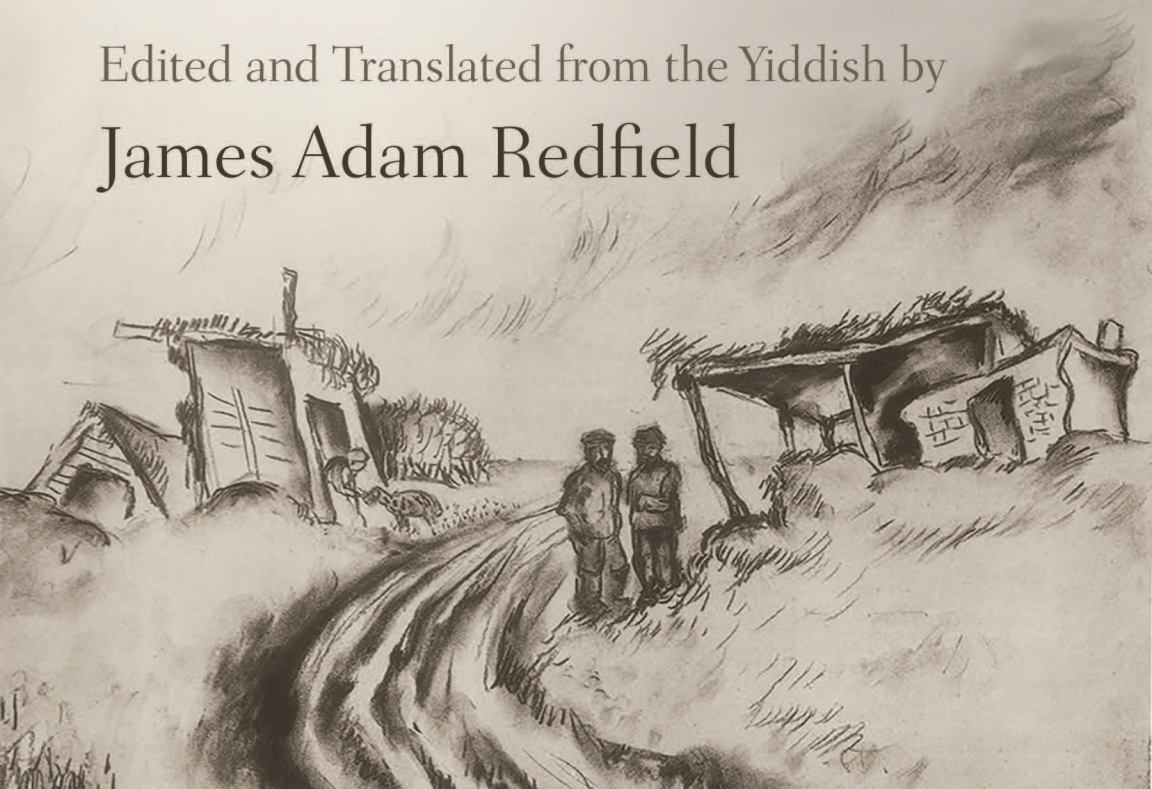
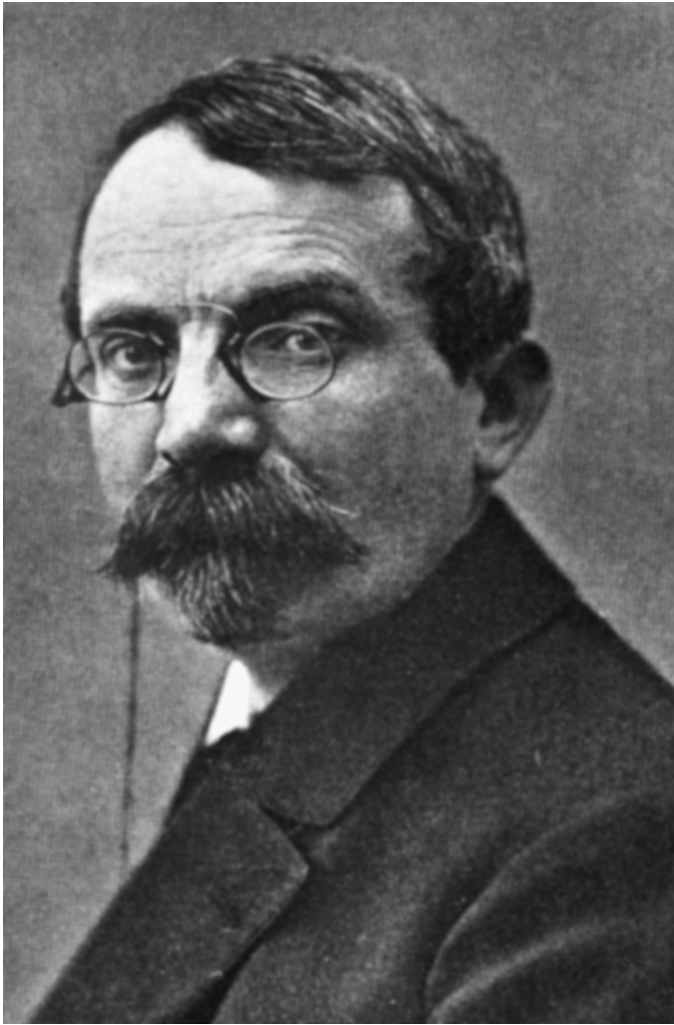


Mikhah Yosef Berdichevsky

From a
**Distant
Relation**

Edited and Translated from the Yiddish by
James Adam Redfield





Frontispiece. Unknown photographer. Mikhah Yosef Berdichevsky at age fifty (1915). By permission of the Archives of Mikhah Yosef Berdichevsky.

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With a Foreword by
Avner Holtzman



Syracuse University Press

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more broadly and his contemporaries. Nor, of course, should the latter be limited to Jewish writers and visual artists. For instance, the sole non-Jewish author named in this volume, Ivan Goncharov, was famous for his satires of courtship (not his romance, as a swooning suitor in “In Jest and in Earnest” supposes), and for his eponymous novel on laziness (*Oblomov*). The latter, in turn, has parallels to Berdichevsky’s homegrown *Oblomov*, “Yankef-Nusn.” Berdichevsky only read Russian literature in translation, but authors like Goncharov may have meant more to him than this passing allusion suggests.

Yiddish and the Second-Person

[\(Read here through bottom of p. 41\)](#)

If Berdichevsky’s Yiddish is linked to his whole polysystem, and if his ideology about literary languages is an unreliable guide to how he actually used those languages, it does not mean that there is nothing distinctive about his Yiddish prose. There is something, but it is not easy to capture. Holtzman’s foreword develops four useful criteria (compare Holtzman 1993, 80). His Yiddish writings use (1) temporalities, (2) protagonists, (3) narrators, and (4) forms of discourse very different from his contemporary Hebrew work. The Hebrew writings focus on the recent past; the Yiddish writings cover both the distant past and the present. The Hebrew writings include many autobiographies, whereas there is only one in Yiddish (see Moseley 2006). The Hebrew narrator is an outsider to the world of the *shtetl*, sometimes warm and sometimes critical; the Yiddish narrator is an insider to the extent that he often fades into the background. The Hebrew stories are poor in speech and rich in style; the Yiddish stories are the opposite, full of dialogues and monologues intended to capture a pure and “artless” *vox populi*, the voice of the folk.

Let me try to refine Holtzman’s third and fourth criteria from a translator’s standpoint. What exactly does it mean that “the narrator’s role is reduced to the bare minimum” or that he, at most, “closely resembles” a storyteller from the *shtetl* itself? What does “privileging the voices of the characters” sound like? Studying challenges that I encountered in marking the narrator’s role, and in

rendering monological or dialogical speech, reveals what I call the “second-personal” poetics of his Yiddish prose. Holtzman’s criteria reflect its literary ideals, but their realization is more complex.

The second-personal is a narrative mode inflected by orality, full of bodies and conflict: “agonistic,” in Ong’s sense. As opposed to the Hebrew and German stories, which adopt first- or third-person perspectives on the *shtetl* world, the Yiddish work approaches it in terms of direct encounters between individuals. The autobiographical persona (“I”), impartial witness (“one”), and national public (“we”) are scarce. The Yiddish work privileges what Buber called “I-Thou” relations: dialogues between self and other, or monologues addressed to the narrator/auditor (layered with snippets of reported dialogue and talking to oneself). Yet these dialogues share none of Buber’s optimism about the I-Thou relationship. Rather, each encounter, grounded in the gritty details of a local situation, is determined by conflicting social categories. By exploring how the social order percolates into nooks and crannies of each household and innermost lives of each person, how it limits the horizon of what anyone can know or desire, Berdichevsky tempers his critical lens on the *shtetl* with realist, not wholly unsympathetic, composite portraiture. These second-personal writings represent the *shtetl* microcosm through the jagged edges of typical people and voices, not the jaded gaze of the *maskilic* satirist or the adolescent angst of his autobiographies. A few speakers, or a speaker-listener pair, take center stage.

A Distant Relation: The Uncanny Auditor

This second-personal dimension is unevenly distributed even among the Yiddish writings. The narrator’s persona, in relation to the *shtetl* world, is clearly unique in the autobiographical story (“A World within a World”). In many other pieces, he is indeed backgrounded, in the sense that his perspective is hard to identify with anyone inside the story itself. He channels many perspectives and moves freely between worlds: in “Gadi,” he goes back and forth from Eden to earth. He may show empathy one moment, criticism the next. He

veers from vulgarity to sly erudition. In most cases, “he” is omniscient, not embodied.

In a few other cases, he does figure in the story, but not prominently. Rather, his persona accounts for how he came by the tale and offers a rationale for its telling, inviting a reader to share his interest but varnishing it with a moral gloss, possibly ironic or censorious. His focus remains on the speakers and characters within the world of the story. These are essentially third-personal tales with second-personal embroidery. The settings where he locates them (such as a carriage, in “The Smith”; entertaining a stranger, in “The Guest”) set him apart from the action. He is a secondary narrator; the storytellers, who star in their own stories, set him apart from them (e.g., “The Smith”: “While you were away, I was serving time”). These are not really oral tales but set pieces framed by the let-me-tell-you-a-story device, what Hawthorne called the “fireside narrative”—although, as early critics noted, they jumble oral and literary features, causing slips in voice and register.

In many monologues, on the other hand, the narrator/auditor is addressed directly by the speaker throughout a highly oral tale and emerges in the course of its telling—often without breathing a word. They generally refer to him as “Yosl,” a diminutive of his middle name Yosef, “Yosls” being the patronymic by which the author was known as a child—or “Reb Yosl,” in deference to his status or that of his father, whom they sometimes refer to as the local rabbi. A few are also aware of his doctorate and his time in Germany, as well as one of his family’s (relatively recently adopted) surnames, “Berdichevsky.” Furthermore, the course of their discussion is sometimes interrupted or diverted when they recall that this is whom they are addressing. Hence, Yosl plays a more significant role than meets the eye (or ear).

It is tempting to assimilate this narrative persona to either the first-personal autobiographical persona or the third-personal limited narrator that I have just outlined. As in “The Smith” and “The Guest,” he may seem to be an outsider who is, as Holtzman says, “reduced to the bare minimum”: a mere mouthpiece for the *shtetl*

storytellers. “The Country Jew” (see *Berdichevsky’s Jewspeak* below) purports to be “transcribed word for word,” effacing him entirely. On the other hand, he certainly resembles the author of the Yiddish writings: a prodigal son of the local rabbi, who went to Germany to get his doctorate, became a writer, and came back to visit. Could anything be more natural for such a figure than hearing and transcribing *shtetl* tales?

Yet in these monologues, I detect a distinct, second-personal narrative persona: the “distant relation” of this collection’s title (a name that Berdichevsky also used to sign some stories in Hebrew). This persona has a more nuanced relation to the speakers than the author’s ideal of a mute, passive, Yiddish folk narrator. Nor is he autobiographical in any robust sense. Rather, he is a screen upon whom each speaker projects an aspect of his or her own situation. They single out different sides of “Yosl” according to what they want from him. His very presence leads them to externalize their own self-images. Thus, in a psychoanalytic or pseudoethnographic way, he reflects the society of the *shtetl* as speakers glimpse themselves through his partly alienated eyes. The “Yosl” behind the screen is an enigma, for he looks a bit like each of them. He is an uncanny auditor: both known and unknown, estranged and surprisingly at home.

House Calls with Doctor Berdichevsky

In order to reveal this second-personal role of the auditor, my first step was as an editor rather than as a translator. I collected many of these monologues into a set that I called “Visitors.” This procedure (which I used to create other sets in the volume: “New Men,” “Modern Times,” and all three sets of domestic pairs, e.g., “Mothers and Sons”) foregrounds connections among the short pieces and follows the author’s own practice: some pieces were originally published in such sets foregrounding similar dynamics (preserved in my edition, e.g., “Right at Home”), and he rearranged the sets in the collections of his Yiddish work which appeared in 1912 and 1924.

(For the complete publication history, see my Note on the Text and Holtzman's foreword. I shuffled pieces among the sets for various reasons. I rearranged or moved pieces from one set to another in order to enhance each set's coherence and overall flow.)

What holds "Visitors" together is a particular form of the monologue, in which this uncanny auditor, or "distant relation," is called upon by one of the townsfolk or, vice versa, pays one of them a visit. A second-personal view of the *shtetl* emerges as they talk to "Yosl," the former insider who has returned to listen and, they fear, to judge. As postmodern critics of ethnography note (Kilcher and Safran 2016), a text that seems innocent of its literary form can become a medium for tense face-offs between auditor and "native."

Such confrontations pose a special problem for the translator. How to convey the anxiety, the passive-aggression and suspicion, the bravado, the eccentricity, the fond or ironic subtexts of what is—on the surface—mere small talk, slip of the tongue, non sequitur?

One strategy is simply to preserve markers of orality which are already central to the structure of these monologues. The first in the set, "Just Cover My Costs," is a good example. It is divided into two paragraphs composing a single rhetorical statement on the part of the speaker: the complaint and the "ask." In the complaint, oral markers ("Let me tell you"; "Do you think? . . . trust me"), followed by a slew of precisely reported curses, underscore the speaker's plight. His family was forced to move in with his in-laws where he is beset by housework and childcare, verbally abused into the bargain. His "ask" begins with another oral marker ("So let me ask you, Reb Yosl") appealing directly to the listener and showing the speaker's agenda behind his tale of woe: Yosl! Just the man to get me out of this mess! It took hardly any intervention to make sure that this rhetorical structure gets across: I added "So" to clarify that the "ask" is predicated directly upon the complaint.

In the second paragraph, the speaker/auditor dynamic develops as the speaker tries to reel Yosl into his plight. This dynamic turns on a discrepancy between how much they talk and how much they

know about the situation. The speaker makes wild demands without realizing what he is asking; Yosl says nothing but implicitly grasps what is really going on.

Here, my interventions as a translator were intended to flesh out the speaker's character and underscore his erratic desperation. In his mind, Yosl is his sole link to the world outside the *shtetl*. To bring this out, I changed "Should I [too] go off to those parts [*yene mekoymes*]?" to "When you go back there, could I come along?" By the same token, he is ignorant of contemporary world Jewry, filtering the entire globe through Yosl. He has heard of a few famous patrons of the past and the Zionists, so he assumes that Yosl has joined them, or is at least well-connected. Yet, in the same breath as he is tempted to ask Yosl to intercede on his behalf, he wonders whether they pay enough to risk life and limb. Without knowing of whom he speaks, he is already demanding a raise! He concludes by appealing to Yosl to help him escape and fantasizes about leaving the "witches" behind with nothing but a pile of dirty linens. To evoke his pitiful and petty figure, I added "I'm begging you, Reb Yosl," and, playing on a double-meaning of his wish to "leave [them] with nothing" (*lozn a fayg*) / "show them the sign of a 'fig'" (*vayzn a fayg*), I added a similar vulgar gesture as a punchline. (This extends the author's own practice of ending monologues with gestures; see, e.g., "A Real Monster"). Finally, the English title doubles as a means of characterization. As in most of Berdichevsky's monologues, the Yiddish title is drawn from one of the last phrases: the speaker offers to go abroad to work "For Expenses" (*Of hoytsues*), the mere price of his passage. I changed the title to "Just Cover My Costs" to show that, while he starts by bidding absurdly high for his services, he ends up settling miserably low (with an equally imaginary bidder). His voice is like a cup clattering against the iron bars of a cell.

Yosl's view of the speaker's situation is rather different. Yosl may admire his hyperbolic *khitspe* but cannot fail to see his self-delusion. Why, after all, is he doing so much domestic labor and living with his in-laws? He must be out of work while the women earn money during the day. He protests that he is not lazy, but he doth

protest too much (no doubt his wife does plenty of housework). His fear of effeminacy (“I’m everyone’s nursemaid”) suggests anxiety about emasculation, and it is clear that, misplaced revenge fantasies aside, he is going nowhere fast. Social forces both new (migration due to unemployment like his own) and old (patriarchy) have reduced him to this abject state. The chaos in his home, his wife’s rage, and his misogyny are all symptoms of the same social situation, but he fails to perceive their connections. He is doubly imprisoned: by his place in society and by his self-centered perspective on it. The same can be said of other misogynistic characters (in “The Smith,” “The Dream,” and “The *Agine*”): women are demonized by men who see marriage as the problem rather than the social order itself, ignoring its harms to the other gender and seeking a selfish escape. Female characters are generally sympathetic, and certainly savvier about patriarchy, although one tale of an ill-fated affair (“You Never Can Tell”) shows that they may fall prey to the same misconception.

In this case, the second-personal form of the monologue is crucial to its effect on the reader. The speaker’s complaint is given a hearing, but we quickly come around to a more critical view. The translation preserves this effect by leaving it implicit, playing across a gap between the speaker’s hot air and the mute auditor; to draw Yosl out of the background would lower the force of the implication. Yet that does not mean Yosl is quite “reduced to the bare minimum.” He plays a key role in the monologue *because* he is silent: even in a one-sided form of the second-personal, he speaks volumes.

Other monologues in “Visitors” display greater equilibrium and differentiation between the roles of speaker, auditor, and reader. When speakers punctuate stories about themselves with asides about Yosl, we realize that they see him in diverse ways, reflecting diverse aspects of their social situations. Yosl is not simply on the outside looking in. He remains a part of the *shtetl* world: as much a world of memory and fantasy for them as it is for him. Reciprocally, it becomes harder for the reader to hold onto a sense of superiority vis-à-vis the speakers. What they want from Yosl may not be realistic,

but the sheer fact that they want it so badly points to real forces in the process of destroying their traditional horizons of meaning and value. Each monologue is a swiftly tilting microcosm.

Both monologues in “Visitors” by women are highly revealing in this regard. At first, Sarah, who proudly speaks of herself in the third person, pits herself against the men in her life. Unlike herself, who scrapped to lift her children out of poverty, her father and husband were broke and lazy: her husband’s death was not really caused by tuberculosis but in fact just another symptom of laziness, whereas she plans to resist even the Angel of Death. She misses her husband a little, but not enough to want to rejoin him in paradise; she would rather go to hell, where the company is better. She cuts a confident, iconoclastic figure, free from insecurity: what she calls her ugliness (“face like a potato-grater”) is simply an economic liability that she overcame with hard work and people skills.

However, another theme emerges in the course of her monologue: the value of education (“learning”) in East European Jewish society. Here and only here, Sarah’s self-image as a woman who does not need a man comes up against the fact that she is not biologically male. As women were categorically excluded from Torah-learning, especially poor women, this is the one area where Sarah’s story about herself falls short. No amount of grit, she concedes, could make her “grow a beard and turn into a man.” She tries to get around this obstacle in two ways: by mocking the downwardly mobile rabbinic elite (such as her mother-in-law, who touts her lineage yet eats at Sarah’s table), and by praising her street smarts (“That’s what I call learning”). “These men and their piety!” she scoffs, picturing her husband’s eternal rest among the heavenly choir as the ultimate male laziness. (It is hard to refrain from drawing a biographical connection with Berdichevsky’s short-lived second marriage, to a shop-keeper, who was aggravated that his literary pursuits made him a liability in her store; see “Between the Four Poles,” “The Only Son,” and “Luck”).

Yet Sarah remains somewhat insecure in this particular area. Her insecurity becomes apparent through the second-personal form. She

reminds Yosl that the rabbi's wife, his mother, respected her for her donations to worthy causes: she shares in the prestige of the *rebetsn*. "Think twice before you try to pull one over on this old woman!" she insists, though Yosl has not said a word. These insecure asides build up to her conclusion, where we see what Sarah wants from Yosl: to read her a bill of credit from one of her many debtors. Here too, she masks her illiteracy with bluster: "Don't think for one second I don't know the value of every coin and can't do the sums in my head." For good measure, lest Yosl suppose that he is doing her any favors, she wheels on him with one last defensive maneuver: she may not know what they say, but she knows he has been reading newspapers. It would be a shame if his father the *rebe* were to find out . . .

The other woman's monologue in this set, "Aging," captures the flip side of the same social currency. This speaker identifies herself as a *rebetsn* (perhaps a teacher's wife), whereas the auditor ("Yosl") is not said to be the son of the town rabbi but one of her husband's former students, visiting from Germany. She remembers Yosl as a boy and, through him, looks back on the good old days when she enjoyed respect and financial independence. Both were taken from her when her daughter married a pious hypocrite and her husband's support from the town stopped with his death. Now she feels like a beggar at her own daughter's table (not unlike Sarah's mother-in-law, we might imagine). She tries to win over Yosl by putting her own troubles in the context of the town's religious decline, insisting that, while he may no longer be an observant Jew, he is no worse than the "ones who call you a *goy*." She muses that she would rather have had him for a son-in-law, pronouncing him Jewish in spirit if not in practice. Once a *rebetsn*, she implies, always a *rebetsn*; even after the prestige of the rabbinate has faded.

Gradually it becomes clear what the *rebetsn* wants from Yosl. Like Sarah, she knows he has been reading newspapers. She knows that he has a degree and is "some kind of 'Rabbiner' for those Germans": a reformer and respected intellectual. Like Sarah, she hopes to make use of his literacy to better her situation. If he writes up a scandalous treatment of her son-in-law's behavior for the papers (not

so implausible: recall the local reception of *From My Small Town*), perhaps he can shame her daughter and son-in-law into treating her better. Her auditor may seem beyond the pale (a “German” and “goy”), but she ropes him back into the *shtetl*, figuring him as a secular rabbi: a surrogate for her husband who has the same role in modern society.

In all three of these examples, the subtext of the speaker’s not-so-hidden agenda fuels its development, gradually disclosing new lines of social conflict and opening multiple readings. This is typical of the Yiddish monologues. His protestations to the contrary, Berdichevsky was not passively recording the spirit of the folk, but taking stock of tales that they told about themselves, to particular people, in particular situations, for particular purposes. The sum of those particulars is a composite portrait of *shtetl* society—not a bird’s-eye but a bee’s-eye view. What Chagall, Ryback, et alia portrayed in cubist angles, his monologues sound out like sonar waves: dissonant voices bouncing off the boundaries of shared social space.

Yosl’s presence is essential to this second-personal poetics. Without it, the voices could easily disintegrate into cacophony. When speakers address different aspects of their “distant relation,” they reflect different shades of the *shtetl* and deepen its social proportions. Their uncanny auditor is mute, but never neutral: for Sarah, his literacy is a problem, whereas for the *rebetsn*, it is a possible solution. Each monologue is a repressed dialogue; every encounter between speaker and listener implies a series of encounters between social positions which, in turn, index changes in society. Far from a timeless popular idyll, the *shtetl* is thus historicized. In the translation, I aimed to enhance the auditor’s role as an index of those social tensions and historical changes by emphasizing, or adding, oral markers wherever Yosl channels the speaker’s inner monologue (“*All this talking brings me back*”; “*A lot has changed around here . . . no, don’t encourage me*”) and implicit dialogue (“*Yosl, whatever your sins may be, I don’t hold them against you*”). Contrary to the author’s ideal of a united folk spirit, his “distant relation” echoes a wide variety of local types and power struggles.

Berdichevsky's Jewspeak

As anyone who has tried to write prose fiction knows, putting speech into writing is not transcription. It requires the invention (never wholly original) of a literary language: consistent enough to maintain a sense of continuous reality, yet flexible enough to inflect subtle differences between voices. This language relies on conventions and models for representing speech, based to some extent on actual speech patterns. It sounds convincing (“real”) if it coheres, both internally and with respect to its setting, so that the reader perceives any exceptions to its artificial rules as authentic individual variations. It teaches the reader how to hear.

Refining and evaluating these ways of representing speech has long been a concern of Yiddish writers and critics, as Roskies shows in a major recent essay (Roskies 2014). Yet he slights Berdichevsky’s contribution in this area. The Yiddish writings, he says, were “greeted with almost universal scorn” (citing Werses 1981, who shows a more balanced reception). Why this summary dismissal of a large and diverse body of work? Like most critics before him—from the scornful Peretz and Bal-Makhshoves, to the even-handed Holtzman, to Berdichevsky’s greatest partisan, his son Emanuel (Bin-Gorion 1980, 187–94)—Roskies equates the author’s ideology *about* literary language with the prose that he actually wrote. Applying Berdichevsky’s ideology—that Yiddish should be written in a purely oral, “artless” vernacular—to all of his Yiddish work, Roskies echoes the claim of Bal-Makhshoves (1911, 87) that it was nothing new under the sun: an effort to “enlist the new orality [of the Peretz/Sholem Aleichem generation—J.A.R.] to resuscitating the old [the pre-Mendele phase of written-as-spoken Yiddish—J.A.R.]” (Roskies 2014, 267–68). In short, Roskies acknowledges that Berdichevsky was influenced by contemporary stylistic developments. Yet he assumes that Berdichevsky’s manifestos about the “unwritten Judaism” of the people, and desire to infuse literary prose with unadulterated popular speech, prevented him from developing the stylistic innovations of his Yiddish literary hero: Sholem Aleichem.

As a translator, one wants to defend an author and bring out the best of their style. Yet at first blush, the critics' attacks rang true. As Holtzman says (1993, 74–86), Berdichevsky was slow to find his Yiddish voice. Sholem Aleichem rejected his first pieces in 1888. In 1890, a friend was amazed that he spoke Yiddish (his mother tongue!) worse than Hebrew (perhaps because he had grown so immersed in German). Peretz (1920) complained that his first published tale (“The Smith,” 1902) mixes “high” (German) and “low” (Ukrainian) registers, conflating the folk’s voice with the learned narrator’s.

I set about to repair such slips of the tongue in my translation. For instance, Bal-Makhshoves mocked the Hebrew term *khoyze* (“Seer”) in “The Weasel and the Pit,” insisting that an oral folk narrator would never say this, but *rebe*, *ruv*, *poresh* (hermit), *baltshuve* (penitent), or the like. Yet I soon learned that the famous *tsadik* in question was called “the Seer of Lublin”: his title, not a generic term. To make that clear, I preserved both terms where the text stresses that this is a title (ignored by the anachronistic critic): “That is why they called him the *khoyze*, the Seer.” I capitalized *Seer* to stress this further. Here, too, the translation builds on the author’s own practice and draws out his intention by making surface changes. As it turns out, the narrator of this tale does indeed echo the “voice of the folk,” but we must know—and the author takes pains to remind us!—that these “folk” speak in the past (as it is said: “Beforetime in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, thus he spake, Come and let us go to the seer”). In this case it is the critic, not the author, who suffered from a tin ear.

Along the same lines, the more closely I scrutinized attacks on Berdichevsky’s Yiddish style, the more I sensed that they were barking up an ideological tree far afield from his literary Yiddish. Most criticisms address his titles or his self-presentation as author and narrator, not the real verbal forms of his Yiddish style: dialogue, monologue, free indirect discourse. Attacks are leveled at “Doctor Berdichevsky” and his literary persona, not his characters. If we accuse Berdichevsky of trying to do the impossible by taking him literally when he envisioned a Yiddish style “for the masses and from

the masses” (see Holtzman’s foreword), then we set him up to fail. There is no one authentic folk Yiddish; hence, no way to write it. Yet his polemical, romantic, overblown, contemporary language ideology has no direct or necessary bearing on what he actually did as a writer: to invent a literary Yiddish *modeled upon* the speech of his *shtetl*. We should not ask, “Did he write how people talk?” but “Is his literary Yiddish internally consistent enough to convince me that it functions as a whole and belongs to its literary worlds? What are the principles that determine its internal consistency? Do individual voices stand out clearly against a stable background?”

Unlike the critic, who is licensed to pick the language apart bit by bit, or tear it down from a high metalinguistic vantage, the translator has to answer those questions in order to work at all; to infer what the author was trying to do in their own literary language, then strive to transpose its principles and effects to another key. Translation runs alongside a process of reconstructive criticism.

In the process, I found Roskies’s Sholem-Aleichem-model for the literary stylization of speech, in opposition to the Peretz-model, highly applicable (Roskies 2014, 263–64). It has five rules: (1) diverse speakers (men and women, young and old); (2) free mix of more/less elevated non-Jewish coterritorial tongues (here, Russian/Ukrainian); (3) individuals characterized by vocal tics (“taglines”); (4) open-ended storytelling, replete with asides; (5) not only using genres of popular speechlore like nursery rhymes, but generating its own original speechlore, such as Tevye’s proverbs.

Having this Sholem-Aleichem-model in mind helped to make sense of the stickiest points in the translation during the third and fourth times that I revised the manuscript in its entirety. The model helped me to refine criteria for critiquing and improving it; that is, for better approximating formal correspondence between the implicit rules whereby Berdichevsky represented speech in Yiddish, and the implicit rules whereby I had to do the same in English. The goal of the translation was not for the English to be “the same as” the Yiddish—written Yiddish is already not “the same as” spoken Yiddish. Rather, the goal was deeper isomorphism between the author’s and

the translator's *invented models* for putting our respective spoken languages into writing. If I took Berdichevsky's crusty shopkeepers and make them sound like British royalty, it would fail miserably; I had to somehow make them sound like crusty English-speaking shopkeepers. To do so, I had to make consistent rules for spoken English that individual voices could break in clearly audible, characteristic ways.

The translation thus aims to replicate typical *effects* of this Sholem-Aleichem-model on a reader. Let us consider another example from the "Visitors" series: "The Country Jew." This two-page monologue was the hardest piece to translate in the entire volume. Like some of Sholem Aleichem's tales, it purports to be "transcribed word for word." In fact, it is highly stylized, in a manner akin to Sholem Aleichem's speakers who think, at length, out loud: in a word, *skaz* (Schmid 2013; Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, 104–28; Frieden 1995, 184–201; Halkin 1987, xxxvi–xl; Safran 2012). At times, the Country Jew ("Ben-Tsiyen," also the name of the country Jew in "The Test") seems not to be forming propositions so much as gesticulating verbally: *az*, "so"; *meyle*, "well then"; *gurnisht*, "forget it!" or all of them in unison. He tiptoes onto premises of half-baked syllogisms; interrupts himself, apologizes, cajoles, coughs, forgets, and starts again on a tangent. But what is he after? Is he crazy—or crazy like a fox?

One of my challenges was to capture, entirely in English, the speaker's way of using all four components of his Yiddish: Hebrew, German, Russian, and Ukrainian (Roskies's Sholem-Aleichem-rule no. 2). I could not resort to transliteration or gloss: that would spoil the effect of subtle shifts between registers, all internal to Yiddish. I experimented with transposing this effect to the mixed heritage of my own English (French/Latin for Russian; colloquial American for Ukrainian), but this yielded a language that was too inconsistent: no plausible English speaker mixes "je ne sais quoi" and "darn tootin'." Instead, I distributed the effects of Yiddish multilingualism across three layers of the discourse: (a) the speaker's stance toward his auditor; (b) shifts between registers and voices within Anglo-Saxon; (c)

replacing word-for-word equivalence with staggered exaggeration. What comes across in Yiddish through the choice of particular words is meant to come across in English through this cocktail of methods.

(a) In some places the translation inserts the mute auditor, “Reb Yosl,” as a proxy for a higher speech-register. The country Jew is aware that Yosl lives abroad (“farther than Russia, where everyone’s a German”) and sees Yosl as a “German” (*daytsh*: a high-class, secular Jew), as he says: “You’ve turned into one of those people who live over there . . . seeing as how you shaved your beard.” So, when he plays on a “high” Germanic word, a reader can get the effect if he teases Yosl instead: *Ikh beyt akh nokh a minitkele* (“I beg you for a teeny tiny minute”) becomes “Allow me just a minute *of your valuable time*.” A Western word (*minit*) with double Eastern diminutive (*-kele*) cuts the speaker’s “German” auditor back down to size.

(b) Shifting registers and voices *within* English can create more or less the effect of shifting between components *of* Yiddish. The country Jew’s rich medical vocabulary is a case in point. His wife is struggling to conceive and consults various medical experts: “healers” (*feldshers*, often punned as *felshers*, “forgers”: Wisse 1986, 16); “fortune tellers” (*Tuters*, Tatars); a “goy witch” (*a goye a makhsheyfe*); a “pest” (*shlak*—a stroke or fit, blown by ill winds; see Tuszewicki 2015, 100), and a fortune-telling “diviner” (*trefer*). But he reserves his real scorn for a so-called “physician” (*royfe*), who inspired his Shaggy Dog monologue by swindling him out of his silverware. He trains his contempt upon this fellow’s official title: *Er iz a shtik royfe. A royfe iz er, a riekh in zan tatns tatn in in zan mames mamen!* (“He’s something of a physician. A physician, is he? To hell with his father’s father and his mother’s mother!”) As in example (a) above, the effect is to cut the opponent down to size with a register shift: from an elevated, Hebraic word (“physician”) to a slew of vulgar invective. I tried to capture this by setting off the word in quotes and putting it in the wife’s voice: “*The man’s* some sort of ‘*physician*,’ *she says*. A physician, eh? To hell with [etc.]” The higher they go, the harder they fall.

(c) Frequently, the effect of a single word requires several. In the process of expanding the text, one can expand other elements of the piece as a whole, even if they are not tied to that passage. Translation is literally relocation: if load-bearing elements of the original language are not supported by the target language, they can be moved to other areas of the discourse and its verbal texture. Because the sound of a note resonates only in the whole body of its new instrument, some must inevitably be struck in different places. (For the same reason, the best or even the sole valid critique of a literary translation is a better translation of the entire text.)

The speaker's register and the author's irony, for instance, come together in the translation where they did not in the original. The country Jew begins by pronouncing himself "tongue-tied" in Yiddish, but he has a keen sense of each word's register. His language is not provincial but cosmopolitan: crossing boundaries, scrambling hierarchies. His final attack on the medical experts is a case in point. *Doktert un doktert*, he says, *in tsim sof lozt zekh arous aza moshentstve . . . aza moshenik. Di gantse velt iz gole moshenikes*. His register shift from German (a reprise of his own use of the reflexive *doktern zikh*, "to be treated") to more local slang (*moshentstve*, "trickery"; *moshenik*, "scoundrel") undermines the pretensions of the fertility physician (whose very existence, he hints, poses a threat to his virility. A similar dynamic defines the 1904 monologue "Advice" [Sholem Aleichem 1998, 59–72]). A word-for-word translation would not capture this effect: "One treatment after another and all that comes of it in the end is such trickery . . . such a scoundrel. The whole world's nothing but scoundrels." Instead, I added parataxis, hyperbole, repetition, and expansion: "Doctor *this*, doctor *that*, and nothing comes of it but *more* quackery . . . a fraud, *I tell you!* The world's full of frauds *and windbags*." The new compound ("frauds *and windbags*") further serves to develop the irony underlying the whole Shaggy Dog monologue: this "speechless" and "tongue-tied" country Jew has an embarrassment of riches when it comes to the gift of gab.

Summary

All told, I hope that a translator's view from inside the guts of Berdichevsky's Yiddish, in light of studies of Sholem Aleichem, will spur some rethinking of this work's place within literary history. Critics have used the author's ideology about literary Yiddish to assess what he actually did, or did not, achieve with the language. But there is an audible gap between his ideology and his poetics. If we shift our focus to the effects of his Yiddish style, we hear the author repeatedly doing things with Yiddish that do not correspond to his manifestos about its essence as pure *Volksgeist*. A staged orality mediates second-personal encounters of individuals: narrator and characters, speakers and auditor. "The folk" breaks up into a social mosaic, glittering in the medium of the human voice.

Translation, or "reconstructive criticism," led me to reassess two aspects of Berdichevsky's Yiddish prose: the role of the narrator/auditor and the oral style. As for the first, I showed that his "distant relation" is not a neutral witness to the *shtetl* folk, but a literary device, toward whom each speaker adopts a distinct and nuanced stance. As for the second, I showed that register shifts—between Hebrew/Aramaic, German, Russian, or Ukrainian—work to characterize individual speakers and to mark the auditor's ironic distance from them. If we listen closely to both aspects of Berdichevsky's Yiddish prose, his work sounds closer to Sholem Aleichem's contemporary work, such as the intricate monologues of *The Railroad Stories* as told to a "commercial traveler." (For a highly experimental translation of Sholem Aleichem's *Monologn*, see Sholem Aleichem 1998.) His ideology about pure folk Yiddish—versus Peretz's elevated style—is not necessarily a useful critical model.

Conclusions and New Directions

This collection has two distinct goals: to introduce a variety of new readers to Berdichevsky and to encourage old readers of his Yiddish