

CHAPTER 4



Belarus in Berlin, Berlin in Belarus

Moyshe Kulbak's *Raysn* and *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* between Nostalgia and Apocalypse

Marc Caplan

The achievement of Moyshe Kulbak's Berlin writings, as well as the phenomenon of Yiddish literature in the Weimar context generally, falls at two distinct crossroads in the history of Yiddish literature and European modernism: a chronological crossroads between aesthetic periods, and a geographical crossroads between the 'organic' setting of the eastern European *shtetl* and the emerging concentration of modern Yiddish culture in metropolises such as Moscow, Warsaw, New York, and Buenos Aires. This coupling of dislocated, transformative juxtapositions suggests an analogous preoccupation in these writings with what the editors of a recent collection, *Jewish Topographies*, have identified as a tension between place and space:

Jewish place is defined by location, *Jewish space* by performance. Both can be congruent or overlap, and the difference between them is not so much defined by *where* one can find them, but lies in their function, or [...] in the different roles they play.¹

Following this distinction, the radically divergent aesthetics of Kulbak's most significant publications while in Berlin, the episodic poem *Raysn* (New York, 1922) and the experimental narrative *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* (Berlin, 1924), suggest an effort to decouple place from space; the dialectic that emerges from considering these dissimilar works as examples of Berlin modernism consists of the poem's depiction of place without space, and the narrative's description of space without place. Both in turn are a consequence of the author's own dislocation, summoning a Belarusian mythos — indeed, more than one — from the Berlin metropolis.

Two conceptual terms that can expose the complicated relationship between place and space in this context are 'nostalgia' and 'apocalypse'; although both will prove essential to the ensuing discussion, the specific implications of nostalgia require critical consideration before the subsequent comparison can commence. Svetlana Boym, in her *fin-de-vingtième-siècle* study *The Future of Nostalgia*, thus observes of nostalgia's typical territoriality that 'curiously, intellectuals and poets from different national traditions [...] claim that they had a special word for homesickness that was radically untranslatable'.² Boym then discusses German, French, Spanish, Czech, Russian, Polish, Portuguese, and Romanian terms — concluding, persuasively,

that these various terms convey a ‘desire for untranslatability’ that is as generic and prototypical as the concept of home itself.³ In this context, it is worth pointing out that the Yiddish words for homesickness and nostalgia, by contrast, are *benkenish* — longing without reference to place — and *nostalgye*, easily recognized as an internationalism. The inference is obvious: Yiddish has no ‘special’ word for homesickness because it has no fixed concept of home.

However unremarkable the lexicon of nostalgia is in Yiddish, the emotional or psychological phenomenon of nostalgia is nonetheless a central component of Yiddish modernist aesthetics — one that distinguishes the development of Yiddish modernism from the preceding ‘classic’ period of the nineteenth century, in which the lost home of the *shtetl* was seldom mourned because it was only exceptionally and incompletely depicted as abandoned — because in temporal terms it provides the alternative to apocalyptic imagery that would otherwise be figured, progressively, as utopia. As Avrom Novershtern demonstrates in his treatment of apocalyptic themes in modern Jewish literature, the foundation of the apocalyptic motif at the beginning of the twentieth century tends to exclude the terminology of redemption, along with utopia or even connotations of harmony.⁴ For Yiddish apocalypticism, the future can be conceived only in negative, destructive terms; like Walter Benjamin’s now overfamiliar angel of history, its only view of paradise is a backward glance from the maelstrom. Nostalgia therefore becomes indicative, symptomatic, of a larger phenomenon of conflicted temporalities — a problem dramatized through a number of strategies in *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* and deferred in *Raysn* through its use of a suspended temporality, a permanent present tense signifying an organic, cyclical notion of time uninterrupted by history, change, or modernity but closed off definitively by death.

In this regard, Kulbak’s major Berlin writings offer contrasting and interconnected strategies for conceptualizing specifically Yiddish notions of nostalgia and apocalypse. Although *Raysn* and *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* portray from the distanced and distancing perspective of Berlin Kulbak’s origins in rural Belarus, they represent this theme from almost opposite aesthetic and psychological points of view. *Raysn*, an old Yiddish name for the land of Belarus, is a sequence of twelve short narrative poems using conventional metres and rhyme schemes to depict the speaker’s extended family of two grandparents and sixteen uncles against the backdrop of a rural landscape. *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* (*Messiah of the House of Joseph*), whose title refers to an apocalyptic precursor of the final, redemptive Messiah of the House of David,⁵ is a formally anomalous and structurally fragmented jumble of prose and poetry set in an unidentified past — one in which signs of modern technology are nowhere visible, and where the Polish aristocracy still wields local power and prestige — that combines both Jewish and Christian imagery as well as low comedy with mystic abstraction to confront the crisis of values, beliefs, and social identities of the pre-revolutionary Pale of Settlement. Together, these two works, each of which is constructed along principles of dislocation and contiguity, in turn establish a dialectical relationship with each other out of their respective formal and thematic ruptures and connections.

To the extent that *Raysn* presents a nostalgic view of the old Belarusian home

Kulbak had left for Berlin, it does so in terms quite counter-intuitive to the Yiddish literature that precedes it: instead of the *shtetl* synagogue, marketplace, or bathhouse that constitute the privileged spaces for nineteenth-century Yiddish literature, *Raysn*, in common with contemporaneous prose descriptions by, for example, Der Nister and David Bergelson, but to a much more exclusive degree, presents as prototypical an eastern European landscape that consists of woods, rivers, and the farm on which the speaker's family lives. Although its second poem introduces the tribal family in propitiously symbolic terms (the rapidity with which they take to the day's work is likened to a *mizmer* (psalm), and the speaker repeats their total number of eighteen men, equated numerologically, of course, with life),⁶ the poem's only subsequent references to the Jewish religion, aside from the names of the speaker's uncles, are to a non-Jewish love interest as a *goye*, or gentile (p. 55), the honorific term *olev ha-sholem* ('rest in peace', pp. 43, 49) following mention of the speaker's late grandparents, the description of his grandmother's corpse as a *bar-minyin* (p. 49), and the final, ritualistic confession or *vide* that the grandfather makes before his aptly patriarchal deathbed speech (p. 60). This address itself is noteworthy, not only because it invokes the blessings of Jacob and Moses at the end of Genesis and Deuteronomy respectively, but also because it overturns their prophetic significance by wishing the sons prosperity in White Russia, not Israel! This benediction is essential to the significance of nostalgia in *Raysn*: by blessing his sons with prosperity in and through the land, the grandfather elevates Belarus to the status of home, thus giving the speaker an address for his longing. Paradoxically, the location of desire in the Belarusian landscape serves to relegate Jewishness in *Raysn* to the realm of the absent, the dying, or the dead.

Indeed, the poem distinguishes itself from the conventions of Yiddish literature by focusing on the archetypal Slavic landscape, rendering it in deliriously overripe imagery of superabundant life: 'Es rinen di zaftn fun dr'erd, az a shikres nemt durkh ale glider' [Juices run from the ground, so that a drunkenness runs through every limb] (p. 43). This intoxicated romance with the land stands in contrast not with a critique of Jewish tradition, as one might expect from nineteenth-century Yiddish satire, but instead with a studied, self-conscious avoidance of references to the Jewish ritualization of everyday life through prayer, Torah study, the religious calendar, and so on. This deliberate exclusion of ritual, tradition, and cosmological memory from *Raysn* stands in contrast both with the intensive engagement with ritual and cosmology in *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*, and with the circumstances of Kulbak's own upbringing, which did occur in the vicinity of 'Jewish' Belarus — Smarhon, Kaunas, and Minsk — but included education in a modern heder and yeshivas in addition to a Russian-language Jewish elementary school.⁷ To the extent that Kulbak tempts the reader to see *Raysn* as an autobiographical work, it might be likened to the classic Woody Allen joke in which Allen sees his life flash before his eyes, only to stop himself in the middle of the reverie, realizing, in fact, that it's not his life.⁸

Following Boym's terminology, one can suggest, provisionally, that *Raysn*, with its foregrounding, unusual for Yiddish literature, of a specific, geographic location, counts as an example of 'restorative nostalgia', defined by its preoccupation with

'place' and the possibility of recovering what has been lost, with *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* serving as an example of 'reflective nostalgia', characterized by a focus on the more abstract connotations of 'space', acquiescing in this abstraction to what is unrecoverable and relegating it to the apocalyptic. In this regard, *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* opens with a reconfigured description of the same rural, peasant Jews that figure in *Raysn*, only now described in the mystical terminology of the *lamed-vovniks*, the thirty-six hidden, righteous Jews on whom the existence of the world depends:⁹ 'Di ale, vos hobn zikh oysgemostn mitn vort yud-key-vov-key, di lamed-vov, geyn arum opgezunderte un elnte bam breg fun der velt' [All those who have set their souls on the word *yud-key-vov-key*, the *Lamed-vovniks*, go about at the edge of the world, alone and isolated] (Y 13; E 268).¹⁰ At the same time as the author inserts these figures in an explicitly Jewish context mostly absent from *Raysn*, he excludes himself from their company by referring to their religious devotion using the sacred Tetragrammaton forbidden by Jewish tradition in all but the most sanctified contexts. The use of this term is radically subversive of both the conventions of modern Yiddish literature and the subject matter of religious speculation; it serves to alert the reader here not necessarily to God's uniqueness and indivisibility, but to the audacious originality of Kulbak's literary experiment.

In narrative terms, *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* resembles *Raysn* in so far as it consists less of a linear plot than of a series of associations built around the juxtaposition of contrasting character types: at the centre of the narrative stands Reb Benye, an old and isolated Jewish peasant, tormented by sexual desires, whom the other characters in the story invest with desperate messianic expectations. Among the cast Kulbak assembles are a trio of *lamed-vovniks*; their Christian counterpart Kiril the bathhouse attendant; Benye's miserly brother, Leyvi; Leyvi's messiah-seeking daughter, Leahle; the discredited Hasidic rabbi Simkhe Plakhte, who takes up with Leahle; the Polish nobleman Pan Vrublevksy, who pursues Leahle; the unnamed daughter of another aristocrat, Pan Lubomirsky, who joins Kiril on his religious quest; and Gimpele, an enigmatic, perhaps mad philosopher. Each of these characters — who dramatically parallel one another in precisely arranged contrasts, and who all resemble, inversely and parodically, aspects of Benye's own character — converge at the failed apotheosis of Benye, when he rejects his redemptive calling and in turn is murdered, apparently, by his mob of would-be disciples.

Meshiekh ben-Efrayim, like much of Kulbak's writing, though distinct significantly from *Montik (Monday)*, his next major prose narrative, is thus distinguished by its contrasting perspectives of collective and individual destinies; this contrast is representative of Yiddish literature from Berlin, and also serves to distinguish this writing from much of its avant-garde German counterparts which tend, with perhaps the notable exception of the *Lehrstücke* in contemporaneous epic theatre, to focus on the individual, the 'lonely man in the crowd', at the heart of urban modernism since the era of Baudelaire. The group for Kulbak — the *lamed-vovniks* in *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*, the family in *Raysn*, and eventually the tribe in his Soviet-era masterpiece *Zelmenyaner* — is characteristically as indivisible as the individual protagonist, whereas individuals highlighted from within this framework are as conflicted and self-contradictory as larger conglomerations.¹¹ In this tension, Kulbak's writing is

simultaneously ‘pre-modern’, in its embrace of the collective, and ‘post-modern’, which is to say ‘modernist’, in its depiction of individual consciousness as an irresolvable assemblage of contradictory drives and desires. The unharmonized instability between the pre-modern collective and the post-Freudian individual demonstrates that temporality as such is seldom stable in Kulbak’s writing, but always conflicted so that neither generic categories nor narrative modes ever remain constant or self-contained. For works such as *Raysn* and *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* specifically, Kulbak’s conflicted temporality portrays a larger rupture both between Berlin and Belarus and between the old Pale of Settlement and either the newly established Polish Republic or the equally new Soviet Union.

In keeping with the stark, typological structuring of the characters and fragmented dramatic pacing of *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*, Kulbak’s prose consists of brief, declarative sentences:

Es iz geven a man a milner in land Raysn.
 Di vayb zayne iz geshtorbn, un dem zun hot men opgegebn in soldatn.
 Di mil iz farvaksn gevorn mit mokhn un mit kraytektser [...].
 Der milner hot nisht gevust, vos er zol onheybn tsu ton.
 Er iz arayn in shtal un hot oysgefunden, az nor zayn beheymele iz im
 ibergeblibn fun dem gantsn farmegn zaynem.
 Demolt hot er zikh avekgezest fun groys elentkayt afn shvel fun zayn shtub
 un er hot zikh biterlekh tseyeynt.
 Men hot im gerufn Reb Benye.

[Once there was a miller in the land of White Russia. | His wife died and his son was taken off into the army. | The mill was overgrown with mosses and weeds [...]. | The miller didn’t know what to do. | He went into his stable and saw that of all his livestock only his cow was left. | He felt so lonely and miserable that he sat down on the threshold of his house and wept bitter tears. | His name was Benye] (Y 17; E 268–69).

This technique departs both from the chatty, theatrical discourse of classic Yiddish fiction, modelled on oral performance, and from the more contemporary, introspective, free indirect discourse of Kulbak’s fellow Berlin residents David Bergelson and Der Nister (however distinct their respective styles are from each other). The use of these bardic sentence-paragraphs, a style that Carole Ksiazencic-Matheron attributes to the influence of, among others, Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra*,¹² combines the compression of verse with the telegraphic rhythm of journalism, in a manner that anticipates Kulbak’s German-language counterpart Joseph Roth, another Weimar writer whose work is preoccupied with, conflicted, and determined by the pull of western modernity and nostalgia for eastern Europe. Moreover, Kulbak’s writing is not only distinctive in its pacing and syntax, but the uses to which he puts these simple statements similarly contribute to the analogical associations out of which the fantastic elements of his story emerge; as Novershtern states, ‘parataxis, the coordinated clause, is the distinguishing characteristic of Kulbak’s style, which is explicitly concerned with coupling very heterogeneous materials’.¹³ Parataxis therefore provides the grammatical structure through which metonymy functions, and establishes a framework through which the metaphorical in *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* can be read literally.

The imperative to read metaphors literally in turn is the foundation for fantastic narrative. The primary and most celebrated instance of this effect occurs when Benye lies down on the ground and vegetation begins to grow out of his body: ‘Ot azoy iz er gelegn mitn barg un im hot zikh gedakht, az er hot zikh mitn barg tsuzamengeshotn, un oyb es vet vu aroysvaksn a grezele, kon es aroysvaksn durkh im, fun zayn pleytse arum’ [He lay there with the hill and it was as though he had been poured into it; and if a blade of grass were to spring up anywhere, it would grow out through him, out of his back] (Y 27; E 274). Here the figurative intimacy of *Raysn*’s characters with the land becomes explicit, absurd, and grotesque. As Ksiazenicer–Matheron writes of this passage,

First reduced to the level of animal, he proceeds little by little to a vegetal state, then mineral, before congealing into the dust of the earth, an inert form having renounced the prestige of the human to return to the simplicity of the machine [...] and an elemental passivity.¹⁴

In the folkloristic terms from which Kulbak derives this imagery, Benye’s status in this passage between machine and primordial, pre-Adamic dirt functions as a sort of golem, the legendary homunculus made Kabbalistically out of clay;¹⁵ he has willed himself, reluctantly, to become clay and then to become life — an internalization and reversal, in fact, of the actual golem legend, which originated as a culturally specific tale about the Maharal of Prague (c.1520–1609) and is thus connected with the origins of urban modernity, but also with the contemporaneous embrace of the primordial by the Yiddish-language Kiev Group, as well as the ‘post-Nietzschean’ Russian avant-garde.¹⁶

Nonetheless, from the parodic connection of the Jewish peasant with the land, Kulbak embarks, by way of Leyvi’s experience of the same mystical ‘connection’ with gold instead of clay, on a discussion of the ten *Sephirot* (Y 36; E 279), the most abstract and esoteric motif in classical Kabbalah;¹⁷ the sudden juxtaposition of the physical with the abstract, of literal meanings with figurative ones, is characteristic of *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*’s poetics, and it encourages a radical reconsideration of the conventional structuralist understanding of poetry’s alignment with metaphor and the alignment of prose with metonymy:¹⁸ just as it is nearly impossible to differentiate where poetry ends and prose begins in this narrative, so too is there a constant challenge to distinguish metaphorical meanings from metonymical ones, in keeping with a more general shift from metaphorical connotations to abrupt metonymies in the poetics of modernism. If this is the case, the ambiguous position of the narrative between Berlin and Belarus, between nostalgia and apocalypse — two strategies for politicizing past and future, respectively, from the standpoint of a present time and place in flux — serves to mobilize these uncertainties. Nostalgia, as Boym underscores, is one consequence of dislocation. Kulbak’s narrative utilizes nostalgia, distinct here from ‘sentimentality’, by incorporating dislocation as its primary structural principle.

To underscore the significance of dislocation as a structuring device, Kulbak traverses the poetic and prose sections of *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* with Gimpele’s interjections of a negationist, contrarian philosophy, which present themselves not so much as ideological positions but as a strategy of reading premised on contingency

and paradox. As Kulbak writes, “‘Ir hot mikh ufgefodert derklern aykh di sistem fun dem nisht-farniftikn denken ...” Un plutsling lakht er zikh funander azoy, az Reb Benye hot shoybn ongehoybn shmeykhln’ [‘You have asked me to explain the system of irrational thinking ...’ And he burst out laughing, and laughed so hard that Benye began to smirk] (Y 52; E 289). Laughter *is* Gimpele’s philosophical system, and it unmakes that system at the same time; the narrative’s philosophy cancels itself out in deformative, derisive, disruptive laughter, a gesture in keeping with expressionism’s elevation of psychological extremes and representations of chaos, while undermining the apocalyptic doom it seeks to cultivate. ‘Beshas mir zogn zikh op fun farnunft,’ Gimpele continues, ‘geyn unter mit dem di kategoriyes fun farniftikn denken: roym un tsayt’ [While we reject reason, we also do away with the categories of rational thinking: space and time] (Y 52; E 289). This rejection of space and time in fact parallels and figures the dislocation that nostalgia produces — the longing for an abandoned place cannot bring the nostalgic subject back in time; it can only dislocate him or her from the present moment he or she inhabits.

With respect to Gimpele’s anti-philosophy as interpretive strategy, the entire narrative can be summarized as a generative exercise in misreading: the *lamed-vovniks* misread Benye’s capacity for redemptive action, men and women misinterpret one another’s intentions with respect to amorous and spiritual love, Jews and Christians confuse one another with the mutually exclusive means by which they read common signs in religious texts, icons, and the landscape itself. As the climax to this series of misreadings, Benye’s rejection of the redemptive role attributed to him, like Gimpele’s anti-philosophy, becomes a subversive strategy of overturning interpretive conventions by repudiating the role of ‘Messiah, son of Ephraim’, a role in which the redeemer must sacrifice himself for the sake of a subsequent and definitive redemption. In fact, Benye’s repudiation derives explicitly from his acceptance of Gimpele’s world-view. As he says, ‘Ot gey ikh tsu der erd ... Der bokher Gimpele — gerekht ... Es iz nishto keyn Got ...’ [I’m going to the earth ... Gimpel is right ... There is no God ...] (Y 117; E 320). Significantly, Benye says ‘to the earth’ (‘tsu der erd’), not ‘in the earth’ (*in d’r erd*) or ‘go to hell’, as colloquial Yiddish would express it. The fractured idiom reflects the function of fantastic discourse in the narrative; in a world without God, spiritual metaphors can be rendered only physically, parodically, literally. Yet this reversal and disavowal of mystical imagery reanimates the symbols of religion *as symbols* — granting them, like Gimpele’s philosophy, a dramatic purpose in the absence of a theological one.

Benye thus creates a discourse of death and self-abnegation — ‘Shtarbt, tayere, shtarbt!’ [Die, my dear ones, die!], he tells his would-be disciples (Y 145; E 344) — that comes to determine the fate of the other characters as well as their decision finally to annihilate him. He moreover demonstrates that this burden of death cannot be displaced onto another person: just as he refuses to die for the sake of other people, a refusal that paradoxically ensures his ritualized destruction, so too does he suggest that redemption cannot be displaced onto an external redeemer. In terms characteristic of the mythic dimension of the work, Benye’s annihilation becomes a self-valorization and vindication, a single contradictory action that like the ‘crowning’ and ‘de-crowning’ of the carnival king must be understood as

indivisible in its unification of opposites. Furthermore, moving from the mythical to the historical, Benye's simultaneous rejection and apotheosis of the folk serves to represent the lingering commitments and ruptures between Kulbak in Berlin and the native land he had abandoned, temporarily, but could not sever from his imagination.

Meshiekh ben-Efrayim is therefore 'mythical' in the structural sense that its images combine antinomies in a way that resists logical, linear analysis. *Raysn*, similarly, is 'mythical' in a more colloquial sense of projecting an idealization of Kulbak's native land that could only have been produced, nostalgically, from afar. Nostalgia also provides a motivating structure for *Raysn*, but if the object of nostalgia, distinct from apocalypse, is return and restoration, what could function as the desired object in this poem? To answer this question provisionally, one should consider the origins of the modern Yiddish ballad: the first significant narrative poem in Yiddish is Y. L. Peretz's *Monish*, first published in 1888; it tells the ironic, tragicomic story of its eponymous hero, who falls from the summit of rabbinic learning via the seduction of two demons — one disguised as a modern, German Jew, and the other as his conspicuously 'Aryan'-looking daughter. These demons personify the cultural and linguistic foreignness of modernity to the traditional world of *shtetl* and yeshiva, to which the ballad form is equally foreign as the German language or non-Jewish sexuality. For Kulbak, by contrast, poetic form becomes a means of locating the family depicted in the poem firmly in and of the eastern European 'firmament', even though the author himself was living and studying in Berlin at the time. By using in the 1920s a neo-Romantic poetic form, in a language that otherwise lacks a Romantic tradition, Kulbak, like previous Yiddish neo-Romantics such as Peretz, Avrom Reisen, or Leyb Naydus, seems to express a desire not for a reconstituted territorial past, but for the 'pure form' of the standard metres and regular rhymes through which he constructs this sequence.

For what, other than formal purity, itself atavistic in the context of Kulbak's engagement at the time with urban expressionism, could be restored following *Raysn's* blueprint? Even the name *Raysn* — a homonym, of course, of the verb *raysn* ('to rip or tear asunder') — is so archaic that it seldom, if ever, appears in the classic Yiddish literature of the nineteenth century; few Yiddish speakers in Kulbak's day, and far fewer today, even recognize the place to which it refers. One can conjecture that, instead of a return to the rural landscape, what Kulbak is in fact striving for is the ability to apostrophize its loss in poetic form, which itself is an anachronistic yet characteristically modernist desire in the context of contemporaneous avant-garde experimentation, but nonetheless a productive enough use for the nostalgic impulse. More broadly considered, nostalgia can express itself *only* in formal terms, since its content is always announcing itself as absent, empty, and fantasized. Kulbak thus performs a feat comparable to what the Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka achieved when he began the lectures collected as *Myth, Literature, and the African World* by stating: 'I shall begin by commemorating the gods for their self-sacrifice on the altar of literature.'¹⁹ Just as Soyinka could consecrate this 'self-sacrifice' only in the context of Cambridge University, where he delivered his lectures, so could Kulbak commemorate Belarus only from Berlin; in both cases the ongoing

reality of the spaces and places represented by these authors would have proven too resistant to their mythologizing poetics when confronted too closely.

Poetic form, by contrast, is a far more amenable object of displaced desire for Kulbak than contemporary White Russia. Indeed, what had been radical for Peretz in 1888 now can be seen as nostalgic for Kulbak, only thirty years later, thus revealing that another characteristic of nostalgia is to render quaint, to neutralize, precisely what had been most formidable for a previous generation. Connected to the Romantic preoccupation with pristine form — a preoccupation that distinguishes the major currents of poetry from nearly every other literary mode in the early nineteenth century — is the status of language in *Raysn*. In this regard, one should consider the line ‘Es shpart zikh a lebn a shtumer durkh grezer, durkh vortsln un tsveygn’ [A silent life presses on through grasses and roots and branches] (p. 43). Silence is key to the poem’s rhapsodic character; silence figures the absence of Jewish content, which could be constituted only through speech acts such as prayers, interpretations, and descriptions. The poem’s silence, therefore, is one of contemplation and reverie, out of which grows the poet’s evocation of an idyllic vision of absent nature and an imaginary home. Moreover, when the beauty of the landscape motivates the grandfather in this passage to speak finally, he utters a Slavic curse rather than a Hebrew prayer (p. 43), an inversion that further underscores the absence, perhaps the repression, of religious reference.

If *Raysn*’s romance with pure form originates, however circuitously, with Peretz’s introduction of the ballad form to Yiddish poetry, Peretz also looms large behind the inspiration for *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*, both in its formal eclecticism and its ideological despair. As the critic Y. Y. Trunk once wrote, ‘Kulbak is ideologically a follower of Peretz. But he takes his privileged Jewish characters from the same reality that provides the source for Yiddish naturalism.’²⁰ At the heart of Kulbak’s aesthetic repudiation of this naturalist tradition and its claims for an ‘organic’ connection between Jews and the territory of eastern Europe, a claim ostensibly valorized by *Raysn*, is a critique of ideologies advocating, alternately, Jewish integration into modern nation-states such as the brand-new Polish Republic, as well as the more radical aspirations of Jewish autonomy in eastern Europe advocated, in varying degrees, by movements such as the Territorialists, *Seymists* and the Yiddish-Socialist Bund. Though first incorporated as a formal ideological organization, the Jewish Society for Knowledge of the Land, in 1926,²¹ each of these movements for *doikayt* (‘presence in the land’) embraces a concept that came to be known as *Landkentenish*, the notion of ‘knowing the land’ as an essential prerequisite — one shared by cultural nationalists of the Diaspora, liberal integrationists, as well as Zionists in Mandate Palestine — to claiming the land as territory. As the historian Samuel Kassow explains in his study of the *Landkentenish* movement in Poland:

The second source of the *Landkentenish* idea was the Jewish cultural revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, symbolized by the Yiddish writer Yitzhak Leybush Peretz, the writer and folklorist S. Ansky, and the historian Simon Dubnow. This cultural revolution [...] nurtured the ideal of *Landkentenish* by highlighting the central role of the people, rather than traditional religious texts, in the survival of the Jewish nation.²²

Among these figures, the most influential spiritual godfather of *Landkentenish* is Peretz.

And yet, already a decade before *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*, Peretz himself, in a move characteristic of his ambivalent position between proto-modernist poetics and secular cultural ideology, had previously offered a parody of what can subsequently be identified as *Landkentenish* in his most experimental work, the expressionist verse drama *Ba nakht afn altn mark* (*At Night in the Old Marketplace*), where the notion of becoming one with the land, whether in a Polish-territorialist sense (figured by Peretz as Yiddishism) or a Zionist version of this ideal (figured as ‘the land of milk and honey’), is presented as a drunken old man rolling obscenely in the dirt:

Vi zis di erd shmekt ...
 Honik mit milkh!
 On hent, vi a mame glet zi
 On loshn, mame-loshn redt zi.²³

[How sweet the earth smells ... | Honey with milk! | Without hands, like a mother she caresses | Without language, in the mother-tongue she addresses.]

Peretz’s graphic, nihilistic rejection in *Ba nakht afn altn mark* of the various movements of Jewish nationalism for which he had served, willingly, as an inspiration in his public role as polemicist and spokesperson, counts in expressionist terms as an example of what otherwise remains a characteristic function of earlier Yiddish comedy as an *inverted ideological critique*; the most sophisticated examples of Yiddish satirical parody, particularly in the writing of Mendele Moykher-Sforim, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz himself, undermine not just the features of traditional *shtetl* life that earlier, maskilic comedy had eviscerated, but also many of the beliefs of the author’s own progressive, culturally nationalist faith in rationality, collective destiny, and political liberalism.²⁴

An additional motif from Peretz’s drama reappears in Kulbak’s narrative in the scene describing Pan Vrublevsky’s ball, where the entertainment is provided by Jewish *klezmerim*, including Wolf, one of the *lamed-vovniks* who initiate Benye’s messianic tribulations. In the ‘back story’ of Peretz’s play, the protagonist had served as a *badkhn* (ceremonial jester) performing with three *klezmerim* at a non-Jewish ball, after which the three drunken musicians had drowned in a well on stage. Where Peretz uses the story of the drowned *klezmerim*, seemingly, as a warning against the over-intimate proximity of Jews to non-Jewish culture, for Kulbak, precisely this intimacy is essential to the syncretic apocalypticism that motivates his writing. The implications of this juxtaposition can be observed in Kulbak’s description of the *lamed-vovnik*: ‘Volf iz geshtanen faroyts mit tsugemakhte oygn, ongehoyn shpiln af der fidele. Zayn veykhe hant hot farmatert aribergefirt mit dem fiddlboyn, geglet, geveynt, fartayerterheynt. | Di tefile fun an oreman, vos iz fartayet gevorn, | Un far Got tut es oysgish zayn harts’ [Wolf, who was standing in front with closed eyes, began playing a fiddle. His soft, tired hand guided the bow, stroking, weeping secretly. | The prayer of a poor man who was hidden | And he poured out his heart to God] (Y 101; E 317). This passage, which mixes poetry with prose to depict the contact of Jews with Christians, conveys, beyond what Peretz would depict as the exclusive modalities of Jewish and non-Jewish sensibility — since, after all, the

Christian ‘*Lamed-vovnik*’ Kiril is also present at the Belshazzarian banquet (Y 105; E 320) — the irreconcilable domains of physical pleasure and spiritual aspiration, as well as a metaphysical reconfiguration of the class struggle in eastern Europe. A banquet for the aristocrats is an occasion for weeping among the poor Jewish *klezmerim*, yet this weeping in turn becomes an additional source of entertainment, for the party revellers but also for the reader. Incompatibility becomes the mode of interaction, the structural principle by which ethnicity, religion, gender, discourse, and genre are deployed throughout the work.

The pervasive resistance to harmonization in *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* in turn underscores the artificial, disembodied discourse of the poems constituting *Raysn*; these, too, count as instances of extreme stylization, deriving, like the *Landkentenish* ideology itself, as much from the precedent of German and Slavic or Baltic Romanticism as from the contemporaneous imperatives of Yiddish territorialist secularism. Moreover, *Raysn*’s atavistic loyalty to poetic form, though in fact consistent with much of Kulbak’s lyric verse, stands as explicitly in contrast to the formal experimentation and generic mutability of *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* as nostalgia relates to and inverts apocalypse: the two works form an ideal interconnectedness not because of their similarities, but because of their conscious and schematic differences. Indeed, the formal ambivalence of *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* generates not only its thematic preoccupation with apocalypse — the fragments out of which it is constructed resemble the remnants of a narrative after a cataclysm — but also its characteristically modernist resistance to linear development and mimetic description. In lieu of psychological or dramatic development, Kulbak presents the contiguity of genres and their affective moods, tempos, and associations, structuring the progression of episodes analogically rather than logically.

It is perhaps to be expected that one of the most productive sources of ambivalence in Kulbak’s writing is the conflicted relationships between men and women in them, and the formal treatment of gender as such. In *Raysn*, the primary female figure is the grandmother, described in the third section as

A mayster fun a kindlerke — a kind tsu yedn frigling
 Un gring, un gor on veyen, punkt vi hiner leygn eyer
 Hot zi geleygt di tsvilingen — a tsviling nokh a tsviling. (p. 40)

[A master of mothering — a new child every spring | And easily, without any birthpains, like a hen lays an egg | She hatched the twins — a twin following a twin.]

This description renders the grandmother as a figure of supernatural fertility, even inverting and dispensing with the curse of Eve by giving birth without physical pain, yet also as a figure beyond humanity, comparable to chickens laying eggs. The imagery is at once animal and metaphysical, hence mythical, for an eastern European archetype as ostensibly pagan as it is Jewish: femininity in *Raysn*, therefore, is also figured beyond the frame of conventional Jewishness, in conspicuous contrast to the masculine designation of the tribe as such.

Nonetheless, her death (p. 40) is narrated immediately after the first reference to uncle Avrom’s non-Jewish love-interest Nastasia, who appears in the previous section as a kind of water-nymph, with green brows and green eyes, embraced by

the waves of the river (p. 45). The limits of the grandmother's status as Earth Mother coincide with the boundaries separating Jew from non-Jew, however cryptically the poem itself signifies these distinctions. Moreover, at her funeral her sons, the sixteen uncles, appear to give vent to their own culpability in her death: 'Dan hobn zikh tsheshrien, nebekh, mayne feters | Vi di retseykhim far der t'liye' [Then they cried out, pathetically, my uncles | Like murderers before the gallows] (p. 49). In this figuration, the sons whom she bore so effortlessly have killed her, with the inference that their attraction, or at least Avrom's, to a non-Jewish woman is the culprit. Sexuality therefore serves simultaneously as the only limit that separates the Jewish world from the non-Jewish one in this poem, and also as the means by which that limit is trespassed. By extension, the mythical 'Raysn' extends only so far as the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews, analogous to the boundary between tradition and modernity, are observed. Once this border vanishes, with the appearance of Nastasia, 'Raysn' becomes 'Belarus', and as such is no more idyllic than Berlin.

A similar fault line between eros and death, youth and old age, motherhood and virginity, as well as Jews and non-Jews, circumscribes the figure of Leahle in *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*. As the target of Pan Vrublevsky's erotic pursuit (Y 122–23; E 329–30), which occurs in the course of enacting her own eroticized and syncretic aspirations for redemption, she becomes the parody of a Madonna figure who in succumbing to an erotic encounter supposedly brings about the coming of the Messiah. The danger and temptation she embodies therefore become the pivot that serves to dramatize the otherwise diffuse motifs and themes Kulbak introduces. Furthermore, in keeping with the principle of contrast that structures the narrative, Pan Vrublevsky's assault on Leahle — interrupted by Simkhe Plakhte, who apparently becomes involved with her thereafter — finds an echo in Benye's grotesquely parodic temptation by the archetypal succubus Lilith.²⁵ The fault line between Benye and Lilith lies between the human and spirit world just as Leahle's liminal status separates and conjoins the Jewish and non-Jewish. These correspondences create a series of complementary narrative functions: the anxiety about Jewish and non-Jewish exogamy stands in the domain of realistic narrative analogous to the metaphysical anxiety on which all of Benye's acts are predicated, between the animate and inanimate world, and between the human and the demonic world. Benye's respective proximity to both the inanimate and the spiritual domain in turn anchors his fate, parodically, in the realm of myth invoked in Kulbak's use of fantasy, so that Leahle's motif connects the realistic and tragic elements of the work as a whole to the fantastic and parodic element of Benye's fate.

Contrasting with her status as a parodic virgin mother, Leahle remains a no less legendary, or parodic, lost daughter — a figure in classical Jewish mysticism for the *Shekhinah*, or Divine Immanence that vanished with the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem, and known to modern Jewish literature through the stories of Reb Nakhman of Breslov — and in this capacity she prompts her father Leyvi to become like a *lamed-vovnik* in his pursuit of her. By smashing the objects in his home and breaking his windowpanes (Y 124; E 330), Leyvi divests himself of his possessions, coming to the belated recognition that love, and not gold, is all that can sustain him, a lesson that corresponds to Benye's rejection of the messianic calling; as brothers,

like the biblical twins Jacob and Esau, Leyvi and Benye serve as inversions that reinforce each other through their own reversal, and the love that Leyvi seeks by the end of the story acquires a far more redemptive connotation than the sacrifice of a putative messiah figure. Benye's death scene at the end of the narrative, in which 'es hot zikh opgeton fun im di neshome un mitamol iz er gevorn groys, shtark vi di erd' [his soul left him, and all at once he became as big and as strong as the earth] (Y 145–46; E 344), therefore collapses the narrative motifs that had determined his fate from the beginning, by culminating his fantasy of return to 'the dust of the earth'. Similarly, the concluding prayer, which elevates 'dem leym, vos im iz beser far alemen' [the clay, which is better off than anything else] over 'mayn hant, vos iz mir iberik | [...] mayn harts, vos iz mir iberik' [my useless hand | [...] my useless heart] (Y 147; E 345), unifies the motifs and fragments on which the narrative as a whole has been structured by equating the stasis of death with the stability of prayer as a speech act: the irony of pure form here contributes to the ambivalence, the mythical contradictions, that motivate and propel the work to its end.

By way of a premature conclusion that itself signifies the same temporal dislocation that produces nostalgia, one should return to another remark by Boym: 'The nostalgic is never a native but a displaced person who mediates between the local and universal.'²⁶ In *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* and *Raysn*, Kulbak has chosen an aesthetic to convey the productivity of nostalgia as a mediating phenomenon; the form of *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*, or rather its formlessness, is a means of affiliating Kulbak simultaneously with expressionism, then in its last moment as the dominant modernist discourse in central and eastern Europe, and with the Jewish culture of a just-vanished Pale of Settlement. Where *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* evokes and dramatizes this double-identification as 'space', *Raysn*, precisely through its embrace of a pseudo-oral, conspicuously Romantic poetic form, performs the same function as 'place', signified in *Raysn* ultimately in negative terms of absence, silence, and death.

One can thus suggest that Kulbak's perspective while he was in Berlin is as crucial to the ambivalence of his ideological critique as it is to the articulation of his ironic nostalgia for the Belarusian landscape; this ambivalence, predicated on the reader's recognition that nothing is more German than a Jew's nostalgia for his abandoned countryside, in turn suggests a pattern in which the Berlin sojourn for Kulbak and many of his contemporaries becomes a critical means of renegotiating their relationship to a *Heimat* that in any event had changed and would change again to a nearly unrecognizable degree over the course of their respective absence. This process of mediation and dislocation, one should hasten to add, is distinct from what occurs in the more celebrated Yiddish writing contemporaneously appearing in New York, precisely because of the relative proximity of Berlin to eastern Europe and German to Yiddish. The common denominator for nearly all the 'Berlin Yiddishists', therefore, is the way in which the Berlin experience — the experience of a metropolis, the mediation of German, the encounter with various modernist aesthetics such as expressionism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and the Marxist aesthetics that would eventually emerge as socialist realism — distorts and reconfigures the perception of what previously had been the 'natural habitat' for Yiddish culture, the eastern European *shtetl*.

Thus the sickness of nostalgia — its *algia* — is the displacement of space onto place, the superimposition of a spatial significance onto an absent place. This confusion results in an additional *dislocation*: the suggestion, essential to both nostalgia and apocalypse, that time, from the perspective of Berlin, has been suspended in eastern Europe. *Raysn* demonstrates the symptoms of nostalgia in its commitment to form, whereas *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* resists nostalgia by resisting the strictures and conventions of form. Both works are, like so many Yiddish works about eastern Europe written in Weimar Germany, at both places and at neither, at the same time.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

This article was researched and written under the auspices of a fellowship in the Kulturwissenschaftliches Kolleg at the University of Constance, Germany; the Kolleg, its staff, and my colleagues there have my sincere gratitude for their support of my work. Drs Anna Lipphardt and Anne-Gaëlle Saliot, as well as Professors Uwe Hebekus, Shimen Neuberger, Avrom Novershtern, and David Roskies additionally offered substantial material and intellectual support as well as prompt and friendly responses to the many questions that arose during my research. Particular thanks are due to Professor Sara Nadal-Melsió for her thoughtful and perceptive reading of this essay in draft form.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke, 'Exploring Jewish Space: An Approach', in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. by Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), p. 4 (italics in original). In addition to my thanks to Anna Lipphardt for making a copy of this collection available to me, I wish to acknowledge my student Mozelle Foreman for calling it to my attention in her paper on *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* for a graduate seminar I conducted at Johns Hopkins in the spring 2009 semester.
2. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 12.
3. Boym, p. 13.
4. See Avrom Novershtern, 'Tsvishn morgnzun un akhris-hayomim: Tsu der apokalyptisher tematik in der yidisher literature', *Di goldene keyt*, 135 (1993), 116. More expansively, see Avrom Novershtern, *Kesem ha-dumdumim* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2003).
5. For more on the relationship between these two messianic figures see, of course, Gershom Scholem, 'Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism', in Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 1–36.
6. See *Ale verk fun Moyshe Kulbak*, 4 vols (Vilnius: Kletskin, 1929), II, 38. Subsequent references to this edition are incorporated as page numbers in parentheses in the text; translations are my own.
7. See Avrom Novershtern, 'Moyshe Kulbak', trans. by Marc Caplan, in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, ed. by Gershon David Hundert, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), I, 952.
8. See, or better yet, hear Woody Allen, 'Down South' (1964), *Standup Comic*, Rhino Records R2 75721; 1978, 1999. For an online transcription, see *Woody Allen — Standup Comic* <<http://www.ibras.dk/comedy/allen.htm>> [accessed 9 November 2009].
9. For historical sources on the legend of the *lamed-vovniks*, see Gershom Scholem, 'The Tradition of the Thirty-Six Hidden Just Men', in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 251–56.

10. Moyshe Kulbak, *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim & Montog* (Buenos Aires: Lerman, 1950), p. 13 (subsequent references by page number are marked as ‘Y’ in the text); translations are drawn from *The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult*, trans. by Joachim Neugroschel (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1986), p. 268 (subsequent references by page number are marked as ‘E’ in the text; the translations given in this chapter will on occasion deviate from the published edition).
11. It is precisely because of the collective function of the family in *Raysn* and the *Lamed-vovniks* in *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* — as well as the origin of both works in Berlin — that this comparison concentrates on *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* and *Raysn*, rather than on what would be a more logical thematic pairing of the narrative with Kulbak’s poem *Lamed-vov*. According to Novershtern, in his major study of *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim* (published in *Di goldene keyt*, 126 and 127), the poem was first published in *Di tsukunft*, New York, 1920 (see *Di goldene keyt*, 126, p. 203 n. 19). It was thus written before Kulbak’s Berlin period, and its relative formal equilibrium reflects this. In schematic terms, *Lamed-vov* signifies both a precursor to and a partial rationalization of *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*’s radical experimentation; it is a metrically flawless yet generically adventurous mix of standard lyric sequences, poetic lines extended almost to the status of rhymed prose — itself a fixture of pre-modern Yiddish writing — and the internalized drama of the protagonist Shmuel-Itse’s Jobian dialogue with Samael. *Raysn*, by contrast, not in spite but because of its ostensibly ‘pure’ commitment to poetic form, is a much stranger achievement: why does Kulbak use such a fixed form to represent such oddly ‘unrepresentative’ figures as the tribe of Jewish peasants? In a sense, one can suggest that *Raysn* anticipates the mock-epic, mock-socialist realist novel *Zelmenyaner* just as *Lamed-vov* prefigures and reconfigures *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*. Yet *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*, at the centre of Kulbak’s creativity, divides its thematic preoccupations between collective and individual destinies, a topic of ultimate significance for a writer cut off from the main social currents of his native land yet bound to its culture linguistically and temperamentally.
12. Carole Ksiazencier-Matheron, ‘Présentation’, in *Le Messie fils d’Éphraïm*, ed. and trans. by Carole Ksiazencier-Matheron (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1995), p. 14 (translations from the French are my own).
13. Avrom Novershtern, ‘Moyshe Kulbak’s “Meshiekh ben-Efrayim”’, *Di goldene keyt*, 126 (1989), 199. Translations from the Yiddish are my own.
14. Ksiazencier-Matheron, pp. 22–23. On the negative animal imagery characterizing Benye and the *lamed-vovniks*, see Avrom Novershtern, ‘Moyshe Kulbak’s “Meshiekh ben-Efrayim”’, *Di goldene keyt*, 127 (1989), 153.
15. Indeed, according to legend, the golem was created by manipulating the Tetragrammaton, which Kulbak had invoked at the beginning of *Meshiekh ben-Efrayim*.
16. I am greatly indebted to Mikhail Krutikov not only for pointing out the connections between Kulbak’s imagery and that of his Yiddish- and Russian-language contemporaries, but also for his sympathetic and constructive editorial attention in general.
17. As Mikhail Krutikov has pointed out to me, however obscure the language of the *Sephirot* in fact is, it would already be familiar to a Yiddish readership thanks to the popularization of Kabbalistic concepts in Hasidic culture. Nonetheless, not even the stories of Reb Nakhman of Breslov present this terminology so explicitly and centrally in a work of Yiddish fiction as Kulbak does here.
18. On the relationship of metonymy to metaphor, see Roman Jakobson, ‘Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances’, in Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 1987), p. 114: ‘The principle of similarity (metaphor) underlies poetry [...]. Prose, on the contrary, is forwarded essentially by contiguity (metonymy).’ Boym similarly recalls and complicates this alignment in connection with her two divergent modes of nostalgia (Boym, p. 362 n. 2).
19. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976; 1992), p. 1.
20. Novershtern, ‘Moyshe Kulbak’s “Meshiekh ben-Efrayim”’, *Di goldene keyt*, 126 (1989), 189.
21. This organization was known both by its Yiddish name, *Di Yidishe Gezelshaft far Landkentenish*, and, perhaps more popularly, in Polish as *Zydowskie towarzystwo krajoznawcze* or ZTK (see

- Samuel Kassow, in *Jewish Topographies*, ed. by Brauch, Lipphardt, and Nocke, pp. 260–61 n. 2). The two equivalent names indicate the intention to appeal to both Yiddish-autonomous aspirations as well as Polish-integrationist strategies. The apparently greater popularity of the Polish-language wing suggests a more general linguistic and cultural dynamic among Polish Jews at the time.
22. Samuel Kassow, in *Jewish Topographies*, ed. by Brauch, Lipphardt, and Nocke, p. 243.
 23. *Di verk fun Yizkhok Leybush Perets*, ed. by David Pinski, 13 vols (New York: Idish, 1920), IX, 18; for a better edition, see *Peretses yiyesh-vizye: Interpretatsye fun Y. L. Peretses 'Ba nakht afn altn mark' un kritishe oysgabe fun der drame*, ed. by Chone Shmeruk (New York: YIVO, 1971). The translation into English is my own.
 24. To extend this argument briefly, one can contend that comic writing becomes truly *political* through the act of ideological inversion: it is at the limits of ideology, where even, especially, the author's own ideological convictions can be stood on their head, that the political emerges as a *space* for contention, debate, experimentation, and exchange. Although this understanding of comedy's relationship with the political — as well as the inverted, dialectical correspondences between politics and ideology — goes beyond the present discussion of Kulbak, it is one I intend to pursue in work in progress on the history and function of comedy in modern Jewish culture.
 25. For more on this episode, see Novershtern, 'Moyshe Kulbak's "Meshiekh ben-Efrayim"', *Di goldene keyt*, 126 (1989), 192.
 26. Boym, p. 12.