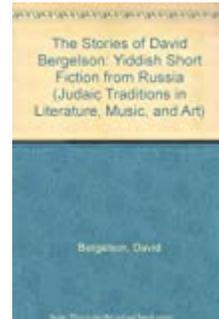




**Ken Frieden, Harold Bloom, eds.** *The Stories of David Bergelson: Yiddish Short Fiction from Russia*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996. xxxii + 157 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8156-0402-0; \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-2712-8.



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**Published on** H-Judaic (May, 1997)

## Dissolving Worlds

Michael Eskin, in his recent introduction to his translation of “On Dialogic Speech” by Lev Petrovich Yakubinsky (*Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 112.2, March 1997, p. 243), a Russian formalist linguist and contemporary of Bergelson’s, writes about Yakubinsky’s concern with the “processuality of language as an individual and a collective activity.” This collection of three fictional pieces (two short stories, one novella), nimbly translated by Golda Werman, exhibits a comparable awareness of language as an identity-bestowing discursive tool. Throughout the three texts Yiddish and its communal culture are depicted as entities ill-equipped to stem the intrusion into the shtetl of modernization and a novel stratification caused by increased social mobility.

In “Departing” (1920), for instance, the construction of power stations brings with it the linguistic usurpation of Yiddish by Russian, which represents the linguistic preference of the social classes promulgating modernization. Social mobility, itself a hallmark of modernist forces, divides the community into a lower shtetl (have-nots) and an upper shtetl (*parvenus*). “Departing” is the most substantive of the three texts and contains the

most eloquent statement of the moral and social dissolution brought on by historical change of an erstwhile unified community. The novella ostensibly thematizes the possibility and justification of suicide in a world made meaningless by the uprooting of centuries of tradition. Chaim Moshe returns to his home village of Rakitne to explore the circumstances of his friend Melech, who, as it becomes clear before long, has killed himself in “silent protest” over the emptiness of existence. While Werman correctly praises Bergelson for breaking a taboo of Yiddish literature by introducing a discussion of suicide (p. xxviii), she gives but scant attention to the societal forces that provide the underpinnings for the feeling of deracination that pervades the work.

After opening with Melech’s funeral, the novella soon programmatically announces the forces, both old and new, that threaten the very existence of the shtetl:

“It rained all night, the first long summer rain of the season. Every flash of lightning illuminates the tall chimney at the mill and the golden church spires at opposite ends of the shtetl. Lit up they look strangely naked. But the old forms soon return, enmeshed as before in the web

of ancient fears and dreams” (pp. 26-27).

The transformational intrusiveness of modernity, as well as the ever-looming threat of assimilation into the Christian Russian community that surrounds the shtetl, are the two main menaces that, in conjunction, threaten the existence of both the Yiddish language and Jewish life at large. While set exclusively in the shtetl, the novella unfolds consistently against a subtext of “the greener, non-Jewish end of town” (p. 144), and even the main female character’s father, Oyzer Loyber, combines financial ostentatiousness with religious assimilation: “[T]he golden pince-nez he wears so proudly on his rather large nose and the strong odor of expensive soap and *eau de cologne* testify from his recent arrival from the home of his non-Jewish inamorata” (p. 147).

Oyzer Loyber represents the dangers of becoming involved outside the faith, despite ostensible involvement within the community (he arrives from his lover’s place a mere ten minutes before the Talmud Torah charity ball). Young Dessler, the brewery owner from the big city close by who ends up marrying Chave Poyzner, Rakitne’s most desired woman, stands in for the dangers of Jews who have a hand in dissolving the community by having fallen victim to the promises of modernist change: “He’s from out of town, he studied engineering, he built the big new brewery in Berizshinetz, and he owns a large share of the four-viorst peat bog in Ritnitz” (p. 39). Later on, the narrator is at pains to describe Dessler as an individual who abuses his employees and values social rank over faith-based solidarity. Clearly, even the likes of Anshl Zudik, the scholar who writes in Hebrew are becoming a minority; a “rich student from out of town” bemoans that the articles “are in Hebrew... I’d like to read translations, if you have them” (p. 76)—where neither Hebrew nor Yiddish are widely intelligible anymore, Russian and the assimilationist modernism it stands for are left to fill the void.

Given the linguistic usurpation by Russian and the

cultural dissolution induced by modernity, what chance for survival do the Yiddish language and Jewish culture have? Stopping short of endorsing complete surrender (as typified by the constantly impending suicide of Chaim Moshe, not averted until the very end of the novella), Bergelson dubiously posits the transcending power of individual love (Channeke Loyber saves Chaim) and the redemptive force of silence in the face of linguistic colonization: “Far away, above the tall trees in the distance, the sun is rising—and in front of [Chaim] ... a pale and frightened young woman in a white dress and long white gloves stares straight ahead, unable to utter a sound. “‘Oh, Channeke.’” (p. 154).

This endorsement of a retreat to the personal and of the constructive power of silence in the face of momentous change seems to pull in a curious way against the historical development in the Soviet Union, which is delineated informatively by Werman. As Soviet culture moved from the high point of 850 Yiddish books being published between 1917 and 1921 (p. xx) to a condemnation of the ostensible “cosmopolitan” and hence condemnable nature of Yiddish literature during the reign of socialist realism, a Yiddish text as conscious of linguistic annexation as “Departing” runs the danger of appearing politically naive by proposing silent accommodation as a magic bullet. On the other hand, Bergelson faced the thankless dilemma of being aware of the potential elimination of his medium of expression (as early on as the mid-1910s) by the political and cultural forces he came to embrace wholeheartedly after his return to the USSR in 1933—the tragedy of the Yiddish writer who was so astute at displaying his characters’ psychological ambiguities was supporting the utopian social goals of a movement, communism, which eventually destroyed the very basis of his artistry.

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**Citation:** Stefan Gunther. Review of Frieden, Ken; Bloom, Harold, eds., *The Stories of David Bergelson: Yiddish Short Fiction from Russia*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. May, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=986>

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