

THE STRANGE CASE OF A. C. JACOBS
by Mario Relich

A. C. JACOBS

Collected Poems & Selected Translations

Edited by John Rety and Anthony Rudolf

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A. C. JACOBS (1937-1994): *Major English Poet*

by Christopher Truman

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It is best to begin with a short poem by A. C. Jacobs:

PLACE

“Where do you come from?”

“Glasgow.”

“What part?”

“Vilna.”

“Where the heck’s that?”

“A bit east of the Gorbals,

In around the heart.”

The above could be a friendly pub conversation, but if “heck’s” were to be changed to “hell’s”, it could just as easily degenerate into an interrogation. These intriguing lines, which give no hint of where the conversation actually takes place, or whether they should really be understood as a reflective monologue, illustrate as no other poem of his does the duality of consciousness and allegiance at the heart of his poetry.

Jacobs grew up in Glasgow, and his parents were of Lithuanian-Jewish ancestry. Anthony Rudolf says in his introduction to the posthumous *Collected Poems* that Jacobs once wrote to John Rety, co-editor of the volume, as follows: “My real language is probably Scots-Yiddish”. Jacobs made this declaration, I hazard to guess, not entirely tongue-in-cheek. According to David Daiches in his autobiographical memoir *Two Worlds* (1957), a kind of Scots-Yiddish was indeed spoken by some immigrants in Scotland during the inter-war years. It emerged from the speech of the poorer immigrants from Lithuania and Poland. This is how Daiches puts it:

In [Edinburgh] semi-slums they learned such English as they knew, which meant in fact that they grafted the debased Scots of the Edinburgh streets on to their native Yiddish to produce one of the most remarkable dialects

spoken by man. ... Scots-Yiddish was the language of the immigrant Jews who for the most part never managed to rise very high in the social or financial scale.

Jacobs himself, unlike Daiches, who was the son of a distinguished rabbi, was not brought up in a *douce* part of Edinburgh. He grew up in the Gorbals, where a version of Scots-Yiddish was undoubtedly spoken. Yet, although a number of his poems mention Yiddish poets and sages, only one contains any Yiddish words. Significantly, it is also a poem in which he addresses a Scottish poet, one who writes in Glasgow vernacular, directly.

That poem is 'Dear Mr Leonard', in which he quotes an aunt of his as follows:

“Ah'm no froom
Bit whan Ah see them
Ee'in in the trayfi meat
It scunners me.”

One can only agree with the editors' very useful notes, which tell us that “This poem is interesting from a multilingual point of view because the aunt uses two Yiddish words and one Scots word ... while speaking English probably with a mixture of Yiddish accent and local Glasgow accent”. The two Yiddish words are “froom”, which means “religious”, and “trayfi”, which means “non-kosher”. American readers might like to know that in this context the Scots word “scunners” means “upsets”. The real significance of the poem, which is addressed to Tom Leonard, actually escapes the editors. The poem reminds us that Jacobs had chosen, with only one or two exceptions like this one, not to write in any kind of urban dialect. Scots-Yiddish was such a dialect, or vernacular as it would more likely be called now.

Another poem, 'Yiddish Poet' laments, at least between the lines, the virtual disappearance of Yiddish, but in English. It also suggests scepticism about the relevance of writing poetry in Yiddish. A sense of the ravages of time, and the extinction of a once thriving culture also strongly permeate it. That seems to be a large part of what Yiddish meant to Jacobs. The following lines are poignantly ironic:

He loved his language
Like a woman he had grown old with,
Whose beauty shone at moments in his memory
But saw how time had stricken what was his
And pondered on the truth of his desire.

Jacobs himself could have fallen in love with Yiddish, but he quite possibly had become too sceptical of “the truth of his desire”. Jacobs's strong awareness of his Yiddish, perhaps even Scots-Yiddish, heritage puts him in the position of many a British poet, whether Scottish, English, Welsh or Northern Irish, so many of whom, like Jacobs himself, have opted to write in a standardized English.

Almost as if to compensate for what may be called the “original sin” of rejecting Yiddish, Jacobs translated a number of modern Hebrew poets from Israel, notably David Vogel and Avraham Ben-Yitzhak. Although of ancient provenance, modern Hebrew is also a standardized language, forged in the 20th century to unify Jewish immigrants (yet also to distinguish them from Palestinian Arabs) who otherwise spoke various European languages, including Yiddish, and Middle-Eastern ones. Jacobs probably identified strongly with modern Hebrew poets of the older generation precisely because they too had to abandon the linguistic heritage of their childhoods, usually in a European diaspora.

Apart from his translation of Vogel’s collection *The Dark Gate* (1976), Jacobs published only one major collection of poems in his lifetime, *The Proper Blessing* (1976), which was expanded in 1992. Two years later, aged fifty-seven, he collapsed suddenly in Madrid, while immersed in translating Ben-Yitzhak. He did leave a large number of uncollected and unpublished poems, as well as translations. John Rety and Anthony Rudolf may therefore be credited with rescuing the bulk of Jacobs’s oeuvre from obscurity, or even oblivion. Although *The Proper Blessing* and *The Dark Gate* alone show Jacobs to have been a poet and translator of considerable stature, the additional material in this volume provides us with an opportunity to assess whether he actually was a major poet, as asserted by Christopher Truman’s monograph, and by the contributions to the *Collected Poems* from the poet’s friends.

On the whole, the editors have done an excellent job, but the omission of Jacobs’s long introduction to *The Dark Gate* is a serious mistake. It is difficult to obtain, and unavailable in most libraries, even research ones. The essay is an indispensable part of Jacobs’s writings, and would surely illuminate his relationship to modern Hebrew poetry in particular, and Israeli society in general. The essay could easily have been included by omitting some of Jacob’s weaker and apparently unrevised poems, and by including as representative translations only the poetry of Vogel and Ben-Yitzhak. Here is a very interesting excerpt from it: “To some Ben-Yitzhak was the object of something like a cult of purity as though he had written poetry perfectly untouched by mundane and vulgar things, but this attitude rather repelled me and seemed wrong.”

Jacobs might perhaps have been repelled at being classified as an English poet, as Rety and Truman do. He did live in London for many years, though he also spent much time in Israel and Spain as well. He occasionally participated in meetings with ‘the Group’, an aspect of his career as a poet discussed by Philip Hobsbaum. He certainly made a distinct impression at such meetings: “Reserved, and even taciturn, though Arthur was, he had a way of making himself felt. His poems were singularly well adapted to his voice, and his voice to his poems: quiet, sombre, yet somehow resonant”. Frederick Grubb’s memoir ‘The Wideawake Stranger’ refers to his “Scots-Jewish accent” and “MacDiarmidian tones”, but settles for calling him a “citizen of the world”. Jon Silkin’s description is the most telling: “Arthur had asthma, and difficulties with breathing contributed to his hesitations of speech, but I think he would have had a delaying measured speech whatever the physiology, which in any case was perhaps as much a part of character as illness”. But, as a poet, how English was Jacobs?

He did occasionally write in a manner that can be described as English. A poem like ‘Hampstead Heath: Bank Holiday’ seems to be very English in feeling, gently

ironic, and intent on yearning observation. Yet in a poem like 'In Early Spring', also set in Hampstead Heath, which he calls "this cool English suburb", gentle irony gives way to an overwhelming sense of history, and Jewish identity. Powerfully resonant, the poem calls attention to such figures as "The ironic Heine", the "tragic Rosenberg" and "My friend Jon Silkin", reflecting on the peaks of culture and depths of persecution. Truman admires Jacobs because he feels that the poet's sense of exile is one very relevant to the English adjusting to a multicultural society, but this tells us more about his insularity than about the poet's breadth of vision. Ideas, even philosophical concepts, are much more important in Jacobs's poetry than merely empirical observation, however yearning and nostalgic. His poetry, I would argue, has much more in common with that of Iain Crichton Smith, Edwin Morgan and Don Paterson.

Like David Daiches, but rather more uneasily, Jacobs lived in two complementary rather than opposing worlds, that of the Jewish diaspora, and that of the Scots. He reveals most about his position as a poet in 'I Choose Neither ...', which begins with "I choose neither East nor West / For I am shaped by the North" and ends as follows:

To those who think my choice is simple I write:
For these and want of these
The blood of my relatives and ancestors
Ran down the gutters of empires.

It flows in me, like a cold, rough sea.

Even so, it is not his identity which makes him a very fine, perhaps even a great poet. It is, rather, the variety of compelling voices, his "way of making himself felt", by which he communicates as a poet. He never sounds parochial, never regional, never chauvinistic in any sense of the word, and certainly associated with no "group" or "movement". Poems like 'Pessimistic Note', 'Love in this Bitter Season' and 'Israeli Arab' could have been written by Brecht in their blend of stark simplicity and humane compassion. Poems like 'The Bookseller' and 'Itzig Mander Browses Through the Papers in Paradise', on the other hand, have all the playful complexity and labyrinthine subtlety of a Borges. His satirical edge can be very sharp, as in his attack on the 'slick politeness' of Movement poets in 'To Some of my Contemporaries'. But even in satirical and overtly political mode, Jacobs displayed a psychic awareness of complementary duality. Hence, the targets of his opprobrium noted by Gerald Mangan in his review of the *Collected Poems* for the *TLS*: "... his purpose is frequently to deplore Zionist fanaticism, in the same spirit that he rejects the Calvinist variety."

Hobsbaum's tribute to him is double-edged: "It is poignant to consider that Arthur was a lifelong asthmatic. His Jewish heritage could not be got rid of, any more than his Scottishness, but it sometimes lay heavily on his chest." It would be more accurate, and not just kinder, to say that for A. C. Jacobs poetry was like wrestling with the proverbial angel. Any reader of his poems will soon discover that he was invariably victorious.