

LANGUAGE AS IDEOLOGY IN BERGELSON'S
'NOKH ALEMEN'
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Language, we are taught, from Mallarmé to the present deconstructivists, is the beginning and end of any given text. The language of discourse under a close reading, then, should yield its idelect, registers and the entwining of grammar and rhetoric, etc.

A Yiddish text, such as Nokh Alemen (1913), increases our difficulties by deneutralizing the normal linguistic ground or code upon which the literary idelect is constructed. Yiddish serves multiple textual functions, as we shall see, it is a metaphor of the Jewish condition, a metonymy of the Jewish people in transition from a traditional culture to secular modernism, and a powerful ideological signifier. Language usage defines the social, cultural, economic and ideological perspective of each personage and his relationship to the other in Nokh Alemen. By using Yiddish, the narrator provides a point of view which has serious ideological implications in terms of the text and beyond.

Unlike a Flaubertian or Jamesian text in which the personages, the narrator and the reader take for granted the shared linguistic code, all the central personages in Nokh Alemen are consciously bi-lingual. Indeed they pride themselves on the second tongue while, at the same time, they divest of significance the primary one, Yiddish, the narrational linguistic ground. The second language contains as it were -- or promises at least-- the modality of a meaningful life. Studying Mishnah as does the Rabbi of the shtetl, or reading the Kuzari as does Reb Gedalye, the gvir, define not only the cultural configurations of the traditional shtetl but the continuity of and insistence upon the Hebrew language -- loshn keyd'ish -- as the sole code of intellectual discourse. For the rabbi and Reb Gedalye, those Hebrew texts structure the model of their world view -- an order which is sacred and organized with its own teleology.

By revealing, however, that Reb Gedalye requests the Kuzari and Abarbanel's Commentaries when he is in self-exile from the shtetl in order to eschew his creditors, Bergelson ironically passes judgement on the man and his traditional Weltanschauung now in decline. Unfortunately the medieval Hebrew masterpieces mediating as talismans cannot protect Reb Gedalye against the pressing world of modern economics. The traditional religious Hebrew-Aramaic culture of the shtetl is threatened. The secular scales the sacred order.

Language codes centrally define the legitimacy of the suitors pursuing Reb Gedalye's daughter, Mirel. Their degree of "europeanization" serves as the axis upon which Mirel admires or scorns them. Her various suitors construct a remarkable configuration of Jewish modes of linguistic and cultural assimilation of the surrounding non-Jewish society. Knowledge and skillful use of Russian or another European language determines the individual's suitability as a mate. Language functions as the metonymy of modernization.

Velvel Burnes, the rejected suitor, struggles with the different language codes, none of which provides either solace or security. A child of the shtetl whose secure Hebrew signature appeared on the broken engagement contract, Velvel now read with effort the Cyrillic alphabet. His linguistic difficulties reflect his steadily improving economic status but uneven acculturation. On his rented farm he fights valiantly with the Russian text of the Birzhevie Viedomosti (the Stock Exchange Journal): Er hot durkgeleynt etlekhe mol afn kol yene verter, velkhe er hot nisht farshtanen (I, 3, p. 107). The Burnes family upward mobility, however, has only begun. The economic assimilation of the shtetl into the new Imperial Russian economic sphere concomitantly raises the prestige of Russian and even Polish. Velvel seeks to imitate the Jewish nouveau riche Tarabay who has accumulated the necessary smattering of Slavic languages not only for his enter-

prises but for his social pretensions. Tarabay "gefirt dortn a pritsish-negidische shtub un hot zayne kinder ergets in groys un vayer shtot gelernt (I, 3, p. 105)." Slavic language acquisition for Tarabay permits a self-deluding change of caste. When Tarabay says: "Farvos zol men zayn erger fun di pritsim (II, 6, p. 170) and acting like a landed aristocrat addresses Velvel's coachman in Polish "Tsi Pan Burnes Doma" (I, 3, p. 105) Bergelson elicits from the nouveau riche both their pettiness and their ignorance, for the landed aristocracy in the person of Graf Kasparivke is passing from the scene as speedily as the old shtetl social and economic hierarchy. Velvel and his new class wish to imitate and usurp an effete aristocratic style. The slavic language acquisition becomes a lambent sign for social-cultural assimilation. This implies the obverse: tje reaction and rejection of the traditional shtetl language and culture. Velvel's linguistic problems underscore his transitional condition. Yiddish, his mother tongue, becomes disrupted by his newly acquired gentile knowledge. He imparts a new register of language usage into Yiddish when he addresses his mother: ir nisht gekont zogn nisht Du un nisht Ir, un derfar geredt tsu ir beloshen nister --efsher vet di name tey trinkn (I, 1, p. 97)? The introduction of the formal third person singular impersonal into Yiddish, a borrowing from German grammar and syntax, subverts the normal language register in Jewish family communication. This artifice cannot be sustained. The sight of the rejecting bride Mirel brings out the vulgarity of the mother and the son's rapid change to the normal family register: sha sha kuk zi nor on! (I, 1, p. 96), the second person singular. So much for linguistic pretension! But the implications for traditional shtetl culture are vast: the value system of the new-rich no longer emanates from the Hebrew-Aramaic religious code or semiotic system but from the world view and systems from which the traditional society had attempted to shield itself --the hellenistic humanism in its Christian chivalric configuration: the Pritsim. Velvel desires the match between himself and Mirel because she successfully fuses, in his eyes, the yikhes of the traditional world with the sophistication of the new world which he is attempting to conquer. Her rejection of Velvel is not from yikhes but from his lack of sophistication, his materialism and slavish but imperfect imitation of European ways. Nevertheless by the end of the novel, she can transcend her original rebuff and recognizes his essential moral goodness from his narrow Weltanschauung. Linguistically she flatters him but at the same time permits herself distance by leaving a note for him in the second person singular Russian! Ti Khorochi (IV, 4, p. 367) ["You're a good man."] The note in Russian symbolically mediates his acceptance into Mirel's value system.

Shmulik Zaydenovski, her suitor and husband, doubles Velvel with little more linguistic security. His knowledge of Hebrew is perhaps more sure and he cojoins a knowledge of cantorials with the pretensions of a maskil: Shmulik reads Akhad-HaAm and some Yiddish writer (II, 5, p. 162)! Beyond imitating landed nobility, Shmulik writes love letters in Hebrew and Yiddish entirely in formulae. This contiguity of codes reiterates the changing shtetl reality. The Hebraic rhetorical flourishes impute traditional scholarship and piety whereas the Yiddish implies a new intimacy and modernity. Together these codes represent different semiotic systems in conflict which find no synthesis in Shmulik but rather an uncertain dualism mediated by money. Shmulik takes pride in his knowledge of Russian which he insists on using with Mirel's friends who speak it flawlessly. "Er redt shlekht rusish (II, 12, p. 225)." The Russian component becomes an attribute of his supposed worldliness the insufficiency of which underscores the evident newness of his europeanization. His Russian may be necessary for business but it is a facade like his "eyropayishn oyszen," (II, 8, p. 198) as Mirel discovers to her horror when he sings "mit di hent vi a khazn" (II, 9, p. 208). The different languages are not new codes for knowledge so much as they represent the Kultur-Kampf of the shtetl seeking a new accommodation in the Russian Empire. The Burnes and the Zeidenowskis daily may pay

lip service to the sacred order of Reb Gedalye Hurvitz, but they are quickly passing into the profane.

Lipkis and Montshik --other suitors-- are already in the profane. Their knowledge of Yiddish and Russian functions neutrally.

Code switching, linguistic virtuosity as well as intellectual pain are best exhibited in the Hebrew poet, Hertz, whose supposed eudemonic role in the fabula wavers and ultimately falters. His Hebrew verse, however, hypostatizes the legitimacy of the Jewish people to their inheritance. Hertz's Hebrew has little to do with the Mishnaic Hebrew of the shtetl Rabbi or of Reb Gedalye. The poet, well beyond the Maskilic "sensibilities" of Zeidenovski generates a melancholic verse akin to the Hebrew writers known in modern Hebrew criticism as talushim. Hebrew, for Hertz, provides the ontological proof that Israel exists. The Hebrew register in which he composes opens Jewry to the secular mode while proffering the dignity of its ancient tongue revived and desacralized. His Hebrew story, recited in the text -- in Yiddish significantly-- captures the ambivalence of the poet who does not reject the past and its treasures but who despairs of beholding the cultural metamorphosis necessary to validate the experiment of secular modern Hebrew: "Ikh bin a shoymmer fun a toyter shtot" (II, 3, p. 144). Hertz, unlike Montshik, has passed even beyond a comfortable Russification. Montshik has no "past" because he has only lived in the gentile city and has never seen a Jewish shtetl until he visits Mirel. Montshik can afford linguistic neutrality and ease of code switching because he lives only in the near future. Hertz who has lived in a Lithuanian shtetl appreciates the past through the optics of aesthetics and Jewish national identity, but not as a traditional participant. He observes the Jews preparing for the Sabbath, and generalizes: "mamish, a shabosdiker himel, shabosdik zeen oys mayrivdikn barg afile di arumike grine felder" (II, 5, p. 242). He is a voyeur and an aesthete whose use of modern Hebrew permits an aesthetic approach-avoidance of the Jewish past while constructing a future weltanschauung and in an updated past modality. Continuity of the Jewish people for Hertz is linguistic: Hebrew, his ideological commitment. To speak Russian, White Russian, and German are mere evidence of Hertz's successful Europeanization. That some shtetl Talmud Torah children repeat his Hebrew verses by rote does not constitute the renaissance he requires, although it does show the shtetl becoming conscious of the national question. That a small coterie like the Hebrew teacher Shabab or the pharmacist's assistant Safian are his passive admirers remains insufficient. His Hebrew texts fail to spark action. Hertz's misery lies in his recognition of that fact. Language has failed him and leads to despair: "a gantse shirayim-dor vos hot shoyrn nisht keyn ort in lebn" (IV, 7, p. 379). Modern Hebrew has only brought another fragmentation into the shtetl it seeks to redeem. His inability to resolve through language the contradictions inherent in his acceptance of a European-based aesthetic system -- Hertz's modern world-- with the traditional Jewish religious system -- the shtetl-- which he admires, but considers moribund, generates ambivalence, alienation and entropy. Hertz's weapon to combat the assimilation of the Jews is ultimately just language, modern Hebrew, which proves paradoxically to be impotent. If Hebrew is otiose and complacency leads to Russification, given that the shtetl cultural walls are breached, then what arms are left to preserve a folk? That is Hertz's inescapable circle. The indice of his quandry are his wanderings.

Language codes are not neutral either for Mirel and her shtetl friends who can all read Hebrew and converse more or less flawlessly in Russian besides the mother tongue-Yiddish. Their linguistic skills set them apart from the quasi monolingual Yiddish speakers of the market place. Russian, particularly, but modern Hebrew too implies emancipation from tradition. The midwife can even translate from the Latin of Dicta Sapientium. Each new Gentile language assists

the flight into Europeanization. Polylingualism becomes a basic criterion for both social and intellectual acceptance into their midst. Beware the scorn for the linguistically "inadequate:" "Rusish hot er geredt shlekht, vi a dentist, aroysgezogt a 'samekh' afn ort fun a 'shin' " (II, 8, p. 197). Acquisition of the new language represents metaphorically a "new life-style". Code switching flourishes, symbolically setting the elite free from the linguistic and cultural bondage of their geography. Their admiration of Hertz's literary accomplishment rests in no small part on its medium being Hebrew, the respected linguistic mode for Jewish national revival. Hebrew and Russian are prestige codes whereas Yiddish and Rabbinical Hebrew are backward. Their delight in reading the Dicta Sapientium permits them, to share the universality of the human condition oddly unperceived until then in the cultural texts of the shtetl world. "Gedakht hot sikh shoyrn, az zey leyenen itst dem posek E-ev...: ot zenen nokh gresere tsores ergets-vu af der velt faran" (II, 7, p. 190). Knowledge of the Russian or Latin gives access to forbidden fruit. Reading and translating the Latin moralistic text --a Roman Catholic Pirke Avos-- hints not of mere secularization but the allure of another sacred order. Secularization can lead to self-reflexive profanation or a new perception of one's heritage. Foreign languages encourage a dialectic between the new and the traditional. The midwife, most consciously rejects the past but Mirel like Hertz would seek a synthesis. Whereas money and power are the correlatives of the Burnes and Zaydenovskis secularizing tendencies witnessed in their truncated Russian --language metaphorically capturing their inner contradictions between modern secular activities and traditional sacred duties, Mirel, Hertz and their shtetl friends, conversely, are completely secular, but each one determines his or her accommodation to the traditional world in terms of sensibility, intellect, and ideology. Language acquisition and usage by the personages is purposeful, conscious and multivalent. Mirel's rejection of the Burnes and the Zeidenovskis and their sons is the consecution of the dichotomy between their world view and hers in which linguistic inadequacy provides a narrational short cut to the understanding of the person and socio-cultural conflict of Nokh Alemen: the dissolving shtetl world.

Mirel does not scorn the shtetl world. But it is foreclosed to her needs. She feels purposelessness and seeks meaning elsewhere in her life. Contemplating divorce from Shmulik, she turns to her former suitors and finds them as divorced from purpose as she is. "Hot zi...Turgeniev's bukh nokh a mol ibergeleynt: a rusish meydl kon mer nit kumen mitn lebn, vos arum, geyt zi avek in monastir, un s'vert fun yir gornisht. Un zi, Mirel, iz shoyrn nisht keyn meydele, un der monastir iz fun yir azoy vayt un vayst yir oys azoy narish (III, 11, p. 320)." Russian literary secular culture fails to sustain her needs as well. Like Hertz, Mirel has not succumbed to mindless Russification. Unfortunately, neither traditionalism, Russification, or Hebraism resolve anything. Her decision to depart leads a physical and psychological border where she still intends to refute: "Zi iz nisht mer vi an ibergang -- punkt un zayn vet fun ir gornisht" (II, 14, p. 238). Purpose though, is still undefined.

But a possible solution lurks in the text. The code switching skills of the personages are so much desperate efforts to produce meaning. By moving to the surface of the text -- to the narrational language of discourse-- we may adduce signification. Yiddish becomes the surface ibergang-punkt for the readership into the fiction. Its pellucid mediation is strategic. The omniscient narration artfully weaves in and out intersubjectively and avoids drawing attention to itself -- the narrational language, Yiddish. Complicity must be established directly between reader and personage. The Kultur-Kampf of the personages must seduce and involve the reader. The narrational language, Yiddish, masquerades as Hebrew (in Hertz's story), as Russian (in the intellectual debates or social gatherings), and as Polish when necessary. Yiddish never appears seemingly

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undisguised. What language is Mirel using? The embedded Russian, Hebrew, and Polish phrases reenforce the reader's suspended belief that these languages are being generally spoken. The necessary transparency of Yiddish permits the various ideological options to appear before the reader and to fragment without solution. Mirel's central role underscores the unraveling, from traditional religious intransigence, through pious Russification to factitious Hebraic estheticism. Language codes designate these ideological positions and the personages become allegorized. But the narration deconstructs the ideologies of the shtetl. Mirel's departure symbolizes the insolvability of the Jewish question.

The narrational language code does proffer the solution: Yiddish secularism! In contradistinction to Hertz's Hebraism which only reproduces a mandarin class, Yiddish, the living tongue of the shtetl fuses wagon-driven with the Poet. The desuet "dead city" of Hertz's Hebrew people can become the modern living city of the contemporary Yiddish speaking folk. Mirel and Hertz are running blindly from a viable personal and national goal in life -- a Renaissance! The limpidity of Yiddish had an ideological intent --throughout the text-- to reveal through rhetorical understatement its subtlety, its richness of expression, its malleability, in short, its ability to shoulder an aesthetic creation equal to the four other language codes and ideologies in the text. Yiddish could offer the commonality of language in the shtetl, a language already secularized, national and ready for culture growth as the reader has discovered. Ignored by the Jewish intelligentsia, the nouveau riche and the religious traditionalists, Yiddish thrives only as the folk language. Against the complicity of both the readership and the personages towards Yiddish in Nokh Alemen, Bergelson needed to maintain the rhetorical guise of a neutral narrational code when, on the contrary, the language code was subverting the other languages and their ideologies for the aesthetic and didactic purpose of persuading a readership -- by the artifact of the literary text itself ultimately-- of the legitimacy of Yiddish as a meaningful basis for a cultural national renaissance. The linguistic strategy of playing off languages codes in the fabula while reserving as a trump on the narrational surface, Yiddish and its ideological intent, reveals the sophistication of Bergelson's literary and rhetorical techniques. The narrational language code itself was hiding the ideological program of the work, the defense and revival of a unique people, when all is said and done.