

Unassimilable Strangeness: The Afrikaans Poetry of Olga Kirsch ¹

EGONNE ROTH

Bar-Ilan University

Department of English
Bldg 404, „Wolfson Building“
Bar-Ilan University
Ramat Gan 52900
Israel

eeeroth@hotmail.com

Abstract. The Afrikaans poetry of Olga Kirsch (1924-1997) makes an important and lasting contribution to Afrikaans literature, despite its “unassimilable strangeness.” In a genre dominated until then by men, Kirsch introduces the voice of a woman poet; more importantly, she is the only Jewish poet in Afrikaans. And Kirsch seals her ‘strangeness’ by her early, initial critique of apartheid policies. Kirsch also wrote in English and Hebrew, but her published output in Afrikaans is more significant and will ultimately determine her place in the national canon and the cultural consciousness of post-apartheid South Africa.

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1. Unassimilable Strangeness: The Afrikaans Poetry of Olga Kirsch

Schmuel Meyer Kirsch, a Lithuanian Jew, spoke Russian, Yiddish and English with a heavy, eastern European accent. His wife Eva was born in Wolverhampton, England and spoke English. At home they spoke English and in the synagogue they worshipped in Hebrew. Yet their middle child, Olga Kirsch, became a

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beloved Afrikaans poet and wrote her way into the Afrikaans literary canon. How did this come about?

Ever since classical times, there has been a debate about who should be in the canon – read and remembered as great writers. The Greek literary critic Longinus wrote in the first century that for poets and prose-writers to gain eminence, their work must take the reader out of himself and sway his thinking with the clarity of the language (Longinus I.4). Such writing will gain him a lasting place in the Temple of Fame (Longinus I.3) or, as Harold Bloom defines it, the “Western Canon” (Bloom 1994). Bloom insists that aesthetic originality is required for a work to be included in the canon and that “one mark of an originality that can win canonical status for a literary work is a strangeness that we [...] never altogether assimilate” (Bloom 1994: 4). This originality includes an element of ‘otherness’ that surprises us and makes us reappraise ourselves and our world.

According to J.C. Kannemeyer (Kannemeyer 2009), the importance of Olga Kirsch’s poetry rests on a strangeness that has not been altogether assimilated. This strangeness can be found in the themes and images of Kirsch’s poetry. Her early work is characterized by use of the sonnet form and rhyming couplets. However, structure and form are not the aspects of her work on which I wish to concentrate. Of greater interest to me is the fact that, in the first instance, Kirsch is the only Jewish voice in Afrikaans poetry. Her poetry is informed by her upbringing in a traditional Orthodox Jewish home, the rhythms of Jewish songs sung on Shabbat and Jewish holidays, and by the beliefs and values Samuel and Eva instilled in their children. As a result, Kirsch’s poetry introduces an understanding of the Jewish people with their specific customs, traditions and beliefs into the consciousness of the Afrikaans Christian reader. While both faiths share certain texts – the Tanach of the Jews, called the Old Testament by the Christians – the very difference in name is indicative of a different reading of the text, and this difference can also be discerned in Kirsch’s use of Biblical stories, as I will illustrate below.

Secondly, Kirsch adds to this strangeness when she brings in the sorrow of the woman whose beloved has gone to war. Here, as a woman poet, she complements the work of Uys Krige, who published *Oorlogsgedigte* [War Poems] after returning from the North African front in 1941 (Kannemeyer 2002: 321). This theme dominates Kirsch’s first collection of poems, which appeared three years after Krige’s war poems, and is also present in her second collection, published in 1948.

2. Kirsch’s oeuvre

Furthermore, after Elisabeth Eybers, Olga Kirsch was only the second woman poet to publish a collection of poetry in Afrikaans. The influence of Eybers on



Olga Kirsch (right) and Elisabeth Eybers (left), Afrikaans's first women poets. Photograph made available for publication by Professor Ada Zohar, daughter of the poet.

Kirsch has been discussed by A.E. Jooste (Jooste 1984). Eybers's first volume, *Belydenis in die Skemering* [Confessions at Dusk] appeared in 1936 (Eybers 1936) followed by *Die Stil Avontuur* [The Quiet Adventure] in 1939 (Eybers 1939), while Kirsch's first collection, *Die Soeklig* [The Searchlight], appeared five years later in 1944 (Kirsch 1944). It was not until 1954 that a third woman, Ina Rousseau, published a collection of poetry in Afrikaans, *Die Verlate Tuin* [The Deserted Garden] (Rousseau 1954). By then, Kirsch had established her reputation with her second published volume in 1948, *Mure van die Hart* [The Walls of the Heart] (Kirsch 1948), just a few months before immigrating to Israel. This collection would prove to be one of her best and most influential, not only due to the 'strangeness' of its Jewish and especially Zionist poems, but also because of its criticism of the social order then evolving in South Africa – the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and its policy of racial discrimination.

Twenty-four years after leaving South Africa for Israel, Kirsch returned to publishing in Afrikaans in South Africa with the appearance of *Negentien Gedigte* [Nineteen Poems] in 1972 (Kirsch 1972). Between 1972 and 1983, five slim volumes of

Afrikaans poetry appeared under the Human and Rousseau imprint in Cape Town. The decision to return to Afrikaans is significant as Kirsch had minimal contact with Afrikaans during the period she lived in Israel. She spoke English at home with her family and Hebrew in the wider community. Even her correspondence with her lifelong friend, Elisabeth Eybers, was mostly in English (letters in private collection).

Kirsch's influence on Afrikaans literary life greatly outweighs her impact on either the Jewish-English community of South Africa into which she was born, or the English-Hebrew cultural life of Israel where she lived most of her adult life. The reason for this has been ascribed to the fact that she wrote mainly in Afrikaans and that neither the Jewish nor English communities felt any affinity for Afrikaans, especially during the apartheid years. However, it is not true that Kirsch wrote mainly in Afrikaans: she *published* mainly in Afrikaans. Her oeuvre of unpublished English poetry far exceeds her published work in Afrikaans. This has become evident in my research for the critical biography that I am writing as part of my doctoral studies on the life and work of Olga Kirsch. A number of her poems in English resemble some of the published Afrikaans poems, suggesting that the poet was trying to find her voice and was uncertain in which language she could best express herself. These poems, though written in different languages, were thematically close and probably written at the same time. Her daughter has also made eight undated Hebrew poems available to me for my research. Thus, Kirsch seemed to be experimenting in all three languages – English, Afrikaans, and Hebrew throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. By the time she published *Ruie Tuin* [Verdant Garden] in 1983 (Kirsch 1983), she had exhausted her capacity to write in Afrikaans and it proved to be her final collection of Afrikaans poetry.

However, the discovery of the size of her unpublished English oeuvre should in no way affect her place in the Afrikaans literary canon nor negate the importance of Afrikaans in her life and affections. Kirsch loved Afrikaans and was deeply loyal to South Africa throughout her life. In a memorial tribute, Chaim Beneven-Botha recalls that as Kirsch lay dying, she kept several books of Afrikaans poetry, including collections by Elisabeth Eybers, beside her bed. He read to her from *Die Stil Avontuur*, which Kirsch had helped Eybers translate.

3. Kirsch as woman whose lover has gone to war

The fact that Kirsch introduced the voice of a woman whose beloved has gone to war into her first two collections flows directly from the world in which she

was living and creating. For the Jewish community in Johannesburg where Kirsch moved with her family in 1941, World War II was a stark reality. Many had family and acquaintances caught in the grip of the Nazi regime, and a large percentage of this community's young men volunteered for the armed forces and went north to fight the Axis powers. It is not known when the Kirsch family in South Africa heard news of the fate of their relatives in Plunge, Lithuania, but at least two of Kirsch's cousins there were killed by the Nazis.

When Kirsch's boyfriend, one of the young Jewish men who volunteered to fight with the Allies, leaves for the Italian front in the autumn of 1943, she writes:

Iets het gesterf in my met jou vertrek;
iets wat ekstasies was, en bly spontaan,
onverantwoordelik soos 'n lentewaan,
het drup-drup uit my wese weggelek

Something died in me with your departure;
something ecstatic and joyfully spontaneous,
irresponsible as a spring illusion,
leaked from my being – drop by drop.

Iets het gewyk ... Og, dat ek kon ontwaak
uit hierdie sware trans, en weer geluk
ervaar, oorstelpend groot, of wurg en sluk
van smart! Maar ek bly koud, onaangeraak.

Something disappeared ... Oh that I could awake
from this heavy trance, and again happiness
experience, overwhelmingly big, or choke and swallow
with sorrow! But I remain cold, untouched.

Dan sal ek maar berus, al is ek stomp –
gevoelloos van verlange. Want ek wag
dat alles wat my ontwyk het, en ontsag-
lik veel wat jy moet aanvul, soos 'n blom
in my sal oopvou op die blye dag
as jy vanuit die vertes huis-toe kom.

So I must resign myself, although I'm dull –
numb with longing. Because I await
everything that has eluded me, and so
much that you must replenish, that
will unfold in me like a flower on that joyful day
when you come home from afar.

[translation by Egonne Roth]

In this sonnet, Kirsch gives voice to the despair of separation, to feeling overwhelmed by the sorrow of parting, and yet there remains the hope that her lover will return to replenish her and allow her to unfold like a flower. And he did return, but their love affair did not survive the war and he did not replenish all that had disappeared and died. Still, through him and others, Kirsch became more aware of what was happening on the front, heard stories and details that fed into her work and is reflected in both her South African collections *Die Soeklig* (Kirsch 1944) and *Mure van die Hart* (Kirsch 1948).

This knowledge can be seen in a poem written by Kirsch that appeared in the Wits student paper, *WU's View*, a year after *Die Soeklig* appeared. It is an elegy to a fallen soldier, Lieutenant Alec Morris Medalie, who was shot down over the Adriatic in 1944:

Resurrexit*Aan Alec Medalie*

Hy wat vergaan het in 'n hoë pluim
 van vlam en donker rook, waarvan die puin
 geblus is in die golwe, het geen oor
 vir die gesmoorde dodeklok nie.
 Moenie die spieëls verhul en laat daar geen
 warm tranes drup en geen erbarme
 oor hom gestort word nie. Hartstogtelik
 het hy die lewe liefgehad en is
 hartstogteliker deur die dood omarm.

Hinder hom nie waar hy nou een word met
 die vormlose vloed in skemerlig
 se rustigheid, waar alle hunkering
 gesus word tussen skulpe en koraal
 en anemone, mollig oopgevou
 om te ontvang. Pas sal hy weer verlang;
 Die aandelikse wasdom en die gang
 uit ademende waters en die gang
 van strome wat kustelik liefkoos, al
 die aanswel en die eb van waters sal
 die heimwee dra van hom wat klewe aan
 die lewe soos die gryse vygie aan
 die klamme sandgrond.

Maar die dag sal kom
 wanneer die wolke blindend wit verrys
 uit die oseaan en langsaam landwaarts gaan
 na die voleindiging, en kalm klim
 bo die berge en die aarde dompel in
 blou skaduwees van verwagting, tot die reën,
 verterende preweling van een
 wat inniglik bemin, die aardeskoot
 stil binnedring om wortel, steel en skeut
 dralend te streel, om aalwyn aan die rondinge
 en heupe van die heuwels te omhels
 en bloekoms, klomp-klomp silwergras gehurk
 in vog en skemering.

So sal sy koms
 vol vreugde wees, want hy het opgestaan
 uit vormloosheid om vorm te lewer aan
 al wat hom dierbaar was, aan alles skaam
 en diep-verborge nog en sonder naam.

Resurrexit*To Alec Medalie*

He who perished in a high plume
 of flame and dark smoke – the rubble
 extinguished in the waves – has no ear
 for the smothered bell of death.
 Don't cover the mirrors and let there be no
 warm tear drops and commiseration shed over
 him. Passionately
 he loved life and was
 embraced more passionately by death.

Don't disturb him where he is becoming one
 with the formless flood in shady light and
 tranquillity, where all yearning
 is soothed between shells and coral
 and plump anemones opened up
 to receive. Shortly he will yearn again;
 The nightly waxing and the motion
 of breathing waters and the movement
 of streams that caress coasts,
 all the swelling and ebbing of waters
 will carry the longing of him who clings
 to life like the grey vygie
 to the moist and sandy soil.

But the day will come
 when the clouds rising blindingly white
 from the ocean will move slowly ashore
 to the fulfilment, and will calmly climb
 above the mountains and plunge the earth
 in blue shades of expectation, until the rain,
 consuming muttering of one
 who loves intensely, will quietly penetrate
 earth's fold to caress root, stalk and shoot
 lingeringly, to embrace aloes
 at the curves and hips of the hills
 and blue-gums, silver green clusters
 squatting in dampness and twilight

In this way his arrival
 will be filled with joy, because he has risen
 from formlessness to bring form
 to all that was dear to him, to everything shy
 and still deeply hidden and without name.

[translation by W.F. Thomas Minnaar]

It is not clear how Kirsch knew Medalie. According to the archives of the University of the Witwatersrand, Medalie studied architecture in the same class as Abraham Axelrod, who later married Kirsch's older sister Becky, and with whom Kirsch had a good relationship. In this and other of her war poems, Kirsch's vivid descriptions illustrate her ability to turn the stories told by others into poetic images that illuminate the scenes. The reader is drawn in by Kirsch's sensuous use of language – "has no ear for the smothered bell of death" (stanza 1), "embraced more passionately by death" (stanza 1), "the motion of breathing waters" (stanza 2), "plunge the earth in blue shades of expectation" (stanza 3) and "to embrace aloes at the curves and hips of hills" (stanza 3). The clarity of her language draws the reader into the scene exactly in the manner Longinus has demanded of the poet.

4. Kirsch as Jewish voice

But while Kirsch's contribution as the voice of a woman whose lover has gone to war is moving and valuable, her position in Afrikaans literature rests primarily on her being the only Jewish poet in Afrikaans. Daniel Hugo has discussed the role of Jan Lion Cachet (Hugo 2009: 32) and Kannemeyer the life and work of Peter Blum (Blum 1993). While both these poets do have strong Jewish connections, their Jewish heritage is in no way reflected in their poetry. In fact, the work of Cachet often has a strongly Christian didactic tone. This is what distances Kirsch from both these male poets – biographically she is steeped in Judaism and this is clearly reflected throughout her writing.

Kirsch's first collection of poetry already has a thread of Jewish thought running through it. The poem "Gaza" in *Die Soeklig*, in keeping with the theme of love and desire and war, tells the Biblical story of Samson and Delilah. Kirsch recreates this familiar story using sensuous images: the wild tinkling of the tambourine and jubilant rejoicing of the Philistines. Samson is oblivious to all this, lost in his memories of pliant, slim, lovely (*lenige, slanke, lieflike*) Delilah, the seductress, the traitor, who has betrayed him to her people, his enemy. Then, as Samson hears the arrogant celebration of the Philistines, he pleads with God for his strength one last time, and wreaks revenge on his enemies by triumphantly breaking his chains and bringing down the prison walls, killing himself in the process. The story of Samson inspired several poets at about this time, including S.J. Pretorius, W.E.G. Louw and Kirsch's mentor and professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, C.M. van den Heever (Dekker 1960: 223).

In *Mure van die Hart*, Kirsch's Jewishness is at its most intense, with poems such as "Rouweek" [Week of Mourning], "Die Erfenis van Israel" [The Heritage

of Israel], "Heimwee" [Nostalgia], "Die Wandelende Jood" [The Wandering Jew], "Die Uittog" [Exodus], "Koms van die Messias" [Coming of the Messiah], "Klein Fuga" [Small Fugue], "Legende" [Legend] and "Legende vir die Sabbat" [Legend of the Sabbath]. Each of these poems is saturated with Jewish images, customs and language. In "Rouweek," she refers to the Jewish custom of "sitting *shiva*." The word *shiva* means seven and indicates that for seven days after the burial of the deceased, family members meet daily to receive condolences from the community. Each evening at sunset, prayers are recited according to a set liturgy:

Wat baat dit dat hul sewe dae lank
hier in die donker voorhuis sit te rou
en deur hul trane in die Boek van Job
lees en probeer vergeet en fel onthou?

Dat mense in die aande deur die reën
se fluistervlae kom om saam te bid
– nat skoene wat droef skuifel oor die vloer –
en later lank en sprakeloos bly sit?

Kan hierdie hete trane en gebede
sy hittelose liggaam binnedring,
hom oprig uit sy graf by Castiglione
en aan die tafel van sy ouers bring?

What benefit for them in sitting seven days
here in the dark house mourning
and through their tears in the Book of Job
they read, attempt to forget and fiercely remember?

People in the evenings through the rain's
whispering waves come to pray together
– wet shoes that sadly shuffle across the floor –
and later long and speechless seated remain?

Can these hot tears and prayers
penetrate his cold body,
resurrect him from his grave in Castiglione
and bring him to the table of his parents?

[translation by Egonne Roth]

In this poem, we hear Kirsch as a woman mourning the loss of a friend whose cold body lies buried in Castiglione, far from home and those who love him. As a Jew, she questions the value of the customs surrounding the mourning process with the haunting lines, "Can these hot tears and prayers penetrate his cold body, resurrect him [. . .] and bring him to the table of his parents?" Kirsch will return to this custom again in *Afskeide* (1982) when she recalls how her family had "sat *shiva*" for her father when they were still living in Koppies in the Free State where she had grown up.

In her poem "Die Wandelende Jood" [The Wandering Jew], the poet strongly and clearly expresses her Zionist affiliation. This poem first appeared in 1946 in the second edition of *Standpunte*. The figure of the 'wandering Jew' is derived from early Christian folklore dating back to the thirteenth century (Leveson 2010). In its deepest sense, this myth serves to explain and even justify why Jews have been forced to move from place to place over the centuries. Uys Krige (Krige 1948) considered Kirsch's poem one of the strongest poems that had appeared until then in *Standpunte*, an important literary journal:

Die Wandelende Jood

O dogter van Babel, jy wat
verwoes sal word, gelukkig
is hy wat jou sal vergeld
wat jy ons aangedoen het

God het sy volk veroordeel tot die vuur,
masjiengeweer, gaskamers en die graf.
Hy het hul saamgeskaar in kerk en skuur
en met die witkalk en die vlam bestraf.

En enkeles het uit die puin herrys,
krank en geknak, met oë wat die dood
se starre niksheid dra en weer gereis
deur vreemde lande na die moederskoot.
Die eeue-oue pelgrimstog hervat
met skuifelende voete en geboë
skouers. Maar aan die einde van die pad
het een hul weggewys met trae oë.

Sal God in toorn die poorte stukkend slaan
dat my moeë mense mag binnegaan?

The Wandering Jew

O Daughter of Babylon, you who
will be destroyed, happy
is he who revenges on you
what you have done to us

God condemned his people to the fire,
machine guns, gas chambers and the grave.
He gathered them into church and barn
and with white lime and the flame punished them.

And a few arose from the destruction,
ill and broken, with eyes that carry death's
stark oblivion and again travelled
through strange lands to the maternal womb.
Resumed the centuries old pilgrimage
with shuffling feet and bent
shoulders. But at the end of the road
one turned them away with indolent eyes.

Will God in anger break down the gates
that my tired people may enter?

[translation by Egonne Roth]

In "Die Wandelende Jood", Kirsch expresses her identification with the fate of European Jewry, their suffering and rejection – what Kannemeyer describes as 'haar deernis' – her empathy and compassion – for the Jewish people (2005: 128). The act of remembering, which is a central tenet of Jewish life, also appears in this poem, where Kirsch describes in the first stanza the horrors of the Holocaust – "condemned to the fire, / machine guns, gas chambers and the grave" [*tot die vuur, / masjiengeweer, gaskamers en die graf*]. Her choice of images graphically portrays the fate of her people. At the end of the third stanza, she refers to the post-war rejection of the Holocaust survivors by most countries – "But at the end of the road / one turned them away with indolent eyes" [*maar aan die einde van die pad het een hul weggewys met trae oë*]. In the years immediately following World War II, the British authorities refused to allow Holocaust survivors entry into Palestine, brutally turning many away. It is this final insult that causes the poet to call out to heaven with the powerful end couplet "Will God in anger destroy the gates / so that my tired people may enter?" [*Sal God in toorn die poorte stukkend slaan / dat my moeë mense mag binnegaan?*]. Years after writing this poem, Kirsch

said that until May 1948, she doubted that a Jewish state was possible (Braude 1997). This doubt and the desperate longing she shares with Jews throughout the ages to return to their ancestral home are clearly rendered in these lines.

The dimensions of this dark page in European history were just beginning to emerge in 1946, and little had as yet been written about it in literary terms. Kirsch's fearlessness in drawing attention to it in South Africa, which had in part been supportive of Nazism and had its own history of antisemitism (Shain 1994), was remarkable. Though her Afrikaans readership would be intimately familiar with the Exodus narrative evoked in the last line, a history with which they traditionally identified, the powerful images of the Holocaust would again serve to estrange Kirsch, underlining her marginality in Afrikaans culture (Wessels 2009).

The perception exists that between the publication of *Mure van die Hart* in 1948 and *Negentien Gedigte* in 1972, Kirsch was silent as poet, not only in Afrikaans but also in English and Hebrew. This is not so. In April 1966, she published a section from a manuscript called "Nevertheless" in *Jewish Frontier*, a Zionist Labour journal in New York, under the heading "Poems of Independence." The manuscript "Nevertheless" consists of one long, epic poem and several shorter poems about the arrival of new immigrants from war-torn Europe. Thematically this poem continues where "Die Wandelende Jood" left off, describing Israel's War of Independence with the joy and suffering it brought. About a third of the epic poem and two of the shorter poems were published in *Jewish Frontier*.

However, for reasons that would have to be explored in a separate paper, Kirsch decided to return to her South African audience. Writing in Afrikaans, her two poems "Sesdaagse Oorlog" [Six Day War] and "By die lees van Solzhenitsyn" [Reading Solzhenitsyn] appeared in the June 1971 issue of the journal *Buurman*. The September edition carried another new poem by Kirsch, "By die Aantrek van 'n Nuwe Kleed" [On Wearing a New Gown], and in December, her "Vyf Sonnette vir My Vader" [Five Sonnets for My Father] appeared in the same journal. The sonnets to her father are the tender expression of a daughter still grappling emotionally with his death thirty-four years earlier. They are among her most beautiful poems and were later translated into English and published (Lasker 2003). I include Sonnet V:

Toe ek nog klein was het ek aan jou sy
gestaan in die sinagoge en gevolg
terwyl jou vingers langs die letters gly
van woorde wat ek nog nie kon vertolk.
Die kantor hef sy stem op, yl en soet
wierook die lied omhoog. Rooi, geel en blou
slaan vlamme uit 'n ruit hom tegemoet –
sou die Voorsienigheid Sy guns weerhou
wanneer daar so gesmeek word? En jy vou
jou syige gebedsjaal weg en hou
jou arm om my en ek staan gedruk
vas teen jou knie en bewe van geluk.
Swaar stemme styg in stadige akkoorde
oomblikke veertig jare sonder woorde.

When I was still little I stood at your side
in the synagogue and followed
your fingers' gliding over the letters
of words I could not yet translate.
The cantor lifts his voice, rarefied and sweet
the song incenses upwards. Red, yellow and blue
flames break from a pane of light to meet him –
would Providence withhold His favor
when entreated so? And you fold
your silky prayer shawl away and hold
your arm around me and I stand pressed
against your knee and tremble with happiness.
Heavy voices climb in slow accord-
moments, forty years without a word.

[translation by Carol Lasker: 2003]

The image of the little girl experiencing deep pleasure at being taken to synagogue by her father offers Kirsch's Christian readers, in particular, an opportunity to participate in a ritual with which they are not familiar: The sonnet takes them out of themselves and introduces the 'other.' The final couplet evokes sadness due to an unexplained long silence that stirs the reader and does not allow easy closure. The image of forty – forty days of endless rain in the time of Noah, forty years that the Israelites wandered in the desert, forty years between the moment in the synagogue and the remembering thereof – poses questions that the poet does not answer.

These poems opened the way for Kirsch to publish her first collection of poetry in Afrikaans that was written in Israel, under the Human and Rousseau imprint in 1972 (Kirsch 1972). It was called *Negentien Gedigte* and six of the aforementioned poems appeared there, including "Five Sonnets to my Father." With this new volume, Kirsch ensured her place among the best of the Afrikaans poets. Jean Marquard wrote (Marquard 1972) that the twenty-four years in Israel had in no way diminished Kirsch's masterful use of Afrikaans or her sensitivity to the nuances of the language. Jan Rabie, commenting on the collection in *The Cape Times*, was impressed that Kirsch had retained her "clear and graceful command of the language" (Rabie 1972). As in "The Wandering Jew" and other 'Jewish poems' published previously, the reader of this collection is conscious of a melancholy in the writing, especially in the sonnets dedicated to her father. The voice of the poet reflects her awareness of the history of her people as a story of

repeated exile, which is also her story of exile – “did you sometimes, sick with longing, yearn for those far away / places to which there was no return. / How do I know that? / Have I not embarked upon my own odyssey?” (Kirsch 1972: 22) (Translation: Lasker 2003).

As noted, Kirsch published four more volumes of Afrikaans poetry over the next decade: *Oorwinteraars in die Vreemde* [Winterers in the Strange Land] (Kirsch 1978), *Geil Gebied* [Fertile Territory] (Kirsch 1976), *Afskeide* [Farewells] (Kirsch 1982) and *Ruie Tuin* [Verdant Garden] (Kirsch 1983) – all with the Cape Town publishers Human and Rousseau. In 1994, in honour of her seventieth birthday and the fiftieth anniversary of her debut collection, *Die Soeklig*, Human and Rousseau published: *Nou Spreek Ek Weer Bekendes Aan: 'n Keur 1944-1983* [Now I Speak to My Friends Again: A Selection 1944-1983], selected and edited by Daniel Hugo. That same year, Hugo produced a documentary on Kirsch for the SABC, recorded in Israel.

5. Kirsch in Israel

In each of the five collections that appeared between 1972 and 1983, the Jewish voice of Olga Kirsch is clearly discernible. Zionism and social issues are no longer central to any of these small volumes of poetry, as they had been in the first two volumes. Rather, Kirsch addresses issues that are central to a woman's life – family (parents, children and grandchildren), aging, death, and marriage. Nature and poetry itself are also addressed. Her final collection, *Ruie Tuin*, though including some poignant poems written to her first granddaughter, such as “Jy Kan nie my Dae Vernuwe” [You Cannot Renew my Days], was not well received. Kirsch was finally losing her ability to write in Afrikaans – an Afrikaans that had changed, grown and developed substantially during the years of her absence. Kirsch had visited South Africa only three times after leaving in 1948, and then only for short visits. This meant that she heard very little spoken Afrikaans. For many years, she had subscribed to the Afrikaans literary journal *Standpunte* and sometimes had access to *Die Burger*, but this was not enough to keep her in tune with the Afrikaans literary scene. She was delighted whenever friends sent a new volume of Afrikaans poetry, but clearly this was insufficient to keep her abreast of developments in the language.

It was not, however, the end of her life as poet. Kirsch continued to write poetry in English until her final illness. This included a collection of eighty poems to her husband, Joe, written after his death in November 1993. I include one short, unpublished poem:

That all our lying, sitting, walking, talking together
should come to this:
Absence, silence, a stone.
Everything the dead leave is flat:
Pictures that ape the roundedness of flesh
papers, books, clothes.
Nothing to still the hunger of the hands,
nothing for the arms to thrust against the chest,
nothing.
Silence and nothing.
Some days I could sink to the soil beside your grave
lie down
stay down.

The discerning reader may notice one small reference to the poet's Jewishness in the third line – "Absence, silence, a stone." It is a Jewish tradition to leave a small stone on the grave as a sign of respect and mourning. And so as Kirsch approached his grave, she will have been clutching a stone to leave at the gravesite.



Olga Kirsch, the young Mrs Gillis in Rehovot, Israel. Photograph made available for publication by Professor Ada Zohar, daughter of the poet.

Some of the Hebrew poems referred to earlier may also have been written quite late in her life. The poem to her granddaughter mentioned above is one of these Hebrew poems. There is no indication whether the Hebrew or English version was written first.

Until the appearance in 2010 of the biographical article written by Erika Terblanche for the ATKV-Skrywersalbum, the most complete biography of Olga Kirsch was Daniel Hugo's introduction to *Nou Spreek Ek Weer Bekendes Aan* (Hugo 1994). This collection of what he and Kirsch considered the best of her poetry, which Hugo edited and introduced, was published to celebrate Kirsch's seventieth birthday and the fiftieth anniversary of publication of *Die Soeklig* (Kirsch 1944), her first collection. Hugo's contribution to *Perspektief en Profiel* (Hugo 2006) about Kirsch is based on his introduction to *Nou Spreek Ek Weer Bekendes Aan* and contains much of the same material.

6. Kirsch in literary histories and academic writing

The making of a literary canon is a process that has received much attention and is the subject of ongoing debate. Scholars such as Harold Bloom (1994) and Frank Kermode (2006), among others, have written extensively about it, while Jan Gorak (1991) describes the concept of a canon as it evolved. For purposes of gauging Olga Kirsch's place in the Afrikaans canon, I have examined how she is represented both in literary histories and in the more important poetry anthologies.

Olga Kirsch was included in several histories of Afrikaans literature. As early as 1946, Rob Antonissen, writing from Belgium, discussed Kirsch's first collection, *Die Soeklig*. Antonissen was of the opinion that while these poems reflect a youthful immaturity, they do show promise and a sensitive use of nature (Antonissen 1946: 311).

Dekker also comments on the youthful immaturity of Kirsch's first collection but finds that her voice as poet has strengthened and become more passionate especially in the poems that deal with the suffering of her people (Dekker 1960: 267-268).

Kannemeyer emphasised the importance of Olga Kirsch's contribution to the canon in each literary history he wrote (Kannemeyer 1983, 1988, 1993, 2005). In his 1983 volume, he noted that, while many of the poems in Kirsch's first collection lacked maturity, she had already then made a valuable contribution to Afrikaans literature by introducing a woman's grief when her lover goes to war. With her second collection, Kannemeyer observes, Kirsch brings compassion for the

Jew to Afrikaans literature. Of her later collections, Kannemeyer maintains that her poems about a woman's daily life and her relationship to her husband and children are of great value (Kannemeyer 1983: 172-4). In his English-language history of Afrikaans literature (Kannemeyer 1993), Kannemeyer also refers to Kirsch's reflections on the grief of the oppressed Jewish nation and their intense longing for their homeland. Again he mentions the importance of her later poems that deal with family issues (Kannemeyer 1993: 62). In the 2005 edition of his literary history, Kannemeyer left the 1983 article on Kirsch virtually unchanged.

Kirsch is also included in a chapter written by Hein Willemse for *The Cambridge History of South African Literature* entitled "Afrikaans literature, 1948-1976" (Willemse 2012). Even though several of Kirsch's volumes of poetry fall outside the designated period, Willemse mentions *Die Soeklig* of 1944 and makes reference to Kirsch's work published after 1976 (Willemse 2012: 435).

The earliest academic citation that I could find of Kirsch's work is the 1957 doctoral dissertation of M.S. du Buisson. This paper uses poems from Kirsch's first two collections to attest to her faith in the Old Testament God of "Abraham, Isak en Jakob, Jahweh" (Du Buisson 1959: 558). The scope of this essay does not permit me to show how this Christian reading of Jewish poetry would have been unacceptable to Kirsch, who did not consider herself a religious Jew. Du Buisson is not simply interpreting the poetry, but drawing biographical deductions from it. Because so little has been written about Kirsch's life, I have had to use her poetry as a guide in my research for biographical facts. However, it is not possible to make absolute deductions from the poetry. Similar errors appear in a more recent doctoral dissertation by S.E. Schutte (2005), which seems not to have made use of the biographical material freely available in Hugo's aforementioned introduction to *Nou Spreek Ek Weer Bekendes Aan*. A master's thesis on Kirsch's poetry was written in 1984 by A.E. Jooste.

In 2012, Thomas Minnaar earned a Ph.D. with a dissertation in which he re-evaluates the poetry of Kirsch using the theories of Freud, Lacan and Kristeva (and he discusses the problems he found in Schutte's work in chapter I.3). Minnaar's research brings an interesting new dimension to the understanding of Kirsch's poetry, but a discussion of his contribution also falls outside the scope of this essay.

7. Kirsch in anthologies

Beyond the literary histories and academic papers, Kirsch's poetry is also represented in a number of anthologies. In one published in Belgium (1966), edited and introduced by Jozef Deleu, two poems by Kirsch are included –

"Illusion" (*Illusie*) from *Die Soeklig* and "The Wandering Jew" from *Mure van die Hart*. Deleu writes in the introduction that Kirsch revolts against the war that has taken her lover from her and passionately defends the rights of her Jewish nation (Deleu 1966: 13).

Another anthology, *Treknet: Bloemlesing uit die Afrikaanse Poësie*, compiled and edited by N.P. van Wyk Louw and E. Lindenberg, was for many years mandatory reading for the matriculation curriculum. The editors write in the introduction that the poetry of Kirsch as well as that of D.J. Opperman, Ernst van Heerden, G.A. Watermeyer and S.V. Petersen is complex and demands an effort from the reader, but is rewarded by a deeper emotional understanding (Van Wyk Louw and Lindenberg 1969: viii).

Minnaar conducted a thorough study of Kirsch's representation in Afrikaans anthologies, including *Die Groot Verseboek* (GV) (1967, 1978, 1983, 2000 and 2008), *Poskaarte* (Pos) (1997) and *1001 Afrikaanse Gedigte* (1999). Kirsch is consistently represented in each of these important anthologies. Her inclusion especially in *Die Groot Verseboek* is significant as Opperman, who compiled it, is considered by many to be the most authoritative voice in shaping the Afrikaans poetry canon (Minnaar 2012: 229).

Poet	GV 1967	GV 1978	GV 1983	Pos 1997	1001 1999	GV2000	GV2008
O. Kirsch	6	12	15	9	10	18	18
E. Eybers	38	50	57	20	10	68	71
S. Cussons	3	11	45	18	10	46	50

Three women poets who wrote much of their work in exile. Compiled by W.F. Thomas Minnaar 2012.

Other than in the *1001 Afrikaanse Gedigte* anthology, where the editor allowed no poet more than ten poems, it is clear that Elisabeth Eybers is the dominant Afrikaans poetess. She has received numerous prizes, and is the only woman to have won the Hertzog Prize twice, in 1943 and 1971. In the Netherlands, where she lived from 1961 until her death in 2007, she won the Constantijn Huygens Prize in 1978 and the P.C. Hooft Award in 1991 (<http://www.humanrousseau.com/authors/460>). These have established Eybers as the most important woman poet in the Afrikaans literary canon. She published some twenty-five collections of poetry, several of which enjoyed more than one reprint. Her first volume, *Belydenis in die Skemering*, appeared in 1936 and her last, *Valreep/Stirrup-cup*, in 2005.

Kirsch published seven slim volumes of poetry in Afrikaans of which only *Die Soeklig* and *Mure van die Hart* enjoyed reprints: *Die Soeklig* in 1945 and 1946, and *Mure van die Hart* in 1980 and 1982. If one compares her output to that of Eybers, Kirsch is well represented in the anthologies mentioned above. Part of

the importance of being included in the canon of a literature is that the poet or writer may become part of the curriculum taught in schools, and thereby not fall into obscurity. Therefore, it is disturbing to note that Kirsch has not been included in the matriculation curriculum since 2005, and so her work is becoming increasingly unknown among the younger generation. Yet Kirsch has not fallen into complete obscurity since she stopped publishing in South Africa, though she is no longer a “strange but familiar, trusted voice” [*vreemde, vertroude stem*], as Lina Spies had described her in 1997.

8. Kirsch is not forgotten

Poetry, like music, has seasons when, due to social, political and other factors, certain poets enjoy more or less attention. In the seventies, when Kirsch was invited twice to visit South Africa: once for the opening of the Paarl Afrikaans Language Monument in 1975 and again for the SABC Book Auction in 1979, she enjoyed much favour. After her last volume of poetry was published in 1983, it seemed as though she would drift out of public awareness. But in 1994, with the publication of *Nou Spreek Ek Weer Bekendes Aan: 'n Keur 1944-1983* and the SABC radio program on Kirsch, there seemed to be a revival of interest in her work. With her death in 1997, many tributes were written in her honour by prominent writers including Henning Snyman, Lina Spies, and Daniel Hugo.

A year after her death, tribute was paid to Kirsch by the Port Elizabeth Amateur Drama Society and the choir of the Glendinningvale Synagogue in the Jewish Pioneer Museum, previously the old synagogue of Port Elizabeth. The afternoon took the form of poetry readings and playing sections from Daniel Hugo's SABC program on Kirsch (Norval, 1998). One of the organisers, Trudi Wegner, said in an interview with me, “Kirsch's poetry is so beautiful it gives me goose bumps all over.”

While not receiving the attention she deserves (Hambidge 2008), Kirsch has remained in the consciousness of those who have loved her poetry. Carol Lasker, an ex-South African teaching at CUNY in New York, wrote an article, “Olga Kirsch: Ghost, Memories, Emotions” for *Metamorphoses: A Journal of Literary Translation* in 2003 (Lasker 2003). It is a short article but includes Lasker's translation of “Vyf Sonnette vir My Vader” [Five Sonnets for My Father] which I have used in this essay.

In a memorial tribute to Helen Suzman, Des and Dawn Lindberg quote Kirsch's poem “Blockhouse” to illustrate the society in which Suzman's constituents lived (Lindberg and Lindberg 2009). Also in 2009, Joan Hambidge wrote an article for

LitNet on Kirsch called “Oor die digkuns: ‘n paar kanttekeninge” [About poetry – a few notes in the margin] (Hambidge 2009). Kitty Vermaak, a journalist who had accompanied Kirsch on one of her visits to South Africa, wrote her recollections of that visit in the *Rapport* in 2010. The interest that Minnaar’s doctoral dissertation has aroused and the possibility of its publication suggest that the poetry of Olga Kirsch is still valued.

Adrian More, a University of Cape Town student, set one of Kirsch’s poems, “Huwelik,” to music as part of a song cycle called “Lewensgang,” performed in 2012 at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town. In an interview with me, More explained that he had read hundreds of poems before settling on the nine poems by different poets that formed the song cycle. He chose them for their lyrical qualities and musicality. Kirsch’s poem is the second song in the cycle. It would have pleased her to hear a musical rendition of her poem – music had been an integral part of her family life, both as child and adult. It would have given her hope that she would not slip into obscurity.

Philip van der Merwe (Van der Merwe 1996: 122) suggests that the purpose of the canon is not only to select on the basis of artistic criteria, but to record for history those artists whose work, for one reason or another, achieved prominence in a given period. I believe it is essential that the distinction attained by Olga Kirsch as a woman poet and a Jewish voice should be recorded as part of the Afrikaans literary canon. Her voice has maintained its strangeness, which has still not been assimilated and probably never will be – no other Jewish writer or poet has emerged on the Afrikaans literary horizon since her. For this exact reason we need to hear and honour the poetry of Olga Kirsch. It is in the light of the ‘Other’ that we recognize ourselves.

Joan Hambidge “Olga Kirsch (1924-1997)”

In Jiddisj blykbaar geen woord of begrip
vir teleurstelling, verydeling, verspeel.
Desondanks moes jy in ‘n vreemde taal
‘n tweede, ongenaakbare ballingskap binnegaan.
‘n Digter kan nooit haar erfenis verloor:
“By die riviere van Babel, daar het ons gesit,
ook geween en aan Sion gedink...”
Met jou verse oor die diaspora, vervolging
die verdriet van jou mense naam gegee.
Hoeveel woorde is daar vir pyn?
Eensaamheid, illusie, verdriet, ang, kommer...
Dié kon jy opvang, stulp en bowenal vertaal
in hunkerende, ylende melodieë.

Joan Hambidge "Olga Kirsch (1924-1997)"

Yiddish, it seems, has no word or concept
for disappointment, defeat, missed opportunities.
Nonetheless in a foreign tongue
you had to enter a second cruel exile.
A poet can't ever betray her heritage:
"By the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down
Yeah there we wept, when we remembered Zion..."
With your poems about the diaspora, persecution
you named the grief of your people.
How many words are there for pain?
Loneliness, illusion, sorrow, anguish, worry ...
These you could capture, preserve and above all translate
into yearning, feverish songs.

[translation by Johan de Lange]

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