# *With the Loss of a Master-Signifier: Modernism and Translation in Lamed Shapiro's American Yiddish Stories*

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ABSTRACT: This article explores translational modes of literary representation in two American Yiddish stories by Lamed Shapiro: "Nuyorkish" (New Yorkish, 1931) and "Oyfn yam" (At sea, 1909). Shapiro narrates in Yiddish events that take place in English, thus shifting much of the thematic "drama" of his works from the represented world to the very act of its linguistic mediation. I argue that for Shapiro, the intersection of translation and narration—translation *in* narration—becomes a means to critically complicate the modernist turn "inward," by refusing the notion of a universalist consciousness that exists prior to and apart from social identity. In dramatizing the multilingual encounter between a Yiddish-inflected perception and the American locale, Shapiro carries forward the modernist project of destabilizing the national language, without giving up linguistic particularity. His distinct style insists on the capacity of translation to produce a new aesthetic language, one that could rearrange the fragmented social real by producing transient encounters between the languages of self and other.

> The moderns take the old forms and fill them up with mockery, love, drama, satire, etc. Plenty of play. But STILL THE SAME OLD FORMS. . . . Pour in symbolism, impressionism, be complex, be subtle, be daring, take risks, break your teeth—whatever you do, it still comes out Yiddish. *Mamaloshen* doesn't produce *Wastelands*.
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> —Cynthia Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America"

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## TRANSLATION, MODERNITY, AND THE FATE OF YIDDISH

Cynthia Ozick's short story "Envy; or, Yiddish in America" (1969) formulates an ironic intellectual rivalry between two aging American Yiddish authors through their views on translation. The story follows Hershl Edelshtein, a failed Yiddish poet who is ignored by the young generation of readers because he does not have an English translator, and his nemesis, the acclaimed Yankel Ostrover, whose universalist works receive wide popularity thanks to their translations into English. When Edelshtein meets a young woman named Hannah, a native speaker of both Yiddish and English, he implores her to translate him. But Hannah refuses, which leads to his nervous breakdown: "What the sages said of Job ripped from his tongue like a peeling of the tongue itself, *he never was, he never existed*."[1] In his anxiety that he might be dying without ever "existing," Edelshtein begs Hannah to ventriloquize his Yiddish works through English words, to help let his works live at least in translation: "I need a dybbuk, I'll become a golem, I don't care, it doesn't matter! Breathe in me! Animate me! Without you I'm a clay pot!... Translate me!" (94).

Anita Norich notes, along with several other scholars, that Ostrover's character is reminiscent of Isaac Bashevis Singer, whereas Edelshtein reads as "a veiled representation of Yankev Glatshteyn or of any number of major but forgotten Yiddish modernists in America."[2] Norich stresses, however, that Ozick herself has offered "a different explanation of the story's origins," claiming that it paid parodic tribute not to Yiddish but to Hebrew authors in the United States.[3] Yet as Kathryn Hellerstein suggests, "whether or not 'Envy' is based on actual literary personalities, Ozick's story itself translates, with mockery and deep feeling together, the dilemma of Yiddish in America in the late twentieth century."[4] In fact, the story's rich and complex references to stirring historical debates in *multiple* Jewish literary circles make manifest that throughout the twentieth century American Jewish authors made the Jewish self into a translational literary phenomenon.

The turn to translation to imagine the present and future of American Jewish culture can be seen, for example, in Lamed Shapiro's Yiddish story "Dak" (1931), which articulates challenges of acculturation as a problem of untranslatability.[5] Written as a series of twenty fragments, the story follows Benny Milgroym, an immigrant cigar-maker who is able to advance himself and become "half a doctor" (*khotse doktor*) but cannot fully integrate (153).[6] Benny's vocational, cultural, and class impasse is thematized linguistically, as Benny is dubbed "*dak*" (the English slang word "doc" in Yiddish pronunciation) by his wife's peddler brother, Joe.[7] Benny hates Joe for speaking half-Yiddish half-English, and Shapiro effectively uses footnotes to translate many of Joe's

1 Cynthia Ozick, "Envy; or, Yiddish in America," in *The Pagan Rabbi, and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 97. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

2 Anita Norich, *Writing in Tongues: Translating Yiddish in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 18.

3 Ibid., 132.

4 Kathryn Hellerstein, "The Envy of Yiddish: Cynthia Ozick as Translator," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 31, no. 1 (2012): 25.

5 Lamed Shapiro, "Dak" [Doc], in *Nuyorkish un andere zakhen* [New Yorkish and other things] (New York: Aleyn, 1931), 127–96. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

6 Translations from Shapiro's "Dak" are mine.

7 As with many transliterated English words in the narrative, Shapiro translates the story's title in a footnote, stating that *dak* is a "colloquial abbreviation for doctor" (*geshprekhlekhe farkirtsung fun doktor*) (127).

mispronounced English words, thus differentiating the story's Yiddish linguistic norm from Joe's.[8] The title "Dak" (literally half a "Doctor") itself conveys Benny's liminal social position through a translational gesture, as a signifier which oscillates between English and Yiddish. By the same token, Benny's best friend, a failed poet named Izzy Fishler, considers social integration a threat to one's ability to live in Yiddish, which for him equals living altogether. Izzy laments the decline of the Lower East Side Yiddish print culture due to processes of assimilation. He desperately segregates himself, surrounding himself with old newspapers and journals whose publishers have long gone out of business, and he depicts the decay of Yiddish intellectual life as an inescapable process of translation, the transition from Yiddish to English. In his portrayal of those who either refuse or fail to acculturate, Izzy traces one's "life" *in* one's language: "Our literature is jargonish, our language is jargonish and in fact our entire life here is some kind of jargon!" (175).[9]

Yet translation, as this article will suggest, becomes not only a trope for negotiating ideas on Jewishness in the face of linguistic decline but also, and more importantly, a practice, that is, a unique narrative technique aimed at carving out volatile, dialogical American Jewish texts and selves. This practice evolves in response to an urban-modern age of social fragmentation, linguistic dislocation, and mass migration. My discussion focuses on the role translation plays in the act of literary representation in two immigrant Yiddish stories by Lamed Shapiro, "Nuyorkish" (New Yorkish, 1931) and "Oyfn yam" (At sea, 1909). These works read as a translation, insofar as the events in the fictional world, which take place in English, are mediated for the reader by another language, Yiddish. I argue that for Shapiro (b. 1878, Rzhishchev; d. 1948, Los Angeles), the intersection of translation and narration—translation *in* narration—becomes a chief means for participating in the literatures of modernity without endorsing what he takes to be the universalizing demand of modernist aesthetics. Shapiro, I suggest, introduces a translational dynamic into the modernist crisis of representation. He highlights the fragmentation of language but he does not wish to give up intelligibility for the sake of (what he sees as) mere material experimentation, and he thus places languages in an aesthetic contact produced by the motion between the language of the events and the language of narration.

The literary interplay between two languages, one spoken within the fictional world and another one in which the events are narrated for the reader "in translation," has been utilized by an array of Jewish American immigrant authors who wrote in various languages, including Henry Roth and Anzia Yezierska (English), Sholem Aleichem, Kadya Molodovsky, and Sholem Asch (Yiddish), and L. A. Arieli Orloff and Y. D. Berkowitz (Hebrew).[10] Hana Wirth-Nesher has called this strategy "internal multilingualism," claiming that this technique shapes a distinct Jewish American identity through a literary work that reads "as if it were a translation from a missing

[8] For example, when Joe tells Benny, "Don't try any *monki biznes*. Get a *sheyv*, and let's go. My *tritt*" (136), Shapiro translates into Yiddish in footnotes the transliterated English words "monkey business" (*shtik*), "shave" (*golt zikh op*), and "treat" (*tritn*, *traktirn*).

[9] It is beyond the scope of this article to address the long, not entirely negative history of the term *zhargon* (jargon) in relation to Yiddish. See Anita Norich's introduction to her recent translation of Kadya Molodovsky, *A Jewish Refugee in New York: Rivke Zilberg's Journal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), vii–xxiv; and Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[10] The use of internal translation as a chief representational device also characterizes other modern Jewish literatures. See, e.g., in the Hebrew context, Adriana X. Jacobs, *Strange Cocktail: Translation and the Making of Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018); and, in the German context, Gershon Shaked, *The Shadows Within: Essays on Modern Jewish Writers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987).

original."[11] Julian Levinson has similarly shown that "mediating between languages—and carving out a mobile identity that draws on both"—become means for immigrant Yiddish authors to "re-defin[e] their cultural identities in the face of the seemingly totalizing force of American culture and American English."[12] What these studies do not consider, however, is the use of internal multilingualism to shape a particular response to the modernist crisis of representation. In *Klezmer America* (2008), Jonathan Freedman invites us to acknowledge how Jewish immigrant authors who wrote during "the febrile and complex experimentation of the early modernist era" bent and "reshaped received aesthetic forms and practices" in order to forge "a poetics and politics of representation that would negotiate new relations to the social."[13] Expanding on this claim, I argue that translation *in* narration plays a unique role for Lamed Shapiro in presenting new relations to a ruptured social world. I thus discuss internal multilingualism through what I call "translational narration," a term which underscores that for Shapiro the act of literary representation can produce a translational modernist potentiality through instants of multilingual encounters.

Shapiro takes pains in particular to free the work of art from the homogenizing effects of mass production and consumerist culture—to express what Ruth Wisse describes as his "uneasiness about art in a land of amusement."[14] As we shall see, in his largely unexplored essays on literary theory Shapiro contends that the experimental modernist works of James Joyce and Yankev Glatshteyn fall into the very homogenizing and "scientific" assumptions which the modernist project seeks to undo. Although he does not formulate an explicit theory of translation, his literary works' distinctive style insists instead on the capacity of translation to produce a new aesthetic language, one that could rearrange the fragmented social real by producing transient encounters between the languages of self and other.

In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin famously argues that "the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations."[15] That is, translation reveals the foreignness which characterizes all languages, making them "recognizable as fragments of a greater language" (260). Yet although translation can begin recuperating the fallen condition of modernity by bringing out languages' multiple "intentions" toward "pure language" (257), this relief can be achieved only momentarily, as Benjamin likens the encounter of source and target languages to the Jewish messianic idea of the rectification of "fragments of a vessel" (260).[16] Benjamin's Kabbalistic modernism suggests that although pure language is beyond the reach of humans, translation can fleetingly transcend the instrumental insufficiency of all language by moving the two languages involved closer and closer to "the messianic end of their history" (257). Shapiro's effort to place

11 Hana Wirth-Nesher, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 38, 80.

12 Julian Levinson, "'Spatsir durkh "Lover's Lane"': The Uses of English in American Yiddish Literature," in *Margins and Centers in Yiddish Culture and Literature*, ed. Shlomo Berger (Amsterdam: Menasseh ben Israel Institute, 2014), 8.

13 Jonathan Freedman, *Klezmer America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 17, 16.

14 Ruth Wisse, "The Yiddish and American-Jewish Beat," *Prooftexts* 21, no. 1 (2001): 139.

15 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 256. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.

16 Benjamin contends that in translation, "the original rises into higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. It cannot live there permanently, to be sure; neither can it reach that level in every aspect of the work. Yet in a singularly impressive manner, it at least points the way to this region: the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages" (257).

multiple languages in an aesthetic dialogue, one that can be produced only by their mutual fragmentation (the oscillation between the language of the events and the language of narration), achieves an effect similar to Benjamin's ideal. This established kinship reveals "if not the intact plentitude of the larger language, then at least the shadow that it casts."[17]

To be sure, translational dynamics take place in any literary work with internal multilingualism, including in works which seemingly espouse antimodernist stances. But Shapiro incorporates an awareness of the aesthetic potentiality of translation into the act of representation itself. His works actively shift much of their linguistic and thematic "drama" from the represented world to the very act of its mediation. These stories, I suggest, are multilingual par excellence, even though they might seem to be written in a single language. Specifically, Shapiro seeks to complicate the modernist universalist turn "inward"—into representing one's consciousness—through his exploration of linguistic particularity and multilingual potentiality. His works foreground the crucial relation of sensory experience to language. They produce encounters between a Yiddish-inflected consciousness and an English-speaking surrounding, as an aesthetic means to recuperate a migratory world that has lost its coherence by putting its fragments in touch with one another.

In his discussion of the role of translation in both high modernism and early twentieth-century immigrant literature, Roland *Végső* argues that despite their different aesthetic practices authors such as Ezra Pound and Anzia Yezierska both turned to translation techniques in order to introduce "'new languages' into the national text" and thus realize "the 'foreignness' of the native tongue itself."[18] Expressing a shared concern with representational failure, their works seek to *be* the very thing they represent—a translation.[19] As we shall now see, Shapiro criticizes one of the hallmarks of modernist aesthetics: James Joyce's stream of consciousness technique. Yet having in mind the modernist concern with the foreignness of all language, which both Benjamin and Végső powerfully elucidate, can help us recognize that Shapiro does not renounce Joycean modernism altogether but rather strives to enhance its aesthetic and political potentiality. The reading I suggest of his literary theory can in turn help us see that being written in a migratory world that has lost its relation to pure language, Shapiro's literary works are embedded within a translational ontology. His works produce fleeting encounters between languages that reveal these languages' shared fragmentation and that thus momentarily free them from sociohistorical constraints, directing them closer to what Benjamin calls "the messianic end of their history" (257).

## THE LANGUAGE OF MODERNISM

Shapiro proclaimed his ideas on modernist aesthetics and modern Yiddish literature in various arenas. In 1934 he founded the journal *Studio*, a failed endeavor with only three volumes issued, which was nonetheless innovative in theorizing Yiddish literature in the contexts of both English literature and Soviet literary debates on modernism. In 1945, toward the end of his life, he published *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder* (The author goes to school), a volume of collected polemical

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17 Antoine Berman, *The Age of Translation*, trans. and with an introduction by Chantal Wright (New York: Routledge, 2018), *138.*

18 Roland Végső, "The Mother Tongues of Modernity: Modernism, Transnationalism, Translation," *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 2 (2010): 26.

19 Végső shows that both authors "elevated the figure of 'translation' to the level of an ontological figure," making it into a precondition for transcending "the essential incompleteness of the nation" and for crafting an alternative, transnational aesthetic language (ibid., 43).

essays whose main adversaries were James Joyce and Yankev Glatshteyn, the Yiddish paragon of Joycean introspection and language experimentation.[20] Yiddish authors of the time engaged with Joycean techniques in various ways, including criticism, translation, parody, and adaptation.[21] Shapiro intervened in these endeavors by theorizing the ethics and viability of Joycean techniques in Yiddish. For Shapiro, what determines whether a work is "Jewish" or not has to do not with content but with representational techniques in themselves. This places him somewhat close to the modernist Yiddish group Di inzikhistn (the Introspectivists), whose members, as Chana Kronfeld notes, posited that the personal and the national could be reconciled through a *formal*, "kaleidoscopic refraction of levels of history and personal experience."[22] Yet Shapiro's criticism offers a model of introspectivism which counters that of Inzikhists such as Glatshteyn and Aaron Glantz-Leyeles.

Glatshteyn's alliance with Joycean poetic devices had been widely praised by his fellow poets. As Rachel Rubinstein notes, Glatshteyn is the Yiddish author "who had been compared the most to James Joyce, and who, indeed, is the only Yiddish writer to have 'translated' Joyce, or more precisely, paid parodic homage to Joyce in a 1928 prose poem titled '*Ven Joyce volt geshribn idish: A par ode*' [Had Joyce written in Yiddish: A par-ode-y]."[23] In Glatshteyn's first three books of poetry, *Yankev Glatshteyn* (1921), *Fraye ferzn* (Free verse, 1926), and *Kredos* (Credos, 1929), the kaleidoscopic imagery of a "cacophonous, anonymous metropolis projects the immigrant's alienated psyche, and language-play abounds."[24] In Shapiro's 1929 caustic review of *Kredos*, he condemns these very features. "I do not understand many of the poems. They are riddle-like!" he complains. "Who wants to break his head on it? It is hard enough to live in the world."[25]

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20 The debate between Glatshteyn and Shapiro took place mainly in the 1930s. By that time, Glatshteyn had become somewhat critical of Joycean introspection. On the one hand, in his caustic essay "Der marsh tsu di goyim" (The march to the gentiles, 1935), Glatshteyn scolds his fellow modernist Yiddish poets "who think they can transcend or deny the threatened world of Yiddish" (Ruth Wisse, "Language as Fate: Reflections on Jewish Literature in America," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 12 [1996]: 142). On the other hand, in 1937 he published a collection of abstract poetry titled *Yidishtaytshn* (translated by Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav as *Exegyiddish*), which includes a "Joycean" poetic response to Shapiro. As Benjamin Harshav shows, Glatshteyn's late "national" poetic style maintains a deep affinity with his early introspective signature, with its emphasis on "personal tone, ironic and kaleidoscopic form, the use of free verse, internal rhyming, and the metaphorical and stylistic effects of spoken language." Benjamin Harshav, "Ya'akov Glatshteyn ki-meshorer tsa'ir" [Jacob Glatshteyn as a young poet], *Siman kri'ah* 8 (1978): 73.

21 See Wisse, "Language as Fate," 137; Rachel Rubinstein, "Joyce's Yiddish: Modernism, Translation, and the Jews," in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon: Essays on Literature and Culture in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse*, ed. Justin Cammy, Dara Horn, Alyssa Quint, and Rachel Rubinstein (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 487–504.

22 Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 173. In their 1919 manifesto the Inzikhistn famously state that "for us, the world exists only as it is mirrored in us, as it touches *us*," contending: "In fact, form and content are the same. A poem that can be rewritten in another form is neither a poem nor poetry" (translated by Anita Norich in Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986], 774, 776). Drawing on the double meaning of the word "Idish" as both "Yiddish" and "Jewish," they proclaim: "For us, then, the senseless and unproductive question of whether a poet 'should' write on national or social topics or merely on personal ones does not arise.... No matter what a Yiddish poet writes in Yiddish, it is ipso facto Jewish" (779–80).

23 Rubinstein, "Joyce's Yiddish," 500.

24 Kathryn Hellerstein, "The Paradox of Yiddish Poetry in America," *La ressegna mensile di Israel* 62, nos. 1–2 (1996): 261.

25 Lamed Shapiro, *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder* [The author goes to school] (Los Angeles: Aleyn, 1945), 71. Translations from Shapiro's Yiddish essays are mine.

Shapiro scorns Glatshteyn's aesthetic distance from the reader and repudiates his abstracting experimentation with language. Glatshteyn in turn parodies Shapiro's attacks in a long experimental poem, whose nonsensical title spreads over no fewer than eleven lines: "to a friend who would / not bother to strain his / noodle-board because / even so it is hard to / go hunting when / your rifle is / blunt and / love is / soft as / an old blanket" (Tsu a fraynt vos vil / zikh nisht brekhn dem / lokshnbret vayl es / iz azoy oykh shver tsu / geyn oyf yagd ven / di bix iz / shtumpik un di / libe iz / tsertlekh vi / an alte koldre).[26] As Jordan Finkin explains, "the playfulness of the title" stresses that Glatshteyn is "quite taken with the language of the charge." Glatshteyn shrewdly invokes Shapiro's vocabulary by literalizing "the Yiddish idiom *brekhn dem kop* (to rack one's brains; literally 'to break one's head')."[27]

In reclaiming the associative features of Shapiro's own words, Glatshteyn suggests that the nature of comprehensibility can be learned from the material features of language. Or, as Glatshteyn himself puts it later on, the poem is meant "to confront hard life with absolute incomprehensibility which doesn't plague your head anymore because breaking your head won't help anyway. From this confrontation, I wanted to extract as much music as possible."[28] In other words, Glatshteyn uses a Joycean device to assert what Saul Zaritt has described as Glatshteyn's "radical particularism." By the same token, as Zaritt shows, Glatshteyn's parodic translation of Joyce into Yiddish in "Had Joyce Written in Yiddish" is an attempt to demonstrate "the acrobatics of Yiddish modernism but also the language's extraordinarily specific associative qualities; Yiddish could be as universal as Joyce—but only on its own terms."[29]

Glatshteyn's homage to Joyce, as Rubinstein persuasively contends, reveals that Yiddish poets "were engaged with Anglo-American modernism, and had their own arguments to make, via translation, about its models and practitioners."[30] Yet Shapiro's writings invite us to consider an additional function that translation has had vis-à-vis Anglo-American high modernism. His critique of Glatshteyn's translation/adoption of Joycean conventions implies a radically different way in which translation could reconcile between Jewish and modernist subject positions without giving up linguistic particularity. In his essays Shapiro contends that literary representation involves an interplay between the material features of language and that which transcends materiality. He suggests that it is this interplay (and not either mere mimesis or abstraction) which makes representation a viable literary device for harboring cultural and linguistic untranslatability.

In his essay "Vegn shraybershe zakhn" (On writerly matters) Shapiro asserts his "heresy regarding the artistic merit of Joyce's heresies," claiming that although Joyce's earlier writings are works of great talent, "his experimental passion in recent years [i.e., in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*] is deceitful."[31] He attacks Glatshteyn's homage to Joyce, sardonically claiming that

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26 Both the Yiddish original and Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav's translation are included in Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, 266, 273.

27 Jordan D. Finkin, *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 75.

28 Cited in Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, 267.

29 Saul Zaritt, "'The World Awaits Your Yiddish Word': Jacob Glatstein and the Problem of World Literature," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 34, no. 2 (2015): 185, 186.

30 Rubinstein, "Joyce's Yiddish," 489.

31 "Ikh vil do aroyszogn mayn apikorses in batsug tsum kinstlerishen vert fun Dzhoys'es apikorsesn. . . . Az Dzhoys iz zeyer a talantirter mentsh un an interesanter parshoyn veys ikh fun zayne frierdike verk, nor ikh halt, az zayn eksperimentatorisher eyfer fun di letste yorn iz farfirerish" (Shapiro, *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder*, 77).

"Glatshteyn's 'Had Joyce Written in Yiddish' relieves my suffering over the fact that Joyce does *not* write in Yiddish."[32] What Shapiro opposes in particular is the making of literature into a replicable technique, the desire to form a universal means for grasping the turmoil of modernity. Overlooking the fact that parody and adaptation are intertextual strategies for asserting difference (and not merely imitating), he contends that Glatshteyn's adoption of a replicable abstracting style effaces the distinctive features of modern Yiddish culture.[33]

Specifically, Shapiro finds fault with Joyce's technique of stream of consciousness, which he interchangeably terms *shtrom fun bavustzayn* (a calque translation for "stream of consciousness") and *derlangen ibern kop* ("to strike someone over the head," which evokes the alienating effect and affect Shapiro relates to Joyce's abstracting representational device). Shapiro explains:

> When I was fifteen years old, I carried around the idea to delineate a day in the life of a person: to note everything that occurs *around him, in him*.... As you can see, this is precisely Joyce's method of "stream of consciousness." I later realized that it's no good. The events in objective reality are chaotic in their contemporaneous circumstances, whereas a literary work is a result of selection and combination. Simply put, a work of art originates from neither nature nor "stream of consciousness." One must set down in writing these events—painting them—molding them—putting them in play. Besides, such an attempt contains an inner contradiction: it is absolutely impossible to capture and record *all* that occurs during even a short while, whether externally or internally. If one tried to do it, it would anyway be necessarily by selecting and combining them [the events].[34]

Shapiro expresses a claim which prevailed in the Soviet social-realist literary criticism of Joyce during the 1930s and 1940s.[35] For him, Joyce's technique amounts to an aesthetic deception because it can only produce a semblance of a true depiction of the real. Yet Shapiro's position is clearly *non*-realist. He asserts that a work of art neither can nor should produce mimesis, and that what makes a great work of art is its idiosyncratic singularity. Shapiro's issue with Joyce centers on his technique qua technique, as both naturalistically impossible and ideologically deceptive. He contends that "*Ulysses* is really not a work of art, it is absolutely not a work but rather laboratory material"; and that Joycean stream of consciousness "is exactly as if one would show us a photo

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32 "Glatshteyn's 'ven Dzhoys volt geshribn idish' lindert mayn shmerts ibrn fakt vos Dzhoys shraybt *nit* keyn idish" (ibid.).

33 See Chana Kronfeld's insightful discussion of intertextuality and agency, especially in the context of repetition with difference, in *The Full Severity of Compassion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 117–73. According to Kronfeld, by utilizing "the tension between iterability and change" (160), the subject "may leave herself the possibility—limited as it may be—to reappropriate the texts of authority, to have a claim on them, and to repeat them *differently*" (161).

34 "Ven ikh bin alt geven a yor fuftsen, hob ikh zikh arumgetrogn mitn gedank tsu bashraybn a tog fun a mentshns lebn: farnotirn alts vos es pasirt *arum im, in im*.... vi ir zet, iz es genoy Dzhoys'es metod fun 'shtrom fun bavustzayn.' Shpeter hob ikh ayngezen, az es toyg nisht. Di gesheenishn in der obyektiver virklekhkayt zenen khaotish in zeyer kegenzaytiker farheltenish, un a verk iz a rezultat fun oysval un organizatsye. Poshet'er: keyn kunstverk antshteyn nit in der natur un oykh nit in 'shtrom fun bavustzayn' fun zikh aleyn; m'muz zey onshraybn—oysmoln—oysklepn—oysshpiln. Akhuts dem, anthalt aza farzukh an ayngeboyrenem vidershprukh in zikh gufe: es iz absolut ummeglekh oyftsukhapn un fartseykhenen *alts* vos es kumt for in farloyf afile fun a kurtser vayle say droysn, say ineveynik; azoy az oyb ir probirt es ton, vet ir sayvisay muzn opklaybn momentn un zey organizirn" (Shapiro, *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder*, 77–78).

35 See Neil Cornwell, "Joyce in Russia," in *James Joyce and the Russians* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1992), 88–144. Cornwell underlines the years 1933–34 as a turning point in Joyce's reception in Russia.

of the body of a person so elaborately detailed that one could see every vein, every pore, the texture of his skin."[36] The excessively close portrayal on a microlevel, Shapiro suggests, produces a distorting scientification of the self in/as its atoms: "With such super-naturalism we would have great difficulties synthesizing the scattered points in a figure or a face."[37] Shapiro refuses to participate in the modernist scene via what he sees as a replication—that is, a "translation" of a poetic device that in itself effaces cultural particularity. Instead, he envisions a modernist unsettling of expression and representation precisely through the literary work's unique presence in time and space.

According to Shapiro, Joycean representation is similar to "submitting the 'objective reality' to a kind of a register-machine that is in itself imperfect and unstable. Such a record would be deficient or, in the best-case scenario, scientific. And: The purpose and methods of art are exactly the opposite—I say: *exactly the opposite!*—of the purpose and methods of science."[38] Shapiro resists the universalizing fragmentation of both text and self into their component atoms. By this he articulates what Nihad M. Farooq has called, in his study of the modernist turn in American immigrant fiction, "a scathing critique of the cold mistranslations of scientific language"—that is, the control over naming and explaining the self in a manner which dismisses one's singularity.[39] But for Shapiro, discursive inscription occurs not only through description but also through abstraction: the materiality of language cannot serve as either the object or the medium of the literary work, precisely because "the word is merely a shadow of reality. The written word, furthermore, is a shadow of a shadow."[40] He likens Joyce's techniques to mere experimentation "'with sound itself' in music; 'with light and shadow,' 'with color and shade' in painting; 'with lines and surfaces' in sculpture."[41] In favoring replicable, formal experimentation over an aesthetic singularity that could be acknowledged as such, Shapiro posits, "the craftsman, the virtuoso, struggles to take over the place of the artist."[42] In his essays Shapiro underscores the foreignness of all language, and he rejects representational techniques that take the fragmentation of language to an atomistic extreme. In his literary works, Shapiro designs a means for recuperating the fallen condition of modernity in a way that, I suggest, is intimately linked with the aesthetic potentiality of translation.

36 "Iz take 'Yulises' nisht keyn kunstverk, iz iberhoypt nisht keyn verk, nor laboratorisher material. . . . vi m'volt undz gevizn dos fizishe bild fun a mentshn azoy vayt detalizirt, az m'zet on ale oderlekh, ale porn, di tekstur fun zayn hoyt" (Shapiro, *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder*, 78–79).

37 "Aza super-naturalizm voltn mir gehat groyse shverikeytn in sintetizirn di tseshotene pintelekh in a geshtalt oder a ponem" (ibid., 79).

38 "Es kumt-oys, vi ir volt tsu der 'obyektiver virklekhkeyt' tsugeshtelt a min registrar-mashin, vos iz nokh dertsu imperfekt un nit-stabil. Der rekord vet zayn a teylvayzer un zayn vert, in bestn fal, a visnshaftlekher. Un: di tsvekn un metodn fun der kunst zenen punkt der heypekh—ikh zog: *punkt der heypekh!*—fun di tsvekn un metodn fun der visnshaft" (ibid., 78).

39 Nihad M. Farooq, "Of Science and Excess: Jacob Riis, Anzia Yezierska, and the Modernist Turn in Immigrant Fiction," *American Studies* 53, no. 4 (2014): 75.

40 "Dos vort iz bloyz a shotn fun der realitet. Dos geshribene vort, vider, iz a shotn fun a shotn" (Shapiro, *Der shrayber geyt in kheyder*, 24).

41 "'Mitn klang gufe' in der muzik; 'mit likht un shotn,' 'mit farb un kolir' in der moleray; 'mit linies un flakhn' in der skulptur" (ibid., 81).

42 "Der mayster, der virtuoz, rayst zikh tsu farnemen dem plats funm shafer" (ibid.).

## REARRANGING THE WORLD FROM ITS FRAGMENTS

Beginning with his early works, the topic of the mass migration to the United States absorbed Shapiro.[43] He pursued this theme further in his second volume of short stories, *Nuyorkish un andere zakhen* (New Yorkish and other things, 1931), which he published after experiencing a series of migrations, displacements, and failed professional and financial endeavors.[44] In several of the novellas collected in *Nuyorkish un andere zakhen* Shapiro seeks "to reinvent himself as an American urban modernist."[45] In "Nuyorkish," the novella that gives the volume its title, he explores the modernist potentiality of multilingual intersections in narrative form. Shapiro delineates a one-night encounter between two immigrants of different ethnicities and native tongues who aspire to become "real" Americans but find themselves wandering in alienation in the urban maze of New York City: Mani, an Eastern European Jew, who has managed to climb the class ladder, to leave the immigrant tenements and move into an apartment building in the Bronx; and Jenny/Dolores, a young Chicana waitress, the California-born daughter of Mexican immigrants, who is at the bottom of the social ladder and who also works as a prostitute to make ends meet. The story is written in Shapiro's famous minimalist style. It is told by a third-person narrator and focalized through Mani's consciousness in an opaque, fragmentary, and alienating manner which distances the reader from the narrated events while also maintaining what Mikhail Krutikov has called a "cinematic close-up."[46] This device evokes Joyce's famous "cinematic aesthetic of moving close-ups."[47] By designing an opaque, camera-like minimalist narrative form, Shapiro opens up a liminal interstice where the encounter between the languages of story and discourse, as well as of self and other, gestures toward a higher, nonreified language.

In terms of exterior events, very little occurs in "Nuyorkish": a man meets a woman at a restaurant, they go on a nocturnal *flâneurie*, spend the night together at his place, and have breakfast; he offers to pay her; she initially refuses but then accepts the money and leaves. The story ends with Mani's bewilderment—"What's all this? What was all this?"—which matches the reader's confusion.[48] Furthermore, Shapiro's "Joycean" technique of narration avoids providing expositional details. The reader does not know, for example, the two main characters' real names, as Mani and Jenny/Dolores are merely the names they choose for each other.[49] The male protagonist's Jewishness is likewise communicated only through the narrator's delayed and scattered hints, such as "the

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43 Most notably in his novella "Oyfn yam" (At sea, 1909), which I discuss later in detail. Furthermore, the frame narrative of "Der tseylem" (The cross, 1909)—Shapiro's best-known story, which shaped his critical and public reception for several decades as an author who mainly wrote "pogrom stories"—is itself set in the United States.

44 Lamed Shapiro, "Nuyorkish" [New Yorkish], in *Nuyorkish un andere zakhen*, 7–35.

45 Mikhail Krutikov, "Spaces of Yidishkayt: New York in American Yiddish Prose," in *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 406.

46 Ibid.

47 Philip Sicker, *Ulysses, Film and Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 3.

48 Translations from this novella are adapted from Lamed Shapiro, "New Yorkish," trans. Lawrence Rosenwald, in *The Cross and Other Jewish Stories*, ed. Leah Garrett (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 198–212. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text and will include page numbers of both the original and Rosenwald's modified translation respectively.

49 The fact that the two characters choose nonbinding names for each other, names which are nonetheless recognizable marks of ethnic and gender stereotypes, stresses Shapiro's modernist investment in the transient moment, as a way to break free from what both Joyce and Benjamin consider a problem of "history." These two names concede the paradox and limitations of one's agency, but they also reclaim stereotypes by refusing to reduce the self to a stable proper name.

smell of a 'goyish' breakfast" that spreads in Mani's apartment (33; 210).[50] The narrator deliberately draws attention to the story's narration *in* Yiddish—to the fact that the phrase "a 'goyish' breakfast" (*a "goishn" onbaysn*) captures a particular cultural response to bacon—before he moves on to elaborating on what Mani had cooked: "eggs, bacon, fresh coffee."[51] The Yiddish word he chooses for "bacon," *khazer-grivn* (instead of *bekon* or *fetzayt*), similarly captures the psychic tensions of acculturation in a linguistic manner: the distinctively Jewish overtones of the Hebraic signifier *khazer* refer not only to pork but also to someone/something boorish and/or gluttonous.

Shapiro insists on the inseparability of the mind from the material language which serves as its intermediary, suggesting that a representation of sensory experience (in this case, of smell) must acknowledge its inescapable mediation through language.[52] His thematization of an enmeshed "language-mind" strives to complicate the Cartesian dualistic division between body and mind, the understanding of consciousness and the material world as distinct entities. By producing fleeting linguistic fissures in the otherwise opaquely narrated events, Shapiro explores "the condition of the immigrant as an existential stranger in the metropolis through meticulous rendering of everyday reality as *experienced* by loners roaming the city."[53]

Furthermore, it is through narration that the Yiddish language comes to play a key role in the story, by producing a reality *in* the fictional world: the translational encounters between the discourse and story worlds, between Yiddish and English, establish a deep affinity between the two immigrant "Others" in the novella. For example, after they first meet, and choose names for each other—a mark of their becoming emotionally closer—the narrator states: "In tone, they had gone over to *du*, the informal 'you' in Yiddish, although the English of today does not need particular words corresponding to the formal *ir* and the informal *du*" (14; 201).[54] Shapiro's third-person narrator deliberately draws attention to the fact that the dialogue between the two characters—conducted in (broken) English in the "real" fictional world—is mediated for the reader by its narration in Yiddish. Despite the story's camera-like minimalist narrative norm, here Shapiro does not conceal the mediatedness of this dialogue. On the contrary, he deliberately draws attention to the mediating language of narration in order to emphasize how his protagonist and focalizer thinks in Yiddish even as he speaks in English. In this and other ways, the Yiddish language becomes a primary protagonist in the story, as it has the capacity to be the sole means for articulating experience. Furthermore, this metalinguistic narrative device also problematizes the illusion of standard modern English as a stable norm of speech which immigrants should unquestioningly adopt. By drawing attention to the linguistic changes brought about by the historical transition from Middle to modern English, Shapiro makes manifest the fact that languages are always in the process of becoming, as they are constantly being negotiated and reformulated by their various speakers. As Lawrence Rosenwald contends, the primary encounter Shapiro depicts here "takes place between the language of the narrator and the language of the

50 "Der reyekh fun a 'goishn' onbaysn hot zikh farshpreyt iber der voynung."

51 "Eyer, khazer-grivn, frishe kave."

52 In fact, the adjective *goish* (non-Jewish), which Shapiro chooses for depicting the smell of bacon, evokes the phrase *oyf goish*, which means "in a non-Jewish language."

53 Krutikov, "Spaces of Yidishkayt," 406 (emphasis added).

54 "In ton zenen zey ariber oyf du—khotsh hayntiker english gebroykht nit keyn bazundere verter far ir un du."

characters" "[b]y means of a resource Yiddish has but English does not—that is, the distinction between the formal pronouns and the familiar."[55]

By producing a work that flaunts its status as a "translation," Shapiro mobilizes the assets of the Yiddish language to gesture toward what modern English lacks—a distinction between formal and informal tone, a capacity to produce intimacy in language. Although we are denied full access to the characters' background, vocation, ethnicity, motives, and command of English, Shapiro's minimalist focalization technique does not seek to erase the story's multilingualism but rather to defy the adherents of monolingual assimilation by producing a complex interplay of presence and absence, embodiment and abstraction, narration and the narrated world. Narration for Shapiro becomes a multilingual liminal space between the written and the nonwritten, a hybrid modernist space that can negotiate the fragmented social real without compromising linguistic and ethnic particularity. It is in this distinct narrative form that the tensions between the embodied and the disembodied features of language and experience can be reconciled.

## WITH THE LOSS OF A MASTER-SIGNIFIER

In his novella "Oyfn yam" (At sea, 1909), Shapiro employs an impressionist style to thematize a chief concern in his entire oeuvre: the essential problematics of language and representation.[56] This early work, written as an intersubjective weave of voices, languages, and perspectives, follows an immigrant ship on its way to American shores. The novella reflects Shapiro's apprehension about the future of Yiddish culture in light of the mass migration out of Eastern Europe. By designing an incessant oscillation of voices, languages, and interior perspectives Shapiro utilizes modernist aesthetics to explore whether Eastern European Jewish culture—and Yiddish as its synecdoche—might continue to exist in a "disembodied" manner, through the faculties of the mind, once it has been displaced from its sociolinguistic "body" in Eastern Europe.

Shapiro's nonmimetic narrative design produces a profound sense of opacity. It is often unclear who is speaking, and in fact many sentences either have no verb or no distinct agent for the represented action. In a typical abstraction of agency and voice which blurs the boundaries between subject and object, the narrator states: "Various songs rise from the ship's deck and then die in the wind's whistle between the masts and in the seething waters all around."[57] Although the songs are the agents of action in this sentence (and not the passengers who sing them), they are quickly overpowered by a more forceful agent—nature. The manifold disembodiment of the agent who "speaks" (or at least communicates through sound) brings about a different approach to expression. Thus, even when the reader ultimately learns in the fifth page that the novella is in fact narrated by a first-person narrator—a passenger on the ship—the various initial strategies in which voices are being fragmented and amalgamated produce a porous, decentered narrating consciousness through which other voices "speak."

The narrator shifts to a first-person voice offhandedly when he describes the ship's deck as an inventory of cultures, languages, and voices. This abrupt transition is surprising at first, as the paragraph begins with two obscure, verbless sentences, but it also renders the first-person voice

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55 Lawrence Rosenwald, *Multilingual America: Language and the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 120.

56 Lamed Shapiro, *Oyfn yam* [At sea] (Warsaw: Progres Verlag, 1909).

57 Translations from this novella are adapted from Lamed Shapiro, "At Sea," trans. Joseph Sherman, in Garrett, *The Cross and Other Jewish Stories*, 159–82. Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text and will include page numbers of both the original and Sherman's modified translation respectively.

of the narration as just one of the many autonomous voices that fluctuate freely at sea (and in the text) without a discernible point of origin:

> Scottish songs with the wild echo of craggy mountains, dark woods, and iconic national bagpipes. Graceful Italian melodies, soaked with sunbeams and the passionate glances of women's night-black eyes. "*God bles di shipp!*" prays aloud the salty, brine-soaked Englishman in a strong low voice. And suddenly a small, thin boyish voice weaves its way forward, struggling to sing its Russian words with the crude strength of a healthy breast: "*Smelo druz'ia! Ne teriaite sily v neravnom boiu*!" And next come *La Marseillaise* and the "*Dubinushka*" and so on. Gradually the voice grows gentler, its tones lower and bolder, and a deep hidden tremor pulses beneath the words: "please, enlighten my poor brothers." Ah, my beloved *Book of Lamentations*—I recognize you! In foreign words, in varied melodies you unfailingly carve out a path for yourself, you eternal, immortal leitmotif. Don whatever garments you will, your sorrowful tones betray you at once. (4–5; 160)[58]

For the narrator, the ship is a stereotypically cosmopolitan space, but he asserts this cosmopolitanism *through* its depiction in Yiddish, while also transliterating words in Russian, English, and French to draw attention to the novella's mediation in translation. Narrating the events in "translation" allows Shapiro to mobilize distinctive features of the Yiddish language to produce kinship between the various languages on board ship. The neologistic term he chooses for "bagpipes," *zak-fayflekh* (instead of *dudlzek*), is a calque translation which melds Yiddish vocabulary with English phraseology. The adjective which he chooses for the "gracious" Italian melodies, *gratsieze*, reveals a shared vocabulary between Yiddish and Italian. More importantly, it makes manifest the migratory and fluid ways in which languages develop: *gratsieze* is a fine Yiddish word which most likely entered Yiddish as a calque from the French *gracieux* via Russian. By the same token, the representation of the British sailor's prayer in transliteration—"*God bles di shipp*"—is supplemented by the narrator's depiction of the sailor's plea with the Hebraic verb *mispalel zayn* (pray). By choosing a signifier which is linguistically associated with a Jewish act of prayer to depict an agent who is evidently not Jewish, Shapiro produces an instant of linguistic kinship which reveals at once the fragmentation and interconnectedness of languages.

Shapiro thus locates literary agency in narration itself, in its dialogical motion between the languages of story and discourse, self and other, consciousness and the material real. Such is the case with the unidentified "thin boyish voice" which is impressed in the narrator's mind as an expression of a Judaized sentiment of sorrow and yearning. Although the "varied melodies" in the above-quoted paragraph are sung in English, Italian, Russian, and French, the narrator traces "a deep hidden tremor [which] pulses beneath the words." As in "Nuyorkish," Shapiro suggests here the idea that a language has its own distinct "tone," or "tremor," and that this tone can nonetheless

[58] "Shotlendishe lider mit a vildlekhn opklang fun shtreng berg, finstere velder un natsyonale 'zak-fayflekh.' Italyenishe gratsieze melodyen, ongezapt mit zunshtraln un heyse blikn fun nakht-shvartse froyen-oygn. 'God bles di ship!' iz mispalel der gezaltsener, mit yam-vaser durkhgeveykter Brit mit a shtarker, nideriker shtime. Un plutsem . . . a din yingelsh kelekhl flekht zikh arayn in di mit un fleyst zikh tsu zingen dafke grob, vi es zingt a gezunte brust: 'Smiyelo, druzia! Nye tieriaytye sili v' nyervanom boyu!' . . . un di Marselieze kumt dernokh, un 'Dubinoshka,' un nokh, un nokh . . . un bislekhvayz, vert di shtime vaykher, di tener—nideriker un bahartster, un a tifer, farborgener tsiter shvindlt unter di verter: 'Ikh bet dikh, kler-oyf mayne oreme brider.' . . . A, mayn liber 'Eykha'—ikh derken dikh! In fremde verter, in farshidenste melodyen shneydstu zikh a veg, du eybiker, unshmerblikher leytmotiv . . . un vos far a kleyder du zolst oyf zikh nit aroyftsien—dayne shmerts-tener ferratn dikh bald."

find an afterlife in another language, in what the narrator calls "foreign words" (*fremde verter*). He thus describes the material features of language as mere "garments" for *clothing* a sentiment that in its prelinguistic state can be simultaneously universal and culturally particular, a Diasporic sentiment of woe that is both Jewish (as in the biblical book of Lamentations recited on Tisha B'Av, the Jewish day of mourning over two millennia of exile) and universal (a modern global crisis of migration and displacement). And he reproduces this very act of translational *clothing* in his own narration. Or, as Lawrence Rosenwald argues in the context of "Nuyorkish," Shapiro's linguistic design suggests that "Yiddish in America might have become as cosmopolitan a language as English itself."[59] In a migratory world that has lost its "center," translational narration becomes for Shapiro a means to rearrange the world from its fragments without compromising linguistic particularity.

Shapiro explores this idea of an afterlife by centering on the language-mind relation. His representation of an impressionist-expressionist perception of disembodied voices of the sea frees these voices from their "original" status. These voices are no longer connected to the body (and language) that initially produced them, but they can be actualized anew in one's consciousness. The capacity of the mind in its linguistic particularity to conjure a reality gradually becomes the chief theme of "Oyfn yam." This is expressed, for example, through the metaphor of "Helshtern," Shapiro's Yiddish neologism. "Helshtern" literally means "gleaming star" and can be translated as "lodestar," although Shapiro makes it clear that this is an imaginary guide star. The narrator learns about the discovery and disappearance of Helshtern from his neighbor on the ship. The fellow passenger recounts how throughout human history the beaming gleam of Helshtern has guided people: sea voyagers "sought and found their direction" with its help; "those in love sent their sighs and the fragrance of their youth to it; poets offered it every tremor of their souls.... The star absorbed all of this into itself, returning it to succeeding generations" (34; 174).[60]

In line with other modernist themes in the novella, Helshtern problematizes the ambition of science to fully define the real. After a series of calculations, scientists conclude that "the star was as far off as the time it took for its beam to reach the Earth: precisely 9,347,657,000 years, 52 days, 18 hours, 49 minutes, and 22½ seconds."[61] Not only does Shapiro ridicule science's aspiration for precision and quantification, but he also considers these methods unfeasible for an account of the world-mind relationship. One evening, a young couple notice that Helshtern had suddenly disappeared. All the scientists' efforts to explain this unforeseen vanishing are to no avail. Furthermore, these efforts bring about the horrific realization that since "its last ray left the star more than nine billion years ago" (37–38; 177), Helshtern was in fact extinguished billions of years before its disappearance to humans.[62] This means that despite its significant "presence" in the lives of individuals, Helshtern has always been a mere phantom, as it ceased to exist long before the beginning of humanity.

Before its disappearance, Helshtern functioned as a guiding star for sea voyagers, scientists, lovers, and poets alike. In Lacanian terms, Helshtern is a Master-Signifier, or "anchoring point"

59 Rosenwald, *Multilingual America*, 120.

60 "Mutike yam-rayznde... hobn gezukht un gefunen zeyer veg mit der hilf fun... Helshtern.... farlibte hobn geshikt tsu im zeyere ziftsn un dem aromat fun zeyer yugnd, poetn hobn im geshonken yedn tsiter fun zeyer neshome.... Der shtern hot dos ales ayngezapt in zikh un tsurikgegebn es di nokhkumende doyres."

61 "Er iz geven azoy vayt, dos zayner a shtral hot farbrakht in veg punkt 9,347,657,000 yor, 52 teg, 18 shtundn, 49 minutn un 22 ½ sekunde, eyder er hot gegreykht di erd."

62 "Der letster shtral zayner hot farlozn dem shtern tsurik mit hekher nayn milyard yorn."

(*point de capiton*), whose symbolic effect maintains the individual's endorsement of the Law, "the reflexive signifier that fills in the very lack of the signifier."[63] With Helshtern's disappearance, individuals recognize the disorder that surrounds them, thus losing their capacity to orient themselves in the symbolic order toward a futurity. In that year, "there were no weddings—none, not a single one" (38; 177).[64] As soon as a young couple raised their eyes to the stars, "they were abruptly confronted with a vision of horror. It seemed to them that the dead eye sockets of long-drowned corpses were staring at them" (38; 177).[65] The vanishing of Helshtern is experienced as a macabre gaze of (what has always been) an empty signifier. This psychosocial tension stands at the center of Lacan's notion of the anchoring point.[66] For Lacan, the Master-Signifier is always already empty, just as Helshtern has always been dead. Yet its allure as the signifier which holds the entire social structure together results from the Master-Signifier's functioning within a phantasmal order which sustains its emptiness in terms of a (not yet fulfilled) expectation.

Slavoj Žižek, in a rather different context, provides a good explanation of how this inherent emptiness is ideologically filled in by fantasy. According to Žižek, the Master-Signifier is

> the signifier of potential meaning whose actuality is the void of meaning: "our Nation," for instance, is the thing itself, the supreme Cause worth dying for, the highest density of meaning—and, as such, it means nothing in particular. . . . the Master-Signifier is the privileged site at which fantasy intervenes, since the function of fantasy is precisely to fill in the void of the signifier-without-signified: that is to say, *fantasy is ultimately, at its most elementary, the stuff which fills in the void of the Master-Signifier.*[67]

In Lacanian terms, the disappearance of Helshtern extinguishes the fantasy that initially filled its emptiness. Furthermore, the realization that Helshtern has always been an empty anchoring point, that it has never materially existed in human history, brings about a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, it makes manifest the phantasmal features of any Master-Signifier, and in doing so, it thematizes the immigrant narrator's turbulent transition from the untenable world of the past into the Law and language of the New World. On the other hand, the realization that a Master-Signifier is always a fantasy, that its "being" is contingent on its phantasmal effect and not on material conditions, opens up the possibility of aesthetically critiquing its emptiness via the faculties of translation.

Shapiro designs a translational strategy to thematize how fantasy ventriloquizes a "dead" material reality in order to hold the symbolic order together. Upon arriving at Ellis Island, the passengers experience anxiety about their cultural and linguistic otherness: "A gigantic female

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63 Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 39. As Žižek explains, the Master-Signifier attaches the signifier to the signified, by concealing their merely contingent and associative relation: "The Master adds no new positive content—he merely adds signifier which, all of a sudden, turns disorder into order" (37).

64 "In yenem yor zenen keyn khasenes nit geven—gornit, keyn eyntsike nisht."

65 "Hobn zey plutsem geshpirt a shoyder: zey hot zikh gedakht, az toyte oygnlekher fun lang fartrunkene pgorim kukn oyf zey."

66 Lacan introduces the term *point de capiton* in his 1955–56 seminar on psychosis, where he contends that anchoring points (translated also as "quilting points") are necessary for individuals who otherwise would develop psychosis and question the meaning of every sign in their mundane symbolic world. *Points de capiton* thus function as symbolic sites at which the "signified and signifier are knotted together." Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, bk. 3, *The Psychoses, 1955–56*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 268.

67 Žižek, *Parallax View*, 372–73.

figure, her hand upraised, appeared on the left. The gaze of the '*Frayhayt*' [Liberty] tensely directed toward the so-near-yet-so-far city. Situated a little further up in the bay, *Ellis Ailand* with its '*Kasel Garrden*' bared its teeth angrily in our direction: Don't move! Stay where you are!" (48; 182).[68] In the original Yiddish, Shapiro reproduces the names "Ellis Island" and "Castle Garden" in transliteration, but he translates the name "Liberty" to "Frayhayt." He draws attention to his narrator's Yiddish mediation, using a Yiddish-English interplay to reveal the emptiness in the Statue of Liberty as a Master-Signifier. The narrator's gothic depiction of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island as "gigantic" (*rizike*) and threatening—"her hand upraised" (*mit an oyfgehoybener hant*), "bared its teeth angrily" (*shtshiret beyz zayne tseyn*)—extends the surreal and gothic elements of the Helshtern metaphor using these qualities to reveal a social crisis of signification. Furthermore, by questioning the ideal of "Liberty" through the translational exchange of English for Yiddish, Shapiro thematizes the price of migration and displacement, as he caustically points out the dangerous intersection of mandated Standard English with questions of freedom, citizenship, and belonging. Through this and other instances of language abstraction and its resignification through translation, Shapiro makes narration into a liminal Benjaminian space located between original and translation, a site where the momentary echo of one language within another gestures toward a higher, nonreified language.

In designing a language of translation to productively fill in the void of a signifier-without-signified, Shapiro opens up modern Yiddish literature to new horizons, making it a viable participant in the modernist project while also ensuring its cultural and linguistic particularity. Since he believes that high-modernist abstraction of voice relinquishes these voices' relation to the "real," nontextual world, Shapiro uses techniques of Yiddish translation to re-present disembodied voices, thus making the language-mind relationship into his works' primary means of expression. All the while, it is in the act of narration itself that he traces what I have called a Benjaminian translational potentiality. Shapiro's contested dialogue with Joyce, in both literary theory and practice, shows us that American Yiddish authors took pains to enhance the political possibilities of modernist aesthetics. Writing during the high-modernist moment, they actively shaped the terms through which modernist models could become feasible, once adapted, for ensuring the singularity of Yiddish literature. A

68 "A rizike froyenfigur mit an oyfgehoybener hant hot zikh opgetseykhent links. Der blik fun der 'Frayhayt' dringt mit angst in di noente vayte shtot: A bisl hekher in oysgos ligt der Ellis-Aylend mitn 'Kesl Garden' un shtshiret beyz zayne tseyn: Shte, vu du shteyst!"