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For David, with love, Ruth

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Speaking of the Devil in Yiddish Literature

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The escalation of violence against the Jews of Europe from the closing decades of the 19th century to their mass destruction is coterminous with the rise of modern Yiddish literature. Many of the same circumstances that fueled the one—demographic, political, socioeconomic, ideological—also inspired the other. The result was a literature that reflected the conditions under which it was being created. Yiddish writers were no more eager to confront antisemitism (a term coined at the start of both these developments) than were the rest of the Jews at whom the aggression was aimed, yet the concurrence of these phenomena left the writers no choice but to confront its impact. What distinguished this hostility from other incidents and trends the Yiddish writer might have been expected to deal with was its incursion from the outside as a frightening, foreign imposition. To the extent that one can generalize, Yiddish literature began modestly, confining itself to the spheres it inhabited and knew. Inspired by Jewish life, it did not readily fathom the intentions of those who tried to extinguish it. But willingly or not, it took note of events and reacted in varied ways to the assaults against its speakers. This is an attempt to describe how writers of successive generations admitted the unbidden subject into their work.

Sholem Yankev Abramovitch, commonly regarded as the first major genius of modern Yiddish (and arguably also of Hebrew) prose, began as a critic of Jewish society with no discernible interest in addressing the problems of Russia at large. Abramovitch's early fiction, written under the pen name Mendele Moykher Sforim, moves within an entirely Jewish sphere, whether in village, town, or city. His first fully realized Yiddish novel, *Fishke der krumer: a mayse fun yidishe oreme-layt* (*Fishke the Lame: A Story of Jewish Beggars*; 1869), is a study of Jewish beggary that awakens sympathy for the unfortunates in Russia's Pale of Settlement—along with anger at the Jews who tolerate its conditions.[1] Mendele, the fictitious itinerant bookseller who stands in for the author as narrator of the work, meets up on the road with a colleague, Alter Yaknehoz, who is, like him, trying to peddle his wares in Jewish towns and villages. As the two men trade stories about mismatched couples, Mendele tells of Fishke, a bathhouse attendant, whom the town benefactors married off to a local blind woman because they refused to let the wedding feast they had donated go to waste when her intended husband absconded on the day of the wedding. By the logic of fiction, the two men then meet up with the same Fishke, fleeing from the band of beggar-thieves his wife had persuaded him to join.

From this point on, the frame story of the booksellers is intertwined with the sentimental story of the handicapped beggar. Fishke recounts how he became an unlikely romantic hero in trying to rescue a hunchbacked girl from the same band of beggars. In good melodramatic fashion, this hunchbacked girl whom the beggars shanghaied is revealed to be Alter's abandoned daughter. The novel comes to its formal (and moral) climax when Alter assumes the responsibilities he had once discarded, repenting of his earlier neglect by joining Fishke in the search to rescue his long-suffering child.

The only mention of "goyim" in this original version is a well-known ditty that Mendele sings as he and Alter lie in the meadow: "Af dem grinem barg / af dem hoykhn groz / shteyen a por daytshn / mit di lange baytshn" ("On the green mountain / in the tall grass / stand a pair of Germans / with long whips").[2] Apart from that single reference, the narrative moves through an all-Jewish landscape, including Odessa, which Fishke reaches in his travels. The dominant theme in this treatment of beggary is the mismanaged institution of marriage, as exemplified both by the stories each man tells and by the revelation that the supposedly respectable Alter is really an unscrupulous runaway husband.

Although Abramovitch's expanded version of the novel (1888)[3] follows the same basic course of action, its landscape is threatening in hitherto unmentioned ways. Thus, Mendele and Alter do not simply meet on the road, but their horses get so entangled that it takes a couple of wagonloads of Gentiles to heave them apart. "The hands of Esau" come to the aid of the children of Jacob—accompanied by mockery and malice. "Look at those skinny Jews in their *labsardaki* [their fringed undershirts], a curse on their mothers!" After clearing the road, the Ukrainians make the sign of pigs' ears with the corners of their jackets, cursing the Jew-pigs for good measure. Mendele responds to this indignity with wonderful ambivalence: he comments on the ineptitude of Jews like himself in handling any physical matters, and in that vein is even grateful for the advent of the peasants. Abramovitch conveys through Mendele his impatience with Jews who are impractical and not self-sufficient. But Mendele also flinches at the aggression of the Gentiles, mourning their unearned dislike. "Almighty God," he urges, "Open Thine eyes, look down from Thy habitation on high and see how Thy worshipful Jews are mocked for Thy Name's sake." The hot-blooded Alter, for his part, merely shrugs, "Look who we have to deal with!"[4]

Much harsher is Mendele's later encounter with tsarist officialdom. It is nighttime, and Mendele has had a little too much to drink on an empty stomach after a day of fasting (it is the seventeenth day of the Hebrew month of Tammuz, which begins the three-week period of mourning for the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE). In a phantasmagoric scene, he helps himself to cucumbers in someone's garden and is nabbed by a watchman who brings him to the local constabulary. He soon sobers up under the questioning of a "Red-collar" with brass buttons, whose cursing is invested with the power of the state:

> It was my sidecurls that had his attention now, and he was giving them the eye, sneering at them in disgust. Then in anger he swept up the scissors from off the writing table, and in a trice he had one of the pair shorn clean off. It was only the work of a moment, and the lock of hair lay already at my feet. I observed that it was gray, and thought how from

> my youngest infancy I had had it, and it was grown old even as I had done; and I wept for the shame which had been done to me.[5]

The shorn *paye* awakens such an outpouring of tears that Red-collar is touched by pity, and takes out his anger on the watchman who had hauled the old Jew into court. Mendele quits the scene with his cheek bound up, the threat having passed, but not the humiliation, nor the knowledge that the Jew is subject to capricious authorities who hold his life in their hands.

In neither of these two scenes does Mendele show any anger. An elderly and traditional Jew, he is disinclined to confront hostility, but rather succumbs to his sorrow and tries to regain his moral equilibrium without inquiring into the nature or motives of his inquisitor. Such restraint contrasts sharply with the charged portrayal of Jewish iniquities in the rest of the book, and in the rest of the author's work. Through Mendele, Abramovitch shows his own disinclination to confront the gratuitous aggression of the Gentiles, either because he could not accept it emotionally, did not fathom it intellectually, could not represent it artistically, or did not want to admit it ideologically. It is also hard to know whether official censorship inhibited his treatment of this subject. What is clear is that as long as he was working within the framework of literary realism, which purports to show society as it exists, Abramovitch vented his outrage on the Jewish community while muting his emotional response to the offenses against it. He championed inductive reasoning as a means to genuine self-improvement. Literary realism was the vehicle of his impatience with whatever stood in the way of analytic reason. Getting Mendele drunk was a way of introducing his character to a situation beyond his own artistic control. Realism sufficed for the small-scale vices and the large-scale miseries of beggary and cruelty, but it could not explain the behavior of the peasants or the government's malevolence against some of its subjects.

Just a few years later, Abramovitch broke through the bounds of literary realism to express his altered view of the Jewish political condition in Russia. Though Abramovitch was no fantasist—his art pointed in quite the opposite direction, warning against the belief in wishing rings and supernatural interventions—he reached to fantasy to convey what he could not otherwise portray.[6] In *Di kliatshe* (*The Mare*; 1873), he offered an image of Russian Jewry as the mythic embodiment of diaspora existence. On the realistic level, a young Jew, Isrolik, wants to study medicine in defiance of his mother's wish that he marry and settle down in his native town. Once he realizes that his Gentile examiners are deliberately thwarting his attempts to enter "their" university, he suffers a mental breakdown.The rest of the novel transpires in a state of hallucination, with only brief chapters of recovery in the middle and at the end. Under the veil of his "madness" Isrolik encounters a mare who reveals herself to him as the representation of the Jewish people in its diaspora mutation. And when Isrolik reproaches the mare, saying "the devil's gotten into you," the evil one himself, Ashmedai, appears to tell *his* story. As the book moves from realistic narrative through the allegory of the mare into flights of fantasy, the author is able to portray the power of hatred of the Jews.

The flight over a landscape of carnage and horror was a common trope of European

literature and art: Goya's image of Asmodeus is a striking counterpart to Ashmedai, who takes little Israel on an overview of the continent.[7] But Abramovitch's devil specializes in baiting the Jews, and he spares Isrolik no images of that particular evil. Open spigots send rivers of ink to regiments of antisemitic scribblers, who denounce the Jews with "words like spears." Jews who try to defend themselves are found guilty of provocation. In Romania, mobs run wild, "attacking houses like locusts, hurling rocks through windows, breaking down doors, chopping, crushing, tearing, yanking, beating murderously, worse than any wild beasts, killing young and old, ruthlessly."[8] Most compelling is the demonic *enjoyment* of this sport: "Demons laughed, devils jeered. They mocked, they jabbered, it was maddening."[9] While Abramovitch also exploits the devil's voice to denounce some of his usual internal Jewish abuses, he lets us feel the delight of those who enjoy their power over the cringing Jews. The devil has Isrolik in the palm of his hand; he can squash him like a flea, he can mock him like a fool. If the first part of the book gives us the young maskil's perspective, and the mare speaks in the second for the Jewish people, Ashmedai brings into Yiddish the unwelcome passion of those who live to do them harm.

Abramovitch's recourse to the fantastic corresponds to Isrolik's fall into madness, in that each manifests the collapse of a rational assessment of his situation. In creating Mendele, Abramovitch conceived a literary mediator who would travel among the Jews of the Pale of Settlement, bringing forms of entertainment that would open their eyes to their defects, their malefactions, and their opportunities for change. Abramovitch's encounter with Jew-hatred was a blow not only to his dignity and peace of mind, but also to the maskilic scheme for rational self-improvement, which depended on equally rational self-interest on the part of the surrounding population. Hence, by summoning the devil, the author was surrendering the optimism of his earlier satire. Ashmedai travels much farther and faster than Mendele, and holds sway over a much larger part of reality.

By the standards of things to come, Abramovitch had seen relatively little mob violence or state-induced antisemitism. But it is likely that the 1871 pogrom in Odessa had shaken him profoundly, because two years earlier he had dedicated a satire to its mayor (on the assumption, so common to the early Russian Jewish enlighteners, that the government was its ally in the forcible reform of the Jews).[10] Between 1869 and 1873, Abramovitch had apparently come to doubt the benevolence of Russia's rulers.[11] Isrolik's madness—a literary device to allow for new modes of representation—registers as well the author's awareness that history is driven by forces over which reason exerts no control. Antisemitism exemplifies history's defiance of progress: the devil is having too much fun tormenting the Jews to allow for the improvement of humankind.

Common to the generations of the "classic" Yiddish writers—Abramovitch-Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Yitzhok Leybush Peretz—was the traditional view that violence was a manifestation of evil. Whatever the status of their religious conviction, they continued to observe Judaism's distinction between goodness and wickedness, with violence unequivocally in the latter domain. The leader of the beggar gang in *Fishke der krumer* is cast in the mode of Fagin in *Oliver Twist*: he threatens to rape and even to murder. The Gentile ruffians are more dangerous than he is only because their culture seems to be so much more prone to violence, and because

they are abetted by the tsar's regime. And in *The Mare*, the violence that Jews do to one another is eclipsed by the anti-Jewish prejudice that is sweeping the continent.

In contrast, Sholem Aleichem situates the pogrom at a sufficiently comic remove so that it may threaten the body politic without affecting the moral boundaries between right and wrong. His pattern of response to pogroms admits the evil of the violence while "laughing off the trauma of history" by showing the discrepancy between the Jewish and the anti-Jewish points of view.[12] In "The Wedding that Came without Its Band," the local train, dubbed the Slowpoke Express, becomes the unwitting savior of the town when it fails to arrive with the would-be-pogromists.[13] The story's title further reduces the threat by discrediting the pogrom as a spoiled celebration. Similarly, in "The Miracle of Hoshana Rabbah," a clever Jew gets the better of a hostile priest when he attributes the slowdown of their runaway engine to the intervention of his Jewish God rather than to its declining supply of coal. The story's title picks up on the wit of the Jew by casting the entire incident as a religious miracle. Like the tardy train and the waning fuel, humor saves the day by turning handicap to advantage.

Hayim Nahman Bialik appears to be breaking with this Yiddish tradition in "Be'ir haharigah" when he insists that his readers witness the pogrom wreckage.[14] His walking tour through "the city of slaughter" shows the full scope of the damage that Sholem Aleichem obscured. Yet he, too, reconfigures the pogrom within a Jewish moral vision, flaying the Jews for not *resisting* the violence against them. Bialik's poem—perhaps the most influential work of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature—stirred a generation of Jews into greater action on their own behalf. However, in urging an end to passivity and acquiescence, it in no way questioned the evil of violence itself.

Peretz's neo-folktale, "The Three Gifts," may be read as his rumination on the challenge of violence to traditional Jewish values. A suspended Jewish soul is told that it will be admitted to heaven only if it brings three acceptable gifts: "If you see any deed that is perfectly good, take it and bring it back to heaven."[15] The mediocrity of the world is such that it takes the poor soul untold years to find the requisite symbols of perfection. But when he does find them, one by one, they are what his tradition has taught him to value. One Jew has been killed for the sack of earth from Eretz Israel that robbers mistook for his ultimate treasure; a Jewish woman condemned to public execution has protected her modesty by pinning her dress to her flesh; and a Jew goes back to run the gauntlet a second time in order to retrieve the skullcap that a whip had knocked off his head. The three blood-stained gifts of earth, pin, and head-covering —representing the national, moral, and religious spheres of Judaism—satisfy the heavenly tribunal. But the story questions their "useless" perfection as well as the corruption of a heaven that would desire them. While Peretz's story continues to honor the readiness of Jews to make spectacular sacrifices for their beliefs, it exposes a problematic scheme of values that encourages martyrdom to no ascertainable end.

Peretz's story bridges competing views of Jewish victimhood as the tragic byproduct of Gentile aggression or the consequence of misguided Jewish priorities. The most dialectical of modern Jewish writers, Peretz defended Jewish values but not their basis in religion. His younger followers, however, took up a more radical stance, particularly with regard to physical violence. Portraiture of Jewish "toughs" became a

subspecialty of Yiddish and Hebrew writing, as though the literature were out to redeem Jewish manhood by demonstrating that Jews could fight. Writers introduced into Yiddish literature a cast of thieves, smugglers, thugs, and "pigeon fliers"; sons ready to beat up their fathers, Jews ready to trade punches as well as goods. Jewish writers began to accommodate violence as a natural portion of, rather than an aberration from, common reality. For instance, in I.M. Weissenberg's novella *A Shtetl* (1906), the violence begins with a pre-Passover fist fight in the synagogue over importing flour for baking matzohs and escalates steadily through the spring and summer, in pace with the revolutionary movement of which such violence forms a tiny but representative part.[16]

There were several ideological avenues of support for physical might at the beginning of the 20th century, going all the way back to the maskilic appeal to "nature." In maskilic literature, the *ḥeder* and yeshiva students who long to join the animals out in the fields seek a healthier life of integrated body and soul. Positivism's emphasis on productive labor encouraged tangible rather than spiritual contributions to progress. The revolutionary movement called for radical reform of government, society, and existing institutions, and for such forceful efforts as would be required to bring about these necessary changes. Nationalism promoted the ideal of self-liberation and imagined a "new man" capable of winning his freedom. The aim of returning to the soil, with its implied shift to a newly virile Judaism, informed movements in Russia, Palestine, and America. Paramount in the world of ideas was Nietzsche's argument for the transvaluation of Jewish and Christian values, an argument that called into question the very ideals of religious discipline, inviting people to acknowledge their will to power instead of deferring to the will of God.

Contrary to popular opinion, Jews were not a passive people. Essentially dynamic in their adaptation to ever-changing political conditions, their literature integrated many of the "muscular" ideals that were rapidly changing the course of Jewish life. But Yiddish literature faced a problem unique to the Jews, in that the contemporaneous support for muscularity resulted in much more violent action against *them*. The same calls for national renaissance, revolutionary action, self-determination, and the will to power were received in all too many Gentile and Christian circles as invitations to assault the Jews. Thus, Weissenberg in his various stories seems to enjoy describing the internal battles of Jew pitched against Jew with fists and clubs until the point at which the Gentiles appear on the horizon with a power that threatens his entire fictional world. Whenever that happens, he brings the action to a close. It is one thing to call for freeing male energy within an overly repressive or rigid Jewish society, and quite another to contemplate the released energies of Christian enthusiasts or reveling peasants.

Lamed Shapiro sets out these very considerations in his story of 1909, "Der tseylem" ("The Cross"), which remains an intellectual-literary Jewish landmark in the treatment of violence.[17] Shapiro was the first Yiddish writer to portray physical aggression through the prism of Nietzsche's promotion of Dionysian passion as a necessary counterpart to Apollonian harmony. Shapiro did much more than introduce the ruffian, or *ba'al guf*, into Yiddish literature as part of the reality of Jewish society. He also championed violence as an elemental force to be creatively integrated as well as politically resisted. The pogrom represented a special challenge to this "transvalua-

tion of values," since its unleashed energy was directed at himself, his family, and his community. "The Cross" was Shapiro's attempt to confront the pogrom not as something counter to Jewish experience, but as a form of energy that would have to be assimilated if Jews were ever to escape its fury.

"The Cross" is situated in America, far enough away from the events it chronicles to insulate the narrator from the consequences of describing them. Two Russian Jews, formerly strangers, are riding the trains in hobo fashion, and one gets the other to tell him how he got the cross-shaped scar that is prominent on his forehead. The unnamed man with the cross says he lost his father almost at birth and was raised very harshly by his widowed mother: she only stopped beating him when he hit her back at the age of 12, and relations between them remained cold thereafter. He later joins a cell of Russian revolutionaries (sometime before 1905), and volunteers for a dramatic suicide mission, presumably to impress Mina, their leader, herself the daughter of a Russian official. However, a pogrom intervenes before he can execute his mission. Although his underground cell had gotten wind of impending attacks against the Jews, it failed to take any preemptive action. The rampaging pogromists who break into the man's flat find him defenseless, alone with his mother. He fights but is overcome, tied to the bedpost, and forced to witness his mother's torture. The chief pogromist then carves a cross into his forehead "to save his kike soul from hell," and leaves him to watch his mother expire.[18]

Until this point, the Jew has been the butt of the action. The dramatic shift occurs once he pries himself loose and puts his mother out of her agony with a final blow. From then on, like a cinematographer following the hero through a battle, Shapiro accompanies his protagonist into the street where the pogrom still rages and watches him wandering in a daze, wondering how to respond to the events that have branded him. First, he comes upon his mother's torturer but deliberately refrains from taking revenge, while making it clear that he could have done so. Next, he sees a young hoodlum splitting the head of an old Jew with an axe. A Jew "wearing glasses" confronts the hoodlum, but instead of killing him, this intellectual turns his gun on himself to the narrator's (and reader's) disgust. Following all this, the narrator goes to Mina's home, where he rapes and strangles her, an act that leaves him "refreshed, energetic, and composed." He decides to wear the scar "as a frontlet between [his] eyes," having turned it from a mark of shame into the brand of a new order of faith.[19]

Shapiro's line of moral reasoning cuts through the chaos of the pogrom. Refraining from killing his attacker, the narrator dismisses as inadequate the goal of personal "justice"; whereas the intellectual who shoots himself instead of the hoodlum evinces the pathology of Jewish self-blame. These serial incidents reveal that the Jew has been lacking the Dionysian spirit. Until he becomes capable of perpetrating violence, he will never be free, let alone secure. The real god that so-called Christians serve is the god of violence that releases itself in pursuit of the Jews. By violating Mina, the branded Jew is accepting the challenge of *that* cross, determined to join the world on equal terms.

The father's death in this story has left the infant son in the charge of a woman who expects him to become her selfless protector (much as Abramovitch's Isrolik, in a very different context, is urged by his mother to fulfil her own ideas of Jewish achievement). Similarly, Mina expects the protagonist to sacrifice himself for her revolu-

tionary cause. As though answering the charge of the philosopher Otto Weininger that Jewish men are corrupted by their feminine nature, Shapiro has his protagonist fight free from the domination of women: this Samson must liberate himself from Woman as well as from the God who had claimed to be the source of his strength. He kills both his mother and Mina with his own hands, albeit out of opposite impulses of mercy and rage, and makes explicit the connection between the events, saying of Mina: "She defended herself, like my mother."[20] Of course it is possible to interpret the murder of Mina as a form of revenge for the death of his mother, on the grounds that she had failed to take action against the impending pogrom. But the real source of his deformity, Shapiro implies, is the neurotic relationship between mother and son from childhood on. By repeatedly linking the women in their wish to control his destiny, the narrator suggests that, however the pogrom may complicate his struggle with his mother, he had to free himself from both alike.

Shapiro was in America from 1907–1909, and then returned there to live in 1911. Although he sets his pogrom story within the land of the free, it is clear that the true fight for autonomy must be waged back in Europe, where Jews remain crippled both by their beliefs and by their neighbors. Indeed, the other man in the frame story, after hearing the narrator out, offers something very much like a moral endorsement: "*A generation of iron men will arise. And they will rebuild what we allowed to be destroyed.*"[21] The Jew turns into iron not through acts of self-defense or by championing a revolution for greater political equality, but by being able to master what for him is most difficult—the art of violence. Were all Jews to act like the Jew in the story, they would not have to set out for new lands but could rebuild what *they allowed to be destroyed,* their lives in Europe.

Because of its title, Shapiro's story was assumed to address the problem of Christianity. By branding his victim with the sign of Christianity, the pogromist appears to make it responsible for his deeds. Hayim Zhitlowsky, the editor of *Dos naye lebn,* reinforced this reading when he paired the story with Sholem Asch's "In a karnival nakht" ("On a Carnival Night") in an essay on the subject of "We and the Cross."[22] Asch's modernist story, as discussed later, tries to exalt the Jews and Jesus in their capacity for martyrdom. His tale was thus a foil for Shapiro's story, which links the Jews with pogromists in their capacity for violence. But in the Nietzschian terms of the story, the pogromist was violating Christianity no less than he was violating the Jews. The story's closing reference to "iron men" suggests that what Shapiro had in mind as a sign of redemptive power was something like the *iron* cross, the Maltese cross that Germany awarded for distinguished service in war. True, the attackers of Jews were Christians, but at issue in the story was their elemental aggression, not its spiritual camouflage, so that use of the Christian symbol set the story askew, as Shapiro himself later realized. In none of his subsequent pogrom stories did Christianity play a major role. The pogrom in "Di yidishe melukhe" ("The Jewish Government"; 1919), for instance, occurs three weeks after Sukkot, independent of the Christian calendar or any obvious instigation by the Church.[23] Vasil, the simple peasant of "Vayse khale" ("White Challeh"), who is gradually transformed into a cannibal and rapist, is identified not as the "priest" of Christianity, but of a god "as eternal as the Eternal God."[24] Shapiro challenges the teachings of Sinai from the standpoint of a prehistoric jungle regimen that, because it follows its own ultimate

rules of nature, he is no longer willing to regard as evil. Jewish irony and obedience-to-duty merely play into its hands.

To be sure, Shapiro's advocacy of violence was always qualified, if not contradicted, by the manner of his exposition. Though he seemed to sense that the Yiddish writer no less than the Jew in his story had to come to terms with physical aggression, he could not so easily accomplish this literary goal. The very structure of "The Cross," which is arranged as an episodic, logical polemic within a symmetrical frame, belies the thematic insistence on irrational passion. When the pogromists break down the door, the narrator says:

> I am a strong man. But until that night, I had never seriously fought anyone, in a rage. Until that night I had never known the true rage that intoxicates you like strong wine, rage that suddenly boils in the blood, courses through the body, rushes into the head, drowning all thought.[25]

The sudden flood of feeling is rendered by such poetic devices as repetition, parallelism, and simile, which check the rhythm and the pace of the prose. The voice of Jacob directs the hands of Esau. For the assault on his mother, the narrator affects an ironic detachment:

> Imagine:
>
> What's a hair—one single grey hair—plucked from the head? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And two hairs? And a skein of hair, torn from the scalp? And many skeins of long grey hair? Tsk! Nothing at all.
>
> When bones are broken, they obviously crack. But when twigs are broken, or dry sticks and whatever else, they also crack. "A natural phenomenon."[26]

This strategy of removal focuses attention on the man's state of mind rather than on the perpetrators of the violence. Forced to witness his mother's torture, the man recalls it in a manner that abstracts and objectifies his experience. So, too, the very point the story is trying to make about the spontaneous release of negative energy is controverted throughout by the narrative style, resulting in something very different from its apparent intention. Zarathustra's utterances convey his untrammeled mind; the energy of Nietzsche's prose drives its ideas. By contrast, the tension between subject and form in every one of Shapiro's pogrom stories has the effect of reining in the violence within an aesthetic of harmony and logic. The art does not experience the "liberation" of its characters.

And indeed, in later years, Shapiro not only repudiated his use of the Christian symbol as "forced and contrived" but also reversed his earlier attitude toward the subject. He explained that he had written about pogroms in deference to friends who had urged him to treat the subject, both after 1903 and in 1914.[27] The real purpose of literature, he wrote in the 1930s, was not to deal with such aberrations as "pogroms, revolutions, wars [that] come and go," but rather with the long course of human life that was calm, even-breathed and "normal."[28] As for Hitler, Shapiro says that his advent cast the whole subject of violence into a grotesque form, "as though in a crooked mirror that reflects a monster-face—my own."[29] Reminiscent of the scene in "The Cross" where the intellectual puts the gun to his own head instead of shooting the criminal he has apprehended, Shapiro's response to the Jew-hatred that Hitler was spewing is to list instances of *Jewish* wrongdoing.

This about-face can be explained only in a critical biography that has yet to be written, in which Shapiro's literary development will be traced in relation to his actions, his health, and his state of mind. The projection of anxiety about his own sinfulness appears to have been the result of a general breakdown, of which there is abundant evidence in the biographical information concerning the treatments he was undergoing for alcohol addiction and mounting paranoia. Coinciding with this decline, Shapiro had become an active Communist sympathizer, and Communists objected to singling out the subject of attacks on the Jews lest this reinforce ideas of Jewish solidarity or Jewish resistance. Since the author himself applies the term "grotesque" to his response to Hitler, it only remains to compare his breakdown with that of Abramovitch's fictional Isrolik upon his realizing that the world was so much worse than he could have imagined.

Shapiro's attempt to demonstrate that the Jew is a mirror image of Hitler includes an item of particular literary and psychological interest. When he lists the Jewish crimes that presumably remind him of the Nazis, he begins with the very example that Asch had dramatized in his 1909 "On a Carnival Night"—the story that had been featured as the *contrast* to his.[30] Set in 16th-century Rome, Asch's story tells of the humiliations Jews were subjected to as part of the annual papal carnival, including the sadistic chase of eight hoary elders through the streets before masked Christian merrymakers. In a mixture of the supernatural with the historical to betoken the story's blurring of religious boundaries, Jesus climbs down from his cross to join the runners, and Mother Rachel weeps with Mary for both sets of children. Linking Jew and Christian through their common martyrdom and messianic expectations, Asch tries to draw a parallel as well between their faults. So he inserts into the story a reference (that would have been familiar to contemporary Jewish readers) to an event in the Ukrainian town of Troyanov in 1905.[31] Upon receiving news of an impending pogrom in Zhitomir, five young Jews had set out from Chudnow to join the Jewish self-defense in the neighboring city. Ukrainians who saw them passing through Troyanov demanded their surrender, threatening the local Jews with a pogrom of their own if they failed to hand them over. The Jews capitulated to the demand, disarmed the youths, and gave them over to the Ukrainians. The scene of their butchered bodies is what Asch evokes in an attempt to establish some kind of moral parity between Jews and Christians.

Thus, in repudiating "The Cross," Shapiro recalls Asch's story—and then outdoes him in drawing a moral equivalence between Jewish and Christian depravity. In addition to the incident in Troyanov, Shapiro calls to mind a Jew who had escaped from the 1903 Kishinev pogrom, then participated in a pogrom against Negroes in Springfield five years later, as well as other Jewish thugs (*banditn)* who allegedly participated in the Ukrainian pogroms of 1919–1920. On the basis of this evidence, Shapiro cries, "Our fate has conspired to rob us not just of the security of life and human dignity, but also of the illusion and the pretense that we are a *pure offering*."[32] The term I have highlighted, *'olah temimah*, with its biblical overtones of ritual purity, anticipates the later use of the English term, Holocaust, which is similarly drawn from the vocabulary of sacrifice.[33] These Jewish offenses—most committed in reaction to mass violence against the Jews—make Shapiro recoil from the claim that Jews are pure victims, as though that were a vocation worth aspiring to. Need I point out

the perversity of this comparison between assaults against the Jews and this handful of aberrant, some of them responsive, actions? Or of Shapiro's regret that the offering is not "pure" when what we are talking about is the slaughter of whole communities of Jews?[34] That the Yiddish "Nietzschian" should have reached this end points up the problem Yiddish writers had in confronting Gentile violence.

Yiddish readers seemed to mute some of the radicalism of the story in order to grant its merit. Typical of those who praised it, Shmuel Niger, the dean of Yiddish critics, hailed the man with the cross as "the strongest and weirdest (*meshunedikster*) hero in modern Yiddish literature." Yet instead of dwelling on the implications of the hero's new ethic that credits savagery as an unexceptional part of human behavior, Niger considers the story as the answer to Bialik, as though Shapiro had been arguing merely for Jewish self-defense. "The future historian of Jewish suffering and shame will know that the dark bitter truth that Bialik speaks in 'Maase Nemirov' [the subtitle of "Be'ir haharigah"] is not the whole truth."[35] Niger appreciates that unlike Bialik who thundered from the mountain, Shapiro was reporting from the depths, revealing the gritty minority of fighters that was hidden from the dominant historical perspective. Niger credits the story to the extent that it shows the fighting spirit of the Jews, ignoring its much more essential challenges to Jewish civilization. Probably for the same reason, because of its ideological foreignness, Shapiro's story had none of the historical impact of Bialik's poem: it remained a literary curiosity. The harshest judgment was the one the author pronounced on himself. In a story of 1930, Shapiro has one of his characters, a Yiddish writer in America somewhat reminiscent of himself, declare that "Der tseylem" was always "a false, bombastic thing written in a falsetto," which allowed Shapiro to mistake himself for "the conscience of the Jews."[36]

From the beginning of the 20th century until the late 1930s, Yiddish literature became a virtual referendum on violence, as writers, poets, and dramatists looked for ways of depicting escalating attacks on the Jews. The First World War and the pogroms in the Ukraine triggered an explosion of expressionist verse on apocalyptic themes. Many writers conscripted messianic figures—Shabbetai Zvi, Shlomo Molkho, Jacob Frank—to convey typologies of doomed striving. The Bolshevik Revolution rehabilitated violence for those who justified its use of force, or otherwise believed that any messianic project must be accompanied by bloody birth pangs. In the period between the world wars, violence figured prominently in Yiddish fiction as a familiar of Jewish experience. Demobbed and AWOL Jewish soldiers appeared as coarsened products of the European battlefields. Shimon Horonczyk's *Shtarke mentshn* (*Tough People*; 1936) projected the image of a thuggish Jewry.

But as against the need to admit brutality into representations of Jewish life, ideological antisemitism and the hooliganism it fostered made violence increasingly unattractive. The rise of fascism with its championship of military force led to the kind of recoil displayed by Lamed Shapiro. Once again, the forces of cruelty were cast as a demonic threat to the quieter ways of the Jews. The equation between violence and evil tightened as the dangers and the injustices increased.

Both the heightened tension and the restored moral equilibrium figure in M. Burshtyn's gentle, almost old-fashioned novel, *Bay di taykhn fun mazovye* (*By the Rivers of Mazovie*; 1937). The hero's name, Hersh Lustig, Hersh the Jolly, signals the author's generally hopeful outlook. In the first 35 chapters of the book, the Jews of

Smolin live and interact with their Polish neighbors. The next chapter opens with this twist:

> You might think that Sa-ma-lin is located somewhere in Byelorussia, Lithuania, or Bohemia.
>
> Those who think so would be fooling themselves and the author of this narrative would not be responsible in the least.
>
> Sa-ma-lin is located not in Lithuania, not in Byelorussia, and certainly not in Bohemia.
>
> —Where then *is* Sa-ma-lin?[37]

After flirting with various possibilities—Mexico, Pennsylvania, and the ancient Ophir—the narrator volunteers that Sa-ma-lin is actually in China, near the river Hong Kong. By changing the relation of consonants to vowels, the narrator transports us to a make-believe location that is in every other respect identical with the place in which the rest of the novel is situated. The clumsy intervention of the narrator conveys the change that is about to occur. The Jewish physician Gabriel Priver, walking contentedly to his work in what was yesterday Smolin, runs across a lad he recently cured of a near-fatal illness. When he calls out "Sa-ta-shek" (the Chinese version of the Polish Sta-shek) the child, instead of responding, shouts at him, "Jew, Jew, Jew!" The doctor is tempted to laugh (not unlike the reader, who thinks he must be party to some authorial mischief) but then his spirit is daunted by "the sultry air of the approaching typhoon." The usual euphemism for pogrom, the Russian storm, has been "easternized" along with Stashek's name. As the day proceeds, local "coolies" gather in the "Japanese restaurant" to fortify themselves for the violence they intend to wreak, and by its end the doctor's wife is a twisted corpse on the kitchen floor of their plundered home. If Burshtyn was trying to dodge the censor by transferring the action to a place concocted to draw attention to its absurdity, in fact he compounded the anxiety of the reader, who experiences disorientation along with the character.

Burshtyn's transparent device of camouflaging Smolin for the duration of the pogrom is symptomatic of the literature in which it figures. The shock of the pogrom, its excesses, its ubiquitous yet always unexpected recurrence—these required novel techniques of representation. Burshtyn gives a simultaneously comic and frightful description of an event that comes out of nowhere yet transforms reality forevermore. He registers the narrator's sense that the subject does not really belong to him, typically finding in Yiddish no viable political language through which the injury could be described. The very word "pogrom" signifies not war—not the standard exchange of violence between competing nations—but a unilateral assault on a people with no reciprocal recourse to force. The Jewish literary tradition of responses to catastrophe was exactly that: a literary tradition not of engagement in violence but of reaction to it. The event might as well have been happening in China for all that Burshtyn or his characters knew how to deal with it.

The subject of violence in Yiddish literature obviously requires much more thoroughgoing treatment than it receives in this essay, but I think that the sequence of engagement is as I have sketched it. Bashevis Singer would merit a special section for the way he "imports" evil through the medium of the Devil. Some of Chaim Grade's irascible rabbis and wives are harsh—if not violent—in their natures and words. The Soviet Jewish writers came closest to mustering moral support for repressive force,

though in support of Communism, not of Jewish society. David Bergelson's *Midas hadin* (*Letter of the Law*; 1929) justified the full measure of an oppressive law in the name of Bolshevism. To my knowledge, no modern Yiddish writer ever did so in the name of Judaism or the Jews.

Yiddish literature of the late 19th century was part of the Jewish engagement with modernity that hoped for close interaction with the surrounding Gentile society. Ideologically unprepared for the political assaults on the Jews, its writers dealt with violence as an unwelcome evil. This began to change around the turn of the 20th century under the pressure of various ideas and ideologies that championed force either as a moral good or as a temporary or permanent means to higher ends. Yiddish writers then sought to demonstrate Jewish muscularity by exploring Jewish physicality or, in the case of Lamed Shapiro, by forcing Nietszche's ideas into the framework of Jewish life. What was new to modern literature was the writer's confrontation of the national trauma through individual experience, and the search for an artistically convincing way of registering the danger. But when violence and the call for violence against the Jews consolidated into fascist politics, Yiddish writers were once more confronted with a political process for which they had no political vocabulary. The tone of moral bewilderment and political unreadiness that characterizes Burshtyn's novel continued into the diaries and fiction of the Second World War.

At the start of Moishe Leib Halpern's 1916 poem, "A Nakht" ("A Night"), his visionary response to the First World War, a warrior leader comes rushing down the mountain crying "O Hi, O Ho— — —." As the torches of his followers sweep through the night like wild birds in flight, their cries echo among the hills: "O Hi, O Ho— — —O Hi, O Ho— — —." This seems to me the cry of violence descending on Yiddish literature. It is never anticipated no matter how often it comes.

Notes

1. Mendele Moykher Sforim [Sholem Yankev Abramovitch], *Ksovim beibom: dos vintshfingerl un fishke der krumer*, trans. and ed. Sholem Luria (Haifa: 1994). Luria provides a critical edition of the 1869 version, along with a full account of the history of composition and an exhaustive study of many aspects of the novel.

2. Ibid., 137. It may be that these "Germans" are really Jewish Germans, that is, enlightened Jews who have adopted Western ways.

3. Although a second missing version was registered with the censor in 1876, we have only the published revision of 1888, included in Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Ale verk*, vol. 11 (Warsaw: 1911–1913). See idem, *Kesovim beibom*, 93.

4. Mendele, *Ale verk,* 11:15; cited in English in idem, *Fishke the Lame*, trans. Ted Gorelick in *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler*, ed. Dan Miron and Ken Frieden (New York: 1996).

5. Mendele, *Ale verk,* 11:54; in English version in *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler*, 91.

6. Would Isrolik's flight with the devil qualify as fantastic according to the influential definition of Tzvetan Todorov? One of its conditions is that the reader reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations, that is, feel suspended between the world of living persons and a supernatural explanation of the events described without trying to explain the latter in terms of the former. (See Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard [Cleveland: 1973]). Although Ashmedai is a composite of identifiable anti-Jewish attitudes, I think this part of the text exceeds allegorical interpretation. Joachim Neugroschel (see below) included this work in a collection of works of "fantasy and the occult."

7. This subject is treated exhaustively in Shmuel Werses, "Motivim dimonologiyim be*Susati* shel Mendele umekoroteihem," in idem, *MiMendele 'ad Hazaz: sugiyot behitpathut hasiporet ha'ivrit* (Jerusalem: 1987), 70–86.

8. Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Di kliatshe* (Vilna: 1873). Trans. as *The Mare* in *Yenne Velt: The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult*, comp. and trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Woodstock, N.Y.: 1986), 632.

9. Ibid., 628.

10. Dedication quoted by I. Nusinov, "Fun bukh tsu bukh," *Tsaytshrift*, vols. 2–3 (Minsk: 1928), 431.

11. On Abramovitch's change of attitude and other related items, see Ruth R. Wisse, "The Jewish Intellectual and the Jews: The Case of *Di kliatshe* by Mendele Mocher Sforim," Daniel Koshland Memorial Lecture of Congregation Emanu-el, San Fransisco, 1992.

12. See David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1984), ch. 7. This book and its companion anthology, *The Literature of Destruction* (Philadelphia: 1988), are indispensable guides to our subject.

13. Sholem Aleichem, "A khasene on klezmer," (1909) in idem, *Ayznban geshikhtes*, *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleykhem* (New York: 1917–1925), 28:127–137. The English version, "The Wedding that Came without its Band," appears in *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: 1987), 194–199.

14. Hayim Nahman Bialik, "Be'ir haharegah," in idem, *Shirim* (Tel Aviv: 1966), 250–260.

15. Y.L. Peretz "Di dray matones," in idem, *Folkstimlekhe geshikhtn* (Warsaw: 1911[?]), 13–24. The English version, "The Three Gifts," trans. Hillel Halkin, appears in *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (New York: 1990), 224. In the original, "un derzestu epes azoyns vos iz oysterlish sheyn un gut, khap es un fli dermit aruf." Basing his interpretation on the Hebrew version, which demands that the gifts be simply *yafot* ("beautiful," without the "good"), Reuven Kritz sees a swipe at aestheticism as part of the story. See Reuven Kritz, "Leha'arakhat sipurei ha'am shel Perez uleha'arakhat hazhanr hadidakti," *Karmelit* 17–18 (1973–1974), 198, passim.

16. See I[tshe] M[eir] Weissenberg, "A Shtetl," trans. Ruth R. Wisse, in *A Shtetl and Other Yiddish Novellas*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse (New York: 1973), 29–78.

17. L(amed) Shapiro, "*Der tseylem*," *Dos naye lebn* 1, no. 6 (May 1909), 15–30. Reprinted in idem, *Di yidishe melukhe un andere zakhn* (New York: 1919), 139–161.

18. Lamed Shapiro, "The Cross" in *The Jewish Government and Other Stories*, ed. and trans. Curt Leviant (New York: 1971), 123. All quotations are taken from this edition, with slight alterations to correspond more closely to the original.

19. Ibid., 129.

20. Ibid., 128.

21. Ibid., 130.

22. H(ayim) Zhitlowsky, "*Sholem Ash's 'In a karnival nakht' un L. Shapiro's 'Der tseylem,'*" *Dos naye lebn* 1, no. 7 (June 1909), 36–46 and no. 8 (July 1909), 36–45. Although he proposes the theme "Mir un der tseylem" in part 1 (p. 39), Zhitlowsky makes it clear that he is referring, in the case of Shapiro's story, to relations between Jews and the entire Gentile world.

23. Lamed Shapiro, "Di yidishe melukhe," in idem, *Di yidishe melukhe*, 7–63.

24. Lamed Shapiro, "Vayse khale," in ibid., 82.

25. Shapiro, "The Cross," 120.

26. Ibid., 121.

27. Lamed Shapiro, *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder* (Los Angeles: 1945), 26–30.

28. Ibid., 32.

29. Ibid., 36; passim.

30. Sholem Asch, "In a karnival nakht," *Dos naye lebn* 1, no. 7 (June 1909), 8–16.

31. For alerting me to this incident, I am indebted to Eugene Orenstein.

32. Shapiro, *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder*, 37.

33. In his story "White Challeh," Shapiro designated the Jews killed in the pogroms by the word *korbones* (Heb. sing. *korban*), which means both victims and sacrifices, thus merging the two perspectives of the time-bound and the historically resonant to create the semantic equiv-

alent of a double exposure. There, irony superimposes the imperative of violence on the traditional view of Jewish victimhood. In this passage, Shapiro seems nostalgic for the purity of the image he once so richly complicated.

34. In a review of Shapiro's book, Jacob Glatstein voices the same incredulity: "Is this a time to recall the ghosts of Jewish 'bandits' of 1905 and 1920? Should we now seek artistic redemption for a single Jewish soul when the entire murdered Jewish people is one huge, pure, clean soul?" See Yankev Glatshteyn, *In tokh genumen: 1945–7* (New York: 1947), 123.

35. Shmuel Niger, "Lamed Shapiro," *Vegn yidishe shrayber: kritishe artiklen*, vol. 2 (Warsaw: n.d.) 98, 101.

36. Lamed Shapiro, "Doc," in his *Nyu yorkish un andere zakhn* (New York: 1930), 179.

37. M[ikhel] Burshtyn, *Bay di taykhn fun mazovye* in idem, *Erev khurbm*, ed. Shmuel Rozhanski (Buenos Aires: 1970), 195.