

Even more explicit is the reference to our Midrash in the chronicle of R. Eli'ezer bar Nathan (RaBaN, author of *Even ha'ezer*), and eyewitness to the massacres, who wrote:

All this happened at one time, in the month of Iyyar to the month of Tammuz, when they were sanctified and purified to ascend to God. "These were the potters, and those that dwelt among plantations [...] they dwelt occupied in the king's work" [I Chron. ix:23]. They gave their souls for Him, and He shall recompense them according to their deeds, and according to the work of their hands shall He pay them. Their souls are tied in the knot of life within the temple of the King, each one dressed in eight garments of clouds of honor, and each one wearing two crowns, one of precious stones and pearls, and the other of gold of Parvaim [II Chron. iii:6], and eight myrtles in his hand, and they praise him and say [Eccl. ix:7]: "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy." And all this is explained in the Midrash *Ma rav tuvkha ašer šafanta lireekha*.<sup>25</sup>

The chronicle thus not only agrees with the Codex poem, "The Paradise," on a number of motifs, but contains (5.52) the same scriptural quotation from Ecclesiastes: 'Is mlt vrvvdn dln bryt vnd ( ) mlt gutm mvv'. We can not only complete the first gap in Fuks' translation, "iss mit ( )," by "... Freude dein Brot..." but we can also reconstruct the missing part of the text as *trInk' dln vvIn*—"trinke deinen Wein."<sup>26</sup>

The prominence of the midrashic Paradise legend at the time of the Crusades suggests that the Yiddish poem, written down at the end of the 14th century, is an echo of a not too distant past. If not the grandfather of the writer, then perhaps his great-grandfather was among the martyrs of the age. At any rate, both the writer and the scribe held a hand to the feverish pulse of events that had not yet faded from memory and strove to transmit to the next generation the experience of a recent catastrophe, in the vernacular language of Ashkenaz, in attractive poetic form. The Christian antecedents of the Yiddish Horant poem, the possible Egyptian allusions in the Fable of the Sick Lion, and the strange geographic story of the manuscript—the oriental paper and its turning up in the Cairo genizah—should not be allowed to obscure the direct and intimate relation of the religious poems of the Codex to the continuous tradition of Ashkenazic literature.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82ff. In a poem based on the same theme, RaBaN also speaks of "eight garments of honor and two crowns" (*ibid.*, p. 87) and of the "seven classes" (p. 88).

<sup>26</sup> The phrase 'eat your bread in joy' has been current for generation. *Eyn Šön frauen bükhleyu* (Cracow 1577, Basle 1602) cited by Grünbaum (*op. cit.*, p. 273) urges: *tu den armen leuten nit vergessen, so werstu dein brot mit lib un' mit vreiden essen.*

## DER NISTER'S 'UNDER A FENCE': TRIBULATIONS OF A SOVIET YIDDISH SYMBOLIST

KH. SHMERUK

Literary analysis of works produced under a totalitarian regime must depend, even more than any other critical enterprise, on reading between the lines. For the historian, the very existence of "lines" written in Yiddish, like the mere fact of social organization on a Jewish basis, signify—in the light of the grudging toleration of Jewish group aspirations by the Soviet regime—an assertion of Jewish identity and loyalty comparable to more explicit and ambiguous manifestations of Jewish nationhood under freer regimes.<sup>1</sup> When a work has literary merit in addition—and a great deal of meritorious prose and poetry was produced by Yiddish writers in the Soviet Union until the liquidation of Yiddish literature in 1949<sup>2</sup>—the interplay of intrinsic literary factors with external political considerations raises fascinating problems familiar to students of Soviet literature in all languages. In the tribulations of "Unter a ployt" ('Under a Fence'),<sup>3</sup> a story by a master of the caliber of Der Nister,<sup>4</sup> we can see reflected the

<sup>1</sup> This attitude is characteristically the one with which the non-Communist world reacted in 1961 to the appearance of *Sovetish heymland*, a Yiddish quarterly which marked the first Yiddish publication in the Soviet Union since 1948, except for five one-volume collections of writings by Mendele, Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, Bergelson, and Shvartsman in 1959–1960. Similar problems of evaluation face the historian in other areas; cf. my dissertation on Jewish agricultural settlement in Belorussia, *Hakibus hayehudi vehahityashvu hehaklait hayehudit bebyelorusiya hasovyetit (1918–1932)*, Jerusalem, 1961 (mimeographed), with English summary.

<sup>2</sup> For a full bibliography, see Kh. Shmeruk (ed.), *Pirsumim yehudiyim bivrit hamo'asot, 1917–1960*, Jerusalem, 1961. Twelve major writers are anthologized in *A shpigl oyf a shteyn* (ed. Kh. Shmeruk), Tel Aviv, 1964, xxxii+812 pp.

<sup>3</sup> Like the Russian *pod zaborom*, the Yiddish expression *unter a ployt* 'under a fence' (in the SE Yiddish dialect, native to Der Nister, it is homonymous, in the form *inter a ployt*, with the phrase 'behind a fence'), connotes an unconsecrated burial ground—a place for burying dead animals or human outcasts.

<sup>4</sup> Der Nister ('The Concealed One', a term derived from the Kabbalah and opposed to *nigle* 'revealed one'), was the pseudonym of Pinkhes Kahanovitsh, born in Berditshev

struggle of a great literary artist with the solidifying political system in the 1920's, a period which from the vantage of the 1960's is not without its idyllic aspects.

In 1929, there appeared in Kiev a collection of Der Nister's stories under the title *Gedakht* (roughly, 'In Mind'). The book contained some of the author's tales and "visions" which had previously been collected in a two-volume edition published, under the same title, in Berlin in 1922-1923. Like the Berlin collection, the Kiev volume begins with "A mayse mit a nozir un mit a tsigele" ('A Tale of a Hermit and a Goat'),<sup>5</sup> in which Der Nister, after initial gropings, found his particular stylistic manner. In this story, the hermit sets out in search of the Seed of Truth, which he finds after overcoming many obstacles and temptations. The fantastic events, grotesquely recounted in a fairytale-like frame, end on an optimistic note. The Berlin edition of *Gedakht* ends with "A bobemayse oder di mayse mit di melokhim" ('An Old Wives' Tale, or the Story of the Kings'), which also closes on the happy note traditional in folktales, as the hero weds his intended. The Kiev collection, on the other hand, concludes with a new story, "Unter a ployt" ('Under a Fence'), subtitled "Revyu" ('Revue'), which had appeared shortly before in *Di royte velt* (Kharkov, 1929, no. 7). Here, too, is the story of a hermit, but this time he is put on trial and is convicted for having betrayed the principles of hermithood. While the conviction is depicted as just, the visionary sequence of confessions in "Unter a ployt" bears a distinctly pessimistic character. Thus the Kiev *Gedakht* collection, although it presumes to be a representative, retrospective summing-up of the writer's output up to 1929, also clearly expresses a certain direction in development of Der Nister's world view.<sup>6</sup>

on October 20, 1884. He made his literary debut in a book called *Gedanken un motiun*, Vilna, 1907. He left Russia in 1920 and returned in 1926. His best work is the unfinished epic, *Di mishpokhe Mashber* ('The Mashber Family'), vol. I, Moscow, 1939; vol. II, New York, 1947. According to reliable reports he died in a Soviet prison, after the liquidation of Yiddish literature in the U.S.S.R., on June 4, 1950. (*Malaja soveteskaja enciklopedija*, vol. VI, Moscow, 1960, p. 643. This is the only Soviet mention of Der Nister's death, published after an interval of ten years.) Concerning Der Nister's arrest, conviction, and death, see Sheyne-Miryom Broderzon, *Mayn layznsveg mit Moyshe Broderzonon*, Buenos Aires, 1960, pp. 88f., 96. See now also this writer's introduction to Der Nister, *Hanazir vehagdiyah; sipurim, širim, maamarim*, translated by Dov Sadan, Jerusalem, 1963, pp. 9-52. A Yiddish version of the present article appeared in *Di goldene keyt*, no. 43 (1962), pp. 47-68. My thanks are due to Beatrice S. Weinreich for her assistance in the preparation of the English translation.

<sup>5</sup> First published in *Di yidische velt* (Vilna), 1913.

<sup>6</sup> Der Nister's previous collection, *Fun mayne giter* ('Out of My Estates'), Ukrainian State Publishing House, 1929 (Soviet censor's [= *Glawlit*] permit dated November 1928), contained works most of which were written after the Berlin *Gedakht* collection had

The summing-up of 1929 acquires special meaning and value if we consider the fact that "Unter a ployt" marks the end of a period in Der Nister's writing, one which we might concisely label as the visionary, fairytale-like phase. Until 1929 Der Nister's individual path in Yiddish literature was apparent in his special stylistic manner, in the artistic devices and the choice of themes expressed in a unique narrative form. For almost two years after the appearance of the Kiev volume, Der Nister kept his silence. It was not until 1931 that he reappeared in print with *Tseykhenungen* ('Drawings'). This title corresponds to the Russian *očerki*, a genre of timely "feature"-type reportage which underwent lively discussion in the Soviet Union in the twenties and which later became well established in Soviet literature of all languages. Two groups of writers turned to the *očerk*: fledgling worker and peasant correspondents used it for their first steps in literature, while more mature writers, who under Soviet conditions had to renounce their previous non-"proletarian" artistic accomplishments and ideological inconsistencies, employed the *očerk* in an attempt to justify their existence in literature. The latter group included, among others, the Russian symbolist Andrej Belyj and the Yiddish symbolist, Der Nister.<sup>7</sup> Despite a series of characteristic "relapses and deviations" in his 'Drawings',<sup>8</sup> it is apparent that Der Nister's turn appeared. Some of them had seen print before in Soviet Yiddish journals and almanacs, whereas others appeared in the book for the first time.

<sup>7</sup> Der Nister's 'Drawings' include "Tsum shnit" ('To the Harvest') and "A nakht mit a tog" ('A Night and a Day'), both about Jewish peasants in the Crimea. They first appeared in *Di royte velt*, 1931, no. 9-10, pp. 151-173, and were later collected in the volume *Hoyptshtet* ('Capitals'), Kharkov, 1934. Concerning the *očerk* in general, cf. *Literaturnaja enciklopedija*, vol. VIII, Moscow, 1934, p. 381 (s.v.), and now E. Žurbina, *Isskustvo očerka*, Moscow, 1957. The debates about the *očerk* of the early 1930's are reviewed by L. Tsart, [In the Struggle for a Proletarian *očerk*], *Der shtern* (Minsk), 1931, no. 10-11, where information about the first Yiddish *očerkisty* will also be found. Of the peculiar character of some *očerk* writers, Tsart said: "And we may already note numerous instances of writers who, bankrupt in their ideology and hence in artistic creativity, accept a 'social assignment' and write *očerki*" (p. 44). In the sequel he specifically mentions Andrej Belyj and Der Nister and finds that their passage to the *očerk* "yielded a number of sad results" (*ibid.*). Andrej Belyj's *očerki* appeared in book form as *Veter z Kavkaza*, Moscow, 1929.

<sup>8</sup> The "deviations" were pointed out in a general way by L. Tsart (see preceding footnote). M. Dublet dwelt on them in detail in his article, [From Mystical "Estates" to Socialist Capitals], *Farmest* (Kiev), 1935, no. 10. The deviations are said to consist, in the main, of "encounters" with the shades of dead writers, dreams "detached from reality," etc. A deviation characteristic of Der Nister's *očerk* is a digression in "Moskve" ('Moscow'), which precedes an encounter with Heine's shadow: "Here I beg pardon . . . of all those who oppose any imaginary element in all art, and especially in the art of the *očerk*: here I have transgressed against a commandment of theirs" (*Hoyptshtet*, p. 194).

to a completely unfamiliar genre, after two years of silence, constituted an abrupt turning point in his writing. We hope to show in the present study that 'Under a Fence', dating from 1929, already anticipated this turn and revealed the most intimate sufferings which its author was going through.

Der Nister's work of any period has not yet had the privilege of being subjected to detailed analysis and evaluation by Yiddish literary criticism. Hardly a beginning has been made in the interpretation of his tales and visions of the pre-Soviet period or of his "Drawings." The complex problems connected with Der Nister's place in Yiddish literature have been disposed of with generalities that do little to help us understand his manner and the complicated formal and content structure of his work.<sup>9</sup> It is all the more curious, therefore, that it was precisely 'Under a Fence' that evoked a sharp discussion among Soviet Yiddish critics.<sup>10</sup>

The editors of *Di royte velt* announced the forthcoming publication of Der Nister's story in a preceding issue (no. 5-6) and gave it the following introduction:

Der Nister is one of our most original artists; although, because of his themes and the manner of his writings, he requires interpretation, and

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the writings about Der Nister cited in Z. Reyzin's *Leksikon*, Vilna, vol. 2, 1930, p. 584. Some concrete but awkward attempts at interpretation will be found in the works of Soviet Yiddish critics: B. O. (B. Orshanski), [Stylized Abomination: Concerning the Berlin Edition of *Gedakht*], in *Der shtern* (Minsk), 1925, no. 1; Kh. Dunets, [About a Faded Uniform Without a General]—a kind of review of *Fun mayne giter*—in *Der shtern*, 1930, no. 1. In subsequent retrospective accounts outside the USSR, this period was also treated casually. Cf. N. Mayzl's introductions to *Di mishpokhe Mashber* (New York, 1948) and to Der Nister's *Dertseylungen un eseyen* (New York, 1957). The same must be said of Sh. Nizer's paper, [The Nister], in *Zamlbikher* no. 8 (New York, 1952). A closer approach to the Nister problem was achieved by M. Dubilet in his essay in *Sovetische literatur* (Kiev), 1940, no. 5. His tracing of influences of Russian symbolism upon Der Nister's work and his analysis of certain formal features of his writings are very much to the point. But his paper is fragmentary and schematic, and suffers, above all, from adherence to Soviet literary axioms which prevented him from appreciating Der Nister's work prior to 1929 without constant reference to "history's verdict" against symbolism. The only attempt at an analysis of the Nister's style is A. Zaretski, [The Nister's *un* (= 'and')], *Shriftn [fun der Katedre far yidisher kultur bay der Alukrainisher Visnshafteleker akademye, literarische un filologiske sektsyes]*, Kiev, vol. I, 1928. But his syntactic analysis of Der Nister's peculiar use of the word 'and' failed to consider its relation to the symbolist inversion (a matter discussed by Dubilet); only in passing does Zaretski mention, toward the end of his paper, that the genesis of the pattern must be sought "in certain Hebrew styles." The whole matter remains in need of detailed investigation.

<sup>10</sup> I have not succeeded in finding a single response to the Soviet edition of *Gedakht*, or to the story 'Under a Fence', outside of the borders of the U.S.S.R. In Mayzl's Nister bibliography, appended to the New York edition of *Dertseylungen un eseyen* (cf. preceding footnote), the book is not even mentioned.

is accessible only to selected individuals, he is unfailingly interesting. His new work, 'Under a Fence,' is marked by all the features of Der Nister's work. It is a ring of allegoric and symbolic tales, mutually intertwined, expressed in a rich, rhythmic language. According to the problem which it treats, it is a kind of confession, a renunciation of the idealistic view of the world, and it marks a certain break in Der Nister's writing. The matter invites reflection and profound consideration. This may be the beginning of a search by Der Nister of a new path that would link him with reality and give him access to broader circles.<sup>11</sup>

The publication of the story subjected the editors of the journal to vigorous attack. *Di royte velt* was a fellow-travelling journal, officially unconnected with the Jewish Section of the Organization of Proletarian Writers in the Ukraine. But in printing 'Under a Fence,' the editors had gone too far, even for a forum of this type. Their compliments for Der Nister, although coupled with a forecast of a "new path" in his writing, evoked sharp protest. A. Vevyorke attacked not only Der Nister, but symbolism in general, as well as any other literature intended for select individuals. In the Kharkov daily *Der shtern*, there appeared an open letter from a "comrade in Odessa" inquiring why Der Nister was published at all.<sup>12</sup>

The editors of the journal, forced to defend themselves, declared that "there had been times, and not so long ago, when such persons as are now disparaging Der Nister considered him one of the greatest phenomena in our modern literature." The tendency of the disputed story, they continued, was clear: "A renunciation of idealism and transition to materialism." Finally, the editors referred to the Party's policy toward fellow-travelling writers which justified the publication of Der Nister's work.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Di royte velt*, 1929, no. 5-6, pp. 207f. Apparently the author of the editorial statement, which was introduced as a regular feature beginning with that issue of the journal, was the new editor, Shakhne Epshteyn. This cultural leader and literary critic had returned to the Soviet Union from the United States shortly before and was attempting to enliven the journal with a new department.

<sup>12</sup> Vevyorke's protest appeared in *Di royte velt*, 1929, no. 9, pp. 171ff. The letter to *Der shtern* is mentioned in the Editor's Column of the same issue, p. 191. Concerning the journal *Di royte velt* and its fellow-traveling character, cf. *Literaturnaja enciklopedija*, vol. IX, Moscow, 1935, p. 744.

<sup>13</sup> *Di royte velt*, 1929, no. 9, pp. 188-191. Mention is made there of the resolution of the Communist Party Central Committee, still in force at the time, "Concerning the Policy of the Party in the Field of Artistic Literature" of June 18, 1925. This resolution limited the claims of the proletarian literary groupings to dominance over Soviet writing. It proclaimed a number of premises for fellow-traveling writers. But both sides

While this discussion was in progress, there appeared in Kiev the volume *Gedakht*. In an introduction, Y. Nusinov dwelt on the story in question. In this "edifying fable," he saw a reflection of the intellectual's fate. "All his life the intellectual boasted of his nationalism, his individualism, his search of God, his socialist-Menshevist revolutionary nature; in the light of the great revolutionary effort, this turned out to be historical mildew. Der Nister expresses the present mood of such a 'saint' of yesteryear in his most recent story, 'Under a Fence'."<sup>14</sup>

As far as we have been able to ascertain, the controversy over the story was concluded with a clear judgement by Y. Bronshteyn: "'Under a Fence' is one of the most reactionary tales written by Der Nister. I declare this with full responsibility, even if this will cause me to be excluded from the circle of select individuals."<sup>15</sup>

were able to interpret the resolution in their own favor. The document, and the Proletarian literary movement in general, are analyzed by Edward J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature, 1928-1932*, New York, 1943. As far as Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union is concerned, we do not yet have as much as an account of the internal struggles. A highly tendentious but informative survey will be found in A. Abtshuk's book, *Etyudn tsu der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur-bavegung in F.S.S.R., 1917-1927*, vol. I, Kharkov, 1934 (a second volume never appeared, since Abtshuk "vanished" during the purges of 1936). The year 1929 was marked in the Soviet Union by a series of intensified campaigns and persecutions of fellow-traveling writers. The most famous incident is the Pilnyak affair (cf. V. A. Aleksandrova, ed., *Opal'nye povesti*, New York, 1955, pp. 6f.). The Ukrainian aspect of the problem is discussed by George S. N. Luckyj in *Literary Politics in the Soviet Ukraine, 1917-1934*, New York, 1956. Yiddish literature in that year had a "campaign" of its own. Leyb Kvitko, a Yiddish poet (born about 1890, executed 1952) in that year published a satirical piece against Moyshe Litvakov, the official tone setter of Soviet Yiddish literature. An acrid anti-Kvitko outcry ensued. The materials on this development are gathered in my mimeographed booklet, *Mavo lesifrut yidiš bivrit hamo'asot, homer kriah leši'ur vetargil*, part A, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1957, pp. 34-42. Kvitko was a close friend of Der Nister's. While émigrés they worked together in the Soviet trade agency in Hamburg and may have returned to the Soviet Union together.

<sup>14</sup> *Gedakht*, Kiev, 1929, p. xvi. Yitskhok Nusinov was professor of literature in Moscow and worked also in Yiddish criticism. It was with him, in effect, that the famous campaign against "cosmopolitans" in literary criticism began in 1948 (cf. R. M. Hankin, "Postwar Soviet Ideology and Literary Scholarship," in *Through the Glass of Soviet Literature*, ed. E. J. Simmons, New York, 1953, pp. 265ff.). Let it be mentioned in passing that there is no sense in accusing Der Nister of Menshevism or nationalism in connection with 'Under a Fence'. It is safe to say that until 1929, Der Nister was perhaps the most "universal" of the Yiddish writers; his definite inclination toward Christian motifs and problems is a case in point.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from his book, *Farfestikte pozitsyies* (Moscow, 1934, p. 251), where the statement appears in an essay with the characteristic title, [A Difficult Occupation, or, a Terrible Tale of How Der Nister Became a . . . Materialist and "Some Marxists"

This discussion reveals quite vividly the situation of a writer like Der Nister at the end of the 1920's in the Soviet Union. It was the situation of a hunted man who had to "renounce" something and "make a transition" to something else if he intended to remain a writer. For someone who was considered an unreserved symbolist, there was no other way out whatever.<sup>16</sup> But the discussion is also characterized by the diametrically opposed views which were voiced in it. Some saw in 'Under a Fence' the desired break, while others found the same tale to be "the most reactionary" ever produced by this writer. While these opposite views may reflect a difference in the ideological and emotional attitudes to Der Nister's work, the great distance between them nevertheless remains a mystery, even if we take into account the fact that it is a symbolist work that is involved. None of the critics so much as tries to justify his opinion by a concrete analysis of the text. Is it indeed impossible to discover the meaning of Der Nister's 'Under a Fence' from the tale itself? Could it be that Der Nister himself intended a possibility of opposite conclusions?

The place of 'Under a Fence' in the creative development of Der Nister makes it particularly important that a detailed analysis of the story be attempted. In a broader perspective, such an analysis can also help to throw light on a specific stage in the history of Soviet Yiddish literature.

\*

"My sorrow is deadly . . .

"And only you, my daughter can feel and understand me."<sup>17</sup>

Ceased to Be Marxists] (dated November 1929). Italics are in the original. Yashe Bronshteyn was the outstanding proletarian critic in Soviet Yiddish literature; born in 1906, he "vanished" during the purges of 1937.

<sup>16</sup> At a meeting of Yiddish writers in Moscow toward the end of 1925, where a common platform was discussed for collaboration between all Yiddish literary groups, a resolution was prepared which contained the following point: "That Symbolism and Mysticism, which are reactionary and obsolete methods, are organically foreign to the working class and can certainly not serve as a method for a literature founded on revolutionary concreteness" (quoted according to Abtshuk, *op. cit.*, p. 144). Even the excellent Yiddish poet Dovid Hofshsteyn (born 1888, shot 1952) had to "take his revenge" of symbolism and of Der Nister in the same spirit: "Yiddish symbolism has a rich history, generations long. But its pitiful metamorphosis here in the Soviet Union is an idle heritage and it contains no further trace of social timeliness. A stunned, frightened individual (the Nister) perspired to tie his vague searchings to the stylistic vestiges of the khasidic movement, until he himself was caught in these stylistic nets" ([How?], *Prolit* [Kiev], 1928, no. 3, p. 45).

<sup>17</sup> *Gedakht*, Kiev, 1929, p. 272. It is to this edition that the page references hereinafter apply. A comparison between the text of the story in the journal *Di royte velt* and in the collected volume turned up no changes except for the correction of a few misprints. The text of the story is now available in the anthology cited in f.n. 2 above, pp. 186-217.

Thus begins 'Under a Fence', a confession of a respected middle-aged scholar addressed to his own daughter. With profound regret, tinged with sarcasm, he tells her about his amorous failure with a circus equestrienne, Lili. The circus environment in which the scholar found himself "with a bouquet of last flowers from his garden" and "with whatever he had left of love" is described in detail. The equestrienne accepts his gifts, without, however, disguising her contempt for the strange suitor. During the scholar's visit in Lili's dressing room, a conflict develops with the circus athlete. The athlete ridicules the scholar and throws him out of the dressing room.

This episode, which does not occupy more than two pages out of forty, is depicted by fully "realistic" means and gives the impression of an "actual" occurrence.

After the scholar's departure from the circus "through labyrinthine-dark little corridors" there begins a kaleidoscopic vision of intoxication and dream, which again concludes with a "realistic" closing of the frame. The scholar awakens in dirt under a fence and "recalls" that "not far from the circus he had come upon a bar and probably drank and after drinking probably set out for home and did not reach it . . . fell asleep and dreamt the preceding" (p. 311). A policeman takes him home, where his daughter attends to the sick, humiliated father after his strange confession to her. Thus closes the frame which is supposed "realistically" to justify everything that will appear in the "revue." The revue itself consists of dramatized, personified visions portraying the inner struggles and debates of the principal character with himself.

The device of a confession, or a revue, for presenting the inner contradictions and conflicts of a hero had been used by Der Nister before. We find it in earlier stories (for example, "Muser" and "Gekept")<sup>18</sup> and in his novel, *Di mishpokhe Mashber*. In "Shiker" ("Drunk") the entire story is little but a conversation recounting events that had befallen a drunken man, his metamorphosis, and his double.<sup>19</sup> In *Di mishpokhe Mashber*, Srole Gol is several times 'led into' intoxication, in order to have him disclose his inner turmoil in conversations with his bottle.<sup>20</sup> Der Nister's method thus prepares the reader, by means of a "realistic" portrayal of a special physiological state of a character (drunkenness or sleep) for an

<sup>18</sup> Both in *Gedakht*, vol. II, Berlin, 1923, pp. 9-51. Neither of these pieces was reprinted in the Soviet Union.

<sup>19</sup> *Fun mayne giter*, pp. 83-124, previously published in the almanac *Ukraine*, Kiev, 1926. This story, too, is of great significance as an expression of Der Nister's mood and of his creative method immediately on his repatriation to the Soviet Union.

<sup>20</sup> *Di mishpokhe Mashber*, vol. I, New York, 1943, pp. 210ff., 278ff.

internal, intimate debate of the character with himself. As a rule, the contradictory principles within a character are presented in personified form. This device is hardly new in literature. The figure of "double" which is never brought to the point of physical separation from the character, is represented as a real, live character. It is a temporary, pathological splitting of ego called into being by the liberated consciousness of the character while intoxicated or dreaming. Famous examples of this method appear in Dostoevski's *Brothers Karamazov* (in the chapter about Ivan's argument with the devil) and in Hermann Hesse's *Der Steppenwolf*.<sup>21</sup>

Although in Der Nister's story, 'Under a Fence', the explicit reference to intoxication and dreaming does not come until the end, one can trace the succession of gradually increasing stages of intoxication, which frees the scholar's inhibition in increasing measure, until his imagination is liberated in a self-disparaging confession. The feeling of guilt, the driving force of the confession, seeks redemption in punitive visions. The three-stage process of guilt-confession-punishment which we find in 'Under a Fence' was a favorite with the Nister:<sup>22</sup>

triplicate structure

1. In the frame of the revue, at the inception of inebriation, the motivation is provided by the guilt feelings which a father, turning to a strange woman, bears toward his daughter. This is the point of departure for the confession, which is resolved at the end of the frame and of the revue by the punishment of "actually" wallowing under a fence.

2. The scholar's guilt feelings are particularized further by a twofold self-revelation before one of his pupils. The vision of an accident involving the daughter and caused by the father is resolved in a vision of death by stoning. All of this takes place in a state of inebriation.

3. At a dream trial, the accused confesses to the court and is punished by burning.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Cf. M. M. Baxtin, *Problemy tvorčestva Dostoevskogo*, Leningrad, 1929. A number of observations contained in that book served as a starting point for my approach to Der Nister's work. Baxtin's analysis of the "dramatic confession" and of the "self-consciousness turned to dialogue" in Dostoevski's work apply most aptly to Der Nister, too. In this connection it is worth pointing out Der Nister's admiration of Dostoevski (cf. *Hoyptshtet*, p. 107). A revised edition of Baxtin's book, entitled *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, appeared in Moscow in 1963.

<sup>22</sup> M. Dubilet pointed to the tradition of folk tales in connection with the number three in the construction of Der Nister's stories (*Sovetshe literatur*, 1940, no. 5, p. 156).

<sup>23</sup> In order properly to understand the meaning of this gradation, one may cite a direct pronouncement by Der Nister concerning dream and reality. In his story "Muser" (*Gedakht*, vol. II, Berlin ed., p. 14), after listening to a fable, the writer says: "It is foolishness and dubious history." The porcelain dog replies: "You do *not* believe in histories [= stories], but you do believe in dreams, don't you? Well then, here is a dream

As was said earlier, the revue begins after the scholar leaves the circus. The scenery (to use a term appropriate to the notion of revue) changes suddenly. The scholar, at home, is visited by a disciple. His appearance on the "stage" begins with a characteristic knock at the door and the exchange: "May I?" "Come in." This is also the way the scene in Lili's dressing-room had begun. The scholar is at this point in an initial stage of intoxication. He engages his pupil in a theoretical discussion about love, but does not tell him of the incident with the equestrienne; the brakes of consciousness are still too powerful. However, this episode is, without doubt, already beyond the "realistic" tone of the initial scene and is the first level of the ensuing visions. The dialogue is couched in the form of an ordinary conversation between a teacher and his pupil. The scholar still speaks sensibly, but the true nature of the scene is determined by the oddity of the topic for such a conversation, even if the discussion does not go beyond general principles.

In the following episode the scholar loses his awareness of "his place and status" and sees himself as "a comedian and in leotards," as a circus equestrian. Together with Lili, he does a turn on horseback before a full circus. What had separated the scholar from the equestrian is overcome by means of a dream transformation. The differences of "place and status" are blurred. His daughter, too, is to enter the same status and to achieve intimacy with Lili. The transformed equestrian now performs an act with both, Lili and his daughter riding the same horse. Lili slips and causes an accident: the daughter falls and fractures her skull.

The scenery changes once more: the scholar returns home with his bandaged daughter. Once more there is a knock on the door and the question, "May I?" Again the pupil comes to visit. After the preceding episode, which was already free of the censorship of the conscious, the pupil's second visit takes place in a new situation. The entire city has heard of the accident. The pupil finds no explanation for his teacher's circus performance. "What were you doing on a horse, and how come you

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for you." It should be noted that although certain parts of *Der Nister's* works lend themselves to Freudian interpretation, that aspect is not considered in the analysis which follows. What is under consideration is a literary work and not a clinical document. More relevant, perhaps, is the question whether *Der Nister* was acquainted with Freud's theory of dreams and constructed his dream visions accordingly. 'Under a Fence' contains some fairly strong indications of such a possibility. The feeling of guilt is the principal structural element of the entire revue and its development determines the construction of the piece. But *Der Nister* did not intend to create an illustration of Freud's theory. In this connection, cf. the treatment of dreams in literature by William Y. Tindali, *The Literary Symbol*, New York, 1955, pp. 156ff.

were riding, and no one can understand. . . ." No one believes in the transformation of the scholar. "They say that the circus director must have disguised one of his servants to look like you . . ." And, above all, the question: "What does all this mean and what shall I tell my friends, your pupils?" (pp. 280f.). The scholar can only offer confirmation: "It is true; and here is proof, and here is my daughter lying in bed."

The scene changes again. A wall of the room opens. A hail of rocks pours on the scholar and there is shouting: "You old fornicator, and sold your daughter as a circus whore . . ." This episode is the climax of the second stage of the guilt-punishment sequence and serves as a transition to the next vision. Up to now the drunken man had been reacting to auditory stimuli, he had "heard" the knocking at the door. It does not matter that in "reality" this led to his feeling of being stoned during the vision. One can, however, here trace the transition to sleep and dream (p. 282).

. . . And one of the stones, a very pointed one, hit my head, and wounded me and stunned me, and I fell unconscious and I sensed nothing except that my head was bleeding, and that as the blood oozed I felt easier, and I felt emptyish and lighter.

And suddenly, and I was no longer in our room, but as if a stranger in a court-room. . . .

The visionary sees himself as an accused man, completely losing his bond with his "real" self. He is now an ex-hermit in circus leotards. He is tried by the senior judge, his former teacher Medardus, of the school for hermits, along with his own pupils. The courtroom scene consists of several parts: the speech by the accused, the judgment, and the accused's justification of the verdict.

During the proceedings, the hermit tells about his transformation. Once, while alone in his hermit's tower chamber, when "one by one, one by one, the servants had begun to leave us, and after the servants also the weaker students, and those remaining were unable to criticize those who were leaving or to accuse them of anything," there appeared before his eyes "a wall-and-dust person." This apparition shows the hermit a father, a mother and a child, all made of straw. All three of them lie swooning on a bed, the father nursing the child. In the father the hermit recognizes himself. To the question, "What am I doing here?" he receives the following answer from the dust apparition: "You, it is your straw and your straw workings, yours and of all the brethren's of your ilk, and your straw life produced this type of children, and you nurse them but you have nothing to nurse them with, and you toss and you turn . . ."

The man of dust once more shows him his teacher, Medardus, who turns into a bird with a face resembling the man of dust. The bird crows and laughs dust.

Stunned by his visions, the hermit, obeying the man of dust, sets fire to the straw wife and the tower, and leaves the hermitage together with the man of dust and the straw child. On the street the man of dust performs new tricks. Elegantly clothed, he is now wearing a top hat and carrying a baton "like a conductor's or a magician's." To the surprised street audience the dust man recounts the hermit's deed—his burning of the woman and the house. He justifies him and reads from a "prophecy and clairvoyance manual" that he had taken along from the tower (p. 296):

First, it says [the prophecy], and he will be poor and no longer fit for anything, and he will draw his livelihood from a basket of ridicule which he will carry about—ridicule of himself "and his teachings and teachers of yesterday, a basket of blasphemies for sale." "Secondly, it says, and with all his paths tried and with his errands run, only one action will be left to him—to go to the circus and the tightrope . . ." "Thirdly, says the prophecy, and let him take this up in time, and let him associate with rope dancers and magicians and learn their trades from them, because only from them will he be able to improve his last bit of luck . . ."

"And fourthly, says the clairvoyant, and let him be prepared to pay for this with everything, with the shirt off his back, with the hair of his head, eyes and with all that he holds dearest and whatever he possesses because otherwise he might as well immediately and upon his doorstep and before he departs from his house, dig himself a grave.

"Who? The last hermit! . . ."

The dust man's next trick consists of transforming the straw child into the scholar's daughter, dressed as a dancer. He leads them into the circus and the circus owner hires them; it will make good publicity: "if the billboards announce that so and so . . . the famous hermit . . . of that well known hermitage . . . will perform today, the circus will certainly be full" (p. 300).

On the dust man's advice, the hermit is given the equestrienne, Lili, as a partner, in order to attach him to the circus. And he counsels further, as if to materialize the prophecy, that a trial of the hermits be enacted in the circus, with Medardus in charge. In the enacted trial, which ends with the burning of the hermits and of their teacher, the ex-hermit plays the chief judge and Lili the hangman.

Lili, however, cannot stand the hermit-scholar's daughter, who displays great equestrian talent. Her jealousy leads to the accident which befalls the daughter, which was already described in an earlier episode of the

revue. This time the father knows that Lili failed to extend her hand to his daughter at the proper instant.

After a concluding statement, in which the ex-hermit admits to treachery, comes the verdict and the earlier scene is repeated, except that this time the ex-hermit is himself burned. Lili lights a cigarette from his ashes. Medardus and his pupils, as his mourners, remove their shoes. And the last hermit speaks from the ashes (p. 310):

Arise, my teacher and my pupils, for I have received what I have deserved and I have brought you shame, and you have made ashes of me and our score is even, and all are as *nothing* . . . and the circus, too, must not mourn, because what kind of circus man am I anyway, and if you had not cleared me away *now*, the circus-owner would himself have thrown me out, for he kept me, after all, only on account of my daughter, and if not for my daughter (because injured), what does he need me for, and what damned good am I? . . . and Lili, too, will certainly shed no tears over me, because I never meant anything to her, and especially now that she has freed herself from my daughter, of what value am I to her and why fuss over me. . . . Arise, teacher and pupils!

After this justification of the verdict the scholar awakens in dirt under a fence.

In summarizing the content of 'Under a Fence,' we have laid special stress on the construction scheme in which one of Der Nister's principal characteristics is displayed. The descriptive portions were omitted and the quotations were selected mainly for the sake of the attempted interpretation, which follows.

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The wall-and-dust-man is one of the central figures in the speech delivered by the last hermit in the trial portion of the revue. He is the actual cause of his guilt. It is he who brought him to the circus and led him to Lili. He is a constant unmasker; knowing exactly what the hermit is thinking and what ails him, he can take advantage of his weaknesses and lead him according to his whim. He is capable of subjecting the hermit's values to public ridicule. Omniscient and omnipotent, he is able to change his appearance instantly. At the same time, however, he is highly intimate with the last hermit and solicitous about him. "He was faithful to me and he really wanted to see me well adjusted to life" (p. 305). This is undoubtedly a personification of that part of the hermit's self which embodies a number of satanic, Mephistophelian attributes. Certain features suggest a resemblance between the dust man and figures in other "visions" of Der Nister.

In "Shiker" ('Drunk'), the vision is the reincarnated soul. There, too, the problem concerns values that have lost their power and meaning. In that story their transformation is brought about by the drunken man reincarnated.

"What do you have there in the sacks?" The drunken man smiles and blushes and hesitates, as it were, to give any response; however, when the reincarnation asks again, the drunken man does answer, still embarrassed: "I have saved and gathered good deeds in the sacks..." "Is that so?" says the reincarnation, "and what, for example?" "Quietness, humility, and more and etc.," answers the drunken man. "I see," says the reincarnation. "Can you demonstrate these things?"

And he can, and he goes ahead and unties one sack after another, and does not himself look into the sacks while untying them. But behind him the reincarnation watches and he does look in, and after he has seen one sack, another and a third, he cries out and says:

"But look, it is only mold that I see in your sacks..."<sup>24</sup>

Here we have the personification of Doubt, which is capable, in moments of weakness, of transforming all of the most cherished and intimately acquired values into straw and mold. This is a cynical denial of everything, an ability to demonstrate and prove that good deeds of the accumulated kind, or attachment to wife and child, have no foundations. From this point it is only a short road to betrayal of everything.

The comedian in "Gekept" ('Behaded') has exactly the same functions. In the course of the story the clown and the shadow are introduced as counterparts of the comedian. The clown is in the head of the central figure, Adam; he is his headache, who can tell him much about "his possessions." He, too, can transform himself into a traveling dervish or into a magician with his wand. Before the arrival of Adam's master, a figure parallel to Medardus in 'Under a Fence', the comedian says to Adam:

I am speaking of your master... and soon midnight will be upon us, and he will appear before you here, in this room, along with his companions, and your great respect for him can already be sensed, and your fear and deference are already apparent on your face and as for me, you will drive me back into your head, and I shall watch the occurrence here through a crack in your eyes, and I shall have to observe and keep silent, and listen and not utter a word and be a mute witness, and not interrupt the entire deception, and be forbidden to interfere...

"Comedian!"<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Fun mayne giter*, pp. 91f.

<sup>25</sup> *Gedakht*, vol. II, Berlin ed., pp. 32f.

The negating function of the comedian is apparent. Even when Adam's contrary principle prevails, the comedian can plague him with doubt and expose the "deception." But Adam, at least, was still able to denounce his dust man as a comedian and to learn, from his master, how to answer him. The last hermit in 'Under a Fence' has lost this ability, although he does appreciate his comedian's essence. It is his submission to the dust man that constitutes his guilt feeling in the trial portion, the chief motif of the revue.

Until 'Under a Fence' Der Nister's characters generally were without proper names. They are hermits, itinerants, saints, wanderers, old men, a green man, "a" man, Adam, Der Nister himself,<sup>26</sup> the master, King of Aces and Queen of Myth, a drunkard, clowns, ghosts, a witch, demons, and the like. In 'Under a Fence', however, there appear two figures who have proper names: the equestrienne, Lili, and Medardus, the teacher of the hermits. This is an innovation for the Nister. It is safe to assume that these names have a special meaning and function beyond that of identifying the *dramatis personae*. Their function is to broaden the characters of their bearers through associations.

The name, Lili, is similar in sound, and hence associated with, Lilith—the traditional female demon who makes men stray from the path of righteousness. The seductive role played by Lili in 'Under a Fence', and her attitude as a whole, fit well into the traditional conception of Lilith. The coupling of the dust man with Lili in the plot of the revue suggests the couple of the Devil (Sam) and Lilith. Here a comparison with Y.-L. Peretz' poem *Monish* suggests itself. In both cases the goal of the demons' efforts is similar. In the one instance we find a student, in the other, a scholar. Both in Peretz' poem and in Der Nister's story the hero is tempted to blasphemy and is punished for it. The male and female devils embody materiality and carnal passion, which "in reality" are empty and whose function is merely to set up temptations which should be resisted. This characteristic of the dust man is revealed in 'Under a Fence' in Medardus' statement at the end of the trial (p. 308): "... that men of dust and similar creatures are neither men nor creatures, and merely visions, and are only born in the sick minds of hermits, and to allow oneself to be led by them is shameful, and to follow them in their paths—disgraceful."

The association Lili-Lilith is especially significant in conjunction with the figure of a hermit, whose task and profession it is to withdraw from

<sup>26</sup> In "Naygayst" ('New Spirit', *Fun mayne giter*, p. 195) the visionary prophet, "Pinkhes the son of Menakhem the Cohen," is none other than Der Nister himself, even without the cover of his *nom de plume*. As almost any Yiddish reader would know, *odom* in Hebrew signifies not only 'Adam' but also 'man'.



worldly passions and pleasures. In the circus atmosphere, Lili(th) exerts her fascination even—or perhaps particularly—on such people as scholars and hermits. The powers wielded by a circus woman have interested Franz Kafka, Thomas Mann and Marc Chagall. Like all of them, Der Nister seems inhibited in his acceptance of her impact, and channels it into the grotesque.<sup>27</sup>

More complex is the essence of the second bearer of a proper name in 'Under a Fence'. Medardus was a Christian saint of the sixth century. There is no direct motivation for his appearance in Der Nister's revue. On the other hand, Medardus is also the hero of E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Die Elixiere des Teufels, Nachgelassene Papiere d. Bruder Medardus, eines Kapuziners*. Hoffmann's Medardus is one of the most complicated alter ego figures in the works of this German romanticist. Two opposing natures vie with one another in Hoffmann's Medardus the anchoritic with the wordly and sinful. Medardus leaves the monastery and casts himself into the vortex of pleasure, passion, sin, and crime. He returns to the Church but, pursued by his alter ego, finds no peace, no matter where he turns. Medardus and his doubles embody the demonic dualism in man's soul.

The conception of such a dualism is quite close to Der Nister's view of the world and of man, to which we have alluded in passing. But in Der Nister's works, a clear apotheosis of the dualistic world-view is elevated to the level of a peculiar cosmic eschatological myth.

In "Gekept" the master tells Adam the story of the creation. The "all-bridge" (*al-brik*) which leads from "the deepest abyss to the highest temples" was created along with other things on that famous Friday at twilight.<sup>28</sup> The "all-bridge" at its creation "had its feet in the abyss and its head in a brightly lit temple." Satan stimulates the bridge to doubts

<sup>27</sup> Chagall was well acquainted with the writers of the *Eygnis* group in Kiev, including Der Nister, and illustrated a number of their books. Der Nister's collection of children's stories (*A mayse mit a hon—dos tsigele*, Petrograd, 1917) appeared with Chagall's illustrations. Chagall's pictures in which the circus forms a central theme are well known, but circus motifs often appear in his paintings as part of the background as well. In his drawings published in Yiddish expressionist journals in the 1920's, the circus motif is quite distinct. A lithograph dated 1957 and entitled "The Yellow Clown" (in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam), depicts, in the background, a riding woman; in the center, a yellow clown is being restrained by another woman. The clown regards the horse-woman. The situation is remarkably similar to the one in 'Under a Fence'. As for parallels between Kafka's Trial and 'Under a Fence', a separate treatment would be required. See also Franz Kafka, *Auf der Galerie*, vol. I, New York, 1946, p. 140, and Thomas Mann, *Bekenntnisse des Hochstaplers Felix Krull*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Pirke abot* v:6.

and complaints against the Lord God because of the level of his lower part. "Evil thought" is enough to produce a catastrophe in the world order: that portion of the all-bridge located in the abyss falls away. And "at that very moment the light in its temple darkened." "And because of the sins of the head of the all-bridge and because of the diminution of its light many heads must fall, in order to replenish that temple-light with the light of their own heads. . . ."<sup>29</sup>

One finds in Der Nister's myth definite echoes of the catastrophe and restoration motifs of Kabbalistic eschatology as well as a Christian sacrifice motif. In Der Nister's treatment, the myth is, however, paradoxical compared with the traditional striving toward the restoration of a destroyed state of harmony. It is not to harmony that one looks forward, since there never was any harmony, but rather a return to a joining of temple and abyss. Only then will the world be restored to its original state. Thus the myth of "Gekept" offers an apotheosis of dualism, an eternal clashing of opposites. A tragic state, which does not want harmonious repose, is set up as the ideal. This myth could be used to characterize in a nutshell the main problem of Der Nister's tales. Its heroes are in constant motion; they are eternally seeking and overcoming temptations and obstacles.

We could then, perhaps, conclude that the last hermit's act of betrayal consists in rejecting the dualistic Hoffmannian Medardus principle and in submitting to a single principle—and the negative one, at that. In 'Under a Fence' this idea is symbolized by the act of arson of the hermit's tower and by the trial of Medardus and the hermits. This, however, is merely one possible aspect of the Hoffmannian Medardus-figure in the revue. It is another aspect that can serve as a key to the main problem of 'Under a Fence.'

Der Nister was well acquainted with classical and modern Russian literature.<sup>30</sup> His symbols, despite their roots in tradition and their Jewish

<sup>29</sup> *Gedakht*, vol. II, Berlin ed., pp. 45-49. In his "all-bridge" conception Der Nister may have been influenced by the Russian philosopher N. Berdjajev. In Berdjajev's book, *Smysl istorii* (Berlin, 1923), the image of the bridge between two worlds appears as an important part of the "inner drama" of the Absolute (pp. 58f.). In connection with Der Nister's all-bridge myth it may also be relevant to consider the term *mifologema*, which Berdjajev uses in contradistinction to philosophy (*ibid.*, p. 65).

<sup>30</sup> This is easily apparent from the large number of "encounters" with Russian writers and from the numerous quotations from their works in *Hoyptshtet*. Among others, Pushkin, Gogol, and Dostoevski are mentioned and quoted there, but also Pilnjak and D. Bednyj. The Nister is also known as a master translator of Russian literature into Yiddish; cf. B. Slutski, [On Pilnjak's Stories, Translated by Der Nister], *Di yidische shprakh* (Kiev), 1930, no. 2-3 (no. 21-22), pp. 75-78.

stylistic manner, also show clear traces of Russian symbolism.<sup>31</sup> Hoffmann's influences on Russian literature in general, and particularly on Russian symbolism, are a topic in its own right.<sup>32</sup> We should like to dwell here on an explicitly Soviet aspect of the relations between the German romanticist E. T. A. Hoffmann and a Russian literary school.

Among the various Russian literary groups of the twenties, the Petrograd "Serapion Brethren" (1921-1922) stood out with particular prominence. This group borrowed the name and the motto of their literary credo from another hermit figure of Hoffmann's, named Serapion. Into the frame of his stories, Hoffmann introduced a figure of a worldly man, who convinces himself that he is the martyr, Serapion, and lives a hermit's life in a forest, convincingly denying the reality of his "true" biographical personality and past. In Hoffmann's work this figure represents the Serapion principle of literary creativity—a principle that accepts every kind of fantasy and sees in it the true higher reality. In adopting this principle of Hoffmann's, the Petrograd group proclaimed that their patron was "the creator of the impossible and the unbelievable, was equal to Tolstoy and Balzac." This group, among others, was an expression of protest against the beginnings of the Party's ideological meddling in literature. The Serapion Brethren ran into vigorous attacks from official proletarian criticism and to this day are considered in the Soviet Union to have been one of the most negative manifestations in the Russian literature of the twenties.<sup>33</sup>

Y. Dobrushin, a critic associated with the literary circles to which Der Nister also belonged, mentioned Hoffmann repeatedly in a book published in 1922 and expressed his dismay at the fact that Yiddish literature had not yet witnessed the appearance of a Hoffmann-tale of its own.<sup>34</sup> It is certainly no mere coincidence that at the very same time, in 1922, Hoffmann's story "Nutcracker and Mouse Emperor" was published in Yiddish by the Kiev "Culture League." The translation was due to the Soviet Yiddish writer, Lipe Reznik, who is considered to have been a symbolist and a disciple of Der Nister. This story is also found in Hoffmann's collection "Serapion Brethren," and is one of the clearest and most typical examples of the Serapion principle in literature.

<sup>31</sup> M. Dubilet, *op. cit.*, pp. 155f.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Michel Gorlin, "Hoffmann en Russie," *Etudes littéraires et historiques*, Paris, Institut d'Etudes Slaves, 1957, pp. 189-205. The traces of Hoffmann's fantasies are pursued as far as the works of Blok and Belyj.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the detailed work on this group by William B. Edgerton, "The Serapion Brothers," *American Slavic and East European Review* VIII (1949), 47-64.

<sup>34</sup> Y. Dobrushin, *Gedanken-gang*, Kiev, 1922, pp. 8, 18.

Der Nister undoubtedly was acquainted with the credo of the Petrograd group which was close to him, inasmuch as his entire production clearly shows his proximity to the Serapion principle. We may therefore view the Medardus-figure in 'Under a Fence' as being closely related to the contemporary set of literary problems symbolized in Russia by another hermit of E. T. A. Hoffmann's. Since Serapion's name was by 1929 out of favor, Der Nister replaced it with the name of a different hermit in the works of the same writer.

We feel that Medardus in 'Under a Fence' is a materialization and symbol of a literary credo, and that the ties between this figure and others create a scheme for the entire revue, a scheme of mutually connected associations and sometimes quite transparent allusions. Let us see how, on this assumption, the interrelations of themselves fit into a scheme.

The scholar, the last hermit, represents an intelligent man, an artist or perhaps even a writer, who grew out of the creative principles of the Hoffmannian Medardus-Serapion. External pressures and internal doubts pursue him ceaselessly. His daughter—his one creation up to now, his very own—is betrayed and harmed because of his attraction for Lili—an opposite creative principle, whose place is in the circus, and whose essence is tricks. External pressures are expressed by the loneliness of the last hermit, which inclines him and readies him to accept his own doubts, symbolized by the dust man. He begins to believe in the strawness of his former path. If we re-read the cited passages about the dust man's prophecy and about the hermit's justification of the verdict; and if we keep in mind the status of a fellow-traveling writer, who has not yet managed to adjust to the demands of "proletarian" criticism, the revue acquires a very special significance.

Der Nister had in advance put on trial the possible or the already achieved transformation of a symbolist writer working under Soviet conditions. The feeling of guilt seems to dominate and accompany this transformation. The threefold punishment seems to be justified and at the end the hero finds himself in dirt by a fence. Only his daughter, his creation, remains loyal to him; it is only to her that he can confess, and only she can understand him.

It is superfluous to develop the scheme any further. It will be even more convincing, however, if we dwell for a moment on the specific metaphors through which the opposing principles are presented in 'Under a Fence'.

The circus is characterized by skin-colored leotards, by disrobement and nudity. Lili is dressed in this fashion; the athlete is half-nude. The transformed hermit, again, stands before the court in skin-colored leotards. The subject of bareness oppressed Der Nister in earlier works as well. In

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'A Tale of a Clown and a Mouse and Der Nister Himself', the glass people are an expression of the beastly and vital bases in man. "In this land there is bare flesh and nakedness, and all are undressed, and to dress is shameful, and human clothing disgraceful and man is *not* wanted there while a donkey, on the other hand, is welcome."<sup>35</sup> The people of this land learn their philosophy of life from the donkey. This is a clearly negative attitude to the principle represented by nudity. And again in "Shiker" ('Drunk'), the drunken man and his double, after shedding the superfluous ballast of the past, assume a very different countenance: "Like two magicians . . . their attire and their clothes acquired a trick color, and it is easy and suited to the skin and nothing unnecessary shall impede them, and nothing shall trail after them."<sup>36</sup> Here the trick color is tied in with renunciation of encumbrances, and with a liberation from them—the shedding of the burden of heritage.

And another interesting case of combining comedians with nudity occurs in "Tsum shnit" ('To the Harvest'), one of Der Nister's first *očerki*. This is a report of a visit among Jewish peasants in the Crimea during the height of collectivization and the struggle against the kulaks in 1931. No feature story could at that time be written without referring to the burning rural issues. Der Nister managed to fulfill this requirement, too. On the way to a village, he meets a group of young actors from Moscow, who have come to bring "the directives of the Party, the message of the workers through play and movement." It is they who put on a play in the village about "The Kulak's Secret Agency." Der Nister finds no other name for these actors than *kometryantlekh* ('little comedians'). And these, too, are half-nude when he meets them.<sup>37</sup> It is apparent that disrobement is coupled by Der Nister with comedians, circuses, and magicians; it symbolizes vitality, freedom from burdens, and primitiveness—all concepts foreign to Der Nister and full of negative connotations for him.

Nudity is a concept that occurred in Der Nister's environment in connection with literature. Der Nister and the impressionist, Dovid Bergelson, had been the pillars of the Kiev *Eygnis* ('One's Own') group, which published its collections in 1918 and 1920. In response to a review of the first issue of *Eygnis* by M. Litvakov, Bergelson, in a programmatic article, formulated his literary credo. He sharply criticized the primitive *lubok* ('cheap literary print') and the "naked lines" in the then accepted futuristic and expressionistic revolutionary poetry. As an example of true

<sup>35</sup> *Fun mayne giter*, p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>37</sup> *Di royte velt*, 1939, no. 9–10, p. 154.

art he cited the Nister's story "Tsum barg" ('To the Mountain') in *Eygnis*.<sup>38</sup>

In Yiddish proletarian criticism, the struggle against the theories of the *Eygnis* writers stretched on for many years. As early as 1929 Bronshteyn, at great length, settled his accounts with Bergelson for his negation of (Party-)Line Nudity (*lineyishe naketkeyt*). In his article, 'The Struggle of Styles During the Period of Military Communism', he asks solemnly: "Is not this 'naked' line-hewing style the only one possible for the flaming revolutionary street-song, for the stormy poster, for the noisy revolutionary concert stage?"<sup>39</sup> Let us recall how the last hermit begins his speech before the court in 'Under a Fence' (p. 283):

You have allowed me to speak in self-defense, and I have nothing to defend myself with. And I stand now before you and feel like a turtle

<sup>38</sup> Dovid Bergelson, [Poetry and Social Responsibility], *Bikhervelt* (Kiev), August 1919, no. 4–5. On the character of Vitalism in expressionist lyricism, cf. M. F. E. van Bruggen, *Im Schatten des Nihilismus; die expressionistische Lyrik im Rahmen und als Ausdruck der geistigen Situation Deutschlands*, Paris and Amsterdam, 1946. In this connection, it is worth quoting a stanza of Perets Markish's *Pust un pas* ('Idle'), written in the explicitly expressionist period of his work:

*Ot azoy zikh ale 'n eynem:  
nakht mit meyd, lets mit goylem,  
ferd mit shpringen, fis mit freyen,  
shtrik mit hoyden, layb mit naket,  
kop mit vant un bak mit petsh;  
sopet op di shvartse zoyne,  
gaft mit shtumenish der oylem,  
pinen ferdlekh op in geyen  
goylem shtum zayn broyne bak hit,  
fayft zikh freylekh op der lets.*

(And thus, all together / Night with dames, clown with dummy. / Horses with jumping, feet with rejoicing. / Ropes with swinging, body with naked, / Head with wall and cheek with slaps; / Then the black whore draws her panting breath, / And the public stares mutely. / Horses end their frothing, walking, / Dummy mutely guards his cheek, / The clown takes his leave, whistling.) This is from chapter 12, 'In the Circus', of his poem "Oyfn mark" ('In the market place'), *Pust un pas*, Ekaterinoslav, 1919, p. 83. Another Yiddish expressionist of that period, Meylekh Ravitsh, in 1921 published a collection of *Nakete lider* ('Naked Poems', Vienna), which he himself characterized as "an ode to the male body" (cf. Z. Reyzen, *Leksikon* . . . , vol. IV, Vilna, 1929, p. 89).—The circus and its art, as an expression of a healthy Vitalism and as a contrast to so-called decadent and neurotic weakness, occupies a large place in the life and works of Frank Wedekind. Cf. Arthur Kutscher, *Frank Wedekind—sein Leben und seine Werke*, 3 vols., 1922–1933; esp. vol. I, pp. 146–149; 287–302; and *passim* (see Index *s.v.* "Zirkus"). It is quite possible that Der Nister inserted allusions to Wedekind in 'Under a Fence'. He had certainly had ample opportunity to familiarize himself with the then fashionable Wedekind during his stay in Germany in the 1920's.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted from his book *Atake* ('Attack'), Minsk, 1931, p. 19.

that has stepped out of its portable tower: bare-skinned and naked. . . . And yes, Master Medardus and I came out of my tower and our hermitage . . . and I felt cold . . . and when cold, one cuddles up to any kind of warmth, be it dirt, be it filth, as long as it is a cover . . . and let it be a rag, as long as it is clothing, and let it be leotards, as long as it is a garment. . . . And when hungry and jobless, even clowning is an occupation, and when homeless and roofless even a circus is home, and when things begin to go as they do in a circus, and your life is cheap and serves only to sate the visual lust of strangers, and your soul hangs on a wire and your life is of no importance, is it surprising then that the child, too, is of no importance, and that for a *nothing* and for a snack you can sell it to the tightrope. . . .

The relationship between the skin-colored leotards of the circus and the concrete situation of an artist in the Soviet Union seems to be clear, although Der Nister could equally well have intended either the proletarian placard art, or the futuristic-expressionistic school, or the naturalistic-realistic tendencies in the Soviet literature of the late twenties. All were essentially foreign to the symbolist.

With regard to the period when the Medardus house flourished, the last hermit says: "In your time our tower game shone over neighborhoods and distances." Tower game and hermit's tower are sufficiently transparent allusions from the treasury of the symbolist metaphors. It thus appears that a confrontation of two diametrically opposed literary schools is at the heart of 'Under a Fence'.

Even so the issue is not too simple for Der Nister. One cannot ignore the opposition between the lonely tower of a last solitary hermit, filled with doubts, and the security of a seasoned circus actor in a packed hall. There remains the gnawing question: Is this, then, the way? Is it, after all, only for select individuals? There is no definite answer to this question. Insecurity coupled with hopelessness and with the necessity to submit, out of "hunger and joblessness," to the transformation, increase the depth and horror of the tragedy of the man undergoing the test.

Despite all of the doubts, Der Nister's judgment is, nevertheless, unequivocal. The feeling of guilt is stronger than the doubts, and the threefold punishment appears justified.

"The torment lasts until death. . . ."

\*

The interpretation of 'Under a Fence' attempted in this paper may leave open other alternatives. Our concentration on specific incidents and on a schematic interpretation of the revue may have distorted other possibilities and occasionally overshadowed some other meanings of the

story. On the other hand, it seems that our analysis of a number of incidents in 'Under a Fence' does bring to light a unique and original protest, powerless though it was, of a fellow-traveling Soviet writer of the late twenties. And it may be superfluous to add that Y. Bronshteyn's evaluation of 'Under a Fence' is the only correct one from his point of view.

The fact that 'Under a Fence' represents a turning point in Der Nister's writings now becomes perfectly clear. Der Nister himself had predicted that he would abandon the symbolist's tower. Not all of his prophecies, however, came to pass. The changes in Party policy in the thirties enabled him to find a new writing pattern by which to remain true to himself. *Dimshpokhe Mashber*, although considered a "realistic" piece, hardly fits any straightforward definition of realism. The true values of Der Nister's unfinished epic can be unlocked only with the key of his heritage from the visionary, fairy-tale period in his writings.

We know of no other case other than the vision in 'Under a Fence' in which Der Nister denounced his own values. One horrible prophecy was, however, fulfilled: "The owner of the circus showed the door" and disposed not only of Der Nister but, along with his opponents and friends, of the entire Yiddish literature in the Soviet Union. This exceeded the imagination even of Der Nister's drunken visionary.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Since the preceding paper was written, in 1960, a number of important materials have come to light which are directly relevant to the problems of Der Nister as a Soviet writer and to our interpretation of 'Under a Fence'.

(1) In a letter written in 1934 or so, Der Nister told his brother in Paris:

What I have written so far is now deeply discredited here. It is an unwanted (*geshlogn*) article. Symbolism has no place in the Soviet Union. And I, as you know, have been a symbolist all my life. To pass from symbolism to realism is very difficult for someone like me, who has labored much to perfect his method and his manner of writing. This is not a matter of technique; in this case one must be born anew, as it were, one must turn one's soul inside out.

I have made many attempts. At first nothing succeeded. Now, I think, I am on the right road. I have begun to write a book—in my opinion, and in the opinion of close acquaintances, an important one. I want to devote to this book all the strength in my possession. My whole generation is involved—what I have seen, heard, experienced, and fancied. Up to now I had found it hard to write altogether, because all my time was spent and wasted in earning enough for expenses. From my older things I was not able to realize one kopeck. But now, in connection with the transfer of the publishing houses from Kharkov to Kiev, I am even out of technical work. And yet the writing of my book is a necessity; otherwise I am nothing (*oys mentsh*), otherwise I am erased from literature and from living life. For what it means to be a writer who does *not* write I need not tell you. It means that he does not exist, he is missing from the world. . . .

This candid, shattering statement is one of the rarest documents of this kind which we possess for any Soviet writer. The letter explains Der Nister's struggles from the forced rupture with symbolism (after 'Under a Fence') until the time he found his new path in 'The Mashber Family', the book to which he alludes in the letter to his brother. Insofar as the light cast by the letter on the interpretation of 'Under a Fence' is concerned, comments seem superfluous. (Regarding the letter, its background, and its dating, see my introduction to Der Nister's *Hanazir vehagdiyah* [cf. f.n. 4 above], pp. 13-15, 48f.).

(2) The journal *Sovetish heymland* (Moscow), 1964, no. 1, presented on pp. 3-73 a work by Der Nister entitled "Fun finftn yor" ('From the Fifth Year', i.e. 1905). It is characterized by the editors as a novel, found among Der Nister's unpublished manuscripts. The editor, L. Podryatshik, states in his concluding comments (pp. 74-76) that the manuscript was a very difficult one; a great deal had been erased and revised, and "several pages were struck out by Der Nister," presumably with the intent "to rewrite them later on." But in printing the novel, the editor declares, he "attempted to reconstruct at least a small paragraph [out of the deleted pages!] in order to yield an organic transition to the sequel." The printed text does not indicate the reconstructed passages and does not reveal the principles which governed the posthumous edition of this complicated manuscript (see the photograph of a page, *ibid.*, p. 76).

Although 'From 1905' was printed as a finished piece, the manuscript clearly testifies that Der Nister had interrupted his work on this novel. To determine the time when he worked on this book is of major importance for Der Nister's creative biography and, indirectly, for the interpretation of 'Under a Fence'. According to the testimony of the writer's second wife, cited in Podryatshik's comments, Der Nister "had begun to write this novel at the end of the 1930's." The editorial comments are marked by a clearcut tendency to set the date of the work as late as possible. By this means the discovery of a novel which is realistically consistent and "revolutionary" in an ideological sense helps to "destroy the legend that Der Nister's way of grasping reality remained the way of symbolic interpretation" (*ibid.*, p. 76). But several specific peculiarities of the text seem to suggest that its date must be earlier:

(a) Der Nister had intended to bring his unfortunately unfinished work, 'The Mashber Family', at least up to the revolution of 1905 (according to the first chapter of Book I). It therefore seems impossible that while working on his major book he should have undertaken another novel depicting the same period and having no relation to 'The Mashber Family'. It was in 1934 that Der Nister had begun to work on the major novel, a chapter of which was published in 1935. Accordingly, the novel 'From 1905' appears to be a draft begun by Der Nister prior to 1934 and abandoned when he decided instead to treat this period in his Mashber novel.

(b) The novel 'From 1905' as it appears in the *Sovetish heymland* edition is unambiguously realistic and is marked by an almost hackneyed ideological and artistic conception. This conception fits well the principles of the ruling Soviet

"proletarian" criticism of the period 1928-1932. Apart from his *očerki* of the early 1930's, we do not find any signs in Der Nister's later works of his adjustment to the demands of criticism of those years. It therefore seems to us that 'From 1905' is another piece of evidence regarding Der Nister's struggle for his existence as a writer.

The manuscript may be a remnant of Der Nister's "silent" years, 1929-1931 (before he wrote his *očerki*), or it may be a draft made after his disappointment with the *očerki* but before he began 'The Mashber Family'. It is quite possible that in working on 'From 1905' Der Nister came upon the idea of the Mashber novel. But we cannot exclude the possibility that 'From 1905' represents a draft written before 'Under a Fence', and that its history is reflected in the conversion and betrayal of the writer-scholar-hermit. One thing is certain: Der Nister did *not* complete and did *not* finish the novel 'From 1905' during his lifetime. It follows that he looked upon the work as one of the unsuccessful attempts about which he wrote in the quoted letter to his brother. For the novel is free of any ideological deviations which might have forced the author to keep it in his "drawer." It could have been freely published at any time after Der Nister's return to the Soviet Union, and every Soviet publishing house would have been delighted to accept it.

The quotation from Der Nister's letter to his brother and our attempted dating of the novel 'From 1905' cast fresh light on his story 'Under a Fence' and confirm the direction of our interpretation of this key work.