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Di gas: A Study of Homelessness

The unnumbered chapter with which Yisroel Rabon's novel *Di gas* begins sets up the situation on which the work is built. The narrator has been demobilized and is free to go home. However, he has recently heard that his father has died and that his family's apartment has been let to strangers. He has nowhere and nobody to return to. The soldier in front of him at the travel office asks for a ticket to Lodz and he follows this man's example -- because he detects in the other's behaviour the joy of *going home* to a loved one. However, neither home, nor friends, nor job await the narrator in the city, and he will soon find himself on the street. What effect will this homelessness have on him?

Although there are few scenes in which we see the narrator before his period of homelessness, it is possible to infer from the text some basic traits of his character which are not the result of the immediate situation. It is important to begin this discussion of Rabon's portrayal of homelessness with a character sketch of his hero for two reasons. Firstly, the novel is about the effect of homelessness on a particular individual rather than homelessness in general. In this sense it is closer to Hamsun's *Hunger* than Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, two well-known portrayals of homelessness, since the former focuses on the effects of hunger on the mind of the individual, while the latter uses individual examples to build a composite and generalizing picture of life on or near the street. Secondly, if the basic character traits of the individual are established at the outset, it will be possible to see what effect homelessness has on them.

The narrator of *Di gas* appears to be a man of integrity and conscience. Early on in the novel, he is appalled to realize that his present lifestyle may force him into being a beggar, a lyer and a thief:

Ikh hob plutsling derzen az mayn bisl mentshlekhkayt heynt on optsushtarbn in mir, un kh'hob getsitert bay dem gedank, az yedn tog vet men mikh kenen

gefinen bay a rog, un hayzer hern zogn lign, az ikh bin paralizirt gevorn,
geferlekh farvundet gevorn in der milkhome un tsum sof farlangen a shtik broyt,
oder a por groshn a nedove. (51)

The thought of losing his "humanity" so upsets him that he heaps abuse and insults onto himself: "Ven es zol mir emetser zogn a helft fun ale baleydikungen, velkhe ikh hob af mir arufgevorfn, volt ikh zikh gevorn af im mit di foystn" (ibid.). That he is willing to defend his honour comes out in the episode when he goes to a barber's shop for a shave. The barber takes one look at his unkempt appearance and calls the young apprentice, who is usually allowed only to clean the customers' clothes (this, at least, is the narrator's assessment), to shave him. The narrator takes revenge for the insult by leaving the apprentice an enormous tip and not even turning round when the barber comes running after him to give him the money back. He does not reflect that he has given away a large portion of his scarce resources; rather: "Ikh hob mir forgedstelt, vi der kleyner hot zikh farvundert, ibertseyndik in zayn hant azoy fil gelt un vi der man in der veyser shirts iz dershtoynt gevorn. Ikh bin geven tsufridn" (111).

The joy which the narrator feels at helping the underdog is indicative of another aspect of his humanity: namely, a concern for others. This comes out in the two flashbacks to the war. In the first, he and the greedy trader Bornshteyn are stuck in a trench for several days without food. While Bornshteyn lies there helplessly, complaining, he has enough courage to leave the trench and get food from a peasant which he shares with his ungrateful companion, probably saving his life (10). The second is the scene at the front in which the narrator kills an already dying horse and creeps into its belly in order to get through the night without freezing to death. His action can be justified as necessary in order to save his life and therefore not morally reprehensible, yet the thought of what he has done tortures him: "Vi azoy iz es geshen, az ikh, vos hob ken mol nisht gekent tsuzen, vi mayne khaveyrim hobn gepaynikt a kats, zol mit di eygene hent hobn ufgeshnitn dem boykh fun a lebedik ferd?" (91)

The poet Fogelnest provides a point of contrast with this aspect of the narrator's character. He chooses an empty circus as a venue to recite his poetry, deliberately cutting himself off from others, and the poem which he intends to recite is significantly entitled "Dos lid fun mir far keynem nisht" (93). He is distressed by the violent death of a dog not because of *tsar bale khayim*, but because it makes him reflect on the senselessness of the world (104). The prose fragment by Fogelnest that the narrator reads after his suicide is a literary expression of longing for death -- Fogelnest's own longing. The narrator, on the other hand, tells his story with his eyes turned towards the world and never becomes preoccupied with the abyss of the self.

His sense of honour and his inclination towards engagement in the world are reflected in indications that he has a real desire to find a job and earn money. On learning of the opportunity to get work in France he notes: "Ikh bin gevorn ufgemuntert un umruik; es iz do a hofenung poter tsu vern ale tsores" (38) -- he hopes that the job will solve all his problems: not only the physical discomforts of homelessness but also the mental anguish of having sunk so low. When he gets the job carrying the circus poster, he remarks how happy he feels: "A freylekhkayt hot mikh adurkhgenumen dermanendik zikh, az ikh fardin itst gelt" (60). Even in a moment of anguish and self-criticism, while trying to fall asleep in the deserted circus, he shows a determination to pull through:

Ekh bruder -- nem ikh redn in gedank -- es vet nisht eybik azoy zayn! a shod, khlebn a shod tsu lozn trern! du bist nisht erger vi an anderer, af ken hor nisht erger! tsi den vilstu nisht arbetn yede arbet? Far vos zol men dikh zidlen? Zay moykhl, bruder, zay moykhl! Du vest baloynt vern far dayn tsar! (83-4)

The narrator thus seems to be a man of integrity with a will to live. He also seems to be literate and a man of some intellect. When he notices a girl reading in the park, he experiences a great longing to read himself which suggests that he was once frequently in the habit of taking up a book: "Vi lang hob ikh shoyn ken bikhl nisht gehat in maynehent? Ikh gedenk shoyn bald nisht di tsayt! A hunger tsu a bikhl hot zikh bay mir dervekt mit aza shtarkayt, vi a hunger nokh broyt" (58; see also 60). When he finally has enough

money to buy a newspaper, he treats it with respect -- the written word is too noble for the street:

Ikh hob nisht gehat fargesn tsu koyfn a tsaytung, vos ikh hob mit a tsiterdiker hant arayngeshtupt in buzem-keshene. Di tsaytung lezn af der gas hob ikh nisht gevolt. Ikh vel oyszukhn an ort in tsirk, aza gut bakvem ort, vos azelkhe gefint men a sakh hinter di kulisn, un dort vel ikh adurkhleyeneni di tsaytung fun onheyb bizn sof. (76)

We never see the narrator reading the newspaper and after the above passage, not yet half way through the novel, he does not again mention the desire to read. We shall see later the significance of the disappearance of this theme, but here it is important to note that it is present, suggesting that the narrator was at one time an enthusiastic reader. The suggestion is reinforced by indications that he has some acquaintance with poetry. When Vogelnest asks in tones of scornful disbelief: "Vos farshteyt ir zikh af azelkhe zakhn?" -- he counters: "Gleybt mir, ikh ken mikh a bisl af dem" (94). And indeed, he later quotes a few lines of Baudelaire of which he is reminded by what he has just been thinking about (160).

There is one more indication that the narrator is a man of some intellect, and that is the text itself. Since it is a first-person narrative, the reader must assume that it reflects the narrator's mind, even if it is hard to believe that he actually wrote anything down while living on the street. We shall return later to the implications of the form and structure of the work; here, however, it should be noted that the language used by the narrator demonstrates his ability to perceive and to assess. Sometimes he states his assessment in abstract terms, as when he records the effect of the word "zeyde" on the old Pole playing the King of Poland: "Dos vort 'zeyde' hot im aropgevorfnd fun an oysgetrakhter, likhtiker, sheyner, keniglekher velt in vorn, heslekhn thom fun oremkayt un biterer noyt" (23). More often, however, he captures the essence of a person, a place or an event by the way he describes it, indicating an innate ability to perceive which almost never leaves him. A small example is the way he describes the attendant of the municipal park:

Nebn toyer hot zikh gefunen dos vakhbaydl, vu der struzh iz gezesn. Durkh zayne kleyne, zeltene mandl-formike oygn, vos men gefint bay khazeyrim un kroen, hot der blik aroysgeshaynt durkh a shpeltl beyz in kas. (7)

The park attendant is hostile to homeless people such as the narrator, and his whole attitude is made clear through the description of his eyes. We are first told that they are shaped like almonds - that is, narrow, a sign of a face contorted because of some strong emotion. We are also told that they are "small" and "unusual"; so far all three epithets could be interpreted in a number of ways, but they immediately become illustrative of hostility with the comparison to pigs and crows: pigs have a built-in negative connotation in Yiddish, the unclean animal par excellence and a symbol of hostility against Jews in all ages, while the crow is a black, unfriendly bird, always on the look-out for carrion (compare the crows which appear in the scene at the front and attach themselves to the soldiers, waiting for a death (85)). The narrowness of the eyes is then brought out by describing them as a mere *shpeltl*, a slit, and finally the emotion which underlies the description is made explicit: *beyz in kas*. The initial elements of the description which do not in themselves convey the hostility which later becomes clear cannot stand alone in the reader's mind without the qualification: the inverted construction of the sentence binds inextricably the initial description and the animal metaphors.

As we turn to an examination of the effects of homelessness on the narrator, then, we should bear in mind that he is a man of integrity and intelligence. This adds to the poignancy of the novel, for it suggests that even these qualities are no defence against the vicissitudes of *di gas*. Will the narrator be able to retain his principles in the face of life of the street?

If we are looking for the effects of homelessness, the first thing we expect to see are the physical effects of having no food and no shelter. These are indeed present in *Di gas*. At one point the narrator complains of a headache which he seem to attribute to lack of food: "Ober der kopveytik, vos ikh hob geshpirt in der letster tsayt, hot nisht ufgehert,

nisht kukndik af dem groysn shlal fun broyt un vursht, vos kh'hob ufgegesn" (75). He often mentions the cold (for example 34, 192). After his first encounter with Fogelnest's wife, he walks past a shop displaying mirrors and comes face to face with the appearance of a homeless person:

Mayn gezikht iz geven dar, knokhik un blas. Af der gombe iz mir geven oysgevoksn a nishkoshedike bord.... Az ikh hob mikh gut ayngeskukt in shpigl, hob ikh afile bamerkt umloyfn in mayne oygn a kleyn vild fayerl fun nisht-dershlofene nekht. (108)

However, the emphasis in the novel is placed not on what happens to the narrator's body but how homelessness effects his mind.

Despite the ability we have noted in the narrator to perceive and assess and his propensity to self-criticism, he is rarely able to order extended thoughts or to make links between events. This incoherence in his mind is inextricably bound up with the nature of homelessness: the individual is so preoccupied with the mechanics of staying alive that he lives only for the immediate future and does not have the mental latitude to plan far ahead or to assess the past. The construction of the text reflects -- or, one could say, dramatizes -- the incoherence of the narrator's mind. It does so through its form, the "quasi diary", and its structure, the division into discrete chapters of a chronological sequence of events.

Di gas has the feeling of a diary, of events recorded almost as they happen, even though it contains no dates and no consciousness on the part of the narrator that he is setting down his experiences in writing. More often than not he refers to "the next day" but an occasional "haynt", as: "Kh'bin haynt ufgeshtanen a zeyger tsvey nokh mitig" (175), reinforces the reader's impression that he is seeing the first-person narrator's experiences almost as they happen. The novel is not *zikhroynes*, it is not the narrator looking back on a particularly difficult period of his life after he has had a chance to reflect; rather, since we see the events almost as they happen, we know that we are seeing the narrator as he is during the period of homelessness. This is why Rabon has chosen the "diary" form even though it is almost inconceivable that the narrator actually wrote anything: he wants us to see straight into his protagonist's mind. Albert Camus's novel

L'Étranger employs a similar technique: even though it reads like a diary in a way similar to *Di gas*, it is almost inconceivable that Meursault, the first-person narrator, could have written it. Like Rabon, Camus uses his hero's style to reflect what is going on in his mind.

In keeping with the diary form, the narrative is structured chronologically. On the two occasions when the narrator devotes a whole chapter to an event from earlier in his life (the childhood accident and the scene at the front), he explains the thought process which leads to the memory so that it is in effect part of the chronological sequence. The narrative flows easily as the reader follows on the heels of the narrator, and yet, the overall impression is one of disparate elements tacked together rather than a steadily developing whole. Each incident is experienced in isolation and seems to have little or no bearing on anything else: the narrator himself makes few connections between them. Indeed, the reader feels as if he is presented with a kind of puzzle: the narrator has told him several stories but each one is broken up, since not all parts of it happened at the same time, and the reader must piece each story together. The inability of the narrator to do this, or even to think back from one incident to another, is indicative of the incoherence of his mind.

This effect of a chronological sequence that flows steadily forward, and yet at the same time seems to be divided into discrete sections, is created in the following two ways. Firstly, a chapter often centres around a single event or subject, for example the crazy Pole (2), applying for work in France (5), Doli (20), the beggar-house (27), the next chapter moving to quite a different topic. Even when successive chapters share some elements of theme, the focus generally changes: in chapter 10 the narrator first encounters the circus and begins his work carrying around the billboard; however, the focus of the chapter is the striking weavers who fill the streets and only in chapter 11 is the circus described. (This principle is contradicted by the division of the Jew from Komarno's story into two consecutive chapters. The division is instructive, as we shall see later.) Secondly,

when the narrator focuses on an event, a person or a place, he describes it in great detail. The passages connecting these descriptions are, by contrast, plain in the extreme. Having been dismissed from his job at the cinema, the narrator spends a night on the streets. In the early hours of the morning he encounters people going to work: the focus falls on them. After the description, he completes the report of the night in a single sentence, which also leads onto the next chapter: "Biz a zeyger nayn hab ikh mikh arumgedreyt in di gasn; dernokh bin ikh avek tsu fogelnestn" (193). The next chapter begins in similar telescopic style:

Ikh hob ongeklapt in der tir fun fogelnest's voynung. Keyner hot zikh nisht ongerufn. Ikh hob farshtanen, az s'iz keyner nishto un bin avekgegangen. Ikh hob gekoyft broyt un avek afn vokzal, esn onbaysn. Shoyn dos drite mol hob ikh bamerkt, vi eyner, a blaser mentsh, ongeton in lates, bavaksn, der kop lang nisht geshoyrn, mit a matn, apatish dershlogemem oysdruk afn midn, tsartn ponem...
(194)

As we see, however, after four short sentences we are back in descriptive mode: the main subject of this chapter is to be the beggar-house and the pale man is one of its inmates. The unsuccessful visit to Fogelnest is only mentioned in passing in order to link the two chapters but here has no further importance and so is recalled with the greatest possible economy. It is in this way that events related in a strict chronological sequence appear to be disparate: what makes the greatest impression on the reader are the long passages of description; the links are the glue that holds the work together and hardly show. It thus seems to the reader that he is constantly jumping from one subject to another -- along with the narrator's unconnected mind.

Within this overarching incoherence which structures the novel, there are, as we have seen, moments when the narrator's mind is clear and active, as when he criticizes himself for the lowly state in which he finds himself. However, these moments of consciousness are brief and rare; more frequent are the moments when his consciousness is subverted. All these moments, however whether of consciousness or the subversion of it, are subsumed within a process in which the consciousness becomes numb. Let us first

consider the moments of subversion after which we shall return to the process of numbing.

The subversion of consciousness, loss of control over the mind, manifests itself for the narrator in involuntary memories and supernatural visions. This aspect of his mental state in particular dramatizes the "nowhere" and "nobody", the privations that led to homelessness and remain very much part of it. Having nowhere to go reflects the physical privations implicit in homelessness, while having nobody to turn to emphasizes the spiritual privations. Both kinds of privation, physical and spiritual, lead to mental imbalance. It should be noted that the mental anguish of having sunk to such a low state is inextricably linked with the effects of privation and also plays its part in the wanderings of the narrator's mind.

The subversion of consciousness due to physical privation is most clearly illustrated by the weird daydream in which the narrator is made into a loaf of bread (chapter 9). It is clear that much as he might like to control these visions, he is powerless to do so:

Es hot gekont trefn: geyndik af der gas, in hits un shtoyb, adurkhgebrent in der heyser zun, hot mir gekent stam aynfaln, azh fun der heler hoyt, an oysterst vilde geshikhte, in velkher ikh bin geven farmisht. Di geshikhte iz geven meshunedik, fantastish un vild. (52)

The memory of the incident at the front (chapter 13) also seems to be triggered by his physical state:

Der kop hot mir genumen hakn. Mayn kerper hot gebrit. Ikh hob hits. Di gedanken zenen gefloygen in mayn kop, vi gliende funken. In der shnel un geayl iz mir adurkhgefloygn an opkirtsung fun ale gefarn, vos ikh hob adurkhgelebt af di shlakhtfelder....

Plutsling hot zikh eyne fun di blutikste iberlebenishn afn shlakhtfeld geshtelt far mayne oygn... (84)

The childhood memory (chapter 7), on the other hand, is triggered by a feeling of loneliness:

Di shot, di hayzer, di gasn, di mentshn -- alts, vos kh'hob gezen, iz mir oysgekumen fremder un vayter un ikh aleyn bin mir oysgekumen klener, elnter un nebekhdiker.

Es hot mikh dermant in azoyns, vos hot zikh farlofn mit mir kleynerheyt, ven ikh bin geven a yingl fun tsvelf yor. (44)

The figure of his mother, who was willing to sacrifice all for her son -- her last penny and even her honour -- becomes representative of the loving concern which he craves almost as much as he does food. It is relatively easy to depict in a literary work physical privation and its effects; it is not so obvious how to convey its spiritual counterpart. Rabon's solution in *Di gas* is a pair of pale women who echo the narrator's mother: Klara Fogelnest and the *blas meyd*. Their paleness gives them a ghostly quality and in his mind, in another kind of dream vision, they become supernatural beings. He describes his mother as follows:

In dem shvarstn, langn, altmodishn mantl, bapintlt mit opgebliakevete perlmuterne knep, un dem langn, shvarstn oysgeribenem shal afn kop, fun velkhn es hot nor aroysgekukt dos bleykhe shney-vayse ponim un di groyse fartrakhte tfile-tuende oygn, mit di gemostene, dine tritlekh, hot zi gekont oyszen, vi a nisht-doik geshtalt. (49)

Reflecting on Klara Fogelnest, he thinks how good it is when someone shows some concern for him and continues: "Ikh hob genumen kukn af ir nisht-erdish, fantastish un meshunedik" (110). His reaction to the *blas meyd* is similar:

Ikh hob lang getrakht un in mayn moyekh iz zi alts geshtanen, dos blase meyd mit di groyse, rakhmonesdike oygn. Ikh hob genumen klern, az zi iz nisht ken erdish bashefenish, az zi iz nisht fun undzer velt. (167)

It is noteworthy that the narrator returns to these women in his thoughts, even when there is no external stimulus for him to do so. This may seem to contradict the idea that he responds only to the moment and is unable to think laterally. However, his thinking about these women can be seen as an immediate reaction to an internal stimulus: just as physical hunger can at any time cause weird visions, so the narrator's spiritual hunger can at any time bring back the memory of the women in supernatural form.

That the women represent something spiritual, something intangible for the narrator is further apparent in the fact that he feels drawn to them without having very much actual contact with them. Here the woman-with-the-basket, who suspects him of being a bandit, provides a contrast. His relationship with her is practical: she gives him

food and money rather than making advances to him in some way, and she sympathizes with his physical state rather than the spiritual anguish that the other two women perceive. When his train of thought does once lead to her, it is one of his rational moments (159). He could conceivably turn to her for concrete help. From Klara Fogelnest, however, he would seek something quite different: he longs to unburden himself to her but cannot find the words to do so:

Ikh hob derfilt a dankbarkayt tsu ot der guter froy un gevolt ir opdanken mit dem, vos ikh vel ir epes dertseyln, dertseyln intims, aygns, azoy vi froyen hobn lib tsu hern. Ikh hob ober nisht gefunen vegn vos ontsuheybn. (106; cf. *blas meydl* 178)

Part of the attraction of the two women is that they seem to perceive his loneliness and to display great sympathy for him (*blas meydl* 169; Klara 235: "Ikh hob lib umgliklikhe"). However, while their sympathy may be genuine, it is almost certainly not altruistic: Klara seems to have little sexual satisfaction from her marriage to Fogelnest and is depressed by her failure to save him; the *blas meydl's* letter (169) suggests that she is a middle-class girl who has seen suffering in the world and feels guilty about her comfortable home -- which her sense of duty towards her parents will not allow her to leave. Thus, alongside her sympathy for the narrator, each is subconsciously seeking something for herself: Klara the fulfilment of her sexual desires, the *blas meydl* an antidote to her feelings of guilt. This ambiguity reflects back onto the nature of the narrator's spiritual longing: that he is attracted precisely to those women who can do nothing real to help him, whose sympathy is as much for themselves as it is for him (contrast the woman-with-the-basket) suggests that his *elnt* is an irremediable state, that in fact, nothing *could* be done to help him. If it is indeed a throw-back to the loss of his mother, it seems that this aspect of his suffering is not actually caused by homelessness, although it is doubtless severely exacerbated by it.

Having considered the elements of delusion in the narrator's mental state as manifestations of the physical and spiritual privations of homelessness, let us now turn to

the process of the numbing of his consciousness which subsumes them. This process can be likened to the physical effects of a long period of hunger: at first the body suffers terrible pain, but gradually the pain is reduced to a dull ache with only occasional stronger spasms. The narrator's mind at first engages with his situation and suffers because of it. As time goes on, however, the spasms become less frequent and less concrete (the ethereal visions of the women come in the latter part of the novel) and instead of assessing or reacting to the situation, the mind merely takes in the immediate scene, seeing every detail but unable to process the information in any way. This aspect of the novel brings it closer to *Down and Out in Paris and London* since Orwell perceives the numbing effects of homelessness. Here he writes specifically of starvation:

Hunger reduces one to an utterly spineless, brainless condition, more like the after-effects of influenza than anything else. It is as though one had been turned into a jellyfish, or as though one's blood had been pumped out and lukewarm water substituted. (36)

The increasing numbness of the narrator's mind can be seen in several aspects of the novel. The long passages where he is preoccupied with himself (the memories and the daydream) occur in the first part of the novel; later he concentrates on events or on the stories of other people. Passages of abstract analysis, however short, become less and less frequent while the amount of description grows: the narrator continues to take in what is going on around him but ceases to react to it. The long descriptions of the travellers in Yazon's wagon and of the beggar-house, in which the narrator scarcely intervenes with his own thoughts, occur near the end of the novel. The theme of reading quickly disappears. The narrator's longing to read is brought out by a *pale woman* whom he sees reading in the park (57-8); later in the novel, as we have seen, pale women no longer represent an "intellectual" longing but rather a spiritual one.

The increasing inability on the narrator's part to put his feelings and reactions into abstract terms is well illustrated by the way he reacts to the woman-with-the-basket's kindness. When he first meets her, he tells us in so many words that she makes him feel better, using the abstract term "elnt": "Mit a varem hantdruk hob ikh ir geentfert un

derfild, az der farharteveter elnt lozt zikh uf in mir" (32). Much later in the novel he sees her again and she has a similar effect on him, but this time he does not interpret the effect, he merely records it: "Mit a varem kayt in di blikn hot zi mikh ongekukt. Mir hot zikh gevolt ir a kush ton in di hent, in di tunkl grolekhe hor" (177).

This development is also apparent in the way he narrates what he hears from others, as can clearly be seen in the way the stories of Yazon and the Jew from Komarno are related. When Yazon tells his story, the narrator is an active listener, jumping in with description-cum-commentary when Yazon pauses, for example: "Yazon hot zikh opgerut dertseyln. Zayne oygn hobn geglantst mit dem shayn fun vayte, ongeneme zikhroynes" (123). Yazon's story is built into the scene in the bar and we hear not only the athlete's voice but also the narrator's as he describes what he sees. The story of the Jew from Komarno occurs almost at the end of the book and shows how completely the narrator has lost the ability to engage with the world around him. For two chapters we hear only the Jew from Komarno, the narrator does not interfere in any way. This effect is heightened by the division of the story into two chapters, a division which on the face of it does not seem necessary since the second chapter is very short and is a direct continuation of the first. Indeed, as we saw earlier, the division goes against the general pattern in the novel of each chapter being a unit divorced from the next, and this is the only instance in which the narrator does not guide the reader in the transition to a new chapter. The implication is that the narrator's mind has become inactive, his consciousness numb.

Not only does the narrator interfere less in what other people have to say, he also gives more and more space to quoting others directly and tells us less about what he does himself, let alone about what he thinks. This process reaches its climax in the last few chapters of the novel: the narrator's voice is not heard at all during the Jew from Komarno's story and much of the following chapter is taken up with Fogelnest's prose and his wife's words. The final chapter is brief in the extreme; there are no details of the

journey or of the work in the mine: the narrator manages to express a few bare facts, to tell us where he went from Lodz, and falls silent.

It seems, then, that the ending of the novel bleak. Homelessness has deprived the narrator of his physical well-being and of his considerable mental faculties. He finds himself buried beneath the earth in the blackness of the coal mine, perhaps a metaphoric grave. However, there are indications that the ending can be read in a more positive light. Despite the loss of the ability for abstract thought and analysis, the narrator retains, at least instinctually, all those traits which we see in him in the first part of the novel. His ability to analyze continues to be reflected in the perceptiveness of his description. His reaction to Fogelnest's story (229) demonstrates that he has read and understood this difficult piece of prose, reminding us of the indications that he has some intellectual capability. As late in the novel as the night before he seeks out the beggar-house, he again heaps abuse on himself:

Haltdik farmakht di oygn hob ikh geshmuest mit zikh aleyn, zikh gefregt un geentfert. Geredt hob ikh sharf, baysndik zikh in zikh, nisht gekargt ken harbe verter dort, vu es iz gegangen vegn mir. (191-2)

In consonance with the general process of numbing, he does not here enumerate the reasons why he is abusing himself as he did earlier (51), but he clearly still feels a great dissatisfaction with the situation he is in. His desire to pull through, to improve on his lot, is apparent in his asking the Jew from Komarno if he can accompany him: it is obvious that the Jew from Komarno is better at finding work than he. It is significant that the narrator does not ask Yazon if he can join him in the circus, although he regrets not doing so (190): it is as if he senses that Yazon will take him nowhere. Indeed, Yazon has no real aim in life and tries not to think about what will happen to him when he is too old to be an athlete, while the Jew from Komarno is a survivor, finding a way out of even the most desperate situations. In choosing to follow the latter, the narrator has chosen life.

Indications of this can be found even in the brief last chapter of the novel -- brief perhaps not because the narrator is no longer able to say anything but because his time is

so taken up with gameful occupation that he no longer has time to do so. He may be working in a *black* pit but he and the earth are covered by *white* snow, reversing the connotations of blackness. Moreover, the final word of the novel, *shney*, could contain in it a reference to his mother's *shney-vayse ponim*, suggesting that the earth is Mother Earth, and that the narrator, ensconced in her womb, will in due course be reborn, perhaps to a better life.

Such a hopeful reading of the end of the novel should not be allowed to obscure the great anguish which constitutes the general tenor of the text. In addition, the narrator's choice to follow the Jew from Komarno, who is referred to as *der shvartser*, has its own ambiguity. We have seen the narrator's integrity, his determination not to let life on the street make him dishonest; it seems that the Jew from Komarno, on the other hand, is not above literally "helping himself":

Gearbet haynt bay oyslodenen koyln in a fabrik. Un tsugenumen tsvey tashn koyln. Ober ir muzt visn, in mayne tashn geyt epes arayn -- un er hot mit der hant mir gevizn di keshenes zayne, (205)

and in his long narrative he describes how he masqueraded as a kind of *vunder-rebe* in China. In choosing the life represented by the Jew from Komarno, then, the narrator must accept that he may have to compromise the integrity which he has, despite everything, preserved on the street.

As a study of homelessness, *Di gas* demonstrates how the privations of life on the street effect the mind, causing irrational, uncontrollable visions within a process of increasing mental numbness. However, it also shows that while homelessness numbs the mind, it does not necessarily destroy character. The particular individual whom we follow in the novel, perhaps because of his integrity or his intellectual leanings, manages to hold on to his essential character traits throughout his considerable trials, and it seems that he will not emerge from the experience a broken man but will possess the internal resources

to begin a new life as conditions improve. The very term "numb" suggests a temporary state which can wear off, leaving few after-effects.

The study of the individual in this novel is, however, qualified by another entire question that this essay has not even touched upon: the state of society in Poland immediately following the First World War. It would be interesting to examine how many of the incidents which build up a universal picture of an individual also reflect the character of a specific time. The impression of enormous pain and anguish with which the book leaves the reader is not due only to sufferings of the hero, but also to the precarious state of the whole society: the narrator's suffering is compounded by the suffering he sees around him. The sorry state of Poland qualifies any speculation on the hopefulness or otherwise of the outcome of the novel: even if the narrator has the internal resources necessary for complete rehabilitation, will society provide conditions in which such rehabilitation is possible?

References

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