“Rear the Head like a Middle Finger . . . and Pierce the Heavens”:

THE LONG POEM AS A SITE OF BLASPHEMY, OBSCENITY, AND FRIENDSHIP IN THE WORKS OF PERETZ MARKISH AND URI TSEVI GREENBERG

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ABSTRACT: I offer a reading of the long poems of two Expressionist Yiddish poets, Peretz Markish and Uri Tsevi Greenberg, according to which the long poem was used as a community-generating practice. Although this aspect of the long poem is recognized by scholars, it is rarely at the center of analysis. I draw attention to the Expressionist aesthetics of the long poem and demonstrate how Markish and Greenberg, through their use of shocking imagery and linguistic violence, created a model of a political community that served as a safe discursive space for the members of the lost generation of Yiddish modernism.
**INTRODUCTION**

Peretz Markish and Uri Tsevi Greenberg, two towering figures of modern Yiddish and Hebrew culture, are a constant source of both fascination and embarrassment for scholars of Yiddish and Hebrew poetry. The embarrassment comes from the same source that fuels the fascination with these poets’ works: the audacity and freshness of their style, which is contrarian and violent, bloody and blasphemous, quite often off-putting, and always hard and opaque. Two major works by Markish and Greenberg draw a great deal of attention: Markish’s *Di kupe* (The heap, 1921), a long poem dedicated to the victims of pogroms in Ukraine; and *In malkhes fun tseylem* (In the kingdom of the cross, 1923), Greenberg’s farewell poem to Europe. Some scholars attempt to understand and contain the explosive energy of these works by placing them in the continuum of Jewish tradition and reading them as a reflection on it. Others describe them as a reflection on the teleology and fate of the Jewish nation and the place of the individual in it. In either case the poems are seen as working within the paradigm of renewal and preservation of Jewish textual tradition.

In this essay, I would like to read these poems, not as part of a metanarrative, but with attention to that aspect of them which is so often mentioned and then dismissed: their revolutionary function. I shall claim that the revolutionary function of these poems goes beyond the reengagement with and repurposing of traditional forms and themes. Rather, it is an ad hoc, performative gesture aiming to open up a safe space that is free of the adherents of these old forms and themes. Their long poems and the harsh aesthetics Greenberg and Markish use contain a double message: on the one hand, they mark a “liberated” space occupied by the poems and their community of listeners, and on the other, they seem to say, “if this is not to your liking, you don’t belong here.”

The period between the publication of these two long poems is also the period of the Khalyastre (The gang), the avant-garde group Greenberg and Markish founded, together with the poet Melekh Ravitch. In this essay, I shall claim that Markish created an Expressionist model of utopian community with the poem *Di kupe*, a community that was elaborated and developed through the activities of the Khalyastre. In Greenberg’s *In malkhes fun tseylem*, published in Berlin just after his scandalous departure from Warsaw and before his immigration to Palestine, we find a moving farewell to the world of the Khalyastre. Greenberg’s poem is engaged in a unique dialogue with Markish’s work. It is a dialogue concerning the fate of the Jewish nation in Europe just as it is an intimate dialogue between friends. I shall suggest that, in this context, national fate put a strain on friendship.

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1 Peretz Markish, *Di kupe (Poeme)* (Kiev: Kultur-lige, 1922). *Di kupe* was published in two slightly different versions: first in Warsaw in 1921 and then in Kiev in 1922. The study here is based on the Kiev edition.
 Uri Tsevi Greenberg and Peretz Markish met in Warsaw in late 1921. Both young men came to Warsaw after serving on opposite sides of the front in World War I and surviving the horrific aftermath of the war: the revolution, civil war, and pogroms. In Warsaw for a short time they were both members of the avant-garde group Khalyastre (The gang).

The Khalyastre, a group of young Yiddish modernists centered on a journal of the same name, was active from 1922 to 1924. Its members wished to place Expressionism as the foundation for a new national culture in Yiddish. In general, young Yiddish modernists in Europe and elsewhere enacted specific versions of a loosely defined political vision: that of a lay national culture in Yiddish. These poets created utopian Yiddish cultural autonomies wherever they dwelled: Kiev, Warsaw, Paris, Berlin, as well as New York and Palestine. In publishing houses and P.E.N. clubs they created models of national culture for a stateless people. In Warsaw, the Khalyastre was one avant-garde group among others, vying for its own version of the future utopian community. Through theatrical displays, public readings, a number of journals and publications, the group's artistic production was aimed at creating a diverse community united by artistic taste. However, it was a rather exclusive taste that often pushed people away. Greenberg, Markish, Ravitch, and the self-proclaimed revolutionary avant-garde of Yiddish poetry “espoused a revolutionary and avowedly ‘rough,’ loud, and contrarian self-image,” as Dan Miron writes. This self-image was elaborated with care and aimed to offend the old guards of Yiddish literature. Ravitch writes in his memoirs of the Ringen-frimorgn, or the early morning of the Ringen journal, a literary event that shook Warsaw. The event was staged in a central theater and was deliberately held on a Sabbath morning. In the theater-made-synagogue, Markish read an alternative hymn (piyut), which was in fact his manifesto “The Aesthetics of Struggle in Modern Belle-Lettres.”

This was a deliberate attack on the literary center in Warsaw. Even the name Khalyastre was adopted from a critical remark made by Hillel Tsaytlin, the influential editor of Moment, regarding their blasphemous behavior. This self-image was presented proudly on the cover of the journal Khalyastre and was adopted as the group’s credo:

mir yngnin, mir — a feryulemus ztounenung baldisesteyn
mir ginek ya an aymbeitsentn got
an tsypn mar—shoverdykhn shung
an nesem mo shyre
Per aspera ad astra!

8 As Karolina Szymaniak writes, Expressionism was the common ground of avant-garde Yiddish aesthetics, as it “seemed more appropriate to render the Jewish experience of modernity . . . [and] did not reduce the peculiarity of Yiddish culture to a mere linguistic issue.” See Karolina Szymaniak, “The Language of Dispersion and Confusion: Peretz Markish Manifestos from the Khalyastre Period,” in Sherman, Captive of the Dawn, 81–82.
10 Miron, “Grinberg, Uri Tsevi.”
12 Ibid.
We, the young, a happy, boisterous gang [khalyastre],
We’re trodding on an unknown path
through deeply melancholic days
through nights of fright.
Per aspera ad astra!¹⁴

As Roy Greenwald writes: “The rise of the Yiddish avant-garde in Eastern Europe is . . . impossible to dissociate from the extreme violence by which it was generated.”¹⁵ And indeed the group’s boisterous image was grounded in trauma. The style of the Khalyastre, described in Markish’s manifesto, insisted on cruelty and chaos. It repelled certain crowds but sought to gather others into a community, one defined by a new language that was suited for a particular experience that could not be rendered in polished forms of expression: that of the war and pogroms. The new language, Expressionism, grew out of destruction and revolution. Its aesthetics was the struggle and its tempo was ecstatic, nearly psychotic. It was an offensive, dynamic language that was to be used in combat to liberate the literary space.¹⁶

¹⁴ This poem, by Moyshe Broderzon, first appeared in Broderzon’s journal Yung-yidish [Young-Yiddish] (Lódź, 1919). It was republished in Peretz Markish and Israel Joshua Singer, Khalyastre: Erster Almanakh (1922).
In the opening text of the journal *Khalyastre*, Markish describes the poets of the Yiddish avant-garde who gathered in Warsaw from the vast killing fields of Europe: “And so we go: scattered, alone, and together—in khalyastres and bands and anarchist federations.” These poets are the voice of a community described in Greenberg’s proclamation from his own journal *Albatros*: “We remain as we are—with gaping wounds, with veins exposed and bones undone after howitzers and Hurras, after the gas attacks…. Thus: the brutality in the poem. Thus: the chaos in the image. Thus: the protest in the blood.” In their poems and manifestos both Markish and Greenberg use a difficult style, shocking and violent, irreverent and iconoclast, a style that made the poems hard to understand, hard to memorize, and overburdened with quotations and references. However, it is precisely this style that constituted the unique community of taste. Coded in a few keywords, the aesthetics of the Khalyastre projected a worldview grounded in a state of anxiety, both personal and political. It was a world governed by impersonal, destructive violence as well as revolutionary, liberating violence. This new world presented in their poems, manifestos, and performances was one in which homeless poets roamed and remade the language from its ruins. The repetition of keywords, images, and structures in different modes of artistic production made the body of work appear, despite its chaotic aesthetics, as a coherent and thought-through form of revolutionary praxis, whose varied utterances effaced the borders between the programmatic and the performative.

The message of the Khalyastre was enthusiastically received among the younger generation of Jews in Poland, a generation that probably resembled the one described so well in Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller”: “A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.” This generation found in Peretz Markish and his aesthetics a voice. Ravitch describes how they named Markish a prophet and made him their champion in the assault on the establishment of Yiddish culture. Markish and the other members of the group toured Poland extensively and engaged in public events in which the content of the addresses was not always understood or coherent but the audience was captivated by the rhetoric, performance, and atmosphere.

The Khalyastre did not last very long. As Seth Wolitz remarks, other than the adherence to Expressionism and some notion of revolution and social justice, there was no real shared ideological common ground within this community: “Each journal expressed a different political ideology: Markish’s *Khalyastre* agitated for Bolshevism; Ravitch’s *Vog* argued for national cultural autonomy; and Greenberg’s *Albatros* moved steadily toward revisionist Zionism.” As Ravitch

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22 Wolitz, “Markish’s Radio (1922),” 112.
23 Ibid.
writes, soon they would find themselves in three different corners of the world and cornered into three different worldviews. By 1924 Greenberg would already be in Palestine and on his way to becoming the poet laureate of the Zionist Extreme Right, while Markish would soon head to Russia to build the Soviet Yiddish culture. Ravitch would end up in Montreal, but in his memoirs, the years of the Khalyastre are described in mythical terms as the days when the three poets rode “the Pegasus of Yiddish poetry.” Greenberg would return many times in his later Hebrew poems to this ideal community of wild outlaws and outcasts, of like-minded thugs and revolutionaries.

In my reading these poets resided in a discursive space made possible by the rough aesthetics of struggle. It was a harsh space but a safe one in which peers and like-minded people could share and express the traumatic experiences of the war, the revolution, and the pogrom. Within the space of the aesthetics of struggle they were protected from the loneliness and alienation that Benjamin described in “The Storyteller,” in which “the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others.”

**DI KUPE; OR, IF GOD DID EXIST, HE WOULD HAVE TO BE ABOLISHED**

In 1921 Peretz Markish published a booklet entitled *Di kupe, a poeme* (The heap, a long poem), dedicated to the victims of a Ukrainian pogrom. This work, written shortly after his arrival in Warsaw, is one of Markish’s first attempts in the genre of the long poem. The choice of genre is important. The long tradition of the long poem, stretching in European poetry from the epic to romantic and then modernist works, gave the genre high prestige. As David Shneer writes,
the modernist long poem was the preferred grounds for experimentation for young Yiddish poets. The genre was considered particularly apt for the traumatic themes of apocalypse, war, and pogrom. David Roskies writes that following Bialik’s long poem *Be¬ir ha-hariga* / *In shkhite-shtot* (In the city of slaughter) from 1903, which narrates the shame and outrage of an eyewitness wandering through the site of a pogrom in the city of Kishinev, “only a poema, a long narrative poem, was deemed worthy of the subject.”

Also inspiring Markish in his stylistic choices was the fact that, as Shneer observes, he saw himself as a Yiddish poet of Russia, and his aesthetic vision was very much influenced by the tradition of Russian poetry. In his article “Envoicing History: On the Narrative Poem in Russian Modernism,” Robert Bird writes that in Russia the long poem, with its ceremonial theatricality, was seen as a national ritual that “gathered communities of listeners and cultivated a common cultural consciousness.” Celebrating the genre’s roots in popular, oral tradition, the Russian long poem was crafted as something that could be memorized, recited, and performed on different occasions, thus re-creating its community. In the twentieth century, however, the modernist poets used the long poem to critically examine these conventions. Under this examination, the narrative poem emerged as a revolutionary field of innovation where tradition was refuted.

Markish adopts the long poem and uses it to refute both Jewish tradition and the tradition of European poetry. He elaborates his own model for the long poem, a model that is present in his manifestos as well: series of fragments in varying lengths and forms orbiting around a central image of a tower, such as a radio tower or the tower of Babel, or a mountain, a volcano, etc. The fragments are usually in the classic forms favored by romantics and symbolists, while the language is saturated with Hebrew words and quotations from sacred texts. The debris from these two broken-up traditions constitutes the building blocks for Markish’s aesthetics of struggle.

The aesthetics of struggle is needed in order to come to terms with the wave of pogroms that raged through the Pale of Settlement during the war and the civil war that followed the October Revolution. This was the worst wave of anti-Jewish violence in Eastern Europe up to that point in history. Many Yiddish modernists felt called upon to engage with this cataclysmic event, whose scope exceeded the responses to destruction offered by tradition. In Markish’s response, the central image in the poem is that of a heap of bodies left after a pogrom that took place in the city of

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34 Ibid., 55.
Horoditche (Gorodishche/Horodyszcze) on September 20, 1920. The pogrom was carried out by Denikin’s White Army most likely, on the eve of Yom Kippur, and the 216 dead were piled up and left to rot for two days. These elements allow Markish to form a cosmological spectacle of death and destruction in which the temporal, spatial, and sacred order is completely derailed. The desecration of the holiest day is a point of rupture that places the poem in a suspended time, after the catastrophe but before redemption.

In their readings of the poem both David Roskies and Seth Wolitz connect Di kupe to long-standing traditions of Jewish lamentations. While Wolitz sees the poem as belonging to the tradition stemming from the book of Lamentations, Roskies explains that poems dealing with the pogrom are a special category in the history of Yiddish poetry that he defines as a “genre.” Both of them, I believe, ignore the revolutionary function of the poem and therefore mistakenly read it as a lament when actually it is a call for action. According to Karolina Szymaniak, Markish’s objective is to storm the Yiddish establishment, to smash the idols, to take power. In my reading, Di kupe liberates the revolutionary Now, making it into a safe space that is opened by the aesthetics of struggle for its community of listeners. As Roskies himself suggests, for the poets of the Yiddish avant-garde, Bialik and his nonmodernist poetics and his narrow-minded nationalist interpretation of pogrom and history, together with the prayers, the lamentations, and the liturgy, were part of the institution of tradition that had to be demolished.

The poem opens with an epigraph, a dedication:

After you, the killed of the Ukraine;
After you, butchered
In a mound in Gorodishche,
The Dnieper town…
—Kaddish!

38 According to the Ghetto Fighters House Archive’s catalog, the pogrom is documented on p. 17 of Yevreyskie Pogrome [Jewish pogroms] between the Years 1918–1921 (Moscow, 1926), http://www.infocenters.co.il/gfh /notebook_ext.asp?item=124000&site=ghf&lang=ENG&menu=1.
The poem opens with a sonnet, which expresses in unpleasant, uncompromising terms the Heap’s refusal to be mourned:

No! heavenly tallow, don’t lick my gummy beards
Out of my mouth’s brown streams of pitch
Sob a brown leaven of blood and sawdust.
No. don’t touch the vomit on the earth’s black thigh.

Away! I stink! Frogs crawl on me!
looking for your mother-father here? Seeking a friend?
they’re here! They’re here, but taint the air with stink.
away. Awkwardly they delouse themselves with hands like warped brass.

From top to bottom, a mound of filthy wash,
Claw, crazed wind. Take what you want, take it.
Before you the church sits like a polecat beside a heap of strangled fowl.

Ah, black thigh. Ah, blazing blood. Out, shirttails! To the dance; to the dance.
We’re laid out here. All. All. A mound. The whole town.
11 tishrey 5681.

The poem performs a parody of Bialik’s famous poem as it tells the story of the Heap from the point of view of a wanderer visiting the town of Horoditche. The wanderer does not condemn the victims, like Bialik did, but rather, he becomes one of the dead. Later, he becomes the self-appointed high priest and representative of the heap of the dead, which he crowns as the new temple,
as Golgotha, as Ararat, and as the queen of mountains who will replace God and Mount Sinai. Markish signals his distance from Bialik’s tradition both in language and in imagery. The earthy, grotesque physicality, the images of decomposing bodies, congealed blood, the representation of harsh colors and smells and the use of unpleasant sounds and alliterations demonstrate the poem’s adherence to the aesthetics of struggle: “not beauty but horror.”

*Di kupe* presents a loose structure, both thematically and formally. It is composed of twenty-two cantos written in a gallery of styles and registers and conjoined in a loose narrative structure. The poem interacts with the Siddur (the Jewish prayer book) and with the prayers for Yom Kippur. In doing so, Markish is casting the speaker as the public emissary, a *hazzan*. The cantos, in a variety of classical forms, compose an alternative *machzor*, a ritualistic cycle of prayers, by cleverly weaving different public sermons from Yom Kippur and Lamentations, from the Mussaf of Rosh Hashanah, and the daily prayers into the narrative. In this cycle of prayers the sacred texts are degraded throughout by an irreverent yet witty play of rhymes. For example, the closing lines of the fourth canto contain the following shocking rhyme. The last verse, in Hebrew, ties the blessing from the prayer to the foul-mouthed attack on the heavens that takes place in Yiddish in the previous lines:

Hey, klezmer from Babel,

rear the head like a middle finger from Bethlehem
And pierce the heavens
And peel it bare, *hoyl im*

Borekh she-omar ve-hoyo **ho-oylem!** [Blessed be He who spoke, and the world came into being!].

Greenwald suggests that this presence of the sacred texts as well as the blasphemous use of Hebrew words and expressions is for Markish a “poetic movement…in which the repudiation of abstract representation tends toward the ritualization of the material.” I argue that this ritualization should be read as a spectacle of blasphemy around which the community is built. Similar to his performance in the *Ringen-frimorgn*, where Markish expropriated the Sabbath, in this poem he liberates the space of Yom Kippur and places in it his own version of tradition, a burlesque where poets read poems as scripture. In a parallel gesture to that of the ritualization, Markish disavows

45 “Unzer mos iz—nit sheynkayt—nor shoyderlikheyt” (*Khaliastre: Erster Almanakh*).
47 Greenwald, “Pogrom and Avant-Garde,” 70, 74.
48 Wolitz (“A Yiddish Modernist Dirge,” 232) reads it as “maga,” obscene contact between the sacred Hebrew and the profane Yiddish.
50 Greenwald, “Pogrom and Avant-Garde,” 70.
the authority of the *hazzan*, the public emissary, in favor of what can be easily read as the authority of a master of ceremonies in a cabaret. From his place by the Heap he calls upon birds and beasts, Zionists and Communists, to participate in the task of overthrowing God in favor of the Heap, but he displays no authority to command them. In the world of wandering and migratory creatures such as birds, discharged soldiers, revolutionaries, and Jewish poets, the Heap is an intersection rather than the Center. Different characters pass through that crossroad and move on. The technique of collage, as Roy Greenwald writes, “accords an equal status to multiple discourses.” These multiple discourses intersect at the foot of the Heap. As the different characters sing in different styles, the speaker does not so much divest himself of authority as cede it to others, inviting them to the stage, thus rendering the poem more democratic and potentially ever expanding.

Roskies identifies the democratization of the poetic space and the refutation of Bialik as interests of Yiddish modernism. This democratization was crucial in order to liberate the violence from its narrow traditional-national interpretation and to accord it a personal meaning more suited to the sensibilities and politics of the time. I read in Markish’s poem the model for the aforementioned utopian Yiddishist national community, made possible in the Hefker (the anarchic lawlessness of revolutionary times) and by the destruction of tradition. In this community sovereignty and hegemony are experienced as the ad hoc liberation of cultural spaces, and the imagined community is made up of groups of roaming poets, all united by trauma. Roskies understands the power of the poem as stemming from its community-making aesthetics of struggle. While Roskies displays distaste for the poetics, blasphemy, and gross sexuality employed by Markish, he does admit that “[t] hose who shared Markish’s radical sympathies were not shocked by his blasphemy and Expressionistic hyperbole; in fact, they responded to ‘Di Kupe’ as to a Kaddish or, at the very least, were reminded of the street ballads of an earlier era.”

The poem should not be considered a textual, exterritorial lieu de mémoir for the martyrs of the nation. While a lieu de mémoir’s function is to indoctrinate and impose conformity, the Heap is a place of power that fuels an attitude, a way of being, this psychotic newness that Szymaniak reads in Markish’s performance. In the hyperbolic over-the-top conclusion of the poem, God, who was exiled by the speaker to roam the world, is crucified on the Heap, which is then crowned as queen of all mountains and spits the Ten Commandments in Mount Sinai’s face before settling back, stinking and malcontent, with the same obstinate refusal that opened the poem. The poem comes full circle with the repetition of the sonnet, this time completed with a closing rhyme displaying the usual cruel wit:

51 Wolitz (“A Yiddish Modernist Dirge,” 233) also sees a burlesque in the arrangement of the poem.
54 Shneer, “My Name Is Now,” 5.
No! heavenly tallow, don’t lick my gummy beards
Out of my mouth’s brown streams of pitch
Sob a brown leaven of blood and sawdust.
No! Don’t touch the vomit on the earth’s black thigh.

Away! I stink! Frogs crawl on me!
looking for your mother-father here? Seeking a friend?
We’re here! We’re here, but we taint the air with stink.
away. Leisurely we delouse ourselves, with warped hands, like brass.

From top to bottom a heap of filthy wash.
Claw, crazed wind, at what you want: a child? A bride?
Before you the church sits like a polecat beside a heap of strangled foul.

O tallowed heavens—we are here! We are here! All of us! …
11 Tishrei 5681
in god’s name [omen],
Amen [omen].

The Heap’s world dominance does not translate here into authority but rather into the negation of it. As the third-person singular that appeared in the opening sonnet is transformed into the first-person plural in the conclusion, the Heap becomes a symbol of the new world disorder, a collective reservoir of ressentiment that poisons and stinks up the old world. For those who shared this ressentiment, Di kupe offered a radical negation of the political order that established itself after the war. Just like the manifesto read in the theater-turned-synagogue of the Ringenfrimorgn, the poem and its aesthetics function as a rallying point for the Yiddish modernists’ khalyastres and anarchist federations, turning Horoditche’s desecrated market square into a pilgrimage site.

Markish, Di kupe, 32.
The long poem *In malkhes fun tseylem* (In the kingdom of the cross) is Uri Tsevi Greenberg’s adieu to Europe. The poem appeared in the third issue of *Albatros*, a journal founded, edited, and almost entirely written by Greenberg.⁵⁷ The third issue was published in Berlin rather than Warsaw because Greenberg had had to flee Poland after having published in the previous issue an offensive piece that put him at risk of being arrested for blasphemy.⁵⁸ From this vantage point and on the eve of his departure to Palestine Greenberg explains in his long poem his reasons for leaving: the nations of the cross would never allow Jews to exist in Europe, at least not in the way the Khalyastre had imagined, and the madness that gripped a declining Europe would be unleashed on the Jews. Among the dubious possibilities still open for young Jews—immigration, Soviet Communism, or Zionism—Greenberg opted for Zionism.

The poem *In malkhes fun tseylem* presents this argument very theatrically. Greenberg doesn’t attack the cosmic order or God as Markish does. Rather, he attacks Christian civilization. This civilization, founded on the aestheticized torture of a Jew, Jesus Christ, is indifferent to Jewish suffering. The cross is a sign of oppression; the Christian feasts are days of horror as the bells announce the pogrom. The speaker, self-described as “the owl, the wail bird, from the woe-forest of Europe,”⁵⁹ presents startling, Expressionist scenes: deep, dark valleys where corpses hang on

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⁵⁷ With the help and active support of Markish. See Shneer, “My Name Is Now,” 6.
⁵⁹ Greenberg, *In malkhes fun tseylem*, 15. All translations are mine.
black trees in the moonlight; sheep mourning their dead pastor by a poisoned well, or shocked pastors mourning slaughtered sheep under indifferent skies; rotting corpses of soldiers rising from their graves; and above all hangs the shadow of the cross. In Poland, all dreams are crushed:

You won’t let us go to the sun. You kill those who go
Even before the golden dream releases itself from the eyelashes.
Even before the prayer to the sunrise vanishes in space.

The speaker in the poem is given to various fantasies/prophecies: one is that of the destruction of Christian Europe as poison gas, accumulated over years of hate, consumes it:

the poisonous gas will enter the temples
And suddenly the icons will scream out in Yiddish.

Another is that of the annihilation of all Jews, as madness finally takes over the Christian world. A different vision is that of suicide as the rivers of Babylon call the Jews to drown in them, and finally the concluding vision is that of the pioneers, naked and beautiful on the beach in Palestine, crying out “Love!” to the world. The speaker decides to leave and join them:

Sit me on a horse and order: run and carry me away to the desert.
Give me back my sands. I leave the boulevards. I want the desert sands.
Such a folk, bronzed youth, naked bodies under sun-brands

When a bronzed youngster opens his mouth . . . and cries out to the stars LOVE.
The answer is a tide of blue-bloody water at the seam of the desert:
LOVE.
In malkhes fun tseylem is often read as Greenberg’s pledge to Zionism and as a testament to his prophetic wisdom, foreseeing the extermination of the Jews. However, I shall argue that a nuanced reading of the poem shows a delicate questioning of the prophetic role Greenberg assumes in it and a subtle irony toward his declarations. This disavowal is performed in and for the space constituted by the aesthetics of the Khalyastre and is enabled by it.

Even though In malkhes fun tseylem is pronounced in a different tone from that of Di kupe, Greenberg is performing in it a role that is dependent on Markish’s poem in order to function. As Szymaniak notes, the revolutionary aesthetic space created by Markish was open to the public, and often other members of Khalyastre had the stage. Using many of Markish’s images and concepts, Greenberg delivers his vision of the world they shared. The poem is structured very differently, delivered from the perspective of a single person observing many scenes. However, the central image of Greenberg’s poem is remarkably close to the one found in Markish’s poem “Veyland” (Woeland), an excerpt of which opened the first issue of Albatros. As Shneer writes: “Woeland portrays contemporary Europe as a civilization in decline, a place of destruction and despair where ‘sadness grows on trees.’” The concepts of homelessness, anxiety, wandering, and storms construct Greenberg’s world as well. The church tower that in Markish’s vision is balanced by the towering Heap or that is later replaced with a radio tower broadcasting revolutionary messages appears in Greenberg’s poem as menacing, equipped with maddening bells. The skies that were pierced and challenged by the Heap hang here like heavy copper. Both speakers, dandies, roam Europe in their suits and patent-leather shoes, but they view its ruins in very different ways. And yet, they share a language, a lehavdl loshn, that places them in the same linguistic space but excludes all others.

In the agora of this imagined Yiddish community Greenberg performs a communal, ritualistic spectacle. He presents himself as the poetic persona he would maintain and elaborate for the rest of his life: that of the prophet/shaman, dream-walking in secret realms, a version of the clairvoyant madman. In character, Greenberg’s clairvoyant vision was anchored in his real-life circumstances, made famous by Greenberg himself, those of the war and the pogroms. As Szymaniak remarks, Greenberg was adept at adopting Markish’s model of cross-medium expression. As in the case of Markish, the poems, the articles, and the manifestos correspond through keywords, images, and structures that are repeated in these different mediums. This

63 Miron, Akdamut le-Atsag, 37.
66 See Wolitz, “Markish’s Radio (1922),” 112.
67 See also Ravitch, Mayn leksikon, 1:131.
68 Lehavdl loshn, or “differentiation language,” is a category of vocabulary used in the presence of non-Jews. According to Max Weinreich: “since the rise of the secular sector…the entire category of differentiation language is now no longer in vogue, except for special purposes of stylization.” Weinreich is quoted in Naomi Seidman, Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 3.
69 Miron, Akdamut le-Atsag, 32; Miron, “Eima kmo rikma,” 95; and Pinhas Ginosar, “AZG beyn Yishayahu ve-Platon” [AZG between Isaiah and Plato], in Ha-matkonet ve-hadmut: Mekhkarim ve-‘yunim be-shirat Uri Tsevi Greenberg [The pattern and the figure: Studies in the poetry of Uri Tsevi Greenberg], ed. Hillel Weiss (Ramat Gan: University of Bar Ilan, 2000), 379.
70 Miron, “Grinberg, Uri Tsevi.”
distribution allows Greenberg to create a system in which poems and articles complete each other. Thus, the poem expresses the emotional landscape in which the intellectual excursions take place. The suggestive language and the affective punch delivered by Greenberg’s emotional intensity give a deeper sense of truth to his interventions in the ideological debate that was tearing the Khalyastre apart.

In general, the entire third issue of Albatros deals with the question of the viability of Jewish modernist existence in Eastern Europe. In Warsaw, Greenberg believed that the “lone and homeless poets . . . of the Jewish exterritoriality” were part of the new humanity and the community it entailed, that of poets, painters, designers, photographers, filmmakers, activists, revolutionaries, and so on—a community that was constituted as a collective by the aesthetics of Expressionism and in which the individual could overcome alienation and freely express himself. And yet, in 1923 he wrote in Albatros that they had failed. The modernist Yiddish culture had not achieved “hereness,” the political relevance that it sought. In an article entitled “The Homeland of Woe in the Land of the Slavs,” he pronounces the cultural autonomy in Poland dead. He likens Yiddish radical politics to Yiddish poetry, which is far superior in his eyes to, say, German poetry, and yet, Yiddish is not translated or read outside its small circle, for the simple reason that no one cares to listen. For Greenberg, the problem of Yiddish modernism was its inability to provide a form of national collective redemption, without which the collective of “loners” is but a selection of individuals grouped together, unable to be heard outside their own circle. With that failure, the only options Greenberg sees for young Jews are Communism in the USSR, which was Markish’s choice, immigration, and Zionism. However, he was equally skeptical about all of them.

Greenberg delivers in In malkhes fun tseylem a discourse that is highly personal and full of sheer, paralyzing horror. It is an anxiety-ridden, near-psychotic discourse, in which the world exists only as an expression of the poet’s emotions. Every object in the poem amplifies the horror and expresses it loudly. Every voice is the speaker’s, resonating back at him his own feelings. Images derived from two biographical scenes (again made famous by Greenberg himself) are obsessively repeated throughout this poem: Greenberg, a lone survivor, witnessing his comrades hanging off the barbwire in the moonlight after fording the Sava River in Serbia, and he and his family awaiting an execution that never took place, during a pogrom in his hometown of Lemberg (Lvov). The poem opens with the image of hanging corpses, an image that is repeated again and again throughout the poem:

א שוחטטעער הואל אאַ נוצעכעָשך יאָקסע בד אאָי ידס פּלאָפשאָכן
אױטלאָען טײס טפאַלװיוּג אױיא אײמא אײ נאי אײראָפּען!

אַטאָיָה יד צוונײָן גענגװן טײסטען נאָך מיט בּלוּטיקע וואוּנדן.
(אַלע הימעלדיקע מתים האָבּן זילבּערנע געזיכטער
77)

d. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
(אַלע הימעלדיקע מתים האָבּן זילבּערנע געזיכטער
77)

72 Harshav, Manifestim shel modernizm, 145; and Greenberg, In malkhes fun tseylem, 109.
73 This promise is made explicitly in several places in Markish’s work. See Szymaniak, “Language of Dispersion and Confusion,” 74; Wolitz, “A Yiddish Modernist Dirge,” 323; and Wolitz, “Markish’s Radio (1922),” 104.
74 Harshav, Manifestim shel modernizm, 163–68. Greenberg’s article originally appeared in Albatros 3–4 (1923).
75 Miron, Akdamut le-Atsag, 39–40.
76 Miron, Grinberg, Uri Tsevi.”
77 Greenberg, In malkhes fun tseylem, 15.
A black forest so thick grows here in the plains,
Such deep valleys of grief and horror in Europe!

The dead are hanging off the branches, their wounds still bleeding.
(All the heavenly dead have silvery faces
And moons pour out oil so golden into the brains—)

Another scene that repeats itself in different forms is the scene of waiting for the murderers. For example:

My father still sits frozen facing west.
He awaits great things…
But outside in the gentile street by the well
My mother stands and yells at the water:
“Give me back my head, evildoers; it drowns in the water!”

Greenberg paints a picture of Jewish existence as a senseless legacy of horror:

And in the books are written all the deaths by the hands of the goys
But the answer is not there, our answer to the deaths.

The poem is full of feelings of loneliness and weakness, as there is no one to talk to, nowhere to turn for help:

When one cries in pain, the voice is a stone that falls in the water
And the prayer of bodies is a teardrop in the abyss.

Even the repeated dreams of vengeance upon the gentiles are disavowed:

78 Ibid., 17–18.
79 Ibid., 15.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 19.
We don’t have, Father, the heroism to climb the towers
To rip out the bells that drive to madness
To rip out the cross that stabs the sky
that for us is like copper.

The poem seems to define the root of the anxiety as the tortured history of Europe, while the prophetic, near-psychotic vision of the speaker is presented as a clairvoyant understanding of that history. However, the language of the poem, rooted in Markish’s aesthetics of struggle, suggests that another reading is possible: one that defines the source of anxiety as personal trauma that is familiar to the members of the gang. In this intimate setting, Greenberg can share his fear: that the vision of the speaker is neither clairvoyant nor an understanding, although it might indeed be crazy. The speaker’s expressions of guilt, self-doubt, and weakness emanate from his paralyzing anxiety:

What can a wanderer like me—a loner—do
With horrified blood and Jewish terror
Of blind violent nights…?

The speaker asks and answers immediately: he can wake the dead soldiers of Russia and Poland, who then come to his bed to tell him that all will end like them, eaten up by worms.

The images of the speaker’s weakness stand in sharp contrast to images valorizing traditional society. Yet he is no longer of that society. It becomes clear that even though Greenberg waves national sentiment as a banner, the speaker is already far removed from the Jewish nation:

Beg for me as well, Father-Mother.
Your son in the clothes of the
Christians of Europe, a Jew, a wanderer.

In the poem, as Greenberg plots his escape from Poland, he paints in broad strokes a map of modern Jewish existence. It is a claustrophobic, hopeless image: to the north is

... Sovdeopia,
Here a brother who can’t speak Polish made himself king
Writing in Jargon manifestos to the nation

82 Ibid., 23.
83 Ibid., 24.
To the west is the sea and other lands:

אֵן שיקט מִכָּה צו האַדַּסאָן—דאָרַט וואַיוֹןַע די בּרִיָּר
ואָס שפּאַרְיָא דָּיָא־לַאָלָאָר דָּי וּבָּאָלָאָר.

You send me to the Hudson—the brothers live there,
accumulating dollars, a kike’s currency.

To the east we find the desert, rather than a new dawn:

ואָר סְיוֹאָרִיּוָה אָמַבְּךָ
metic אַלְעַלְעַל לְבַנִּית גְּמוּרְפּאָשִׁין ווֹי סְתוֹפֶּן
פּאָר שְּאוֹפָחַעַתְּוְוְוָלְדַדְוְו—

…where the Arabs live
With crescent moons sharp as scythes
for sheepish throats—.

In leaving Europe the persona he abandons is that of the urban, dandy poet:

טוט מִכָּה אָן אִבְּרִיִּיְשָא אָמַבְּךָ—בָאֶאָטַא, פּאָרְוְוְוִאָרָא אָוָּהֳיָי מִיֵּ ויְקָלַא אִלְּפָלָה,

Dress me in a wide Arabic abaya, throw a tallit on my shoulder,

take the frock coat and the bow tie and the patent-leather shoes
That I bought in Eu-ro-pe.

Read carefully, this Zionist moment appears ludicrous. The speaker, in a parody of Bialik’s “In the City of Slaughter,” leaves the people and goes to the desert, only he does so dressed in a costume of orientalist clichés: the great tradition of Judaism, symbolized by the tallit, is just another element in the general mess, thrown in together with an abaya and a horse. Fittingly, on the beach in Palestine he is the odd man out, ridiculously dressed among the beautiful, naked pioneers.

Toward the end of the text, the poem recognizes something like Markish’s Heap, the bloody relic of Jewish life, in the form of a minyan made of ten wounded Jews:

צעַן וואַון בּלוֹיָמָא צעַן וואַנדיקע ייָד דער בּלוֹיָמָאָר שֶאָרִיְהוּ ווּפּאָלָה
דַר צו בּשֶׁרִיוֹיָה : בּוגְוַוִינְיָה אָוָּה בּוֹדַא אָוָּה ויַאָוָּה קְיָפְסַלְּפַלְּגָּרַא ויִו—עַוִּד
נָאָר צו וואָלְקְיָיְנָאָר נֵישַט קוֹמָצָא בּיֵז זַיְמַשֶּׁי מְיִיאְר בּלוֹיָמָאָר: נָפָטִי!

Ten will remain, Jews of wounds, the bloody surviving refugees
To show: there was here a nation on the Christian land of woe [veyland].
But they will never come still bleeding to the gates of Rome: Open!

84 Ibid., 19–20.
85 Ibid.
In the following lines, Greenberg pays homage to the exterritorial Jewish nation that the Khalyastre championed:

Such a mystery: that the kingdom of David has gone in our blood.
The kingdom has domain in the poverty of Lita.
It dreams a darkening Jewish dream
Of small birch trees and large moons.

The kingdom has woe-towns and villages in Poland.

The kingdom has a wide land of woe in Ukraine
And many rivers where the sheep are slaughtered . . .

Ten will remain, with throats of sheep, their eyes like birds in the fog,
And they will live, will live forever, and in fear they will bear children.
With throats-of-sheep, with birds’ eyes, with blood like roses in the evening light.

Greenberg recognizes here the historical right of the Jews of the Pale as the heirs to the house of David. He also recognizes the deep connection to the Slavic land, marked in the text not only by the conventional description but also in the mixture of Hebraic and Slavic words. Throughout, Markish’s coinage “Veyland” is used to describe the kingdom. But unlike Markish the speaker is not willing to join them. He sees the ten wounded Jews surviving but views their existence as unbearable. As the last lines indicate, the burden is of a psychological nature.

In this poem, the answer to why Greenberg will not stay in Europe is presented with a moving sincerity. It’s the fear that haunts Greenberg and forces him to see everywhere the image of the trauma and horrific violence he has experienced. While Markish sees in the destruction a field of renewal and possibility, Greenberg is dominated by his fear, which is represented in the poem by the oppressive and ever-present sound of the bells, swinging, so to speak, at the top of Markish’s tower:

86 Ibid., 23.
At dawn, at dusk, the bells swing
On your towers.
They drive me crazy and tear off my hurting flesh
Like the mouths of animals.

When Greenberg described the possibilities available to him in the grim terms quoted earlier, he also placed, a few lines further, the criterion for selection among them:

Where will I go to find a place,
So I won’t hear your bells ringing…

Later on, in the vision of Palestine that closes the poem, Greenberg places a line in parentheses, as if mentioning in passing the smallest thing:

(No bells around here, that hang overhead, only the planets are overhead).

CONCLUSION

Seth Wolitz writes in the beginning of his article “Markish’s Radio (1922): Yiddish Modernism as Agitprop” that Peretz Markish’s long poem is a space opened by the aesthetics of struggle, which provides a convergence point for communal and personal concerns. He does not develop this aspect in his article, and in another article, it is completely absent from his discussion of Di kupe, which he reads as a desperate attempt by an ambivalent atheist to create a secular form of mourning. In my reading I have tried to show how Markish’s long poem works along the lines that Karolina Szymaniak reads into Markish’s theatricality. It is a call for communal action, to storm the establishment and take its sacred spaces, replacing its authority with that of the revolutionary poets, who compose their scripture from ruined traditions. For him the long poem is a performative gesture, changing reality as it is performed. It is utopian projection of the place poets ought to occupy in the new world.

In my reading of the poem In malkhes fun tseylem, I wanted to show how Uri Tsevi Greenberg used the shared aesthetic space opened by Markish’s poem to place in his poem a contrapuntal voice that resists his own argument on a rational level but nevertheless sustains it on an emotional one. The very use of the model affirms Markish’s vision, but the subversion of his symbols
and concepts in the text places the subjective manner in which Greenberg experiences this vision as the crucial, deciding factor. Greenberg wrote in his Hebrew manifesto “One against Ninety-Nine,” published in 1928, after his immigration to Palestine: “There must be a reason for a man to cut his mother’s language from the tongue and start, for ‘some reason,’ with the submerged blood-language of the ancient race. This cannot be a normal ‘some reason.’” In the poem, the argument, with its political and historical analysis, sustained by Greenberg’s various articles, constitutes the normal “some reason” for his departure to Palestine. The “real,” not-normal reason is found in the realm of emotion and affect—his own trauma. In order to be heard, Greenberg is actualizing the political and cultural potential suggested by Markish’s aesthetics of struggle just as he is rejecting it. Even though he is taking his leave from Europe and Yiddish, In malkhes fun tseylem creates a discursive space that for Greenberg will always be the model of the political community. He uses the intimacy generated by both the shared aesthetics of horror and the communal experience of the long poem to deliver a very personal message: that Europe for him is a site of trauma, constantly triggering his madness. Thus, the long poem produces a space of dialogue between individuals and between poems, in which experience and emotions can be shared. It is a space that is founded not only on cruelty of language and chaos of image but also on compassion, understanding, and even love—a space that tolerates, like no other, the expression of the protest in the blood.

92 Uri Tsevi Greenberg, „Klape tishim ve-tish‘a” [One against ninety-nine], in Harshav, Manifestim shel modernizm, 238.