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SUTZKEVER: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS FANTASY

Ruth Wisse makes the point that Abraham Sutzkever's story of his own past is fantasy because the place where he grew up had ceased to exist. (1) The Vilna of Sutzkever's birth still exists as a city with people and buildings, but Sutzkever's personal Vilna is a Jewish city that was destroyed in the Holocaust. The attempt to reconstruct it literally is not history, but fantasy. Therefore, the Sutzkever's telling of what he experienced as a Vilna Jew is an exploration, an exercise in constructed memory no less adventurous than the author's actual explorations in Latin America.

nice intro

In Where the Stars Spend the Night, Lupus says, "as soon as you discover the sense -- you will lose your senses." According to Wisse, this is evidence of Sutzkever's style of autobiographical adventure writing: to obscure rather than to clarify. (2) Wisse also writes of Sutzkever's notion of yearning as a powerful force that affects the natural order (3). Sutzkever's yearning is the attempt to stave off mutability, that force that has destroyed his culture and even [redacted] as he writes is causing the attrition of the Yiddish language in which he writes. (4).

The narrator in Lupus locks himself inside his room so that he can perform "chemical and alchemical experiments designed to transform an orphan shadow into its former living owner." The narrator is apparently that shadow. Paradoxically, to transform that [redacted] shadow into its former living owner, there must be darkness. The shutters are barricaded and the windows hung with drapes. Only a dim kerosene lamp may be used, because electricity is that which powers electric fences and electric chairs, instruments of death. In the lamp, however dim, the narrator finds comfort. Its very inconstancy is reminiscent of language; in the darkness of the study, it serves as day.

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The transformation of the orphan shadow is like a new creation. When the narrator breathes life into it, and recognized "the rib whose clay was used by a sculptor to mold Eve," the imagery is that of God's creation of the world. Here, though, the product is uncertain. An apparition, who reveals his name as Lupus, appears. It is unclear whether Lupus is the creation turning on itself, or an outside character. In any case, Lupus the Cyanide Merchant is an agent of death. Lupus characterizes the attempt to revivify the orphan shadow as the sacrifice of a dream and the creation of being out of nothingness. Perhaps Lupus is accurately describing himself as a monster, a Frankenstein.

In Lupus's world, death is the desired object. Bearing cyanide, he is a savior. Those who can obtain the poison, at the price of a ring or a jewel, are the fortunate ones: the stars smile on them. The narrator praises Lupus for his "commentary on the scroll." For the narrator, Lupus has become the exponent of Torah, in a twist of the usual conception of Torah as the Tree of Life. The narrator proposes a toast to life; he has accepted Lupus definition that apportioning death is truly the creation of life. ✓

The narrator in Where the Stars Spend the Night is also confronted by an interloper, Lili the Blond, a "young-old-woman-from-birth." Lili calls him Volodia, and he remembers neither that name nor hers; yet out of curiosity, he finds the strength to accept her terms and listen to her story. Lili relates that she and he were caught in a city transformed into a black clock, a city of death. At this point, the narrator says he remembers. Whether he actually does or not is secondary. What is important is that he has accepted her story, and in doing so has accepted the concept of memory, if not specific memories. . Lili finishes her story by telling her interlocutor that in the "shaggy swamps of the subconscious" where the two of them escaped, she swallowed his soul.

The narrator of the Where the Stars Spend the Night begins in a realistic setting: a little park, where he sees the setting sun. But he soon enters a world as fantastic as that of Lupus. But instead of a theme of death-as-life, Lila the Blonde displays the paradoxes of memory.

Faithful Needles also dwells on the realm of memory. Tilya, the oldest of three sisters who have survived Slaughter City, now dwells in a seashore turret. She sends for her sisters on the occasion of their father's *yortsayt* in order to honor his memory and tell one another their memories. The three sisters tell stories of their tailor father, a good man who provided for orphans but, apparently, did not survive Slaughter City. His daughters did, and, in the words of Tilya, proved less faithful to him than his needles. The sisters, having exchanged reminisces, are about to take leave of each other, when Tilya springs a surprise: their father is still alive. And he does indeed appear, in a Sebastian-like pose with flaming needles stuck in him. Yet he is jovial, and when he speaks, he confirms the truth of his daughters' memories. ✗

More likely Tilya is the only one who is truly "alive," making her conjuration that much more fantastical.

In this tale, Sutzkever uses a different interplay of fantasy and realism. The story begins fantastically, with a woman in a seashore turret. Soon, realism takes over, as the sisters reminisce about plausible events. Then however, fantasy unexpectedly returns in the person of the resurrected father.

Whether the tailor is really alive again is not the main point. As in the case of the narrator in Where the Stars Spend the Night, what is important is that memory has been acknowledged. Memory, in the form of storytelling, has accomplished a resurrection.

As in other Sutzkever tales, stars glisten in the telling of The Hunchback. But the stars of this tale are not just innocent signs of hope. They form a sieve, which at the beginning of the tale scoops up victims in a conquered city and at the end collapses and dooms the conquerors of the city. The narrator of The Hunchback says that he has locked his treasure between earth and sky; again, Sutzkever uses the metaphor of between-ness. This time, there is no young-old-woman or death-as-life. Instead of complete fantasy, there is grotesquerie: a hunchback who attracts the narrator with his magnificent hump. The hunchback, named Kheme, speaks in a split voice, just as Tilye looked in a cracked mirror and the narrator of Where Stars Spend the Night slices his own tongue.

... as in the yellow stars the Jews were forced to wear

Kheme the hunchback rises above the grotesque and in doing so becomes a hero. He tells the narrator to anoint him a madman, and the narrator, persuaded that "only the impossible can still make sense," does so. This enables Kheme, with blasts of a shofar, to turn his madness on the conquerors of the city and make them go mad. Once again, paradox has shown its power.

In Glikele, the narrator receives a letter that is not a letter, but the herald of the appearance of his first love, Glikele. In this tale, memory is called a treasure, yet its use does not always seem so. Once again, Sutzkever tells of a flight from death and destruction; the narrator and Glikele, in their youth, escaped to the forest. Time shifts; Glikele appears as an old woman, yet is soon transformed into a young girl. Glikele, like other Sutzkever characters, is an expression of opposites, starting with her appearance in the story: "' I don't know how to begin,' she began." For Glikele, "every person is like somebody else." She says she will "shut up, but let my tongue run free."

Glikele's tongue does run free as she tells her story. Sutzkever again uses the image of cutting; this time, Glikele uses a slaughtering knife to slice breath during her escape. She also cuts herself off from accepted human behavior, by abandoning her child and by suckling from a she-wolf.

Glikele, like Lupus, is largely fantastic; but unlike in the latter story, the characters are realistic. In Glikele, the setting is fantastic, as seen in Glikele's appearance in the story, and by the time-place shift when Glikele and the narrator take a stroll to "the other region" and realize real existence in a hanging mirror. In that other region, away from the forest of flight, the couple enters the "living city," where there are lovers and water and a water dancer. Glikele finds the son she has abandoned; rather, she finds a young man she calls her son, and he picks her up off the ground. The man does not admit to being her son, and whether he really is or not is less important that Glikele's perception. Does she not realize the mistaken identity ?

Again, as in other tales, benevolent stars appear, this time as the prelude to the entrance of Glikele and the narrator to the living city. In Glikele, the stars do not take action, as did the sieve-stars in The Hunchback; rather, their very presence is the gateway to another world, a world of fantasy that is the truer than reality. Although Sutzkever does not say so explicitly, here, too, the stars are those things found between heaven and earth that have the least substance but the most significance.

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Based on the tales examined here, it is difficult to sustain Wisse's claim that Sutzkever's yearning is an attempt to stave off mutability. Instead, Sutzkever seems to revel in change: change of character, change of setting. The very nature of his characters, with their this-and-not-this descriptions, point to continuing mutability. The continuing theme of stars could be seen as a yearning for fixity; yet stars do flicker, and for Sutzkever, they do not always remain on high, but sometimes come to the ground.

What Sutzkever does try to preserve is memory itself. He will not have memory in its pure form, because such a thing does not exist, and, even if it did, would not serve his purpose. Instead, he treasures memory while transforming it, often, beyond recognition. He molds memory, creating tales that are mixtures of fantasy and reality.