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The Story's the Thing: Afterword

1

THE BELEAGUERED SOUTH BRONX is not the only ground where the ancient and medieval traditions of Jewish storytelling flourished. As the articles in this issue point to some of the stopping places along the way—thirteenth-century Ashkenaz and sixteenth-century Safed—so in the modern period the map became global in scope. The eastern European heartland gave rise to a modern school of folktale writing in both Hebrew and Yiddish and when the Jews of this community dispersed—to Western Europe, America and Palestine—so too did their storytellers. Agnon, foremost among them, bridged the languages and the lands of the Jewish dispersion. In North Africa, meanwhile, the first French-speaking writers recaptured the indigenous storytelling traditions in Judeo-Arabic even as they adapted the fictional forms of modern Europe.¹ When American-Jewish writing came into its own after World War II, storytellers such as Malamud and Ozick assumed a prominent place alongside the novelists. In France, tales of horror and tales of faith combined in the person of Elie Wiesel. And in the Jewish State, Agnon left his stamp on a new, native-born generation of writers.

Almost from the start, the impulse to make the traditional story into modern art was accompanied by an impulse to collect the earlier story corpus into a new canon. With the work of Bialik-Ravnitsky, Berdyczewski, Buber and Ben-Yehzekel, the disparate texts of the past were made into a viable “literary tradition” which in turn could legitimately contribute to a Jewish cultural renaissance. In our own day, the same activity continues, only its purpose has changed; it is Scripture

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that is being used to legitimate the modern storytelling enterprise instead of the other way around.²

Since the subject as a whole is still virgin territory and all we have to date are some close readings and studies of a writer or two, I propose to pick out one major strand of storytelling in Jewish literature in the hope that my brief discussion and the present thematic issue will stimulate a deeper inquiry into the origins, the scope and the meaning of this modern movement. Motivated by four considerations I have chosen Yiddish as my focus: Because of all Jewish subcultures Yiddish is the closest to the folk tradition; because the geographic spread of modern Yiddish writing is almost coterminous with that of the Diaspora; because its historic roots are identical with that of modern Hebrew culture and, perhaps most important, because Yiddish culture is that which I know best.

2

Looking back to the beginning of the nineteenth century one clearly sees that the traditional culture received a new lease on life on the very threshold of modernity. Hasidism was the moving force in this revival, primarily on account of its appeal to myth. The repertoire of medieval miracle tales, exempla and even romances (that circulated in the form of Yiddish chapbooks) was easily updated and adapted to dramatize the powers of the zaddik, giving rise to the largest body of hagiographic literature ever produced by Jews.³ Kabbalah, in addition, provided Hasidism with an esoteric scheme for subjecting almost any text to an allegorical reading. The simplest folktale could yield profound clues to the cosmic struggle for *tikkun* if properly interpreted or reordered in the light of Lurianic kabbalah. This, as is well known, was Nahman of Bratslav's method of retelling the "stories that the world tells."⁴

Tsarist tyranny also played a hand in preserving traditional norms. For twenty-six years, from 1836–1862, all but two Jewish printing presses were closed down in the Jewish Pale of Settlement. This effectively blocked the publication of anything that even hinted at heresy and it meant that any reformer had to learn the art of camouflage if he (there being no women involved at the time) wished to see his work in print. The first generation of eastern European maskilim learned very quickly that Hasidism could best be beaten at its own game, by providing a starved reading public with a good story, by adopting the speech pattern of a *maggid*, replete with Scriptural references and personal anecdotes—in short, by subverting the very traditions that were seemingly being revived. Once the printing monopoly was rescinded, the maskilim launched a frontal attack on Jewish "medievalism" through parody and satire, but the lessons learned in the art of camouflage stood them in good stead

when, at the end of the century, it suddenly became clear that modernity had exacted too high a price. As they saw the entire medieval structure collapse economically, socially and morally, the intellectuals began to seek some new form of cultural expression that would transcend the present squalor and project a sense of collective and individual pride. This is when they rediscovered the great repository of the national genius—folklore.

Thus storytelling came to play a pivotal role in the course of Jewish self-discovery. Along with a modernist trend that absorbed the techniques and sensibilities of European culture, from satire to surrealism, there was a countermovement to return to the sources of Jewish literary tradition. Yet this latter trend also did not come from within. It took the example of German neoromanticism, Russian populism and Polish positivism to convince the generation of Peretz, Berdyczewski, and Sholem Aleichem that there was anything worth preserving in Jewish folk culture. And since in those days the study of Jewish folklore was still in its infancy and there were as yet no journals of Jewish literary history, writers had to do their own field work. Looking back on his first field trip to "the provinces" in 1890, Peretz had one of the characters turn to him (i.e., to Peretz as the implied narrator) and say: "His *yidishkayt* is made up of kugel . . . is your *yidishkayt* made up of stories . . . ?"⁵ What Peretz reveals in this brief episode and more fully in "Stories," an almost sordid account of the life of a modern Jewish writer,⁶ is the extent of his own estrangement from the values of "the folk." Having fallen from grace, the modern Jewish writer who chose the path of return would have to carry a double burden; he could appropriate the folk tradition only in the name of values completely foreign to the folk. His was a creative betrayal of storytelling.

Peretz, to be sure, was not the first Jewish writer to use traditional forms for subversive ends. As Peretz himself recognized, all roads led back to Nahman of Bratslav whom he hailed as the harbinger of modern Yiddish culture and whom he enlisted as the narrator of a series of visionary parables.⁷ Unlike Peretz, who read Nahman as an allegorist, the approach to Nahman's *Tales* that most directly answers to our own needs is the autobiographical. If we follow Joseph Weiss' brilliant lead,⁸ later carried forward by Arthur Green,⁹ we discover a composite portrait of the *tsadik-hador* (the preeminent zaddik, i.e., Nahman himself) as a Marrano (The King Who Decreed Conversion); as both the father grieving for his dead son and the much-maligned zaddik whom the son so longed to see (The Rabbi and his Son); as both the lonely genius plagued by doubts and the simpleton living by absolute faith (The *Hakham* and the *Tam*). Such contradictions bespeak a modern sensibility which we would view as being far more subversive than the radical messianism hidden away in the structure and symbolism of Nahman's *Tales*.

In this sense Nahman emerges as the first real modern and his *Tales* do indeed anticipate the future. This tug-of-war between the formal requirements of the folktale—a cast of God-fearing Jews, a mythic plot and stylized language—and the subversive tendencies born of the author's despair; this irreparable rift between the real and the ideal become the substance of modern Jewish storytelling from Nahman's time on. The modern stylized folktale becomes at once an emblem of loss and an exemplum of the wholeness that might someday be restored.

3

Nahman, for all his *Angst*, was still firmly rooted in the traditional world. For him to tell stories to his chosen disciples was no more strange than to teach them through homilies on the Zohar, though the relative status he gave to storytelling was surely a departure from past cultural norms. For Peretz, in contrast, and all the writers who followed, storytelling was the path of most resistance. To be a professional writer meant to master European forms, to cultivate a "literary" style, to cater to a differentiated audience. For moderns to choose storytelling was an ideological statement in and of itself.

Given the questionable loyalty of the writers who now chose to employ the tools and themes of traditional storytelling, how was one to know their intention? Was every neoromantic tale a call to traditional faith? Were vehicle and tenor always supposed to agree? Did the use of symbols from other than Jewish culture already signal a subversive twist? Was there anything that all modern folktales had in common, a shared concern or perspective on life? Peretz, the pathbreaker and tireless experimenter in all forms of stylized folk narrative, can supply us with some of the answers.

Since here is not the place to present all the evidence, the following must be taken on faith: (1) That Peretz's neohasidic tales are among his most humanistic works and as such are totally at odds with hasidic teaching; (2) that for Peretz the supernatural is knowable and essentially benign and (3) that miracles highlight human freedom rather than divine providence. Sometimes the betrayal of the traditional story is obvious, as when Peretz shifts his attention away from the zaddik and onto the simple Jew, frequently a woman.¹⁰ At other times he reserves the twist for the end, as when the Litvak says "If not higher" when asked about the miraculous ascents of the Rabbi of Nemirov.¹¹ The Rabbi's acts of kindness are greater than any miracle—a humanist position if there ever was one. Still, these are all positive tales, attempts to rescue a secular faith from a sacred plot. Peretz, however, never fully abandoned the parodic techniques he had perfected in such early stories as

"Kabbalists" (1891) and "Bontshe the Silent" (1894).¹² One of Peretz's most celebrated *Stories in the Folk Vein* (*Folkstimlekhe geshikhtn*) is, in fact, a brilliant self-parody. It is the story of "Three Gifts."¹³ What the casual reader neglects to see is that the tale of the gifts is imbedded within a frame tale about a thoroughly mediocre soul who did not know the difference between good and evil when alive and is therefore consigned to permanent limbo after death. Bribery being the only recourse, it finally wins a place in heaven by presenting the ministering angels with three stigmata of Jewish martyrology. The head angel ends with a typical *pointe*: "Truly beautiful gifts, extraordinarily beautiful . . . they're not of much use, not at all practical, but as decoration—truly extraordinary." Which is to say: there is no denying the beauty of such deeds, only their total effect is to redeem an unworthy soul. Jewish self-sacrifice, Peretz seems to be arguing, makes no difference on the global scale of human mediocrity. This radical thrust can be better understood against the backdrop of the Kishinev pogrom and of the angry response it provoked among Peretz's generation of intellectuals. And so the pious tale about three exemplary martyrs becomes a bitter exposé of the Jewish and human predicament.

Here, the vehicle of the story and the ideological tenor openly clash, yet many readers, even in Peretz's own day, were so taken in by the folksy façade as to miss the subversion altogether. Perhaps this was a measure of how estranged the readers themselves had become from the religious ethos of the folk, of how desperately they now clung to stories as a surrogate for faith.

Through his use of folklore and fantasy, Peretz mainly argued the case for humanism, that we are like angels, capable of self-transcendence (if not higher), of achieving a state of ethical perfection through the powers of love, music, art and individual striving. If the modern stylized folktale stood for anything in particular, it was the search for transcendence in a world that had broken with tradition. Unlike the modern Jewish novelists who may have shared the same concern, the storytellers exploited traditional narrative forms in order to highlight the possible continuities or the impossible contradictions between a dimly-remembered past and a fragmented present.

The dualism of *Der Nister*, a writer of the next generation, was informed by the darker side of Peretz's vision. *Der Nister's* point of departure in the hypnotic symbolist tales which he, alone among Yiddish writers, mastered, was the divided soul of humankind, fated to live with irreconcilable forces that tear one apart. While his stories invite, nay, demand, a psychological reading, *Der Nister* articulated the language of the soul in terms borrowed from Christianity, Bratslav Hasidism, E.T.A. Hoffmann and the Russian symbolists.¹⁴

Yet to write of the divided soul in perfect story form already inti-

mated a redemptive possibility. *Der Nister's* recurrent plot, the tale of a quest (or a quest-within-a-quest-within-a-quest), belied any Freudian determinism, even if the quest ended in suspended animation. For through the abyss, the mud, the black enameled cellars, the demonic love and the debauchery that characterized life on earth, *Der Nister* could see the way clear to personal redemption, especially when the artist himself appeared in the guise of redeemer ("Bove-mayse, or A Tale of Kings"¹⁵).

Which brings us, in the inexorable logic of modernism, to the use of storytelling as a self-reflexive genre. Paradoxically, it is to Sholem Aleichem, the least "modern" of modern Yiddish writers, that we must turn for the fullest exploration of storytelling as a verbal medium. While *Der Nister* calls attention to the archaic, repetitive and circular features of his narrative style which distances the reader from the story told, Sholem Aleichem uses the syntax, cadence, intonation, code switching, diglossia and wordplay of spoken Yiddish to eliminate the boundary between text and reader. Even when read silently, his stories "speak." But Sholem Aleichem's stories-in-monologue are also *about* language, in more than one respect. Benjamin Hrushovski has recently described the use of "metalinguage" by Sholem Aleichem's monolinguists, Tevye in particular, by which he means their ability to jump from the immediate reality to metaphysical questions.¹⁶ And while Tevye may be considered Sholem Aleichem's most perfect storyteller, the speaker of the perfect language,¹⁷ he is by no means Sholem Aleichem's only fictional stand-in. In the traveling salesman aboard the third-class train compartment Sholem Aleichem discovered a new kind of narrator for tales of dissolution in the industrial world, and one of them at least, the storyteller who jumps off at "Station Baranovitsh," is as much a spokesman for the powers of art as for the terrors suffered by a powerless people.¹⁸

With I.B. Singer both the repertoire and ideology of modern Jewish storytelling come full circle. Miracles that occur in his stories are hieroglyphics of the holy, much as they function in the Bratslav tales. For Singer, as for Nahman, evil is a metaphysical problem, a question not of man's free will, but of God's. A familiar tale, when retold by the devil—or by any one of his henchmen—is Singer's most effective way of dramatizing this potential for evil in the universe. And once the devil takes over, anything can happen. In "The Last Demon" (*Mayse Tishevits*), for instance, the familiar plot (borrowed directly from Peretz) is deliberately truncated.¹⁹ After the virtuous rabbi twice succeeds in thwarting the seductions of the very likable demon-narrator, we are programmed to expect that the third test will make or break him. Yet in this version there *is* no third trial. The Germans come and murder the Jews of Europe leaving no one worthy of being tested. The demon's work pales in comparison with the work of human demons. The full indictment

against mankind is left for the demon to deliver, a repudiation of the secular humanism championed by Peretz and his school. As Nahman improved upon the universal folklore repertoire, Singer improves upon the modern secularized folktale. In Singer's hands storytelling is used to subvert the modern subversion.

As the last of the demons, who draws his sustenance from the letters of the Jewish alphabet, Singer's narrator is also a stand-in for the writer. Here the story as a self-conscious genre reaches its culmination, for never before has a story been told to an absent audience and never before has a storyteller been reduced to communing with a disembodied language.

As much as the medium of storytelling, even in written form, conjures up an image of communal listening, of old and young sharing and shaping the collective memory of the people, its reemergence as a form of modern fiction bespeaks an ever-widening gap between the world of shared experience and the consciousness of the individual storyteller. The range of possibilities I have just outlined, from the messianic-autobiographical to the humanist to the symbolist to the demonic tale, spans the great schisms of the last two hundred years: geographic, political, social and existential. By further subjecting these stories to critical analysis, one endangers the last bit of naive pleasure that they afford. But that need not be the case. For if the critical enterprise can reveal the historical development of the modern Jewish story, what Walter Benjamin called the "layer effect," and unearth the deep structure that underlies stories of vastly different provenance, then we may come that much closer to apprehending our own epic struggle with modernity and the role that literature (hopefully still) plays in the shaping of the Jewish collective myth.

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NOTES

1. See Judith Roumani, "The Portable Homeland of North African Jewish Fiction: Ryvel and Koskas," *Prooftexts* 4 (1984): 253-67.

2. Howard Schwartz would have us believe that Judaism is storytelling and that all of modern Jewish fiction is nothing but a midrash on sacred texts. See his *Gates to the New City: A Treasury of Modern Jewish Tales* (New York, 1983), including copious cross-references to putative sources, and most egregious of all, the conceit (in both senses of the word) of providing a sequel to Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*. In a similar vein, Yaffa Eliach makes the Holocaust into a story of miraculous survival and undaunted faith in *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (paperback ed., New York, 1983). Through her own set of notes, Eliach tries to pass this hybrid form of pseudofolklore off as historical documentation.

3. Joseph Dan, *Hasippur haḥasidi* [The Hasidic Story: Its History and Development] (Jerusalem, 1975); Gedalia Nigal, *Hasipporet haḥasidit* [The Hasidic Tale: Its History and Topics] (Jerusalem, 1981).
4. Nahman of Bratslav, *The Tales*, ed. Arnold J. Band (New York, 1978); Dan, chap. 3.
5. I.L. Peretz, "Dos vaserl" (The brook), retroactively appended to his *Bilder fun a provints-rayze* (1891), but first published in 1904. In *Ale verk fun Y.L. Perets*, 11 vols. (New York, 1947-48) 2:197.
6. "Mayses" (1903) in *Ale verk* 3:462-77. For an English translation, see Maurice Samuel, *Prince of the Ghetto* (Philadelphia, 1948), pp. 133-50.
7. Peretz, "Reb Nakhmenkes mayses" (1904) in *Ale verk* 4:187-208.
8. Joseph G. Weiss, *Mehkarim behasidut Braslav* [Studies in Braslav Hasidism] (Jerusalem, 1974).
9. Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (University, Alabama, 1979), esp. pp. 223-26.
10. Dan, p. 39. For examples of heroines, see Peretz's "A Passion for Clothes" and Ber Horowitz's "The Dybbuk," both translated from the Yiddish in *Yenne Velt: The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult*, ed. Joachim Neugroschel (paperback ed., New York, 1978), pp. 353-70.
11. "Oyb nisht nokh hekher" (1900) in *Ale verk* 4:98-102. For an English translation see *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York, 1954), pp. 231-33.
12. "Mekubolim" (Heb. 1891; Yid. 1894) in *Ale verk* 4:20-25 and "Bontshe shvayg," *ibid.*, 2:412-20. For English translations see *Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, pp. 219-30.
13. "Dray matones" (ca. 1908), in *Ale verk* 5:81-92; *Yenne velt*, pp. 114-22.
14. The only critical study of Der Nister to date is by Khone Shmeruk, "Der Nister's 'Under a Fence': Tribulations of a Soviet Yiddish Symbolist," *The Field of Yiddish, second collection* (The Hague, 1965), pp. 263-87. The largest sampling of his stories in English are in *Yenne Velt*.
15. 1920; in *Yenne Velt*, pp. 460-542.
16. Benjamin Hrushovski, "The Deconstruction of Speech: Sholem Aleichem and the Semiotics of Jewish Folklore" [Hebrew], afterword to his translation of Sholem Aleichem, *Tevey hehalban vemonologim* (Tel Aviv, 1983), pp. 195-212.
17. See my *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 163-83.
18. "Station Baranovich" (1909), in *The Best of Sholom Aleichem*, ed. Irving Howe and Ruth R. Wisse (Washington, D.C., 1979), pp. 61-70. See also Wisse's comments on the story on pp. x-xi.
19. I.B. Singer, "Mayse Tishevits" (1959) in *Der shpigl un andere dertseylungen*, ed. Khone Shmeruk (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 12-22. For a free English translation, see *The Collected Stories* (New York, 1983), pp. 179-87.