

Major Trends in Yiddish Parody

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TO GROW UP YIDDISH WAS to grow up with parody. The moment one left the charmed circle of other Yiddish-speakers—in my case, the moment I crossed the street—one entered a world where the very sound of Yiddish evoked laughter, was itself considered comical, retrograde, or obscene. Bad enough when your French Catholic neighbors were the ones to laugh; worse yet, when the outer circle was populated by Jews, either those who carried their Jewishness with pride (except that Yiddish for them was an ideological affront), or Jews who in casting off their Jewishness despised the immigrant tongue. So self-contained were my Jewish worlds growing up in Montreal, that I faced off against the Hebraists only in Camp Massad. When, in the wake of the Six-Day War, I made my first trip to Israel, the Sabras all looked at me as if I were mad and their parents were only somewhat more forgiving.

Fortunately, Yiddish contained a powerful antidote to those who vilified the sound of the *mame-loshn*. It was called “Di zhiduvkes” (The Jew-Girls), one of close to a hundred satiric and parodic songs that my mother remembered from her nights spent at the various cabaret theaters in Vilna between the years 1921 and 1930.¹

בײַ די זשידװוקעס איז דאָך גרייס עקשנות.
זײ רעדן פּייליש אָן רחמנות.
מע זאָל זײ נישט דערקענען,
די זשידװוקעס װאָס זײ זענען,

1. A transcript and full set of taped recordings of these songs are housed at the YIVO Institute. They were recorded in the summer of 1973 as part of a research project directed by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett on “The Performance of the East European Yiddish Folk Song in its Social Context.” For a preliminary sketch, see David G. Roskies, “Der mames lider: A kapitl moderne yidishe kultur-geshikhte,” *Di pen* 31 (February 1997): 1–21. Since the focus of the YIVO study was performance, in all its particularities, I have retained my mother’s Litvish pronunciation.

פּויליש איז ביי זיי אַ שפּראַך,
 ייִדיש איז אַ מאַוסע זאַך.

(Oh these Jew-girls, they're ever so stubborn. / They speak Polish relentlessly. / So nobody should ever tell / they're a gaggle of Jew-girls. / Polish by them is a true-blue tongue. / Yiddish—as ugly as sin.)

The lyrics satirized the young Jewish women who spoke Polish *on rakhmónes* (relentlessly), in the hope that no one would recognize who they were, ostentatiously quoting from Przybyszewski and other high-brow Polish authors, never from Peretz or Sholem Asch, until finally, in the last stanza, one piece of their physiognomy—their Jewish noses—gives them away, and they are forced to acknowledge the true worth of their mother tongue.

Many years later, when I sang this song in Lublin before a circle of Polish philo-Semites, I discovered that what made the song parodic were the melody and rhyme scheme, which were lifted from the Polish cabaret. Through the melody, the singer revealed herself to be completely at home in contemporary popular culture. Through the lyrics, she upheld with fierce pride the rights of a Jewish minority within a multinational state. In order to win that struggle, however, the first enemy to be vanquished was the enemy within. What better way of closing ranks, of asserting one's cultural autonomy, than by means of Yiddish parody?

But my coming of age through Yiddish parody had only just begun. One day my sister Ruth, fresh from Columbia University with a master's in Yiddish and comparative literature, let me sit in on one of her classes at the local Y, where they just happened to be studying Peretz's "Bontshe the Silent." This story was a staple of the *Folksbule*, the Yiddish-Hebrew Day School, which we had both completed. Only here, in an academic setting, among grown-ups, the truth of the story was revealed: that the point of Bontshe's request for a *bulke mit puter*, a hot buttered roll each morning, was not to extol pacifism but precisely the opposite, to burlesque Jewish passivity, and the vehicle of this bitter message was Peretz's parody of the Jewish sacred tale, in which the hidden saint who suffers in this world is richly rewarded in the world to come.²

Parody was like sex: once experienced, you never regained your innocence. And if Peretz—the standard bearer of Jewish ethical superiority—used Yiddish promiscuously, who else might be doing it on the sly? Enter

2. For a recent translation by Hillel Halkin, see "Bontshe Shvayg," *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, ed. Ruth R. Wisse, 2d ed. (New Haven, Conn., 2002), 146–52.

Dan Miron, the fearless expositor. From *A Traveler Disguised*, which I first read in dissertation form at the YIVO Library, to the courses I was privileged to audit in New York, I was to learn Miron's Rule of Thumb: a writer is only great if he has something devastating to say about the human condition. In his course on the New York *Inzikhivn* that he first taught in the summer of 1972, Miron initiated his naive charges into the secrets of the Yiddish bedchamber. Jacob Glatstein, whose poems on the Holocaust were my sacred texts, Glatstein, whom I and others revered as the great Jewish national poet, Glatstein, it turned out, was outrageously promiscuous, never more so than when pretending to be quintessentially Jewish. Indeed, the high-water mark of American Yiddish modernism was Glatstein's 1937 volume innocently titled *Yiddishtaytshn*—Jewish Meanings, Yiddish Glosses—which Miron revealed to be an encyclopedia of Yiddish literary parody. Why, even "Yosl Loksh of Chelm," which the composer Henekh Kon had set to music and Isaac Lichtenstein had provided with somber, lyric illustrations, all so lovingly published by Machmadim Art Editions in 1944, this dramatic monologue did not have a cute bone in its body. Through this comic persona, Miron argued, Glatstein had subverted "the holy cause" of Yiddish culture itself.³

Yiddish parody was ubiquitous and inescapable. It marked the fault lines of Jewish modernity—the tortuous path of Jewish emancipation and counteremancipation, whether in Poland or across the ocean in North America. It marked both ends of the cultural spectrum—demotic and highbrow—and through its promiscuity, it targeted those aspects of Jewish culture that were most untouchable, sacred, secret.

What Miron also modeled, as a scholar and teacher, was how to construct a theoretical model. For such a model to work it had to work globally, and for a theory to work globally, it had to follow a triadic structure. In deconstructing the image of the shtetl, for example, Miron taught us to distinguish between the Mythic, Mimetic, and Ideological planes. Most recently, when exposing "The Dark Side of Sholem Aleichem's Humor," he focused on the simultaneous interplay of comedy/tragedy/hostility.⁴ Implicit in this triple-tiered structure was its hierarchy. While the first two levels

3. See Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century*, 2d ed. (Syracuse, N.Y., 1996). For a translation of Glatstein's "Yosl Loksh of Chelm," see *A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York, 1969), 246–256.

4. *Der imazh fun shtetl: Dray literarische shtudies* (Tel Aviv, 1981), 21–138. For a different triad, see "The Literary Image of the Shtetl," *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2000), 1–48. Miron's most recent essay on Sholem Aleichem has not yet been published.

were apprehensible by average readers and professional critics, the last and highest level of interpretation was the privileged domain of the Ideal Reader; in other words, Miron himself. In the spirit of my topic, therefore, I shall mimic my teacher by distinguishing three “Major Trends in Yiddish Parody,” which I am calling Sanctioned Parody, Militant Parody, and Sanctified Parody. Like Miron, I am reserving the best, most complex, and elusive trend for last. Unlike Miron, I am also attempting to map a trajectory—dynamic and dialectical—from medieval to modern times.

Within traditional Ashkenaz, there were two sanctioned domains for parody: the *se’udat mitzvah* and the children’s realm. On Purim, the uniquely Ashkenazic genre of the *Purim-shpil* originated as the performance of poetry, song, and spoofs at the festive meal in the homes of well-to-do burghers and eventually spread to the rest of the day and the community at large. At weddings, at the meal that honored the bride and groom, a master of ceremonies called a *badkhn* or *márshalik* chanted or sang improvised rhymes about the bride, groom, in-laws, and guests, moved the assembled to tears by reminding them of their child-bearing responsibilities and their mortality, described the latest pogrom, fire, or technological advance, then switched abruptly to satire and mime. Both the *Purim-shpil* and the improvisational art of the *badkhn* were performed in Yiddish.⁵

The most radically democratic class of Ashkenazic Jews was children. Jewish children celebrated Purim every day of the year. *Heder* lore adapted the various subgenres of classical Hebrew parody for everyday use. Thus, exegetical parody—introduced, according to Israel Davidson, by Immanuel of Rome in the last decade of the thirteenth century—was reemployed by Jewish children as a counting-out rhyme to determine who was “it”:⁶

ויקרא—האָט געקרייט
 משה—דער האָן
 אהרן—דער פּיעקעליק
 לוי—האָט געפֿירט אַ וואָגן מיט ציבעלעס.

(*Vayikro* (the LORD called) —and he crowed / *Moyshe* (Moses) —the rooster / *Arn* (Aaron)-the back-of-the-oven / *Leyvi* (Levi) —led a wagon-load of onions.)

5. See Ahuva Belkin, *Ha-purim shpil: 'Tyyunim ba-te'atron ba-yebudi ba'amami* (Jerusalem, 2002). On the art of the *badkhn*, see David G. Roskies, “The Golden Peacock: The Art of Song,” *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Bloomington, In., 1999), chap. 6.

6. Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York, 1907), 18–19; Shmuel Lehman, “Di kindervelt (gramen, lidlekh, hamtsoes un shpils),” *Bay undz yidn: Zamlbukh far folklor un filologye*, ed. M. Vanvild (Warsaw, 1923), 116, no. 23.

Concatenation, a learned technique in which fragments of unrelated biblical and liturgical phrases were strung together to humorous effect, added parodic spice to a taunting rhyme:⁷

אוטער טוטער—תלמן טוטער.
 טוטער תלמן—הערש זלמן.
 זלמן הערש—בוים קערש.
 קערש בוים—גבורה שלוים.
 שלוים גבורה—געלט עשירה.
 עשירה געלט—עולם פֿעלד.
 פֿעלד עולם—ליימענער גולם!

(Ooter tooter—Talmen tooter. / Tooter Talmen—Hersh Zalmen. / Zalmen Hersh—tree cherry. / Cherry tree—strength peace. / Peace strength—money wealth. / Wealth money—people field. / Field people—clay fool!)

And every day could also be a wedding feast, at which the children took turns playing the *badkhn*:⁸

פֿלחשע, פֿלחשה, וויין-זשע,
 דער חתן וועט דיר שיקן אַ לעפֿעלע כריין,
 וועסטו זיך באַסמאַרקען ביז צו די ציין.

די טויבן, די טויבן,
 שטייען אויף די לאָדן
 ס'איז שוין צייט צו געבן אַ שטיקעלע פֿלאָדן.

די טויבן, די טויבן,
 שטייען אויף די בעטן.
 ס'איז שוין צייט די פֿלח צו באַדעקן.

די טויבן, די טויבן,
 שטייען אויף די טישן.
 ס'איז שוין צייט די פֿלח זאָל זיך באַפֿישן.

(Bridey, bridey, how you should weep. / When your groom sends a spoon full of horseradish, / then you'll cover yourself with snivel down to your teeth. // The doves, the doves, / are perched on the shutters. /

7. *Jewish Life: "The Old Country,"* ed. Ruth Rubin, Folkways Records FS 3801 (1963), side 1, band 4.

8. Lehman, "Di kindervelt," 123, no. 68, includes the music and description of the mock wedding, with several variants.

It's time to hand you a piece of cake. // The doves, the doves / are perched on the beds. / It's time to veil the bride. // The doves, the doves / are perched on the tables. / It's time for the bride to pee in her pants.)

Taken together, these examples illustrate a threefold parodic strategy:

1) *Khumesb-taytsh*, the rote method of learning Scripture through word-for-word exegesis—each word of the Hebrew Bible glossed by however many words of archaic *Taytsh*—is rendered parodic by applying it to a mundane and totally unrelated reality: VAYIKRO—Cockadoodledoo, MOYSHE—went Moses the Rooster.⁹

2) Just as this method of traditional pedagogy yokes together the sacred tongue with the cosanctified language of *Taytsh*, so the use of rhyme yokes together two or more disparate realms: SHLOYM GVIRE—GELT ASHIRE // ASHIRE GELT—OYLEM FELD; LODN [shutters]:FLODN [cake], TISHN [tables]:BAPISHN [to piss in your pants].

3) Those windows of sanctioned opportunity within Ashkenaz to desacralize Scripture and to play with the liturgy—Purim and weddings—are themselves cut down to child size through the employment of what Bakhtin so decorously calls “Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum.”¹⁰

Sanctioned Yiddish parody, therefore, was public, communal, carnivalesque, and above all, performative. The use of rhythm, rhyme, and recitative—*Purim-shpiln* were either chanted or sung—signaled a playful, stylized, and extremely festive speech act. The sanction to parody, moreover, derived from the same sources that were being targeted: the covenantal community and its text-based religion. Even when they blasphemed, children were only aping the grownups.¹¹ By not being inviolable the system of *yiddisbkayt* remained viable.

The Great *Kulturkampf* between Hasidism and the Haskalah, East and West, tradition and modernity, gave Yiddish parody unprecedented scope. From the narrow performative base of *huppab* and *heder*, Yiddish parody branched out into such new prosaic forms of Jewish self-expression as the novel and the closet drama and exploited new secular forums such as the press and popular fiction. The status of Yiddish as a vernacu-

9. See Shlomo Noble, *Khumesb-taytsh: An oysforschung vegn der traditsye fun taytshn khumesb in di khadorim* (New York, 1943).

10. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), chap. 6.

11. For sanctioned parody in the pedagogy of the traditional *heder*, see Yekhiel Shtern, *Kbeyder un bes-medresh* (New York, 1950), 15–17.

lar now became an asset, not a cultural liability, because the spokenness of Yiddish is precisely what recommended its parodic use.

What radicalized this trend vis-à-vis its precursor was both its venue and its venom. Global parody—and now we turn to our master, Bakhtin, for the working definitions—presupposed open disagreement, the appropriation of the utterance of another *as* the utterance of another and used for one's own purposes. Global parody, in short, was antithetical to its target.¹² However witty, however dirty, the parodic rhymes of a *badkhn* or a *heder* boy, they were never intended by the author-performer to have a higher semantic authority than the original. The relationship between the first and second utterance was *chutzpahdik* but was, ultimately, corroborative.

Not so the following passage, which describes the response of a Wise Man, learned in all the Seven Wisdoms, who receives word that the king himself wishes to grant him an audience. The reader-listener has just been privy to the antithetical response of the *Tam*, the Simpleton, who greeted the same invitation with joy and was ultimately rewarded with extraordinary largesse. Here is what the Wise Man says to the king's messenger, rendered in highly idiomatic Eastern Yiddish:

”וואַרט און נעכטיק דאָ איבער, וועלן מיר איבערשמועסן און מיר וועלן זיך מיישב זיין. אויף דער נאָכט האָט ער געמאַכט אויף אים אַ גרויסע סעודה. אין דעם עסן האָט דער חכם אָנגעהויבן צו קלוגן און צו קלערן מיט זיין חכמה און זיין פֿילאָסאָפֿיע און האָט זיך אָנגערופֿן און האָט געזאָגט: ”וואָס קאָן דאָס באַטייטן וואָס אַזוי אַ מלך זאָל שיקן נאָך אַזוי אַ קליינעם מענטש ווי איך בין? וואָס בין איך עס, אָ דער מלך זאָל שיקן נאָך מיר? וואָס טייַטש? אַזוי אַ גרויסער מלך וואָס ער האָט אַזוי אַ ממשלה און אַזוי אַ גדולה, און איך, אַזוי קליין ווי איך בין, אַקעגן אַזוי אַ גרויסן מלך! נאָ, ווי געשיקט זיך דאָס אין שכל אַז אַזוי אַ מלך זאָל שיקן נאָך מיר? איך זאָל זאָגן, מחמת מיני חכמה האָט ער נאָך מיר געשיקט—וואָס טרעף איך אָן אַקעגן דעם מלך? האָט דען דער מלך קיין חכמים ניט? און דער מלך אַליין איז זיך אויך בוודאי אַ גרויסער חכם. און וואָס איז דאָס, אָ דער מלך זאָל נאָך מיר שיקן?”

און ער האָט זיך דערויף זייער פֿאַרווונדערט. און ווי ער פֿאַרווונדערט זיך אַזוי, רופֿט ער זיך אָן: ”ווייסטו וואָס איך וועל דיר זאָגן? אַט מיין דעה איז, אַז עס איז געדורונגען, אַז עס איז נאָך קיין מלך ניט אין דער וועלט, און די גאַנצע וועלט איז זיך דערינען טועה. . . .”

“Wait and spend the night here, and we shall talk it over and decide.”

In the evening he prepared a great banquet for him, and while eating the *hakham* started in with his cleverness by [showing off] his wisdom and philosophy. He stated: “What can it mean that such a king should

12. See Gary Saul Morson, “Parody, History, and Metaparody,” *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*, ed. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (Evanston, Ill., 1989), 63–74.

send for an insignificant person like me? For who am I that the king should send for me? What is the meaning? He is a king who has such power and grandeur, and I am so insignificant in comparison with such a great king! Is it plausible that such a king should send for me? If I say for my wisdom, who am I in comparison with the king? Doesn't the king have wise men? And the king himself is probably a great wise man, too. And so, why should the king send for me?"

And he wondered about it very much. After being so amazed, he himself said to the clever messenger: "Do you know what I think? It is conclusive that there is no king in the world at all. And the whole world is misled in this nonsense when they think that there is a king."¹³

Taking speech as an index of its speakers, Bakhtin teaches us, the parodist selects whatever most clearly uncovers their affectation or folly. In this case, what exposes the speech of the generic Wise Man, Maskil, philosopher, is the egocentric working of his superactive mind, which the narrator underscores so colloquially with "*ongehoybn tsu klugn un tsu klern*" (started in with his cleverness). Nothing unmasks him more boldly than the incessant, obsessive, protestations of his modesty: Who am I that such a great and supremely wise king should take note of me? "*Vos taytshb?*" "*Vos taytshb?*" What possible explanation can there be? And what does our Wise Man finally conclude after such mental gymnastics? That there is no proof for the existence of the king and the whole world is therefore deluded.

Published in 1815, this "Tale of the Wise Man and the Simpleton" by Rabbi Nahman ben Simhah of Braslav was just the opening shot in a century-long war of words between the opposing camps of pietists and modernizers. The Maskilim, of course, could give as good as they got. For starters, Joseph Perl's primary target in *Sefer megale temirin* (The Revealer of Secrets, 1819) was the whole class of hasidic and simple-minded readers, whose "pathology of reception," as Bakhtin would call it, is exposed through intricate plots and subplots. Motivating the machinations of the main players in this hilarious epistolary novel is the reception of two contrasting books: a German-language *Buch*, which unmasks the *tsaddikim* as thieves and charlatans, versus the Hebrew and Yiddish

13. Nahman ben Simhah of Braslav, "Mayse mikhokhem vetam," *Seyfer si-purey mayse*, [ed. Nathan of Nemirov] (Jerusalem, 1979), 76; "The *Hakham* and the *Tam*," in Nahman of Bratslav, *The Tales*, trans. Arnold J. Band (New York, 1978), 154, with slight changes. Band translates "*ongehoybn tsu klugn un tsu klern*" as "started showing off."

editions of *Sefer Shivḥe ha-Beḥbt*, biographical legends about the Baal Shem Tov that are deemed to be true.¹⁴

Yiddish parody cast an ever wider net as parodic venues expanded exponentially at the end of the nineteenth century. Writing in the 1890s, Peretz was constrained by tsarist censorship to camouflage his satires and parodies as *Yontef-bletlekb*, Holiday Folios. “Bontshe the Silent” formed part of a much larger mock-legendary corpus.¹⁵ Writing in the same city of Warsaw a mere quarter-century later, Der Tunkeler boasted:¹⁶

Now that special editions of humorous-satiric journals and joke sheets, as well as the cabaret and miniature theaters with all their attendant forms of travesty, calambour, burlesque, skits, and caricature have become a permanent and distinguished feature on the Jewish Street, the genre of parody has also been elevated.

A whole panoply of professional humorists, endowed with greater or lesser talent, now create in various parodic arenas, reacting to literary phenomena, as well as to all the political and social issues of the day.

It should also be noted that the author of this extremely upbeat overview of the rise of Yiddish parody had come into his own on New York’s Lower East Side, founding *Der kibitser* in 1908, then cofounding *Der groyser kundes* a year later, and eventually exporting what he had learned back to Poland. And if my mother and her circle are any proof, by the 1920s the audience for Yiddish parody reached far beyond the working-class neighborhoods, what Der Tunkeler called “the Jewish Street.”

This would imply a historical trajectory of ever greater latitude. As Jews left the shtetl en masse for the big cities, as the system of *yiddishkayt* competed in the open market with other systems of meaning, as Jews mastered multiple tongues, as Jewish artists broke into new media and ran away with the show, it would follow that Yiddish parody became ever more secular, sacrilegious, ever less tied to the cultural idioms and textual habits of old. Yiddish parody should bear out the doctrine of the Russian Formalists, who celebrated parody as a means of defamiliariza-

14. *Joseph Perl’s Revealer of Secrets: The First Hebrew Novel*, trans. Dov Taylor (Boulder, Colo., 1997).

15. For Peretz’s “art of creative betrayal,” see David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), chap. 4.

16. Der Tunkeler (Yoysef Tunkel), “Di yidishe parodye (materyal far a shtudyum)” (1921), *Sefer ha-humoresqot ve-ha-parodiot ha-sifrutiyot be-yidish*, ed. Yehiel Szeintuch (Jerusalem, 1990), 83.

tion, of undermining the old hegemony, of moving that which lay at the periphery of the literary system into its very center.¹⁷

Yet precisely the opposite occurred. The world of Yiddish-speaking Jews, even as it now encompassed every continent, began to contract and deconstruct radically. The process of decay from within was accelerated by ever more ferocious attack from without. Nothing could better reflect and deflect this onslaught on two simultaneous fronts than the double-edged art of Yiddish parody, which, as Der Tunkeler correctly noted, had reached unprecedented heights of formal sophistication. I call this third and last trend “Sanctified Parody” in order to signal a conscious act of retrieval. I enlist a term from the realm of theology in order to signal an awareness of what came before and a deliberate, dialectical response thereto. During this last act, parody becomes a means of refamiliarization.

I locate the first instance of Sanctified Parody in the monologues of Tevye the Dairyman—not when Tevye first appeared on the scene in 1895, very much the country bumpkin, and not yet as the distant relative of Menakhem-Mendl and his get-rich schemes, but certainly by 1905–1906, when, through his daughters, the patriarch-without-sons faced off against revolution, apostasy, and free love. Through the figure of Tevye, Sholem Aleichem revived the art of exegetical parody, creating what Ruth Wisse has called a Comic Rashi, a natural Jewish comedian, whose “mistakes” were always calculated.¹⁸ Helpless in the face of historical catastrophe, Tevye fought back the only way he knew how. His trilingual wordplays, bilingual puns, scriptural malapropisms, and otherwise brilliant fusions of covenantal promise and chaotic present signaled that the main target of Sholem Aleichem’s laughter were those in Tevye’s world who were unable or unwilling to play along. The readers of this open-ended book were invited to recapitulate Sholem Aleichem’s own journey over the course of a quarter-century, from laughing at Tevye to laughing with him.

Sanctified Parody, I submit, is a precise gauge of the perceived threat to the Jewish body politic. When Peretz saw what had happened to his dreams of cultural revolution, he retreated to the Old Marketplace, there to compensate the radical diminution of Jewish space by cracking open all of Jewish time. Inviting the dead to rise from their graves was the

17. See especially Jurij Tynyanov, “On Literary Evolution,” *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1978), 66–77.

18. Ruth R. Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture* (New York, 2000), 32–42. See also Sholem Aleichem, *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York, 1987).

blaspheming *Badkhn*, master of ceremonies at this Jewish midnight carnival. Thanks to Khone Shmeruk's annotated edition of the play, we can now recognize *At Night in the Old Marketplace* for what it is: an encyclopedic parody of Jewish life and letters.¹⁹

And again, after publishing manifestos, literary criticism, and an epic novel in a Yiddish literary journal called *Globus* (The Globe), where he and Aaron Zeitlin tried to fashion a new "cosmic art," Yitskhok Bashevis [Singer] saw all these dreams collapse; then, emigrating to America in 1935, he heard how the Yiddish language had been reduced to obsolescence and was now being spoken like a patois; and when, in 1943, he emerged from a seven-year-long writer's block with another manifesto, "Concerning Yiddish Prose in America," he called upon his fellow writers to renounce the great American present in favor of a reimagined Eastern European Jewish past, a world in which Poland and its Yiddish-speaking Jews were the world.²⁰

In a cycle of stories titled "*Dos togbukh fun yeytser-bore*" (The Devil's Diary), Bashevis compensated for the collapse of universal space by creating a metaphysical alternative. Just as Tevye had used his little bit of book learning, his knowledge of the liturgy, and his amazing gift of gab to disassemble the unfolding historical crisis of Russian Jewry, so Bashevis's *yeytser-bore*, the Devil with a dozen names, used his vast erudition and unassailable memory to present an anatomy of human sins:

Adultery ("The Unseen")
 Apostasy ("Zeidlus the Pope")
 Heresy ("The Destruction of Kreshev").

On the surface, the reader is back in the familiar Polish landscape of Juzefov, Lublin, Kreshev. Only never before has the story been narrated by the Devil:²¹

19. See Khone Shmeruk, *Peretz's yesh-vizye: Interpretatsye fun Y. L. Peretz's Bay nakht afn altn mark un kritishe oysgabe fun der drame* (New York, 1972). For an inspired translation by Hillel Halkin, see *The I. L. Peretz Reader*, 363–432.

20. Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Problems of Yiddish Prose in America" (1943), trans. Robert H. Wolf, *Prooftexts* 9 (1989): 5–12; Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, chap. 8.

21. Yitskhok Bashevis, "Der khurbn fun Kreshev," *Der sotn in Goray: A mayse fun fartsaytns un andere dertseylungen* (New York, 1943), 193; "The Destruction of Kreshev," trans. Elaine Gottlieb and June Ruth Flaum, *The Collected Stories of I. B. Singer* (New York, 1982), 94.

איך בין דער יצר-הרע, דער שטן, דער נחש-הקדמוני. אין קבלה-ספרים רופט מען מיך סמאל, אדער דער ס"מ. יידן רופן מיך צו מאָל דער בעל-דבר.

(I am the Primeval Snake, the Evil One, Satan. The Cabala refers to me as Samael and the Jews sometimes call me merely "that one.")

Teaching this semantic lesson in demonology is the Devil himself, speaking a highly learned Yiddish, replete with words and expressions in *loshn-koydesh*, Hebrew-Aramaic. But the purpose of all this erudition is more than merely to parody the speech of a talmudist. Each of the Devil's victims, drawn from a higher class of Jewish society, is accustomed to reading or learning. Thus, after laying his trap, there invariably comes a moment of intense introspection, when the Devil enters into dialogue with each of his victims individually. By precisely mimicking his or her most bookish vocabulary, by bombarding the victim with biblical proof-texts and other subversive applications of Jewish law and lore, the Devil makes the sin fit the sinner like a curriculum vitae.

In addition to learned speech, in addition to a profusion of Polish-Yiddish idioms, consistent with Bashevis's call to return Yiddish prose to a former time and place, the Devil reemploys a venerable technique called *lehavdil-loshn*, word-substitutions that create a semantic barrier between the Jewish and Christian world.²² But owing to the fact that he is the Devil, master of blasphemy, he not only differentiates between a Jew, who, when he dies, is placed in an *orn* and buried in *beyss-oylem*, *beyss-bakvores*, or *dos gute ort*, as opposed to a Christian, who is placed in a *trune* (coffin) and buried in a *twinter* (non-Jewish cemetery). He also consistently substitutes sacrilege for Christian sancta. The Devil invents a new professional dialect, which can only be called *kbilul-bagoyim-loshn* (Anti-goyim-speak).

For example, in "The Destruction of Kreshev" (1943), the Devil boasts of how he instilled within the peasant population a burning faith in Catholicism so that it would never be rid of its wretchedness. In this one passage, the Devil-narrator brings a veritable catalogue of *kbilul-bagoyim-loshn*:²³

frumkayt (piety) = *krumkayt* (crookedness)
church = *tifle* (hovel)

22. See Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble (Chicago, 1980), 193–95.

23. Bashevis, "Der khurbn fun Kreshev," 193; Singer, "The Destruction of Kreshev," 94. Only a few of these derogatory glosses survive in translation.

halo = *forroost reyfl* (rusty hoop)
 Jesus = *der mamzer* (the bastard), *Yoyzl*
 Joseph = *Yosl Pandre*
 to pray = *blekekhten* (to bray)
 to baptize = *tsu bashventlen* (immerse in urine)

Not since the twelfth-century Crusade chronicles has a Jewish author targeted Christian sancta so directly and ferociously. And a good thing this devilish author has taken up residence in Seagate, Brooklyn, because had he remained in Poland, this “Devil’s Diary” would never have been published.²⁴

Thus the Devil’s narrative bespeaks a Judaic culture at war both with itself and with every conceivable form of heresy, at once deeply rooted and thoroughly parodic. What defines its very Jewishness are the manifold levels of parody. But there is more. The Devil’s repertoire, as he himself admits, is as old as the hills. He retells familiar tales (about an upstanding burgher who was seduced by his maid, about a brilliant talmudist who almost became pope), and when he runs out of stories from the Middle Ages, the Devil turns next to the modern Yiddish classics, especially those that lay claim to secular humanism and other alternative faiths.²⁵

“The Devil’s Diary,” a terrifying catalogue of Jewish self-betrayal, written and published during World War II, is proof positive that my mother’s interpretation was right: to win the struggle, the first enemy to be vanquished is the enemy within. But whereas in the 1920s one way to hit back at the rapid pace of linguistic assimilation in Poland was through a parody of the latest Polish hit song, in the 1940s, when the enemy stood at the gate; when the combined forces of genocide, mass immigration, apostasy, and self-hatred had reduced Jewish culture to a shadow of its former self; when the faith of so many in a new, universal order lay in utter ruin, then, according to Yitskhok Bashevis, the only way to fight back was through Yiddish parody—multivalent and multivocal, and quintessentially Jewish.

24. Anti-Christian references were routinely censored or banned from Yiddish publications during the Polish Republic. Two notable examples are Canto XVI of “A Night,” in the Warsaw 1927 edition of Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, *In nyu-york*, which is a travesty of the Sermon on the Mount, and the second issue of Uri-Zvi Greenberg’s Expressionist journal, *Albatros*, which was confiscated for being sacrilegious.

25. On “The Destruction of Kreshev” as a point-by-point rebuttal of Sholem Asch, the great ecumenicist, the great idealist, the great humanist, of Yiddish letters, see Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 292–293.

“The history of the Jewish people,” wrote Bashevis at the end of his 1943 manifesto, “is the history of an ongoing revolution against the powers of darkness.” What is a writer to do when the very language he writes in is the subject of universal ridicule? What is a writer to do when the forces of darkness combine to rid the world of the Jews and their Jewspeech? Answer: The writer digs into the past to find an alternative Jewish voice—fiercely independent, untrammelled by fear, unlimited by the strictures of time. Locating the scattered remnants wherever they may be, the writer adopts that voice to reengage them in the most secret, most deeply encoded, Jewish conversation. The writer—Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Glatstein, Bashevis—creates an inner space where a Jew can rail against the *goyim* and blaspheme against God, a performative space that demands the reader’s utmost attention, a space that now exists only in the imagination: the self-emancipated space of sanctified Yiddish parody.

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