

The Circus Comes to Town: Reading Gershon Shofman's Hebrew Literature in the Ring

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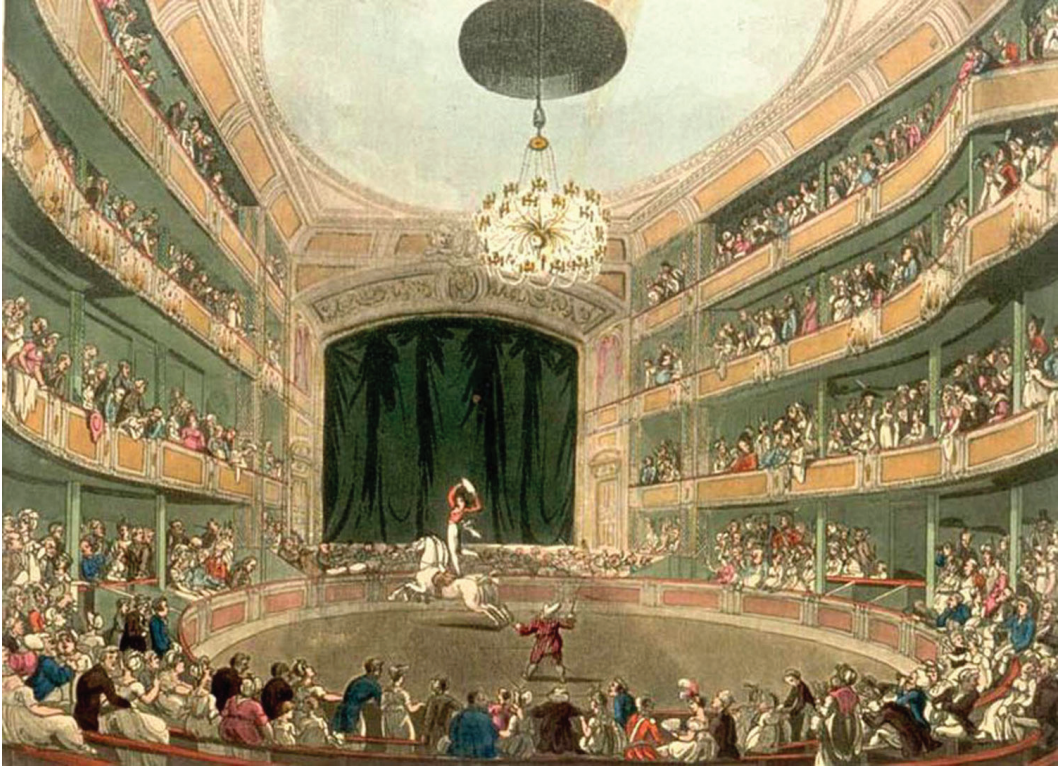
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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the circus setting in Hebrew literature as a supranational theme that expresses the worldly in literature. Focusing on three circus stories by Hebrew modernist author Gershon Shofman, the paper stresses a distinct concept of physical power and its political implications. It suggests that through this power concept, the circus phenomenon lends a worldly perspective to Shofman's twentieth-century Hebrew literature, which is usually read in a national context.

IN 1768, AN ACCOMPLISHED ENGLISH EQUESTRIAN and former sergeant major by the name of Philip Astley created a novel entertainment show featuring horse-riding stunts. While training, Astley attempted different acrobatic tricks. He discovered that repetitive motion in a circle made it easier to perform physical stunts while standing on the back of a galloping horse. Accomplishing this physical stunt was made possible due to centripetal and centrifugal forces, which are strengthened when an object moves in a circular motion. The centripetal and centrifugal forces simultaneously pull objects in and push objects out of the circle, allowing Astley and his equestrians to maintain equilibrium and stability while performing these incredible feats. Astley's discovery quite literally set the stage for his new London-based spectacle, which was eventually called "circus."

The round arena, or "the ring," soon became the standard of the modern spectacle and an integral part of its semiotics. The ring, a round-shaped stage that evokes the shape of the earth, signifies that the circus is a performance of *this world*—a show of humans harnessing gravity, the laws of nature and physics, to suit their needs. Like Astley in the ring, the circus artist

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Astley's Amphitheatre in 1807. Aquatint print by Augustus Pugin and Thomas Rowlandson for Rudolph Ackermann's *Microcosm of London* (1807)—*Dominique Jando Collection*. Image is taken from *Circopedia*, http://www.circopedia.org/File:Astley_ampitheatre_1807_2.jpg

harnesses physical forces for their aesthetic purposes, making the performance seem superhuman. We can recall, for example, the tightrope walker—an unusual creature who seems to defy gravity. Tightrope walkers intimately understand how gravity works and know that it cannot be “defeated.” They use their physical and cognitive skills to make us think they have escaped gravity. Indeed, all circus artists demonstrate a deep understanding of the natural forces of this world. Though they cannot overcome nature, they use the skills gained through intensive training and close observation of the earth to make us believe they can. In their attempts to appear as people who can escape gravity and overcome the laws of nature, circus artists can reveal the forces of the world to their audience and demonstrate the boundaries of the world.

The idea that one gains a thorough understanding of the forces of the world through the circus, both as a performer and as a viewer, is at the center of this paper. My discussion relates to the chapter “Worlds” in David Damrosch’s book *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*. In this chapter, Damrosch addresses worldly presence within literary works. He discusses how the inner dimensions of the text’s imaginary world impact three interrelated contextual and environmental levels of its literary meaning: national, international, and supranational.¹ I focus on the third context, the supranational, a dimension that “doesn’t rely on national or

¹ Damrosch borrows this distinction from the Slovak comparatist, Dionýz Ďurišin, in his 1993 essay, “World Literature as a Target Literary-Historical Category,” in *World Literature: A Reader*, ed. Theo D’haen, César Domínguez, and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (New York: Routledge, 2013).

regional contexts but involves issues that have worldwide scope.² I apply Damrosch's concept of the supranational to the circus phenomenon, which can be read as a literary theme of the supranational, and suggest that the circus lends a worldly perspective to Hebrew literature. Drawing on Astley's physical experience in the ring, I stress a distinct concept of physical power that emerges from the circus. Through a discussion of three stories of the twentieth-century Hebrew author Gershon Shofman, who regularly wrote about the circus, I examine the concept of power in the circus and its political implications.

Over recent decades, the circus has become a more central focus in cultural research. Many academic studies investigate historical aspects of the circus, mainly its ancient and modern origins,³ semiotics,⁴ and cultural and political aspects—including performers' ethnicities and genders⁵ and representations of the circus in literature and art.⁶ Scholars often highlight the circus as a spectacle of "otherness" and individual or cultural difference.⁷ Freak-show performances presenting a wide range of social and physical anomalies demonstrate this idea in the Western circus. In addition to these political and cultural qualities, it is essential to point out that the circus is a spectacle of affinities and can reveal a variety of influences within what we believe to be a stable, uniform force. As Astley's case demonstrates, circus forces in a single act range from elasticity and flexibility to dynamic movement to gravity and centrifugal and centripetal forces.

Astley's new spectacle gave him the title of the inventor of the modern circus. As circus scholar Jewgeni Kusnezow claims, the circus is "a unit in variety,"⁸ as it merges acts that differ in origin, form, character, and content in one space and time. Astley did not invent popular circus acts such as juggling, acrobatics, and clowning, all of which had been present since ancient times. Instead, he was the first to gather a group of skilled performers, representing artistic forms from many different nationalities, and have them contribute to one combined spectacle. Astley employed everyone from Flemish strongmen to Italian clowns to Arab acrobats.⁹

² David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 262.

³ For example, see Janet M. Davis, *The Circus Age: Culture and Society under the American Big Top* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Hanuš Jordan, Veronika Štefanová, and David Konečný "The Past and Present of Czech Circus," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Circus*, ed. Gillian Arrighi and Jim Davis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 78–91.

⁴ For example, see Paul Bouissac, *Circus and Culture: A Semiotic Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976); and Paul Bouissac, *The Meaning of the Circus: The Communicative Experience of Cult, Art, and Awe* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁵ For example, see Peta Tait, *Circus Bodies: Cultural Identity in Aerial Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2005); and Marline Otte, *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment, 1890–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁶ For example, see Naomi Ritter, *Art as Spectacle: Images of the Entertainer Since Romanticism* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1989); Janice McCullagh, "The Tightrope Walker: An Expressionist Image," *Art Bulletin* 66, no. 4 (1984): 633–44; and Anna-Sophie Jürgens, *Poetik des Zirkus: Die Ästhetik des Hyperbolischen im Roman* [Poetics of the circus: The aesthetics of the hyperbolic in the novel] (Heidelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2016).

⁷ Also see Karen Fricker and Hayley Malouin, "Introduction: Circus and Its Others," *Performance Matters* 4, no. 1–2 (2018): 1–18.

⁸ Jewgeni Kusnezow, *Der Zirkus der Welt* [The circus of the world] (Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1970), 7.

⁹ See Matthew Wittmann, "The Origins and Growth of the Modern Circus," in Arrighi and Davis, *Cambridge Companion to the Circus*, 32.

Through presenting this wide variety of nationalities, acts and artists, the circus introduces different kinds of bodies, cultural affinities, and physical affinities. In this sense, the modern circus is based on cultural and physical difference and multiplicity. Damrosch's category of the supranational, an aspect of the worldly, expresses the multiplicity the modern circus offers. During the performance, the spectators witness not only a variety of forces and physical interactions, but a multitude of life forms: live bodies of different ethnicities, nationalities, genders, and species. In short, the circus's audience witnesses a spectacle of worldliness. Thus, entering the circus means entering a spectacle of both the cultural and physical world.

What happens, then, when the circus "comes to town" and enters Hebrew literature? How can the worldly character of the circus—a multinational traveling spectacle of physical feats—affect Hebrew literature and Jewish cultures? Jewish individuals played a significant role in the history of circus entertainment in Europe. As circus historian Marline Otte notes, Jewish families stamped their distinct vision on the circus, working in numerous traveling circuses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The historical bond between Jewish culture and the circus can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when many of the ancestors of nineteenth-century German-Jewish circus families worked as magicians, jugglers, strongmen, and tightrope walkers, all performing their skills at local markets and seasonal fairs.¹⁰ The political and aesthetic relationship of the circus with Jewish and Hebrew literature and culture continued throughout the twentieth century, as the circus became a central motif in modernist works of artists and authors, many of German-Jewish origin, such as Franz Kafka in his 1917 stories "Auf der Galerie" ("Up in the Gallery"), which describes the skilled performance of a circus equestrienne in the ring, and "Erstes Leid" ("First Sorrow"), in which a trapeze artist refuses to step off his trapeze. Another example is the works of Else Lasker-Schüler—for example, her 1912 novel *Mein Herz* (*My Heart*), in which the clown is a leading figure.

Exploring the circus and its earthly qualities can assist in understanding the concepts of power and the body and in examining a worldly presence of Jewish and Hebrew prose. A significant case of circus representation in Hebrew literature is the writing of twentieth-century Hebrew author Gershon Shofman (1880–1972), a distinct member of modern Hebrew literature. Despite repeatedly appearing throughout his stories, the circus and its figures have not been meaningfully investigated in any academic research on Shofman. His works have inspired mostly national-level scholarship as Hebrew literature dealing with Jewish experiences in the Diaspora. The national context of his works was examined mainly through marginal figures in his writings, such as the *talush*, a typical figure in twentieth-century Hebrew literature which reflects the precarious existence of the Jewish protagonist.¹¹ Some prior attention was given to depictions of the body in his work, mainly through images of strength and weakness,¹² and to the issue of the

¹⁰ Otte, *Jewish Identities*, 45–46.

¹¹ For example, see Nurit Govrin, *me-Ofeq el Ofeq: G. Shofman—Hayav ve-yetsirato* [Horizon to horizon: G. Shofman—his life and work] (Tel Aviv: Yahdav, 1982), 18.

¹² For discussions on expressions of strength and weakness in Shofman's stories, see Yaakov Rabinowitz, "Halalim ve-Halashim" [Casualties and weak], in *G. Shofman: mivhar ma'amarei biqoret 'al yetsirato* [A selection of critical essays on his literary prose], ed. Nurit Govrin (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1978), 43–49; Govrin, *me-Ofeq el Ofeq*, 18–32; and Ilana Szobel, "Lights in the Darkness: Prostitution, Power and Vulnerability in Early Twentieth-Century Hebrew Literature," *Prooftexts* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 181–85.

pronounced strength of his skeletal and spare style.¹³ Little scholarly conversation was invested in investigating Shofman's stories on the international level, such as European, modern, or modernist tradition.¹⁴

However, the circus and its figures are not examples of Shofman's modernist interest in "lower" (popular, profane) aspects of culture and society, one of his primary aesthetic concerns. As this discussion demonstrates, the circus remains a significant element of Shofman's work throughout his different periods of writing, positioning him as a leading circus writer in Hebrew literature. Many of Shofman's works inhabit the circus and its figures—for instance, the 1927 fragment "KeYeled!..." ("As a Child"), which describes circus lions on their lunch break devouring their meat. The circus is not merely the main theme of Shofman's work but is crucial for his poetics. Circus artists' body language, physical abilities, and gestures appear in the descriptions of Shofman's different figures and the syntactic structures of his stories, his word choice, and the metaphors he uses. One example is the 1927 story "Einayim VeNeharot" ("Eyes and Rivers"), which opens with a female tightrope walker performing above the river and ends with a deadly fall. Another is the 1948 story "Lvov," which addresses the unstable state of refugees through a clownish figure they encounter and through the singing of the Jewish female cross-dressing vaudeville performer, Pepi Litman.

Through close reading, I focus on three of Shofman's distinct circus stories, highlighting the affinities between the circus and the supranational as an aspect of the worldly character of literature. Written and published in different periods, literary stages, and geographies, these stories express the centrality of the circus in Shofman's work.

Published in the Hebrew journal *Divrei Sofrim* in 1943, approximately five years after Shofman left his home in Austria and settled in Mandatory Palestine, "Vitebsk" depicts the narrator's recollections of life as a young Jewish boy. The protagonist arrives in the Russian city of Vitebsk in order to study at the Jewish Beit Midrash. While wandering on the river shore, the protagonist encounters an acrobat:

On top of a *kanat* (thick rope), over this Vitebsk-river, once walked an acrobat, a handsome young man. Before the "show," he paced among the crowd, holding a box for collecting money.

¹³ Most of Shofman's critics address the thin, compressed style of his writing and categorize it as a new and unique literary form in modern Hebrew literature. For example, see Shlomo Zemach, "Shofman be'Tqufot' [Shofman in 'Tqufot']," in *G. Shofman: mivhar ma'amarei biqoret 'al yetsirato*, 81–85; Joseph Klausner, "G. Shofman," in *G. Shofman: mivhar ma'amarei biqoret 'al yetsirato*, 67–72; and Gitta Avinor, "Qavim be-yetsirato shel Gershon Shofman (be-mal'ot lo 85 Shana)" [Features of the literary prose of Gershon Shofman (upon reaching the age of 85)], *Moznaim* 20, no. 5 (1965): 362–63.

¹⁴ For critical discussions on the modern and modernist qualities of Shofman's stories, see Shahar Pinsker, "The Challenges of Writing a Literary History of Early Modernist Hebrew Fiction: Gershon Shaked and Beyond," *Hebrew Studies* 49 (2008), 294–95; Dekel Shay Schory, "The Uncanny Meeting Point of Languages: Hebrew in G. Shofman and David Vogel's Vienna," *Yod* 23 (2021): 169–84; Judith Müller, "Nationalliteratur oder Europäische Literatur in Hebräischer Sprache? David Fogel und Gershon Shofman Zwischen Hebräisch, Jiddisch und Deutsch" (National literature or European literature in Hebrew? David Fogel and Gershon Shofman between Hebrew, Yiddish and German), in *Zukunft der Sprache—Zukunft der Nation? Verhandlungen des Jiddischen und Jüdischen im Kontext der Czernowitzer Sprachkonferenz* [The future of language—The future of the nation? Negotiations of Yiddish and Jewishness in the context of the Czernowitz language conference], ed. Carmen Reichert, Bettina Bannasch, and Alfred Wildfeuer (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022), 203–18; and Hillel Barzel, *Hazon ve-Hizayon: Franz Kafka, Gershon Shofman, Haim Hazaz, Natan Alterman, Aaron Appelfeld, Abraham B. Yehoshua* [Message and vision: Franz Kafka, Gershon Shofman, Haim Hazaz, Natan Alterman, Aaron Appelfeld, Abraham B. Yehoshua] (Tel Aviv: Yahdava, 1987), 65–87.

This place on the river shore was full of obstacles and pits, slopes and hillsides, and it was difficult for walking. But the acrobat, dressed in tricot, was pacing here, flexible and light, from mound to mound and from hill to hill.¹⁵

Rather than depicting the actual act of tightrope walking, Shofman focuses on the acrobats' activity prior to the circus act—walking on the river shore to gather money from the crowd awaiting the performance. The narrator's attention here is given to a non-acrobatic activity: walking on the ground in difficult yet somewhat normal social conditions. The narrator's gaze captures the meticulous skill that influences how the acrobat moves and carries his body. Even when walking on solid ground, rather than on the high wire or rope, the acrobat's flexibility and lightness are useful. With the use of his physical feats and circus skills, the acrobat performs his role, both intentionally on the rope and instinctually on the ground.

By using his acrobatic skills while simply walking on the river shore, the acrobat automatically performs his role. Through the acrobat's most mundane physical movements, completely removed from the circus context, his body is still transformed into a spectacle. Shofman places the acrobat figure in everyday life, positioning the acrobat not as a performing body in a scene or spectacle but as a present literary body. The acrobat's performative presence in the story expresses the unique power the circus artist holds. Since the acrobat is deeply attentive to his environment and is skilled in controlling and modulating his elastic organs, he can casually display superiority and distinctiveness in different conditions. The automatic performativity of his body comes from his ability to modulate his strength and flexibility, even in the most casual and ordinary activities.

A similar depiction of the circus artists' power to modulate strength appears in Shofman's early story "Koah" ("Power"), published in 1908 in David Frischman's Hebrew journal *Reshafim*. In "Power," Shofman describes a circus athlete, a strongman, performing at the circus for an audience of Russian soldiers. Shofman was himself a former soldier, as he enlisted in the czar's army in the Belarusian city of Homel in 1901. He served for approximately three years and finally deserted the army before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, crossing the Russian border to Galicia.¹⁶

The narrator—apparently a soldier—describes the circus performance: how the athlete threw heavy weights as if they were small stones, grabbed a horse's tail to keep the beast from moving, and easily broke an iron horseshoe with his bare hands. Before each stunt, the athlete approached the soldiers' commander sitting in the front row to confirm the authenticity of the materials and engage the audience.

However, the unique type of power presented in the strongman's performance does not lie in these impressive displays of strength, but in the athlete's movements and the precise use of his body:

And the movements and the steps! The solid, massive-muscled body moved and shifted—light, touching and not touching, fluttering. It seems he is still conquering his power out of some humility, out of some modesty. A man from another world.¹⁷

¹⁵ Shofman, "Vitebsk," *Kol Kitvey G. Shofman* [Collected works of G. Shofman] (Tel Aviv: Dvir and Am Oved, 1960), 3:313–16. All of the translations in this discussion are made by the writer of this article, since most of Shofman's work was never translated into English.

¹⁶ Nurit Govrin discusses Shofman's military base stories. She argues that his army experience deeply influenced both his literary prose and his humanistic worldview, and more specifically his view on the Jewish people. See Govrin, *Horizon to Horizon*, 80–83.

¹⁷ Shofman, "Koah," 1:182.

Here, the narrator focuses on the contrast between the athlete's muscular, large, and solid body and the light and floating manner in which he carries his body. The unique power the strongman demonstrates comes from the restraint of his immense strength and a delicate balance of the limbs. We can better grasp this type of power by comparing the destruction presented in the show—for example, breaking the horseshoe and throwing the weights—and the destructive, violent force of the army, represented by the Russian soldiers and their commander.

Moreover, the type of power demonstrated in this circus performance circulates beyond the boundaries of the ring. By presenting itself as a light entertainment show, which requires no critical thinking, prior knowledge, or even language, the circus has the political potential to disrupt the soldiers' perceptions of power and authority. Shofman describes the soldiers leaving the circus as undisciplined and disorderly. The more highly ranked soldiers, who usually marched ahead and kept order, were "suddenly suppressed and neutralized of their authority."¹⁸ Even the violent and sadistic deputy commander, known among the soldiers as the "wolf," tried to command his soldiers to order in lines. However, his voice came through as feeble and was ignored by his troops. The new notion of power the soldiers acquired through the circus—and, ironically, while enjoying a moment of freedom from their rigorous lives—has destructive and anarchic potential when seen in relation to regimented military structure.

In stark contrast with controlling, brutal martial power, the emancipatory power of the circus artist, as demonstrated in Shofman's stories, expresses self-restraint, modesty, and refinement of the body. Through the circus performance, the soldiers in the story "Power" witness physical, social, and political power that comes from the ability to transfigure brute strength. The circus artist demonstrates a radical configuration of power not based on aggressiveness or coercion but rather as delicate movement, elasticity, and looseness. For instance, the strongman does not attempt to resist the inescapable force of gravity but somewhat restricts his own body and intentionally deploys his strength in more delicate ways to actually harness gravity to his advantage. Through this, the circus offers an alternative conception of how to wield power: not by attempting to resist or overcome the power of another through force or violence, but by using a particular set of highly specific skills to limit one's own power strategically. By transforming pure strength into elasticity and freedom, the circus artist applies in the ring an understanding of how to wield the world's natural forces.

Where, then, lies in Shofman's circus stories what Damrosch calls the "worldly"? Alternatively, how does Shofman situate his stories, which deal with matters concerning Russian society, Jewish cultures, and Hebrew writing, within a supranational context? He accomplishes this through the circus setting—the international phenomenon whose tradition is deeply rooted in travel and knowledge of the physical realm—and through maintaining a perception of the circus as being both of this world, through a strong focus on physicality, and out of *this world*. While the Russian soldiers and their commander in "Power" have a distinct national identity, the strongman has no cultural or ethnic identity. Rather, he is "a man from another world," as Shofman writes, situating him outside the text's highly specific cultural, social, and historical context. Shofman also uses this expression to describe circus figures in other stories, emphasizing the sense of worldliness the circus brings to literature.

Shofman elaborates on the idea that the circus and its artists are from another world in his "BaKirkas" ("In the Circus"), a literary fragment which was published in 1951 in the Hebrew

¹⁸ Ibid.

journal *Davar*. The fragment recalls the fragile existence of circus artists as captured already in the narrator's childhood:

I see them again, as I did long ago, in my childhood. Parents and their children, performing the marvelous, the "traditional" acrobatic tricks. Nothing has changed, nothing has been renewed. In the meantime, worlds have been turned, but they have stayed the same. For all they care, let it all return to chaos—as long as the circus remains!

Nomad humans. If one of them falls and dies, who will come for them? For this is the reason for their creation. Creatures from another planet so to speak, with no mental connection between them and us.¹⁹

Although the narrator is seated in the circus, we, the readers, enter the live spectacle through a childhood memory. This way, the circus in Shofman's fragment becomes an arena of suspended time and gains distinct spatial and temporal characteristics. Existing within its borders, the circus here is separated from the outside world. Along with its performers, the circus appears unaffected by historical events and social changes and can offer the audience a chance to witness a different kind of existence.

However, the circus relates to the world not just in opposition. The circus is involved in a dialectic relationship with the world. By rejecting the world and suspending the world's exterior—time and space—the circus elevates the world and reveals its mechanism: the physicality of the world and the bodies in it and the laws of nature. Through the suspension of the world's exterior and the revelation of its mechanism, the spectacle lets the audience for the circus and the readers of the texts gain experience and knowledge of life on earth: they sense the boundaries of the body and the world and encounter varied life forms through which history can appear.

The perception that the circus and its artists are part of "another planet," separated from history, society, and culture, expresses a common myth about the circus. In his study on the social and political marginality of circus travelers in Britain, Yoram Carmeli points out that at the core of the circus institution was the performance of apartness, which in turn created the travelers' lives as objects of display. Carmeli claims that circus artists perform apartness, as their marginality is embodied in the public's experience as ontological isolation, "epitomizing a temporality out of social time and spatiality, out of relations and meaning."²⁰

The idea of the circus as a unique form of temporality and spatiality, a spectacle of creatures separated from everyday time and space, also has to do with the traveling tradition of the circus. Popular right from the start, the modern spectacle reinforced the cultural and historical ancient perception that circus performers circulate not only in the ring but around the world.²¹ Circus artists, such as acrobats and jugglers, were already present in ancient times. In Latin, these entertainers were usually called *circulatores*, which literally means "those who are in motion." They performed in the Roman arena, but also in ritual ceremonies and along the roads. This phenomenon crossed cultures, continents, and time periods. Even nowadays, circus artists are seen as figures in perpetual motion, regularly crossing physical, geographical, and cultural borders of nationality and language through physicality. As Carmeli notes, circus performers travel not only

¹⁹ Shofman, "BaKirkas," 4:12.

²⁰ Yoram S. Carmeli, "Text, Traces, and the Reification of Totality: The Case of Popular Circus Literature," *New Literary History* 25, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 176.

²¹ Also see Linda Simon, *The Greatest Shows on Earth: A History of the Circus* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), 10–11.

for economic reasons or to reach the public but also because traveling is a semiotic construction coded on the tradition of circus performance.²² That is why the circus is often understood as a traveling show even when it is local and stationary.

Shofman's description of the acrobats as creatures from "another planet" reinforces the feeling of isolation from the ontological and social world by travel and, at the same time, enhances the sense of this world. While watching the circus performance, the spectator-narrator in "In the Circus" states that since his last visit to the circus, "worlds have been turned." Shofman here uses the Hebrew expression *olamot nehefshu*, which has several meanings: (1) the world (society, culture, time, space, and nature) was turned over and transformed into something else; and (2) the world turned upside down or collapsed. As part of Shofman's circus poetics, the expression *olamot nehefshu* expresses the performance as its meaning flips over and turns like an acrobatic body during the act, in line with the first definition. The expression also insinuates military coups and historical and political revolutions, in line with the second definition. While watching the allegedly ontological apartness of the circus artists, the historical world unfolds.

Being "nomad humans" or creatures from "noplac," the circus artists allegedly should have no real effect on the spectators. This is why the soldiers are permitted in the first place to visit the circus in the story "Power." It is also why their commander sees no harm in approving the authenticity of the strongman's act. However, after watching the circus performance, not only do the soldiers question military power and stay up at night preoccupied with the metaphysical and political question, "What is power?" but the orders they are given by their superiors seem to no longer apply to them.

In "Vitebsk," the political effect of the circus performance begins with the protagonist's attraction, as he states, to figuring out what power is. The attraction to power sends him wandering outside the Jewish Beit Midrash and eventually leads him to the river shore, where he encounters the acrobat and the circus. By setting a traveling circus near the Beit Midrash, "Vitebsk" highlights the proximity of the circus and the Jewish world and invites the reader of the text to examine the Jewish world through the ring. Influenced by the circus, the protagonist enters the Beit Midrash and can now notice the two lions that appear in the *shiviti*—the two boards that assist in pronouncing the name of God. Inspired by the traveling circus and its figures, the protagonist gains a new perspective on the dangers of his social existence and political destiny as "the exiled, the foreigner, the wanderer."²³ Again, through its somewhat anarchic display of power, the circus experience invites a radical configuration of elastic and free thought.

What does it mean for a man from "noplac" to hold power over men from someplace? Shofman's stories demonstrate the political potential of reading Hebrew literature through the ring and the circus's concept of power. The stories present the subversive and destructive potential of the circus, which can change the way we "read" and ultimately navigate the world. In this analogy, the soldiers in "Power" and the spectators in "Vitebsk" and "In the Circus" are the readers of the text, the circus artists are the text, and the spectacle's environment is the arena in which the act of reading takes place. Shofman defamiliarizes perceptions of power by inviting the spectators (and the readers of the actual stories) to the circus. While watching the entertainment show with artists with no apparent connection to their world, the spectators are not passive

²² See Yoram S. Carmeli, "Why Does the 'Jimmy Brown's Circus' Travel? A Semiotic Approach to the Analysis of Circus Ecology," *Poetics Today* 8, no. 2 (1987): 222.

²³ Shofman, "Vitebsk," 3:316.

observers. Like the readers of the written text, they use the “text” of the circus to question the “truths” they live by and become active participants as they gain knowledge and a new critical perspective on social and political order.

In reading from within the circus ring, Shofman’s work is brought to the worldly plane of the supranational. For Damrosch, the supranational is a dimension of the worldly which focuses on the historical, social, and cultural boundaries of the imaginative world invoked by the text. Unlike other theoretical concepts of the worldly that can be applied in academic discussions on world literature—such as global, transnational, and even planetary—the supranational transcends over and above borders and relations. What transcends in this interpretation of the supranational is an expression of the varied forms of human physical existence.

The transcendent quality of the supranational (“supra” meaning over or above something) brings us back to the unique body techniques of the circus artist in Shofman’s stories. Whether a flexible acrobat or a muscled strongman, circus artists in Shofman’s stories appear as creatures out of this world as they skillfully control their bodies to harness the laws of physics, especially gravity. By harnessing gravity, Shofman’s circus artists seem to overcome insurmountable limits and embody a kind of anarchic transgression. But in fact, the literary circus artists do not move without limits and borders or between them. These literary figures move with borders and limitations. Through their skills and knowledge of the world, they appear to gravitate above borders and relations—like the circus artist who manipulates his body according to the physical world in order to have power over it.

Shofman’s circus also offers new notions of alternative worlds, and not only of *this world*. As Margarete Fuchs, Anna-Sophie Jürgens, and Jörg Schuster claim, the circus “can be called a heterotopia: a discursive, cultural and institutional space (or island) with real and utopic characteristics that is somehow ‘other’: contradictory, intense, transforming and transgressive,” and functions as “a surface for various projections, making visible different modes and facets of transgression.”²⁴ A

²⁴ Margarete Fuchs, Anna-Sophie Jürgens, and Jörg Schuster, “The Circus as an Aesthetic Model—Research on Circus Arts and Circus Studies in Germany,” introduction to *Manegenkünste: Zirkus als ästhetisches Modell* [Maneuver arts: The circus as an aesthetic model] (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2021), 25.