

## A Yiddish Bard in Berlin: Moyshe Kulbak and the Flourishing of Yiddish Poetry in Exile

RACHEL SEELIG

“IKH BIN ITSTER IN BERLIN. Dos bin ikh gekumen in ‘eyrope.’”<sup>1</sup> So wrote Moyshe Kulbak on September 13, 1920, to the literary critic Shmuel Niger. “I am presently in Berlin. Now I have arrived in ‘Europe.’” Here in the cultural and intellectual hub of central Europe, Kulbak immersed himself in the humanistic tradition of Goethe and Schiller and absorbed current poetic trends in the hope of producing a similarly rich literary tradition in Yiddish. Implicit in the aspirations of the individual poet was the cultural mission of expanding Yiddish literature and integrating it into European belles lettres, which would in turn allow East European Jewry to attain the status of a modern European nation and Yiddish the status of a national tongue. Indeed, Kulbak was speaking not only personally but also for Yiddish culture when he proclaimed to have “arrived in Europe.”

Yet Kulbak’s assumed arrival was hardly consistent with his actual experience of Berlin. “In terms of livelihood, things are very difficult for me,” he informed Niger. “Nevertheless, I have no intention of leaving Berlin. I am studying and am thrilled that nearly everything interests me.”<sup>2</sup> A diet of German literature and philosophy may have whetted an intellectual appetite, but it would not satisfy an empty stomach. Lacking a local audience and earning little for his sporadic publications, Kulbak did not assimilate into native or immigrant intellectual circles, and struggled to make ends meet. His brief time in Berlin between 1920 and 1923 was the loneliest of his life—but also one of the most prolific.

Kulbak was, in Georg Simmel’s terms, the quintessential “stranger,”

---

1. Moyshe Kulbak, “Finef briv fun moyshe kulbak tsu shmuel niger,” *Di goldene keyt* 13 (1952): 236.

2. Kulbak, “Finef briv,” 237.

one who gains access to the universal (ethical, intellectual) dimension of the host culture, but not to the specific (ethnic) dimension, and therefore stands for the “synthesis of nearness and distance.”<sup>3</sup> Berlin was the perfect environment for such a paradoxical figure because it was both center and periphery. On the one hand, it was the center of an ostensibly universal *Kultur*, which provided access to a rich history of humanistic culture and exposure to current trends in European letters. On the other hand, it was a temporary refuge on the periphery of Kulbak’s native Eastern Europe, now in the throes of revolution, a transitional space within which he was relegated to the margins. As such, Berlin provided the physical and psychic distance required to cultivate both collective cultural goals and a unique individual aesthetic. It was a suitable haven for Kulbak because it was, as Peter Gay put it, “hospitable to the stranger; indeed, it was so welcoming not only because it gave its residents conspicuousness, but also because it allowed them to disappear.”<sup>4</sup>

If Kulbak was invisible in Berlin, it is noteworthy that Berlin likewise makes no appearance in the poems he penned there. As Jordan Finkin observes, the “decidedly non-urban” themes and motifs of Kulbak’s Berlin lyrics reflect the “poet’s means of escape from the city, rather than an exploration of a bewildering new urban landscape.”<sup>5</sup> His two major works from this period, *Naye lîder* (New Poems, 1922) and *Mesbiekb ben efrayim* (Messiah Son of Ephraim, 1924), remain thematically rooted in the White Russian countryside while conveying the rootless condition of the itinerant interwar Yiddish poet. The parallel dichotomies driving these works—arrival and exclusion, influence and absence—provide the key to understanding the role of Weimar Berlin not only in Kulbak’s development but also in the evolution of a young Yiddish literature at a moment of transition.

---

3. When Simmel composed his 1908 essay “The Stranger,” he had in mind the German Jew, whose embrace of *Bildung* as the entry ticket to universal *Kultur* ultimately betrayed his exclusion from the ethnic dimension of this culture. Kulbak’s example demonstrates that the East European Jewish immigrant, who embraced Germany as a symbol of “European” cultural values but remained consigned to the margins of German society, is equally befitting of the term “stranger.” For a nuanced discussion of Simmel’s essay, see Paul Mendes-Flohr, “The Berlin Jew as Cosmopolitan,” in *Berlin Metropolis: Jews and the New Culture, 1890–1918*, ed. E. D. Bilski (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 22.

4. Peter Gay, “The Berlin-Jewish Spirit: A Dogma in Search of Some Doubts,” *Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture* 15 (1972): 5.

5. Jordan Finkin, “‘Like fires in overgrown forests’: Moyshe Kulbak’s Contemporary Berlin Poetics,” in *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin: At the Crossroads of Diaspora Politics and Culture*, ed. G. Estrakh and M. Krutikov (Oxford, 2010), 76.

If Kulbak's Berlin lyrics reflect the escape from Berlin, it is equally striking that the few verses he set in Berlin were written in Eastern Europe, in Soviet Minsk. The mock-epic poem *Disner tshayld berold* (Childe Harold of Disno, 1928–31), set in Berlin's swinging 1920s, engages the avant-garde techniques and motifs typical of German poetry of the day. Its identification with the political recalcitrance typical of German expressionism constitutes an expression of contempt for bourgeois culture and sympathy for socialist values, which the author's settlement in the Soviet Union would appear to corroborate. However, its sardonic style distinguishes it from the propagandistic, poster-like literature of the Soviet Union, where socialist realism was becoming the dominant style. By adopting and adapting the thematic and stylistic features of expressionism, Kulbak sought to integrate into Soviet Yiddish culture without forfeiting his cultural ideals or compromising his unique personal aesthetic.

#### ARRIVAL AND EXCLUSION

Germany in general, and Berlin in particular, had long occupied the East European Jewish imagination as a symbol of Enlightenment and modernization. Imagination was transformed into reality toward the turn of the twentieth century as increasing numbers of East European Jews traveled west in search of professional opportunity, political freedom, and education. The image of Berlin as the wellspring of humanism was succeeded in the post-World War I period by the new Weimar metropolis, a hotbed of avant-garde artistic activity and a space of ethnic and political diversity. Yiddish-, Hebrew-, and Russian-speaking Jewish writers and intellectuals, facing censorship and persecution in their native lands, were drawn to the freedom of political affiliation and artistic expression that characterized Berlin. The sudden, extreme growth of the city also ushered in a noticeable increase of Jewish immigrants.<sup>6</sup> Expanded and restructured as *Großberlin*,<sup>7</sup> the young Weimar capital was transformed from a symbol of *Kultur* (in the singular Hegelian sense) into a cauldron

---

6. What began as a trickle in the wake of the 1880 Russian pogroms, at which time fewer than 3,000 of Berlin's 50,000 Jews (or 5.5 percent) were foreign born, became a flood, and by the mid-1920s, East European Jews numbered 43,000 out of 172,000 Berlin Jews, or just over 25 percent. See Gay, "The Berlin-Jewish Spirit," 4.

7. The 1920 Greater Berlin Act (*Groß-Berlin-Gesetz*), which doubled Berlin's population (bringing it to four million), made Berlin the second largest city in Europe and greatly expanded its economic, political, and ethnic diversity.

of European cultures (in the plural), a haphazard assemblage of locals and foreigners, residents and wayfarers.<sup>8</sup>

Postwar inflation and the increased value of foreign currency attracted a significant number of foreign publishers, making Berlin the second-largest center of Yiddish publishing between 1920 and 1924.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as Shachar Pinsker stresses, a “center of publishing” should not be confused with a “literary center.”<sup>10</sup> Like Kulbak, Yiddish literature itself merely sojourned in Berlin, which was less a literary center than a clearinghouse. Most of the Yiddish periodicals and books produced in Berlin were sent abroad to Eastern Europe and America, while those produced abroad rarely traveled in the opposite direction, making it difficult for Yiddish writers stationed in Berlin to acquire Yiddish works—including their own. Kulbak complained to Nizer that he could not obtain a single copy of an anthology in which he had published poems: “Unfortunately, I do not have a single copy of *Vayter-bukh*. I can’t get my hands on it here in Berlin.”<sup>11</sup>

While Yiddish publishers were focused on foreign audiences, the local reading public showed little interest in the Yiddish literature being produced in their own backyard. Although German Jewish books and journals were filled with romantic portrayals of East European Jewry, German Jews remained largely oblivious to current trends in Yiddish literature. As Delphine Bechtel argues, German Jews “looked back to

---

8. For a nuanced historical analysis of the dual definition of “culture,” and its implications for modern Jewish thought, see Mendes-Flohr, “The Jew as Cosmopolitan,” in his *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit, 1991), 413–23. Mendes-Flohr places Hegel’s conception of a singular high culture, which he believed to be confined to the intellectual and aesthetic attainments of Europe, in opposition to J. G. Herder’s understanding of “culture” as a pluralistic anthropological category, that which distinguishes individual nations.

9. At its apogee in 1924, Berlin’s Yiddish publishing industry was responsible for producing as many as 214 Yiddish books (nearly 25 percent of all Yiddish books published worldwide that year). As the German economy began to stabilize around this time, Yiddish publishing experienced a stark decline. See Glenn S. Levine, “Yiddish Publishing in Berlin and the Crisis in Eastern European Jewish Culture, 1919–1924,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 42 (1997): 87. For a detailed analysis of the emergence of Berlin as a center of Yiddish publishing, see Leo and Renate Fuks, “Yiddish Publishing Activities in the Weimar Republic, 1920–1933,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 33 (1988): 417–34.

10. Shachar Pinsker, “Deciphering the Hieroglyphics of the Metropolis: Literary Topographies of Berlin in Hebrew and Yiddish Modernism,” in Estraiikh and Krutikov, *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin*, 31.

11. Kulbak, “Finef briv,” 237.

the world of Yiddish literature and culture as to a place of origin tinged with sentimentalism and nostalgia because they needed to romanticize it in order to define their own identity. They did not want to make the effort of really understanding its modernist, avant-garde aspects."<sup>12</sup> For the East European Jewish immigrants in their midst, Berlin was a *Sprachinsel*,<sup>13</sup> or, to borrow Pinsker's term, an "enclave" of Yiddish modernism, a temporary, tentative refuge in which Yiddish literature proliferated but remained largely inaccessible and invisible to native and immigrant audiences alike.<sup>14</sup>

The immediate postwar period witnessed the proliferation of Yiddish poetry, marking a turning point for a relatively young literature. New styles and movements were influenced by the avant-garde trends and extreme individualism that distinguished European poetry of the interwar period.<sup>15</sup> However, as Seth Wolitz has observed, the transition from collective concerns to personal aesthetic freedom was delayed for Yiddish poets. Whereas their non-Jewish counterparts were able to make this transition smoothly as a result of newly established nation-states, Yiddish poets, lacking a sovereign state or autonomous territory after the war, remained concerned with the national question while cultivating a personal poetics.<sup>16</sup> Berlin enabled poets like Kulbak to pursue collective and

---

12. Delphine Bechtel, "Babylon or Jerusalem: Berlin as Center of Jewish Modernism in the 1920s," in *Insiders and Outsiders: Jewish and Gentile Culture in Germany and Austria*, ed. D. C. G. Lorenz and G. Weinberger (Detroit, 1994), 121.

13. I borrow the term *Sprachinsel* from Susanne Marten-Finnis and Heather Valencia, *Sprachinseln: Jiddische Publizistik in London, Wilna und Berlin, 1880–1950* (Cologne, 1999).

14. Pinsker, "Deciphering the Hieroglyphics of Modernity," 29.

15. Mikhail Krutikov has shown that a similar turning point took place for the Yiddish novel in Eastern Europe during the years between the first socialist revolution of 1905 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. He argues that the transition from the preindustrialized *shtetl* to modern, urbanized life, and the attendant political and economic transformations, contributed to the development of realism and the novel form. If the years leading up to the First World War marked the burgeoning of Yiddish realist prose, the immediate aftermath of the war signaled an outpouring of experimental verse. See Mikhail Krutikov, *Yiddish Fiction and the Crisis of Modernity, 1905–1914* (Stanford, Calif., 2001). Ruth Wisse has shown that the flourishing of Yiddish poetry in America began somewhat earlier with the emergence in 1907 of *Di yunge* (The Young Ones), a coterie of lyric poets based in New York that included Mani Leyb, Moyshe Leyb Halpern, Zishe Landau, Reuven Ayzland, and H. Leyvik. See Ruth R. Wisse, *A Little Love in Big Manhattan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

16. Seth L. Wolitz, "Between Folk and Freedom: The Failure of the Yiddish Modernist Movement in Poland," *Yiddish* 8.1 (1991): 26.

personal goals simultaneously. It provided the cultural stimulation needed to expand a young literary canon striving for generic and stylistic diversity as well as the intellectual and political freedom needed to develop one's individual voice.

Berlin was therefore the ideal space within which to conceive an imagined "Yiddishland." This concept originated with the rise of Yiddishism at the end of the nineteenth century, a movement that promoted Jewish national autonomy rooted in Yiddish language and culture.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the Zionists, Yiddishists made cultural autonomy in the Diaspora, as opposed to political sovereignty in a territorial homeland, their most pressing goal. Insofar as Kulbak's image of "Yiddishland" was a cultural construct, rather than a political entity, it exemplifies what Kenneth Moss has described as the "principled distinction between culture and politics" that defined the "culturist" ideals of a network of East European Jewish intellectuals during the Bolshevik Revolution and the interwar years who believed that the "defense of culture's sovereign prerogatives was not a betrayal of the nation, but in fact represented true service to the nation—that is was a nationalist act in the truest sense."<sup>18</sup>

However, Kulbak's example also reveals the limitations of Moss's argument, which is predicated on a nineteenth-century conception of "high culture" defined by "individual rather than collective prerogatives of literary creativity."<sup>19</sup> Moss argues that the culturists called for "an outright revolt against the idea that a modern Jewish culture had to be based on indigenous national traditions." Kulbak's work reflects, by contrast, a cultural vision founded on the fusion of ethos and ethnos, or universal and particular definitions of culture. Although he strove for a Yiddish canon varied enough in voice and technique to be integrated into European culture, he was committed to preserving the elements of Jewish folklore and tradition that distinguished Yiddish literature from other national literatures and thus served to promote a distinctly Jewish cultural renaissance.

---

17. The major event marking the upswing of Yiddishism was the Czernowitz Yiddish language conference of 1908, led by Nathan Birnbaum, Chaim Zhitlovsky, and I. L. Peretz, all of whom shared a commitment to Yiddish but represented different political and religious perspectives and goals. For more on the conference and its leading figures, see Emanuel S. Goldsmith, *Architects of Yiddishism at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* (Rutherford, N.J., 1976).

18. Kenneth B. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance in the Russian Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 22.

19. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance*, 56.

## FROM FOLK SONG TO MODERN LYRIC

Before turning to Kulbak's Berlin writings, it is worth examining an earlier programmatic essay in which he developed his poetics as part and parcel of his national-cultural vision. "Dos yidishe vort" (The Yiddish Word, 1918) traces the development of Yiddish literature from folklore to modernism. Kulbak explains that the Yiddish language, once "crooked and lame," began to come into its own at the end of the nineteenth century with the birth of the folk song, in which "heartily Jewish (*yidishlekh*) and folksy (*folkstimlekh*) words were woven together in naïve verses and infused with the primitive precision of folk-creation."<sup>20</sup> At this stage, however, the Yiddish language "sharpened unconsciously. The nation did not appreciate the artistic worth of the word."<sup>21</sup> The first inkling of artistic potential emerged with the stories of Mendele, the *zeyde* (grandfather) of modern Yiddish letters, who pioneered the "epic" phase in Yiddish literature. Mendele was succeeded by I. L. Peretz, whom Kulbak credits with creating the first "lyric" style in Yiddish. Yet Peretz's poetic lexicon was incomplete, for it lacked words for tenderness and delight in nature.<sup>22</sup> As if to anticipate Kulbak's critique, Peretz had in fact ridiculed his own attempt to write a love poem in Yiddish: his ballad "Monish," celebrated as the seminal protomodernist poem in Yiddish, contains a discursive passage on the artistic constraints of a language that is replete with "jokes and pranks" (*vitn un blitsn*) but has only a measly few expressions for affection which "taste like goose fat (*gentn-sbmalt*)."<sup>23</sup> Kulbak maintained that Yiddish gained the capacity for sentimental expression only with the next generation of poets, singling out Dovid Einhorn and Sholem Asch as Yiddish romantics whose verse "emits the smell not of 'goose fat' but rather of 'grasses,' the smell of the field that God has blessed."<sup>24</sup>

Whereas the creators of the Yiddish folk song had shaped Yiddish "unconsciously," modern Yiddish poets had surpassed the "mouth of the folk" and "consciously purified the language." On the basis of this analysis, Kenneth Moss claims that Kulbak "resolutely asserted the subordinate status of folk culture relative to the aesthetic capacities of the modern, self-conscious Jewish artist."<sup>25</sup> The argument is inaccurate. Far from degrading folk culture, Kulbak sought to establish a poetic tradition

20. Kulbak, "Dos yidishe vort," in *Oygeklibene Sbriftn*, ed. S. Rozshanski (Buenos Aires, 1976), 299.

21. Kulbak, "Dos yidishe vort," 299.

22. *Ibid.*, 301.

23. I. L. Peretz, "Monish," *Ale verk* (New York, 1947), 23.

24. Kulbak, "Dos yidishe vort," 302.

25. Moss, *Jewish Renaissance*, 74.

that stemmed from the Yiddish folk song but that had grown beyond its folk roots into modern lyric. In presenting folklore as the foundation—but not the fulfillment—of a national canon, he echoed I. L. Peretz's definition of "Yiddishkayt," which brought together the sources of Jewish textual tradition with the dynamism of modern secular literature. Indeed, Peretz regarded Yiddish as the primary tool for the synthesis of an authenticating Jewish folk culture with modern European life and universal humanistic values. He demanded that the Jews take up "new prophets and new books," by which he meant secular European literature, without neglecting the primitive sources of Jewish culture found in Scripture and folklore.<sup>26</sup> "A new Jewish life must flourish," he wrote, "a new Bible must be carried to the people as a seed, the Jewish folk (*folkstimlikhe*) symbols and legends rejuvenated as dew and rain!"<sup>27</sup> Peretz placed the onus on his successors to harvest the ancient crops and to plant the new seeds of an autonomous national culture in Yiddish.

Kulbak's essay contains a response to his predecessor's demand: "The Yiddish word has been synthesized by the finest spirits of the nation and carries with it the musical rhythm of singing Jewish souls. If our language has something to conquer, it will do so with its flowers rather than with its pamphleteering paper swords."<sup>28</sup> In other words, modern Yiddish literature would be the primary tool for Jewish national renewal. Yet Kulbak was aware of a major challenge facing modern Yiddish poets: they lacked a poetic tradition upon which to build. He lamented: "A Turgenev or a Bal-mont of our own has yet to arise to sing the Yiddish language as the Russian language has been sung. But he will come—the love of Yiddish will inspire such a poet."<sup>29</sup> Without the shoulders of great romantics upon which to stand, modern Yiddish poets would have to borrow and modulate European trends. *Naye lider*, the volume to which we will now turn, represents Kulbak's first sustained effort to blend the distinctive elements of Jewish folk culture with various trends in European poetics in order to produce a complete, self-sufficient poetic tradition in Yiddish.

#### NAYE LIDER: HOMELESSNESS AND WANDERLUST

*Naye lider*, published in Berlin in 1922, reflects both the itinerant existence of the interwar Yiddish poet and the desire to produce a Yiddish poetic tradition on par with other European nations. Merging motifs taken from

26. Peretz, "Vegn, vos firn op fun yidishkayt," *Ale verk*, 58.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Kulbak, "Dos yidishe vort," 303–4.

29. *Ibid.*, 303.



Jewish folklore and mysticism with themes and techniques borrowed from romanticism, Russian symbolism, and German expressionism, its stylistic heterogeneity betrays Kulbak's belief that for Yiddish culture to "arrive in Europe" it required a lyric tradition emerging from the roots of its folklore, blossoming into romantic poetry and reaching its apogee in avant-garde verse. Indeed, the volume is an attempt to layer all three phases of this tradition within a single multivalent work. Only one element provides thematic coherence: the valorization of nature as the site of both indigenous roots and authentic individual experience. Yet the longing for rootedness is continually counterbalanced by the wanderlust of the individual in exile. This abiding tension—homesickness versus wanderlust—reveals the challenge of inspiring a national renaissance through literature without subordinating the concerns of the individual artist to the needs of the nation.

The opening poem is a little ditty sung by a cheeky wandering minstrel who traverses his native White Russia, wild and free:

A Youthful Rogue Am I . . .	<i>ikh bin a bokber a hultay . . .</i>
A youthful rogue am I, A stick held at my side, Tra-la-lie, tra-la-lie, I travel far and wide.	<i>ikh bin a bokber a hultay, bob ikh mir a shTekn, tray-ray-ray, tray-ray-ray kh'shpan in alde ekn.</i>
I come upon a little inn And knock against the door, "Who are you? Who wants in?" I say: a wanderer.	<i>kum ikh tsu a kretshme tsu, klap ikh on in toyer, "ver bistu? ver bistu?" entfer ikh: a geyer.</i>
Loafer traveling so free! You idle and you squander . . . Tra-la-lee, tra-la-lee So I wander farther.	<i>leydikgeyer, azoy fri! kbutshpenik farshayter . . . tri-li-li, tri-li-li un ikh gey mir vayter.</i>
Over to the well I stray To drink till thirst is quenched, I stand in graying light of day, Like a rooster fully drenched . . .	<i>kum ikh tsu a brunem tsu, kh'trink zikh on mit vaser, shTey ikh in dem morgn-groy, vi a hon a naser . . .</i>
A farmer traveling by Greets me with a "Howdy!" I shrug bewildered and reply: Howdy?—howdy shmowdy . . .	<i>fort a poyer! farbay: "tsu tshibatsh na svetsbnye?" veys ikh nit un tu a brey: svetsbnye?—petshe metshe . . .<sup>30</sup></i>

30. Kulbak, *Naye lider* (Berlin, 1922), 7. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

Bringing to mind the playful *purim-shpiler* (Purim player) or bawdy *badkhn* (wedding jester),<sup>31</sup> the speaker is a typical Jewish folk hero, a mischievous native son who sings proudly in Yiddish. David Roskies has argued that in the post–World War I era folklore became the “vehicle of Jewish self-determination, the basis for the Jewish claim to normalcy and nationhood, to land and to landscape.”<sup>32</sup> Besides the speaker’s identity, various folkloristic elements appear to root the roving rogue in his native landscape. The poem’s tonic-syllabic metric structure, comprising rhyming quatrains with a fixed number of syllables and stresses per line, is typical of the folk song.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the frequent use of colloquial contractions such as *kb’shpan* (instead of *ikh shpan*) or *alde ekn* (instead of *al di ekn*) enhances the quick oral rhythm. The simple ABAB rhyme scheme and steady trochaic meter, which bring to mind a nursery rhyme, further emphasize the speaker’s impish nature.

Yet the free-spirited wanderer is quickly transformed into a penniless idler. Finkin underlines an important contrast between the speaker’s proud self-definition as a *geyer* (wanderer or traveler) and the innkeeper’s epithet, *leydikgeyer* (idler, literally “empty traveler,” a reference to penury), which is equivalent to the conversion of “movement into stasis, and thus of positive self-definition into pejorative socially imposed category is the stifling inertia which the rogue’s persona is meant to combat.”<sup>34</sup> The

---

31. The traditional *purim-shpiler* is a performer, usually appearing in costume, who recounts the story of the Purim holiday in rhymed paraphrases and parodies on liturgical texts, adding obscenities and bawdy humor to entertain the audience. The *badkhn* likewise uses irreverent humor to entertain the guests at Jewish weddings. Other poets of Kulbak’s generation, perhaps most famously Itzik Manger, took on such roles in their writing as part of the process of constructing a Jewish national canon.

32. David Roskies, “The Last of the Purim Players: Itzik Manger,” *Prooftexts* 13.3 (1993): 211.

33. In his seminal work on Yiddish prosody, Benjamin Harshav explains that the “syllabic” organizational principle refers to the number of syllables per verse, while the “tonic” principle refers to the number of stressed syllables per verse. A verse is “tonic-syllabic” if it is organized into a fixed number of stressed and unstressed syllables in a fixed order. In Kulbak’s poem, the syllabic count of each quatrain is 7–6–6–6, with the number of stressed syllables per line following the pattern 4–3–4–3. According to Harshav, poems such as this one, which have a fixed strophic structure composed of equal numbers of measures per line, betray the influence of the folk song, whereas freer length and number of measures are associated with more modern, experimental forms. Kulbak played with both rhythmic groups in *Naye lider*. See Benjamin Hrushovski (Harshav), “On Free Rhythms in Modern Yiddish Poetry,” in *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Yiddish Language, Folklore and Literature*, ed. U. Weinreich (New York, 1954), 219–66.

34. Finkin, “Like fires,” 80.

linguistic transfer introduces the tension underlying the entire volume between the pride of diasporic freedom and the plight of homelessness—the blessing and curse of living on the margins. Finkin observes a variation on this motif in the poem “In shenk” (In the Tavern), which appears later in the volume. In contrast to the independent wanderer of “Ikh bin a bokher,” who can “get drunk” on a drink of water, here the wanderer “sits silently” in a tavern among other drunken idlers. He does not retain the vocal *ikh* (I) but rather fades like a “shadow” (*shotn*) into the third-person plural, becoming just one among “a gang of rogues” (*a kbevre bul-tayes*). As Finkin remarks, the “*coup de grâce* in this humiliation” is that “the wanderer’s status as ‘rogue’ has been decoupled from him and applied to others at a separate table in the tavern. His own self-definition therefore cannot hold.”<sup>35</sup> The contrast between the two poems points to the challenge of cultivating the individual lyrical voice in a language long associated with a culture of idling masses.

This contrast is already adumbrated in the opening poem. The rogue’s proud stride in the first quatrain and powerful knock in the second are deflated in the final quatrain by his bewildered shrug in response to the passing peasant’s Byelorussian greeting. To the typical reader from the Vilna region, the sudden linguistic intrusion—*tsu tshibatsb na svetsbnye?* (What’s new in the world?)—would register as both familiar and foreign. Multilingualism was after all a defining feature of Jewish identity in the Diaspora. Since the Jews were always a minority in a non-Jewish milieu, they had to know, in addition to their own Jewish language, the language of the coterritorial majority, and, where the non-Jewish population was itself divided linguistically, more than one non-Jewish language.<sup>36</sup> In this context the speaker emerges as a hero of Diaspora Yiddish culture, a Jew who sings proudly in Yiddish within a multilingual sphere. At the same time, however, his nonsensical response (*petshe metshe*) suggests that he is perhaps less a proud wanderer than a rootless vagabond who remains linguistically alien to his own native realm. In an effort to approximate the effect of simultaneous familiarity and discomfort, a difficult task for the translator, I have resorted to a dialect of the American South, which the average (presumably monolingual) Anglo-American reader will recognize as “local-yokel” vernacular. The speaker’s “Yiddishized” response (howdy shmowdy) calls into question his “indigenoussness” to his current environment. My assumption is that while no Yankee city slicker would

---

35. Ibid.

36. Max Weinreich, “Internal Jewish Bilingualism,” in *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. S. Noble (Chicago, 1980), 247–314.

say “howdy,” one can imagine the response “howdy shmowdy” coming from any American Jew finding himself in the rural Deep South and feeling, as it were, not at home on the range!

Although the poem is written in the vein of a folk song, intimations of the speaker’s alienation and uncertainty signal the birth pangs of individual poetic consciousness. Kulbak’s rogue is the appropriate emissary to open the stylistically varied volume. His song is both the cry of national rebirth and the credo of personal aesthetic freedom. Unlike the *purim-shypiler* or *badkhn*, he sings not for his people but for himself, expressing the disconnectedness and individuation of the modern condition in general and the plight of the interwar Yiddish poet in particular. The vocal *ikb* (I) that opens the poem puts Kulbak in step with other avant-garde poets and movements of his time. A strong parallel can be found in Moyshe Leyb Halpern’s “Der gasnpoyker” (The Street Drummer), for instance, which typifies the extreme individualism and dislocation of the New York *Inzikhistsn* (Introspectivists). Like Kulbak’s meandering rogue, who uses his cheerful tune to escape his lonely itinerant existence, Halpern’s drummer masks his pain and solitude with the din of his instrument.<sup>37</sup> The rolling trochaic meter and rhyming couplets emphasize the poem’s playful, ironic tone, while the syncopated refrain—*dzbin, dzbin, boom-boom-boom*—drives the poem musically, not unlike Kulbak’s cheery *tra-la-lié*. Though more aggressive than Kulbak’s jolly rogue, Halpern’s drummer is likewise a vagabond: “wild, wild through the strange world! / I have no dress, no shirt / I have no wife, no child” (*hefker, hefker durkb der fremt! / hob ikb nit keyn rok, keyn bemt. / hob ikb nit keyn vayb, keyn kint*).

This *hefker*-wildness was also the trademark of Peretz Markish, a member of the Kiev Group and later of the Warsaw-based expressionist circle *Di Kbhalyastre* (The Gang), who became a symbol of new cultural freedom through his projection of the untrammled “I.” Like Halpern’s drummer, Markish’s alter ego in an untitled early poem tears through the world with his “shirt undone.” Like Kulbak’s rogue, who travels “to all corners of the world,” he has arms that “reach the world from end to end.”<sup>38</sup> His voice is at once defiant and mournful, betraying the loneliness attendant to cultural freedom.<sup>39</sup> The unmistakable similarities in theme and diction

37. Moyshe Leyb Halpern, “Der gasnpoyker,” *In nyu york* (New York, 1919), 36.

38. Peretz Markish, “Veys ikh nisht . . .,” *A shpigl oyf a sbteyn: Antologye, poezye un proze*, ed. Binyomin Hrushovski, Khone Shmeruk, and Avrom Sutskever (Tel Aviv, 1964), 376.

39. For an excellent reading of Markish’s poem, see Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), 202–8.

among the three poets attest to both the detachment and the interconnect- edness of Yiddish poetic production of the day. Kulbak, Halpern, and Markish were all forced to negotiate between homeland and homeless- ness, between the old world, in which Yiddish was the accepted vernacu- lar but remained relatively undeveloped as a literary tongue, and the new world, in which the official status of Yiddish had yet to be determined. Lacking a single literary center, they read and published in journals sta- tioned in cities as far removed from one another as New York, Kiev, Warsaw, and Berlin. That none of these cities was dominant meant that Yiddish poetry had become an international enterprise. Like the speakers of their poems, Kulbak and his contemporaries were everywhere and nowhere at home.

Notwithstanding the obvious parallels, Kulbak's volume stands apart from the poetry of Halpern and Markish in that it blends avant-garde individualism with a romantic connection to the East European soil. While the works of Halpern and Markish emphasize homelessness, isola- tion, and the recalcitrant voice of the individual, *Naye lider* is less explicitly rootless, alternating between the voice of the folk bard and the voice of the modernist poet. In fact, the "I" that opens the volume disappears from nearly all of the subsequent poems, in which the confident voice of the free-spirited drifter is overshadowed by neoromantic, symbolist, and expressionist influences, which demonstrate the poet's desire to balance individual aesthetics with a poetic register as varied as those of other national literatures and equally rooted in its indigenous environment. "A levone-nakht" (A Moon-Night), the second poem in the volume, could not differ more in tone or style from the opening. It is a transitional piece that bridges features from the Yiddish folk and Russian symbolist tradi- tions.

## A Moon- Night

In distant stillness Queen Sheba  
swims,  
Her veils glimmering in the cool  
night—  
Dreams of heaven-blue . . .

And extinguished moonlight  
Drips succulent-cool upon  
Every village dozing  
quietly . . .

*A levone-nakht*

*in vayter shtilkayt shvimt di malkes-  
shvo,  
es funken in der nakht der kuler ire  
shlayern—  
khaloymes fun dem himl-blo . . .*

*un opgeloshene levone-likht  
trift zaftik-kil  
af yedn derfele, vos dremt  
indershtil . . .*

A soft moonbeam stirs	<i>un s'rivt zikh um a vaykber sbtral . . .</i>
And brings together:	<i>vos bindt tsunoyf:</i>
The puppy in the yard,	<i>dos bindele in boyf,</i>
The fishy in the water,	<i>dos fisbele in zayn geveser,</i>
And the sweet white lambkin in the stall—	<i>un s'vayse lemele in sbtal —</i>
In distant stillness Queen Sheba swims	<i>in vayter sbtilkayt sbvint di malkes- sbvo</i>
From her trembling marble castles.	<i>fun ire tsiterdike mirml- sbleser.<sup>40</sup></i>

Striking is the sudden liberation of the rules of versification. Although the meter is iambic, the strophic structure, number of lines, and length of measures are tremendously varied. End rhyme is maintained but follows no consistent scheme and is overshadowed by alliteration, as in the first line, which streams in soft sibilants: *In vayter sbtilkayt sbvint di malkes-sbvo* (In distant stillness Queen Sheba swims). In addition to its free-verse structure, the poem betrays three important symbolist techniques. First, enjambment links disconnected words, images, and abstract concepts to produce a unified picture and emotional milieu, a technique deployed by the symbolists to capture abstract truths through indirect means. Second, unusual compound nouns—*binl-blo* (heaven-blue), *levone-likbt* (moonlight), *mirml-sbleser* (marble-castles)—are more evocative than descriptive, exposing the state of the poet's soul rather than the actual objects observed. The blueness of the night sky is indistinguishable from water, with the twinkling of the stars and planets rendered mystically as the floating veils of the swimming queen. This aquatic metaphor is extended in the following strophe, which depicts moonlight as paradoxically “extinguished,” as fire by water. Night spills upon the village like liquid. The compound adjective “succulent-cool” (*zaftik-kil*) exemplifies synesthesia, the confounding of the senses of taste, smell, and touch for emotional effect. Emotional intensity is matched by aesthetic experimentation. Exploiting the synthetic quality of Yiddish, Kulbak enriches his poetic lexicon with terms that demonstrate its potential for poetic virtuosity.

An obvious change occurs in the third stanza. The singsong quality of “Ikh bin a bokher” is unexpectedly reprised. Flowing enjambment is disrupted by staccato breaks, and dreamlike images are replaced by concrete objects reminiscent of a nursery rhyme or lullaby. The soothing repetition of the diminutive form (*bindele, fisbele, lemele*) infuses the poem

40. Kulbak, *Naye lîder*, 8.

with the “hearty Yiddishkayt” that Kulbak observed in the classic Yiddish folk song, thus demonstrating Kulbak’s wish to establish a Yiddish folk tradition that could be carried over into the composition of modernist poetry. The concluding image of “trembling marble-castles” produces both a link to the classical past and the connotation of something carefully crafted, polished, and refined. Although they float in the sky, the marble-castles do appear, so to speak, out of thin air. The *vaykher sbtral* (soft moonbeam) in the second stanza, which echoes the previous *vayter sbtilkayt* (distant silence), unites all the elements of the poem. That which is “distant” is brought near, both visually and linguistically. The moonbeam “binds together” (*bindet tsunoyf*) the raw roots of the Jewish folk song with the refined structures of European poetics, fulfilling Kulbak’s wish to chisel modern secular culture from the rough stuff of folklore.<sup>41</sup> The result is a carefully crafted poem that ascends aesthetically yet remains ingrained in Yiddish folk culture.

No trace of the folk tradition is to be found in the poem “In a yadlovn vald” (In a Forest of Firs), yet Kulbak’s desire to ground Yiddish poetry in his native landscape is felt strongly. Symbolist freedom of verse blends with imagist precision and direct relation to the object at hand. In the opening lines, the reader’s eye is drawn to a subtle fleck of red:

still. where pointing red of  
strawberry

*sbtil. vu es pintelt rey*  
*a pozemke*<sup>42</sup>

What is described is not the inanimate redness of the strawberry, as in a still life, but rather the active reddening of the strawberry as it first sprouts from the earth. Color becomes a verb.<sup>43</sup> There is no English equivalent for the word *pintelt*, meaning something like “coming to a point,” and which, like the noun *pintel* (point or fleck), denotes something subtle, fleeting, and almost imperceptible.<sup>44</sup> The effect is strengthened by the line-break between *pintelt rey* and *pozemke* (wild strawberry), which

41. Finkin, “Like fires,” 82.

42. For this poem only I have departed from the YIVO rules of transliteration in order to draw attention to the Lithuanian pronunciation with which Kulbak would have read it. As will become clear through my analysis, the local dialect contributes significantly to the poem’s musicality and theme.

43. I wish to thank an anonymous reader for making this astute observation.

44. I have used the gerund “pointing” to produce adjective-verb ambiguity. The word “strawberry” is deliberately placed at the end of line one in order to rhyme with “quietly” in line four, thus offering a sense of the natural end-rhyme of the original.

concretizes the first inkling of fruit as it emerges from the soil. The technique bears a striking resemblance to the final stanza of one of the great American imagist poems of the period, William Carlos Williams's "Spring and All" (1923).<sup>45</sup>

But now the stark dignity of  
entrance—Still, the profound change  
has come upon them: rooted, they  
grip down and begin to awaken.

The line break between "they" and "grip down" enacts the very condition being described: carrots taking root in their native soil. Kulbak's poem likewise links signifier and signified, literally rooting the Yiddish language in its native landscape. The carefully placed line break enables the Slavic word *pozemke* to break through the dominant Germanic layer of the language like a strawberry breaking through the topsoil. The poetics that Williams embedded within "Spring and All," quoted below, may well be applied to Kulbak's:

Now the grass, tomorrow  
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf  
One by one objects are defined—

So too Kulbak's poem defines objects "one by one"—moving from the single sprouting strawberry to a worm, a branch, roots, ferns, nettles, and so on—until all are woven together in a great cosmic "web." Here is the poem in its entirety:

In a Forest of Firs . . .	<i>in a yadlovn vald . . .</i>
still. where pointing red of strawberry—	<i>shtil. vu es pintelt reyts a pozemke</i>
and little worm climbs quietly	<i>un vu es kletert shtilerbeyt a vereml</i>
in web of clumsy branch with branch,	<i>in dem tsuneyfgenem fun tseyg tsu tseyg di knokbike,</i>

---

45. Although there is no evidence indicating that Kulbak read the American imagists, it is highly possible that he absorbed certain trends of the movement through the work of his New York compatriots, such as Yankev Glatstshetyn and Arn Glants-Leyeles, who were strongly influenced by Anglo-American modernism.



lattice of mossy trunk and roots . . . deepening thicket, hairy and dense— overflowing spring delights by green-bearded tree stumps . . . a hush passed from grass to grass, a sound a splash a gentle source and spring of humble hare— gray fur turns round through ferns, cold nettles, upon old rot . . . and still, and cool the forest echoes blue-concealment . . .	<i>in dem geflekbt fun shtam un vortslen          mokbike . . .          un tif iz di gedikhtenish di horike,          di peterdike —          es iz a kvelenish a mikhomorike          bay di kortobes          di grinberdike . . .          un vu es tut a shushk          a grezl tou a grezl,          a klung,          a plushk          a milder kvelkbele,          un vu es tut a shprung          a bidner bezl, —          a ker dos greye felkbele          durkh paportnik,          in kalter kropeve,          af alter feylenish . . .          un shtil,          un kil          hilkbt op in vald          dos bley-farheylenish . . .<sup>46</sup></i>
---	---

The cataloging of natural objects occurs simultaneously on linguistic and concrete levels, linking the growth of the Byelorussian forest with the flourishing of a Yiddish idiom heavily laden with Slavic influences, a Yiddish indigenous to the region it is used to describe. When read aloud, the poem's roots grip down even more firmly. Hailing from Vilna Province, Kulbak would have spoken with the Lithuanian pronunciation; thus, the word for "red" would be pronounced *reyt* instead of *royt*, and likewise "stillness" as *shtilteyht* instead of *shtilerhayt*, thereby adding an additional layer of rhyme.<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to the opening of the volume, the speaker's presence is scarcely felt; nature in its interconnected splendor is the true hero of the poem. The unity of nature is expressed and enhanced by the intrinsic properties of the language. The rhyme seems less a product of artistic innovation than a natural outgrowth of Yiddish morphology. For in-

46. Kulbak, *Naye lider*, 9.

47. I am grateful to Dr. Boris Kotlerman for correcting my pronunciation during a lecture at Bar Ilan University.

stance, the frequent use of plural adjective endings (e.g., *knokbike*) creates a natural rhyme. The plural form creates assonance with diminutive nouns such as *kvelkbele*, with which it shares the same number of syllables, vowel endings, and antepenultimate stress, producing powerful dactyls that lend vigor and drive. Adding another layer of rhyme, the repeated suffix *enish*, which may be appended to a verb to create an abstract noun or gerund, blurs the conceptual boundary between stasis and movement, stability and evolution.<sup>48</sup> For instance, the neologism *kvelenish* could be either a synonym for *kvel* (a spring) or an inflected version of the verb *kveln* (to delight), thus infusing the natural object with emotion. The poem concludes with its sole abstract image, *bley-farheylenish* (blue concealment/concealing). As in “A levone-nakht,” the compound term denotes a synesthetic moment wherein stillness “resounds” through color. Ironically, this poem about stillness (*shtilerbeyt*) contains a great amount of movement enacted by the language itself. Even the proper noun *gedikbtenish* (thicket), like the German word for “poem” (*Gedicht*), gestures toward the continued “thickening” of the forest as a metaphor for poetic composition. Objects emerge one by one, layer upon layer, until all come together in nature’s mighty network.

In mere pages, Kulbak moves from folk song to romanticism through symbolism and imagism. The stylistic heterogeneity reaches its culmination in the concluding cycle, “Raysn” (White Russia), a collection of twelve narrative poems that romanticize the Jews of the Byelorussian soil.<sup>49</sup> Blending a mythic landscape with rich, earthy *realia*, the poem straddles Jewish and secular thematic registers, while the long-breathed romantic verses rely equally upon Hebraic and Slavic linguistic registers. In contrast to his Zionist contemporaries, who produced images of an Orientalized Palestine, Kulbak locates the Promised Land in his native Vilna province. As Marc Caplan points out, “Raysn” distinguishes itself from the conventions of Yiddish literature by focusing on the natural Slavic landscape rather than on privileged Jewish spaces, such as the *shtetl* synagogue, marketplace, or bathhouse.<sup>50</sup> Indigenously to the

---

48. For instance, the Yiddish word *shtupenish*, meaning “crowd” or “congestion,” is taken from the verb *shtupn* (to push), and thus denotes the kind of chaotic activity that occurs in an overcrowded place.

49. With the help of Shmuel Niger, *Rayson* was first published in the New York-based newspaper *Di tsukunft* (The Future) in 1922. It was later gathered into *Naye lider*.

50. Marc Caplan, “Belarus in Berlin, Berlin in Belarus: Moyshe Kulbak’s *Rayson* and *Meschieb ben-Efrayim* between Nostalgia and Apocalypse,” in Estraiikh and Krutikov, *Yiddish in Weimar Berlin*, 90.

Byelorussian landscape is emphasized in the final poem, “Grandfather Prepares to Die,” which invokes yet inverts the blessing of Jacob (Gn 49.1–27). Whereas the biblical tale establishes Jacob’s sons’ claim to the Land of Israel, Kulbak’s version affirms the dream of Diaspora nationalism by bestowing upon the native sons of White Russia the forests, fields, and rivers that nurtured them. In a parody of Zebulun’s blessing (“Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore; / He shall be a haven for ships,” Gn 49.13), Uncle Shmulie is promised the sludgy rivers of Vilna Province: “You smell of fish scales and the slime of rivers. Blessed are you on land, and blessed on water!” Ironically, nostalgia for the White Russian countryside betrays the influence of metropolitan Berlin. As Caplan observes, the striking absence of the city registers the poet’s own dislocation from his urban environs, while the projection of an idealized native land could only have been produced, nostalgically, from afar. Nostalgia serves as a strategy for reflecting on and reclaiming the past “from the standpoint of a present time and place in flux.”<sup>51</sup>

*MESSIAH SON OF EPHRAIM: FAREWELL TO BERLIN*

If “Raysn” reflects the poet’s attempt to negotiate the past in a transitional time and space, *Mesbiekb ben efrayim*, the last piece Kulbak produced in Berlin, betrays his apprehensions about the future. Like “Raysn,” it is replete with earthy language that honors indigenously to Eastern Europe and the value of simplicity as the foundation for a socialistic life in the Diaspora. Yet an overriding sense of madness betrays doubt about the feasibility of this ideal in a newly redrawn Europe still struggling with the violent aftermath war and revolution. Moreover, while “Raysn” reveals the influence of Berlin covertly (i.e., through its absence), *Mesbiekb ben efrayim* reflects the metropolis directly through its use of avant-garde techniques and motifs typical of German poetry of the day.<sup>52</sup> Like the German expressionist artists and writers, Kulbak responded to urban dislocation from opposing angles, balancing fear of impending apocalypse against the flight from civilization and return to nature as a panacea to the stolidity and alienation of urban life.<sup>53</sup> His unusual prose-poetry mir-

51. *Ibid.*, 94.

52. Neil H. Donahue, ed., *A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism* (New York, 2005), 14.

53. For example, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and his colleagues in *Die Brücke* (The Bridge) expressed resistance to industrialization by portraying both natural landscapes and the mirror image of modern urban life. Compare, for example, Kirchner’s *Winter Landscape 1919*, in which placid blue mountains are set against the backdrop of a feverish red sky, with his *Potsdamer Platz*, in which two veiled

rors the cinematographic effect and fast-paced journalistic rhythm typical of poets such as Georg Heym and Jakob van Hoddis, who were preoccupied with the dynamics of technological civilization, urban isolation, and a sense of impending doom.<sup>54</sup> The same style and themes used by German poets to express the jingoism and terror of 1914 emerge in *Mesheikh ben efrayim* as a response to the revolutionary mood of 1920s Eastern Europe.<sup>55</sup>

The prevailing tension between redemption and destruction is encapsulated in the title. The Messiah Son of Ephraim (sometimes referred to as the Messiah Son of Joseph) appears in apocalyptic and rabbinic literature as a false precursor to the true Messiah of the House of David. It is believed that he will gather the nation of Israel and ascend to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple only to fall in battle. In Kulbak's version the apocalyptic myth is joined with the redemptive Hasidic legend of the *lamed-vovniks*, the hidden righteous or saintly people who justify the existence of humanity in each generation. Among the characters that make up the legendary Jewish landscape are two semi-messianic figures that share a primitive connection to their natural surroundings. Benye the miller stands for earthy corporeality: "He gradually understood the clay of his body, his face was buried in the sand, and his crooked fingers were clutching the roots . . . And it was as if the clay were breathing and shaping up in hands, feet, head, chest, and there were no difference in the world between Benye and the clay of the earth."<sup>56</sup> Representing asceticism in nature is Simkhe Plakhte, a former rabbi who has retired to a simple life in the woods. His physical appearance reflects a kind of nature-based Hasidism and the confluence of Jewish and Christian peasant culture: "[Simkhe] looked like a Christian peasant, he wore a straw hat on his head and, on his feet, shoes of birch bark; but he did have a beard, an enormous Jewish beard, that was bright gray. His beard was beautiful!"<sup>57</sup>

---

prostitutes stand on a platform precariously placed at the center of a dizzying cityscape.

54. Edward Timms and David Kelley, *Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art* (Manchester, 1985), 1.

55. One thinks, for example, of the violent clash of colors in Franz Marc's iconic painting *Fighting Forms* (1914), the maelstrom of swirling colors and soaring lines in Wassily Kandinsky's seven earliest *Compositions* (1911–13), and the kaleidoscopic images of Jakob van Hoddis's poem "End of the World" (1911).

56. Kulbak, "The Messiah of the House of Ephraim," *Yenne Velt: The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult*, vol. 1, trans. J. Neugroschel (New York, 1976), 274–75.

57. *Ibid.*, 277.

The novella obscures the apocalyptic motif through its affectionate portrayal of these salt-of-the-earth characters. Although Benye, anointed as the Messiah Son of Ephraim, ultimately dies a violent death at the hands of an angry mob, he remains close to God, who becomes manifest in the natural vistas:

The world was stretched out before him, vast and cold, and God was in it. The world echoed like a blue cavern of ice, and he crawled around in it like a muddy bear . . . Here he saw him, God, but then God was gone again . . . Now he understood the world in the very marrow of his bones, in the burning skin of his body.<sup>58</sup>

This naturalistic revelation is described as a “covenant between the pieces,” an allusion to God’s revelation to Abraham (Gn 15.17–18), whereby a divine torch passed between the pieces of a sacrificial animal, thus indicating God’s promise to bestow the Land of Israel upon Abraham’s descendants. In the merging of revelation and ritual, Kulbak combines romantic idealism with expressionist physicality; revelation through solitude in nature is fulfilled when Benye beholds God’s presence in the natural vistas, only then to be transformed into something earthly and grotesque as it passes between the pieces of Benye’s own flesh.

The thematic tension between redemption and apocalypse is matched by stylistic and generic ambiguity. In contrast to “Rayzn,” which reflects nostalgia for a lost homeland through conventional meters and rhyme schemes, *Meschieb ben efrayim* blends nostalgia with apocalyptic dread through its fragmented form, a jumble of sparse prose that is interrupted periodically by poems and incantations requesting the coming of the Messiah. The concluding prayer-poem may be read, as Shmuel Niger suggests, as the “lyric-philosophical breath” of the entire work.<sup>59</sup>

The prayer of the poor man who was hidden,	[ <i>di tfile fun an oreman, vos iz farteyet gevorn</i>
And he poured out his heart to God,	<i>un far got tut er oygion zayn harts:</i>
Why are we so tortured God!	<i>far vos vert men azoy gepaynikt, got?!</i>
Wherever I am, I am too much present,	<i>vu ikh sbtey, bin ikh tou fil faranen,</i>
And wherever I go, I take along the smell of	<i>un vu ikh gey, trog ikh mit dem reyekb</i>

58. Ibid., 275.

59. Shmuel Niger, *Yiddishe shrayber in sovyet-rusland* (New York, 1958), 86.

the darkness.	<i>fun finsternish.</i>
I envy the bird, who is better than we are,	<i>bin ikh mekane dem foygl, vos im iz beser far unz,</i>
And the clay, which is better off than anything else.	<i>un dem leym, vos im iz beser fun alemen,</i>
What shall I do with my useless hand,	<i>vos zol ikh ton mit mayn bant, vos iz mir iberik,</i>
And with my useless heart? <sup>60</sup>	<i>un mit mayn barts, vos is mir iberik?]</i>

The secret of the *lamed-vovniks*, according to Niger, is not the path of Torah but rather the path of simplicity: “They turn to the birds, the trees; their goal is—the stillness of clay, the simplicity of roots in the earth.”<sup>61</sup> Benye is counted among the righteous few, for he was “becoming one with the clay.”<sup>62</sup> The haunting coda expresses dissatisfaction with humanity while reserving hope for redemption through an embrace of the natural landscape. Stylistic ambiguity is amplified through the sudden shift from the third person to the first person in the first two lines, while the fluctuation between the singular and plural voice signals the contrasting perspectives of collective and individual destinies, the loss of a national home and the present situation of the wandering poet. Vocal ambiguity attests to the fact that Kulbak’s interest in Jewish national identity did not precede but rather coincided with his aesthetic concerns as a modern artist.

The prevailing tension between redemption and destruction registers profound uncertainty on the part of the author. In preparing to return to Eastern Europe—which had recently been divided into the newly established Polish Republic and the equally new Soviet Union—Kulbak was suspended psychologically between nostalgia and apocalyptic anxiety.<sup>63</sup> This ambivalence, inscribed in the work through thematic, generic, and stylistic ambiguity, distinguishes Kulbak from other avant-garde Yiddish poets of his day. A particularly revealing contrast is the expressionist verse of Uri Tsvi Greenberg, who sojourned in Berlin at the same time as Kulbak.

60. Kulbak, “Messiah,” 345.

61. Niger, *Yiddische shrayber*, 86.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Avrom Novershtern reads the novella as an “open work” which raises more questions than presents answers about this particular historical moment. See Avrom Novershtern, “Moyshe kulbaks ‘meshiekh ben efrayim’: A yidish-modernistish verk in zayn literarisher gerem,” *Di goldene keyt* 126 (1989): 181.

Greenberg's monumental poem "In malkhus fun tseylem" (In the Kingdom of the Cross) shares with *Mesbiekb ben efrayim* not only its year of publication (1923) but also the status of the last piece its author penned in Berlin before departing for a new homeland. Both pieces demonstrate an embrace of opposition and disharmony and an attraction to visionary or prophetic figures, and portray in apocalyptic terms the fading East European Jewish world. Yet they stand for divergent responses to the violent aftermath of the war, and, as such, the divergent political aspirations developed by each poet in his native land and while in exile. While Kulbak's work conveys ambivalence about the future of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, Greenberg's poem articulates a much clearer position: the rejection of Jewish exile and of the Christian European environment that had sustained it for centuries. In contrast to the Byelorussian woods and fields that Kulbak depicts as a nurturing native realm, the forest of Greenberg's imagination is a site of endless suffering: "I want to open up the forest and expose all the trees from which the decaying bodies of my dead hang. / Enjoy, Kingdom of the Cross!"<sup>64</sup>

Greenberg did not share Kulbak's belief that the Jews represented one of many indigenous nations of a heterogeneous East European landscape. He therefore rejected the struggle for cultural autonomy within Eastern Europe. In the essay "Baym shlus: Veytikn heym af slavisher erd" (At the End: Homesickness for the Slavic Earth), which he published alongside the poem in the fourth and final issue of his expressionist journal, *Albatros*, he offered an outspoken response to the lack of autonomy for minorities in Europe. In the eyes of the "home nations of the cross," he wrote, the Jews are no more than "an abandoned flock of sheep," a downtrodden "population" (*bafelkerung*) that will never attain the status of "nation" (*natsiye*) or "folk" (*folk*).<sup>65</sup> Although Greenberg conceded inevitable "homesickness" (*veytikn-heym*) for the land where one was born and raised, he maintained that the Jews must acknowledge what "Christian Europe" had been telling them all along, namely, that their true native claim was not to occidental lands but to the Land of Israel: "Europe disavows my birth here. She affirms, after long generations, my pedigree: Orient, so it is!"<sup>66</sup>

As Greenberg departed for *Eretz yisrael*, Kulbak was preparing his own

64. Uri Tzvi Greenberg, "In malkhes fun tseylem," *Gezamlte verk: Tzveyter band*, vol. 2, ed. K. Shmeruk (Jerusalem, 1979), 464.

65. Greenberg, "Baym shlus: Veytikn-heym af slavisher erd," *Gezamlte verk*, 475.

66. *Ibid.*

eastward “return.”<sup>67</sup> Rather than venturing to the “Orient,” however, he settled in *Yerusholayim de lite* (Jerusalem of Lithuania). During his five years of residence in Vilna between 1923 and 1928, Kulbak wrote one of his most famous poems, *Vilne* (Vilna, 1926), a stunning paean to the “dark amulet set in Lithuania,” and his second novella, *Montik* (Monday, 1926). It was as though the Yiddishist doctrine that he had cultivated in exile had returned home. Interwar Vilna was, after all, the virtual capital of “Yiddishland”; it boasted a rich network of institutions that operated entirely in Yiddish, and the majority of its Jews claimed Yiddish as their native language.<sup>68</sup> If Vilna was the center of Yiddishism, Kulbak found himself at its very epicenter, serving as a teacher of Yiddish literature in the local Yiddish high school and at the Yiddish Teachers’ Seminary, through which he had a profound influence on an entire generation of students and aspiring writers.<sup>69</sup> His students recalled his boundless charisma and, above all, the pride he took in Yiddish.<sup>70</sup>

For both Greenberg and Kulbak, Berlin in 1923 was the final way station on their respective journeys “home.” The homelands that they constructed poetically within this open, transitional environment were soon to be supplanted by real physical spaces on the new postwar map.

---

67. The Hebrew word *teshuvah* denotes “return,” “repentance,” and “answer,” and as such carries national, theological, and messianic connotations. The early Zionist pioneers regularly spoke of their arrival in the Land of Israel as both a historical and spiritual “return.” Although Kulbak literally returned to his geographical point of origin, the emergence of the Soviet Union meant that he was “returning” to unknown territory and to an ideology that, notwithstanding its strict secularity, held out the quasi-messianic promise for the erasure of national boundaries and the ultimate federation of nations.

68. These included a secular school system, sports and scouting groups, theaters, daily newspapers, and—the crowning achievement of Yiddishism—YIVO (the Institute for Jewish Research, est. 1925. For an excellent overview of Jewish culture in Vilna during the interwar period, see chapter 1 of Justin Daniel Cammy’s Ph.D. dissertation, “Yung-vilne: A Cultural History of a Yiddish Literary Movement in Interwar Poland” (Harvard University, 2003).

69. Justin Cammy notes that Kulbak was the “main literary mentor” of Yung-vilne (Young Vilna, 1929–40), a group of Vilna-based Yiddish poets, writers, and artists, including Chaim Grade, Avrom Sutzkever, and Shmerke Kaczerginski, who synthesized individual aspirations for artistic experimentation with a collective concern for the social, political, and cultural life of the city. See Cammy, *Yung-vilne*, 22–24.

70. For specific recollections about Kulbak’s role as a teacher, see Dina Abramowicz’s memoir in Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, “Heschel in Vilna,” *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* (1998), and D. Lazar, “Mit moyshe kulbak in vilne,” *Di goldene keyt* 77 (1972): 36–37.



And yet this transformation of the imagined and metaphorical into a true “return” was not easily actualized. Just as Greenberg could not be repatriated to a place he had never inhabited, neither could Kulbak reclaim his native land within a newly redrawn Europe. The political and geographical transformations that had taken place while each poet was in exile ensured that “going home,” in the sense of reclaiming a lost domicile, was no longer possible. This fact may help us to understand the initially baffling fact that Kulbak left Vilna to resettle in Soviet Minsk. Although he supported the revolution, he did not view his departure for the Soviet Union as a break with Vilna or Yiddishist ideology. The Byelorussian landscape to which he had dedicated so many verses remained with him as a kind of portable homeland even after he resettled in Minsk in 1928.

Although the reasons for Kulbak’s move remain unclear, two possible motives can be identified. First, Minsk was now home to his parents, with whom he longed to be reunited. Kulbak’s native Smorgon (today’s Smarhón, Belarus) had recently come under Polish control, whereas neighboring Minsk had just been named capital of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. Insofar as the Jews still considered Minsk “Litvak” territory, Kulbak most likely continued to view Vilna as his cultural center. At the same time, however, he was undoubtedly attracted by the cultural policy of the nascent Soviet government, which created a promising atmosphere for Soviet Yiddish writers, particularly those dedicated to a proletarian literature stripped of any trace of tradition or religious sectarianism.<sup>71</sup> To be sure, the Soviet Union appeared to provide the best prospects for the Yiddish writer.<sup>72</sup> Before Stalin rose to power to implement his rule of “socialism in one country,” the young Soviet government promoted a heterogeneous national identity through the policy of “de-russification,” which recognized the Jews as an ethnic minority and Yid-

---

71. According to Gennady Estraiikh, Minsk was a natural home for iconoclastic Communist writers because it lacked Jewish cultural associations. See Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers’ Romance with Communism* (Syracuse, N.Y., 2005), 106.

72. Kulbak was not the only Berlin exile to hold this belief. Dovid Bergelson, who, unlike Kulbak, lived quite comfortably in Berlin, regarded the Soviet Union as the future of Yiddish. In the inaugural issue of *In shpan* (In Harness), a new journal for the “worker reader” established in Moscow in 1926, Bergelson published the programmatic essay “Dray tsentren” (Three Centers), in which he dismissed New York and Warsaw in favor of Moscow as the center of Yiddish literature. For a translation of the essay, see Joseph Sherman and Gennady Estraiikh, eds, *David Bergelson: From Modernism to Socialist Realism* (London, 2007), 347–56.

dish as an “indigenous” language.<sup>73</sup> Based on the guiding cultural slogan “Socialist in content, national in form” (meaning minority literatures were to conform substantively to the Communist Party’s socialist project for Soviet society as a whole but continue to operate primarily in the local languages), Soviet Yiddish literature enjoyed significant financial and institutional support, and—with Moscow and Minsk as twin centers—tremendous freedom until the 1930s.

Moreover, with the establishment of “Comintern” (Communist International) sections beyond Soviet borders, the international orientation of Soviet doctrine appeared to complement that of Yiddishist ideology. Insofar as the Soviet Union appeared to be evolving into a multilingual, super-national empire, many Yiddish writers viewed it as a continuation of, rather than a break with, the heterogeneous landscape of pre-World War I Europe.<sup>74</sup> The dream of an international Yiddish culture as part and parcel of a new socialist order seemed well within reach.<sup>75</sup> Thus, Kulbak could become a “Soviet” writer without redefining himself or revolutionizing his national orientation.

*DISNER TSHAYLD HEROLD: REMEMBERING  
BERLIN FROM THE SOVIET UNION*

Kulbak’s oeuvre is a testament to his unwavering commitment to establishing an autonomous Yiddish literary culture varied in voice, genre, and technique. The imprint of German modernism in his Soviet-era writing suggests that he viewed his move not as the abandonment of his Yiddis-

---

73. Because Yiddish was viewed as a secular, “native” language, it was preferred to Hebrew, associated with Judaism and Zionism, both of which went against the atheistic dimension of Communism. David Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture, 1918–1950* (Cambridge, 2004), 39–41.

74. Mikhail Krutikov makes a similar claim about two Austro-Hungarian Jewish intellectuals who became Communists in the 1930s. Béla Balász and Meir Wiener reconciled their Communist future with their Habsburg past based on the belief that Communism was “the only viable alternative to the xenophobic nationalism that held sway in Central Europe after World War I.” See Krutikov, “Marxist Intellectuals in Search of a Usable Past: Habsburg Mythology in the Memoirs of Béla Balász and Meir Wiener,” *Studia Rosenthaliana* 41 (2009), 112.

75. “It is hardly an overstatement,” Gennady Estraikh has argued, “to define Yiddish literature of the 1920s as the most pro-Soviet literature in the world.” In this way, Estraikh elaborates, Yiddish émigré writers in 1920s Berlin stood apart from their mainly anti-Soviet Russian counterparts, such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Andrei Belyi, and Georgii Ivanov. Estraikh, “Vilna on the Spree: Yiddish in Weimar Berlin,” *Ashkenas: Zeitschrift für Geschichte und Kultur der Juden* 16.1 (2006): 65.

hist vision in favor of Communism but as the path to fulfilling the cultural dream that had been incubated in Berlin. Whereas the poems from his Berlin years are all set in Eastern Europe, the few verses he set in Berlin were penned shortly after he had settled in Minsk in 1928. “Disner tshayld herold” is perhaps the strongest example of the influence of German expressionism on Kulbak’s writing. Notwithstanding its clear socialist orientation, the poem is hardly representative of the Soviet style but rather invokes and lampoons expressionism. Like the works of some of the leading German expressionist poets and painters, Kulbak treats Berlin as an object of both fascination and contempt.<sup>76</sup> The collection of sixty-two satirical cantos offers a scathing critique of the bourgeois German culture from which the author had in fact drawn a great deal of inspiration. Ironically, Kulbak’s disavowal of Europe represents the culmination of his efforts to integrate Yiddish poetry into European letters. It represents the final phase in the development of Yiddish poetry—as Kulbak envisioned it in the essay “Dos yidishe vort”—from folklore to romanticism to avant-garde verse.

The poem portrays the journey of Lyulkeman (Pipeman) from his Lithuanian shtetl to Berlin, a great cultural capital on the brink of descent into the abyss of fascism and violence. Like the Byronic hero to whom the title alludes, this Childe Harold of Disno bids adieu to his native land to seek out adventure and intellectual stimulation in foreign territory, only to discover that the charm and revelry of his new surroundings cannot feed a disconnected spirit. Representing the young generation of secular Yiddish intellectuals and poets, Lyulkeman boards a train armed with nothing but “a bunch of wild poems” (*a bintl vilde lider*).<sup>77</sup> Though he is swept up initially in the fervor and tumultuous spirit of change, his enthusiasm quickly dissolves as he discovers a Janus-faced Berlin, a vibrant metropolis in the throes of economic and political upheaval. Poetry readings in smoke-filled cafes and the riveting nightlife ablaze in electric lights signal the decline of the bourgeois order:

Pipeman listens, hears an age gone mad	<i>s'bert lyulkeman un bert di dule tsayt:</i>
Berlin fades in screams;	<i>berlin fargeyt zikh in geshrayen;</i>
Old bourgeoisie screaming in bells.	<i>der alter mikbel in di gleklekh sbrayt;</i>

76. See, for example, Georg Heym’s sequence of eight sonnets, begun in 1910, titled simply “Berlin.”

77. Kulbak, “Disner tshayld herold,” *Geklibene verk* (New York, 1953), 229.

Screaming in the theaters and museums.	<i>es shrayen di teaters un muzeyen.</i>
Granach rushes on a barren stage	<i>granakh yushet af der vaster bine</i>
In madness Moissi <sup>78</sup> croons like a pale, sickly ballerina.	<i>in teyruf. moysei zingt, vi a kranke blase balerine,</i>
And dead poetry stinks . . .	<i>un di geshtorbene poezye shtinkt . . .</i>
The dying body of a distant glimmer,	<i>es iz di gvise fun a vaytn broyzen,</i>
Its demise is sweet, —	<i>es iz di meyse, vos iz ziv, —</i>
Expressionism treads on red feet,	<i>ekspresyonizm shprayzt mit royte fis,</i>
Dada with its pants down.	<i>dada — mit aropgelozte boyzn.<sup>79</sup></i>

Gone is the flowing enjambment and organic imagery of the earlier poems. Instead, we find abrupt end-stopping and disconnected images linked solely by a steady rhyme scheme, a technique which resembles the *Reihungstil* (sequence style) made famous by Jakob van Hoddis's "Weltende" (End of the World, 1911), a kaleidoscope of catastrophic images that attests to a new metropolitan sense of haste and simultaneity.

Despite his attempts to immerse himself in German *Kultur*, Lyulkeman gradually realizes his eternal outsider status. More importantly, he acknowledges the absence of such a rich cultural legacy in his own language. The German fascination with Goethe, initially an object of his admiration, becomes a repository of nationalistic feelings buried in the German unconscious. On the national holiday dedicated to the great bard, Lyulkeman inhales the pervasive "poet spirit" (*dikhter gayst*), only to realize the absence of a similarly rich literary and philosophical tradition in Yiddish:

He smolders in gray libraries;	<i>er tshadet in di groye bibliyotekn;</i>
And idles in darkness like an old crow . . .	<i>un ploydert finster, vi an alte kro . . .</i>
There are at least a hundred works that rouse and stir	<i>faranen bloyz a bundert verk, vos vekn</i>
(in Yiddish not one such book exists).	<i>(af yidish iz nokh aza bukh nishto).<sup>80</sup></i>

78. Alexander Moissi and Alexander Granach were popular stage actors in Berlin during the 1920s and 1930s.

79. Kulbak, "Disner tshayld herold," 239.

80. *Ibid.*, 251.

Disdain for overwrought urban life, bourgeois superficiality, and *völk-isch* nationalism is a pretext for Lyulkeman's absorption into the Communist movement. The glitz and glamour of the *Kurfürstendamm*, the grand boulevard of Berlin's affluent Charlottenburg neighborhood, is contrasted in the second half of the cycle with the "other Germany," that of the workers' movement in the proletarian neighborhoods of Neukölln, Wedding, and Moabit. The city, like day and night, is literally divided in two:

Half the night in the cabaret	<i>a balbe nakht in kabare</i>
With a jazz band and condoms,	<i>mit djaz-band un preservativn,</i>
And half—under the yoke of	<i>a balbe—ligt in yokb fun</i>
A.E.G. <sup>81</sup>	<i>ab.eb.ge</i>
And Borsig's <sup>82</sup> dusky	<i>un borzigs finstere</i>
locomotives.	<i>lokomotivn.</i> <sup>83</sup>

While the affluent Berlin bourgeoisie reminds the speaker of his pariah status, the Communist underworld grows more and more appealing. The cycle ends with a depiction of the Workers' Movement, violent street fights opposing the Communists, and the threat of impending revolution.<sup>84</sup> Yet Lyulkeman's embrace of Communism is almost accidental, stemming less from ideological conviction than from his increasing poverty and relentless sense of rootlessness. In this way, the poem reflects Kulbak's conditional acceptance of Soviet socialism, which was fueled less by politics than by the belief that the Soviet Union was the only place where Jews could gain equal status and Yiddish literature could thrive. Like Lyulkeman, who accepts Communism less out of ideological conviction than the need for socialization, Kulbak saw the Soviet Union as a means, not an end.

#### BETWEEN CENTER AND PERIPHERY

In tracing Kulbak's transition from Berlin to the Soviet Union, it is clear that the roots he sought could not be found physically; instead, they were

81. Allgemeine Elektrizitätsgesellschaft (General Electric Company), one of the biggest Berlin-based industries.

82. A prominent German industrialist.

83. Kulbak, "Disner tshayld herold," 243.

84. One canto offers an account of the *Blutmai* (Bloody May) rioting in Wedding that took place on May 1, 1929, between members of the Berlin Communist Party and the police that left thirty-three dead and hundreds injured.

attained by way of literary development. Through exposure to modern literary trends within the politically and artistically open environment of Berlin, Kulbak achieved new styles and produced new treasures to enrich a modest Yiddish literature. At the same time, his exclusion from the dominant culture provided the freedom and distance he required to cultivate his own national agenda, as well as the isolation required to cultivate his own unique idiom and aesthetic. The persistent tensions of home and homelessness, exile and wanderlust, redemption and apocalypse underlying his work from this period reflect the process of developing an authentic and indigenous Yiddish literary tradition rooted in the Diaspora while cultivating a unique modernist voice. If exile provided Kulbak with the freedom to construct a native poetic landscape, the abiding influence of German expressionism in his later Soviet writing reflects his commitment to developing a multivalent literary tradition extending from folklore to modernism. Yiddish literature, lacking a poetic tradition upon which to build, had to develop each phase of this tradition simultaneously in order to become a literary canon sufficiently rich and diverse to earn a place alongside other European literatures rooted in territorial centers.

Kulbak's example compels us to examine not only the influence of Weimar culture on Yiddish literature but also the contribution of Yiddish writers to Weimar culture—and thus to modernism. The incorporation of Yiddish writers into this field of study contributes to a more nuanced definition of modernism as both a time period and a constellation of styles. Moreover, it provides a powerful counterexample to both the strictly geographical and the strictly chronological approaches to literary historiography. Kulbak's Berlin sojourn provides an important case study for the remapping of international literary space—or the “world republic of letters,” to borrow one scholar's coinage—in a manner that extends beyond the political and linguistic borders of modern nation-states and therefore pays greater attention to literatures produced in languages poor in “literary capital” and by nations lacking a territorial center.<sup>85</sup> Yiddish

---

85. Pascale Casanova's conception of the “world republic of letters” challenges the ecumenical conception of world literature as inhabiting a metaphorical universe to which all nations and languages have access by drawing attention to the concrete ways in which certain languages and aesthetic orders gain dominance while others are relegated to “non-literary” status. Against the “ahistorical fiction” of a world of “peaceful internationalism, a world of free and equal access in which literary recognition is available to all writers,” Casanova portrays a world of letters defined by unequal power structures, where “small” languages and literatures on the periphery are subject to the violence of their dominant counterparts at the center. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. C. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 43.

literature, which has always had exile and extraterritoriality as normative conditions, stands to gain from this reformed paradigm of literary history. Using Kulbak's example as the model of a diasporic literary identity, we may begin to reshape our approach to Jewish literature—and to literary history at large—according to more porous boundaries.

Copyright of Jewish Quarterly Review is the property of University of Pennsylvania Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.