



The Hermit at the Circus: Der Nister, Yiddish Literature, and German Culture in the Weimar Period¹

MARC CAPLAN

'And then the projectionist began to officiate at the film by Harold Lloyd.... And even as the man on the screen was performing some wonderful comic gag, I decided I would dedicate the rest of my life to God, and become a hermit'.²

THE PROTOTYPICAL NARRATIVE of nineteenth-century Europe, exemplified by novels such as Honoré de Balzac's *Illusions perdues*, which uses the parable of a young man's travel from the provinces to Paris to illustrate the transformation of a society from tradition to modernity, finds a parallel in East European Jewish culture in the passage of an adolescent yeshiva student from the precincts of rabbinical learning to a crisis in faith and a consequent encounter with the modern world via the literature of the Jewish Enlightenment or *haskalah* [Yiddish *haskole*]. This Ashkenazic version of the modernizing trajectory forms not only the subject matter for several Yiddish and Hebrew narratives throughout

1. This essay was conceived and researched under the auspices of a 2005-2006 Harry Starr Fellowship at the Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard University; the Center, its staff, and my colleagues there have my sincere gratitude for their support of my work. Early versions of this paper were presented at Harvard, the Johns Hopkins University, and a seminar I organized for the 2006 American Comparative Literature Association Conference at Princeton University. In addition to the valuable comments and questions I received from audiences at these venues, particular thanks are due to Kenneth and Anne Eakin Moss for their thoughtful reading of this work in successive early drafts, to Laurence Roth for his advice on critical sources dealing with *Der blaue Engel* and film theory, as well as to David Roskies, who introduced Der Nister's writing to me and generously responded to my ideas for this comparison at its inception.

2. J. Roth, 'The Conversion of a Sinner in Berlin's UFA Palace' (1925), *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-1933*, transl. M. Hofmann (New York 2003), p. 169.





the latter half of the nineteenth-century, but also summarizes the biographies of countless writers from Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher Sforim; c. 1835-1917) to Chaim Grade (1910-1982).³ Indeed, although students at yeshivas constituted only a small proportion of Ashkenazic society, the recurrence of the 'fallen' yeshiva student as the primary synecdoche for modernization underscores the paradox that even when breaking from convention the first modernizers of East European Jewry established a tradition to which subsequent generations conformed. Moreover, the persistence of this theme calls attention to the *textual* terms through which these Jews understood their modernity. After all, the itinerary of these intellectuals often involved a journey no greater than from Volozhin to Berdichev, or later Warsaw or Odessa, but the engagement with *haskalah* served not only as a parallel to larger social forces within European modernity, but also as a substitute when these technological, economic, or political innovations were absent in the Pale of Settlement.

One late and particularly intriguing example of the 'fallen yeshiva student' motif occurs in the story *Unter a ployt: a revyu* ('Behind a Fence: A Revue', 1929) by Der Nister ('the Hidden One', pseudonym of Pinkhes Kahanovitsh, 1884-1950), one of the most idiosyncratic figures in Yiddish literature. Der Nister's narrative is not only an attenuated example of this theme, but also an unusually cosmopolitan one, dispensing with the explicitly Jewish references expected in other examples of the genre, and simultaneously reflecting the author's own experiences in Germany during the 1920s; this story was published just after his return from Berlin to the Soviet Union. In biographical terms Der Nister thus juxtaposes the motif of a student leaving his academy with the conventional European narrative of the journey from the provinces to the metropolis, in this instance recounted *symbolically* after a return to the radically reconfigured point of origin. As such, it serves not only as an extended metaphor of Jewish modernity, but also an indication of paral-

3. As late as 1934, a twenty-one-year old participant in the YIVO youth autobiography contest describes his path to modernity as beginning when, as a student at the Hafetz Hayyim yeshiva, he began reading the Hebrew-language *Sefer ha-berit* – a tamely rationalistic primer in natural sciences first published in 1797 – and gathered around himself like-minded students 'who were drawn to the *Haskalah*'. See 'Henekh' in *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland Before the Holocaust*, ed. J. Shandler (New Haven 2002), p. 119.



lels between modern Yiddish culture and contemporaneous German culture. The Weimar period, which saw a coterie of Yiddish writers working in Germany,⁴ is a particularly suggestive context for considering Yiddish literature because it culminates the historically specific and culturally fraught series of encounters between German and East European-Jewish cultures begun at the end of the eighteenth-century with the advent of *haskalah*.⁵ It also takes place in a period of profound displacement for both German and Jewish culture. Of perhaps greatest interest, the Weimar era is the only time when a group of Yiddish writers were creating an experimental literature in one of the great metropolises of European modernism.

In order to situate *Der Nister* within Weimar culture, it is helpful to consider *Unter a ployt* in comparison with the classic Josef von Sternberg film *Der blaue Engel* ('The Blue Angel', 1930).⁶ Both the Yiddish short story and the German film are free, but recognizable, adaptations of the 1905 novel *Professor Unrat*, by Heinrich Mann. The coincidental attraction which both the Austrian-American-Jewish filmmaker and the Yiddish short story writer feel toward Mann's novel thus suggests an analogously complicated identification among political, na-

4. The subject of Yiddish literature in Weimar Germany will, I hope, provide the focus for a book-length project that I have just begun to research. To date, the only full-length consideration of Yiddish literature in the Weimar era, and this primarily from a cultural-historical perspective rather than a literary analysis, is D. Bechtel, *La Renaissance culturelle juive: Europe centrale et orientale 1897-1930* (Paris 2002). By contrast, the leading cultural history on Weimar-era Jewry in English, Michael Brenner's *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven 1996) mentions Yiddish literature only in passing, and offers no discussion of any Yiddish belletristic figure. To date literary discussions of the Weimar Yiddishists are confined primarily to uncollected scholarly articles and chapters in books otherwise unconnected to the theme of Weimar modernism.

5. The history of German and East European-Jewish encounters both precedes and follows the time period I am presenting as the heyday of German-Jewish modernity; prior to the synchronicity of German emancipation debates and the establishment of *Haskalah*, there was the complicated series of interactions and mingling between German and Jewish cultures that resulted in, among other manifestations, the establishment of the old Yiddish literature of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. Since 1989, similarly, Germany has experienced a large and culturally dynamic influx of Jews from the former Soviet Union. The broadly defined period from roughly 1780 until the morning of January 30, 1933, differs from what precedes and follows it insofar as it reflects an era in which modernization as such is 'unevenly distributed' among Germans and East European Jews, and in which German culture stands as the primary model of modernity for East European Jews to imitate, adapt, or reject.

6. This discussion supersedes my earlier essay 'Performance Anxieties: Carnival Spaces and Assemblages in *Der Nister*'s 'Under a Fence', *Prooftexts* 18 (1998), p. 1-18.



tional, and linguistic outsiders active in interwar Germany; considering Der Nister's adaptation of *Professor Unrat* in turn offers insight into what ways Der Nister can be considered a 'German' writer, and what ways, perhaps, *Der blaue Engel* can be seen as a 'Jewish' film.

Before embarking on this comparison, though, a few words are in order regarding Der Nister's career in general. Like virtually all Yiddish writers of his generation, Der Nister was born in the Russian Pale of Settlement – in his instance the large commercial town Berdichev, in the Ukraine – and received a private though traditional education in classical rabbinic texts before falling under the spell of modern Hebrew and Russian literature during his adolescence. It is noteworthy, moreover, that Der Nister's older brother Aaron joined the Bratslaver khasidim, a dissident sect within the khasidic movement considered even by other ultra-orthodox Jews to be excessively pious and inclined to mysticism, while his younger brother Max became a sculptor and art dealer in Paris: Der Nister's vocation as a secular Yiddish writer falls somewhere between the two poles of traditionalism and assimilation occupied by his brothers; it is particularly significant that Reb Nakhman of Bratslav (1772-1810), the founder of the movement to which Der Nister's older brother adhered, was the first published storyteller in the khasidic movement and his collection of fantastic, obscure tales exerted a strong influence on Der Nister's writing.⁷ After unsuccessfully beginning his literary career as a Hebrew poet, a gesture again typical of virtually all the Yiddish writers in his generation, Der Nister settled on the medium of Yiddish fiction, as well as his provocative pseudonym, with his 1907 debut *Gedankn un motivn: lider in proze* ('Ideas and Motifs: Prose Poems').

For the next twenty years Der Nister was the leading author of symbolist fiction in Yiddish literature, as well as a distinguished translator of world literature into Yiddish, whose publications include works by Turgenev, Jack London, and Hans Christian Andersen. Upon return-

7. This discussion will follow khasidic practice by referring to the founder of the Bratslaver khasidim as 'Reb' Nakhman of Bratslav. In traditional Jewish usage, 'Reb' refers to any married Jewish man; the term functions essentially the way 'Mr' does in modern English. However, because traditional Jewish discourse is nowadays confined almost exclusively to the precincts of the ultra-Orthodox, in modern usage the term 'Reb' signifies, as here, a khasidic leader.





ing to the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s, however, he was obligated to conform to the emerging aesthetic mandates of socialist realism.⁸ After struggling over the course of the 1930s to refigure his writing in accordance with the party line, he managed to produce the major achievement in Yiddish socialist realism, the grand historical novel *Di Mishpokhe mashber* ('The Family Mashber'), the first volume of which appeared in 1939 and the second of which was published in New York in 1948. During World War II Der Nister was prominent in the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and despite his valiant service to the Soviet Union, he was arrested by the Stalinist regime, tortured, and murdered in 1950.

Certainly the first step in approaching Der Nister's aesthetic achievements is to consider the implications of his pseudonym, 'the hidden one'. The choice of pseudonym, when made, must be counted as the first and most important words in an author's body of work, and Yiddish fiction during the nineteenth-century was dominated by pseudonymous writers, primarily because the Jewish vernacular was considered inferior to Hebrew, German, or Russian, and therefore a demeaning linguistic vehicle for serious intellectuals. Over the course of classic Yiddish fiction's development from the pseudonymous work of Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh to Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitsh), one observes a progression from a nearly three-dimensional persona narrating, conversing with, and interacting with other characters to a more subtle and complicated literary 'presence', as Dan Miron formulates it,⁹

8. Even in this period, however, Der Nister never fully abandoned the stylistic principles of his previous aesthetic, as can be observed even in an essay on the prosaic theme of Moscow's literary drought immediately following the Soviet Revolution: 'The city [was] half dead, a kind of Pompeii.... Few [Yiddish] literati were in Moscow [in 1920]. Prose was silent. Poetry was shouting.... Seven nonentities and untalented people were always at each real talent's side, and seven rogues and drones made a living from them. The best writers overstrained their voices, but nobody could hear them outside Moscow'. In this brief passage, one sees a full arsenal of symbolist techniques—equating a contemporary city with a legendary one; personifying literary forms; repeating the fairy-tale figure of seven; and most characteristically of all allowing the effect of the artistic construction to collapse on itself with the climactic declaration that none of these fantastic aspects were perceivable outside the fantasized object of representation, Moscow! See Der Nister, *Moskve: a shvere demonung, Di royte velt* 7-8 (1932), translated by and quoted in G. Estraiikh, *In Harness: Yiddish Writers' Romance with Communism* (Syracuse 2005), p. 43.

9. See Dan Miron, 'Sholem Aleichem: Person, Persona, Presence', *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination* (Syracuse 2000), p. 128-156.



felt only by implication but nonetheless shaping and determining the character and structure of each story or monologue. From Sholem Aleichem to Der Nister, an additional transformation and generational shift occurs from transparency to invisibility.

Hidden-ness, inscrutability, hermeticism, and the absolute estrangement of the narrated world from the experienced world are fundamental to Der Nister's symbolist aesthetic, which culminates with *Unter a ployt*. In contrast to the injunction Isaac Babel's grandmother issues that 'you must know everything',¹⁰ Der Nister in his choice of pseudonym suggests that the reader is incapable of knowing anything. Like the cabbalistic allusions in the Torah commentary of the thirteenth-century Judeo-Catalan mystic Nachmanides,¹¹ Der Nister informs his readers only that a secret exists, never what the secret is. This insistence on the secrecy of knowledge – *concealed* from the masses and at best reserved for an initiated elite – is itself an anti-Enlightenment gesture that calls to mind not only the hermeneutics of medieval Judaism, but also the oral origins of Yiddish storytelling; as Nouréini Tidjani-Serpos notes of the status of knowledge in oral cultures generally: 'science is never more appreciated than when it is secret and when it demands years of wandering and suffering before it can be properly acquired'.¹²

Der Nister *returns* Yiddish storytelling decisively away from one set of origins in the 'rationalist' and ostensibly anti-traditionalist parodies of the *haskalah*, back to its contemporaneous, *hidden* origin in the khasidic tales of Reb Nakhman of Bratslav. He employs a Kabbalistic discourse paired with the mystic's belief in the tangibility and magical qualities of words, now emptied of its theological content. This contra-

10. I. Babel, 'Childhood, With Grandmother', *Collected Stories*, transl. D. McDuff (New York 1994), p. 26.

11. To cite one of countless examples of Nachmanides' cryptic references to Cabbalistic interpretation in his Torah commentary, which essentially amounts to a Cabbala conceived in negative or *ineffable* terms, consider his distinction between the biblical account of Noah's flood (Genesis 6:9-8:19), in which the name of God (*Elokim*) predominates, and the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), which consistently uses the Tetragrammaton (the LORD). Of this distinction, Nachmanides—or as he is referred to in Hebrew, Ramban—merely says, 'The student learned [in Kabbalah] will understand'. See *Ramban: Commentary on the Torah*, Volume 1, transl. with annotation C. B. Chavel (New York 1971), p. 155.

12. N. Tidjani-Serpos, 'De l'école coranique à l'école étrangère ou le passage tragique de l'Ancien au Nouveau dans « L'Aventure ambiguë » de Cheikh Hamidou Kane', *Présence Africaine* 101/102 (1977), p. 189.



diction of *secular mysticism* compares with analogous themes in contemporaneous German-Jewish culture, particularly with Walter Benjamin: the *unprogrammatically* articulated secular mysticism in Benjamin and Der Nister, in conspicuous contrast to the programmatic formulas of a figure such as Martin Buber, points to the simultaneous crisis affecting both religious tradition and secular modernity at the beginning of the twentieth-century; when the rational codes governing civilization become dislodged from their authority, whether in the case of Der Nister by the failure of the 1905 Russian revolution¹³ or in the case of Walter Benjamin by the catastrophe of World War I,¹⁴ the first viable alternative is to embrace the non-rational and the extra-rational – to recognize, as the mystic composer Cecil Taylor has explained, that ‘logic [is] the lowest form of magic.’¹⁵ In the case of Weimar-era Germany, the fragmented mysticism of Der Nister or Benjamin serves as an eloquent rejoinder to the mystifications of totalitarianism that otherwise characterize the sad passing of the 1920s into the 1930s, and which of course neither Benjamin nor Der Nister was able to resist completely.

Both the appeal of irrationality and the powerlessness that it betrays receive a thorough dramatic treatment in *Unter a ployt*. The story’s title refers obliquely to the spot reserved just over the boundary of the Jewish cemetery – behind the fence – for suicides, heretics, and similarly marginal members of the community. The story as such is preoccupied with the danger and despair of inhabiting a marginal space, one that might be considered at its most general the space between the Jewish tradition and the broader, modern world, but at its most specific might be understood as Berlin, the way-station for Jewish refugees ‘just over the border’ from their devastated and chaotic post-revolutionary homes in Eastern Europe.

13. The impact of the failed 1905 revolution on Der Nister’s turn, along with many of his contemporaries, to symbolism, was first noted by Y. Nusinov in the introduction to Der Nister’s collected stories *Gedakht*, in which *Unter a ployt* appears. See *Gedakht* (Kiev 1929), p. XII. Nusinov’s introduction otherwise offers a remarkable example of the contortions and evasions which a doctrinaire Marxist must perform in order to rationalize Der Nister’s symbolist aesthetic in light of the then-emergent strictures of socialist realism.

14. On the influence of World War I in the formulation of Benjamin’s (as well as Ernst Bloch’s) secular-mystic ‘messianism’, see A. Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley 1997; 2000), p. 27-65; esp. p. 47-53.

15. C. Taylor, ‘Introduction to Fifteen’, *Dreaming of the Masters, Vol. 2: Thelonious Sphere Monk* (New York 1991), CK 48962.





The contradictory and associative action of the story is almost impossible to summarize, but for the sake of clarity one can describe what appears to take place in the narrative as the confessions of a drunk and disgraced scholar who has been rejected by a circus acrobat, Lili. Upon leaving her dressing room, he is visited by one of his students, to whom he begins to confess the tale of his disgrace, which involves his abandonment of the academy and his esteemed teacher Medardus, and his subsequent alliance with a magical ‘dust-person’, who sells the scholar and his daughter to the circus where he had fallen in love with Lili. When the scholar’s daughter is injured, perhaps maliciously, while performing a circus trick with Lili, the scholar is put on trial by Medardus and his former students for his betrayal of their scholastic mission. At the moment when the scholar is sentenced to death by immolation, he wakes up behind a fence, covered in vomit, to find that he had fallen into a stupor after retreating from his humiliation in Lili’s dressing room to a bar. When a policeman rouses him, he returns home, where he is forced to confess his disgrace to his aggrieved and ashamed daughter, thus returning the story to its point of origin.

The Yiddish reader will recognize *Unter a ployt* as a not-very-distant descendant of works such as Mendele’s *Dos Tosfes-yontov kelbele*, Y. L. Peretz’s *Mekubolim*, and Lamed Shapiro’s *Esn teg*, each of which are examples of the ‘fallen yeshiva’ genre, in Der Nister’s instance decoupled from the explicit association with the shtetl and Jewish learning. This motif in Yiddish fiction connected the poverty of the shtetl with the bankruptcy both of traditional Jewish education and a social system that left its most intelligent young men to waste away physically and emotionally. Of the extreme poverty in the protagonist’s academy, Der Nister writes, ‘You have permitted me to defend myself...but I don’t know how I can. Standing before you now, I feel like a turtle without a shell: completely naked. Medardus, my teacher, I left my shell, our tower, and I grew cold. And when we are cold we hug anything that can keep us warm, any garbage or filth, as long as it covers us. And we wear anything, even rags or flesh-colored tights, as long as it’s clothing. And when we are hungry and have no work, being a clown is work.... And when we have no home, the circus can be home. And the circus is as it is. Your life is cheap’.¹⁶ This

16. Der Nister, *Unter a ployt: a revyu, Gedakht* (Kiev 1929), p. 283; subsequent references incorporated in text as ‘Y’. English translation, ‘Behind a Fence’, by S. Levitan in *A Treasury of Yid-*



'defense' indicates paradoxically that *no* meaningful difference exists between the world outside the academy and inside it: standing in the flesh-colored tights of a circus performer, the protagonist feels naked; but it was precisely the nakedness, exposure, and degradation of the broken-down academy that had driven him to the circus to begin with.

By way of comparison, consider how Y. L. Peretz portrays the setting of his 'fallen yeshiva' story, *Mekubolim* ('Kabbalists'): 'The impoverished town gradually sent less food to the students, provided them with fewer 'eating days,' and the poor boys went off, each his own way.... They frequently suffered hunger. Hunger leads to sleeplessness, and night-long insomnia arouses a desire to delve into the mysteries of Kabbala'.¹⁷ The precedent of Peretz is particularly relevant to *Der Nister* because Peretz was the first Yiddish writer to engage with the aesthetic trends of naturalism, impressionism, and symbolism, and as such was the primary mentor of Yiddish modernists in the first two decades of the twentieth-century; moreover, as a cultural leader, in addition to his universal respect as an author, Peretz's embrace of Yiddishism as an ideology placed him as the primary representative of the Yiddish language's aspirations to high culture. Nonetheless, his use of the 'fallen yeshiva' genre harkens back to the roots of his fiction, never completely abandoned, in maskilic social critique. In Peretz's satire of Kabbala, the poverty of the rabbinic tradition leads to the study of mysticism, whereas in *Der Nister's* story the use of mysticism is sublimated to subvert and conflate the oppositions upon which he structures his story. From an emblem in Peretz's story of desperate irrationality and self-destructive aesthetic longing, Kabbala now serves as a narrative strategy unto itself. By contrast with *Mekubolim*, *Unter a ployt* reads as a revelation, not of truth through parody, but rather the corporeal reality of naked bodies and flesh-colored tights.

Der Nister's story is thus a retelling of the 'fallen yeshiva' story and a sequel to the genre, updating maskilic disillusionment with traditional study to reveal that the yeshiva student unmoored by the traditional culture finds himself in the big, secular city to be just as lost and alone as

dish Stories, ed. I. Howe and E. Greenberg (New York 1990), p. 580; subsequent references incorporated in text as 'E'.

17. Y. L. Peretz, *Mekubolim, Ale verk*, Volume IV (New York 1947), p. 20; the story was first published in Hebrew in 1891 and in Yiddish in 1894; English transl., 'Cabalists', by Sh. Katz in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, p. 219.



he had been before. At the same time, Der Nister's *nozir-boyz* (hermitage) is not explicitly a yeshiva, and Medardus, a name he took from E.T.A. Hoffman's *Elixiere des Teufels*,¹⁸ is not a rabbi, or even identifiably Jewish. Similarly, the author refers to the skullcaps worn by the students at the 'mock trial' as *galekh-mitslekh* (Y 303), 'priest's caps', rather than *yarmulkes*. Even the Yiddish at places in Der Nister's original betrays a somewhat German-like or *daytshmerish* cast to the vocabulary and sentence structure: for example, *Un ba undzere tishn iz shoyrn troyerik geven, un kayne gest un kayne bazukher...zaynen shoyrn tsu undz, nisht af undz tsu fregn un nisht undz tsu bazukhn gekumen* (Y 284). These Germanizing deviations from the stylistic norms of nineteenth-century Yiddish prose – however discreet they may seem when compared to the wholesale and haphazard appropriations of modern German vocabulary in the contemporaneous popular Yiddish press – are striking in this context because they are nearly unique in Der Nister's writing, and they suggest a deliberate effort both to distance this story from the traditional Yiddish discourse of the *shtetl and* to orient its milieu toward the author's (only recently abandoned) location in Berlin.

In the absence of traditional Jewish referents, Der Nister uncovers the structure common to all of his predecessors in the 'fallen yeshiva' genre and even connected with the beginnings of Yiddish storytelling with Reb Nakhman: a structure in which power and desire receive concrete expression – here as elsewhere in the genre figured as the yeshiva and erotic passion directed toward the outside world – but at the same time dissolve into one another to the double-voiced critique of both. With *Unter a ployt*, it is not just traditional knowledge that has lost its relevance, but knowledge as such, the knowable as a category, which is parodically undermined. Filling the void left by the absence of knowledge is a series of parallel power relations playing out over a *network of desire* entangling the protagonist with the other characters in the story. This series of relationships manifests itself in at least four ways over the course of the narrative: (1) the displacement of dramatic roles and narrative functions onto a proliferating cast of characters; (2) the consequent emptying out of narrative introspection in favor of the projection of the

18. See Kh. Shmeruk, 'Der Nister's 'Under a Fence': Tribulations of a Soviet Yiddish Symbolist', *The Field of Yiddish, Second Collection* (The Hague 1965), p. 281.





narrator/protagonist's inner life onto the power dynamics of his interaction with the other characters; (3) the repetition or recurrence of dramatic relations among characters; (4) the continuous fluctuation of narrative space between open and closed, public and private, circus and academy.

Perhaps one particularly complicated example can serve as illustration of these narrative processes: after first encountering the 'dust-person', who will lead him to the circus, the protagonist discovers an unnoticed room in his hermitage. Der Nister then writes, 'But when I looked closely at the bed, I was suddenly amazed to see that there were three people lying there: a father, a mother, and a child.... All three were made of straw.... The mother was dried out, thin, and flat as a board, without breasts for the child, but the father was fuller, and he was the one with breasts, and the child lay at one of his breasts and sucked. The straw child had a little straw mouth, and the little mouth apparently pained and bit the father...for he twisted and grimaced while giving the breast.... And the longer I looked at him, the more his pain became my pain, and the more he twisted and turned, the more I twisted and turned as well' (Y 287-288; E 582-83). This bizarre image, predicated on the discovery of an *undiscovered* space within the hermitage – initiating the juxtaposition of open and closed spaces that provides a correlative to the exposure of the protagonist's secret desires to the condemnation of the mob – finds precedence both in the androgynous iconography of several mystic traditions, whereby the religious leader is figured as both father and mother simultaneously,¹⁹ as well as in specifically Jewish legends of the golem, a homunculus made of clay. The significance of the straw family lies in the protagonist's identification with the straw father, which makes *literal* the metaphorical androgyny of mysticism.

The story as a whole thus unfolds as a struggle between two 'father-figures', the 'dust-person' and Medardus – the former suggesting a terminal, charnel physicality and the latter connected to spiritual and intellectual aspiration – over the protagonist's soul, just as the events depicted shift along the fault lines between the real and the imagined,

19. For a (somewhat unsatisfying) discussion of the use of such imagery in khasidic culture, see N. Deutsch, 'Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav: The Zaddik as Androgyne', in *God's Voice from the Void: Old and New Studies in Bratslav Hasidism*, ed. Sh. Magid (Albany 2002), p. 193-215.





the experienced and the performed, the private and the public. Via the protagonist's debased identification with the straw-father, the narrative can be understood as enacting an intersection between two opposing 'triangles': a triangle of power involving the 'dust-person', Medardus, and the narrator; and a triangle of desire involving the narrator, his daughter, and Lili. This structure does not create a fixed, definable allegory of meaning, but rather a means to represent the destabilizing and debilitating interpenetration and superimposition of power with desire.

In the context of the Berlin milieu, both the source for this story, Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrat*, and the affinities between this story and *Der blaue Engel*, yield insights into Der Nister's specific achievement and place in the history of High Modernism.²⁰ As John Baxter writes of *Der blaue Engel*, 'Emmanuel Rath, professor of English at a provincial high school, pursues a group of his pupils to a sleazy night club called 'The Blue Angel,' is infatuated with the cabaret singer Lola, gives up his career to marry her, and becomes a stooge in the troupe. Years later, the combination of Lola taking a new lover and his appearance on stage in the town where he once taught drives Rath insane, and he runs to his old school room, dying with his arms locked around the desk that was a symbol of his standing'.²¹ Already in a cursory plot summary one perceives several obvious similarities between the movie and Der Nister's story. Of equal significance are the strategic departures both works make from their original source, and their corresponding violations of realist decorum in both the narration of this story and its metaphorical significance.

In formal terms, Der Nister's story compresses the action of Mann's novel into an associative monologue, in which the narrative unfolds as a single, dreamlike (or dreamed) event. Sternberg's film, by contrast, con-

20. Another possible source for Der Nister's story is the 1925 German film *Variety*, directed by E.A. Dupont and starring, like *Der blaue Engel*, Emil Jannings. Like *Unter a ployt*, *Variety* depicts, in Richard McCormick's description, a 'good, solid German male whose passion for his exotic mistress blinds him to her betrayal of him.... All three of them [the main characters in the film] are trapeze artists, objects of the spectacle of the circus, and it is only by accident that Jennings's [sic] character learns to see 'for himself'. Then he can see what is actually going on behind the seductive spectacle of success'. See R. W. McCormick, *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature, and 'New Objectivity'* (New York 2001), p. 29; for an extended discussion of this film, see McCormick, p. 72-86.

21. J. Baxter, *The Cinema of Josef von Sternberg* (London 1971), p. 70.



tinuously interrupts its narrative through montage, jump-cuts, musical set-pieces, and chronological gaps. Where the short story, which could be read 'outside time' in successive sittings, *simulates* a single narrated event – thereby deceptively harking back to the origins of stories, particularly Yiddish ones, in the oral tradition – the film, which at least before the advent of the VCR generally *had to* be seen in one sitting, calls attention to the *interruption* of narrative time. An additional morphological anomaly distinguishes *Der Nister's* story from its German-language counterparts: *Unter a ployt* reverses the ordering of events observed in *Professor Unrat* and *Der blaue Engel*; *Der Nister's* story begins with Lili's rejection of the protagonist, whereas in the film and more ambivalently in the novel this rejection serves as denouement. Lili's initial rejection, instead of *culminating* the protagonist's descent from civility, plunges this character and the story he tells *from the outset* into a world of fantasy, introspection, and self-reproach. Each work therefore distorts its audience's *perception* of narrative time not only in opposition to one another, but also in the opposite direction of its medium's actual relation to time, in turn reminding the audience that time is in fact running out – for the characters, for the culture, for the audience itself. As Tennessee Williams formulates this fact, '...time is short and it doesn't return again. It is slipping away while I write this and while you read it, and the monosyllable of the clock is Loss, loss, loss, unless you devote your heart to its opposition'.²²

Working independently of one another, both Sternberg and *Der Nister* use the manipulation of narrative time to fashion substantial improvements over their source material, not only as innovative examples of avant-garde art, but simply as narratives; they tell better stories than Mann.²³ Why, then, are they both attracted to this novel? The appeal, it seems, speaks to the crisis facing the intellectual when confronted by the rise of mass culture. The connection between knowledge and power, as-

22. Tennessee Williams, 'The Catastrophe of Success', *The Glass Menagerie* (New York 1945; 1970), p. 17.

23. It is significant in this regard that when Mann's novel appeared in English, it was re-titled, apparently over the author's objections, as *The Blue Angel*. Although Sternberg's film adaptation of this novel must be counted as the most enduring achievement of Mann's creativity, it is additionally noteworthy that Sternberg rejected Mann's original effort at creating a screenplay from his novel.





served as a general principle by Michel Foucault, was in actuality never more forcefully valorized than in the precincts of nineteenth-century German idealism; as Joseph Roth writes, in the immediate aftermath of Hitler's ascendance to power, 'Behind the sergeant stood the engineer who supplied him with weapons, the chemist who brewed poison gas to destroy the human brain, and at the same time formulated the drug to relieve his migraine; the German professor...who is paid to disseminate the idea of Prussian superiority, the non-commissioned officer of the university...'.²⁴ The aftermath of World War I and the Weimar era, however, saw the profound disconnection between the intellectual and various manifestations of political, economic, and cultural power. This accounts in part for the attraction that nearly every intellectual cultivated for the extreme ideologies of the right and left – each of which sought and received the subordination, often willing, of an entire intellectual class – with the catastrophic consequences these allegiances fostered among the right in Germany and the left in the Soviet Union during the 30s and 40s.

Both of these narratives focus on the powerlessness, the impotence, and the humiliation of the scholastic ideal. In this respect, *Der blaue Engel* portrays its intellectual protagonist as a functionary, a bureaucrat, and a technician, reduced at the outset to a pitiable figure, who degenerates further to the ultimate point of losing both the power of speech and his sanity. As Judith Mayne notes, 'The final performance number of the film, when [the magician] Kiepert puts Rath in the role of student and orders him to crow, is a parody of Rath's teaching techniques. The scene suggests that mimicry has come full circle in the film, from Rath's classroom to the stage of the Blue Angel'.²⁵ As with *Unter a ployt*, knowledge itself, figured here as rational language, falls victim to the destructive effects of misplaced desire and the mockery of the crowd. Indeed, where the film begins with a parodic deformation of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' soliloquy – a purposefully clichéd reference to high culture and civilization, comically debased by the inability of German students to pronounce the word 'the' – it ends with Rath's speech as

24. J. Roth, 'The Auto-da-Fé of the Mind' (1933), *What I Saw*, p. 209.

25. J. Mayne, 'Marlene Dietrich, *The Blue Angel*, and Female Performance', *Seduction and Theory: Readings of Gender, Representation, and Rhetoric*, ed. D. Hunter (Urbana 1989), p. 36.





such reduced to the insane imitation of a crowing, egg-laying rooster, evoking simultaneously the gender confusion of an emasculated, cuckolded husband, a gender confusion equally suggested through the figure of the nursing straw-father in Der Nister's story, and the dehumanizing cruelty of the crowds gathered to watch his grotesque performance. Rath's degeneration at the end of the film demonstrates his unmaking as a man and as a human being.

Intimately related to the film's blurring of boundaries among man and woman, human and animal, as well as the debasement of the intellectual as a public figure, is an anxiety emerging from the instability of German culture at a time of significant immigration, disputed borders, and the importation of popular culture from other countries, particularly the United States. As Peter Jelavich notes in his study of Berlin cabaret, 'The 1920s witnessed an Americanization of popular entertainment in Berlin.... The specifically Central European musical elements receded, and the melodies of revues came to be dominated increasingly by the fox trot and jazz rhythms';²⁶ this phenomenon is both reflected and promoted by the music in *Der blaue Engel*, composed and performed by Friedrich Hollaender, one of the most popular cabaret musicians of the day.²⁷

The echoes of jazz and fox trot in the movie's soundtrack call to mind more profound disjunctions in Weimar popular culture; thus the theatre critic Frank Warschauer, writing in the *Weltbühne*, describes the Revue *An Alle!* ('For Everyone!' 1924), writing that it brought together performers 'from Russia, Scandinavia, England, France, and America. And from Berlin. The result is a cozy confusion of languages, which gives the gaping spectator the impression (or the illusion, I don't know for sure) that we are living in a cosmopolis' (quoted in Jelavich, 169). Berlin in this description is likened to a modern-day Babel, and the multilingual character of Weimar cultural life in turn underscores the

26. P. Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge 1993), p. 169.

27. The same phenomenon is also embodied in the biography of *Der blaue Engel's* director. As McCormick writes, 'Josef von Sternberg was not German. His original name was Jonas Sternberg and he was born in Vienna to Austrian Jewish parents in 1894.... He first came to New York at seven and lived there for three years. Then he and his family returned to Austria, but four years later, at fourteen, he came back to New York. From then on he lived in the United States' (p. 115).





detrterritorialization of German culture, following the profound reshuffling of territory in the aftermath of World War I. Center and periphery change places in Berlin during the 1920s: the center, as Sara Nadal has written, becomes a 'recycled periphery',²⁸ reconstituted from the huddled masses of a previous, lost culture.

To the juxtaposition of languages and nationalities in Weimar Germany can be added a juxtaposition of temporalities. Thus John Baxter notes that, 'There are no cars in *The Blue Angel*, no radios or cinemas, and the lamps that hang in almost every shot are gas-burning. Except for a short sequence showing Rath peeling leaves from a calendar that begins at 1923 and ends at 1929, the film is exclusively an image of the Europe in which Sternberg grew up' (Baxter, 70). But in fact the collision of a seemingly nineteenth-century small-town ambience with the calendar, the 'jazz' music, and the 'urban' social disorder of the cabaret indicates the ways in which the film's setting contributes to the detrterritorialization of its narrative: presenting a male protagonist and his female love-interest as embodiments of two different eras in cohabitation and confrontation with one another represents the essential temporal condition of Weimar culture as 'between' epochs – unstable, confused, tenuous, but also a moment of *becoming* that in retrospect acquires dreadful poignancy in the ineluctable awareness of what it actually *became*.

At the same time that the borders of German culture are opening up on the East and West, and the temporality fluctuates between the nineteenth and twentieth century, traditional hierarchies between high and low culture were breaking down, with Sternberg's film again reflecting and contributing to larger trends. As Jelavich is quick to note in his study of the cabaret, although *Der blaue Engel* is the most celebrated representation of cabaret culture in the Weimar era, the kind of performances spotlighted in the movie are much coarser and more sensationalistic than what most Berliners of the day would have considered cabaret: 'Lola Lola performed in what was usually called a 'Tingeltangel,' a third-rate variety show that was a direct precursor of cabaret' (Jelavich, 1). *Der blaue Engel*, therefore, is cabaret and it isn't. It is at

28. S. Nadal, 'Introduction: Around...Peripheries/Propositions', *Around: Planning the Periphery* (Barcelona 2002), p. 9.





once a representation of an art-form 'lower' than affluent, literate cabaret, but as a representation it is considerably more sophisticated than the performances actually given in cabaret. It is high and low all at once – much like the opera *Carmen*, with which it otherwise shares several significant morphological characteristics; its depiction of low culture expands the expressive potential of high culture and creates an enduring work of modernist cinema, but also at the same time one of the most *popular* films of the era.

The mixture of high and low, the intermingling of intellectuals with either circus acrobats or cabaret singers, the juxtaposition of high culture with sex, violence, and performance all point to the most obvious thematic similarity between Sternberg's film and Der Nister's story: the prominence accorded in both works to the carnivalesque. Where Mikhail Bakhtin claims that carnivalistic themes lose their authenticity and power over the course of the nineteenth century – "there is no all-encompassing whole of triumphant life", he complains of Romanticism and Symbolism, "there remain only the denuded, sterile, and therefore, oppressive contrasts"²⁹ [of death with laughter and eros] – one can now see that both *Unter a ployt* and *Der blaue Engel* use carnival themes in unvarnished, unreconstructed form. Carnival is particularly significant to any interpretation of *Unter a ployt*, and in this regard it is necessary to call attention again to the often-ignored and under-theorized subtitle *A revyu*; all the surreal and grotesque developments in the narrative occur under the mantle of this subtitle, which underscores precisely the idea that this story, like life itself, is essentially a burlesque performance, a theatre without walls in which anyone can witness his or her private life held up to the ridicule of the mob.

Carnival is perhaps the signal difference between these works and the source that inspired them. The strategic use of carnival, almost completely repressed in Mann's novel, makes more explicit and therefore palpable the play of desire, eroticism, and cruelty that these works dramatize. At the same time these two works *carnivalize* the literary realism to which Mann's tepid novel remains faithful; they violate the decorum of realism both by presenting the conflicts of the novel more

29. M. M. Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, transl. M. Holquist and C. Emerson (Austin 1981; 1987), p. 199-200.





graphically and by using fantasy and parody to go beyond the conventions of everyday reality in pursuit of a more intensified representation of desire and its discontents. This embrace of carnival – a classically anti-authoritarian motif with roots in late-antique satire, medieval festival, and Renaissance pageant – is of a piece with Der Nister's use of Reb Nakhman's oral, improvisational storytelling techniques to push narrative form into the future by means of a reclaimed and reconstituted tradition. Carnival can therefore be seen here, as in other canonical modernist narratives, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, as an essential strategy in modernism's revolt from realism, and its dissent from a faith in rationalism that had failed modernity consistently over the course of the twentieth century.

Where *Der blaue Engel* achieves the paradoxical distinction of creating an enduring work of popular culture while at the same time articulating anxiety toward the mass culture essential to popular success, *Unter a ployt* offers an extended meditation on the hazards of popularity as such, demonstrating the failure inherent in any success. In this regard the concept of deterritorialization applicable to both works calls attention to the similar consequences, despite their different sources, of the post-War dislocations to German and Yiddish culture, respectively. For Yiddish, specifically, the engagement with mass culture and the international currents of the avant-garde call attention to the tentativeness and transience of the culture itself. The 1920s was, of course, the great era not only of ideological 'isms' in Yiddish literature, but also of Yiddish cosmopolitanism. As the 1920 manifesto of the New York-based *inzikhist* or 'introspectivist' movement formulated the demands of Yiddish writing at the moment: 'For us, everything is 'personal.' Wars and revolutions, Jewish pogroms and the workers' movement, Protestantism and Buddha, the Yiddish school and the Cross, the mayoral elections and a ban on our language – all these may concern us or not, just as a blond woman and our own unrest may or may not concern us. If it does concern us, we write poetry; if it does not, we keep quiet. In either case we write about ourselves because all these exist only insofar as they are perceived *introspectively*.'³⁰ Such aspirations speak equally to the Berlin

30. Quoted in B. Harshav, 'Chagall: Postmodernism and Fictional Worlds in Painting', *Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theater* (New York 1992), p. 20.





Yiddishists, particularly Der Nister; as Benjamin Hrushovski [Harshav], a pioneering theorist of Yiddish modernism, writes of modernist Yiddish poetry, '...the New York free-rhythm patterns of Leyeles are akin to M[oyshe] Kulbak's big-city rhythms of Berlin'.³¹

The Berlin Yiddishists, however, never created a manifesto that would represent their aesthetic so concisely or comprehensively as the *inzhikhists* did: their artistic inclinations were too diverse, their circumstance was too unsettled, and they never considered Berlin to be a genuine or permanent home for their work. Indeed, the novelist Dovid Bergelson, Der Nister's closest artistic comrade, devotes his 1926 polemic *Dray tzentren* ('Three Centers'), to a discussion of the cultural possibilities for Yiddish in New York, Warsaw, and Moscow, but *not* Berlin, where Bergelson himself lived until 1933.³² As Joseph Roth famously commented, also in 1926, 'No Eastern Jew goes to Berlin voluntarily. Who in all the world goes to Berlin voluntarily?'³³ If anything, this makes the presence of Yiddishists in Berlin all the more aesthetically and historically compelling; theirs is a modernism created on the fly, a fugitive aesthetic that returns the casually used term 'avant-garde' to its political and territorial origins.

Nonetheless, with respect to the deterritorialization of Berlin Yiddish and its consequent cosmopolitanism, the fusion nature of the Yiddish language makes it an especially appropriate vehicle for the emergence of what Benjamin Harshav terms a 'demonstratively eclectic' modernist aesthetic. As he states, writing on Marc Chagall, 'Like the ideal of 'pure poetry,' pure art to the avant-garde meant the acceptance of one language that dominated each work.... For them, at any given moment, the poetics of their art was like a spoken language: one speaks either French or English or Russian, but not all in the same sentence. In Yiddish, however, one *can* speak several languages in the same sentence'.³⁴ The concept of 'demonstrative eclecticism' can further illuminate both the attraction of Der Nister toward Mann's novel and the ab-

31. B. Hrushovski, 'On Free Rhythms in Yiddish Poetry', *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Yiddish Language, Folklore, and Literature* (Volume 1), ed. U. Weinreich (New York), p. 236, n 52.

32. See D. Bergelson, *Dray tzentren*, *In shpan* (Vilna 1926), p. 84-96.

33. J. Roth, *The Wandering Jews* (New York 2001), p. 68.

34. Harshav, p. 18, emphasis in original.





sence of Jewish references in his story. After all, neither *Professor Unrat* nor *Der blaue Engel* makes any specific reference to Judaism, which is unremarkable either in the case of the non-Jewish Heinrich Mann, or the assimilated filmmaker Josef von Sternberg. Indeed, John Baxter offers only a single, telling insertion of 'Jewish' content in the film: 'For the misery of Rath's school, Sternberg recalled his own childhood, basing the character of Rath on a hated teacher from Vienna. His early tuition in Hebrew, a language he was forced to learn by rote, with no knowledge of the meaning of the words he memorized, appears in Rath's overbearing attempts to make the hapless Ertzum pronounce the word 'the' (Baxter, 70). As significant as Sternberg's identification of Rath with a Hebrew teacher is the replacement of Hebrew, the sacred language of Judaism, with Shakespearean English, the sacred language of high culture.

Der Nister's avoidance of Jewish references, however, could be a consequence, simultaneously, of early twentieth century Yiddish literature's efforts to embrace a broader range of cultural references, Soviet Yiddish culture's emerging demands to abandon Jewish 'parochialism', and most significantly his own poetics of concealment and latency. Judaism in his symbolist stories isn't abandoned, but embedded, as it were, in the storytelling *structure*. This speaks not only to the nature of Yiddish cosmopolitanism of the era – in common, arguably, with other Jewish cosmopolitans such as Franz Kafka or Bruno Schulz – but also to the sense of an internal exile of Jewish culture even within Yiddish literature itself. All of these motivations are evidence of the deterritorialization of Yiddish culture; cosmopolitanism is the Janus-face of Jewish homelessness during the 1920s.

Analogously one can understand Der Nister's heterogeneous symbol systems – which in his symbolist phase tentatively embrace Christianity, Buddhism, medieval fantasy, German Romanticism, and European folk motifs, in addition to Jewish mysticism – as masks for the ostensibly 'Jewish' content of his imagination. As Theodor Adorno writes of Gustav Mahler's orientalism, 'This orient is pseudomorphous also as a cover for Mahler's Jewish element. One can no more put one's finger on this element than in any other work of art: it shrinks from identification yet to the whole remains indispensa-



ble'.³⁵ So too can one say this of Jewishness in Der Nister's work, the 'demonstrative eclecticism' of which also serves as a displacement for the author's Jewishness. What is unusual in Der Nister's instance is precisely what is most comprehensible in Mahler's (or Adorno's) case: Jewishness for German Jews, as for most other latecomers in a modern culture, *must* find a cover by the logic of assimilation and civic culture. Judaism 'hides in plain sight' for these figures in order for them to speak beyond the parameters of their 'parochial' culture. Why, though, does Der Nister habitually find camouflages for his Jewishness when writing for a completely Jewish audience in a Jewish language? At least in historical terms one can understand this as a consequence of the dislocation affecting Jewish culture in Eastern Europe following World War I and the Russian Revolution; what novelists such as Bergelson and the Hebrew writer Haim Hazaz, as well as expressionist poets such as Uri-Tsvi Greenberg and Peretz Markish, proclaim on the thematic level regarding the 'disappearance' of traditional Jewish culture, Der Nister internalizes on the level of narrative form.

Der Nister's adaptation of *Professor Unrat* is therefore of a piece with his translations from world literature: combining a Romantic belief in the ability of storytelling to remake the world with the modernist's resignation to the fact that all stories have already been told. As an attenuated example of the 'fallen yeshiva' genre, *Unter a ployt* uses allusions to and motifs from German literature to superimpose the destination of the lost yeshiva student – the modern, European world – onto the academy which he has abandoned, revealing that the opposition of the tradition and modernity, like the opposition of public spaces and private ones, dissolves with the traditional authority of the academy itself in the face of unattainable and illusory desire. At the same time, the self-consciousness of adaptation in Der Nister's symbolist phase returns Yiddish narrative to its origins, not only in the pre-modern era when all Yiddish narratives were adaptations either of co-territorial sources or extracts from the classical tradition in Hebrew and Aramaic,³⁶ but also to

35. Th.W. Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, transl. E. Jephcott (Chicago 1996), p. 149.

36. On this point see M. Erik, *Vegn altyidshn roman un novele, fertsenter-zekhtsenter yorhundert* (Warsaw 1926), esp. p. 22-23.





the beginnings of the modern era, when Reb Nakhman of Bratslav, whose tales similarly disguise their Jewish content, proclaimed that the stories of the nations were holy when rearranged in their proper order.³⁷ David Roskies' identification of Der Nister with Reb Nakhman as part of a fantastic tradition within Yiddish narrative provides a crucial genealogy for Der Nister's writing, but the affinities with Reb Nakhman go beyond questions of chronology and influence insofar as both writers pursue a strategy of camouflage and masquerade, as well as an aesthetic of fragmentation. The disguise of profound truths as supposedly naïve folktales is one aspect of their shared aesthetic. The underscoring by both writers of how artificial such disguises are completes this aesthetic.

Moreover, the gestures of demasking, disrobing, and uncrowning that structure *Unter a ployt* and at last *repudiate* the artificiality of his symbolist masks are indicative of the ways in which Der Nister internalizes the carnival aesthetic for Yiddish literature, and carnivalizes Yiddish aesthetics, particularly the specific narrative genres of Yiddish fiction such as the 'fallen yeshiva' motif, for modernist literature. When the protagonist in *Unter a ployt* meets with his student to discuss love he does not explain what love is but instead dramatizes its meaning: love as loss, self-abnegation, injury, and humiliation – as good a definition as any – over the subsequent course of the story. In keeping with the modernist pursuit of unity between form and content, meaning in Der Nister's symbolist stories is identical with and inextricable from the act of storytelling. Both the fate of the protagonist in *Unter a ployt* and the act of narration indicate in formally parallel terms what the narrative's continuous use of private spaces opening into public ones does: that life is a performance, even, or especially, when the life in question is not so much lived as it is dreamed; the dream is a performance the psyche mounts for itself, and the self-reflexivity of dreams is as such the model for each of Der Nister's stories, as well as the refuge to which his symbolist aesthetic retreats when forced to conform to the demands of the realist novel later in his career.

To begin the difficult task of concluding this comparison, it is useful to consider in what ways the choice of names for the female love in-

37. See Reb Nakhman's explanation for 'rearranging' the structure of co-territorial folktales, as quoted by D.G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge 1995), p. 26.





terest in *Der blaue Engel* and *Unter a ployt* reveals the divergent rationales motivating these respective adaptations. As John Baxter explains: ‘To replace Mann’s name for the heroine, Rosa Fröhlich, Sternberg adapted ‘Lola’ from ‘Lulu’ of [Frank] Wedekind’s plays *Earth Spirit...and Pandora’s Box...*’ (Baxter, 68). The name Lola Lola, like Vladimir Nabokov’s transformation of ‘Dolores’ into ‘Lolita’, suggests both the deformation of a proper name as well as a repetition of it – a degeneration of language into sounds at once infantilizing, endearing, and obsessive. Der Nister, by contrast, names the circus acrobat who stands in for Rosa ‘Lili’, itself suggestive, of course, of the legendary ‘first wife’ of Adam, Lilith – the archetype of demonic, destructive feminine sexuality in Rabbinic and Kabbalistic tradition and as such deflecting the demonic desires of the protagonist onto the object of his obsession.

Lili fulfills this demonic role through her aggression, directed not, as it would be in traditional folklore, toward the protagonist’s wife, who plays a negligible role in the story, but toward his daughter: ‘And I saw that Lili was jealous and couldn’t bear to share billing with anyone else or to have another woman nearby. Though she knew that the woman was my daughter, it still bothered her, and she was always angry at her and worked against her whenever she could.... And I felt that she was capable of worse and that she was just waiting for the chance. Lili was the sort who would stop at nothing’ (Y 304-305; E 592). To the extent, however, that the reader understands the actions of the story to be dreamed rather than lived, he or she realizes that it is not the desired object, Lili, who stops at nothing, but rather the desiring narrator whose pursuit of Lili leads to his destruction. In the dream-logic of the story, Lili at the end of the story lights the bonfire on which the protagonist is to be burned – indicating at last that she is in league with Medardus in judging the protagonist, and that no opposition can be maintained or even established between the world of the hermitage and the world of the circus; both are united via the morbidly comic ‘show-trial’ of the protagonist, which in turn reveals that trials, like circuses, are yet another instance of spectacle and ritual theatre, and therefore the solemnity of the academy and the sensuality of the carnival ultimately collapse onto one another as spaces from which the protagonist has been exiled as punishment for his unconsummated desire. The cigarette that



Lili lights on the bonfire that immolates the protagonist (Y 310; E 595) thus expresses a definitively ambivalent gesture of seduction and condemnation on which the story as a whole is premised.

At this point of collapse between the governing oppositions that structure Der Nister's story – comparable to Professor Rath's return to the classroom at the end of *Der blaue Engel* – the comparison tentatively undertaken here can at last and with steadfast tentativeness conclude. In these two works, each representative of the larger complexities inherent in Yiddish and German modernism respectively, the recurring conflict between power and desire is animated through the carnivalizing mediation of an urban space figured as circus or cabaret. For both Der Nister and Sternberg, carnival performance represents the vitality as well as the brutality of a new mass culture on display everywhere in Weimar Berlin. In the years ensuing, the savagery and exploitation of modern life that the short story and film depict with a parodic intensity, approaching nihilism, would soon find expression in a ferocity and apocalyptic purpose that neither Der Nister nor Sternberg could have predicted, but which each of their works anticipates. The ineluctable knowledge of subsequent history that the modern observer of these two works brings to them lends an unexpected poignancy to these otherwise diabolical satires of Weimar culture, and suggests their persistent relevance to the still contemporary problems of exploitation, brutality, and desire.