

Constellating Hebrew and Yiddish Modernism: The Example of Markish and Shlonsky

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An image which sometimes comes to mind when I think of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, particularly poetry, in the early part of the twentieth century is that of two brothers with cups connected by string, one to the one's ear and one to the other's mouth. It is both a sibling and a dialogic conception of the relationship, rivalrous and tenuous, shaky and at times unclear, but sharing a still more intimate bond. This essay takes as its starting point the now thankfully more accepted view of the fundamentally interdependent relationship of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature as the sibling pair. The substance, however, of this investigation is the string. I will offer an analysis of some of the early writings of Avraham Shlonsky and Perets Markish as an exemplary pair in this reconfigured constellation in Jewish modernist poetry. Through a broadly overlapping set of themes and techniques shared by these poets, both the convergences and divergences offer a telling glimpse at the heterogeneous and constantly shifting nature of their modernist literary production while at the same time confirming the family resemblance which allows us to take them together at all.

My basic premise concerning Jewish literary modernisms is the notion that Yiddish and Hebrew literatures¹ were so often reflexes of the same literature. This comes into sharper focus when looking at the substantial and significant overlap in writership and readership in each of these languages. European writers² were participants in the polyglot culture of Jewish Eastern Europe: (in a simplified scheme) Yiddish as the language of personal life, Hebrew (a shorthand for the languages of the sacred texts) as the language of religious life, and one or more co-territorial languages for official life and interactions with the non-Jewish world, in addition to possibly other, non-co-territorial European languages used especially for the reading of contemporary literature. Continental Jewish modernisms were the production of the largely secularized and secularizing inheritors of this multi-lingual, multi-textual cultural environment; and as modernists the distinctions were ripe for blurring.

¹ In discussing these literatures in this way I am referring to the period covered by Benjamin Harshav's literary and historical analysis of the "Modern Jewish Revolution" (see Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993], 3-77), that is, from about 1881.

² By European I am focusing not only on Yiddish writers but also those Hebrew writers born in Europe and reared in the European Jewish cultural nexus. Though some of these Hebrew writers will later have moved to Palestine, I set them apart from the authorship of the autochthonous Palestinian literature of the Yishuv.

Returning to what I referred to a moment ago as Jewish modernisms (particularly in poetry), these comprise a notoriously fuzzy category.³ What I will say about the modernisms through the interwar period is that they are less movements than constantly reconfiguring constellations of poets, often with similar or intersecting – but constantly shifting – poetic tendencies, though sometimes bound together by personal as opposed to professional affiliations. Some promulgated manifestoes outlining poetic creeds, though often enough these served more as part of a new genre to exploit than expressions of rigidly adhered-to dogmata. In most cases the only poetic “rule” was experimentation. These movements constitute a set of cross-cutting streams through the currents of modernism running through European letters in general. However, much like the then newly plastic notion of Jewish identity, each poet could choose to activate, or not, any of the trends in whatever configuration suited him or her.

There are, however, always too many data for a linguistically sensitive and literarily aware poet to absorb. This surely holds for life in modernist literary circles, and certainly for these Jewish authors. For example, despite programmatic pronouncements of the complete renovation of literature and poetic language – according to the Russian Futurists to “throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. etc. overboard from the Ship of the Modern” (from the manifesto “A Slap in the Face of the Public Taste”)⁴ – the use of a textual tradition for Jews was a much more complicated issue. This latter manifesto goes on to excoriate much more brutally the closer contemporary Russian poets of Symbolist and Parnassian tendencies (such as Sologub, Bunin, Blok, etc.). This was a *rhetoric* shared by many Jewish writers. For others, though, including some who mouthed such views, despite sympathy for, and adoption of, certain other Futurist ideas, this particular tenet was tempered. The point was, rather, heterogeneity, experimentation, and innovation. Much like a fusal language, such as Yiddish, these poets developed a fusal poetics which drew elements from a number of movements, though none necessarily in toto. We find in poets such as Perets Markish and Avraham Shlonsky – the primary focus of this essay – a decidedly less baby-with-the-bathwater extirpation of literary heritage. In the case of Shlonsky, for example, even taking into account a more nuanced reading of his manifesto “The Melitsah,” there are brilliant poems of his which are saturated with Biblicality, with quotation and allusions. To be sure, they are often subversive, but they nevertheless in many cases abound. For Markish, too, despite some of his Futurist predilections, in his great poem “The Heap” (“*Di kupe*”), for example, written in the aftermath of the Horodishtsh pogrom which took place on Yom Kippur, 1919, the exigencies of his thematic material as well as the inspiration

³ Ultimately political events in Europe, especially the post-Revolutionary reconfigurations in the Russian empire, and the growth of the Yishuv in Palestine, to take two prominent examples, become increasingly reflected in the ideological and thematic concerns of the poets, to the extent that by mid-century the literary and linguistic lines were completely redrawn.

⁴ Anna Lawton, ed., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51.

of his poetic genius led him to a masterful integration – in this case with subversive, anti-sacral intent – of the themes and language of the Yom Kippur liturgy.⁵

More generally, though, despite commitment to the social and ideological purposes of poetry (the heterotelos) on the one hand – as reflected in Markish’s revolutionary socialism and Shlonsky’s Zionism – and despite a tendency against a more aestheticist notion of art for art’s sake (the autotelos) on the other hand, we find a polytelic sensibility; veins of symbolism run through the work of both of these poets alongside Futurist techniques, and in the case of Markish even more so a profound Yiddish Expressionism.⁶ The common poetic denominator is a pre-occupation with the language itself, its freedom and its possibilities.

The two poets in this discussion present an interesting contrapuntal case.⁷ Both Markish (1895-1952) and Shlonsky (1900-1973) were born in the Ukraine. Despite a year-long stint in Tel-Aviv, Shlonsky spent the war years in the Ukraine. There he was an admirer of Markish’s work and held readings of his poetry. Shlonsky’s commitment to socialist Zionism led him to move to Palestine in 1921. Later he would even host Markish on a visit of his to Palestine. There was most probably a mesh of socialist affinity and, though there were probably no overt influences one on the other, a degree of intersecting and shared poetic sensibilities.

I have chosen Markish and Shlonsky for analysis precisely because of their contact, both literal and figurative, their ideological affinities, and the various points of intersection – as well as divergence – in their poetic styles. I have also confined myself to their earlier work – which is to say the poetry up to the mid-to-late 1920’s – insofar as both of their later works undergo distinct and marked change. In addition, their poetry of *this* period, however, is a complicated web of stylistic and rhetorical strategies, so it is preferable to focus on a few and glimpse the whole through the prism of its parts.

One of the most important thematic tropes of the period was that of territoriality.⁸ Though obviously physically residing in various locales in Eastern

⁵ Seth Wolitz, “A Yiddish Modernist Dirge: *Di Kupe* of Perets Markish” *Yiddish* 6:4 (1987), 56-72.

⁶ The poetic creed of Yiddish Expressionism was: “Our measure is not beauty, but rather terrifyingness (*shoyderlekhkayt*)” (Perets Markish, untitled opening manifesto, *Khalyastre* 1 [Warsaw, 1922]). Melekh Ravitsh, the most temperate of the Expressionist triumvirate – Markish, Grinberg, and Ravitsh (Y. Y. Zinger is a special case) – published a manifesto entitled “The new naked poetry: Seven Theses” in the first issue of Grinberg’s journal *Albatros*. In the final thesis from that manifesto he states (in almost as wantonly a Christological move as Grinberg’s famous poem “Uri Tzvi before the Cross”): “VII. ‘And they hung him upon the tree.’ Naked hangs the word upon the cross. The proud INRI laughs from it. It wanted to be the king and the redeemer from pain. From its head and feet drips blood. But the secret of pain, which lives in it, and the secret of joy it takes down into the grave. But it did not cry out: – ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!’ – Still you served beauty, still you served the lie, I have forsaken you,” (*Albatros* 1 [1922], 16) which is to say, he is no poet who serves beauty!

⁷ The following material on the two poets’ contact I take from a conversation with Dr. Yael Chaver whose thoughtful and incisive research has already linked these two figures and whom I thank for it.

⁸ Despite a technical meaning for the term “territoriality” in current literary critical writing (especially as developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) I am not using it in that way.

Europe, the degree to which poets felt grounded, truly at home in those places, is frequently given voice in their poetry. And very often that grounded connection is absent or lamented. There are those poets who do speak of a very warm connection to their “native” place. Shaul Tshernichovsky in his idylls of his childhood just north of the Crimea is a famous example. These poets are far fewer, though, and Tshernichovsky’s own nostalgic portrayal and ambivalent references elsewhere make those poems distinct if beautiful exceptions. For the most part exile-consciousness, the notion of *goles* or *galut*, was an integral feature of the cultural landscape. For Markish this sense of homelessness was an important recurrent theme. This was probably intensified by the facts of his own biography: a peripatetic lifestyle, at least in the early period (Kiev, Warsaw, Moscow, Paris, and Palestine, to name a few of his many sojourns and visits). His famous early poem “I don’t know whether I’m at home” (“*veys ikh nit, tsi kh’bin in dr’heyim*”)⁹ is a storehouse for what would become many fixtures of his poetic vocabulary and thematic inventory, or *lyrolect*,¹⁰ (such as *tseshpilyen* “unbuttoning,” *hefker* “ownerless; licentious,” *shmekn fun* “stinking of”) to name a few. What is more, in the poem this homelessness is greeted with a kind of triumphalism. The caution-to-the-winds boundless (spatially) modernist “I” of the first stanza is mapped onto a temporal vocabulary in the second.¹¹ The “I”’s name is “Now” (*atsind*). And this “Now” gives the world a slap one end to the other (*fun eyn ek bizn tsveytn*), which betokens a similar kind of defiance as the Futurists’ “slap in the cheek of the public taste.” It is a disregard for decorum and the “natural” order made all the more striking because the “I” is a self-proclaimed boundless being, unencumbered by either beginning or end (*on an onheyb, on a sof*); the present has no tradition to bind it. The final stanza returns to the spatial language of the first stanza, made ambiguous by the central temporal configuration. In its way it is, as the discussion in *On the Margins of Modernism* points out, a kind of poetic manifesto of its own.

The early triumphalism and exuberance found in this poem, however, have largely been lost in the Expressionist period. The homelessness described there is one of wandering (*valgern zikh* and *blondzhen*, both of which mean “to wander,” are

Briefly put, territoriality is an element of the famously slippery, eel-like concept of “deterritorialization,” which refers to the process of severing the organic ties between a culture and the place or context of its development and displacing those original associations and meanings in favour of ones that are imposed from without. As such it is often part of critical discussions about colonial or minority cultures. I, however, have chosen the word for the very concrete images of land and physical space which it evokes along with social and political features which accompany its habitation.

⁹ Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 202-204. This discussion in this book (pages 202-208) is one of the definitive readings of this important work and my brief treatment is based on the deeper analysis found there.

¹⁰ I coined this term elsewhere as a useful way to characterize the particular diction of some modernist poets. It refers to “those elements of a poet’s idiolect which transcend mere repetition and constitute individual vortices of shifting thematic and semantic value.”

¹¹ Kronfeld, 207.

two verbs common to Markish's lyrolect) among despair and sorrow in bleak, often forbidding landscapes. For example, the first stanza of the poem "Thus in a wintry-desolate train station" ("Azoy in a vinterik vistn vokzal") from 1921 reads:

Thus in a wintry-desolate train station,
between white walls,
silently by the window the sorrow [*umet*] waits with me,
like a night-black matron,
who was late for a train so she waits for another,
and is not in a hurry, and does not ask,
and knows that she will not wait long...¹²

This poem immediately activates the image of the train station (*vokzal*), the symbol par excellence of the displacement of the Jew in the modern world. Within the span of a single extended sentence the poem starts off with one of Markish's key stylistic features, the warping of syntactic structures. The second line heightens the sense of snowy desolation in the fractured syntax of "between white walls" (*tsvishn vent tsvishn vayse*), rendered literally as "between walls between white," where the connection between the adjective and the noun is severed by repeating the preposition. Whiteness itself becomes an independent character, giving us the association of snow, but also of an absence, a void. From the visual void we are immediately made aware of the aural void in the beginning of the third line: "silently" (*shtil*). As in the poem "I don't know whether I'm at home," the narrator is in the first person; but here the focus is on that narrator's companion, "sorrow" (*umet*), which becomes a kind of catch-phrase for Markish in many of the poems of this period. Here, that sorrow is personified as a lady (*dame*) who arrived late for a train. This, however, is no ordinary lady. She is a "night-black" lady, in stark contrast to the whiteness of the walls, the whiteness of the snows through the window, of the train station; this sorrow is unmistakable. As well, she is described as having arrived late, but her lateness is given in another disruption of the syntactic order. Instead of the expected "...*dame, vos hot farshpetikt tsu...*," we encounter the immediately arresting construction "...*dame, farshpetikt vos hot tsu...*" By forcing the past participle before the relative marker, it occupies the topical position and in a way becomes its own subject: the lady and her lateness are equal, not relativized, participants in the personification metaphor. The power of this equation is then revealed since she "knows that she will not wait long," which is to say, there are always trains to bear the wanderers away into the desolate distance, flaunting the ineluctability of this homelessness.

This idea of homelessness as wanderingness can be elaborated by looking at a key Yiddish Expressionist manifesto, the "Manifesto to the opponents of the new poetry" (1922) in Grinberg's journal *Albatros*. There we find:

¹² B. Hrushovski, Kh. Shmeruk, and A. Sutskever, eds., *A Shpigl af a Shteyn: Antologye poezye un proze fun tsvelf farshnitene yidische shraybers in ratn-farband* (Tel-Aviv: Di Goldene Keyt - I. L. Perets Publishing House, 1964), 426.

But our great literatures must suffer from healthy one-home-having culture-folks – what is the great tumult among is, in point of fact, in a literature, standing on hen’s feet, of a people belonging neither to the orient nor to Europe, which on one side bleeds, on the other side dreams, and on the other side conducts business?¹³

The evocative phrase “standing on hen’s feet” refers to the magical house of the witch Baba Yaga in Russian folklore which stood on hen’s feet, able to move from place to place and therefore hard to find. Implicit in the manifesto is an indictment of this “enchanted” literature which lives under the cloud of the literatures of peoples which *have* homes, as opposed to the Jewish culture, being both in Europe and the East but not belonging to either one, steeped in suffering, dreaming, and haggling. It was a literature which was unsettlingly *self*-stigmatized by the very cultural iconography of co-territorial folklore: Jewish literature was the elusive house of the Russian witch. Expressionism was the response and corrective to that grim literary situation. In Ezra Pound’s words, “the age demanded an image/of its accelerated grimace”; what was for his brand of Anglo-American modernism a grimace was for Jewish Expressionism a gaping maw: “We stand just as we are: with gape-mouthed wounds, with uncoiled veins and dismantled bones.”¹⁴

This last poem is fairly typical of the poems of sorrow, the poems where wandering and homelessness are ultimate states of grief. However, there is a kind of balance struck between such utterly bleak poems, and poems of a more optimistic bent. “Yes-yes, my head once was” (“*yo-yo, mayn kop geven a mol iz*”) is just such a poem. Its first stanza runs as follows:

Yes-yes, my head once was – Mount Sinai’s...

¹³ “Manifest tsu di kegner fun der nayer dikhtung” *Albatros* 1 (1922), 5.

¹⁴ “Proclamation” (“*Proklamirung*”), *Albatros* 1 (1922), 5. I need to make an important aside about my use of material from the manifestoes of these authors and the other poets with whom they associated. There is a growing body of work which analyzes the complicated relationship between the manifestoes of modernist and avant-garde poets and the interplay of ideology and poetics. Janet Lyon, for instance, sets the manifesto as a genre within a broad historical context, focussing particularly on a feminist reading of its implications, but treating the political as a central feature of manifesto writing. Her basic claim that “the cultural revolution known as modernism has been made intelligible to us primarily through its adaptations of the manifesto form” (Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999], 5) points out first her contention that the writing of manifestoes was one defining element of modernist activity, but more importantly highlights in the centrality of the idea of “adaptations” the fundamental heterogeneity of the genre. Despite attempts to gather together formal similarities within the genre, the nature of modernism itself, its trends and “movements” (really hustlings and bustlings), make that endlessly complicated. So often the manifesto is as the manifesto does. (Setting, for example, Markish’s inaugural manifesto in *Khalyastre* next to Shlonsky’s “Autumn” demonstrates this immediately.) In my account, though, I am not engaging the ideological or political dimensions of the manifestoes. Rather, I am focussing on them as essential crucibles for the development of poetic ideas, language, and themes; as laboratories of these techniques.

the desert's – my footsteps of walking around and of wandering [*blondzhen*]...
– but the thirst burns, and is far from foaming and pulling[?]¹⁵ –
is with my forehead's eastern blond-shine
your day I intellect out...¹⁶

This is a complicated poem in terms of syntax and rhyme, but it is instructive in both exemplifying several of Markish's favored techniques as well as filling out this notion of territoriality. The organizing principle is not rhythmical, but is rather, as we shall also see in certain of Shlonsky's poems, bound up in the rhyme. Here it is roughly ABABA; and I say roughly because in this poem we have Markish being very typically playful with his rhymes. With regard to the A-rhyme, *Sinays* is made to rhyme with *tsin iz* and *zin oys*. These feminine rhymes play both with the vowel reduction in unstressed syllables in Yiddish – unstressed *ay*, *i*, and *oy* are all treated as *essentially* equivalent – and with the varieties of the initial sibilants (*s*, *ts*, and *z*); only the stressed vowel is constant. With regard to the B-rhyme, *blondzhen* is made to rhyme with *blond-shayn*, with a similar sibilant/unstressed-vowel sound-play as the A-rhyme. The B-rhyme is particularly relevant here because of the semantic association which it points to. The narrator's head belonged to Mount Sinai and his wandering feet to the desert. This mapping of human body parts onto natural landscape features, too, is a common Markish device (as we see, for example, in the first section of "Rocks" [*Feldzn*]),¹⁷ where a mountain chain is likened to a body, head in the sky, feet planted in the ground, and the ridge like a grim backbone with protruding vertebrae). The mapping becomes more complicated as the forehead (*shtern*), a part of the head (*kop*), reflects the blond-shine (*blond-shayn*) of the east, which is the locus of sunrise (both notions being coded in the word *mizrekh*, "east"). But as a function of the rhyme, *blond-shayn* becomes yoked phonically as well as semantically to *blondzhen*. This is a wandering, through the desert with its burning thirst, which is connected with the sunrise (and with Sinai) which bears a more positive valence.¹⁸ This is the kind of move which we will also see with regard to Shlonsky's use of "Autumn" which similarly has both positive and negative associations. The delicate manipulations of polysemous vocabulary were key to Shlonsky and Markish, as they were to many modernist projects.

Another aspect which I will briefly mention with regard to Markish's territoriality is the fact that the vast majority of his poems, when they describe place and geography, do so in fairly general ways. There are few specific references.

¹⁵ It is possible that this is "tin," though the meaning is still equally opaque.

¹⁶ Hrushovski, et al., 396.

¹⁷ Hrushovski, et al., 378.

¹⁸ This auroral optimism, which is a current in European modernisms, including some versions of German Expressionism, can be glimpsed elsewhere in the Donne-like rebirth motif from Markish's poem "I take my leave of you" ("*Ikh zegn zikh mit dir*") (Hrushovski, et al., 375): "We both die alike/ and are alike born" and in his "Hey, what business are you doing there – sorrow?..." ("*Hey, voz handlt ir dort – umet?...*") (Hrushovski, et al., 382): "...dies and is born anew!..."

Rather, these references are more generic landscape types, used to emphasize certain qualities and relations, including most importantly the personifying superimposition of the human body onto land features. It points to a lack of connection to specific locales, but in a desire to personify them there is a desire to create a kind of ersatz intimacy. The one specific reference encountered so far was to a “mythical” place, Mount Sinai, which was used more for textual associations than for actual descriptive purposes.¹⁹ For a homeless literature, this seems a natural move.

Yet it is a move which Shlonsky actively works against. Particularly in light of his Zionism, the actual physical land all around becomes an important poetic character of its own. And it is especially in the context of Palestine, where every location also bears a textual association, the *land* itself is not generic, but rather its specific nature is key. To take but one example, the image of the Jezreel valley and Mount Gilboa which overlooks it is a key image of the “Gilboa” cycle in the anthology *In the Wheel (Bagalgal)*²⁰ from 1927. This title incorporates a polysemous word – again stressing the importance of polysemy to Jewish modernisms – and can also be rendered *In the Whirlwind*. The dichotomy of “wheel”-“whirlwind” is emblematic: the sign of culture set against the sign of chaos. The collection contains some of Shlonsky’s more biblicizing poems, and within its orbit is the importance of the Saul-David tragedy in the Bible. Shlonsky’s own physical labor in the Jezreel valley becomes an actual defiance of David’s curse in 2 Samuel 1:21: “Mountains of Gilboa, no dew and no rain shall be upon you, nor fields of fruit, for the hero’s shield was rejected, the shield of Saul unanointed with oil.” So equally important for Shlonsky was the fact that he worked in *that* valley as a road builder, and as such he develops a notion of land as intimate, particularly in the poem “Labor” (“*Amal*”).

Just as it has been said that modern Russian literature has come out of Gogol’s *Nose*, so too does modern Hebrew poetry glide down Shlonsky’s roads. The poem “Labor” revolves around ideas of place as concrete reality, but dealt with *in terms of* biblical textuality. I have just mentioned how Gilboa (among other sites) had an historically layered significance for Shlonsky, whereas for Markish biblical place is of largely textual and not fundamentally physical significance. His references in “You, enhonied-ones on the tower-top of Sodom” (“*du, oysgehonikte af turemshpits fun sdom*”)²¹ to Sodom and the mythical Tehom are rhetorical devices to undergird the madness, frenzy, and lust which he is describing. For Shlonsky, in a poem such as “Labor,” the biblicality is part of the point of the poem; its intense textual layering is key for the mapping of his experience onto both the literary tradition and his Zionist ideology in order to create a *new* path for poetry:

¹⁹ Other examples, such as “Galilee” (“*golil*”) or “Eiffel Tower” (“*eifl-tur*”), seem to be the anomalies of travel experiences rather than elements of a concerted poetics.

²⁰ Avraham Shlonsky, *Bagalgal: Shirim u-foemot* (Tel-Aviv: Davar, 1927).

²¹ Hrushovski, et al., 395.

Clothe me (*halbishini*), *kosher* mama, in splendor in a coat of many colors
And with the dawn²² lead me to labor.

My land wraps itself in light like a tallit,
Houses stand like phylacteries,
And like tefillin-straps roads flow down, palms paved [them].

Here a lovely town will pray the morning prayer to its Creator.
And among the creators – is your son Abraham,
Poet-paver in Israel.

And in the evening at twilight dad will return from his burdens
And as a prayer he will whisper contentedly:²³
– The son dear to me Abraham,
skin and sinews and bones –
Hallelujah.

Clothe me, *kosher* mama, in splendor in a coat of many colors
And with the dawn lead me
to labor.²⁴

Taking my cues from Leah Goldberg's detailed analysis in *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*,²⁵ I see this poem as still more allusive, both biblically and in terms of Yiddish idiom, than is even in Goldberg's presentation. The first word, a command in elevated style (with suffixed object pronoun), sets the rhetorical voice of the poem. At the very same moment, the addressee, the "kosher mama," deflates the elevated diction by using the colloquial endearment word for mother and the adjective *kosher*. This is an element of the Yiddish phrase, *koshere mame*, making Shlonsky's term a calque. The "coat of many colors" is from Genesis 37:3, Joseph's famous coat. It is a sign of parental favor and of blessing. It, of course, comes with a price. "In splendor," perhaps also rendered "for splendor" is a doubly referential element. First of all, as in Exodus 28:2, holy vestments are commanded to be made for Aaron "for honor and splendor." The narrator's mother here is being called upon not only to show her favor and blessing, but as well to consecrate her son for what is implied to be a sacred activity, or better, what ideologically for Shlonsky as a socialist occupies the position of sacred activity, namely labor. The other referent is Isaiah 52:1, where the prophet calls out to Zion: "Awake! Awake! Clothe yourself in your strength, oh Zion, clothe yourself in the garb of your splendor, oh Jerusalem, holy city..." The command to be clothed in splendor, matching our poem, is accompanied

²² Or "at matins."

²³ Or "*nakhes*."

²⁴ Shlonsky, *Bagalgal*, 98-99.

²⁵ Stanley Burnshaw, T. Carmi, and Ezra Spiceland, eds., *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 74-76.

by the imperative to awaken in strength, and Shlonsky could not have but felt the resonance of “Zion” here. Again, our poem feels the imperative of labor.

In each imperative case – the mother in the poem and Zion in Isaiah – the one commanded is a woman, or something personified as a woman. In the Joseph story, by contrast, it was *Jacob* (or better *Israel*) who gave Joseph the coat of many colors. Here the narrator commands his mother to give him the honor, a gender inversion echoed and emphasized by the Isaiah text activated subsequently. For a poetic Zionist discourse which was squarely dominated by a “masculine” valorization, this inversion is striking. Of course, it is phrased as a *command* to a parent, so it is not a compete upheaval of the “standard” gendering. But it does point to a complicated thematic web which Shlonsky will weave his way around later in the poem.

The third line is a reference to Psalm 104:2: “You wrap yourself in light like a garment,” glossing “garment” of the Psalm as “tallit.” In Hebrew “houses” is a polysemous term, referring both to actual houses and to the boxes of the phylacteries. The external accoutrements of prayer par excellence are tallit and tefillin. As soon as the land is mapped as a human body, a move common to Markish’s work as well, then the linguistically polysemous “houses” become coordinated and the image is partitioned accordingly. The force of the co-ordinated imagery is so strong that by the third line of that stanza one feels that the poem is almost compelled to complete the image by mapping the tefillin straps as roads “flowing down,” a reference to the Song of Songs 4:1 and 6:5 where the beloved’s hair is referred to as “flowing down” like a flock of goats down Mount Gilead. Here the motivation is the class of long thin winding things: tefillin straps, a winding mountain road, a beloved’s long hair.

Beyond this metaphorical motivation for the tefillin straps there is potentially also an allusive one. There is the tantalizing possibility that Shlonsky is also bringing in Tshernichovski’s “Before the Statue of Apollo” (“*Le-nokhach pesel apolo*”) with its famous image of the binding tefillin straps. In that poem, after the narrator’s reverie on the lost grandeur of the god of the Bible – occasioned on admiring a statue of Apollo – the poem concludes: “God, God of the conquerors of Canaan in a whirlwind, – / And they have bound you in the straps of tefillin...”²⁶ Shlonsky’s own use of the image is made to resonate with the echo of a poem he has positioned as the progenitor of a subversive genre. However, where Tshernichovski’s heterodoxology utterly rejects the oppressive restrictiveness wielded by traditional religious authority, Shlonsky’s instead presents a revaluation of exactly those traditional religious symbols, making out of them a wholly new cult of Jewish labor, with cleansed ritual garments and a brand new liturgy penned by a fresh generation of poets (led, of course, by Shlonsky).

Though I am moving through these many images fairly quickly I need to emphasize that this is a short poem. In reading it, the density of imagery and allusion which I am at pains to detail comes at the reader fast and furiously, a biblical barrage which is on its own arresting. Poetry of this nature calls for dedicated rereading to get the full scope of Shlonsky’s inventive and nuanced

²⁶ Shaul Tshernichovski, *Hezyonot u-manginot: Shirim. Sefer sheni* (Warsaw: Tushiyah, 1900), 52.

sensitivity to language. As I mentioned in the reference to “kosher mama,” Shlonsky, like many modernists including Markish, enjoyed confluences of high and low, a technique of both playfulness and subversive deflation. In lines 6-7 we encounter a heretical example of this technique. After the prayer of the beautiful city to its Creator, clearly God here, Shlonsky places himself, Avraham, as one of “the creators,” which he elaborates in the next line (line 8): “poet-paver.” As a gloss it presents a puckish image of God as foreman of a road-crew charged with the task of “creation.” But Shlonsky makes his own role even more important. He is also a poet, *paytan*; this is not, however, a secular poet but rather a composer of *piyyutim*, or highly wrought liturgical pieces, which is in one sense what he is creating in this poem. At the same time he equates that position with being a road paver, a *laborer*, specifically in Israel. The importance is that it takes place in the land, in this land, in Israel. In referring to the place not as The Land but as Israel, Shlonsky returns to the Joseph story. At the time Joseph was given the coat of many colors his father’s name had been changed from Jacob to Israel. There is a formulation here – in light of both the mother being commanded to give Avraham that coat *and* the relation to Israel as land/father – of a reconstructed notion of patrimony. That that patrimony is interpreted not only as an inheritance but as a prescriptive injunction to labor is supported by another biblical substratum. Road paving connects to Jeremiah 31:21: “Set up for yourself sign-posts, Place for yourself guide-markers, Set your heart to the highway²⁷ on which you walked, Return virgin Israel,²⁸ Return to these your cities.” This is not only historical memory but an active engagement of the specific work required to “return.” What is more, in a masterful retrograde link, the verse preceding this one, namely Jeremiah 31:20, serves as the source text for the father-son interaction of the following stanza, once again emphasizing the patrimonial imperative.

“Dad” returns at twilight and whispers his *nakhes*-prayer. This, as was said, is taken from Jeremiah 31:20 – “Is Ephraim a son dear to me?” With Avraham standing in for Ephraim, the remorseful child, the father in effect answers and sets to rest the biblical question. The next line, “skin and sinews and bones,” also has a double referent. First of all it refers to the famous story in Ezekiel 37:6-8 of the resurrection of the dry bones. This is meant as an image of the renewal/revival of both the land

²⁷ This biblical word for “highway” – *mesilah* – shares the same root (*s-l-l*) as the word for “road-paver” in Shlonsky’s poem – *solel*.

²⁸ The gendered dimension here is complicated. The land is figured as *both* man and woman. The roads as tefillin straps, which are worn exclusively by men, are biblically contextualized with a passage from Song of Songs about the hair of the female beloved. In *working* the land, building and paving roads on it, the violence done to the body is elided by a poetic vocabulary of cultivation and civilization. The duality is underlined again in the biblical interplay of Israel as land/father on the one side, and on the other side not only the standard poetic vision of land as woman but Shlonsky’s own “virgin Israel” (*betulat yisrael*) subtext. (And virgin bodies in literature are rarely long for their virginity.) Though not the central focus of the poem, this Janus-faced anthropogyny is typical of the kind of poetic riptide Shlonsky sometimes adds to push univocal interpretations out of alignment, as we will see, for example, in his manifesto “Humpback World.”

and those who labor on the land (in the words of the Zionist hymn “to build and be built”). The second reference is to Job 10:11: “You clothe me (*talbishini*) with skin and flesh, and with bones and sinews you weave me.” The stanzas are thus connected through a linguistic form: here *talbishini*, and in the first and last stanzas *halbishini*. Again, alongside these higher-fallutin forms there is an echo of the earthier Yiddish “skin and bones” (*hoyt un beyner*) which usually describes a skinny or sickly person, whereas here it may indicate a kind of inverted pride at seeing someone so thin, but hale, from work.

Not only does this poem present a very tightly constructed weaving of references, mapping its meaning onto the allusive contexts, but it does so through a series of metrical, rhythmical, and formal intricacies. The poem patches together several sonnet types, with both couplet and triad elements. Its scansion is not regular; there are, however, whole sections of regular scansion in the Ashkenazic pronunciation, though these are broken up by the layout of the lines. The effect of this duality – “enjambéd” Ashkenazic scansion which can simultaneously be read as free verse in the Sephardic pronunciation – is a fractured style, an interplay between possible variants, a hybrid style meant to break free of the perceived constraints of received metrical forms. This controlled chaos in the structure of the poem is quite modernist in its sensibilities, especially in its juxtaposition of fractured sonnet forms, broken metrical forms, and biblical and liturgical language. Though certainly not as extreme, the latter elements especially bring to mind the kind of etymological wordplay popular among the Russian Futurists, especially Velimir Khlebnikov’s toying with Slavic linguistic material (including elements from Old Church Slavonic, itself a liturgical language) in his famous poem “Incantation for Laughter” (“*Zaklyatie Smekhom*”) from 1910, a typical example of what has been described as “the Esperanto he built on Slavic roots.”²⁹

This biblical patterning must, however, be put into the context of Shlonsky’s more programmatic statements in his manifesto “The Melitsah” (“*Ha-melitsah*”).³⁰ Briefly, *melitsah* refers to the florid Hebrew style of authors of the Jewish enlightenment (Haskalah), which was marked by purple prose and poetry prodigiously peppered with biblical phrases, not for any thematic content of their own (which would be the innovation of such writers as Sholem Abramovitsh) but rather for ornamentation. In his manifesto Shlonsky criticizes the habituation of linguistic forms generally (a critique he shared with the Russian Formalists). Language freedom, a very broad modernist desideratum, is his stated goal. In the Jewish milieu, as well, the specific problem as Shlonsky sees it is represented by the mosaic of sacred textual references for the sake of nothing but elevation of the tone. His excoriation of this position is expressed, ironically, by means of a Biblical reference, namely Exodus 21:1-7, which discusses the procedures for freeing or keeping a Hebrew slave. He says that Melitsah is by its nature slavery. “Free love” and “civil marriage” between words is his call; the “one night stand” of word

²⁹ Lawton, *Russian Futurism*, 18.

³⁰ A. Sh., “Ha-melitsah” (1923), cited in Benjamin Harshav, ed., *Manifestim shel Modernizm* (Jerusalem: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, Tel-Aviv University, 2001), 201-202.

associations should be the order of the day. “Civil marriage, free love between words – without the matchmaking of style, without ancestral pedigrees or a dowry of associations. The point is: no marriage-canopy and wedding ceremony! (There’s too much family purity in our language!)”³¹ All of his proclamations in this regard can be seen in the light of the contemporary positive call for thumbing one’s nose at decorum, subverting established order, and absolute freedom in thought and word. But it is exactly this freedom which gives him, and other modernists like Markish, the latitude to enjoy the use of textual allusion for any number of purposes. This is why the implications of this manifesto call for a nuanced reading. Textual references *can* be made, as Shlonsky himself does in the manifesto more than once (and even more clearly in “Labor”) insofar as a “one night stand” does not necessitate complete renunciation; just as long as nothing is habituated. “This is the point: a pairing-up for an enjoyable hour.”³²

The “Melitsah” manifesto was an implicit salvo at the school of Bialik, who was a master of this kind of textual embedding, and also the dominant voice in Hebrew poetry and its early modern aesthetic. Shlonsky’s hostility can at times be quite strong. One of his strongest condemnations comes in his poem “Revelment” (“*Hitgalut*”).³³ In this poem, which opens *In the Wheel*, Shlonsky is occupied with one of his recurrent themes, one which he shares with the symbolists, namely the notion of the poet as prophet, ultimately influenced by Pushkin. Both Pushkin’s “The Prophet” (“*Prorok*”), which Shlonsky translated into Hebrew,³⁴ and “The Poet” (“*Poet*”) are demonstrably present in Bialik’s “Word” (“*Davar*”) and “After my Death” (“*Acharei Moti*”), respectively (most notably for the former in the brutal usage of Isaiah 6, and for the latter in the image of the “silent lyre”). Shlonsky’s “Revelment” begins with a lemma from I Samuel 2: “And Eli was very old...And the sons of Eli were wicked men...And the boy served the Lord.” This presentation of verses, however, is an inversion of the actual canonical order of quotations (1 Samuel 2:22, 12, 11). Throughout the poem Shlonsky orchestrates a recreation of the story of Samuel’s prophetic call against the objections of the elderly and crotchety Eli, a none too flattering depiction of Bialik. Through his subtle manipulation of the biblical source material, complicated metrics, and interlinking convolutions of rhyme, Shlonsky positions his virtuosity and novel Hebrew poetics as a legitimization of his own “divinely” ordained assumption of the laurels of Hebrew poetry. He is making a break with tradition, his own casting off from “the ship of the Modern.”

I need to add, though, that Shlonsky was not an espouser of the poet-as-prophet model. Rather, he was an able manipulator of its imagery. In using it to

³¹ Harshav, *Manifestim*, 201.

³² Harshav, *Manifestim*, 202.

³³ Shlonsky, *Bagalgal*, 5-6. I avoid translating this word as “revelation” because of its rather Christian overtones as well as the fact that in Yiddish this term can also mean the coming to light of a tsaddik, a Hasidic spiritual leader, which could well have been echoing somewhere in Shlonsky’s mind given that he grew up in a Lubavicher Hasidic home.

³⁴ Avraham Shlonsky, *Ketavim. Tirgumim. Pushkin 2* (Jerusalem: Sifriyat poalim, 1971), 226-227.

topple Bialik he engages the rhetoric of exfoliation – of rejecting and dissociating oneself from certain poets or their poetics – which was part of the contemporary discourse. Not only “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” but Max Erik’s “The Language of Yiddish Expressionism” and the New York Yiddish Introspectivists’ manifesto engage in just this kind of activity.

Though Markish would have understood Shlonsky’s Futurist summersaults, his view on the prophetic role of the poet is less clear. It was certainly not a focal element of his poetics, except to the extent that Expressionist poetics in general foregrounded the social effect of a poet’s use of language.³⁵ More interesting is what would have been for Markish a “prophetic” statement in the early poetry, namely the declaration “My name is: Now,” (from “I don’t know whether I’m at home”). For his sensibilities it is the immediacy which is what really matters. The eternal “present” leads him ever onwards. Markish’s attention is directed less at this prophetic polemic (after all, he was a Yiddish not a Hebrew poet) than at the implications of his telescopic view of time and history. One of his responses is to bundle together his concerns on territoriality with this telescopic function of time. Just as in the space/time/space conflation in his “I don’t know whether I’m at home,” he presents a metaphorical description of one in terms of the other. There is an important connection between the idea of homelessness, of the lack of the territorial, and the use of history, of time, as a way of marking out space; that it, a spatialized description of time as a way of “inhabiting” a space which one does not actually have.³⁶ For example, images of clocks as the tokens of time – such as Markish’s “clocks hang, hairy like hacked-off heads of calves,/ and lick emptiness with the pendulum’s back-and forth...”³⁷ from the poem “On the silent walls of vacant stores” (“*af shtume vent fun leydike gevelber*”), or even Shlonsky’s “in a remote corner a clock sleeps”³⁸ from the poem “In Tel-Aviv” (“*Be-Tel-Aviv*”) – give a glimpse into an important perceptual grid in the analysis of modernist Jewish poetry.

Both this powerful manipulation of metaphor and the forceful portrayal of language in “The Melitsah” underscore the importance of language ideology, which has been the subtext of the discussion all along. The poetries of both Markish and Shlonsky are marked by shifting orientations towards language. Certain broad trends do seem, though, to emerge. For Markish it is in the language of Expressionism, which most marks his earlier period. An instructive set of documents

³⁵ Richard Sheppard, “German Expressionism” in: Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (London: Penguin Books, 1976, 1991), 277.

³⁶ In Robert Kaplan’s *Balkan Ghosts* his remark about the perception of history in the Balkan context seems appropriate, particularly as regards modern Jewish literary use of ‘historical’ material: “In the Balkans, history is not viewed as tracing a chronological progression, as it is in the West. Instead, history jumps around and moves in circles; and where history is perceived in such a way, myths take root” (Robert D. Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History* [New York: St. Martin’s Pres, 1993], 58).

³⁷ Hrushovski, et al., 425.

³⁸ Shlonsky, *Bagalgal*, 141.

is the “Proclamation” and “Manifesto” at the beginning of Grinberg’s *Albatros*. These are texts self-consciously determined both to herald and to lead the sea-change. The poets of this movement are presented as the generation at a crossroads; theirs is a new language and a new poetry. “Therefore, the brutal in the poem. Therefore the chaotic in the image. Therefore the screaming of the blood.”³⁹ This new completely “free, naked, blood-churning human expression”⁴⁰ was exactly what Markish aimed at. It was, however, to be a controlled chaos. His trademarks become completely fractured syntax – unlike much of Shlonsky’s works, which despite great difficulties in diction, neologism, and the like, maintain a less ruptured syntactic orientation; a stretching of the bounds of the poetic line, such that page-width lines co-occur with single words; verbless noun catalogs; and sometimes inventive, sometimes bizarre rhymes (where rhymes occur at all). In addition, Markish’s relation to Hebrew needs to be stressed. He was certainly knowledgeable in Hebrew (in his youth he had been a synagogue *meshoyrer*, or chorister),⁴¹ and he employs it calculatingly throughout his poetry. In Max Erik’s article (also published in *Albatros*) entitled “The Language of Yiddish Expressionism” he singles out Markish’s and Grinberg’s poetry as exemplars. He states:

The language of our “young” is the language of people who choke under a heavy burden. Thus, it is so hoarse, convulsive – every word wrenches itself free from a harsh prison... These are therefore the foundational elements of the Yiddish Expressionist language: 1) Hatred for the round, musical word, for the rotund verse. 2) Deepest sympathy for the “bony,” heavy, weighty word. Therefore many Hebrew words are to be brought into use. They are “weighty”; but they are not merely idly to be introduced; it is easily seen how Markish and Grinberg bend them, make them longer, fasten them to the other words. 3) The rhythm of the poem is identical to its “exertion” – to every eruption of force which called the poem to life and holds it stretched like a bow.⁴²

The “weightiness” of the Hebrew word was both phonic and semantic. Hebrew had a great resonance in the Jewish cultural echo chamber, and looking at Markish’s use of Hebrew one is immediately struck by how carefully and strategically it is chosen. The Markish Hebraism par excellence, *hefker*, is just such a “bony” word. He uses it as the (lyrolexical) touchstone of his shirt-unbuttoned, world-slapping persona, the utterly free man using an utterly free language. *Hefker* in the technical sense means “ownerless” as of property found but unclaimed; as well it means “licentious or

³⁹ “Proklamirung” *Albatros* 1 (1922), 3.

⁴⁰ “Proklamirung” *Albatros* 1 (1922), 4. Parallel to Shlonsky’s “language freedom” note the added Expressionist dimension here of “blood churning.”

⁴¹ Hrushovski, et al., 751.

⁴² Max Erik, “Di shprakh funem yidishn ekspresyonizm” *Albatros* 2 (1922), 17.

libertine.”⁴³ It is on the interplay between these senses that Markish focuses, embedding his pre-occupation with world-wanderingness and homelessness into the formula.

As for Shlonsky, at least in the early poetry, it is easiest to get a glimpse of his language strategy, full of multilingual layering, seemingly nonsense sound-plays,⁴⁴ and fanciful “poetymologies,” by looking through the prism of one particular poem. This facility is due in large part because to the recurrent and continually recycled imagery and collocations. This poem is entitled “Emptiness” (“*Srak*”) from the cycle “In My Hurry” (“*Bechofzi*”) from *In the Wheel*.⁴⁵ The underlying imagery and ideology can be found in his 1923 manifesto “Autumn” (“*Stav*”).⁴⁶ This word, “autumn,” along with its associated images, is key for reading Shlonsky’s poetry of this period. It infects so many other poems that it is almost a signature, a central element of his lyrolect. In the manifesto, which is less a manifesto than a kind of modernist tone poem, everything is mud, mud all around. He then runs quickly through a series of associative images of coping with the mud and of shtetl Jews dealing with its uncleanliness. Ultimately he moves into an optimistic socialist stance, taking the mud, and autumn in general, as the precursor to the inevitable summer when all of the mud will dry up. Mud is a good thing, then, because it is how we get to summer. “Aha! I believe nothing! I know nothing! I want Autumn (*stav*). I want the dripping rain (*delef*). Puddles (*shluliyot*) and with bare feet to trample – life.”⁴⁷ This is the core of Shlonsky’s autumn imagery.

After a short prelude, the poem “Emptiness” opens with the following three stanzas:

(1)⁴⁸ And here is a street.
The dripping rain: *tof-tof-tof*.
And my heart: Good! Good! Good!
And thus: without end.

(5) And here is a market.
(My how the prices have fallen here!)
A fading sun wades in the puddles
Along with fallen leaves
And pigs.

⁴³ See Kronfeld, 205.

⁴⁴ These are reminiscent of the technique called “*za-um*” (literally “beyond the intellect”), usually translated “trans-rational,” developed among the avant-garde Russian modernists.

⁴⁵ Shlonsky, *Bagalgal*, 37-40.

⁴⁶ Harshav, *Manifestim*, 200.

⁴⁷ Harshav, *Manifestim*, 200.

⁴⁸ Since I am only giving selections from a longer poem, for the sake of convenience and ease of reference I have added line numbers which are not in the original

(10) And it is good in the gutter:
Pigs trample hoof-by-hoof
And the dripping rain:
tif— —

It is a distinct challenge to convey the layering of sound effects, odd rhymes, and pronunciation puns which run through the entire poem. These are all, though, elements of the genre-scene with which we are presented from the very beginning of the first line: “And here is a street.” It is a modern street scene, hot-bed of the “carnavalesque,” though here in a toned-down variety. It is more the carnival of language than of activity. The second line activates that Shlonskian *Leitwort*, that evocative element of his lyrolect, “dripping rain” (*délef*). So not only is this an example of the common modern street-scene genre, but also a typical Shlonsky “Autumn”-scene, complete with dripping rain, puddles, fallen leaves (preferably rotting), and gutters.

The first four lines rhyme ABAB in the Sephardi pronunciation. In the Ashkenazi pronunciation it is even more closely related, AAAA, when the final consonants are devoiced. Line 2 maps the onomatopoetic sound of dripping rain onto the heart’s joyous thumping—“Good! Good! Good!” (*tov tov tov*)—through an exact phonic triple repetition. The perfect imitation in the Ashkenazi accent is even further promoted by the echoing homophone “drum” (*tof*). As in the “Autumn” manifesto, there is here a generally positive psychological disposition towards the Autumnal rains. I think that Shlonsky is also adding a thematic and metalinguistic joke at this point. In saying “without end” (line 4; *bli sof*), he is also saying “without the word ‘Autumn’ (*stav*),” which, though pronounced in the Sephardi pronunciation *stav*, would be pronounced in the Ashkenazi pronunciation *sov*, or with final devoicing, *sof*, thus homophonous with the word for “end” (*sof*). Additionally, for a different treatment of this notion of endlessness and interminability, compare this to Markish’s “I am no one’s, I am *hefker*,/Without a beginning, without an end (*on an onheyb, on a sof*)” from the poem discussed earlier.

The next stanza is a further escalation of the street scene by adding the commercial dimension: “And here is a marketplace (*shuk*).” This is not an activation of the market/fair image as both site of carnival and site of pogrom.⁴⁹ The normal

⁴⁹ That site is more often referred to by the market/fair synonym *yerid* or *yarid* in Hebrew and *yerid* in Yiddish. This, though, is certainly the resonance in the poem “Fair” (“*Yarid*”) from the same collection:

“Corpses, skeletons came down from the gallows—
They call out: To the fair!
Someone sang devoutly: Woe-woe a descent,
A descent must come before an ascent...
Woe-woe...

Crosses stood abandoned upon Golgotha
Among the howling of the dogs” (Shlonsky, *Bagalgal*, 68).

cues for this are absent and, though dismal, the depiction is not menacing. Here is decrepitude and decay, not death and murder. The market scene instead highlights the commercial dimension of this decay. Images of capitalism, as I will show later, for Shlonsky are unsurprisingly a site of critique, a standard metonymy for the ills of modernity.

The third stanza, echoing the sound play of the first stanza, again yokes the rhymes together with the Ashkenazi pronunciation, this time associating through near homophony the word for “hoof” (*télef*) – which itself becomes emblematic of the sound of the hoof-falls trampling through the gutter via its reduplication *télef-télef* – with the “dripping rain” (*délef*). That rain then sounds like *tif*, which may also be an activation of the Yiddish word for “deep, or deeply” (*tif*), suggesting the all-encompassing damp of the Autumn rain.

The poem’s second subsection (lines 14-25) is a series of three quatrains (ABAB, CDED, FGHG), the first of which introduces the poem’s first human character, a blind hurdy-gurdy player:

And a blind musician passes there before the hurdy-gurdy.
(15) And some clown is already up to his pranks.
(The wind then hostilely plucks off
a last leaf from the tree.)

And no one then came out to listen to the pain, –
Only towards three a dog.
(20) Oh, dogs know only how to listen thus,
And a man – one out of a thousand.

So play, play, my heart, Autumn –
Like a hoarse hurdy-gurdy to the dogs.
Trees stand bald-headed
(25) And spit their leaf-fall at the clouds.

This Christologized use of the fair type-scene is motivated by the resemblance of the word for “fair,” *yarid*, and the word for “descent,” *yeridah*. The pogromological dimension is highlighted by Jewish modernists’ common obsession with Jesus as the prototypical if subversive model of Jewish martyrdom. Even more striking for Shlonsky’s description of the event is the image of Jesus’s body being taken down off the cross as parallel to the lowering of prices at the fair. And just as prices will fluctuate – what goes down must come up (*yeridah tsorekh aliyah*) – ultimately to come up again, so is Jesus’s ascent expected. The valorization of the martyr embodied in the rhyme *teliyah – aliyah* (“gallows” – “ascent”) is completely deflated at the end of the section in the rhyme *tselavim – kelavim* (“crosses” – “dogs”); dogs, as we will see in the poem “Emptiness,” are not neutral images.

The hurdy-gurdy is another standard image of the street scene.⁵⁰ But unlike the rain and the trampling hooves, we get no onomatopoeic renderings of its song. In point of fact, we get no sound at all. The second line of that stanza (line 15) introduces yet another stock street-scene member, the clown or prankster. His “pranks” (*lehatim*) are technically more acts of magic, which is a valence picked up later in the poem (in line 34 with the notion of riddles). Again, there is little sound involved in what would certainly be a noisy scene. Indeed, the second stanza of the subsection (lines 18-21) indicates that the hurdy-gurdy and the clown are playing for barren streets. No one has come out to listen. And the listening they are *not* doing, so to speak, would not involve the expected mirth. Rather, it involves “pain.” It is an eerie scene of dejection and vague foreboding. We are not told why there is no one but a hurdy-gurdy player, a clown, and scavenging dogs in the market.

The final stanza introduces at last the anticipated word “Autumn,” and with it the image of the fallen leaves. The denuded trees, in a final futile gesture at the Autumn winds which robbed⁵¹ them of their last foliage, “spit” their leaf-fall at the clouds. Though futile – all leaves are destined to fall – the act of spitting is introduced here as an important emblem of defiance; it is an image which will return to remarkable effect later on.

The fourth subsection (lines 26-44) returns to the sound play of the first subsection:

And on the hurdy-gurdy: a cage.
 In the cage: a parakeet.
 The dripping rain: *tuf-tuf-tuf*.
 And I: illegitimate.
 (30) Illegitimate. Bastard. Nameless child.
 Motherless.
 Fatherless.
 Hey, parrot! Parrot! Parrot!
 Do riddle me the riddle of a worthless-clown,
 (35) Whose life is: ‘empty bottles,’
 thus – incidentally.

⁵⁰ The iconic power of the image of the hurdy-gurdy in East European modernism can be emphasized not only by its repetition in contemporary Yiddish poetry, including Markish – as well as the Soviet Yiddish poet Izi Kharik’s (1898-1937) poema, or long poem, entitled *Katarinke* (1925) – but also in the name adopted by the short-lived group of Polish Futurists in the early 1920’s in Kraków, *Katarynka* (“hurdy-gurdy”), one of whose founders was Bruno Jasiński, who came from a Jewish family. Indeed, specific reference is made to the *Katarynka* group (Jasiński and Stanisław Młodożeniec in particular) in Max Erik’s article “The Language of Yiddish Expressionism”: “When true Polish Expressionism will first be born, those difficult language-pains, which are so characteristic of the Kraków “Katarynka,” of Jasiński and Młodożeniec, will be the first signs of its emergence” (Max Erik, “*Di shprakh funem yidishn ekspresyonizm*” *Albatros* 2 [1922], 17).

⁵¹ Not only ‘robbed’ – this is the verb used for nipping off a dove’s head as part of a sacrifice (cf. Leviticus 1:15).

—“Po-po-po bdu rak—
Srak—
Rkak” — —⁵²

(40) The words of the hurdy-gurdy and the parrot
And the note.

And I am on the point of spitting at him:
'Empty bottles' —
Pshaw!

The first stanza is irregular, composed of 11 lines (lines 26-36). Again, the rhyme scheme works better with an Ashkenazi pronunciation (ABABCCDBDBD), and the conjunction of both its regular and irregular elements serves to heighten the sonic effect of a broken-down hurdy-gurdy on a damp autumn street. The image of the parrot, or parakeet, on top of the hurdy-gurdy gives Shlonsky the opportunity to turn his phonic poetics into a kind of verbal alchemy. First, by sound similarity alone it allows the narrator, now unveiled as an “I” within the scene itself, to proclaim his own illegitimacy, his bastardy. It is precisely the kind of gesture Markish would have understood as *hefker*, showing another thematic affinity between the two. This bastard narrator then calls on the parrot to “riddle him,” to pose him the riddle of his life, a life which he describes as “empty-bottles.” This is a Talmudic Aramaic phrase used to indicate “absurdities.” It is the phonically relevant (by which I mean hyper-rhyming) counterpart to the notion of “futility” or “worthlessness” from the previous line (*shav*). The parrot replies in seeming parrot-speak: “Po-po-po bdu rak — / Srak — / Rkak.” Though it sounds so parrot-like, it is actually intelligible.⁵³ The first part of the utterance, “here-here-here” (*po* means “here”), is in one sense a locative statement, i.e., that is how a parrot might say “Lookie here!” However, it also echoes the Yiddish and Russian word for parrot, *popugay*, thereby letting the parrot assert its own identity, if in an incomplete way. The next element, *Bdu rak*, can mean in Hebrew “fabricate only,” a fragmentary imperative; more likely is that it should also be read as incorporating Russian *durak* meaning “fool,” showing the parrot’s comical contempt of the hurdy-gurdy player, or the clown, or the narrator. *Srak*, “emptiness,” is both the title of the poem — and thus both its thematic source and, from Shlonsky’s genius, its phonic motivation — and a further near synonym for *shav* (“futility”) and *buki-sruki* (“empty bottles”). *Rkak* not only means “mire,” but also

⁵² Or: “Here-here-here fabricate only — / emptiness — / mire” — —

⁵³ Benjamin Harshav once dubbed certain aspects of the Hebrew poet Avot Yeshurun’s stylistics the “poetics of *gimgum*,” of “stammering,” that is, an often multilingual orchestration of disjointed words and syllables designed to produce the effect of stammering, a way of expressing an inability to express. Likewise we may dub these virtuoso sound-plays of Shlonsky’s the “poetics of *kirkur*,” of “cawing.”

comes from the same root as the verb for “spitting” used in line 25 for the autumn trees’ last defiant gesture of self-exfoliation.

The parrot therefore plays a very important role as a polysemous image. First, it goes naturally with the hurdy-gurdy. Street performers often have animals, sometimes parrots, sometimes monkeys (such as the organ-grinder’s monkey), and sometimes other animals. But in addition, the image of the parrot as imitator is key. The parrot functions as a kind of linguistic mirror, or prism, repeating the linguistic raw material back with “meaningful” distortions. The riddle that the narrator asks the parrot to give him is thus a refracted version of the data he provided.

To this depiction of the complexity and density of the layerings of sounds, meanings, and polyglot material in the use of which Shlonsky is a virtuoso I will add one more element, which I call Shlonsky’s “poetymology.” This is a kind of inventive etymology based on sound resemblances and thematic adumbration. In his manifesto “Autumn,” he writes: “Autumn. All around: mud. Mud. Always. Everything. In everything. Today – rain. Tomorrow – tears (*demaot*). Blood (*dam*). Nations (*amim*). Lands (*artsot*). This is to say that tears are a function, really and phonetically, of blood, nations, and lands: *demaot* = *dam* + *amim* + *artsot*. It is more experimental element of his sound-rhetoric.

Before drawing this essay to a close I would like to mention one final image which is shared by both Shlonsky and Markish. It is the powerful image of the humpback. This involves an old anti-Semitic image of the wandering Jew, aged, decrepit, and stooped over with both the burdens of his pack and the burdens of his guilt-laden soul. The image was taken up in various ways by Jewish authors themselves to curse the degradation of the ghetto life and call for an amelioration of the Jewish condition, bringing the Jew into the strong, healthy modern world as strong, healthy participants in it. For both Markish and Shlonsky, it is a symbol of decay and of burden. For Markish, it is a powerful mark of the “wanderingness” of the modern being. Take, for example, the short section “Humpbacked” (“*Hoykerdik*”) from the poem cycle “North” (“*Tsofn*”) from 1919:

Humpbacked – your green bread,
Just like the heaped-up slain covered with green quilts
And your withering skin
Stinking with suffering...

Somewhere at the knot of an ash-gray sack – day
Is bloodied by your good shepherd after the sunseting mouth...
– Only your patchwork body – darned with wailing,
And red honey drips on your silencing naked...⁵⁴

This grotesque image of a moldy piece of bread is transmogrified into a depiction of the wanderer’s suffering. This dimension of the word “humpbacked” is reinforced by the “ash-gray sack (*torbe*)” which is the essential accoutrement marking the

⁵⁴ Hrushovski, et al., 395.

wandering, vagabond Jew. The “patchwork” body, a being whose identity is composed of the discarded rags of others, is sewn together with wailing. It is not only weary sadness but mortal peril that characterizes the humpback subject, the eternal menace born on his shoulders.

For Shlonsky, it is an image of the decay and weakness of a world overburdened with a past which requires casting-off. The words “hump” (*hoyker* or *horb*) or “humpbacked” (*hoykerdik* or *horbedik*) occur with great frequency in Markish’s poetry, and that image becomes a real fixture of his thematic inventory and lyrolect. It is no less important an image in Shlonsky’s works. Aside from its importance to the fifth subsection of the poem “Emptiness” (lines 45-56) it is the central image of one of his most powerful manifestoes, “Humpback World” (*Hatoteret olam*) from 1922.⁵⁵ In it Shlonsky castigates the profligacies of capitalist “culture” and the pretensions of those not in it to appear as if part of it. This “hump” is the yoke of this “culture’s” artificial burdens. It has no relation to the actual worker or peasant, the actual bearers of culture. But as we have seen, indeterminacies and deflations of ideological dogmata are also characteristic of Shlonsky’s rhetorical strategy. The final rhetorical move of “Humpback World” is no exception, exactly the kind of ironic gesture which makes reading Shlonsky such a challenge: “Who knows? Perhaps...perhaps the hump of culture has already fallen off your back. Thus you have already torn up your shares (or not?)”⁵⁶ This parenthetical rhetorical question is just such a mark of indeterminacy. He builds very often exactly in order to pull down. And in a concluding way, the inversions, deflations, renovations, innovations, and “interlinguistics,” are key aspects of the works of both Markish and Shlonsky. The rhetorical question-mark flickers on and off.

⁵⁵ Harshav, *Manifestim*, 199-200.

⁵⁶ Harshav, *Manifestim*, 200.