לקט

יִידישע שטודיעס הײַנט

Jiddistik heute

Yiddish Studies Today

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Der vorliegende Sammelband לקט eröffnet eine neue Reihe wissenschaftlicher Studien zur Jiddistik sowie philologischer Editionen und Studienausgaben jiddischer Literatur. Jiddisch, Englisch und Deutsch stehen als Publikationssprachen gleichberechtigt nebeneinander.

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Herausgegeben von Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed,
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Marking Time

Bergelson and Bergson

Born in 1884 in Okhrimovo, Ukraine, Dovid Bergelson achieved acclaim for the innovative style of his first published work, אַרום וואָקזאַל (At the Depot, 1909). He was one of the key figures of the Kiev group, an association of Yiddish writers that also included the poet Dovid Hofshteyn and the Yiddish symbolist Der Nister, and he was one of the founding members of the Kiev *Kultur-lige* (an association that promoted Yiddish culture). Bergelson's temporary exile in Berlin in the 1920s was one of his greatest periods of productivity; his return to the Soviet Union in 1934 is usually described as heralding his conformity to the government-driven aesthetic of socialist realism. Bergelson's service on the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee during World War II led to his murder by Stalin in 1952.[1]

Reading Bergelson produces the peculiar experience of a world in which all decisions have already been made, and in which, consequently, the present moment is merely the aftereffect of critical but obscure events.[2] Failed politics, failed love, failed economic enterprise, and failed aspirations characterize life in the peculiar zone of the aftermath. Indeed the title of Bergelson's novel, נאָך אַלעמען (alternatively translated as *When All Is Said and Done* and as *The End of Everything*), captures this specific temporal sensibility.[3] Most critics therefore interpret Bergelson's works as a realist representation of the decline of the shtetl; Soviet criticism added the dimension of Marxist dialectics to this general view. I argue, in contrast, that Bergelson's fiction is better understood in the context of European and Russian modernism as a new form of Yiddish narrative art. This essay will show that Bergelson used the transformations of the traditional Jewish life-world to craft a new poetics of creative futurity in response to the crisis of modernity itself. By making time's duration palpable – "marking time" in the sense of imbuing it with tonality, weight, and rhythm – Bergelson revealed the potentiality of the present.

1 See Sherman 2007.
2 For a discussion of this temporality in Kafka, see Greenberg 1961: 266–273.
3 See Bergelson 1977; Bergelson and Sherman 2010.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, new explorations of consciousness and perception, new technologies, the spread of capitalist modes of production, Einstein's theory of relativity, the collapse of empires, World War I and the Russian Revolution shattered the continuity of time. In an essay originally published in 1922, Osip Mandelshtam said that the explosive quality of events meant that "the concept of a unit of time has begun to falter and it is no accident that contemporary mathematics has advanced the principle of relativity."[4]

The loss of a universal concept of time and the unmooring of the present from the past splintered time into contingent, disconnected moments. Moderns and modernists proclaimed that they had shed the past. Daily life in Berlin in the 1920s, for example, meant living "on the edge of time," as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht writes, without thought for the past or future.[5] For the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), however, the past retains its importance in shaping ongoing experience, because the past reaches forward into the future. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson describes duration as "the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances."[6] Duration, the unpredictable infusion of the heterogeneous past in the present, allows for "creative evolution." Memory, for Bergson, is not the dead weight of the past, constricting the future, but rather, a space of potentialities, or, "virtualities," awaiting realization. Habitual, repeated action forecloses possibility, and therefore Bergson values inaction, daydreaming, and art itself for their capacity to activate the unrealized potentialities of the past.

This essay offers readings of early Bergelson through the lens of Bergson, who played a crucial role in early twentieth-century theoretical and artistic inquiries about memory, time, and consciousness. I see Bergelson's writing as an artistic transposition of Bergson's philosophy: the concrete realization in literary form of Bergson's argument about the reality of the flow of time. My aim is not to establish Bergson's direct influence on the Yiddish writer, but rather to show the contiguity of their ideas. In developing these parallels, I rely on Dan Miron's concept of 'contiguity.' In *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking*, Miron rejects traditional models of influence, arguing instead for a more open-ended confluence of thought and artistic practice.[7] After discussing Bergson's thought and his reception in Russian and Yiddish, I turn to an analysis of three early works by Bergel-

4 Mandelshtam 1979: 117.
5 "Living on the edge of time" is the subtitle of Gumbrecht 1997.
6 Bergson 1911a: 4.
7 Miron 2010.

son: אַרום וואָקזאַל, אין אַ פּאַרגרעבטער שטאָט ("In a Backwoods Town," 1914) and אָפּגאַנג (Descent, 1920).

Bergson's importance in intellectual circles in Western Europe and America in the first part of the twentieth century has long been established, as has his significance for the major authors of the time, including Proust, Joyce, and Woolf. Françoise Nethercott has demonstrated his influence in Russia as well.[8] Bergson's appeal in the *fin-de-siècle* stemmed from his emphasis on a unifying life-force (the *élan vital*), his insistence on freedom and creativity, his proposition of an alternative form of knowledge – intuition, a non-analytic, sympathetic apprehension of the self in the world – and his view of art, which, in its approximation of intuition, transcends the limitations of philosophy.[9] Bergson's major writings, including *Time and Free Will* (originally published in 1889), *Matter and Memory* (1896), and *Creative Evolution* (1907), and others were translated into Russian; his study of laughter and his *Introduction to Metaphysics* were translated into Yiddish.[10] Mandelshtam's essay "On the Nature of the Word," quoted earlier, directly refers to Bergson.

Viktor Shklovsky and other writers associated with Formalism were deeply influenced by Bergson.[11] Shklovsky's "Art as Device" argued that the purpose of art was to impede the mere recognition of objects, thereby making perception slow and "laborious," and he showed how estrangement and other devices, such as the "retardation" of the plot, achieved this end. The emphasis on perception as opposed to mere recognition echoes Bergson, who affirmed that art "dilates our perception."[12] The new cinema of Shklovsky's time was similarly interested in using the sped-up camera to see slowed-down time, as in Dziga Vertov's 1918 experiment. In 1918, Vertov (who changed his name from Dovid to Denis Kaufman, and then to Dziga Vertov) had himself filmed as he jumped from the second story of a building. The extreme slow-motion shot of Vertov's leap transformed his rapid descent into an emotional ballet. Vertov wrote: "Cranking the camera at maximum speed made it possible to see my thoughts during my leap on the screen."[13] The kino-eye (camera) revealed that what appeared to be a single, uniform action actually consisted of multiple, disparate transformations. Vertov confirmed what Bergson described in *Matter and Memory* as the

8 Nethercott 1995; for the Russian translation, see Nethercott 2008.
9 See Bergson 1965: 135.
10 Bergson 1928; Bergson 1923.
11 Shklovsky planned to write a book on Bergson and cinema. For a discussion of Bergson's role in Formalist thought, see Curtis 1976. For a discussion of Bergson and modernism, see Fink 1999.
12 Shklovsky 1990: 6; Bergson 1965: 157.
13 Vertov 1984: 131.

truth of motion: "real motion is the transference of a state and not a thing."[14] Vertov uncontracted or uncondensed the contraction of the past that is the normal work of memory, as it condenses the "successive heterogeneity of perceptions" into the single point of movement in the present. As Annette Michelson points out, for Vertov – as for other film-makers and theoreticians of the time in Western Europe – film made possible a fresh perception of the world, along the same lines that Shklovsky had argued for in "Art as Device."[15]

The elaboration and development of Bergson's ideas, as evidenced in Shklovsky and Vertov, could also be seen in the Yiddish-speaking world. Bergelson's Yiddish-language critics praised אַרום וואָקזאַל using Bergsonian terms. For example, in his essay, „דוד בערגעלסאָן – פֿון ‚וואָקזאַל' ביז ‚אָפּגאַנג'", originally published in 1927, Nakhmen Mayzel remarks that the relations between Bergelson's characters "do not grow from the periphery to the center, but, on the contrary, from the interior to the center, from the artistic center to the periphery."[16] Mayzel's use of the terms "center" and "periphery," his reference to Bergelson's "intuition," and his emphasis on the "unfinished" quality of Bergelson's characters, his description of the world of אָפּגאַנג as not lived, but "dreamed" (אויסגעחלומטע, אויסגעטרוימטע) – reveal the direct influence of Bergson. In *Time and Free Will*, Bergson writes that the feeling of intensity is not given the motion of a sensation from the periphery to the center or the other way round, but rather, by the awareness of a multiplicity of states, each one of which ramifies into the other.[17] In *Matter and Memory*, he links the capacity to form images with the rejection of activity: "to call up the past in the form of an image we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment, we must [...] have the will to dream."[18] The characters in אָפּגאַנג have nothing but the "will to dream."

Mayzel could have gained his familiarity with Bergson from Russian- and Yiddish-language sources. Bergson was broadly discussed in the Yiddish-speaking world. The Yiddish press in New York, Warsaw, and Vilnius carried translations of and commentaries on his work.[19] Among them was די יִידישע וועלט (*The Jewish World*), a journal that Bergelson edited. Sh. Rudnyanski, whose article, „בערגסאָן וועגן עסטעטיק" ("Bergson on Aesthetics"), appeared in די יִידישע וועלט in 1913, emphasizes that, according to Bergson, the necessity of living, the round of activity that

14 Bergson 1988: 202.
15 For a discussion emphasizing the epistemological significance of cinematic experimentation, see Michelson 1984.
16 Mayzel 1971: 294.
17 Bergson 1971: 31.
18 Bergson 1988: 83.
19 See, for example, Bergson 1913; Gliksman 1924; Zhitlovski 1924.

makes up daily life, determines the images we form of the objects that surround us. We see, hear, and sense objects only in relation to the actions we are about to take: the virtualities to which I referred earlier arise because, as Bergson writes, "my perception displays the eventual or possible action of my body."[20] At the same time, our anticipated response to the object is imbued with memory: "with the immediate and present date of our sense, we mingle a thousand details of our past experience."[21] There is a time lag inherent in the very process of perception. We select those details of our past experience necessary and suitable for the act we are about to perform. In the completion of regular, habitual acts, memory condenses to a single point; the motor response to the sensation takes place almost immediately, in one smooth motion. It is important to note that in his book on laughter, which was translated into Yiddish and to which Rudnyanski refers, Bergson observed that the comic effect is produced when the body loses the suppleness of its responses to the external world, thereby resembling a machine.[22]

In the normal course of events, the smooth and efficient discharge of action, however, results in an impoverished perception of the world around us, which is reduced to the absolute minimum of information necessary for the performance of the act. In this condition, Bergson writes, we do not see the things themselves, but rather confine ourselves to "reading the labels attached to them."[23] Rudnyanski's article reiterates this point in virtually identical language. The abstraction, generalization, and categorization necessary for daily-life activity lead to this impoverished response of merely "reading labels," instead of experiencing objects in the surrounding world in the fullness of what they are independently of our need to use them.[24]

The seamless performance of routinized acts prevents us from forming representations of them. In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson writes, "representation is stopped up by action."[25] When something thwarts the accomplishment of an act, however, "consciousness may appear." He continues: "the obstacle creates nothing positive; it simply makes a void, removes a stopper."[26] The entirety of the past, which we trail behind ourselves, and which "swells as it advances," but is cut off from us in the completion of the action, condensed to a single point, expands when the action is impeded, becoming available to us in the form of

20 Bergson 1988: 22.
21 Ibid.: 33.
22 Bergson 1911b: 29.
23 Ibid.: 153.
24 Rudnyanski 1913: 83.
25 Bergson 1911a: 140.
26 Ibid.: 144.

images. This multitude of recollections can now mingle with the impressions we form of the surrounding world, no longer merely the object of the limited, utilitarian view of it created by our need to act. The prolongation of a series of successive states into the present was what Bergson called "duration." There is no discrete instant of now; there is instead continuous flow, the bulging out of the past into now. Duration, the unpredictable infusion of the heterogeneous past into the present allows for something new to emerge. For Bergson, duration is what gives rise to "creative evolution."

What for Bergson constitutes the wellspring of potentiality – including inaction, dreaminess, sleep, and immobility – corresponds to the leitmotifs of Bergelson's early fiction. אַרום וואָקזאַל uses the image of the train, the symbol of mobility and modernity, to indicate utter stasis and immobility. The train station itself is asleep, as if under the spell of an evil magician. The brokers and go-betweens who are its denizens never board the train; on the contrary, departure takes the form of downward mobility: the protagonist Beynish Rubinshteyn returns to his shtetl to take up the traditional Jewish profession of teaching Hebrew. Mirl Hurvits, the protagonist of *The End of Everything*, similarly fails to take advantage of the new economic opportunities of the time; unlike other young women, she does not pursue an education, but agrees to an unwanted marriage to save her father from bankruptcy. The central theme of the novella is the cessation of action. Mirl spends her time trying to "put an end" to the marriage; she terminates her pregnancy. To make everything "null and void" (as in the Yiddish מבֿטל זײַן) is the goal of all her undertakings.[27] The hero of "In a Backwoods Town" is similarly removed from action; he is aware that somewhere else "there were great noisy cities."[28] Like Mirl Hurvits, Burman misses opportunities for mobility. In Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg's translation, he is perpetually "drowsy" and has "let his chance to finish the university go by forever."[29] A more literal translation reveals the paradoxical time structure that Bergelson uses here: "he was forever too late to finish his university studies" („האָט אויף אייביק פֿאַרשפּעטיקט דעם אוניווערסיטעט") – as if being too late was a perpetual and repeated act.[30]

Most of Bergelson's characters are always (already) too late. Living in the present means being left behind, trailing in the aftermath of something else, always missing the forward motion of progress. This

27 For example, Mirl wants to "nullify" her second engagement; see Bergelson 1929 (II): 153.
28 Bergelson 1929 (III): 9.
29 Howe and Greenberg 1989: 471.
30 Bergelson 1929 (III): 7.

state of belatedness corresponds to Bergson's condition of heightened receptivity to the surrounding world. According to Bergson, to be able to call up the past in the form of an image, "we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment." Bergelson's work explores the consequences of this withdrawal, both negative and positive. Missing the chair you are about to sit on can revive the body's otherwise mechanized, habitual relation to the world; missing a longed-for meeting can reflect time that is out of joint. Missing the scene of progress – whether in the form of Zionism, socialism, communism, or opportunities for economic mobility – can activate other, unrealized potentials hidden in the obsolete past. The failed meetings and unfulfilled longings that typify the lives of Bergelson's characters reveal the disjuncture of time itself.

Durative time in אַרום וואָקזאַל

In a letter of 1910, Bergelson wrote that his method of creating stories began with the creation of the atmosphere:[31]

צום אָנהייב ווערט געבוירן די שטימונג פֿון דער דערציילונג מיטן הויפּטטיפּ. […] אַזאַ מאָדנע בענקשאַפֿט ווערט מיט אָט דער שטימונג געבוירן צו יענעם אייגנאַרטיקן קאָלאָריט פֿון דער וועלט, וועלכע טראָגט זיך אַרום דעם הויפּטטיפּ און אין דער שטימונג. מיַין גאַנצער ציל איז שוין נאָך דעם נאָר אויף אַרויסצוגעבן אָט די שטימונג צוזאַמענגעבונדן מיטן לעבן און מיט די געשעענישן, וועלכע קומען פֿאָר אַרום אים און (אויב ס׳איז אַזוי מעגלעך צו זאָגן) אין אים.

First to be born is the atmosphere of the story, together with its main character. […] Together with this atmosphere, such a strange longing comes into being for every nuance peculiar to the world transmitted by the chief character and by this atmosphere. Thereafter, my entire aim is to give expression to this atmosphere, together with the life and the occurrences that take place around and (and if it is possible to say this) within it.

Bergelson's description of his own creative process suggests parallels with Bergson. The term שטימונג, translated here as "atmosphere," is also synonymous with "melody" (מעלאָדיע).[32] The "atmosphere" or "melody" of the work differentiates itself into the fictitious personae and events of the story. According to Bergson, the real is pure continuity, our perception of clean-cut objects and states is the product of our need to move and react. Perception cuts out of the real that which is necessary for hu-

31 Letter to Shmuel Niger, 8 July 1910, cited by Mantovan 2007: 89f.
32 Stuchkoff 1991: 252.

man activity; we artificially decompose the world for the convenience of our intelligence. Evolution, according to Bergson, is a movement akin to the motion of an individual's arm and hand through iron filings; wherever the hand stops, the filings will fill in the negative spaces it leaves behind, which correspond to the forms of life that evolution creates. But the whole is the movement of the hand and not its stopping places.[33] The real is pure continuity and not the clean-cut states cut out of the real by our perception and our knowledge. The analogy that Bergson turns to again and again to describe this continuity is music: duration is the interpenetration of one quality by another, as in the example of one note in a musical composition "leaning over" into the next one.[34] Bergson's duration can provide a gloss on Bergelson's creative method, and in its concrete realization such works as אַרום וואָקזאַל.

More like a musical composition than anything Bergelson subsequently wrote, אַרום וואָקזאַל transposes a single theme into multiple registers. The wind, the moon, the darkness of night, the world of nature, the buildings and objects created by human beings, and the thoughts, imaginings, and memories of the protagonists – all sound the same melody of unfulfilled longing (בענקשאַפֿט) and sorrow (טרויער).[35] In the opening of the work, for example, the train station seeks, but does not find renewal from the distance itself (די ווײַטקייט). The "dead" and "frozen" (פֿאַרגליווערטער) station looks with longing into the depth of the distance that surrounds it, as if from the distance itself would arise a "helper" who would return everything to life, but there is no help forthcoming.[36] The twilight, the wind, the hammering of the blacksmith, the sound of train as it passes the station, and the leaves that fall from the trees all tell the story of something that has ended, passed, and cannot return. The phrase „געענדיקט, געענדיקט" ("it is done, done") suggests the rhythmic echo of a passing train.[37]

Beynish, the main character, does not live in the present, but rather remembers the past and imagines possible futures. He pictures visiting his wife, a sickly woman with a greenish face; this anticipation of what would happen intermingles with other pictures, his imagined future with another man's wife, which is intermingled with the memory of his childhood, and the kindly way the rabbi used to look at him when he was a boy in school. The atmosphere of אַרום וואָקזאַל, which conveys the end of something and the expectation of something else, may re-

33 Bergson and Mitchell 1911a: 94f.
34 See, for example, Bergson 1965: 147.
35 Bergelson 1929 (1): 81.
36 Ibid.: 7.
37 Ibid.: 13.

flect the disappointment after the failed Russian revolution of 1905, as Nakhmen Mayzel argues, but it also reveals a new form of art that overcomes the separation between thought, feeling, and the surrounding world of other people and objects, and in so doing creates what Bergson would call a moment of "duration." The mutual interpenetration of human being and thing in Bergelson is distinct from the more traditional poetic device of personification. Personification works to enchant the world; interpenetration rejects the easy dividend of enhanced meaning that results. The action of the narrative – to the extent that there is action – is born of the immobility with which the narrative begins and ends (the "frozen" and "dead" station looking into the distance). The term "frozen" (פֿאַרגליווערט), one of Bergelson's favorite and repeated words, can also be translated as "congealed," suggesting the cessation of movement, a kind of temporary immobility, not necessarily born of stagnation or a moribund state, but rather the fleeting cessation of movement into the discreet images necessary for language. To the greatest extent possible in prose fiction, Bergelson "unmakes" the cut, or separation, of people, things, and nature, making it difficult to tell who is speaking or feeling a particular emotion, but also making it poetic and musical. It is no wonder that Bergelson's first critic, A. Vayter, writing in 1909, described the "unexpected joy" that אַרום וואָקזאַל created in him.[38]

Slow motion

The atmosphere of suspended animation that permeates אַרום וואָקזאַל is also central to אין אַ פֿאַרגרעבטער שטאָט. First published in 1914 in די יידישע וועלט, the same journal in which Rudnyanski's article on Bergson had appeared a year earlier, the story describes the corruption, kickbacks, adultery, and violence of "a backwoods town." Its leitmotif is: „די וועלט איז בלאָטע" ("the world stinks)."[39] Elishe has brought his new wife from Medzhibozh, and everyone has come to have a look:[40]

זי איז געווען מיט אַ גאַנצן קאָפּ העכער פֿון אלישען [...] און אַז זי האָט אין שוואַרצן שמאָלן קליידל אָנגעשטעלט אַ פֿוס אויף אַ שפּאַן צו טאָן, האָבן זיך צו אים נישט־ווילנדיק אַראָפּ־געלאָזן אַלע אַרומיקע מאַנסבילשע אויגן; גלייַך

She was a whole head taller than Elishe [...] and when, clad in her tight black dress lifted her foot to take a step, all of the surrounding male eyes unwillingly focused on it; as if in this slender foot

38 Vayter 1971: 293.
39 Bergelson 1929 (III): 59.
40 Ibid.: 14. All translations in this article are by the author, unless otherwise noted.

אין אָט דעם היפֿשן און שלאַנקן פֿוס ליגט עפּעס אַ גאַנצער מעזשביזשער קונץ, און ס׳איז כּדאַי צו זען וואָס וועט פֿאָרקומען מיט אים און מיט איר גאַנצער ווּקסיקער פֿיגור, בשעת זי וועט דעם פֿוס נאָך אַ מאָל אַ הייב טאָן און וועט אים נאָך אַ מאָל אויף דער ערד אַראָפּשטעלן.

lay some particular Medzhibozh art, and it was worthwhile seeing what would happen to it, and to her entire tall figure, when she would once again lift it and again place it on the ground.

This is one of many instances of delayed action in Bergelson in which it takes longer to describe an action than for the action to take place. Time is not divisible into objective, measurable units in this instance. Time slows down and nearly stops altogether. What dilates time in this scene from אין אַ פֿאַרגרעבטער שטאָט is male desire. It is the male eyes that fixate on and fix the pointing, lifting, and placing of the woman's leg and foot. The longer the delay, the more pleasurable is their experience. The men's eyes keep the foot in the air, the intensity of their lust freezing the action, as if in the cinematic freeze-frame that Vertov experimented with in *Man with a Movie Camera*. Bergelson returns to the motif of the eroticized foot in a subsequent scene in which Elishe's wife and her lover, Burman, play "footsies" (אַ גאַנץ ערנסטער שמועס אויף פֿיס־לשון).[41]

Burman walks past Elishe's house and notices that the curtains have already been hung:[42]

פֿון הינטער איינעם פֿון זיי, אַן אונטערגעהויבענעם און אַ פֿאַרוואָרפֿענעם אַ ביסל אָן אַ זייַט, האָבן זיך געהערט די קלעפּ פֿון אַ קליינעם האַנט־העמערל; ס׳האָט זיך געמאָלט די קילקייט, וואָס אינווייניק, אין חדר, די הויכע שטולן, וואָס אין די פֿרישׁ אָנגעצויגענע טשעכאָלן, און זי, אלישעס וויַיב אַליין. זי איז דאָרטן געשטאַנען לעבן דינסטמיידל, וועלכע איז אַרויפֿגעקראָכן אויף אַ קליין צוגעשטעלט טישל, און האָט איר באַווּיזן:

„שלאָגט אים, זייַט מוחל, אַ ביסל העכער, דעם טשוואָק... נאָך העכער".

From behind one of them, which had been raised and thrown back a bit toward the side, the hammering of a small hammer could be heard; the chill inside the room could be pictured, and the tall chairs, in their newly made covers, and she herself, Elishe's wife. She was standing there near the maid, who had climbed up a table that had been placed there, and ordered her:

Please put the nail in a little higher ... higher.

The delay and deferral of desire create this scene, just as in the earlier scene with the foot. Burman wants Elishe's wife, Fradotshke, and his desire transfers back and forth across the metonymic chain, from the sound of the hammer, to the nail, the hammer itself, the maid ham-

41 Ibid.: 30.
42 Ibid.: 15.

mering, the table, the chairs, and, as the text emphasizes, "she herself, Elishe's wife." All that Burman actually sees are the newly hung curtains. He imagines everything else, including the maid, the table, the nail, the hammer, Fradotshke's voice, and Fradotshke herself. Note the use of the passive in the phrases „האָבן זיך געהערט די קלעפּ פֿון אַ קליינעם האַנט־העמערל", „ס׳האָט זיך געמאָלט די קילקייט, וואָס אינווייניק, אין חדר" ("the hammering of a small hammer could be heard," "the chill inside the room could be pictured"). The passive obscures the agent of the action; who is hammering and who is picturing the interior of the house remain blurred.

The scene corresponds to what Bergson in *Matter and Memory* describes as the dream state, the state of pure imagination devoid of action. Since perception, according to Bergson, is geared to the action we are about to perform, our memory selects recollections that are pertinent to that particular action, similar to it. But when consciousness is detached from action, "a multitude of events contiguous to the memory are thereby fastened onto the perception [...] anything can be associated with anything."[43] In the episode from אין אַ פֿאַרגרעבטער שטאָט, Bergelson sets in motion the association of the hammer's sound with the hammer, the maid holding it, the table supporting the maid, and the woman standing next to the table instructing the maid to hammer the nail "a little higher." Burman's imagination of the interior of the room is significant in light of Bergson's linkage of sensation and spatiality. In *Creative Evolution*, he describes what happens when action stops: "Suppose we let ourselves go and instead of acting dream [...] our past is broken up into a thousand recollections made external to one another [...] Our personality thus descends in the direction of space. It coasts around it continually in sensation."[44] It is precisely Burman's awakened desire that carries him afloat in the inside of Fradotshke's house; it is from Burman's perspective that „ס׳האָט זיך געמאָלט די קילקייט, וואָס אינווייניק, אין חדר"; Burman's sensation is extended into a set of objects in a space – the scene of chairs, table, maid, hammer, all arranged and set in motion by the object of his passion, „זי, אלישעס ווייַב אַליין" ("she, Elishe's wife herself"). This scene, although different in tone from the mood of אַרום וואָקזאַל, nonetheless reveals certain parallels to it. It is another example of the diffusion of a single emotion into a series of things, thereby conforming to Bergelson's description of his creative method, which begins from the atmosphere and moves to the characters of the story.

43 Bergson 1988: 167 f.
44 Bergson 1911a: 201.

The beautiful miniature is set against the backdrop of the vile backwoods town, mired in its feudal economy and deadly rivalries. The tax on kosher meat and the system of kickbacks that enforce it lead to Elishe's brutal beating and death by the town's butchers. The adulterer Burman wastes time and lags behind everyone else; however, in the image of perpetual delay that Bergelson creates with the character Burman, the author reveals the possibility for creative duration, in Bergson's sense of the term. Bergelson's innovative narrative artistry, no less than Vertov's "kino-eye," makes the "acted unacted," and uncontracts motion into the metonymic chain. In so doing, he makes time palpable; he reveals the inner workings of now.

The search for time past in אָפגאַנג

In אָפגאַנג, Bergelson does not use an omniscient narrator and does not string together plot episodes along a single linear line. The novella opens with Meylekh's funeral and works back toward the past in an attempted reconstruction of what happened to him. There is no one single past external to the multitudes of individuals who lived it; hence, there is no single account of Meylekh, who was many things to many people: lover to Etl Kadis, Khave Poyzner, Khanke Lyuber, son to his disappointed mother, would-be son to Yitskhok-Ber, friend and alter-ego to Khayim-Moyshe.

The intensive focus on the past in אָפגאַנג resonates with Bergson's major point about the survival of the past in the present, his argument in *Matter and Memory*. Our entire interaction with the world is the insertion of our past (which is a heterogeneous, ever-changing process) into our present. Time as already filled, the orientation of "now" as "after" – a key feature of Bergelson's entire oeuvre – corresponds to Bergson's idea of duration, "the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and swells as it advances."[45] Bergelson carries out artistically what Bergson proposes abstractly: we exist in a stream of ongoing impressions mingled with our memories, in which every moment "durates," or bulges out from "now" into the past and future.

For Bergson, the image of well-organized, purposeful human action is a falsehood concealing a fluid inner heterogeneity, a "heap of co-existing psychic states."[46] In אָפגאַנג, there is no one central character who

45 Ibid.: 4.
46 Bergson 1971: 10.

focalizes and organizes the action, description, and emotion; instead, we move from center to center to center, from the absent Meylekh to his unnamed sister, to Yitskhok-Ber, Khayim-Moyshe, Khanke Lyuber, Khave Poyzner, Preger, Zaynvl, and Zalker, the Singer sewing machine agent – this is not the full list. Each commands his or her narrative focus, and these distinct and overlapping points coalesce into the entirety of the narrative of אָפּגאַנג. Reading Bergelson is like looking through a kaleidoscope of constantly changing narrative elements. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson describes the human body moving through space in similar terms. My body, an image among other images, is for me the center conditioning all other images; "at each of its movements everything changes, as if by a turn of the kaleidoscope."[47]

This line of analysis, however, which emphasizes dreaminess and subjectivity, merely reiterates and draws out what Mayzel and other critics hinted at. I turn now to another set of features characteristic of Bergelson's style that have received less attention. This set includes deliberate ugliness, the "גליטש„ (Bergelson's term), the mistake, or misfire in the performance of an action, an interest in disability and what could be called de-evolution, the moments in the text lacking in flow and continuity, a reorganization of the body into the instruments it uses (the extension of the body into tools), de-textualization (words functioning as sounds), and, finally, the staging of musical performances in the text and Bergelson's own textual musicality. These features, far from representing metonymically the death of a life-world, produce an opening for new forms of being in the world and for creating art. Both Bergson and Bergelson are interested in returning to life, to the body, to physicality – in an effort to overcome the separation between the self and the world.

In the opening of אָפּגאַנג, Meylekh's sister has a problem seating herself in the carriage:[48]

> אַז איר האָבן געוואָלט העלפֿן חנקע ליובער און עטל קאַדיס – די קורסיסטין, וואָס האָט אין גיכן געזאָלט אַ כלה ווערן פֿאַר מלך – האָט זי זיך פֿון זייער הילף אָפּגעזאָגט: געמאַכט אַ פּאָר פֿאַרעקשנטע, נישט קיין זיכערע תנועות און זיך סוף־כּל־סוף אַרײַנגעוואָרפֿן אין בריטשקע אַרײַן מיטן בויך, ווי איינער, וואָס זעצט זיך רײַטן אויף אַ פֿערד. נאָר בשעת די מיידלעך זענען געבליבן וואַרטן אויף איר לעצטן וואָרט, האָט זיך פּלוצעם אַרויסגעגליטשט דער שירעם פֿון איר האַנט. אויבן אָן, אויפֿן אָנגענעצטן קישעלע, האָט זי מיט אַ מאָל געגעבן אַ צי אַרײַן דעם קאָפּ אין די אַקסלען, זיך אַרײַנגעהויקערט, אַזוי אַז די בורקע האָט גענומען אויס־זען ווי אָנגעפֿילט מיט אַ בינטל שמאַטעס, און זי האָט אויסגעשאָסן מיט אַ משונה ייִאושדיקן קוויטש:
> „אוי, מלך!... מלך!...״

47 Bergson 1988: 24.
48 Bergelson 1999: 7.

Joseph Sherman translates this as follows:[49]

> When she was offered assistance by Hanke Lyber and by Ethel Kadis, the university student who should soon have been married to Meylekh, she refused their help, made a few stubborn, uncertain movements, and finally threw herself forward into the britzka like someone mounting a horse. While the other young women waited for her last word, the umbrella suddenly slipped from her grasp. Up above, on the sodden driver's seat, she abruptly jerked her head into her shoulders, hunched herself up so that the felt coat took on the appearance of being stuffed with a bundle of rags, and emitted a wildly despairing shriek:
>
> "Oh, Meylekh! … Meylekh! …"

I note in passing that the translation omits the ugly detail that Meylekh's sister throws herself into the carriage „מיטן בויך" ("belly first"). There are at least two other occasions when a character miscalculates how to carry out a physical act. Khayim-Moyshe turns back to have a look at Khanke Poyzner and makes a strange movement, "as if he had forgotten to bring something with him"; the movement is abrupt and is cut off midstream („אַן אָפּגעריסענע און געשווינדע באַוועגונג").[50] Later, when Khayim-Moyshe visits Khanke Lyuber for the first time, he sits „אין אַזאַ משונהדיקער פּאָזע, גליַיך אָט־אָט־אָט טוט ער זיך מיט אַ מאָל אַ גליטש אַראָפּ פֿונעם בענקל און בליַיבט זיצן מיט אַלע פֿיר אויפֿן סאַמעט גלאַטן קאָברעץ, וואָס אונטערן טיש." (in "such a strange posture as if he were about to suddenly and by mistake fall off the bench to end up on all fours on the smooth velvet carpet under the table").[51]

What is surprising about episodes such as these is their ugliness and dehumanization, which serve a comedic effect. Meylekh's sister scrunched up in her felt coat looks like a bundle of rags, and the otherwise sophisticated Khayim-Moyshe suddenly and inexplicably does not know how to sit in a chair properly. In his study of laughter, Bergson describes these mistakes as the product of habit: repeated action prevents us from seeing what is right in front of us. Hilary Fink argues that this characterization of the dulling effect of repetition found its way into Viktor Shklovsky's well-known formulation that the purpose of art is to "lead to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition."[52] Bergson and Shklovsky shed light on Bergelson's characteristic technique.

49 Bergelson and Sherman 1999: 7 f.
50 Bergelson 1999: 28.
51 Ibid.: 53.
52 Fink 1999; Shklovsky 1990: 6.

In the episode of Meylekh's sister and the uncooperative carriage and umbrella, as well as in the scene when Khayim-Moyshe almost slides from his seat, Bergelson's narrative technique heightens the vividness of the physical gesture for the reader. It is tempting to say the viewer, because the image Bergelson creates is so cinematic. In other works, the dissection of physical motion in order to reveal its inner workings serves a similar purpose. Bergelson's emphasis on delayed, discontinuous, and disaggregated movement resonates with the embodiment characteristic of early cinema, and the experimental photography of Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, which similarly analyzed motion into its component parts.[53]

It is as if the film had been slowed down, and instead of seeing the action as we normally would, without interruption, the action is jerky and abrupt; both passages use „מיט אַ מאָל" and „פּלוצעם" (both mean "suddenly"). There is nothing to motivate the abrupt motions that Meylekh's sister and her umbrella make; the use of "suddenly" serves only to impede the action. The act of seating oneself in a carriage is broken down into three distinct motions, with no connection between them: the belly forward, followed by a pause, created by the young women "waiting to hear" Meylekh's sister's "last word," then the umbrella slipping from her hand, and then the final motion of hunching the head into the shoulders, which takes place in a seemingly different location, above, on the driver's seat. A separate body part performs each motion: belly, hand, head, and shoulders. The forward motion of Meylekh's sister's departure cannot take place in the way it normally would.

The breakdown of the action into its constituent parts, and other means of retarding the action – including the parenthetical description of Etl Kadis as Meylekh's bride-to-be – serve another, related, purpose. My hunch is that it takes longer to read the passage than to perform the action it describes of seating oneself in a britzka; the particular structure of the narrative itself slows down time. Bergelson retards the forward motion of the action. What Bergelson depicts and the technique he uses to depict it reinforce each other.

The cause of the sensory-motor breakdown on the psychological level is, presumably, the sister's overwhelming grief, although Bergelson does not make this explicit. The temporary disability extends the present moment beyond its normal boundaries. In this and in countless other instances in the novella, the past – Meylekh's death – enters the present. According to Bergson, we are all always stopping time: the universe comes at us in sheet after sheet of onrushing events; we each,

53 For a discussion, see Auerbach 2007: 10f.

in innumerable ways, slow down this onrush by mingling our multiple pasts with the present. To be able to call up the past in the form of an image, Bergson writes, in a passage I have already quoted, "we must be able to withdraw ourselves from the action of the moment" – a capability that Bergelson has created in the entirety of אָפגאַנג in general, and in the carriage scene in particular. Bergelson is working artistically on concepts that Bergson developed philosophically.

The motions that Meylekh's sister performs, thrusting herself forward, belly first, and hunching her head down into her shoulders – suggest a kind of limbless form of locomotion, something far more primitive than we would expect from upright homo sapiens. Bergelson uses the phrase „תוהו־ובוהו" ("without form and void") elsewhere in the work, suggesting primordial chaos.[54] In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson describes learning how to perform a physical exercise as requiring a necessary analysis of its component parts, because the movement is "compound and made up of a multitude of muscular contractions and tensions."[55] The initial attempt to imitate the movement is "already its virtual decomposition, it bears without itself, so to speak, its own analysis." As learners gain facility with the movement to be executed, they are increasingly able both to preserve each separate part and to physically link one part of the motion with the next. The body understands and performs this interpenetration of one act with another. In the britzka scene in אָפגאַנג, the action, on the contrary, is shown in its decomposition, having been unlearned. We see the component parts, but their mutual relation is impeded. The passage leaves the reader no choice but to visualize gesture and motion; the "last word" that we and the two young women, Khanke Lyuber and Etl Kadis, expect to hear never comes. Instead, the bereaved sister "lets loose with a squeal, 'Oy, Meylekh!'" I suggest this alternative, less elegant translation for the purpose of showing the motif of devolution in the scene. The sound that the sister emits cannot be described as a deliberate, articulate utterance. There are other passages like this one in נאָך אַלעמען, אָפגאַנג, and דער טויבער. Indeed, דער טויבער as a whole proceeds from the perspective of a deaf-mute, whose impeded hearing and speech estrange language and narration, shifting the narrative focus away from meaning and thought toward gesture and sound. The deliberate primitivization of action and utterance in this passage and others like it, what might be called "creative de-evolution," reveals the separation of the body from the world.

54 Bergelson 1999: 17.
55 Bergson 1988: 111.

Bergelson's play with sound in this and other works serves to heighten the acoustic effects of language, forming a kind of rhythmic undergirding distinct from the meaning of the text. Sound-play serves to heighten the connection between one part of a text and another; it impedes the forward extension of a narrative, instead introducing qualitative modulations of a single theme. Bergelson's text is musical, as I argued earlier with regard to אַרום וואָקזאַל. Musical performance is also part of the story. In אָפּגאַנג, the accordion-player fills the room with sounds that "somersault after one another, like joyous mocking clown acrobats" ("קוליען זיך, ווי די קליינע פֿרייליך שפּעטנדיקע קאָמעדיאַנטלעך").[56] The narrator refers to the musician by using the term "der gilgul," which Joseph Sherman translates as the "transmigratory soul."[57] The term can also be read as a gloss on Bergelson's own narrative technique, which transforms one quality into another, as in the example of musical notes metamorphosing into acrobats.

This and other, similar moments of transformation help to make the argument that Bergelson's aesthetic, at least before World War II, was not based on a poetics of despair, or twilight, as is so often claimed. The very features that make his writing so difficult, as if we had lost our ability to see the world, serve precisely the opposite purpose, as a way back into the world, which requires detextualization along the way. Bergelson is not simply rejecting Sholem Aleichem's verbosity (באַרעדעוודיקייט), but rather he is experimenting, together with his contemporaries in Russian and other languages, with verbality itself.

By returning to Bergson, Bergelson's contemporary, we gain access to what was new, creative, and joyful in Bergelson's writing before the catastrophes of the twentieth century, before, in other, more Bergsonian words, the insertion of the past into the present radically changed. Instead of seeing the past dominating the present through the lens of trauma, Bergson's theories permit an alternative optics important for understanding Bergelson's early work: the interpenetration of the past and the present in a creative light, as the continual opening up of something new by means of art itself.

56 Bergelson 1999: 174.
57 Bergelson and Sherman 1999: 177.

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