was rooted in the soil of Lithuania, in its old oaks trees from which he drew his inspiration.... He was instantly recognizable due to his sunny perspective and his earthy scent.”

Yung-Vilne’s early membership actively encouraged the exploration of the region’s diverse human, urban, and natural geographies. For instance, the heroes of Henekh Soloveytshik’s prose stories were Lithuanian and Polish peasants and non-Jewish villagers. At one of the group’s public readings in Vilna in the early 1930s, Soloveytshik appeared in tall boots and a short pelt, having just returned from the provinces. He tossed a heavy potato sack onto the stage and began to recite by heart his most recent story about a peasant who murders the nobleman who attempted to seduce his daughter. When he reached the point in the narrative where the peasant’s axe is about to come crashing down on the lecherous nobleman, a dark stream of blood began to trickle from his sack onto the stage and down into the audience. People jumped out of their seats in fear, perhaps thinking that Soloveytshik had brought the nobleman’s head with him. In fact, the sack contained several frozen calf heads he had brought home that had begun to thaw during his reading. Such was the performative nature of Soloveytshik, who actively cultivated a persona drawing from the folkways of rural life?

For his part, the poet Shimshn Kahan enjoyed parading around town in fancy Russian shirts done up at the neck with a red scarf and tall, shiny black boots. In 1925, after his education in Vilna’s Yiddish secular schools, he elected to move to the picturesque village of Troki, where he had spent summer vacations as a child, to work as a farmer and tutor. Troki was one of the region’s most beautiful places, nestled amid dozens of lakes and featuring a medieval castle. It was a community where Jews, Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, Karaites, Tatars, and Roma lived side by side. These cross-cultural encounters left an indelible mark on Kahan’s imagination. A romance
developed with a local Roma (Gypsy) girl. The two ran away together, but her father, the local chief, sent a messenger after them warning that unless she returned (with or without Kahan), she would suffer permanent banishment from the clan. Heartbroken, she returned to her family and Kahan to Vilna, where he translated folk songs from Russian, Ukrainian, White Russian, and the local Roma language into Yiddish. Many of his translations were put to music and sung by the city’s Yiddish choir. Life with the Roma prompted some of Kahan’s most original work, injecting the cultural diversity of the local countryside into Yung-Vilne’s thematic repertoire. He recited one such poem, "Litvishe tsigayner" (Lithuanian Gypsies), at the group’s third annual public reading in March 1932. Kahan invited Yiddish audiences to recognize that they shared more in common with their Roma neighbors than they might imagine. Both were minority groups who were often scapegoated by nationalists as alien implants, both relied on strong group bonds to sustain their culture, and both shared a diasporic consciousness. Kahan’s Yiddish translations of their folk songs contributed to a vision of culture where Jews and other peoples were intertwined in mutual respect. The urge to capture a distinct regional flavor was also pursued by the group’s leading visual artist Bentsye Mikhtom, whose drawings featured local landmarks and Jewish and Polish folk motifs.

Vogler’s first significant contribution to this genealogy of a regional environmental Yiddish poetics promoted by such writers as Eynhorn and Kulbak appeared in 1935, when he was the first member of Yung-Vilne to publish an independent volume, *A bletl in vint* (*A page in the wind*). Its book cover, illustrated in a folk style by fellow Yung-Vilne artist Rokhl Sutzkever (figure 2.1), features imagery of local trees, birds, and animals and a tiny sketch of Vogler himself. It also introduces the volume as a *poeme* (a long, narrative poem), signaling his frustration with the limitations of the modernist short lyric and a groping toward the monumental. At the same time, Vogler’s introduction to the volume hints at his own creative anxieties, including the paradox of being a member of a literary group in one of the global centers of modern Yiddish culture who nonetheless cultivated the persona of a homeless wanderer and who felt no more respected than a “discarded page [carried off] in the wind.” The poem’s prose preface defends the work’s unusual romance between his first-person (human) speaker and a plum orchard:

> With trembling fingers, I tear out the last pages of my notebook, written in 1935, and consign it to the wind. Perhaps it will accidentally carry them off somewhere and bring solace to this discouraged author, giving him some courage in his free time (from his job as a sign painter) to record afresh earlier poems that were erased from his old notebook.

> That is why I wrote on the cover “A Page in the Wind,” although the poem really should have been titled 'My Marriage to the Plum Orchard.” But I feared
that had I given it that title a critical reader would have strung me up (and perhaps he still will after reading this poem . . .) on the neck of the alder tree, the heroine of this poem, who has been a loyal friend from my orphaned childhood until now (or more precisely: until midnight, when these lines are being penned).

Vogler sought to inoculate himself against those who looked to young Yiddish writers to address the most pressing social and political challenges of the day, and he recognized that his poem’s pastoral setting and romantic theme would leave it open to accusations of artistic self-absorption. With all the challenges facing the Jews of Poland in 1935, who would be interested in a folktale about his love for a country orchard? I argue that readers miss the point if they assume that Vogler’s wanderings amid the warmth and friendship of the trees and fields, the rivers and soil, and the animals and the birds of the Lithuanian countryside eschew political work. To the contrary, by giving his native natural landscape a Yiddish voice, he provides a distinctly regional texture to Yiddish poetry’s broader project of imagining Yidishland, including an insistence on the preservation of rural Yiddish dialect: “The alders and birches who are the heroes of this poem speak a Yiddish that is somewhat old-fashioned and Russified. The trees of my Lithuanian fields and towns imitate the people in the poor huts that still speak that way.”

A belt in vint is divided into three sections, each subdivided into various chapters. The first two sections—“A khasene” (A wedding) and “A roman” (A romance)—tell the story of the speaker’s courtship and marriage to a plum orchard from spring through late summer. As with Kulbak’s Raysn, the ambition was to bring rural sunshine to urban Yiddish literature in order to free it from the social tensions of urban and shetel life and to draw from the simpler folkways of village life.

Vogler’s modernist poeme borrows from folktales by anthropomorphizing the entire natural world. Its Yiddish is earthy and provincial, heavily accented with Slavic elements and with local Jewish idiom. Terms such as pasiekęs (chopped down forests used for pasture), lapes (lips), krasaviets (handsome young man), reynikeyn (Torah scrolls), lyubovnitses (young lovers), and odlige (a moist frost) are among the more than fifty included in a glossary of “Vilna localisms” at the end of the volume, a further indication of the degree to which language was deployed to mark the rootedness and the distinctiveness of the region’s Jews. By endowing the flora and fauna of his Litvak countryscapes with human qualities of emotion and intelligence, he takes full possession of the province’s natural features. Elsewhere, he brings in the region’s diverse populations by seeing in a stalk of wheat a full-breasted peasant woman. As the poem unfolds, it does the work of naming specific spaces, animals, trees, and fruits, showing a depth of intimacy with the regional landscape that performs a much deeper Yiddish linguistic repertoire than readers abroad were familiar with. In differentiating among a sbliakh, a gostinetes, a trakt, and a stezshkele (all variations of roads), the poem shows off the hybridity of Yiddish culture through its linguistic openness and provides a way to map the project of landkentenish, the movement of Jewish home tourism that promoted knowledge of local landscapes. Moreover, by anthropomorphizing the natural world, Vogler lures readers into engaging with the environment as more than just something one passes through on the way between destinations. Rather, it is sentient and alive. For
instance, in Vogler’s imaginative universe, the main river that runs through Vilna is not just a river but a lonely maiden awaiting the return of her fiance; the birch tree is not just a tree but an agune (an abandoned wife) worried that her husband, a rainbow, has left her to pursue an affair with the sun; and the highway by the orchard is not just a road but an old bachelor who moans beneath the burden of the heavy wagons that drive over him. Vogler’s personifications (and frequent Judaizations) of the natural world invited readers to take possession of the minutiae of Vilna’s pastoral surroundings by seeing their own lives and humiliations reflected in them. Consider the following short episode of the country rose:

She has a rendezvous today
With the young butterfly.
But the bug, that ugly scoundrel, Won’t give her a moment’s peace.

She has so many suitors Summer birds and bees. She toys with all the men With her aristocratic manners.

Vogler’s talents as a nature fabulist come alive in this brief scene that overflows with erotic sensuality. However, flirtatious desire gradually transforms into predatory violation. First, the butterfly kisses the “red breasts” of the rose while she is passed out drunk, unable to provide her consent. Then, a jealous swarm of bees challenges the butterfly suitor for control over the sleeping rose. After they vanquish him, they sting the rose’s lips and tear off her clothes—Vogler’s poetic interpretation of their thirst for pollen amid her petals and filaments.  

If this episode offers readers a way of taking notice of something as simple as a wildflower in a field by translating nature’s dance into human terms, it also reveals how betrayals lurk where they are least expected, as when innocent flirtations fall victim to gang rape as the rose is violated by a swarm of bees. The terrifying episode allowed Vogler to offer his own gloss on contemporary Jewish life, capturing both the romance of home and those sudden moments in which mass violence threatened to destroy it.  

If we think of the rose, the butterfly, and the bees as codependent but different species inhabiting the same space—each organically rooted in and belonging to the land Vogler’s scene would have been read as an interpretation of his multinational borderland community of Jews, Poles, Lithuanians, and others.

Vogler’s most important accomplishment in A bletl in vint is the national claim it asserts on a particular corner of Europe. He reads Jewishness into the Litvak borderlands by endowing them, as Kulbak had in his own writing, with an aura of sacredness that could appeal to readers whose Jewishness was defined more by
their sense of national self-consciousness than religious commitments. In Vogler’s poetic world, both here and thereafter, the wind rushing through the trees recites ti/iw (psalms); a canary’s chirp is akin to the sanctification of a marriage through the recitation of the kidesh (blessing over wine); woodpeckers peck out moral advice on the trees, suggesting that “tsedoke [acts of righteousness] will save you from death”; wolves howl the yisgadal (the traditional prayer recited by mourners); and the sparrows shoki (sway) back and forth on the branches, just as Jews do in prayer?6 Vogler’s native Litvak landscapes are not an imagined homeland but a fully realized, intimate, organic, and substantive Jewish cultural space.

Though Kulbak’s influence on Vogler’s generation of emerging local writers is undeniable, it is important to note that they functioned within different political moments. The revolutionary-era springtime of possibilities that Kulbak expresses in Raysn was entirely different from the world in which Vogler wrote a decade later, a mood reflected in his volume’s final section, “Na-venad” (Homeless). Here, the fantasy union between a Yiddish-speaking Jew and a natural environment of raw beauty comes to a tragic end when his beloved, the plum orchard, dies in late autumn, leaving behind her brokenhearted lover and a bushel of fruit, which represents her orphaned children. Humans cannibalize the young plums when they cut into them with their sharp teeth; the red juice they excrete as they are consumed is likened to human blood. The poem’s portrayal of a pastoral idyll cut short was a way for Vogler to write himself both into the landscape and then out of it, staking a Jewish bond with it while also anticipating its passing. Here, we see a profound uncertainty about the future, a catastrophist streak that was a feature of the Yung- Vilne generation who resisted sentimentalizing their world, preferring instead to expose its fissures and anxieties. If the speaker’s love for the orchard symbolizes the deep bond that developed over centuries between the region’s Jews and their environment and if its fruit signifies the cultural richness that was produced over time on its soil, then the orchard’s death and the fate of her orphaned children suggest a profound crisis of faith in the viability of Jewish life in situ. Vogler’s verse functions simultaneously as an intimate textual expression of home and an elegy on the inevitability of leave-taking.

More than eight hundred people attended a Sabbath event in September 1935 at the Vilna Conservatory organized by Yung-Vilne in celebration of the volume’s publication. The room was packed with representatives of the city’s Yiddish intelligentsia and local youth. Eliyohu Shulman, a writer visiting from New York, was given the honor of introducing the evening by putting Vogler’s book into a comparative framework. He spoke about the influence of Southern writers in the United States, casting Vogler as an important model for regionalism in Yiddish literature and inviting readers to celebrate the distinct environmental and cultural geographies of Yiddish-speaking Jews living over a vast territory. When it came time for the poet to speak, his shyness overtook him, and he could barely whisper a few words of embarrassed appreciation?7 He had good reason to fear the opinions of critics, several of whom considered his writing overly self-involved?8 Vogler’s sensitivities were stung by such criticism. When he wrote in early 1936 to A. Liessin, the respected editor of New York’s Yiddish art journal Di tsukunft, to ask him to consider publishing a fragment of a newer poem, his words could not have inspired much confidence: “The truth is, I don’t believe in myself. Perhaps my poems
have little worth.” He needn’t have worried. Vogler’s achievement outweighed his self-doubt. He was the first member of Yung-Vilne to publish an independent volume, and A blett in vint put the group on the Yiddish literary map and carried within its pages the promise of their name to bring both an honest generational perspective and a specifically vilnerish (of the Vilna region) flavor to readers at home and abroad. Vogler tried to live up to expectations in a metapoetic lyric in which he co-opted the language of tradition to promote his secular humanist understanding of the role of the Yiddish poet as one who “flings his sorrow into the shkhine the brilliant dawn light / and brings it as a sacrifice to God beauty and justice.”

With these commitments in mind, between 1935 and 1938, Vogler got to work on an even longer verse narrative set in the period around World War I, when Vilna went from being a czarist city under German occupation to one of the central sites of contention between the newly established Polish and Lithuanian states. Rather than engaging directly with the political drama of the historical moment, the poem seeks refuge from “the storm” by retreating to “the North Lands, Eden” that correspond to Vogler’s pastoral borderland worlds where life is simpler among the tall (Jewish!) birch trees by the highway and between its quiet rivers, which he calls its “Christines.” Vogler’s ability to simultaneously inscribe Jewishness upon the landscape while also engaging with it as Slavic (and Christian) space allows him to celebrate the interethnic and interreligious hybridity of the borderlands. For instance, in the section “The Cross’s Ancestry,” Vogler contributes to a broad interwar corpus of Yiddish texts interested in the Jewish Jesus as part of their modernist sensibilities:

The highway is a well trod wandering Jew, his son in law, the Cross, is blond....

The Cross’s great grandfather is a fir a pope with long gray hair, and his great-grandmother is an alder, a tall pious Gentile woman.

His grandfather is an oak tree
And the willow is his hunchbacked Jewish grandmother/

The poet’s song celebrates an ecosystem that embraces the mixing and coexistence of different species as a countermodel to life in Vilna, which was increasingly divided by nationality and religion. Vogler’s poem gradually defamiliarizes the cross as a symbol of Christian power and difference, domesticating it as a member of the family and an organic part of Jewish lore and life.

The finished volume, Tsvey beriozes bay m trakt (Two birch trees by the highway), appeared in 1939, published by the Jewish Literary Union and PEN Club in Vilna. Its cover art by Rokhl Sutzkever once again communicates a fondness for rustic simplicity (figure 2.2). But Vogler was anxious about whether his newest
Figure 2.2. Cover art by Rokhl Sutzkever for Elkhonen Vogler, *Tsvey beriozes baym trakt* [Two birch trees by the highway] (Vilna: Yidisher hteratn-fareyn un PEN klub in Vilne, 1939).

book-length fable would make sense to readers. Several months before its publication, he organized a private reading for his friends Arn Mark (who helped edit his first book) and Shloyme Belis. The entire evening was cloaked in a veil of secrecy. When the two guests arrived, they found Vogler's kitchen table set for a feast, but not before he read aloud all 159 handwritten pages. Aware of Vogler's insecurities, Mark offered nothing but praise. But Belis was frustrated: “The Russians have an expression: getting lost between two pine trees. But you, Khonke, you get lost between two birch trees!” Belis’s central complaint went to the heart of Vogler’s aesthetic, which involves his technique of piling one metaphor on top of the other to create an associative poetic universe that leaves readers scrambling for interpretive footing. Vogler responded to their critique by providing one of the most unusual prose forewords to a poetic volume in all Yiddish literature. “A Footpath to the Highway” serves as both a reader’s “guide” to his brand of neofolk modernist experimentation and a preemptive self-defense:
The contours of this poem were sketched in the fields. Not once did the peasants find me behind a willow tree and ask:
—Are you alone?
—Oh, grey joy of mine! I am not alone. The dawn is always by my side....

I am not lonely. I am intimate with the blooming orchards. ... I have so many silent friends among the plants and animals. They sparkle in my eyes by day, and at night I kiss them in my blue dreams. I am neither alone nor poor because poverty is my fortune. As long as there is sun and music in the world, I am rich,... The White-Russian mint fields and the wild strawberries are mine. The young forest of walnut trees and the cool balsams—all mine. And this poem that I chant is also almost entirely mine. I did not overhear it from anyone else, aside from the sad rustle of the grey Lithuanian rivers and from the region’s orphaned swallows. Yes, birds were a great inspiration. I learned the nign [the melody] directly from them, but the words are mine alone. Everything the pious nightingale and sick canary sang for me I have tried to translate into lucid, trilling Yiddish....

... And now, I beg my modest, maternal Yiddish to forgive me the many Slavicisms I breathed into my crippled, broad stanzas. I appreciate that localisms can be obstacles in the middle of a poem’s path.... Don’t blame me: the poem was reared in the hot arms of old blue Vilna, clinging to the stray White Russian towns that surrounded it. Because of the special dusk-color of our gray landscape I bear the simple grey garland of Slavicisms—the heart and soul of my soil, the only part of my poem not exchanged for more refined, polished words.... When it came to the names of Lithuanian towns, their streams, or to back streets and alleys in Vilna—the only available translation could come from stammering Grandmother Lite and her grandchild quiet teacher Vilna themselves.34

Vogler reads human qualities into the birds with which he communes that are akin to the socioreligious realities he encountered in Vilna, whether it be its thick layers of tradition or sickness born of acute poverty. His earthy variety of Litvak Yiddish, sated with localisms and Slavicisms, is as organic as the naturescapes that inspire it, underscoring the importance of regional dialect in laying claim to and conjuring home.

Elsewhere in the foreword, the poet rejects the kind of ideological co-option that might have lent his verse a more self-confident spirit, a clear critique of fellow Yiddish writers who had allowed their verse to serve the cause of politics rather than art. Instead, Vogler seeks to evoke a truth that is closer to the lived experience of the moment;
I know that my poem is not joyous. ... It may be that it flows against the hot streams of our times. I can’t escape from the land of my birth, from its black sadness. I don’t circle around the moist depths of my sorrow and I don’t always come to readers with a well-trodden highway of complicated thoughts and ideas. But over the abyss of blue feeling and red sorrow, I try to toss the reader a bridge a metaphor.

But bridges of metaphor are slippery, they have no handrails, so it’s possible I’ve stumbled in places. Nonetheless, perhaps the reader will detect in my poem his own suffering and Joys, and also his experiences....

... In this poem I tell the story of the highway and his two sisters, birch trees, who got engaged to the cross—the spirit of the world. I know that the trees and country roads are alive. And perhaps they are even better than we mortals because their sorrow is green, and their longing blue....

A confession about my fable: Sir Doubt confided to me long ago that I am not cut out to address real world problems, especially the challenge of the Cross. And this cross—the conscience of the earth, the hero of this poem—I bring along like a close relative from the forest, and also a symbol of affliction, righteousness, and orphanhood. And so, because the highway is Jewish, I also had his son-in-law convert to Judaism.

... Not for nothing do I include here a section called “The Old Wind and the Young Wind” (yes, dear friends, there are two winds). The winds play entirely different roles. For instance, the old brown wind is gluttonous and married. He is an angry teacher. He buried our poor mother and taught us the Jewish alphabet from her tombstone. But the young, mild wind (the highway’s lackey), our dream and our hope, the one who ought to have protected us from our current realities, the one who ought to have sipped the tears of our apples and brought us the scent of youth, freedom, and possibility—that wind is deceitful and tricked us. He led the birch trees to shame and betrayal. He led our springtime to death, and our author to regret and pessimism.35

Far from clarifying matters, Vogler’s introduction provides scant hermeneutic direction. The reader gains psychological insight into not only Vogler but also a moment in time when the Jews of eastern Europe themselves feel on the precipice, pushed to read their own fate under the shadow of the cross. Accordingly, the warning that his writing “flows against the hot streams of our time” is somewhat misleading. While it is true that the poem shuns any overt call to political action, it is far from apolitical. Everything from its use of localisms (accompanied by a glossary of terms at the end) to its effort to claim Jewish space does political work. By having the poem shift its setting between the local countryside and Vilna itself, Vogler also exposes the degree to which local identity is deeply rooted in relationships between urban and pastoral, modern ideas and traditional folkways, and Jewish and non-Jewish cultures. Vogler could not have provided a more substantive model for poetic doikayt.

At the same time, Vogler exposes his political exhaustion through the fable of the Young Wind, “our dream and our hope who shields us from reality.”36 The wind here serves as a symbol for a youthful idealism that is initially refreshing but gradually reveals the storminess of internecine partisanship. Though, at first, the Young Wind is attractive and charming (like any new political ideology or movement), he is gradually shown to be a charlatan because he is more interested in satisfying his own primal desire for power.
He moves from wasting his nights away with a gorgeous “maiden the red rose- on her green divan” to besmirching the reputation of another suitor, a nut tree, who has been promised as a fiance to a virginal birch tree. The Young Wind uses the power of his rhetoric to capture the birch tree’s heart, only to dump her once she allows him to fondle her leaves. The work is a devastating critique of the false messianism of a contemporary politics (Jewish and internationalist) that overwhelmed daily life through its ideological arguments, promises, and politicized social affiliations.

Vogler writes himself into this expressionistic reading of the natural environment in the figure of the poet, who appears as the hero of a folktale told by a provincial highway to a nut tree about a “wanderer” (Yid. Vogler) named Elkone.38 This mysterious figure (who is compared to one of the lamedvovnikim of Jewish folklore upon whom the world’s existence allegedly depends) approaches various animals during his journey to inquire about whether they have ever experienced such phenomena as justice, truth, freedom, and love. When they all answer in the negative, he despairs of ever finding true goodness in the world. He decides to drown himself in the Viliye River after she promises to relieve him of his suffering by embracing him in the gentle caress of her arms. Elkone’s immersion into her waters is an act of ritual purification from the civilization’s contaminants. Poetically, it invites the reader’s retreat from reality into his alternative universe of poetic fantasy. Only once the “gray truth” of the times is polished clean by the “diamond dream” that is the local river does “the poet” provide “a new path for those who are lost.”39 The volume’s final stanzas proclaim the redemptive possibility of Vogler’s brand of Yiddish folk modernism, which is deemed authentic by virtue of its primal bond to a natural world that has not yet been corrupted by politics. If the prevailing sentiment among Elkhonen Vogler’s literary contemporaries was that art ought to serve as a means of raising social consciousness, by 1939 he concluded that Yiddish poetry could best serve readers by providing them with an escape from it.

During the brief window of Lithuanian rule over Vilna in 1940, when the city’s Jews and thousands of refugees enjoyed relative safety, the poets of Yung-Vilne continued their work unabated, persuaded that one form of resistance to the tyranny that threatened to consume them was through a regional environmental poetics that would allow them to, literally, stand their ground on this corner of Yiddishland. Though much of Polish Jewry was already under German occupation, Vogler’s Yung-Vilne colleague Avrom Sutzkever published Valdiks (Of the forest), a collection of ecstatic Yiddish hymns set in the local forests that approximated pantheistic celebration. Vogler, too, rooted himself even deeper in his native soil during these years. In “Postne Lite” (Modest Lithuania), published in the first joint miscellany between Yung Vilne and Yiddish writers in Kaunas
I and other authors hint that since the incorporation of Vilna as Vilnius into the Lithuanian republic, he hints that what his region lacks in economic or political power, it makes up for in the richness of the affective bonds it inspires in its inhabitants. His speaker imagines himself sovereign over an "enchanted land" that transcends artificial political borders, a place where he "consumé[s] the ripe juices of [his] dream."39 Within a few short years, Jewish Vilna was completely destroyed. Such lyrics could no longer serve the immediate needs of a Yiddish readership whose entire world had been shattered.

Vogler was fortunate to escape Nazi occupation by fleeing to the Soviet interior and spending the war years as a refugee in Kazakhstan. Perhaps it was fate that a writer who adopted the pen name Vogler then wandered from Moscow to Łódź before finally settling in Paris in 1949, where he continued to work as a Yiddish journalist until his death in 1969. It fell on Vilna’s surviving writers and poets to sustain a site-specific mythopoetics of Jewish space as part of a broader landscape of memory and collective mourning. For Vogler, the intuitive response to loss (many of his Yung-Vilne colleagues were murdered, and the rest were dispersed to such far-flung cities as New York, Tel Aviv, Buenos Aires, and Montreal) was to reinscribe the region’s Jewishness as primordial, as in the opening lyric to his only postwar volume, *Friling afn trakt* (Springtime on the country highway):

I was born in the Land of Lita;
Her highways, weaved with blue steps, and her sour cherries in bloom are the gateways to my spirit.41

Despite Yiddish literature’s frequent association with the modern city and the shtetl, Vogler’s artistry exemplifies the claim that it also possesses an important tradition of exploring specific rural landscapes, their folkways, and their natural features to provide a more organic conceptualization of home. Though Yiddish writers arrived belatedly to the Romantics’ admonition "Let Nature be your teacher,"41 its classic writers often dispatched their characters into nature as part of their critique of the disconnection between religious culture and the world beyond it, since nature was seen as diverting attention away from tradition. Yiddish modernist writers were especially keen to expand the borders of Yiddish to spaces that were not traditionally considered Jewish. In some cases, wandering through nature provided them with a new vocabulary for spiritual sublimation, while in other cases (such as Vogler’s creative engagement with the Lithuanian borderlands), the claiming of rural space through Yiddish was part of a broader cultural project designed to provide readers with a vocabulary of homeland and an experience of their rootedness in it. Vogler’s center was the Polish-Lithuanian pastoral, as much a Jewish space as the large multinational cities we have come to associate with the blossoming of Yiddish culture in the interwar period.

NOTES

1. In this essay, references to Litvak or Lithuanian Jews and landscapes refer not to the borders or inhabitants of the independent Lithuanian republic during the interwar period but rather to a much larger geography encompassing Lithuania, northeast Poland, northern and western Belarus, and parts of the Baltics, the area was known as Lita in Yiddish (Heb. Lita) and its inhabitants as
Litvakes. Litvak Jews constituted one of the large subgroups of Yiddish-speaking eastern European Jewry (the others being Galician and Polish Jews), who were distinguished not only by region but also by differing folkways, dominant forms of religious expression, and Yiddish dialect.


9. Warsaw, the largest Yiddish-speaking city in Europe, was also the center of the Yiddish press and publishing industry. By the interwar period, Tlomackie 13, the headquarters of the Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists, was considered the main address for Yiddish literature in Poland. Vilna and the broader culture of the Litvakes for whom it functioned as a center sought to compensate for what they lacked in demographic strength by cultivating the qualitative strength of Vilnas traditions of scholarly excellence and creative dynamism through such institutions as Y1 VO (the Jewish Scienti he Institute).


13. If earlier critics read Kulbak’s ”Vilne” as an expressionist work, concluding with a rousing fusion between speaker and subject (“I am the city!”), Jordan Finkin argues that Kulbak’s ode is part of a larger performative, ethnopoetic trend in modern Yiddish literature that conjures traditional folkways while providing an elegy on their loss. See Jordan Finkin, “Yiddish Ethnographic Poetics and Kulbak’s Vilna,” in Writing Jewish Culture: Paradoxes in Ethnography, ed. Andreas Kilcher and Gabriella Safran (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 2016), 94 115.


16. Daniel Tsharni, “Ver zaynen di Yung-Viliane?,” Literarishe bleter, February 26,1937, U5-

17. By the late 1930s, Kahan had enough material to assemble the volume Gildenepodkoves (Golden horseshoes), a collection of Yiddish poems and translations about Iocal Roma life. The manuscript was lost during the chaos of the Second World War and never published.

18. Rokhi Sutzkever was one of only two women to join the ranks of Yung-Vilne. She trained in
the art faculty of Vilna’s Stefan Batory University. In November-December 1938, the Jewish Art Society of Vilna and Yung-Vilne cosponsored an exhibition of more than sixty of her works. It catapulted her to local fame. Catalog titles of her work suggest that she shared with Vogler a thematic interest in Vilna’s natural and built landscapes. See Shloyme Belis, “Vegn fir molers fun Yung-Vilne,” Di goldene keyt 109 (1982): 36-41.

22. Vogler, 61-63. Vogler was not the only member of Yung-Vilne to include a glossary of terms for his writing. The Yiddish of Moyshe Levin’s short stories was so unabashedly local that his first collection included a lexicon for the benefit of readers elsewhere. See Moyshe Levin, Friling in keleurshtub: Noveln un humoreskes (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1937).


27. A brief report on the event was included in “Fun unzere shraybtishn,” Yung-Vilne 3 (1936): 94-95. The report noted that in an interview published in Belgishe bleter, the Yiddish poet Moyshe Broderzon named Vogler’s volume as one of the four best books published in Poland in 1935.

28. Y. Rapoport saw in Vogler a poet of gifted potential whose overemployment of metaphor overwhelmed his writing with kunst-shtik (creative horseplay): “Several of its individual poems are very beautiful, but only as discrete units. In the context of a longer poem, his style seems much too artificial. It becomes nothing more than artistic acrobatics. . . . Imagery cannot go on interminably.” See Y. Rapoport, “Der blondzhendiger Vogler,” Di tsukunft, November 1936, 759-760.


32. Vogler, Tsvey beriozes baym trakt, 47-50.
34. Vogler, Tsvey beriozes, 3, 8. As with his previous volume, Vogler here also included a glossary of almost three dozen “localisms,” which provided his Yiddish with a specific folk register and regional flavor.
35. Vogler, 4 6.
36. Vogler, 6.
37. Vogler, 29.
38. Vogler, 100.
39. Vogler, 41.
40. Elkhonen Vogler, “Postne Lite,” in Bieter 1940: Zamlbuch far literatur un kunst (Kaunas:
Union of Yiddish Writers and Artists in Lithuania, 1940), 137. Reprinted in Elkhonen Vogler, *Friling afn trakt: Lider un poemen* (Paris: Earband fun di Vilner in Frank-raykh, 1954), 22-23. The urge to chronicle Vilna as a center of Jewish Lite had a distinguished history in rabbinic, maskilic, and modern literature, especially at times of significant political or cultural transition. The year 1939 alone saw the appearance of Grodzenski, *Vilner almanakh* (Vilna almanac), and Zalmen Szyk, *Toyznt yor Vilne* (A thousand years of Vilna) (Vilna: Gezelshaft far landshaftkayt in Poyln-Vilner opteyl, 1939), each of which featured contributions by the writers of Yung-Vilne. Szyk’s volume was an ambitious attempt to map a multicultural spatial consciousness by devoting significant room to Polish, Lithuanian, and Belorussian sites alongside Jewish ones. Vogler’s “Postne Lite” was thus part of a broader moment of spatial and cultural self-assertion.

41. Elkhonen Vogler, “Di toyern fun mayn gemit,” in *Friling afn trakt*, 15. The opening section of this volume returns to many of the poet’s prewar themes, from imagining filial ties to country locales (“My brother is the Vilna Highway”) to celebrating the region’s diversity (“The Shepherd Mikite and His Flute”).